

APPARITIONS OF THE VIRGIN MARY
IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION

by

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Called apparitions, the widespread phenomenon of appearances of Mary has been reported to occur since the apostle St. James the Greater roamed Spain, and it continues to this day. A folklore and following has developed surrounding her apparitions to the laity, poor, uneducated and young occurring, especially, in modern times. Contemporary authors have reinterpreted Mary and these apparitions in order to explore and understand their meaning.

This thesis reviews both the history of Marian devotion and theology, and it narrates major, modern apparitions. It further examines how apparitions of Mary are portrayed in the three contemporary novels Our Lady of the Lost and Found by Diane Schoemperlen, Bernardo and the Virgin by Silvio Sirias and Our Lady of the Forest by David Guterson. These novels show the traditional representations of Mary and how this tradition is reinterpreted in a post-modern and contemporary lens: they portray the suffering and liberation of the characters and author through their relationship with Mary.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my parents for their unconditional love and support and the Dominicans and community of the St. Thomas More Newman Center for their endless pursuit of “faith seeking understanding.”

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I. Introduction

"... Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you." Luke 1:28, NAB

A simple list of her names flows like a litany: She is

Mary, Maria, Marie,
Miriam of Nazareth,
Mother of Jesus,
Mother of God,
The Blessed Virgin Mary,
Woman,
The New Eve,
Queen of Heaven,
Queen of Peace,
Star of the Sea,
Mediatix,
Mother of Wisdom and Hope.

She has survived more image changes than any other Madonna in history. To the early Christian monk: she was the pure virgin and Mother of God dedicated to following God's will. To the medieval faithful: she is "the Queen," "the Mother of All," the miracle-worker. To the reformist: she is a shameful idol. To the artist: She is the ultimate muse. To the feminist: she is an oppressive, idealized figure. To the female theologian: she is to be rewritten as the woman of liberation. To Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan: she is the "Woman for All Seasons," ready for reinterpretation at each century (Pelikan 21).

No matter how she is reinterpreted or re-understood, the vote is clear: no single human woman of any religion has received more devotion than Mary. Muslims honor her in the Qur'an, Orthodox Christians who are primarily in the East revere her, and more, now, than in Western Christendom. In the Occident she has had a great influence on politics, art and daily life, more than any other female figure. Mary has been the most honored and revered woman in the entire world for two millennia.

For Roman Catholics, Mary is a woman not only of the past but also of the present. They believe God designated her with a preeminent role in salvation by removing — at the moment of her conception — the stain of original sin, thus rendering her the only woman worthy of bringing God incarnate into the world. Mary, as the new Eve, also represents Christ's bride. Similarly, Christ was chosen her to assume the role of his faithful mother and wear the crown as his Queen in the Kingdom of God. For Catholics and Orthodox Christians, all the saints — or holy people united with Christ in eternal life — are able to intercede in a powerful way and pray to God for His mercy and goodness to reign on earth. The Queen of the Saints is Mary who is believed to have a much closer relationship to the Trinitarian God than all other followers of Christ.

This thesis will focus on Mary's visible appearance to her followers. Called apparitions, these appearances have been reported to occur since the apostles began to evangelize the world. One of Mary's first reported apparition was to the apostle Saint James the Greater in Saragossa, Spain, where James built the first chapel in her honor. Mary has appeared in order to encourage the Christian faithful, to direct them, to chastise them and to give them a visual taste of eternal life. The widespread phenomenon of Marian apparitions continues to this day. Mary reportedly appears at to people of all ages and even different creeds all over the world, but mostly she appears to her simple, humble and devoted faithful.

According to the Roman Catholic Church, these apparitions are *not* part of God's public revelation of scripture and tradition carried on through the seat of Saint Peter the Apostle. They are not a necessary tenet of faith, but rather, apparitions are *private* revelations, much like the experiences and wisdom of the mystics. News of these

revelations often spread to the curious and faithful and a following ensued that knew no bounds. Inspired to proselize their faith or to warn the world of its sinfulness, followers narrate and interpret the apparitions. This popular folklore of Mary's supposed message — which is subversive, conflicting or aligned with the teachings of the Catholic Church — is spread through all the forms of media. The Catholic Church steps in to approve or disapprove of the reported apparitions according to the message's orthodoxy and guide the faithful. The local bishop has the authority to judge. An approved apparition gains a legitimate cult and gains the church's allowance to distribute materials and pray and worship at the site. It could, for example, name a new church after the apparition. A disapproved apparition is supposed to shut down, stop a cult following of the apparition and eliminate the distribution of its messages.

Apparitions, thus, have a unique relationship with the Catholic Church. She is reported to have appeared to many religious brothers and sisters, saints and popes. However, folklore and following has developed around her apparitions to the laity, poor, uneducated and young occurring, especially, in modern times. These apparitions can make the educated and powerful of the church jealous who do not understand why Mary would appear to such simple people. Furthermore, Mary is side-stepping the sacraments and tradition of the Church to communicate directly with the faithful or to those who are humble and powerless both in society and in the church. Operating outside of both the sacraments and tradition of the church, these apparitions express the liberating theology of Mary's Magnificat: "He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones but lifted up the lowly. The hungry he has filled with good things; the rich he has sent away empty" (Luke

1:46-55 NAB). The Marian apparitions suggest Mary is the Mother of Mercy who seeks to have contact with all of “her children.”

This thesis will review both the history of Marian devotion and theology and narrate major, modern apparitions. This background will provide a greater historical context for the person of Mary, the development of her cult in theology and devotion in order to help the reader understand the two-thousand year process of interpreting Mary.

The apparition narratives are essential to the reader’s comprehension of these novels’ cultural context as they form the pool of folklore from which authors draw. In the third and final section I will examine how apparitions of Mary are portrayed in the three contemporary novels Our Lady of the Lost and Found by Diane Schoemperlen, Bernardo and the Virgin by Silvio Sirias and Our Lady of the Forest by David Guterson. These novels show the traditional representations of Mary and how this tradition is reinterpreted in a post-modern and contemporary lens: they portray the suffering and liberation of the characters and author through their relationship with Mary.

II. Background on the Theology and Devotion of the Virgin Mary

Stories of the Historical Mary

She began simply as Miriam. Carrying a common Hebrew name, she was raised as a faithful Jewish girl in Nazareth during the Roman occupation. Thomas Aquinas, Doctor of the Catholic Church, has reasoned that God predestined her to be without sin, already being saved through the redemptive suffering of her son. When an angel appeared to Mary, a young adolescent, and announced her miraculous pregnancy, Mary was shocked: “How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?” she asked (Luke 1, 34 NAB). Yet Mary’s response to the angel’s life-altering proclamation that she would give birth to a child called the Son of God was willful obedience: “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word” (Luke 1, 38 NAB). Eve’s disobedience with Adam brought sin and death into the world. Mary — through opening her lips and her body to correspond with the will of God — became a co-creator of God incarnate. Through her motherhood of Jesus, Mary ushered in redemption and the promise of eternal life. Upon greeting her pregnant, older cousin Elizabeth, Mary celebrates with joy and thanksgiving for the surprise of new life in her womb: “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my savior, for he has looked upon his handmaid’s lowliness; behold, from now on will all ages call me blessed” (Luke 1, 46-8 NAB). These few lines, echoing the words of Hannah from the Hebrew Bible, are Mary’s manifesto proclaiming her joy, God’s mercy and goodness to the poor and meek and, still unknown to her, her preeminent role in Christian salvation. Beginning at this annunciation of the birth of Jesus Christ, Mary becomes an active participant in the Christian mystery and the spiritual mother of all followers of her son.

Her life is one of the greatest adventure stories ever told. It is full of love, surprise, tragedy and redemption. The story is pieced together from the different perspectives of the recorded Gospel writers Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. According to the biblical story by Matthew, her husband-to-be Joseph was also full of doubt and worry that his fiancée would be pregnant. In this time, he has the right to disown her or stone her, but he is also visited by an angel who reveals to him the incarnation. Joseph chooses to wed Mary, and to become the father to her child. They are forced by the Romans' census to return to their place of origin. In the Gospel of Luke, Mary gives birth to her son in a cave and is visited both by simple shepherds and great wise men searching for them from afar. Then Joseph flees with his family to Egypt to prevent infant Jesus from being killed by the jealous governor, Herod. In keeping with the traditions of her faith, Mary later presents her son in the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, where she is told that her own soul will be pierced by a sword. When she visits the temple once again, with her child Jesus, she loses him for three days. Upon finding him, Jesus is teaching to the elders in the temple, speaking his mind about the business of his Father in heaven.

Then the story skips ahead to when Mary encourages her son to begin his adult ministry. In the Gospel of John, Mary is with him at a great wedding feast, when she tells him the servants have no more wine. Jesus responds, "Woman, how does your concern affect me? My hour has not yet come," yet Mary tells the servants to obey him, and Jesus miraculously turns water into wine (John 2, 4 NAB). Mary is among the crowds when Jesus performs other miracles. In the Gospel of John, his mother is there beside him, at his gruesome, shameful death; when he is tortured, humiliated and killed. In the story of the Acts of the Apostles, she is there among his disciples in the upper room at Pentecost

when the third person of the Trinitarian God, the Holy Spirit, descends upon them in the form of a dove, and when the disciples spoke in many tongues. It was assumed that Mary lived in the Christian community of Ephesus and was cared for by Jesus' beloved apostle John, to whom Jesus entrusted his mother at his crucifixion. This is the known life of Mary as recorded in the canon of the Gospels of the Christian Bible.

Mary and the Early Church

The early Christian theologians were most interested in questioning and debating the person of Jesus to rationally uncover his nature; this Christology would lead them to understanding Mary and her role in salvation. The first known description of Mary as *Theotokos*, meaning God-bearer or Mother of God, was Hippolytus of Rome (d. 235). Nestorius, the Patriarch of Constantinople, later disputed the attribution of this title. Applying classical dualistic thought to Christianity, Nestorius argued, "the Son of God is one thing, the son of Mary another, in the sense that he sees in Christ two persons: one Divine (Logos), and the other human (Jesus)" (Dictionary 333). Thereby, Mary could not be called "Mother of God" because she did not give birth to the Divine but the earthly Jesus. According to the Dictionary of Mary, a council of bishops gathered together in 431 C.E. at Ephesus to officially debate the exact physical and spiritual nature of Jesus. The Council defined and defended Christ as being both fully human and fully divine; it condemned Nestorius and his followers; it further confirmed Mary as the vessel for the Incarnation of God. This theological development set the stage for an understanding of the spiritual motherhood of Mary.

After its first era of persecution ended, Christianity sought to express itself; it borrowed traditions and patterns of thought from the classical world and assimilated with Mediterranean culture. Elizabeth Johnson, female theologian and author of Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints, writes, “The church was not fashioned in a vacuum, but absorbed many of these assumptions, verbal and visual imagery, and rituals of the surrounding culture into its own theology and liturgy” (Johnson 73). Early Christians attempted to redirect worship of the female goddesses of the Hellenistic mystery cults and the Mediterranean Great Mother Goddess of fertility. Christianity emphasized veneration of Mary as the human mother of Jesus, and it emphasized her virginity in contrast to the fecund sexuality of the locals’ goddesses. As Christianity replaced the pagan religions, the image of Mary became a powerful evangelistic force that resonated with a culture whose female goddesses played prevailing roles. For example, in Chartes, Druids worshipped a protective mother goddess in grottoes which connected to a sacred spring. Early Christians adapted the Druid cult to a place of Christian worship dedicated to the Virgin Mary. On the same site as the spring a church has stood since at least the fourth century. In some cases, Johnson believes that Mary, though a mere woman, was worshipped as the feminine face of God. While Christianity emphasized God the Father, Mary was sometimes misconstrued as God the Mother.

Marina Warner, author of the 1970s classic Alone of All her Sex, wrote that in Hellenistic culture, virgin goddesses were great, alone and independent from male rule. “Temple virgins like the vestals were forbidden intercourse during their period of office largely because their exalted position gave them political powers that might be abused by

a lover” (Warner 48). Applying this concept to Mary empowers her with the freedom to be obedient to God alone. Following her powerful witness of virginity would allow new Christians to seek a white martyrdom of ascetic self-denial, as opposed to a red martyrdom of death. Through consecrated celibacy and monastic life, Christian women could also seek liberty from a slave-like state of marriage, and both men and women could live free from the seductions of the flesh. The Patristic Fathers developed an idealized notion of Mary’s unique status as both mother and virgin that often negated women’s own creation in the likeness of God. Warner argues that the early idealization of her virginity and feminine qualities leads to the subjection of the female sex. This “Woman for All Seasons” is both worshipped and venerated; she is both empowering and subjecting.

