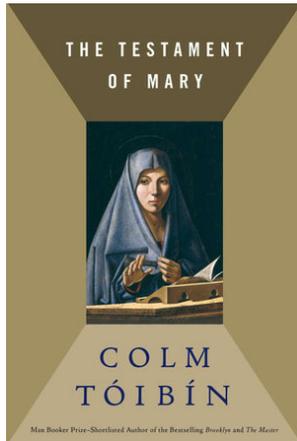


The story of Mary, ever mother



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The Testament of Mary

By Colm Tóibín

Scribner. 96 pp. \$19.99.

Reviewed by Helen W. Mallon

After the silent night came a cataclysm.

Colm Tóibín's novella *The Testament of Mary* highlights the microscopic, personal aspect of Christianity's earthshaking beginnings. In this daring interpretation, he takes a behind-the-icon approach to Mary, the Catholic embodiment of perfection. This book is one in which the name *Jesus* does not appear. It's not essentially about faith, yet it was cannily written in response to the juggernaut of 2,000 years of organized religion.

His imagined Mary could be any woman forced to live as a pawn, and this is the strength of Tóibín's vision. Speaking 20 years after the crucifixion, she tells her side of the story.

Mary lives in hiding because those who murdered Jesus still seek her "silence" in death. Conversely, the "minders" and "guards" who regularly visit her (Bible

students will search for clues as to their apostolic identities) "are looking for my voice" as they relentlessly question her.

Tóibín's Mary is racked with guilt, depressed, the pawn of "impatient" men (her "minders") who protect her in exchange for what interests them. Their work is to prove that her son is the Son of God. But Mary holds fiercely to her identity as a failed mother, insisting on the truth: She abandoned him, fleeing the hill of crucifixion to save her own life.

"I never saw his grave, I never washed his body," she protests, but she is countered by an implacable narrative: "You were there. You held his body when it was taken down from the cross." The implication is that those in power have the ability to impose their version of reality on the world.

Mary's battle is also, poignantly, with time:

If water can be changed into wine and the dead can be brought back, then I want time pushed back. I want to live again before my son's death happened, or before he left home, when he was a baby and his father was alive and there was ease in the world. I want one of those golden Sabbath days. . . .

In this respect, the book focuses not on religion, but rather on the act of holding on to one's own truth, no matter how unpalatable, even if no one will listen, even if it is self-damaging. One of Tóibín's oft-explored themes is the complicated relationship between mothers and sons. Here Mary longs for the irretrievable past before her son grew up to become

a man not heeding me, hearing no one, a man filled with power, a power that seemed to have no memory of years before, when he needed my breast for milk

Mothers, can you relate?

Tóibín cuts to an important question for believers and unbelievers alike. By causing a central figure in the Gospel story to speak as the ultimate outsider, he challenges us to examine the extent to which human beings are determined to create God in their own image. The presence of very real and frankly disturbing supernatural elements in the story suggests that the veracity of the Gospel accounts is not at issue. Rather, the book is about clinging. Mary clings to the jeweled summer of her son's childhood, while her guardians *think I do not see the point of their questions or notice the cruel shadow of exasperation that comes hooded in their faces . . . when I say something vague or foolish, something which leads us nowhere. When I seem not to remember what they think I must remember. They are too locked into their vast insatiable needs*

The Testament of Mary is not a Gospel, which literally means "good news." It is one dark tale, but Mary holds to it with integrity and without expectation of reward. She is ruthless in her refusal to be consoled by "dreams" of resurrection:

I tell the truth not because it will change night into day or make the days endless in their beauty. . . . I speak simply because I can.

Yet she is heard only by the four silent walls of the house where she is held. Her story calls to mind another dark account from the Bible, a passage from the Old Testament, quoted as prophetic in the Book of Matthew:

Thus saith the Lord; A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children; she refuseth to be comforted for her children, because they are not.

Refusing consolation is not necessarily against religion.

Helen W. Mallon's short stories appear at <http://bit.ly/HWMStories>.