

I Julian: A Story That Made All Things Well for the Author

A book review by Owene Courtney

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If you are a scholar of Julian, you will know that the 14th century visionary was the first woman, as far as we know, to write in English, and her life was lived in times as turbulent as our own. You will know and may have read all 16 revelations Julian experienced during a life-threatening illness after years of prayer for God to reveal God's self to her. The mystical visions brought comfort and concern, but she was condemned for writing them down. Therefore, much of Julian's own story remains something of a mystery. If you are not a scholar of Julian, do not be deterred or daunted by the angst of reading about a medieval mystic who only wrote in Middle English and had visions of God. This book makes all of her story very accessible.

Very little is known about her life, and her book is believed to be the first book written by a woman in English. Julian was a medieval woman who dared to tell her story. The "holy church" was condemning heretics then as it often does now. And so, Claire embarks on a fictional telling of Julian's journey, carefully noting at the end of the book in a meticulous timeline, which characters and events are historical, and which are not.

Perhaps the most stunning chapter of the book is the day of Julian's funeral, when the anchor hold in which Julian has vowed to live for the rest of her life is bricked up, and Julian is dead to the world as she knew it. Immediately after the last brick is placed, Julian settles into the stillness with the words, "I have never felt so fully alive." And her journey as an anchorite began, cut off from the world living in a 9 x 12 room with a dirt floor, a few furnishings and a wash bowl that also served as a toilet.

When asked if she could tell where Julian stops and she starts in the novel, Claire's response was, "I have never had visions, but in the act of writing the book, I reenacted them. I do feel very close to her... Julian receives and participates in her visions and is porous and responds to them. In that regard, I felt very much like her." When asked which of Julian's visions was the most revealing vision, Claire said, "The vision of Mary at the time of the conception of Jesus... and Julian's explanation that God comes to those who know they are nothing because God knows there's room."

This book is rich with beautiful language, filled with plausible fiction, and most especially a touching story of a 21st century woman's way of struggling through pain accompanied by a 14th century woman's own struggle with God.