

Mary Magdalene: A Cultural History

Philip C. Almond

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Philip C. Almond's fascinating and comprehensive cultural study of Mary Magdalene reviews hundreds of interpretations of the revered saint and explores the creative tension between her complex tradition and the history of religious belief.

Featuring twenty-nine gorgeous color plates, the book is deft at summarizing 2,000 years of church history while teasing out enlightening developments in the "idea" of Mary Magdalene. Mentioned only thirteen times in the gospels, she was a follower of Jesus who was cured of seven demons and who witnessed both the crucifixion and resurrection. Despite these scant details, however, she became a "woman for all seasons," assigned identities including that of a penitent prostitute, solitary desert dweller, wealthy heiress, and Jesus's wife.

Mary Magdalene is a masterful synopsis of "pious imaginings" of the saint and the cultural trends that shaped them. Early church leaders often conflated her with other New Testament women, including Mary of Bethany, the sinful woman who anointed Jesus's feet, and the bride at the wedding at Cana. Gnostic gospels further embellished her story, including suggestions in the Gospel of Philip that Jesus favored her above all others and often kissed her on the mouth. Medieval biographers invented details about her family's wealth, her contemplative years in the wilderness (where she was naked except for her long hair), and her journey by boat to southern France to work as an apostle. Her physical remains were also venerated, with rival European cathedrals claiming at least three bodies, twelve locks of hair, eight arms, and other assorted body parts, all with miraculous properties. The book is brilliant at narrating developments through the Reformation and into modernity, including an engaging discussion of the novel *The Da Vinci Code*.

Mary Magdalene is an enthralling examination of a pivotal figure in Christian tradition and a thought-provoking study of the countless stories and interpretations she inspired.

KRISTEN RABE (March / April 2023)

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