



Waiting for the Apocalypse: A Memoir of Faith and Family

Veronica Chater

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Chater, a widely published essayist, gives us an impressionistic portrait of a family immersed in extreme Catholic traditionalism. Written from the perspective of the child and adolescent, Chater is successful in letting readers experience the chaos that was her family life. When this memoir begins, Chater's father is a California Highway patrolman and the family lives a comfortable and outwardly normal suburban life. At home, however, he is obsessed with his belief that Vatican II is "the greatest crime in history apart from the Crucifixion." Disgust with the American Catholic Church and a friendship with Harry Doten, a wealthy (and eventually untrustworthy) traditionalist, leads him to quit his job and move the family to Portugal, where he expects to find dogmatic fidelity. There, Chater's imagination is steeped in the prophecies of Fatima, the expectation that "the world was teetering on the brink of the Holy Chastisement: an apocalypse so huge that entire nations would be annihilated...."

When Portugal proves to be a disappointment, the financially impoverished family of thirteen returns to California, and Chater's father, believing that "the Crusades of the twentieth century had begun," becomes an activist in the "counter-revolutionary movement." The girls in the family are forbidden to wear modern clothes and Veronica's deception ("keeping a single pair of pants was like having a fire extinguisher on hand") leads to "a long series of self-pervations." Not surprisingly, she and her older sister experiment with drugs, listen to suggestive music, go to discos, and become sexually active. When these secrets (and her sister's pregnancy) are discovered, their father disowns them, but a few days later, their mother, an exemplary prodigal parent, seeks them out and brings them home.

That incident serves as a metaphor for the abiding loyalty to family, not faith, that emerged from this childhood. Chater writes about her complex father with affection, ambivalence and, ultimately, acceptance, but the heart of this book is her mother, the indomitable woman who was her husband's backbone but who "refused to let religion come between her and us." This book is a worthy testament to her mother's legacy of love. (February)

Rachelle Linner

RACHELLE LINNER (December 15, 2008)

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