



Women Of Magdalene

Rosemary Poole-Carter

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During the nineteenth-century, asylums for “fallen women” opened that were named for Mary Magdalene: a saint that many remember as a sinner. Though administrators and clergy proposed to offer reform and rehabilitation, the asylums often became de facto prisons. So too the fictional Magdalene Ladies’ Lunatic Asylum, as the protagonist of Poole-Carter’s *Women of Magdalene* discovers.

Dr. Robert Mallory is the asylum’s new physician. Journeying by foot to take up his position, he finds the corpse of a patient in the river. Asylum staff show little concern when he presents the body. Worse, Mallory’s patients frequently require treatment for malnourishment, bruises, and breaks attributed to “falling.” Psychiatrist Dr. Kingston and the retired general practitioner, Dr. Hardy, justify the patients’ mistreatment with crude theories about women. On a tour of the asylum, Hardy comments, “Sane or otherwise, all women are full of guile... Without a man’s intellectual and physical resources, what have they but cunning?” Though this asylum houses “mad” rather than “fallen” women, the stigma of Magdalene, and Eve before her, remains: “Woman is a vessel...her purpose is to receive man and to bear his children,” declares Kingston. Mallory is ill-fitted to the culture of the asylum. Through his continual bucking against the order of things, there and in the surrounding town of Lorraine, he will eventually learn the truth about the woman in the river.

Poole-Carter is the author of novels *Juliet Ascending* and *What Remains*, plus four plays, including *Inconvenient Women*. The plot of *Women of Magdalene* is structured around the unveiling and answering of the story’s essential mysteries (however recursively and languorously, in keeping with the cultural rhythms of the south and with Mallory’s recurrent bouts of “malarial fever”). Even a secret passageway figures into the mix, though it is not key. The deft way in which Poole-Carter explores the form does not permit clichés. The asylum itself is no foreboding presence; it is simply a former “plantation mansion of the Greek revivalist style, with broad veranda and towering Doric columns” that now had “bars on the upper windows.”

Poole-Carter understands the region she writes of, its history as depicted in textbooks and in southern gothic literature. Intimations of the grotesque appear, as when Mallory describes his need for shoes with traction when serving as a surgeon in the Civil War: “I wore a special pair of boots with rows of horseshoe nails embedded in the soles for cleats to keep me from slipping and falling...the floor awash in blood.”

Poole-Carter’s emphasis is not on moments of violence and brutality, however, but on the context surrounding those moments—what precedes them, authorizes them, and hides them from scrutiny. Of patients in the asylum and of his own sister who committed suicide, Mallory reflects, “they had been brought up from earliest childhood to be pleasing and obedient, particularly obedient to those in authority. And who were they, the authorities, if not a host of men... And what if one of them was corrupt? More than one...”

Indeed, the most affecting passages in *Women in Magdalene* pertain to Mallory's observations of the injury racism and sexism does to families and individuals. A grown son comes to the asylum to demand the release of his mother, informing Mallory of the real reason for her confinement years ago: "Mother objected, in particular...to Father's manner of keeping a mistress under the same roof as he kept his family." Mallory decides to help the elderly woman escape. He carries her out to the carriage, noting: "I set her down beside the carriage and opened its door. Mother and son stared at one another—she at a boy grown to manhood, he at a woman grown old... And then she was beside her son, laughing and sobbing..."

Women of Magdalene is a brilliant example of the best historical fiction can do: illuminate the past not as it really, truly was, but as imagined, in order to better understand motives, desires, and prejudices. If the book stumbles at all, it is because the bigoted characters may read as one-dimensional. Such a small complaint. It is refreshing to read a work of fiction that doesn't gloss over the sexism entrenched in southern—indeed, American—culture. As Mallory solves the mystery surrounding the woman in the river, he finds his place in the world: an ethical place, one he is bound to by commitment, care, and ultimately, love.

AIMEE HOUSER (October 9, 2007)

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