In 787 C.E., the Church leaders gathered again in an ecumenical conference in Nicea to put to an end to the heresy of iconoclasm — the destruction of religious icons, statues and images — and to legitimize the veneration of images of Christ, the Virgin Mary and the saints. The triumph of orthodoxy, along with new political and religious tranquility in the Roman Empire launched an era of religious development and new Marian expressions in art.

The Cult of the Virgin Mary

From the eighth century to the end of the fifteenth century, the “cult of the Virgin Mary” began to grow and flourish. Due to the gradual estrangement of the church in the East and West and the schism of 1053 C.E., Marian piety continued to develop in separate directions. “The East” maintained its great traditions and devotion to Mary in a

reverent and mysterious light. According to the University of Dayton's Marian Institute, Eastern Christianity emphasized a mystical connection between the visible paint of icons and the holy persons represented. After having survived the iconoclast period of the eighth and ninth centuries, the Eastern Christian Church had a penchant for icons of "Mother and Child." One of its most loved icons is "Our Lady of Vladimir." Called *Eleousa*, the Greek word for Mother of Tenderness, the image dates to 1125 C.E. (Frisk 1). Robed in gold, the child Jesus gazes lovingly at his mother while touching his hand to her cheek and pressing his cheek against hers. Mary continues to embrace him with love and tenderness as her pensive eyes sadly gaze forward as they foresee his Passion. Three golden stars signify her virginity before, during and after Jesus' birth. The icon — written during a time of fasting, silence and chastity — is also known as "The Soul of Russia" (Frisk 1). For six hundred years this icon has remained close to the hearts of Russian faithful. Rome-based Catholicism, on the other hand, emphasized more tangible aspects of holy images, such as the solidarity of a group of the faithful or the history of miracles associated with them.

From the fifth through the fifteenth centuries, European theologians launched an era of theology called scholasticism which relied upon dialectical reasoning. The scholastics were eager to define everything, from the number of angels that can fit on a pin head to Mary's exact state of grace. Dominican Thomas Aquinas was hesitant about her Immaculate Conception. He worried that allowing Mary's pre-redemption would detract from the universality of Christ's redemption of the human race. Franciscan Duns Scotus proposed that Mary was fully redeemed from the beginning of her life. Rather than being

liberated from sin through baptism and faith, Mary was *preserved* from sin through the honor of being *Theotokos* (Dictionary 85).

Contemporary female theologian Johnson believes many followers renamed Mary as the maternal face of God when the practice of theology and the faith became increasingly masculinized. Medieval mystics, reading the erotic language of the Song of Songs, were inspired in sensual interpretations of Mary. Some wrote of drinking drops of holy milk from the breasts of Mary that would give them nourishment for eternal life. At this time, titles and lauds were packed onto Mary and litanies of Mary claiming her virtues grew in length and popularity. At this time, theologians universally believed that such honors “redounded to the glory of God, who ‘himself’ so honored Mary (Johnson 77). Perhaps these honors helped believers to perceive God in female terms. Some believers found Mary more accessible than God. Popular sayings suggest devotion to Mary leads followers closer to Jesus. One says that if Christ is the head of the body, then Mary is the neck.

The gothic cathedral — a commanding symbol of the Western Christian faith during the Middle Ages — is the place where Mary is most clearly honored. The holy ground of Chartes was chosen to house the alleged relic of the tunic which Mary wore when she gave birth to Jesus. The relic’s survival of a massive fire in the cathedral there was taken as an indicator to build an even more magnificent church of gothic architecture, intricate stained glass, a labyrinth and “sacred geometry.” All the elements of the cathedral were used to inspire the illiterate commoners and educate them in the faith. The great heights lifted their eyes to God, the stained glass windows, statues and stonework instructed them in the Bible and the lives of saints; the entire artistic endeavor served as a window to

meditation on the Divine. It was a place for the community to gather together in worship; this gathering is evident even beforehand as both rich and poor came together as equals to build the massive cathedral. During its rebuilding from 1194 to 1223 C.E. even French nobles carried loads of heavy stones to build the Cathedral, which is celebrated for its rose window and blue luminescent interior. Of the construction, Abbot Haimon of Saint-Pierre-sur-Dives in Normandy wrote:

Who has ever seen! Who has ever heard tell, in all ages of the past that kings, princes, and lords, mighty in their generation, swollen with riches and honours, that men and women, I say, of noble birth have bowed their haughty necks to the yoke and harnessed themselves to carts like beasts of burden, and drawn them, laden with wine, corn, oil, stone, wood and other things needful for the maintenance of life or the construction of the church, even to the doors of the abode of Christ? But what is even more astonishing is that, although sometimes a thousand or more men and women are attached to one cart – so vast is the mass, so heavy the machine, so weighty the load – yet so deep a silence reigns that not a voice, not a whisper even can be heard. (Martin 67)

The construction of the cathedral itself engaged the bodies, minds and souls of every person in the community; rich and poor in honoring Mary and praising God. Dedicated to the Virgin Mary, Chartes and other cathedrals in Europe are holy sites where pilgrims traveled by foot and made processions while carrying famous Marian statues and paintings to honor her, repent and plead for her intercession. Many pilgrims started their sojourn late in life and the arduous trek eluded some. Perhaps in homes nearby the locals performed “miracle plays.” These plays are amusing and humble stories of man’s foolishness and Mary’s mercy and her sometimes, God-like power.

While the monks debated theology, Marian devotion became an important spiritual avenue for the people, and feasts of Mary’s birth, and the Annunciation and Purification were firmly established as part of the liturgical year. The new Dominican religious order spread adherence to meditating on the Christian mysteries through praying the rosary.

In the arts, the cult of Mary continues. As many craftsmen and artist offered their talents in order to praise God, some were commissioned to express devotion and wonder of Mary. Rich texts in Latin and the vernacular languages were written in some the greatest lyrics to praise and honor Mary. The Renaissance left a lastly legacy of devotion to Mary. At twenty-five, Michelangelo created his Pietà of a strong, tender, young Mary holding the lifeless body of her dead son. Fra Angelico, Botticelli, Raphael and Da Vinci created particularly stunning portraits of Mary and images from the life of Christ.

Mary: Reformed, Ignored and Renewed

On the 31 of October, 1517, Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk and doctor of theology set the hammer to the doors of the Castle Church in Wittenberg where he nailed a placard printed with his 95 complaints against the Roman Catholic Church — complaints which not only attacked the sale of indulgences from purgatory but the authority of the Church itself. Contrary to popular opinion, Martin Luther did remain devoted to Mary after he left the monastery. In his writings, he upheld predominant Catholic beliefs in Mary’s perpetual virginity, Immaculate Conception and Assumption into heaven. Because Luther advocated *sola scriptura*, he argued that belief in the Assumption and Mary’s perpetual virginity could not be required of Christians due to a lack of literal Biblical evidence. Luther venerated Mary but decried “excesses” in her celebration (Armstrong 1).

In the wake of the Reformation, hundreds of thousands were forced, or willingly joined, the Anglican Church and Lutheran, Calvinist and Protestant denominations. Europe was falling apart in war and dissent. Catholic shrines were desecrated and

destroyed, most notably in England. In abandoning Catholicism, the Protestants also abandoned the long tradition of reverence and devotion to Mary, mother of the church and of the Son of God.

On the other side of the Pacific, the flame of faith was about to be ignited. Fifteen months after Luther's hammer, thirty-four-year old Hernando Cortez left Cuba with his legion of six hundred men and sixteen horses and made history with every footstep. Cortez soon learned that Mexico's many tribal nations were governed by the tyrant Montezuma, "the Aztec whose grandfather had built an empire on a systematic tribute of gold and food and at the same time build a grisly mystique on wide-scale human sacrifice" (Martin 85). Along with conquering a subject people and pillaging their natural resources, Cortez opened the door for Spanish missionaries to spread Catholicism and Marian devotion to the Americas. Ultimately, it was not the Spanish, but an image of Mary that so rapidly spread the Catholic faith. The apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe and the resulting miraculous image of Mary assimilated indigenous beliefs with the Spanish faith. Following the apparition, a spiritual rebirth washed over Mexico as if John the Baptist himself was there. Eight million people were baptized in the same time period, in a "spectacular rebirth that represented the equivalent of as many conversions on each of 2,666 consecutive days as on the day of Pentecost itself, when three thousand hallelujah-shouting sinners joined the fold" (Martin, 85).

France would later become the bloody center of political and religious tensions. The religious wars of the sixteenth century and the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre pitted Protestant against Catholic in unprecedented gore. The French Revolution — proclaiming "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity" — and filled with ideas of the Enlightenment would

send the Catholic Church into the catacombs. In Paris, forty monks were taken outside of their left-bank monastery and executed in the streets. In a new period of iconoclasm, Churches were ransacked and seized to worship the Goddess of Reason. The Gregorian calendar was reset to the time of the Revolution. Many surviving priests, monks and nuns fled for Spain; Catholics went into hiding, and in some regions, Mass was not celebrated for over three years.

During the nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, Christianity was facing industrialization, nationalization, and secularization and atheist philosophers such as Nietzsche and Marx. Beginning with an apparition in 1830, Mary reportedly put her foot down, smashing the snake beneath her toes. In a Marian revival, apparitions occurred in record numbers. Four significant apparitions occurred in France and two in Belgium. Locals fled to these sites seeking a meaningful connection with the Divine. Congresses on Mary increased dramatically. Saint Louis de Montfort's fervent devotion to Mary was spread through the 1862 discovery of his book True Devotion to Mary.

The Catholic Church, standing firm against the pressures of the time, declared two Marian dogmas of long-held Catholic beliefs. In 1854, Pope Pius IX declared the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. Catholics must believe Mary to be preserved from original sin, beginning with the moment of her conception when Catholics believe the soul is created. In 1950, Pope Pius XII declared Mary's Assumption a dogma. He proclaimed that "having finished the course of her life on earth," Mary was "glorified in body and soul" (Dictionary 42). While affirming Mary's holiness and spiritual motherhood, these doctrines created a greater division between Catholicism and other Christians.

Contemporary Mary

Most recently, Pope John XXIII, who upon taking the papacy in his old age, figuratively opened all the doors and windows to air the Catholic Church. He called the Second Vatican Council, popularly known as Vatican II, which changed the mass from Latin to the vernacular tongue and breathed the energy of life into the Church. In the 1964 and 1974 documents *Lumen Gentium* and *Marialis Cultus*, the Church admonishes improper piety toward Mary, seeks to harmonize beliefs and practice, constricts the new modernist Mary to more Biblical interpretations, emphasizes Mary's relationship to the Trinity and Christ and acknowledges ecumenical problems Mary poses. The Queen of Heaven was not dethroned but placed in a quieter role with fewer lauds and less popular devotion. Liberated from the ideas of previous ages and cultures that interpreted Mary according to their structure, needs and desires, Mary is being recast through the contemporary perspectives of ecumenism, eco-feminism and liberation theology.

This is the known Mary of the Bible and academic and Church scholarship and tradition. Yet another Mary exists, a mystical Mary, who is more difficult to document and who has been casting a visual likeness before mankind for two millennia.

III. The Woman in the Sky

“A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.” Revelations 12:1 NAB

Phone Calls from Heaven

Apparitions are like a telephone call: “they are a personal message, received and communicated in a personal way” (Roten 1). As apparitions of Mary gained cults, the Roman Catholic Church sought to exercise its authority and guide the faithful’s beliefs. The local bishop is the first judge the merit of an apparition. These manifestations are judged on a variety of factors, including documentation and orthodoxy of the message and image. While the church issues a positive, negative or neutral statement of an apparition, approval is not proof of its supernatural origin, nor is belief a binding aspect of the universal Roman Catholic faith. The Church is slow and deliberate in judging apparitions, waiting sometimes decades to affirm them: waiting to judge a tree by its fruits.

