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By SAM SACKS

Nov. 29, 2013 1:55 p.m. ET

Reading a work of religious fiction is a little like stepping inside a house of worship. If the book professes the tenets of your faith, you read it to have your beliefs reaffirmed or refocused. But if you are an outsider to its creeds—if you are just visiting—you must be particularly open-minded to receive whatever beauties and truths it has to impart.

Roland Merullo's novel "Vatican Waltz" (Crown, 293 pages, \$24) is a welcoming place for parishioners and interlopers alike. It tells the story of Cynthia Piantedosi, a young nursing student from a working-class Roman Catholic neighborhood outside Boston. Cynthia lives with her father and leads an unremarkable, "semimonastic" life with one exception—she regularly experiences divine visions, in the form of a "language without sound, a communication with something unknown and unnamed."



In time, the message of those visions grows both clearer and more insistent: God is directing her to become a priest. When she conveys this to local church authorities, some angrily accuse her of falling for Satan's wiles, but others are so disarmed by the sincerity of her certitude that they nervously pass her up the chain of command. To Cynthia's astonishment—and here readers both religious and not

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will need to suspend their disbelief—her petition creates shock waves throughout the church, and she is granted an audience with a cardinal.

Once in Rome, Cynthia must navigate the stubborn refusals of church elders as well as the threats of a zealot group called the Lambs of God. Mr. Merullo launches fierce denunciations of such extremists within the church, who, in his telling, rely on violence and intimidation to silence would-

be reformers. (Many characters endorse the theory that such a cabal poisoned Pope John Paul I, who died suddenly in 1978 after only a month in the papacy.) Cynthia herself is less interested in conspiracies, but she is angered by her church's incapacity to adapt to the times: "Being a loyal Catholic was starting to feel to me like being friends with someone who's doing something hurtful and refuses to listen when you try to talk about it."

Still, the political and historical debates in "Vatican Waltz" can feel a bit rehearsed. Far more natural and persuasive is Mr. Merullo's probing of Cynthia's state of mind as she pursues what she thinks of as her divine calling in the face of impossible opposition. Her strength, fortified by prayer and meditation, derives from what one sympathetic cardinal calls "the understanding of what is not seen." Her interior world, filled in moments of grace by "some other spirit . . . a comfort, a twin soul," is even more vivid and urgently described than the Dan Brown-tinged skulduggery that enmeshes her in Rome and continues until the book's startling final twist.

By that point, the novel will have touched readers of all kinds. Catholics will identify with its plaintive call for the kind of renewal—a "delicate hope, a fine structure made of thin sticks and rare paper"—that for many has been embodied in the inspiring figure of Pope Francis. But others, too, if they have kept their minds open, will be surprised at how uplifted they are by its story of individual courage and conviction.

The title story of Anthony Wallace's debut collection, "**The Old Priest**" (Pittsburgh, 171 pages, \$24.95), is far less optimistic in its treatment of church scandal. The old priest, "Jesuit, brainy and fey," is a raconteur par excellence who lives off the admiration of the talented young men he once guided through Catholic school. The story's narrator was one of those bright young things, but as he ages and fails to fulfill his promise, he is haunted by his mentor's long-ago sexual trespasses, which evoke an unbearable morass of love and shame, need and resentment.

Such is the tone of much of this acid-etched collection. Many of the stories center on overeducated casino employees in Atlantic City, men who expected that something else would happen with their lives. Some stories—"Snow Behind the Door," "Upstairs Room"—peer at the bitter dregs of these men's fortunes. The most memorable, however, hurl the characters headfirst into the back alleys of drugs and rough trade. "The Unexamined Life," written with chilling poise, watches a middle-aged man abandon his wife and son for a sex worker. "What was it like here on the other side," he thinks, "where people just did whatever came to mind, lust and squalor and hopelessness like the dark shaft of a centerpole in a tent where all the lights had been extinguished." The line separating decency and degradation turns out to be frighteningly easy to cross.

In "Blue," the opening story of Jason K. Friedman's debut, "**Fire Year**" (Sarabande, 186 pages, \$15.95), a young man in Savannah, Ga., reflects on the Torah portion that he chanted during his bar mitzvah earlier that day. It told of the Hebrews "camped on the far side of the Jordan, within sight of the Holy Land," yet beached in an inhospitable

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wilderness. The unhappy narrator sympathizes desperately with their plight. And so, one imagines, would most of Mr. Friedman's outsider characters, who include impoverished, diasporic Jews ("All the World's a Field," "The Cantor's Miracle") and gay men in the South ("Reunion").

Loneliness predictably attends these people on the fringes, yet sometimes Mr. Friedman craftily reverses the polarity of acceptance and rejection. In "Reunion," the real pariah is the man who won't stop making gay jokes. In the collection's longest and best story, "There's Hope for Us All," a museum curator, with help from his boyfriend, discerns that a series of Renaissance portraits of handsome youths actually depict women in drag. Rather than causing dismay, the discovery plays into management's "tabloid vision of the museum"; they promote the art with dancing cross-dressers and demeaning bedroom gossip about the paintings' subjects. There can also be loneliness in inclusion, Mr. Friedman suggests, when it resembles exploitation.

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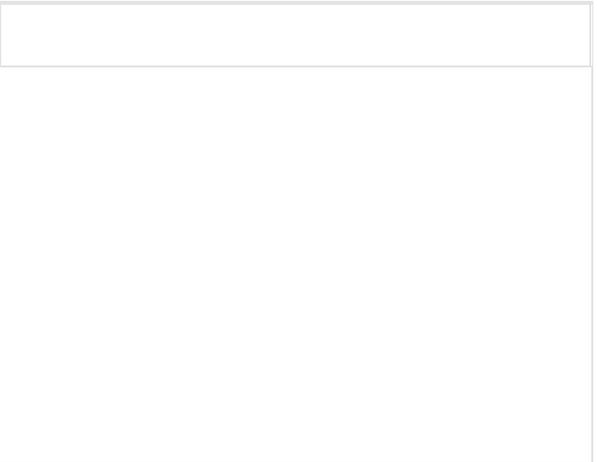
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