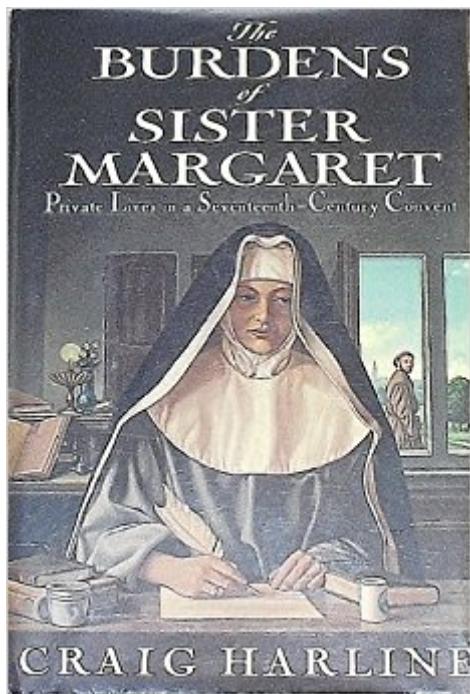


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Burdens Of Sister Margaret, The



Synopsis

A noted historian recreates life in a seventeenth-century Belgian convent, offering a fascinating narrative based on recently discovered letters and documents, focusing on the trials of Sister Margaret, who accused a chaplain of sexual harassment.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Life in a seventeenth-century cloistered convent would not seem to be the most exciting of topics, but it turns out to be more provocative than one might expect. Harline, a scholar in European history, was doing research in a Belgian archive when he came upon letters and documents from a convent in the town of Louvain. The focal point of the correspondence was Sister Margaret Smulders, who earned the enmity of her fellow sisters by claiming she was sexually harassed by the convent's popular confessor. Witchcraft, demonic possession, and sexual tension all play roles in this bizarre tale, but the fragmentary source material leaves Harline no choice but to put together a lot of the puzzle pieces himself. A more serious problem for the general audience is the dryness of the prose, which works against the provocative subject matter. Still, for larger religion and history collections, this peek inside the walls of a counter-Reformation convent offers new information about a largely hidden world. Ilene Cooper

A scrupulous dissection of the daily lives of a group of cloistered 17th-century Franciscan nuns as seen through the eyes of one blighted sister in their midst. Harline (History/Brigham Young Univ.) has amassed rare evidence from a convent in the Spanish Netherlands to show that, during the

Catholic Counter Reformation, religious life was ``shaped by debate...rather than established forever by arbitrary proclamations from on high.'' Toward this end, he offers the correspondence of (and about) the convent's controversial Sister Margaret Smulders, whom he calls ``one of the most prolific letter-writers in early modern monastic history.'' Margaret earns the hatred of her Mother Superior and becomes an outcast among her sisters after her allegations of sexual harassment against the well-liked convent confessor result in his dismissal. She is charged with harboring demonic spirits and all manner of evils. She is then banished--remaining defenseless until the archbishop and another powerful male religious figure become her advocates. But after exorcisms and an apparent ``recovery,'' Margaret returns only to be excluded from the main life of the convent. Finally, she becomes a full-time chronicler of convent ills. Her vast correspondence with the powerful clergy--written mainly in anticipation of their periodic corrective ``visitations''--form the basis of Harline's narrative. But Margaret's litany of complaints varies little. What are interesting points the first time around--that too many nuns pursue temporal pleasures or fraternize with outsiders through the convent gates--wear thin by the fourth official visit. Though many of the reforms Margaret recommends are actually prescribed, few of them are enacted, and she dies largely defeated. Though sad, Margaret's tale effectively illustrates Harline's point that ``if a superior wanted to ensure that reform went in a certain way, he would have to do more than merely issue decrees.'' A lovingly wrought--but overly lengthy--bit of arcane religious history. (b&w illustrations) -- Copyright ©1994, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

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