

*The anchoress: A Novel*, by Robyn Cadwallader. New York, NY: Sarah Crichton Books, 2015. Pp. 320. ISBN: 9780374104252 (cloth).

ROBYN CADWALLADER'S *The Anchoress* is a book-length study, crafted in fiction and set in thirteenth-century England, of Virginia Woolf's assertion that "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction."

Sarah, the titular seventeen-year-old anchoress, chooses enclosure to escape the outside world after the death of her sister in childbirth. Sarah retreats both from her grief and from the attentions of Thomas, son of Sir Geoffrey, the local lord. The daughter of a cloth merchant, Sarah proves a literate and thoughtful narrator. From the window that connects her cell to a small parlor we meet the townswomen, who are allowed to meet with her for guidance; from this window we also hear her confessor—initially the aged Father Peter—although we do not see him, as Sarah is forbidden to put herself in sight of men. A second window introduces us to her two maids, the elderly, cantankerous Louise and the young, exuberant Anna, with whose spiritual and moral care Sarah is charged. Notably, Sarah has negotiated a room of her own—in addition to her upkeep and that of her maids—by trading the promise of prayers for financial support. The ailing Sir Geoffrey, in exchange for Sarah's prayers, gifts land to the local priory so that the priory will support her. This complex legal setup is expertly explained by Cadwallader's narrative; furthermore, the requisite paperwork becomes part of the intricate web of written documents that unobtrusively inform and advance the narrative. Cadwallader, who wrote her doctoral thesis on St. Margaret of Antioch, brings a scholar's expertise and a novelist's artisanship to the details, yet it is notably the viewpoint of a writer—academic, creative, or otherwise—that consistently shines through in this, her first novel.

Initially the writer's impulse is conveyed through Ranaulf, the monk, priest, and scribe who inherits the role of Sarah's confessor from Father Peter. Ranaulf is introduced as an alternate point-of-view character to Sarah, and initially he interacts with her as a writer only. Commissioned to write a *Life of St. Margaret* for the anchoress, he adds elements to the story that he considers instructive. The additions provide an enactment of what medievalists have long argued about scribes: that they changed the texts they recorded and often copied as they saw fit. Indeed, Ranaulf has no editor overseeing his work for what a modern audience might consider "accuracy." At times bogged down with more mundane copyist tasks, Ranaulf makes it clear that he has settled into the rural priory that supports Sarah's anchorhold so that he can lay claim to his own space to write, and he accepts the scribal tasks as part of the deal. For the writerly reader,

it is difficult not to empathize with Ranaulf in this respect, although his own ability to empathize and sympathize with those around him is at first stunted.

Once he is appointed Sarah's confessor, Ranaulf finds his requisite interaction with Sarah and incidental encounters with the villagers he must pass to access the anchorhold to be a burden. He hears Sarah's confession as authoritatively as possible, offering only penance as remedy for Sarah's very substantial problems. Many of these involve Sir Thomas, who had pursued her prior to her enclosure. He pursues her still, but with more power at his disposal, and, when Sarah is inaccessible, turns his unwanted attention on her maid, Anna. Anna's plight ends in tragedy and, in a trans-period echo of current victim-blaming responses to sexual assault, potential punishment for Sarah, who is held responsible for the maid's spiritual and moral well-being. In addition to these very present concerns, Sarah is also haunted by the past. This includes the trauma of losing her sister, but also Sarah is deeply affected by the ghostlike presence of the two anchoresses who held her cell before her, both of whom come to serve as polar exempla for Sarah. Sister Agnes, who by all accounts fulfilled her vows and lived out her days in the cell through displays of inhuman self-abnegation, lies buried beneath the cell floor. Isabella, the most recent anchoress, broke her vows to leave the tiny, isolated cell and then mysteriously disappeared. Sarah finds herself torn between the drive to deny/escape her (woman's) body as a sign of her devotion to God and the desire to break her vows and escape her cell.

Sarah's practical and spiritual plights eventually engage Ranaulf's sympathy, driving him to discover what happened to Isabella. As the priory documents offer little record, Ranaulf must turn to the villagers for Isabella's story. At first insistent on dates—with annals and records as his writing models—Ranaulf later decides that he instead needs a proper "story." Here Cadwallader demonstrates the process by which multiple first-person accounts are melded into what the modern reader might see as a standard narrative, but which the novel itself has presented through only legal documents, rules, and saints' lives. Cadwallader manages to contextualize Ranaulf's composition of Isabella's story as something new for him: the story of a decided non-saint. The initial purpose of composing Isabella's story is to provide Sarah with protection against any action from the bishop, who, we learn, physically beat Isabella before she fled and disappeared. However, events outside the anchorhold unfold that render Sarah safe from both the bishop and Sir Thomas and ensure her continued financial support. More importantly, perhaps, Sarah's cell undergoes a dramatic overhaul as both the villagers and priory agree to append a walled garden to her cell. Given access to the open sky once more, as well as a space to more directly interact with

the female denizens of the village, Sarah is able to reconcile her competing allegiances to both Agnes's dedication and Isabella's quest for freedom. Now that she can leave her own room, she can choose to stay inside it.

At this point Cadwallader also reconciles the split allegiances that an academic, a novelist, or a writer of any kind might have between Sarah and Ranaulf: now that Sarah has an appropriate room of her own, one that she truly chooses, she ponders Isabella's story—left to her by Ranaulf for safe keeping—and decides that she will take up writing. *What* she will write is left unsaid—we do not know if Sarah will write fiction—yet it is a fitting close to this novel to leave that choice for Sarah to make on her own.

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