

WALL STREET JOURNAL MARCH 2, 2018  
BOOKS BOOKSHELF

# ‘The Cloister’ Review: Enclosed Encounters

James Carroll writes a sweeping, beautifully crafted book about Christianity’s shameful contradictions and enduring possibilities.



A covered walkway at The Cloisters museum in New York. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

*By John Kaag*

March 2, 2018 4:31 p.m. ET

THE CLOISTER

By James Carroll

*Nan A. Talese, 364 pages, \$27.95*

**In the history** of Christianity, cloisters have frequently been regarded as a barrier, a series of wide arcades and covered walkways separating the sphere of worship from the affairs of everyday life. They are a strange sort of wall, defined and enclosed by openings and meant to be traversed.

About 14 miles north of Wall Street in New York, perched on a hill overlooking the Hudson River, is The Cloisters, a branch of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. As its name suggests, the branch's tapestries, stained glass and prayer books are secondary to the building itself, which was constructed from a series of medieval cloisters brought from Europe by John D. Rockefeller Jr. in the first half of the 20th century. In a city that is always noisy and cramped, The Cloisters serves as its own kind of barrier, where visitors can come for a moment of seclusion and space.

This is the setting of James Carroll's novel "The Cloister." One of the sections of the Met's Cloisters is originally from the monastery at Cluny, in central France. It was the onetime home of the 12th-century monk and scholar Peter Abelard, presented in Mr. Carroll's book by turns as a heretic, an admired scholastic philosopher, an embryonic Protestant, a hero of the Enlightenment and an admired humanist of the

Romantic era. Abelard is most famous for his ill-fated love affair with the nun and abbess Héloïse. It is this tragic romance (Abelard was castrated as punishment) that forms one of the novel's two central strands. While Abelard and Héloïse are widely regarded as the “Romeo and Juliet . . . of *la France*,” their relationship, as presented by Mr. Carroll, meant something more than star-crossed love.

Fast-forward nearly a millennium: Father Michael Kavanagh is a priest serving the working-class Catholics of Inwood, a neighborhood at the northern tip of Manhattan, next to The Cloisters. In 1950, in the midst of a rainstorm, Father Kavanagh seeks shelter in the museum, where he meets Rachel Vedette, a brilliant and beautiful docent. A French Jew, Rachel arrived in New York after narrowly escaping the Holocaust. Her father, Saul, a scholar of the Talmud who was in the process of writing a book on Abelard's radically inclusive theology, wasn't as fortunate. In the ensuing weeks, Father Kavanagh and Rachel find each other again in The Cloisters and together begin to uncover the secret that cost her father his career and, ultimately, his life.

In “The Cloister,” Mr. Carroll, the author of “Warburg in Rome” (2014) and other novels, as well as “Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews, a History” (2001), has produced a sweeping, beautifully crafted book—perhaps his best yet—that draws readers into the inner sanctum of Christianity, with its shameful contradictions but also its enduring possibilities. He conveys a vital lesson about religiously inspired violence and the prospect for peace but avoids being heavy-handed, instead toggling lightly between

two fraught moments in history. He weaves together a complex story of spiritual traditions and their lasting political legacies. We witness the Vedettes' capture and internment in Nazi-occupied Paris. A sympathetic French policeman asks Rachel: "Why do [the Germans] hate the Jews?" A very good question—with a very long and complicated answer. For Rachel, the reason is theological and traces back to the time of Abelard: "Because they say we killed Christ."

The Holocaust was framed by longstanding Catholic anti-Semitism underpinned by this interpretation of the Crucifixion. Before his death, Saul had passed a crucial insight to his daughter: Abelard, who had become a Christian hero in modern France, stood fast against this misinterpretation of Judaism but also against the warring spirit that it spawned. Abelard represents the peaceful, capacious road less taken in Christianity. In Rachel's words to Father Kavanagh, Catholicism "follows from a fork in the road; a fork lit up by burning texts. There was another way to go at that fork, one the Church chose not to take."

Abelard came of age during the Crusades, a series of wars in which Christians attempted to reclaim the Holy Land from infidels and supposed Christ-killers. At the age of 17, he refused to join their ranks, instead growing into a church leader and one of Europe's most vociferous antiwar protesters. "How do we," Mr. Carroll's Abelard asks his fellow Christians, "exiles in this vale of tears, know what the great and Almighty God, in His eternal wisdom, wants for Jerusalem?" This was a forbidden question for the Crusaders, who believed that in crucifying Jesus the Jews had turned their backs on God. Abelard disagreed: "If the Jews believe God wants them to kill Christ, then, however gravely

mistaken, their intention saves them.” This sentiment—so crucial to Jews like the Vedettes—was anathema to crusading theologians like St. Bernard, but, in Héloïse, Abelard found a thinker, and a lover, who shared his views.

As their friendship deepens, Rachel teaches Father Kavanagh a lesson that was lost on the Crusaders and the Nazis: “For Abelard, everything follows from the first principle: The Creator loves what the Creator creates. Creation itself is God’s act of love.” This spiritual “expansiveness” could not be accommodated by tightly circumscribed doctrine or the narrow rigors of the priesthood. But Father Kavanagh slowly comes to see the wisdom of Abelard and Héloïse (and of the Vedettes), and to grasp the possibilities of living “out of bounds.” This leads him to re-evaluate Christian hierarchies, priestly abuses, unspoken taboos and foundational hatreds. The death and rebirth of Jesus, he now sees, was never meant to be reduced to a decoration for the house of war, a red sign on a knight’s tunic, the emblem of the Iron Cross. It was, and remains, an act of love.

Mr. Carroll—a former priest, an antiwar protester and the son of an Air Force general—has spent his writing life making this point. It is at the core of virtually every one of his more than 20 books. The divine, if it is anything, is love. It is an open and safe passage—much like a cloister.

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