



Mariette in Ecstasy

By Ron Hansen
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Introduction It is August, 1906. The Sisters of the Crucifixion are awakened--hours before dawn--to the knocking of Sister Hermance's wooden castanets. She pauses a moment, and then shouts, "In Jesus Christ, my sisters, let us rise." And they do, one by one, each entering with a different ritual into another day of devotion. Soon, they will all gather in church to pray for their new postulant--Mariette. In a country house not far away, Mariette, only seventeen years old, esteems her young body in an upright mirror, and, "haunting" it with her hands, passionately offers it to God. In *Mariette in Ecstasy*, Ron Hansen conveys with breathtaking clarity the essence of a life lived within a religious order--a life punctuated by fervent, prayerful whispers; by Gregorian Chants; or by the caw of a crow somewhere beyond the church windows. With prose as spare as the unadorned halls of the Sisters of Crucifixion convent, he tells a story that is rich and complex, provocative and fascinating, and, at times, terribly unsettling. Through Mariette Baptiste, a young, beautiful prioress among many older (some embittered) nuns, he explores the confounding mysteries surrounding rapturous devotion to the divine. Mariette enters the convent with a ceremony similar to that of a traditional Christian wedding. Wearing her mother's wedding dress and flanked by girlfriends, classmates, and villagers, she makes her way to the church. At the Church of Our Lady of Sorrow, she walks down a white runner to the prie-dieu. Amid the rite, the assessment of Mariette begins. Mother Saint-Raphael thinks that she is "too-pretty," but nonetheless, is pleased. Sister Honore glances at Mariette, thinking unwillingly of another sister who was expelled from the Motherhouse for tattooing the Sacred Heart on her chest. Sister Philomene is overwhelmed by feelings of inadequacy, and prays for the grace to be just like Mariette.

Indeed, Mariette's presence in the priory has an immediate--and eventually profound--affect on the quiet, introspective nuns. Her devotion to Jesus is complete, and her reputation for lapsing into episodes of prayerful "ecstasy" inspires in her fellow sisters both reverent awe and bitter jealousy. Jesus appears to Mariette often, and they hope that by being close to her they are closer to him. They are jealous because each one of them--craving that intimate connection with Jesus--has sacrificed the worldly pleasures of the outside for a cloistered religious life. Why has he chosen Mariette, and not them? When Mariette's "ecstasy" culminates in a series of stigmata, the peace of the convent is irrevocably shattered, and the mysteries inherent in divine possession are starkly laid bare.

However tempting it may be to fixate on the question surrounding the authenticity of Mariette's stigmata, to do so would be to skin only the surface of Ron Hansen's haunting novel. There are more profound mysteries in *Mariette in Ecstasy*: What feeds the human compulsion to connect with the divine? How closely related are religious rapture and sexual ecstasy? And why, through the ages, have we persistently searched and yearned for miracles? Ron Hansen doesn't presume to know the answers to these questions, and we, too, can only wonder. But by offering readers this exquisite, unnerving novel, he does suggest that that life abounds with mysteries richer than anything the human mind can easily comprehend. And that should be the only answer we need. **Questions for Discussion**

1. Was the time in which the novel took place, 1906, incidental or was it essential to the narrative? If it had been written in the present day, would the story have been different? How? Do you think that society was more prone to believe in miracles at the turn-of-the-century than today? Has our desire for the miraculous increased or decreased with time? Why or why not?
2. Hansen meticulously wove into the narrative detail about the natural world surrounding the convent. Why do you think he did this? What effect did it have on the tone of the novel? Are there any other techniques that he used to set the mood of the convent that you found particularly effective?
3. Discuss Mariette's relationship with her father. Do you think that she replaced him with Jesus because she was devout, or because there was discomfort in her relationship with him? If you sensed discomfort, where do you think it came from?
4. Was her sister, Annie, wrong for remaining so distant from Mariette when she entered the convent? How did her family ties to her sister affect her assimilation into the culture of the convent? Do you think that it was a coincidence that they both chose a religious life?
5. At one point in the novel, during "evening recreation," Mariette and Sister Genevieve perform a playlet that they have written from the bible. The scene (pg. 82-83) is a romantic exchange between a bride and a bridegroom. How did its performance affect the sisters watching it? Did they find it inappropriate? Did you find it inappropriate? In general, how do the sisters express their sexuality in the convent?
6. One of the themes of the novel is the relationship between sexual desire and religious ecstasy. Have the sisters' sexualized their devotion to Jesus? How? Did you notice that some of the nuns fixated on the physical manifestation of Jesus? Did it affect their dispositions?
7. What do you think inspires someone to choose a life of religious devotion? Is it an escape? Are the reasons for selecting this course in life different for men than they are for women? How? Are they different for individuals of different religions?
8. Many of the sisters were jealous of Mariette. Why? Is it surprising that such a physically painful experience--stigmata--implies holiness? Do you think that the individuals that experience it are blessed or cursed?
9. How did you feel about Mariette? Do you believe that a person can be so consumed by religious ecstasy that they precipitate "miracles"? Do you believe in miracles?
10. Why do you think that Ron Hansen chose to end the novel the way in which he did? Was it realistic? Is it possible to return to a normal life after experiencing what Mariette experienced? Did her post-convent life seem "normal" or was she, in spirit, still devoted only to Jesus? Did it change how you felt about the authenticity of the event that unfolded in the convent?

About the Author: "I am challenged when I write from a woman's perspective or set my work in a historical period, because there is so much more that I have to imagine" says Ron Hansen. Hansen has been imaging fictional worlds since his childhood in Nebraska. His first two novels, *Desperadoes* and *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, retell Wild West legends. His other novels are *Hitler's Niece* and *Atticus*, which was a finalist for the National Book Award. *Nebraska*, a collection of short stories, received an Award in Literature from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. He also wrote the screenplays for *Mariette in Ecstasy* and for Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. Hansen graduated from Creighton University in Omaha, and went on to the University of Iowa's Writers' Workshop where he studied with John Irving. He is now Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J., Professor in Arts and Humanities at Santa Clara University in northern California. Hansen earned a Masters degree in spirituality from Santa Clara in 1995.