

BOOKS

Life after Catholicism

You can take the boy out of the church, but you can't take the church out of the boy

BY KAREN KUDEJ

For better or worse, more than 1 billion people are baptized into the Roman Catholic Church, making it the largest Christian religion in the world. Here is a look at two books about young men dealing with their sexuality under the broad shadow of Catholicism.

The Tragedy of Miss Geneva Flowers

by Joe Babcock; Carroll & Graf, 2005; \$14.95 softcover

Erick Taylor is a teen-ager at a Catholic school in Minneapolis. He's bullied by his peers, misunderstood by his parents and threatened by his family priest.

In a manner sure to make Pope Benedict XVI proud, the priest warns him: "Mark my words, young man, if you continue on this path of immorality, you'll find yourself locked up with other delinquents. Furthermore, if you don't repent your sins, you will most certainly be condemned by God."

For Erick, the path to immorality includes being gay, smoking pot and making snide remarks. With the help of Chloe, a drag queen diva and manager of a sunglass shop at the local mall, he struggles to find his inner queen. Chloe acts as a true fairy godmother, teaching Erick where to shop for fabulous clothes, introducing him to the club scene and encouraging him to use his artistic talents.

But the road to diva-hood is fraught with troubles. Erick's first lover betrays him. His parents threaten to send him to Christian youth camp. He drops out of school, moves in with



Chloe and turns to drugs. Soon, his newfound friends introduce him to crystal meth, and not even Chloe, who warns him to stay away from it, can help him. He turns to God in his darkest hour, proving that you can take the boy out of the Catholic Church, but you can't take the Catholic out of the boy.

The Tragedy of Miss Geneva Flowers is Joe Babcock's first book. He does a good job following Erick's descent as he makes his mistakes, learns his lessons, takes responsibility for his

actions and grows from a punk teen to Miss Geneva Flowers, drag queen extraordinaire.

At times, Babcock's prose is clunky and his characters can be stereotypical. Erick's "teen talk" becomes tiresome. To his credit, Babcock does not shy from the drug and sex scenes. The

novel is well-paced and, overall, can be considered a brave book by a young author.

A Son Called Gabriel

by Damian McNicholl; CDS Books, 2004; \$22.95 hardcover

Also recently out of the Catholic closet is Gabriel Harkin, an Irish boy growing up in Northern Ireland of the 1960s and '70s. As the oldest son in a farming family, he would rather play with the girls than play football with the boys. As can be expected, that causes him trouble with the school bully. Gabriel's father is of no help, insisting that Gabriel needs to "toughen up" on his own.

As he ages, Gabriel struggles with his sexuality at a time when homosexuality is an unmentionable subject. A neighbor boy, Noel, gives him his first sexual experience in a hayloft. Later, Gabriel satisfies his sexual needs with his cousin, who

tells him it's OK if they touch each other as long as they think about girls while they are doing it.

Denial and repression, hallmarks of Catholicism, help Gabriel get by for a while, but eventually he can no longer deny his feelings for men. When he at last outs himself to his mother, she assures him it's just a phase and marches him to Father McAtammney, who tells him: "If He has planned that this isn't a phase, then I will say this to you. If you're not promiscuous, if you meet and settle down in a monogamous relationship with a man, then the Catholic Church will not condone the relationship.... But, it will not condemn it, either." Ultimately Gabriel finds acceptance from his family and learns he is not the only one who has been keeping secrets.

A Son Called Gabriel is a skillfully written book with a tone reminiscent of Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*. At times, Gabriel seems overly innocent, but McNicholl makes up for that with depth of plot and a rich setting that transports readers to Gabriel's world.

Most satisfying about this book is its wonderful complexity. More than a coming-of-age story, *A Son Called Gabriel* touches on class issues, family dynamics and the political conflict between Irish Catholics and Protestants. With this first novel, McNicholl establishes himself as a writer to watch for in the future. **JM**



KAREN KUDEJ is a Portland free-lance writer and recovering Catholic. Amen.

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