The seers themselves are often poor and young, as in the “classical” apparitions from 1830 – 1933, but they have also been adults, male and female, married and consecrated celibates such as nuns, monks and priests. Some have seen Mary once, as in Pontmain, France, while others count daily visions for over a fourteen-year span, like those in Medjugorje, Bosnia-Herzegovina. The visionaries often doubt the apparitions and their sanity and sometimes even entertain the possibility of a diabolical experience. The purity of their message is sometimes distorted into their own imagination or desires; intellectual or emotional state might color their reporting. Their families often fail to

believe them and they are often persecuted as lunatics, liars and traitors to the government.

Our Lady of Guadalupe

In 1531, only fourteen years after Luther's hammer, something happened in Mexico that would forever change the face of Christian faith in the Americas. Juan Diego, a small, recently converted 57-year old, married, indigenous man was walking his usual 13 miles to worship at the missionary church. In what is considered the first Marian apparition of modern times, Juan Diego, on December 9, 1531, saw a woman resembling a native on the hill where the native Mexicans venerated the goddess Tonantzin.

The woman spoke to Juan Diego in the Nahatl language and called herself "mother of the true God from whom all life comes" (Roten 2). She sent Juan Diego to the Spanish bishop to ask for a sanctuary to be built at the bottom of the hill. Juan Diego persistently requested an audience the bishop several times but was ignored because he was an unimportant, small, indigenous man, because there were other people to see. After the fourth apparition, Juan Diego's uncle was cured, and Diego went to the bishop carrying flowers that had miraculously appeared on the barren site of Tepeyac. Carrying them in his tilma, a mantle woven from strong fibers of hemp, he placed them before the bishop. There, on the front of his mantle, a portrait of Mary miraculously produced. According to Guadalupe expert Monsignor Virgilio Elizondo explains that, "In the Indian cultures of that time, the tilma was the exterior expression of the innermost identity of the person. By being visible on Juan Diego's tilma, Mary became imprinted in the deepest recesses of

his heart -- and in the hearts of all who come to her” (Samaha 1). The bishop quickly built a church at the hills where the apparition took place and placed on high the beautiful image.

Our Lady of Guadalupe was named by Rome as the Patroness of the Americas. Mary in the portrait has dark indigenous skin, and it is full of symbolic meaning for the natives. That Mary appeared to the poor and indigenous rather than the Spanish colonizers and missionaries is seen as an affirmation of their worth and dignity in the eyes of God. This gift echoed the words of Mary’s fiat, “He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones but lifted up the lowly; the hungry he has filled with good things” was available for all to see (Luke 1, 52-3 NAB).

Today the portrait is used as a reminder, as a rallying cry by religious and political groups. This image of Mary is ever-present in Mexico, and Guadalupe is sometimes worshipped as a goddess in her own right. Five hundred years later, the portrait can still be seen in a shrine near Mexico City.

Mary Conceived without Sin

The most recognized apparitions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries took place in France, Belgium, Portugal, and Yugoslavia. In 1830, Mary first appeared in the chapel of the convent of the Sisters of Charity along the street Rue du Bac in a poverty-stricken quarter on the left bank of Paris, France. Mary appeared above the altar to the 24-year-old religious sister Catherine Labouré and told her to cast a medal. The image on the front was to be the Virgin Mary holding out her hands, lifting her eyes to the sky, and stepping on a globe while crushing the head of a serpent with her foot. Rays of light

streaming from her hands were to represent the abundant graces she obtains from God for those who ask for them. Mary told Labouré that the globe represented the entire world. The greatest amount of rays fall on France, which was still suffering the effects of its violent, anti-clerical revolution. Around the edge of the medal would be etched, “O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee.” On the backside are the sacred hearts of Jesus pierced by a crown of thorns and the sacred heart of Mary, pierced by a sword. In the center are an interwoven cross and the letter M, and all are encircled by twelve stars. The medal was cast, and it quickly became known as miraculous for the many blessings its bearers received. While millions of medals were spread worldwide, the sister kept her identity as a secret until just before her death. This apparition is said to prefigure the Lourdes apparition, where Mary explicitly affirms the new doctrine of the Immaculate Conception.

University of Oregon scholar Barbara Corrado Pope analyzed the image of nineteenth century Mary crushing the head of the snake with her foot demonstrates that “while the outstretched arms of the Immaculate Conception promised mercy to the faithful, the iconography of this widely distributed of Marian images also projected a militant and defiant message that through Mary the church would defeat its enemies” (Corrado Pope 177). Neither the sacraments, the hierarchy nor the pope would defeat the sin and struggles of the world, but Mary.

Our Lady of Lourdes

On a cold, rainy day in February 1858, in a grotto in the Pyrenees Mountains, Mary appeared to a fourteen-year-old poverty-stricken, illiterate shepherdess named Bernadette

Soubirous. Bernadette and her family were loving and devout, but were outcasts from the peasant village of Lourdes and lived in a hovel called "The Jail." Bernadette believed in God, but struggled to understand the concept of the Trinity. Because of her lack of education, she had not been allowed to receive first Holy Communion. Detailed extensively by Father René Laurentin in Bernadette and other books, Bernadette witnessed eighteen Marian apparitions. Bernadette, while collecting a crowd behind her, initially could not even convince her own family. She remained steadfast through inquisition and persecution by the town's police and the parochial priest and local bishop. During one apparition, which occurred before a large crowd, Mary asked Bernadette to eat dirt and drink water from a muddy puddle. Despite speculation from the crowd of a Marian apparition, Bernadette only identified the apparition as "aquero," a dialect word meaning "that lady." During the final apparition, Mary told Bernadette "Que soy era Immaculada Councepciou" in Spanish, a language she did not know. The girl ran straight to her priest to tell him the phrase completely unknowing its meaning. Four years after the papal declaration of Mary's freedom from sin, this apparition is seen to affirm church dogma.

The visionary is now canonized as an official saint, and the Catholic Church has approved the apparition. That muddy puddle also turned into a spring, and although scientifically proven to be nothing more than hydrogen and oxygen, the water has been the source of over 4,000 recorded cures of people who have drunk or bathed in the water and sixty-six cures been officially certified as miraculous -- meaning that there is no other possible explanation for the complete and almost immediate healing of their recorded physical ailments for which there are no known cures. One of the largest pilgrimage sites

world-wide, over five million people have visited Lourdes, which has since criticized recently for its commercialization (Zimdars-Swartz, 211). The original village is now swarming with souvenir booths, hotels and restaurants. Lourdes is a major train stop and has its own airport as people make pilgrimages for thanksgiving, penance, healing and hope.

Bernadette was hunted by the press and faithful, and sought refuge in a religious community in Nevers, France, where she assisted in the infirmary and was hidden from the eye of the public and even visiting priests. Regarded as curious, even by her sisters in Christ, she suffered from asthma and poor health. She died at age thirty-five.

Our Lady of Fatima

In 1917, totalitarianism was taking over the country of Portugal, and the Church was losing footing to anti-clericalism and a sharp division of church and state. Mary appeared six times to three young peasant children in the fields of Fatima. She urged them to pray for peace and to pray the Rosary. In a miracle before a large crowd, the sun “danced” according to local tradition. Additionally, Mary had given three prophetic “secrets” to one of the peasant children Lucia. The first secret was a terrifying vision of hell. The second secret was a war more terrible than World War I, and the possible avoidance of this war through re-conversion of communist Russia to Mary.

The third secret was given to the pope and remained unopened until 1960. Some suggest a relationship exists between this third secret and the near-assassination of Pope John Paul II on the anniversary of the first Fatima apparition. On the 13 of May, 1981, the pope bent down to hug a girl wearing a small image of Our Lady of Fatima, just as a

Turkish man attempted his assassination, firing two bullets at his head. Both bullets missed him, but a third bullet hit his abdomen. John Paul — whose personal motto “Totally yours” is a dedication to Mary — has since visited Fatima, where one of the bullets was placed in Mary’s crown. Fatima’s message was praying the rosary for peace, in particular an end to communism. John Paul II played an integral role in ending communism in his home of Poland and through his early pontificate. For the faithful of the early twentieth century, Our Lady of Fatima provided a powerful message against the fearful forces of war and state-sponsored atheism in the world.

Our Lady of Medjugorje

For the Franciscans who established missions in the Balkans, it was long a struggle to maintain their churches against the Islamic East and changing regimes. The town of Medjugorje was a Catholic village on the forefront of a racially and religiously diverse battlefield, and it is was in this faithful place that Mary was reported to appear, beginning in May 1980. Mary’s first apparition occurred not long after a terrible civil war and ethnic cleansing began to destroy Yugoslavia, already embittered by centuries-long religious, political and ethnic struggles. Mary appeared to six children, warning them of the impending bloodshed in their country and urging all to repent and convert. Like the children in Fatima, these children were able to speedily race up a rocky hill to the site of the apparition. Despite the war around them, violence never touched the town. Like other apparition sites, Medjugorje is known as a place of miracles and peace.

Medjugorje is unique in that no known apparition has occurred with greater length or frequency. Twenty-six years later, Mary still appears sometimes monthly or yearly to

some of the seers, until they will learn all of the ten personal and apocalyptic secrets. The seers, in this time, have faced grave danger and intense scientific scrutiny because of the apparitions. They have been kidnapped and interrogated by government officials but have never swayed from their message. Their local priest and bishops refused to believe them. In his journalistic report on the apparitions The Miracle Detective, *Rolling Stone* writer Richard Sullivan explains that dozens of scientific tests were used to suggest the apparitions were staged or cases of hysteria or hallucination. The cautious Church has yet to make a formal statement on Medjugorje. The local bishops have been both for and against its veracity.

Fatima and Medjugorje are the most renowned apparitions of the twentieth century, but many others have occurred all over the world. Keeping in line with the vision of Vatican II, these apparitions are also more ecumenical, as Mary seems to be interested in peace and faith for all humanity. Mary is reported to have appeared in 1981 in Kiebeho, Rwanda before children, one of whom was Muslim. Mary warned them to fast and pray for peace; the warning did not prevent the bloody civil war that soon followed. Mary also appeared in non-Western countries in Akita, Japan in 1973, and in Zeitoun, Egypt in 1968 where she was visible to crowds of people, Christian and Muslim. In 1982 she appeared in Damascus, Syria, and in 1988 she appeared to a Greek Orthodox boy in Mercer, Pennsylvania. Some of the apparitions have been held unworthy of belief by church officials, such as those in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Garabandal, Spain, Bayside, New York and Scottsdale, Arizona. Mary seems to have no preferences for peoples or locations, as she has been reported to appear in Italy, Ireland and Argentina as well.

Her apparitions are also said to have taken material form. On February 3, 1994, she appeared visibly to many on a painting in the trailer of Irma Munoz in Hermiston, Oregon (Sullivan 5). Since December 1996, a 60 ft. tall, oily image of the Virgin Mary has been appearing on the side of a bank in Clearwater, Florida. The building has since turned into a Marian shrine. Someone even tried to sell her supposed apparition onto a piece of toast on E-Bay.

Folklore of Marian Apparitions

Flowing from modern Marian apparitions is a widening stream of folklore. Perhaps this folklore begins with the pamphlets from local believers or an article in the local paper, but as the apparition gains followers, this lush press becomes a national and international effort to report and evangelize the message of Mary. The content of Mary's message has a local and universal significance. Messages have been prophetic, such as suggesting impending bloodshed in Yugoslavia and Rwanda, or to proclaim the equality of the meek, as in Mexico. Sometimes the messages are apocalyptic, prophesizing doom, destruction and the end of the world if people do not repent and amend their ways. Additionally, Mary often gives a universal message of prayer, forgiveness, conversion and peace. The apparition sites have become places of pilgrimage and worship, sometimes despite the wishes of the parish priest and local bishop. Approved apparitions may have their own statues and feast days.

Today these messages are spread through a grassroots devotional press that distributes leaflets, newsletters, videos, books and uses the worldwide web. This grassroots press seeks to spread Mary's message, devotion to her, and to prove that the apparitions are

true. Despite the seeming evidence of miracles, extraordinary natural phenomena and scientific experiments, the apparitions' truth can be implied but never proved. As Marian apparitions have become part of a universal Catholic folklore, novelists too have decided to explore their meaning and impact through the imagined word.

