



Sistine Heresy

Justine Saracen

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Absolute power and absolute corruption make for a deadly combination, and nowhere was this confluence more bloodthirsty than in early sixteenth-century Rome where, under the reign of Pope Alexander VI, such overt political villainy reached new heights (or, more appropriately, sunk to new lows.) Born Rodrigo Borgia, the Pope was well-acquainted with the intricacies of depravity, sin, and perversion. His death created a void that would be filled by one of the eager zealots whose piety was equally absolute.

Caught up in this maelstrom of fervent righteousness and blatant political intrigue is Adriana Borgia, wife and mistress of two of the late Pope's sons. Having fled the Spanish Inquisition, she finds that she is no safer in Rome now that her protector is dead. But Adriana is not without influential friends, chief among them Michelangelo, recently commissioned by the new Pope, Julius II, to paint the Sistine Chapel. Like Adriana, Michelangelo is critical of the Church's strict scriptural interpretations, especially in the area of human sexuality. Yet unlike Adriana, Michelangelo has a means of voicing his displeasure.

And herein lies Saracen's theory of heresy. Having meticulously studied Michelangelo's panels, Saracen contends that the artist filled the frescoes with homoerotic imagery, not only as a repudiation of the Church's hypocritical rectitude, but also as a reflection of his own (and Adriana's) predilections. Although in her postscript, the author freely admits there is no historical evidence supporting her assertion that Michelangelo was, in fact, gay, there is also nothing, she says, to suggest that he wasn't.

Such is the bane and beauty of historical fiction, a genre that must artfully blend historical accuracy with fanciful conjecture in order to succeed. And succeed Saracen does. A professor of German language and literature at such prestigious institutions as Stanford University and Rochester Institute of Technology, and the author of two previous theocentric novels, Saracen is a self-proclaimed amateur historian who nevertheless renders accepted period details with a robust physicality. And while the rapid-fire pacing of the tale spins on the dangers inherent in succumbing to homosexual temptation, its gay/lesbian characterizations are handled with a discerning degree of restraint.

Casting such an iconic artistic and historic figure as Michelangelo in a controversial new light is risky business—some would say a heresy unto itself. But Saracen portrays Michelangelo and his cohorts as anything but corrupt, endowing them with an absolute sensitivity and absolute humanity.

CAROL HAGGAS (February 11, 2009)

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