

Author Alice McDermott uses faith to give language, lore to characters

TORONTO — Catholic journal of opinion *Commonweal* describes writer Alice McDermott as one of America's greatest living novelists, while *The Washington Post*, in a review of her latest book, says the Catholic Church "lurks" in all of her stories.

But if McDermott is getting tired of being thought of as a Catholic or Irish-American writer, her latest work "The Ninth Hour" might not help her case.

Released to high acclaim from reviewers throughout North America and beyond, the book describes the life of Annie, an Irish-Catholic widow. She and her infant daughter Sally are taken in and raised by an order of religious sisters in early 20th-century Brooklyn, New York. The Little Nursing Sisters of the Sick Poor is an amalgamation of many of the real-life orders McDermott heard about growing up in an Irish-Catholic family, first in Brooklyn and later on Long Island.

The interplay of the Little Nursing Sisters of the Sick Poor with their new charges offers poignant insights into pre-Vatican II religious communities, while testifying in their own way to McDermott's deep respect and admiration for the sisters' spirit of service. As Sister Illuminata describes to Sally early in "The Ninth Hour": "A sister makes herself pure ... immaculate and pure, not to credit her own soul with her sacrifice — her giving up of the world — but to become the sweet, clean antidote to suffering, to pain."

There also is a delightful treatment in "The Ninth Hour" of a Sister St. Saviour, whose service to the poor is matched only by her bridling at all forms of authority. Accompanying the widow Annie home from the funeral of her husband, whose death

by suicide sets in motion the events of the novel, Sister St. Saviour's contradictions are laid bare. "But the woman, childless, stubborn, coming to the close of her life, had a mad heart. Mad for mercy, perhaps, mad for her own authority in all things — a trait Annie had come to love and admire — but mad nonetheless. Riding home from the cemetery, Sister St. Saviour had said, 'It would be a different church if I were running it.'"

In an interview with Catholic News Service, McDermott agreed that "The Ninth Hour" is her most Catholic work to date.

"It deals quite directly with religious women in the church as a subject, and makes thematic use of essential elements of Christian belief — dying so that others might live, for instance," McDermott said. "In a broader sense, it is also about faith itself, the vivid belief in things unseen."

"The Ninth Hour" is McDermott's eighth novel. "Charming Billy," published in 1997, won the National Book Award for fiction and an American Book Award. Three other novels have been Pulitzer Prize finalists. She was inducted into the New York State Writers Hall of Fame in 2013.

McDermott combines her writing schedule with a teaching position at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, where she is the Richard A. Macksey professor of the humanities. She has three children and lives in Bethesda, Maryland, with her husband, a retired neuroscientist formerly with the National Institutes of Health.

"I've been living in Bethesda for nearly three decades," she said. "My parish is St. Bartholomew's in Bethesda, where my youngest child was baptized and all three of my children went to grammar school. My mother was buried from St. Bart's as well, so I think of it very much as my home parish."

McDermott, who has Catholic themes and experience sprinkled throughout her body

of work, is unconcerned that her stories might have less appeal to non-Catholic readers.

“I retain the somewhat dated conviction that literature always transcends its subject,” she told CNS. “I honestly never think about ‘appealing’ to readers. I’m with (Joseph) Conrad in believing that my only obligation to readers is to make them see. After that, I feel we’re in this together, reader and writer, doing our best together to make sense of this imagined world, this constructed reality.”

For McDermott, Catholic prayer and faith practices are used to give language to her characters and to lend a sense of order in the “constructed reality” she creates.

“A Catholic upbringing has played an essential role in my development as a writer because it has shaped the way I use words,” she said. “Catholic prayers and Catholic hymns were in many ways my first poetry.”

Also, her interest in the “essential question of the efficacy of love in a mortal world,” arises out of her Catholicism.

Many of McDermott’s works suggest a sense of loss or nostalgia as her characters advance through sometimes troubled, sometimes unremarkable lives. The narration often unfolds across generations, as children and grandchildren reflect on the lives and influence of parents or cherished old relatives. This sense of loss, or at least profound change, hints at a diminishing role of the church in the lives of contemporary actors.

Toward the end of “The Ninth Hour,” for example, grandchildren of the book’s principal character express the inevitability of change and impermanence. “The holy nuns who sailed through the house when we were young were a dying breed even then. The bishop with his eye on their rich man’s mansion even then. The call to sanctity and self-sacrifice, the delusion and superstition it required, fading from the

world even then.”

McDermott’s reasoning for the use of the words delusion and superstition to describe an institution so central to her creative art is instructive.

“These lines belong to the narrators of the novel — the 21st-century generation who, it seems to me, could not help but look at the faith of an earlier time with some distrust — distrust as well as astonishment, perhaps even envy,” she said. “The ninth hour — in the New Testament, the hour of Christ’s death — strikes me as a moment when believer and non-believer alike hold their breath, unable to fully believe or fully disbelieve. Nothing proven. Nothing resolved. A kind of stasis. A place where much contemporary religious belief resides, it seems to me.”

While “The Ninth Hour” continues to draw raves from the critics, McDermott soldiers on with her faith-influenced craft.

“I do have another novel well under way,” she said. “Since I tend to work on more than one novel at a time, it seems I’m never without a novel under way. I like to tell schoolchildren that to be a novelist is to have homework due for the rest of your life. It discourages the cowardly.”

Copyright ©2018 Catholic News Service/U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.