IV. Truth: Fact and Fiction

Female theologian Charlene Spretnak opposes the modern Marian developments encompassed in Vatican II that limit Mary's cosmological dimension. In Missing Mary, Spretnak argues for this new synthesis a beloved Marian tradition with contemporary philosophies and lifestyles:

From inside the Marian resurgence, one can easily see what is apparently not visible from the viewpoint of modernity: Many of the elements in Mary's spiritual presence — her attention to those who are suffering, her female ethic of care, her cosmological dimension, her combination of power and humility, and her ability to instill hope — are essential elements in a new awareness of what is taking root. The question is not whether we “go back to the Middle Ages” *or* remain in the thrall to the ideologies of modernity but whether a new synthesis can draw deeply of enough wisdom to match our current knowledge of the Creation. (Spretnak 53)

Three contemporary novels have been written by a non-Catholic, a Protestant and a non-practicing Catholic who have been drawn to Mary and the fascinating themes that Mary apparitions evoke. These novels — Our Lady of the Lost and Found by Diane Schoemperlen, Bernardo and the Virgin by Silvio Sirias and Our Lady of the Forest by David Guterson — illustrate a tension in religion and literature existing since the advent of modernism, when truth could no longer be taken at face value. The settings of small town French-Canada, revolutionary Nicaragua and backwoods Washington create a background for the dynamic of traditional or progressive interpretations of Mary in contemporary times. The characters themselves must suffer a transformation and find liberation through their relationship with Mary. The authors similarly struggle with the meaning of truth in apparitions and novels. They draw from Mary's history, theology, devotion and apparition folklore to imagine stories of Mary, “Woman for All Seasons,” relevant to readers in the present day.

Our Lady of the Lost and Found

Canadian Methodist author Diane Schoemperlen's novel Our Lady of the Lost and Found is very sympathetic and open to Mary and Marian apparitions, yet it simultaneously breaks the mold of their traditional understandings. It seeks to encounter Mary through a post-modern lens. The narrator is a materialist, self-sufficient, non-religious woman who, unlike modern seers, encounters Mary as a tired houseguest needing relaxation for the month of May. Expressing a low Mariology — a common theme in these novels — this Mary is more human than mystical. The narrator asks postmodern questions about the nature of truth, fiction, science and history as she continues on her spiritual journey through Mary.

A Personal Relationship with Mary

First, Schoemperlen's Mary has little in common with the reported apparitions. There is no ecstasy, no direct universal message, no cult following. The apparition is not in a series of moments, but Mary is a true house guest. No one else is aware of the apparition. There is no intervention or persecution by the church, there is no involvement or pressure for political parties and local interests. The only miracle is the narrator's newfound faith in Mary as a powerful intercessor and companion, hope in her future and love for Mary and the world. Such a simple apparition as an encounter between two women is shown in a very positive light.

Secondly, the narrator, who does not pray or have a spiritual intuition, encounters a materialist Mary. This materialist view of the world is evident through the types of signs that the narrator had before Mary's apparition. She says, "These were nothing like the

signs so often reported by other people who have had similar experiences. The sun did not pulsate, spin, dance, or radiate all the colors of the rainbow. There were no rainbows. There were no claps of thunder and no bolts, balls of sheets of lightning...”

(Schoemperlen 1). Curious coincidences alert the reader to signs of something unusual: a broken toaster suddenly “repents” and works. Her stuffy car mysteriously loses its cold. She is reading the same book, The House of the Spirits by Isabel Allende, as the store clerk who normally reads the *National Enquirer*.

Third, the Mary whom the narrator encounters would be familiar to the prevailing culture of North America. Like Our Lady of Lourdes who spoke in the local dialect to Bernadette Soubirous and Our Lady of Guadalupe who appeared as an indigenous and spoke in local dialect to Juan Diego, this Mary appears as one of the narrator’s own in this Canadian town: “She was wearing a navy blue trench coat and white running shoes. She had a white shawl draped over her hair like a hood. Over her right shoulder she carried a large leather purse. In her left hand she held the extended metal hand of a small suitcase on wheels” (Schoemperlen 30). With Nikes, a purse and a “hoodie,” Mary appears like a contemporary traveling woman on-the-go. Furthermore, Mary is material — she touches things and needs bags and suitcases to carry her possessions. Mary is solid, sturdy and real. Mary is also approachable for the middle aged narrator because the Virgin appears beautiful but slightly older than the narrator. She does not defy age like the Madonna of Michelangelo’s Pietà, who holds her dying 33-year old son but looks as young as when she conceived him. This Mary mirrors the story of Mary in the Gospel of Luke who while pregnant visits her cousin Elizabeth. When Mary arrives at the narrator’s

home, she is hungry and tired; she needs company and rest for the month of May. Mary does not have a halo, and she seems like the woman next-door.

Unlike feminist perceptions of Mary as outdated and timid, Schoemperlen's Mary self-identification proves her humble confidence. She knows who she is and claims to be nothing more and nothing less. As Mary usually names herself to her seer,

Schoemperlen's Mary does so familiarly: "Fear not, she said ... It's me, Mary ... Mother of God" (Schoemperlen 30). This is not a polite encounter between strangers; Mary identifies herself as if the narrator should know her, like she is a long-lost friend. Mary then continues with a litany of more creative and unusual titles:

You know. Mary. Lamb of the Redeemer. Queen of Heaven. Pilgrim of Peace. Daughter of Zion. Ark of the Covenant. Fount of Beauty. Summit of Virtue. Sublime Peak of Human Intellect ... Mother of the Mystical Body. Unplowed Field of Heaven's Bread. Cloud of Rain that Offers Drink to the Souls of the Saints. Virgin Most Venerable. Virgin Most Powerful. Virgin Most Merciful. More Holy than the Cherubim, the Seraphim and the Entire Angelic Hosts. (Schoemperlen 30)

Mary announces this list in a matter-of-fact manner, as if the narrator should know her.

Mary's physical presence and humble confidence encourage the narrator to believe in her. This humble woman approaches the narrator at her comfort level. Mary asks not for piety. Mary neither appears with a rosary in hand nor does she hide in a remote grotto or hill but she appears in the comforts of the domestic home. This encounter gives the seer faith: "It strikes me now as the ultimate testament to the power of her presence that I had not a doubt in my mind about her reality, not then and not since. I knew from the very beginning that it was really her: Mary, Mother of God, Queen of Heaven, Our Lady of Angels" (Schoemperlen 31). With such clear conviction, there is no room for the narrator to doubt her own sanity. Mary's presence is as real as her own. As evangelical

Christianity emphasizes the personal relationship between a believer and Jesus, this novel does the same with Mary. This portrayal of Mary is daring in both Catholic and non-Catholic culture. For the Catholic, Mary can be accessed outside of traditional devotion; for the Protestant, Mary is present without being idolatrous. She does not take attention away from a redeeming Jesus; she is simply herself.

Mary may be the Queen of Heaven, but her relationship with the narrator is like that of a mother, a sister and a friend. This contemporary interpretation of Mary was urged by Johnson: “A crucially important task for a contemporary feminist theology of Mary is the retrieval of the companionship model of interaction” (Johnson 315). Schoemperlen’s Mary makes a great companion along her pilgrimage of faith. Mary is non-judgmental. She listens well; she does not chastise, and her secrets are stories told intimately between friends. Mary plays a dual role that perhaps most mothers must balance. Mary remains mysterious; she can disappear to help a child in trouble without the narrator knowing her whereabouts. Even during her time of rest and replenishment, Mary cares for her host. Mary is so helpful around the house that the narrator in a Freudian slip thinks she was her own mother: “But of course, it was not my mother. It was Mary,” she told herself (Schoemperlen 304). Perhaps missing from the Mary’s own litany is “Mother of All.” While Mary is oft-perceived as submissive, Schoemperlen’s Mary knows how to take a compliment. After her host praised her holy hotcakes, Mary said, “They *are* pretty good, even if I do say so myself” (Schoemperlen 306).

Through her helpful and holy intercession as a mother, a sister and a friend, Mary makes possible the narrator’s transformation. The narrator is suffering from post-modern angst: even though she has a nice home, a rare career as profitable novelist, she suffers

from the hurt of a string of failed relationships. Furthermore, she is complacent in her loneliness. Mary never forces change. She listens, she is pushy at the right moments, and she allows the narrator to wrestle with issues herself. Not until late in the novel does the narrator begin to show transformation. After telling the story of a single woman, who lied to her coworkers and invented an untrue life that was only exposed at her death, the narrator acknowledges duplicity: “None of us is exactly how we appear to be”

(Schoemperlen 309). Mary gently opening up the narrator asks, “How about you?” and “again she listened quietly without judgment or impatience” (Schoemperlen 309). The narrator gradually begins to reveal her own desperation. She said in her 30s she had a crisis where she turned to quizzes in popular women’s magazines. “The trouble was that sometimes I always scored zero. So no matter how carefully I calculated my score at the end of the quiz, I always ended up with nothing” (Schoemperlen 311). The narrator found no answers in self-analysis. Through Mary, the narrator is able to come to faith in her own future happiness: “Our persistent belief in our own future happiness is perhaps the better part of faith in our ordinary everyday lives: *now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen*” (Schoemperlen 314). The narrator then moves from hope and faith in something vague to faith in the intercessory powers of Mary:

Upon witnessing this, the boys’ mother, a devout Catholic, fell immediately to her knees, sobbing and praising God. She had no doubt, she said, that the Virgin Mary herself had come down from heaven and saved her son’s life.

I had no doubt either. (Schoemperlen 332)

What the narrator finds through this faith in Mary is acknowledgement and acceptance of her past hurts. She says, “Sometimes what looks like irony turns out to be in fact grace” (Schoemperlen 322). How history matters to the narrator is that her own story of her future will change. The narrator has come to accept her position in life, to stop worrying

and to accept that her future is undecided still. She has come to enjoy the life that before she was struggling so much to enjoy. The truest miracle of the encounter is the new life and hope found in the heart of the narrator.

Madonna of the Post-Modern

Our Lady of the Lost and Found is a unique expression of the human and eternal person of the Virgin Mary through the lens of post-modernism. This rare meeting is supported by Johnson, who says, “This culture has little time for faith symbols configured to medieval or premodern sensibilities” (Johnson xv). The narrator calls her own novels postmodern and describes it as “a word which nobody really knows what it means” (Schoemperlen 16). Schoemperlen’s style would suggest post-modernism is materialist and an amalgamation or collapsing of previously separate concepts. For example, Our Lady of the Lost and Found contains eight chapters with the title “history” that are full of supposedly factual stories of Mary’s apparitions. The other chapters tell the narrator’s fictional encounter with Mary. As the stories pile on top of each other, the distinction between fact and fiction becomes blurred. The fictional Mary begins to comment on events in the factual Mary’s history. The narrator asks, “Fact and fiction. What is the difference, how can you tell and who decides?” (Schoemperlen 265). The analysis of fact and fiction is the beginning of the narrator’s digression that uncovers and blends opposites.

In these chapters called “History,” the narrator uncovers her perspective on the topic. During the narrator’s childhood, her teachers taught her that history was “carved in stone,” and no one suggested that history was an “inexact science.” In the narrator’s

college class Ancient History 101, her professor opened her mind to interpretations of history:

I began to see what Dr. Sloan was getting at: that history can only be lived once and any written record of it that follows must be read as a reconstruction, simulation perhaps that must be deemed more or less accurate according to any number of variables. I also begun to appreciate how the study of history involves a constant slippage into other disciplines ... why do we call them disciplines when they are so decidedly undisciplined?" (Schoemperlen 115-6)

Rather than viewing history as a factual account, the narrator views it as a reconstruction of an event based on a perspective. Perhaps post-modernism helps to reveal how the disciplined is undisciplined. History, the narrator says, is a blending of disciplines, perhaps as much journalism as fiction, and as much science as faith. The narrator continues, "In retrospect, I can see that the most important thing I learned from Dr. Sloan and Ancient History 101 was that there is more to history than facts, more to truth than reality" (Schoemperlen 118).

