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Mary, Mary, quite contrary

Barely a decade after the Catholic church admitted it had done her wrong, Mary Magdalene gets another thorough going-over

Mary Magdalene
Christianity's Hidden Goddess
Lynn Picknett

Mary Magdalene is an enduring motif in esoteric Christianity, despite her bad press from the official churches (although the Catholic Church quietly admitted in 1994 that it was wrong about her, the old attitude is still evident in the literature). She is also venerated in small enclaves of Catholics, with a devotion that must have deeply irritated the Church for a long time.

Lynn Picknett attempts to trace the history and development of the Magdalene in Europe, and to search for traces of her in Scripture, literature and legend.

The result is an untidy pot-boiler of a book, several chapters of which have only a tenuous connection to the main theme, and most of which is a giddy maelstrom of synaptic spacewalks around a fascinating subject.

For writers like Picknett, it can seem that plausibility is more important than authenticity (though the word 'authenticity' is overused throughout). She treats her sources inconsistently, as myth on one page, history on the next; this is especially evident in her dealings with Scripture, canonical and otherwise. It's a curate's egg approach to research which can leave a reader wondering what the point is.

It is a common fault of alternative writers to treat their own thought processes as research, and to elevate them to the status of evidence, and Picknett is no exception.

To take an example at random (there are plenty to choose from): at one point, she examines the Magdalene cult in early mediaeval Languedoc; although there is no evidence for it, she makes the assumption that copies of Gnostic texts relating to the Magdalene must have been available to the people of the region (she offers no justification for this); by the next

paragraph, the supposition is called a fact, and used to support another supposition.

The Gospels get the most inconsistent treatment of all. They are classified as highly redacted propaganda (so presumably pretty untrustworthy as source material); yet Picknett can blithely write that it is a 'fact' that Roman soldiers played dice for Jesus' clothes; she can take the references to Mary and John the Baptist as bad propaganda, but those to Peter as solid historical bases for a character analysis.

Picknett believes in the historicity of the Gospel characters (she is entitled to the opinion; it's shared by many) but her justification for the belief (other than that it suits her theory and her purposes) is that the narrative is inconsistent; the Gospels are proof of the Magdalene's historical existence because she is not a sympathetic character in the text. It's difficult to see the merit in this approach.

Some of the arguments are simply fanciful: I find it hard to accept that Voraigue wrote the compendious and glorious 'Golden Legend' just to badmouth Mary Magdalene; it seems equally unlikely that thousands of Cathars were slaughtered to cover up a pogrom against her, but the suggestion is made.

There is a great deal of material here which is simply a reworking of earlier books by the same author (this is another common trait in alternative scholarship, putting everything into every book – see David Icke for the apogee of the art); as a consequence, we are treated to reprises of theories about Jesus, John the Baptist, the Templars, the Cathars, ususally with only tenuous references to the Magdalene (she disappears for large sections of the book, except for off-hand mentions to remind the reader what the book is supposed to be about).

If this book proves anything, it is less that Mary Magdalene is '*the most important woman in history*' (author's italics), and more that there is a whole school of authors out there who have a peculiar idea of research, a very loose definition of evidence, and a very hard time thinking straight.

If you don't mind a haphazard jumble of things more or less connected with the Magdalene, you may enjoy this book; if you are looking for the evidence behind the myths, look elsewhere.

Noel Rooney