

The Drug of Hope

Francois Napoleon Jones

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Religious scholars have long debated aspects of Jesus' life: if he was married, if he had a child, if the Holy Grail exists and what it is, where Christ's body lies, and what all of this means for the Second Coming. Author Francois Napoleon Jones' first novel, *The Drug of Hope*, begins a saga which promises to examine these questions.

This sprawling epic takes place in both present-day England and the Europe of the Crusades in the fourteenth century. In 1314, the last surviving Knights Templar convene to protect the Holy Grail and Jesus' bloodline. In the twenty-first century, meanwhile, a secret group called the Sect ritually rapes girls in hopes that the rape victim will produce a boy who will be the next Savior. Mary, a Catholic teenager, is raped and sires a son. The Sect's assassin, Crusader, kills everyone he perceives as a danger to the baby. Sam, a police detective whose wife is killed, and his best friend David find themselves involved in this caper.

The author asserts that religion is the titular "drug of hope" for the masses, then goes on to plunge readers into this gory tale of violence and secret societies in which flat, dull characters exist only to advance the plot. It is a pity that this novel reads like a poor man's knock-off of Dan Brown's *The DaVinci Code*, because the author's research into the controversies surrounding Jesus are impressive, as are his theories about why stories about Christ evolved the way they did. Indeed, it is fascinating to ponder the possibility that Jesus married Mary Magdalene, that the pair bore a daughter, and that religious sects are searching for Christ's blood heir. Unfortunately, Jones takes this exciting premise and renders it needlessly brutal and lifeless.

The effects of the Mary's rape and her ensuing decision to keep the child are told from the point of view of a distant observer, without empathy. Within the book's first forty pages, at least four others are brutalized or killed. The sexual exploits of the surviving characters are told with so much detail that it seems like erotica. Unfortunately, readers are offered bland character descriptions instead of actual character development. It is difficult to sympathize with Mary, for example, because she is merely reported on, and she herself rarely acts. Descriptions of characters drag on without being properly formatted into paragraphs. The dialogue is banal as characters routinely state the obvious to each other, or exchange insipid pleasantries. Scenes which could have been enhanced by dialogue, such as the Mary's growing love affair with a kindly pastor, are reduced to a few flat summary paragraphs.

The author's ideas have the potential to be thrilling, and one hopes the next installment in this series will be more fully developed.

JILL ALLEN (June 28, 2010)

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