The narrator's personal contact with Mary leads her to seek knowledge of Mary's greater influence. This research leads her to ask feminist questions. Mary has been attacked by feminists such as Warner and Simone de Beauvoir for being an oppressive archetype of femininity that promotes submissiveness, silence and unachievable purity. Schoemperlen does not show the Virgin Mary as an archetype but as a person. In another collapsing of spheres, the narrator shows how Mary has more in common with feminists than they would imagine:

In a chronology of women's history, she was listed only five times, as having given birth to Jesus in 1 A.D., as having given rise to a cult-following by 1100, as having appeared to Juan Diego in Mexico in 1531, to Catherine Labouré in Paris in 1830, and to Bernadette Soubirous at Lourdes in 1858. She was not mentioned at all in any of the other books.

How can this omission be explained in light of the fact that Marian veneration has flourished around the world ever since her death in the first century? How is it that the most influential, inspirational, and significant woman in the history of the world is not accorded a single mention in most standard history books?

Despite having been thus rendered virtually invisible by most secular historians, Mary has not become a quaint and feeble anachronism. She has remained an important and ongoing part of history. Like most people, she has continued to exist as both a part of and apart from history. (Schoemperlen 290)

This passage suggests that even though she has been more present, encouraging and hopeful to more people throughout history, her presence is ignored. Her influence is surely greater than personal devotion as Guadalupe and Lourdes become rallying cries for the poor and sick. Just as women's history has been unwritten by male historians, Mary's history has been unrecorded as well in North American history books. Apparitions not only exist apart from the main structure of the Catholic Church, but also the main structure of society. Both apparitions and feminist movements are spread through grassroots networks. Both Mary's work and women's work are invisible to most of society.

History in the novel is also important in its lack of chronology. Much like Joseph Heller's Catch-22, the narration jumps from present to past to future. The reader must focus to realize whether Mary is still visiting the narrator, whether the narrator is at a point in time before Mary came, whether she is telling stories of her previous life in retrospect of the visit or whether she is simply living her post-apparition life. The reader thereby gains a sense of being outside of time.

The relationship between the narrator and author is also undisciplined. The narrator admits *her* stories are unusual: "I am not especially attracted to the traditional beginning-middle-end approach to narrative" (Schoemperlen 16). Yet this is the same style as the author. Throughout the novel, the voice of the narrator and the author are intentionally

confused. For example, the narrator lays claim to a style of writing that describes exactly Our Lady of the Lost and Found: “People often ask me how much of my fiction is autobiographical, how much of what I am writing is actually the real story of my own life. I freely admit that some parts of each book are true but I am not about to say which parts or how true” (Schoemperlen 16). As both the author and the narrator are non-Catholic Canadian women writers, it is impossible to tell one’s voice from the other. The effect is that while the narrator divulges her personal struggles, the reader gains a feeling of intimacy with the author.

Furthermore, the reader is almost led to believe that the narrator and author have interchangeable roles. The narrator says,

My original intention was to write a fictionalized version of the story of Mary’s visit to me, keeping my promise, of course, to publish it under a pseudonym and call it a novel. I knew this would work to the book’s advantage because, ironically, calling it fiction would make it easier to believe. There are some truths that cannot be made credible in any other way. (Schoemperlen 96)

The narrator’s novel seems to be one and the same as Schoemperlen’s, who includes on the inside page the reminder “a Novel” and “a work of fiction.” The relationship between the author and narrator is unclearly linked. Schoemperlen takes advantage of this mix-up to justify the form of her novel.

When I began to write this book, I thought it would be a very simple story, one that would result in a slender pretty volume with gold lettering and a Renaissance painting of Mary and Jesus on the cover. But I soon realized that I could not write the story of Mary’s visit to me, fictionalized or not, while ignoring her whole history, the history of the last two thousand years. (Schoemperlen 96)

She argues that any story of Mary cannot be separated from her history of apparitions, her history of devotion and the development of Mariology, and the history of man.

History, which has been ignored by historians and her involvement in it is mysterious.

The narrator says the plentitude of Marian stories and ways of telling them could overwhelm her. An author, like a seer of Mary, still has to live in the real world. Still has to work and try to make sense of it all: “As I tried to sift through and make some sense of all this material, it became more and more obvious to me that the whole of the story has not, cannot, will never be told. It also became clear to me that the whole story, the real story, and the true story are not always the same thing” (Schoemperlen 96-7). She discovers through her immensity of Marian stories, that there is still more to know. Knowledge itself is limited. The whole story is two-thousand years of mysterious interaction with the world; the whole story that is Mary’s history will never be entirely known or told. On the other hand, she implies that what is real and true can be known and shared.

Lastly, Schoemperlen argues that the postmodern lens can express the Christian truths. This long demonstration of slippage in form, history and narration cumulates in Schoemperlen’s philosophical breaking of dichotomy to look at the world through the lens of “both/and.” Drawing inspiration from a contemporary woman writer, Schoemperlen quotes Kathleen Norris before her chapter “Grace:”

As for myself, I have come to think of Mary as the patron saint of ‘both/and’ passion over ‘either/or’ reasoning, and as such, she delights my poetic soul. Ever since I first encountered Mary ... I have learned never to discount her ability to confront and disarm the polarities that so often bring human endeavours to impasse: the subjective and objective, the expansive and parochial, the affective and the intellectual. Kathleen Norris, Amazing Grace (Schoemperlen 315)

If Mary is the patron saint of “both/and” reasoning, then she exemplifies this reasoning in her life, and lifts up to God in prayer those people with this reasoning, or seeking this reasoning who need her help. If this reasoning belongs to Mary, Mother of God, then it is

proper to all men and women. Norris sees the “either/or” polarity as a roadblock to human creativity. She implies that through Mary’s intercession this roadblock can be properly approached and surmounted. What lies beyond this roadblock is a world of breaking opposites and polarities; this is the world where metaphysical poet John Donne wrote, where the author argues that Mary and postmodernism live. In this world, polarities are no longer opposites but exist together symbiotically. Mary, patron of “both/and,” is able to step across boundaries blocked in the human imagination. Mary’s virginity and motherhood, humility and exaltation exemplify the breaking of contradiction. Marian apparitions themselves cannot fit into “either/or” reasoning as they bridge the heavens and the earth and operate outside of the tradition of the Roman Catholic power structure, yet gain its consent.

The narrator also encourages the reader to also leap beyond the “either/or” world:

From a very early age, we are indoctrinated into seeing the world in pairs of opposites. Think of all those children’s books in which the world is so clearly and cleverly laid out two by two; big and little, boy and girl, stop and go, up and down, happy and sad. Perhaps it is some unconscious atavistic longing for the simplicity of the old mechanistic universe (where there were no contradictions and all mysteries could be solved) that keeps us clinging to these tidy constructs: yes and no, weak and strong, give and take, love and hate, heaven and earth. Perhaps it is some subliminal collective nostalgia for the good old days of Plato and Heraclitus (before Einstein and relativity, Heisenberg and uncertainty, quantum physics and chaos theory) that keeps us stuck in the resolute land of opposites: body and soul, lost and found, life and death, good and evil, truth and lies.

Fact and fiction.
 Victim and villain.
 Alpha and omega.
 Beginning and ending.
 Virgin and mother.
 Human and divine.

It is time now to venture out of the comforting land of either/or opposites and travel into the uncertain territory of both/and. Time to realize that irony is not cynicism, paradox is not chaos, and prayer is not wishful thinking. Time to accept

the possibility that these, irony, paradox, and prayer, are the still points, the thin places, the perfect quantum qualities. It is time now to admit that reality is not as simple as we would like it to be and that, given half a chance, it will indeed expand to fill the space available. (Schoemperlen 298)

The narrator argues that the world is not dualistic, that Christianity is the thin place where contradictions co-exist. She further suggests that the real story, the true story and the whole story lie beyond the roadblock where “either/or” thrives. Not only does Mary help heal the narrator, but she invites her to contemplate how Christianity and post-modernism can co-exist. Mary can be both a part of and separate from this contemporary time.

Bernardo and the Virgin

The novel Bernardo and the Virgin by Latino writer Silvio Sirias retells the reported apparitions in Cuapa, Nicaragua — one of the poorest countries in the Western hemisphere — in 1980 during the time of violent political turmoil. In the novel, the seer is 54-year-old Bernardo Martinez, a tailor and the local church sacristan. Bernardo grows up illiterate in a poor area of Nicaragua. His grandmother requires him to join in saying the rosary daily on his knees, and Bernardo has a great devotion for the Virgin Mary. When the area’s priest — who is in essence “exiled” to their region — is about to leave, he tells Bernardo he is going to take Bernardo’s favorite statue of the Virgin Mary. Bernardo offers to buy it, and the priest, seeking travel money, opportunistically demanded an enormous price from the poor boy. Bernardo is determined and with the help of some comrades formed a society to collect the money. Bernardo buys the statue and carries it far to his home parish.

Bernardo has a single-track mind for the Virgin Mary. As a child, he is to marry the beautiful lady captured in wood, and later his sole desire was to become a priest. The

local priest does not encourage him though, because poor Bernardo is dumb and lacks education. Bernardo eventually works in exchange for basic schooling, and returns to his hometown to become a tailor and the sacristan of the parish. He becomes the surrogate father to Elias, son of an unwed friend, and he teaches this boy to pray the rosary. One day, while he is walking through his farm, Mary appears to Bernardo and put him in the limelight of a battle for power.

Like the narrator of Our Lady of the Lost and Found, Bernardo first notices signs. The lights of the church were going on and off at mysterious times. Then, he notices a statue of the Virgin, who he calls in his Spanish peppered style *la Virgencita*, giving off a soft, blue light.

There had to be, I thought, a simple reason for the light. I looked at her hands, her neck, her feet, and her dress. Everything about her glowed. The shine was real but I couldn't explain where it was coming from. The statue was the one I had brought to Cuapa thirty-five years earlier. The same statue I had fallen in love with as a boy. The same rustic cedar statue I had known all my life. But never, never, had I seen her so beautiful. La Virgencita's skin, from looking like that of an aged doll, was now perfect. Her flesh reminded me of a rosy mango. Her face ... had become enchanting. Her eyes, once flat, now seemed deep. She appeared to be alive. I was afraid and joyful at the same time. (Sirias 25)

Bernardo finds no logical explanation for the light and the sudden change of the statue's beauty, but he is so moved that at the following church meeting he publicly confesses his sins and asked for forgiveness from the members of the community. Bernardo risks looking foolish but found peace and contentment afterwards.

Bernardo feels his problems growing: increased poverty and unpaid debt along with the hours he devotes to caring for the church and the negative comments from his relatives of his devotion to Mary and the church. Bernardo resolves to be grateful though. Soon after, while walking through his pastures, he sees a cloud descending and feels a

powerful presence in it. Stricken with terror, he falls to the ground and started shaking. His terror is quickly replaced by a sudden, irresistible urge to greet on his knees this unknown. The first thing Bernardo notices are the lady's straight and slender feet, then her simple, modest white dress with a light blue ribbon around her waist. A tailor, he notices the gold embroidery on her cream-colored shawl.

Mary is portrayed traditionally and is similar to descriptions of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal. Mary appears to Bernardo with radiant skin, a halo of twelve sparkling stars and her hands clasped in peaceful stillness. He tries to speak, but his tongue was stricken. Then Mary becomes real: he looks in her eyes and she blinks. She opens her hands and then her palms towards him. "Suddenly, they released strong beams of light, more intense than the light of the sun. The rays struck me squarely in the chest" (Sirias 69). Suddenly, he can speak again. Bernardo learned the woman's name is Maria.

Unlike Schoemperlen's Mary, Sirias' Mary has a direct message for Bernardo and his people. She asks for people to pray the rosary daily in families. She continues,

Love one another. Fulfill your duties and obligations to each other. Forgive one another. Work for peace. Do not ask el Senor for peace. You need to work for peace among yourselves; otherwise it will never happen. Do not choose the path of violence. Never choose the path of violence. Since the earthquake your country has suffered much, and now dark, menacing clouds cover it again. Your suffering, as well as the suffering of all humanity, shall continue if people don't mend their ways ... I am begging el Senor to delay his judgment. However, if you don't mend your ways, your dependence on violence as a way to settle differences will bring forth Armageddon ... El Senor has chosen you for this task. (Sirias 71)

As in Medjugorje and Rwanda, Mary's message is for peace and an end to violence.

