

The Pope, My Brother, and I: Recollections of a French Childhood

Penny Howson

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Penny Howson's *The Pope, My Brother and I* is a reissue of the memoir she originally published in the 1960s. Subtitled *Recollections of a French Childhood*, the reprinted book offers a new generation of readers the opportunity to smile and chuckle at the exploits and foibles of Régine, a precociously pious twelve-year-old girl in 1930s France. Régine, of course, is Howson.

Those who remember memorizing their catechism questions in Catholic school or religious instruction classes undoubtedly will relate to Howson's childhood trials, beliefs, and fears. "Somewhere around the age of twelve," she says, "I suddenly realized my family was going straight to Hell." She takes it upon herself to save them all. Her father, with his "pagan ways" and "religious devotion to the stock market," would, at best, make it to purgatory (even with her help). But it is the fate of her little brother, Jean-Paul, who is surely condemned to limbo, that worries her most. Near tears, she admits, "I don't want to go to Heaven all by myself."

Howson's depiction of her twelve-year-old self is an absolute delight. The young Régine is a charmingly quirky heroine, as earnest and well meaning as she is misguided and unsophisticated. Her devotion to Catholicism plays a decisive role in her story, especially her ongoing quest to have her little brother baptized, even if she has to do it herself—which she does, some twelve or thirteen times. Howson clearly speaks tongue in cheek as she relates each of the girl's new religious revelations and disappointments, each "Sign from Up Above" that renews her fervent dedication, at least for the moment. The drama, the zeal, the anguished chest thumping are all so very real to the impassioned Régine. Listening to the young girl, even the local priest sometimes must disguise a chuckle with a coughing fit and hide his face in a handkerchief.

The everyday exploits of Régine's well-to-do family provide some exquisitely detailed insight into life in France immediately prior to World War II. As foils for Régine's adventures, Howson introduces the maids, cooks, gardeners, and frazzled governesses who populate the privileged Paris household. The comings and goings of the servants, closely observed by the young Régine, present a rich contrast to the entitled life of the young girl's family.

Lovely Régine is pure fascination, start to finish. Howson not only offers readers a unique peek into a completely enthralling character but also provides extraordinary insight into an era and a lifestyle.

CHERYL M. HIBBARD (August 2, 2012)

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