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What They Did to the Kid: Confessions of an Altar Boy A Comic Novel Based on a True Memoir

Jack Fritscher
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Stepping behind the cloistered walls of Misericordia Seminary and experiencing twelve years of preparation for the priesthood is as foreign to most readers as a two-month stay on the International Space Station. Fritscher provides a glimpse into the private world faced by fourteen- to twenty-four-year-old seminary students honoring their vocation, or personal calling, from God to become priests.

Author of eight novels, Fritscher portrays the turmoil faced by Ryan O'Hara who narrates this fictional memoir. O'Hara shares his powerful calling to the priesthood. He navigates through the foibles of seminary life with its surprisingly competitive and at times, cruel, classmates. Student life, like that in any boarding school or college dormitory is ripe with humorous pranks played on each other and the priests.

Students are taught in three distinct phases of four years each of high school, college, and theology. Students in each phase are not permitted to speak to members in other phases.

Reading of literature and listening to radios are strictly forbidden, as are friendships amongst the students. They are not allowed to set foot in each other's rooms.

Contact with the outside world is not permitted either, save for Christmas and summer vacations. During these vacations, seminarians often feel outcast from the world they face away from the seminary, their lives having become distant from the everyday lives of family members and old friends.

During freshman year in school, Father Gunn (head of the seminary) shared with his students, "The Seminary is not supposed to be a bed of roses. Vocations are hard to come by and have to be paid for; either in the seminary or after Ordination."

Students are forbidden to have contact with the ninety percent of their classmates who don't make it through to Ordination. Any communications with those who leave are grounds for "being shipped" (dismissal); students live in constant fear of being shipped. Academic performance, breaking rules, and loss of vocation, as determined by the priests running the seminary are all grounds for culling the students down from the ninety that start the seminary as high school freshman to the few who make it through to Ordination.

Students are faced with shunning their own sexuality, even thoughts of self-gratification. Still there is a priest who is removed from the seminary for homosexual overtures towards students. "'Trust me.' The priest advances a step. 'Jesus cured many by virtue of His touch. Open your shirt. Let me touch you.'"

Set in the early 1950s through mid-60s, What They Did to the Kid provides a distinct insight into seminary life for both Catholic and non-Catholic.

JOHN R. SELIG (May / June 2001)

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