She asks people to change their behavior and to take an active role as peace makers.

She also warns of God's wrath and the end of the world if they do need heed.

Peace, Policy and Political Morality

Bernardo's steadfast faith forms him into a peacemaker in his community. His young, idealistic son Elias joined the Sandinistas and with a vow of obedience, much like that of a priest or monk, he places his life into the hands of his superiors. When Elias is forced into several dangerous situations, Bernardo becomes also a hero. Elias says of Bernardo,

I mean his faith, his belief in his Virgincita, seems to work miracles. Papa must have saved at least twenty lives over the past couple of months. I'm not kidding. Sure, they were not the Clint Eastwood-shooting-off-powerful-guns type of rescues, but in his quiet, geeky way he was able to get people to change their hearts, and thus avoid a lot of bloodshed. Honestly, he *did* save lives. For starters, he saved mine. (Sirias 110)

After running away from home, Elias and some comrades are sent on a mission to his hometown. Forced to take a perilous route, they barely escape with their lives and take refuge in Bernardo's home. Having already captured one young man from Cuapa, the Somoza soldiers come looking for the rest. Bernardo is angry, but after fervent prayer invoking Mary's merciful aid, he manages to hide the young guerrillas from the soldiers — even when the Somozas come to search his house. The soldiers make an example of their prisoner by torturing and killing him, and it was Bernardo who bravely seeks his body for a just burial. One day, the tables turn, and the guerrillas capture the soldiers, including their infamous leader. In a thrilling sequence which Sirias intersperses with lines from the *Our Father*, Bernardo steps into the middle of the angry community and prevents the community, and his specifically his adopted son Elias, from killing the Somozas and their leader during their surrender. Bernardo is an active maker of peace.

Bernardo's role as a peacemaker causes him personal suffering as both the CIA-backed Somoza dictatorship and the Sandinista guerillas try to manipulate the apparitions to their

advantage. Each faction must make moral, political and economic decisions that have personal ramifications for Bernardo.

First, the reporter Sophia Velazquez had joined the Sandinsta-backed paper to support the cause of the revolution. When her mother, who is a devout Catholic and opposes the communists, becomes ill with cancer, Sophia makes a pilgrimage to Cuapa to report on the apparitions and ask for her mother's healing. Although her article is fair, honest and directly quotes Bernardo, her more biased editors reject it as too sympathetic and "counterproductive to the goals and objective of la Revolcion" (Sirias 169). The Sandinistas' Minister of the Interior pits the guerilla group against the Catholic Church and the apparition. He offers Sophia the choice of rewriting the story or getting a new job:

What you don't seem to understand, companera Velasquez, is that our government is beginning to enter – how shall we call it? – a very delicate phase in its relationship with the Catholic Church. The Church is in a position to make things – shall we say? – complicated. If people begin to make pilgrimages to Cuapa because they believe la Virgen has appeared there, well, that will just get everyone riled up about nothing. The National Directorate doesn't want that. What's more, los comandantes have reason to believe that the Church, working with the CIA, has contrived this ... hmm ... fairytale. We are asking you to write an article discrediting Bernardo Martinez's story. Do you understand me now? (Sirias 170)

In a pressured position to write contrary to her beliefs and distort the truth or to lose her job, Sophia writes a new mix of gossip and lies to discredit Bernardo's experience and his character.

The Church also reviews the apparition through a report by a priest. This priest is sympathetic to Marian apparitions because of his mother's own spirituality; furthermore, he is encouraged by the CIA to support the Catholic Church in Nicaragua as a counter-

revolutionary institution. The reviewing priest's favorable statement of the apparition's veracity is reprinted across the nation in anti-Sandinista propaganda backed by the United States' government. In what would seem like passive approaches to politics and war, it is clear that both sides believe the apparition has the power to sway the minds of the faithful. The CIA Special Operation officer says, "Ah, Father, I know you're a man of action. But one lesson I've learned from our mistakes in Vietnam is that at times it's more important to win the hearts and minds of the people. It's easier, cleaner, and certainly less costly than military conquest. Don't you agree, Padre?" (Sirias 196). These cases show how the institutions of the Church and the US government have agendas. The documents of the media, the Catholic Church and the US government are often read as factual and accurate. These documents, though, are more like stories colored by the author's own perspective.

Bernardo also adds his own spin onto Mary's message that gives her non-partisan plea a political spin and a side in the civil conflict. Mary in her messages only speaks of peace and love for all Nicaraguans. Unfortunately, Bernardo makes a muddle of Mary's message and adds his own interpretation and anxieties. He adds a strongly partisan message that Mary mistrusts the Sandinistas.

Political and moral decisions in this life or death climate have grave ramifications. Bernardo suffers for his role as a seer: for his interpretation, he is tortured by the guerillas. The Sandinistas kidnap him, rape him and use their strongest torture techniques to render him harmless. "All Tatiana could hope for was to hurt the visionary deeply, to cause him such agonizing pain that it would be a while before he appeared in public again (Sirias 253). Sirias admits this part of the novel is undocumented. Yet it mirrors other

apparition stories because at this same time in war-torn Yugoslavia, the seers are also kidnapped and held hostage by the government.

A Literary Perspective

The author also seeks to examine the apparitions through the eyes of the artist of words. In “Posdata,” Sirias, a non-practicing Catholic, writes:

Upon hearing Bernardo’s life story, I immediately knew that the best way to capture its many dramatic and magical dimensions was through fiction. As Joseph Campbell posits in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, to try to render miraculous events in a straightforward manner, narrating them as the truth, will always lead a writer into bathos. In other words, in striving to accurately describe the sublime nature of Bernardo’s experience, I would have inevitably overreached and toppled into the absurd. His tale, and the tales of his compatriots, deserve better.” (Sirias 441-2)

Sirias, perhaps like most novelists, believes that the events and characters would be best portrayed through imagined representations. Perhaps Sirias believes he would be saved from the stress and guilt that comes from a journalistic enterprise by writing a fictional account of the historical tale. Here he also suggests that the sublime becomes absurd in trying to “render miraculous events in a straightforward manner, narrating them as the truth.” Thus, Sirias argues that fiction best keeps the sublimity of the encounter with the divine.

Two of Sirias’ characters attempt to reconcile the apparition with the world of letters. The first of these is a Nicaragua Germán Sotelo who moved the United States to earn a doctorate in literature and pursue his abstract ideas about literary theory. This character practically worships the “Great Ecuadorian writer Jaime Jaramillo Solís. Both are in Nicaragua while Jaime researches the Sandinista movement. In the account below,

Germán tells of Jaime's interest in the apparitions, and Germán gives his theory on the impact of apparitions:

“When the Great Ecuadorian Writer interviewed the cardinal, for instance, he learned about the supposed apparition of la Virgen, in Cuapa. For some reason, this story really caught his attention. And I can understand why. After all, the entire phenomenon is a glowing example of Victor Shklovsky's concept of defamiliarization. La Virgen's message, and her appearance, has disrupted our nation's ordinary language and habitual modes of perception. She has rendered unfamiliar what were once common points of reference. Thus, it has become impossible for Nicaraguans to use conventional codes of representation with regard to the gap between religion and politics. In other words, the apparition has deadened our powers of discernment. In the process of deciding whether the event represents a truth, or not, we have become unfamiliar to ourselves. La Virgen's appearance has even disrupted the dreams being forged by our emerging socialist system, thereby impeding the political development and change. Still, although I find the entire thing somewhat intriguing, I would never write about it.” (Sirias 274)

Like the bright light that they are to the seer, apparitions blind the locals to the familiar and engage them in a questioning of the meaning of their lives, of truth and of the Divine. The Sandinistas see the apparition as a threat to their movement. Some characters report that Mary in her apparition neither supports nor denies the legitimacy of the rebels. The apparition of Cuapa thereby impedes the political development and change by causing a distraction of unexplainable and unknowable consequences. The line “In the process of deciding whether the event represents a truth, or not, we have become unfamiliar to ourselves” suggests that the apparition shifts the criteria of truth, by allowing a possibility of truth and experience of the Divine before unknown. Even Bernardo, whose source of truth is the Roman Catholic Church, the Bible and the Sacraments, is pressured to question his own sanity, his own relationship with evil spirits, his own memory and senses without ever having concrete proof of his experience. Thus, an apparition not only causes a questioning of

the divine, but it also causes a questioning of oneself and one's very ability to perceive and reason.

Diego Miranda is a Nicaraguan living in the United States who earns a PhD in literature but becomes an unhappy workaholic in pursuit of perfection. In reoccurring dreams, Diego is lost in a frightening forest, filled with voices crying of their unfulfilled destinies, when he hears and encounters a woman who says, "Diego, I've come only to deliver this message: First you will suffer through many changes, painful changes. But this path will someday lead you to her. When you get there, the story will be waiting" (Sirias 406). The presence of the Virgin Mary is evident not only in apparitions but also in dreams. She is calling Diego to discover her in Nicaragua, but he is still unaware. Diego is anxious over these dreams. He becomes both physically and mentally ill and unable to function as before. Deciding to make a change, Diego realizes that writing is his means of self-discovery, spirituality and redemption.

Strangely, in spite of the torment the dreams had caused, to his waking mind, what she said made a kind of sense. Although Diego's existence had been cast into the abyss of doubt, there was one thing he was absolutely sure of: he wanted to write. He needed to write. Writing, Diego was certain, would lift him out of the wretchedness he had sunken into. Beyond all questions, writing would save his soul – word by word he would claw his way out of the dark pit of despair. But what would he write about? (Sirias 409)

Indeed, for this man full of anguish and doubt, writing is his sure way to find a new life. Like the narrator of Our Lady of the Lost and Found, his experience of uncovering the divine and sharing that through the written word greatly heals him. His faith does not exist separate from his gift of writing. His journey to the heart continues as Diego escapes to Nicaragua to rediscover his roots; just at the moment of failure, through an interaction with the other Nicaraguan with a Ph. D in literature, Germán Sotelo, he meets the seer

Bernardo. Sirias has many similarities with Diego, and both are drawn to retell the story of Bernardo through fiction.

The readers of Bernardo and the Virgin and Our Lady of the Lost and Found are left with similar questions of the relationship between the author and the narrator. In “Posdata,” Sirias explains that after meeting Bernardo, he decides to write about the apparition in the form of historical fiction to best tell the story and preserve the integrity of the experience with the sublime. Diego has the same experience:

The seer shared his story with Diego. The writer couldn't believe his luck. A saga right out of the realm of magical realism had fallen into his lap. Before long, the voices of the characters started to buzz, like an instant swarm of bees, inside of Diego's head. And the more Diego the novelist heard, the more obsessed he became with retelling the priest's tale. It was then that Diego realized that the only way to accurately convey the remarkable paths of Padre Bernardo Martinez's experience, and keep it believable, was in the form of a novel – his novel. (Sirias 410)

As a storyteller, Diego finds incredible appeal of an apparition narrative: it seems to be a true story full of magic and a myriad of diverse peoples and communities connected through an experience that speaks to them all. Diego also justifies the retelling of the apparition experience when he says the only way to tell the story justly is through fiction. It seems Sirias is speaking directly to the reader to justify his own choice of form, and to reveal the view, also expressed by the narrator of Our Lady of the Lost and Found, that fiction can be truer than fact.

Diego, showing compassion for his subjects, worries they will not understand the distinction between fact and fiction because of their high illiteracy. “‘Padre Bernardo,’ Diego pressed on gently, but hoping to make himself clear, ‘you do understand that what I’m writing is fiction. I’m not a historian. My account of your story will stray from the

truth – many, many times. A novelist makes up things; a novelist *lies*. We invent the things we don't know of, or reinvent the things we find dull” (Sirias 411). It is interesting that Diego admits a novel is a lie: it is a mirror of reality. Fiction, like a mirror, helps more people to see the object, from another angle. Diego worries that “because Padre Bernardo had learned to read so late in his life, distinctions between fiction and nonfiction weren't always perfectly clear” (Sirias 411). It seems the only thing perfectly clear is the apparition itself: a few moments of sublimity, of direct witness and communication with a peaceful heavenly being. Everything else is a matter of doubt and faith and degrees of truth or untruth. Diego continues to stress how he can communicate to his subjects the nature of his work: “How would he tell them that they had been recreated as characters and placed in imaginary situations that, although not entirely true, would try to recapture the essence of their lives? How would he explain something that he had trouble understanding himself?” (Sirias 418). Diego fears communicating an abstract way of looking at their lives that his subjects may not grasp. Diego also fears explaining mystery, what he himself cannot grasp.

Our Lady of the Forest

Our Lady of the Lost and Found imagines an entirely fictional apparition and Bernardo and the Virgin retells a real event in Nicaragua. Our Lady of the Forest by David Guterson, author of Snow Falling on Cedars, borrows elements from the apparitions of Bernadette Soubirous in the peasant village of Lourdes, France, and places them in our own backyard, the un-churched woods of the Pacific Northwest. Our Lady of Lourdes, one of a few apparitions approved universally by the Catholic Church as worthy

of belief, sets the highest standard for the possibility of a bona fide apparition. Bernadette was virginal and pure; her doggedness in the face of opposition from her family, her priest, the police and the church was astonishing, the message of the Virgin Mary was compelling and Bernadette became a nun and a saint. Furthermore, Lourdes developed a cult following. Of the many graces asked of Our Lady of Lourdes, miracles occurred that are inexplicable. Like Bernadette, Guterson's seer Ann Holmes is also young, uneducated in the faith, and from a meager background. Ann too struggles with asthma and ill health; she also experiences the ecstasy of an encounter with in the woods; Ann too unearths at Mary's beckoning a source of miraculous water. Both adolescents attract an unmanageable crowd to the apparition site, and both meet resistance from the local priest and bishop. Both have a beautiful shrine built that brings economy, new life and new hope to the area. Beyond these similarities, Guterson throws the readers into a pool of moral ambiguity where doubt reigns. With Mary, Juan Diego and Bernadette, God chose the humble to reveal his plan, but would God choose a victim of the world's wantonness?

This is the seer Guterson, himself a non-Catholic, presents:

Ann and her mother, fifteen at Ann's birth, had lived with Ann's grandfather, a long-haul trucker, a man with complicated gambling debts, in a series of rental homes. The newspapers, though, did not uncover that her mother's boyfriend, a methamphetamine addict, had raped Ann opportunistically beginning when she was fourteen. Afterwards he would lie beside her with an expression of antic, contorted suffering etching his hairless long face. Sometimes he cried or apologized, but more often he threatened to kill her. When Ann was fifteen she took a driver's education class, which she missed only once, on a Friday afternoon, in order to have an abortion. Eight months later she expelled her second fetus into a toilet at a minimart on the heels of a bout with nausea. On her sixteenth birthday she bought a two-door car, dented or crumpled in more than one panel, for three hundred and fifty dollars earned foraging for truffles and chanterelles. The next morning, she drove away. (Guterson 5)

This seer is both a victim of countless injustices and a purveyor of it. The Catholic Church views abortion as a violation of God's natural law and God-given human dignity and a mortal sin that turns the human soul away from God's grace. Even in the case of rape, the pope and the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith call abortion the purposeful killing of a human life. On her own, Ann begins to seek God and show remorse:

In a campground rest room she found a pocket Bible and stuffed it in her sweatshirt's kangaroo pouch. She read it by her evening campfire, wiping her nose with a handkerchief. It passed the time and in small towns, on rainy days, she sat in libraries and read it. She stole a copy of the catechism from a library ... She began to feel worse about the abortion she'd endured the year previous. The baby Mark Kidd had planted in her, murdered before it had drawn a breath ... (Guterson 133)

As Ann becomes more prayerful, she also becomes more lonesome. She begins to hide in her own shadows by consistently wearing her hooded sweatshirt like a shroud. She stops communicating with others; she chops off her hair; she does find the courage to warn her mom about her rapist boyfriend, but she also seeks further escape in drugs: "She took psilocybin at least once a week. Her hallucinations now had a religious cast and were sometimes rimmed by halos" (Guterson 133). Ann's drug use heightens her religious fervor.

Ann knelt in a pew. The body of Christ hung over the altar. She went up, touched it, and put her fingers in her mouth. They tasted salty, like seaweed. God, she said, save me from my sins. This was during a psilocybin binge, part of its crescendo. Ann put her fingers between her legs and touched herself absentmindedly. It was private, comfortable, and reassuring; it involved no one else. (Guterson 134)

This scene demonstrates how Guterson is unafraid to mix the sacred and the profane. Alongside an image of a suffering and redemptive Christ is Ann, suffering from abuse

and reassured through self-love. Whether Guterson intends to mock religion or simply to bring redemption through the propane is unclear. Both his style and the novel's characters suggests how difficult it is to discern a person's sincere faith. Ann's desire for God's mercy seems induced or at least influenced by mind-altering drugs. This situation sets up the reader to question whether Ann's apparition is a result of her hysteria and drug use or a true encounter with the Divine. In the Middle Ages, people who were physically and mentally ill were often considered to be closer to God and had mystical experiences. In modern times, even God and faith are put to scientific tests.

Ann first experiences an apparition in the forest while she is collecting mushrooms. She sees a "bright, floating orb ... that was light from inside" that she "felt certain was not a fantasy or dream but more like something from a science-fiction movie, a UFO or a governmental experiment she wasn't supposed to know about" (Guterson 11-2). Ann deduces all the logical explanations for the strange globe that the television show *Unsolved Mysteries* might offer. The globe becomes more visible: "It kept gliding toward her in a frightening arc, dropping first and then advancing. It loomed larger and more distant until it was clearly a human figure – she could make out a spectral, wavering face and a pair of incandescent hands – levitating just off the forest floor thirty yards away. It was now too brilliant, too luminous to behold" (Guterson 12). Ann does not guess it is Mary, but prays the rosary out of fear, asking for mercy, and she drops to her knees to ask for divine intervention. She promises to never sin again and means it. Then the light leaves.

Ann brings to her second encounter with the divine a small crew of an atheist, a mother looking for her lost daughter, a fervent Catholic and an alcoholic. No one else witnesses

Mary, but Ann herself is in a state of ecstasy. She gasps now and then while seeming to defy gravity as she tilts forward in an awkward pose. She is stone-like except for occasional trembles. Ann witnesses the Virgin Mary and returns to share her message:

One: All good followers of Christ were called immediately to renewed service in the name of the Mother of God. Two: Our Lady has come to warn the world and to implore in particular the selfish and greedy to change their ways immediately, lest it be the case soon that she could no longer restrain her Son from wreaking a general destruction. Three, true believers were called upon to spread Mary's message of dire consequence if sin were not energetically thwarted and also of hope for a better future in which few, if any, were still impoverished. Four: Our Lady would return on four successive days to deliver further messages and to elaborate her themes. Five: A beautiful new church and shrine to Mother Mary should be built at this very place in the forest where they now stood together. Six: Ann was to go to the local priest and tell him everything. (Guterson 29-30)

This is a message more like the apparitions in Cuapa than Lourdes. It says Jesus is angry and calls for renewed dedication and conversion, and, as in the apparitions of Guadalupe, Mary wants a new church. This message begins to gather and change the community of North Fork, Washington. Guterson's novel is less about Ann's encounter with the Virgin Mary than the cruel, comic and transforming ways the community responds.

The Sacred and the Profane

Our Lady of the Forest is painfully parallel to the character of contemporary times. Lust, hatred, greed and vanity are not new problems to the church; apparitions of the Virgin Mary are nothing new. Guterson attaches to these timeless themes modern warts: cynicism, the abuse of legal and illegal drugs, the collapse of the family and moral ambiguity. The theme of the sacred meeting the profane is pivotal to his novel, showing à la Ken Kesey, a literary interest in the lowly of the Northwest: the runaway drug-user, the

jaded priest, the out-of-work logger and the over-educated hippie. Guterson exposes his readers to the religious: repetitions of the Hail Mary and Bible passages, to ethereal encounters with the Virgin Mary, talks in the confessional and loony Jesus-freaks, and he writes equally as explicitly about the low elements of the characters' lives: the priest's lusty desire for the seer, Tom Cross' insatiable appetite for sex devoid of love and effusive verbal hatred and Ann Holmes' violent rape. In Greek myth, rape was something gods did incognito as bulls or swans; here Guterson reveals in pornographic color the human soul from all its angles.

As place is crucial for Guterson, he reveals a murky forest community weighed down by forces as concealed as the spotted owl and as dominant as the ACLU. Opening the door to a local bar, he shows how the depressed logging town is in the slumps of absurdity and darkness.

The Big Bottom was crowded but not lively. Despite the impoverished tenor of the times, drinking establishments still flourished in North Fork as though it were a frontier boom town. The Vagabond, the Big Bottom, HK's, and TJ's were filled with diplomaniacs. Almost every patron's life was complicated by debt, by decisions devoid of the most basic logic, and by a generalized confusion. Somebody would lose half their teeth, a couple of fingers, a spouse and a truck in seven days' time. Somebody else would shoot a horse in a field, drive a borrowed car into a ditch, stumble drunkenly into ferns and sleep, bleeding, until 2 p.m. It was inexplicable by the more reasonable standards of the American upper middle class – people who folded their underwear at night and watched their mutual funds in on-line portfolios – but there it was, another slant on things without roots in better judgment. How to explain two unemployed loggers who smashed in the door of HK's one dawn, then sat at the bar drinking shot glasses of Jack Daniel's until the sheriff finally loomed over them? We needed a place to sleep was not a viable explanation. Or the logger who heard at the Vagabond one night that laughing gas was an aphrodisiac and so broke into North Fork Dental, sprawled in the chair with his pants at his ankles, twisted a valve, pulled on a mask, groped himself, and died? Or that already on probation and in disobedience of a retrained order by virtue of being in the tavern at all, an ex-con left TJ's at 2 a.m., crept into a van, hot-wired it – melting a nest of wires beneath a dash – then put the van in first gear, not reverse, and drove through TJ's rear wall? There was no explaining these things. It was all one tale, like low-rent soap opera. The town was an

extended family teeming with dark associations. Stories of loss were loved in North Fork: episodes of inexplicable behavior exhibiting a feckless and reckless bravado; head-shaking morality tales from a twisted universe. They mostly corroborated what North Fork knew: that an orderly life was unnatural. Things happened because of the Sierra Club, the ACLU and Jane Fonda. CHARLETON HESTON IS MY PRESIDENT a ubiquitous bumper sticker read. There was another that said KILL DOLPHINS. No one knew why all this was so and you couldn't really blame the rain for it because rain is as much a cathartic precipitation as a purveyor of ridiculous sorrows. Monstrous, dark and claustrophobic woods could not be imputed either. A dark rathole, wrote one explorer. A weight upon my sensibilities, added a nineteenth century reporter. They brought their unhappiness with them to the woods. A billion places are ripe for discontent. You can't blame trees for your soul's condition. Was it perhaps the absence of light, then, a condition medically named? (Guterson 81-2)

This portrait of the local bar sets the scene for the apparition. If Mary usually appears to places of ruin and poverty, places struggling in the midst of war; this is the ruin and the "war" of the Pacific Northwest: unemployment, depression and inebriation. As if in Joseph Heller's Catch-22, the only ladders out of their abyss of despair always break. It seems like there is everyone and no one to blame.

Guterson provides something for everyone in this novel as the reader is invited to read the story seriously or mockingly. The reader can either take the apparition as a real mystic-like experience or mock it as a hallucination due to psychedelic drug use. Guterson takes a similar approach with the community of North Fork. The reader can laugh at the locals for their absurd behavior or understand them as needy people in a time of crisis. Hoards of Mary-seekers also descend upon North Fork to revive its economy, buy out the convenience store, fill the motel and trample the forest surrounding the apparition site. This comic portrayal allows the reader to laugh at religion, but the reader might also understand their desire to seek the presence of God. For as many "Hail Mary" prayers, priests and euphoric experiences as this novel

includes, it is equally as brazen in detailing rape, abuse, lust, chaos and exposing the low points of religion. He mingles the sacred and profane in ways that are shocking, and the contrast between the sacred and the profane can be read as comic or tragic.

Three significant characters demonstrate how Guterson rides the fence of faith and folly. Father Collins, Carolyn and Tom Cross are characters whose appearances are deceiving. All seem faithful in one light and depraved and selfish in another. These characters are contrasted with and find redemption through Ann, who dies as a sacrifice.

Guterson's portrayal of Father Collins draws from the tragic incidents of priest pedophilia in the United States and the climate of moral relativity present in Western culture. Guterson contrasts the unbaptized Ann, full of faith, with the skeptical and immoral priest Father Collins. Father Collins does not believe Ann, yet desires to believe her only because he is strangely attracted to her. When she meets with him in his trailer, Father Collins tries to please her and flirt with her. Ann — in a moment of penance and faith — asks for baptism and confession; Father Collins, instead, asks her to talk to him as a friend, voyeuristically listening to her sins. Ann takes her sins seriously and seeks forgiveness. However, Father Collins dismisses them: “‘That all sounds very normal,’ the priest said, though he had to admit, privately, a misguided, prurient, tantalizing interest in her obsessive masturbation. ‘You sound human to me, Ann’” (Guterson 160). Father Collins instead justifies her sins. He dismisses her fear of the devil by abstracting both the devil and God as mysteries. While Ann is persistent in her request to build a church, Father Collins is ignoring the architect. Ann is seeking reconciliation and union with God; Father Collins is further indulging

in his sexual fantasies. Evident through Guterson's descriptions of falling leaves and rain, the theme of mortality is the truth behind Father Collins' fears: "He found himself thinking of mortality, which was the subject inspired by her tender impoverishment, which was always the subject behind all subjects – sex, the universe, God. 'Father,' she repeated. 'We have to get busy. We have to build a new church'" (Guterson 131). Ann, who is the same age as the Virgin Mary's purported age at the time of Jesus's birth, stands between the brink of life and death. She is fertile yet has abortions; she tastes eternal life through Mary yet is psychosomatically ill. Ultimately, Ann reminds the priest of his own mortality and brings him closer to the essential questions of "sex, the universe and God."

Furthermore, Guterson exposes the duplicity of Ann's sidekick Carolyn. The pot-smoking, 30 year-old roamer with aspirations of become a mycologist is an avowed atheist yet names herself Ann's spokeswoman. Carolyn follows Ann through all the apparitions and is by her side to meet with the sheriff, the priest and the church's inquisitor. She cleverly handles the representatives from property owners when they claimed the crowds were causing environmental damage to the fragile ecosystem they would later harvest. Despite her forefront role as Ann's guardian and speaker, as MC to the thousands of seekers, her hidden motivation is to gain attention and steal enough money for a long, leisurely vacation in Mexico and a liposuction. Carolyn recognizes her own depravity:

She thought of herself as a decent person who didn't cause harm to sentient beings. So what was this about right now? This fraud she perpetrated on a major scale? Ripping off the religious faithful – not to mention Ann of Oregon – was certainly no way to hedge one's bet against that ultimate, looming cardsharp, vast, colorless eternity.

No atheist, she thought, is ever firm. Even at near complete conviction the pittance left over was consternating: fire and brimstone, geysers of flame, those popes in Dante stuffed head to toe down orifices in Beelzebub's cellar. Chilling. Gruesome. Popes in a chute. In college she'd memorized twelve lines of that canto for the express purpose of anticapitalist recitation. *Ah, Simon Magus, and you his wretched followers, who, rapacious, prostitute for gold and silver the things of God which should be brides of righteousness, now must the trumpet sound for you, for your place is in the third pouch.*

How ironic, thought Carolyn. But I'm committed already. A secular humanist. A material girl. All I wanna do is have some fun. And I definitely can't be one of these Christians with their myriad insanities. God's son, of all things, ridiculous! So what does that leave? Nothing, I guess. All I can say at Saint Peter's Gate is, I'm sorry, I went with Mexico and science, Darwin and margaritas.

Carolyn picked up the catechism and quickly rehearsed the Hail Mary, since it was very short, a few sentences. She made sure of it. She said it aloud. Then she grabbed her electric megaphone, slid open the van door, and set all the picking buckets on the roof. They were full of change and one-dollar bills with an occasional five or ten mixed in, and they made her feel clever and deceitful. (Guterson 295-6)

Here, she is at a moment of truth, where she acknowledges her cruel deception, and the eternal ramifications she could face if Dante's Inferno were real. Carolyn rejects God. She has the opportunity here to make a change, yet she is "committed already" to her own personal gain and proceeds to lie and to steal thousands from the generous and naïve seekers.

The most fascinating character tied to the apparition is Tom Cross, whose life spiraled out of order when his lustful obsession with sex created a child that he refused to love. Tom's anger against his son was unparalleled: he "crucified" his own son when he forced him to cut a tree, and then it fell on him, paralyzing his son from the neck down for life.

God couldn't love until his hate was purged. A man was finally civilized by guilt, tamed by his own transgressions. And what was the worst transgression possible? Kill your own son, like God.

But in the case of Jesus there was the resurrection, proof that God has grown, was merciful, whereas Junior suffered on. Junior was permanently crucified. And whose fault was that anyway? Who was responsible for it? Tom remembered his

words from the time, less than a minute before Junior's "accident," and they'd been logging a steep knoll for the state highway police department, taking out an S curve. You god damn pussy piece of shit, I wish you were never born. You fuck, you girl, you faggot little fuck. You finish the job or go fuck yourself. You finish dropping that tree you fuck. Don't talk to me until you've finished with it. I want that tree on the ground you fuck or I'll cut your god damn dick off.
(Guterson 104)

Unlike Jesus, Junior is never resurrected; he has to have all his bodily needs cared for by others. Unlike God's reconciliation with humanity through the shedding of Jesus' blood, Tom's rage is never purged. Despite frequent visits to the sacrament of confession, Tom continued his rage until his wife divorced him and filed a restraining order against him. Out of work, Tom barely holds onto a paycheck. Tom is kicked out of his hotel room, and in a fit of rage he leaves with his mattress pad and the hotel's owner in hiding. With nowhere to go but the woods, Tom reaches the bottom of his abyss. In an impulsive pilgrimage, he joins the crowds heading to collect miraculous water from the apparition night on the last night before the forest is closed. In an act of faith in God's mercy and goodness, he seeks water for his son's recovery, and admits his role in the accident:

It was black and smelled of mud and moss and a woman with a hoe who was working nearby – in the dark he couldn't make out her face – said Praise the Lord and Hail Our Lady, what miracle are you seeking?
I'm seeking my ill son's health and salvation.
What illness does he suffer from?
Paralysis, said Tom. He's paralyzed.
He can't move?
His neck is broken.
An accident?
No, said Tom.
What happened then?
I did it to him.
You broke his neck.
That's right. I did.
But how can that be?
I broke it on purpose.

But how can that be? How? Why?

Hatred, said Tom. I hated him.

He filled his water bottles, wiped his hands on his pants. The woman let him do so in silence and then she reached to touch his shoulder. Hail Mary, full of grace, she said. The Lord is with thee. He is.

Leave me alone, answered Tom.

In the woods, by the trail, not far off, he set down the bottles, sat on a log, and smoked the last of his cigarettes. Tom knew he wasn't acceptable now in his language or demeanor. He could still see himself as others saw him. And he was not surprised to be not surprised. He asked himself, Is it me or them? The world or me? Who doesn't see? Who doesn't know? How long have I been going in this direction? When did I start this way?

... In North Fork Tom found a mob at the church ... Okay, he said. All right.

This is it. Tom drove up onto the sidewalk, spilled out, and waded into the crowd
(Guterson 266)

All of a sudden, Tom seeks to help his son, the victim of his cruelty, and he admits his hatred as a catalyst for the unhappiness of his family. This moment of grace allows Tom to look at himself more truthfully. Tom had previously confessed his evilness, but in this moment, Tom is able ask himself how he got there and allow the possibility for change. Then he goes to seek Ann.

In the novel's feverish denouement, Tom approaches sickly Ann in the chapel, seeking a miracle healing of his son. Fearful Ann promises that only Our Lady heals; "I want to believe that," replies Tom. These magic words bring Ann to prayer, and Tom asks again for a miracle. Meanwhile, Carolyn had sought the sheriff to arrest Tom for his bullying intrusion, and he holds Ann like a hostage in front of him, mesmerized by her warm touch. Pretending her pepper spray is Ann's asthma inhaler, Carolyn approaches the pair against Ann's cries, "No ... Stay back. Stay back ... I can see your aura ... I can see you now" (Guterson 309). Carolyn mists Tom with pepper spray, reducing him to a "large fetal ball" whimpering Tommy. This time, it is Tom who is the victim of anger:

“That’s what you get, said Carolyn wrathfully. You shouldn’t have challenged me sucker,” (Guterson 309). Tom for the first time in his life becomes humbled:

Tommy, answered the fallen man.

He’d never felt so helpless before. Never been reduced in this way. A pain he could neither deny nor accept. It simply was, no matter what. And what to do in the face of such pain? How to propel it forth or thwart it? There was nothing to do; pain was what it was. It seized him again on every inhalation. Tom’s own breathing seared him down to nothing. Air itself was a torment, death. Tom was introduced to illuminating blindness. He flailed in search of the visionary’s presence but the ordinary world had abandoned him. Where was everyone? Why was he alone? What did all his suffering mean? Imprisoned as he was behind his eyelids he beheld a light as thorough as darkness. Mother of God, he prayed silently. Be inside me now. (Guterson 309)

For the first time completely helpless, unable to abuse others, Tom is able to ask for and accept Mary’s help. Ann dies besides him from the effects of the pepper spray, her escalating illness and an overdose of prescription medication. Here is the powerful image of a reverse pieta: Tom is like the Virgin Mary, except that he is neither a virgin nor nurturing. Ann is like Jesus, whose self-sacrifice brings new and eternal life to all who seek it. Through this gender reversal, Guterson challenges the reader to examine the Christian faith outside of its traditional gender roles.

Ann’s death gathers the community together, and donations pour in to build a beautiful, new church. The community is lifted up in hope. The poor character Tom Cross is able to make a new effort at self-improvement and becomes a server at the parish. Father Collins finds renewed enthusiasm for his vocation; he takes a true interest in the architecture of the new church, his first practical and moral interest in a world beyond philosophizing. With the opening of the church, he has an eager new flock waiting for him, so that his mortality is circumvented through the legacy of his spiritual parenthood and contribution to the community. Carolyn skips off to Mexico only to become fatter after her liposuction

fails and suffers from the mystery of Ann's last words and her role in Ann's death. She lives a wealthy life entirely devoid of meaning. Truth, in the end, lies not in the apparition, but in the transforming power of faith which is both a choice and a blessing.

V. Conclusion

In these novels, Mary is a focal point in the search for Christian truth. Because of her radical faith, she is also a guide to the characters as they hope for the muck in their lives to settle into clarity. Mary helps the characters in these novels to find all the essentials of a happy life — humility, healing, hope, love, peace, purpose and prayer. The narrator of Our Lady of the Lost and Found sees the truth of her past; she sees through the muck of history and finds faith in Mary. With the hope that comes from faith, she sees new “both/and” possibilities. The author also brings Mary into the garb of the post-modern world, showing that Christianity is not at a loss to converse with contemporary people in a contemporary way. Bernardo's truth is the painful reality of his encounter with Mary: It empowers him to live as a man of courage; it enables him to fulfill his life-long dream of becoming a priest and it causes his personal suffering at the hands of his enemies. Bernardo and the Virgin shows the manipulation and distortion of truth. For Nicaraguans, Mary's apparition brings a voice urging them to discover truth through respect for human dignity and a way of peace. In Our Lady of the Forest, truth arrives for the characters by making a judgment on what are ultimately matters of faith and ending their moral relativity. Guterson further probes the truth of apparitions as Ann's drug use, personal history and personality create doubt. These novels become part of the readers' and authors' pathways towards truth as they encounter the thin places in theological,

historical, scientific and personal fact and fiction. Marian apparitions themselves are a subjective truth, and faith in them is a personal choice. The reader encounters both fictitious apparitions and the folklore and legacy of historical apparitions. Maybe these fictitious stories seem more real than the reported ones, and they allow the reader the imagination to look at reported apparitions with a new understanding of the relationship between fact and faith. Furthermore, the reader has a keener view of the varieties of stories that exist. In questioning truth, the reader may realize that truth is both within and without the bounds of logic, surrounded like life and love in an element of mystery.

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