



The Cloister

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From National Book Award-winning writer James Carroll comes a novel of the timeless love story of Peter Abelard and Heloise, and its impact on a modern priest and a Holocaust survivor seeking sanctuary in Manhattan.

Father Michael Kavanagh is shocked to see a friend from his seminary days named Runner Malloy at the altar of his humble Inwood community parish. Wondering about their past, he wanders into the medieval haven of The Cloisters, and begins a conversation with a lovely and intriguing museum guide, Rachel Vedette.

Rachel, a scholar of medieval history, has retreated to the quiet of The Cloisters after her harrowing experience as a Jewish woman in France during the Holocaust. She ponders her late father's greatest intellectual work: a study demonstrating the relationship between the famously discredited monk Peter Abelard and Jewish scholars. Something about Father Kavanagh makes Rachel think he might appreciate her continued studies, and she shares with him the work that cost her father his life.

At the center of these interrelated stories is the classic romance between the great scholar Peter Abelard and his intellectual equal Heloise. For Rachel, Abelard is the key to understanding her people's place in intellectual history. For Kavanagh, he is a doorway to understanding the life he might have had outside of the Church. *The Cloister* is James Carroll at his best.

The Cloister Details

Date : Published March 6th 2018 by Nan A. Talese

ISBN : 9780385541275

Author : James Carroll

Format : Hardcover 384 pages

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Fiction, Religion

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From Reader Review The Cloister for online ebook

Trin says

A Catholic grapples with "the Jewish question" for 360 pages.

OY VEY.

Far be it for me to speak for the entirety of the Jewish people, but: as long as you cool it with the murder and the genocide, we don't really give a shit what you think about us. We definitely don't need lengthy, self-back-patting apologia on our behalf. Thanks.

I'm am very relieved to be done with this and to now get to read something that, whatever the author's intention, doesn't reference "the Jew" and "the Christ-killers" about 12 times per page.

Annie says

Originally published on my blog: Nonstop Reader

A new narrative historical fiction from James Carroll and Doubleday, *The Cloister* uses parallel storylines from the 12th and 20th centuries to illuminate and emphasize the timelessness of faith, love, fidelity, understanding and salvation.

I cannot emphasize enough how well written and lyrical this book is. It's definitely one of the more masterfully written books I've read this year. The prose is beautiful and luminous. The author's ability to write so honestly about some of the most atrocious, brutal, and heartbreaking episodes of both the 12th and 20th centuries is breathtaking.

I was really struck by the elevation and sanctity of these two couples (whose relation to one another form two potential halves of a whole circle) separated by almost a millennium, being shaped and molded by these watershed moments. That there are valuable human lessons in the midst of devastation and horror throughout time and history and that it was just as true a thousand years ago as now, was very profound to me.

This is a book which is going to stick with me. I think this is an important book, even (especially?) for people who have no active religious belief system. The book provides such an eloquent and unassailable logical argument for compassion and self control especially with regard to external belief systems.

It's not an easy book to read. It's emphatically not light reading. The language is finely crafted, but it took me time to digest and understand.

Flawless and achingly beautiful.

Five stars

Anticipated publication date: 6 March, 2018

Formats: Kindle / Hardcover, 384 pages.

Disclosure: I received an ARC at no cost from the author/publisher.

Charlene says

This book has three settings, one in medieval Europe, the other two more closely-related in time: Jewish people from France in one of Hitler's camps, and 1950s NYC Irish Catholic priesthood.

The medieval story is a fictionalized account of Abelard and Heloise; the French Jewish woman (Rachel) helped her father (a medieval scholar at the Sorbonne) with his research into Abelard's unusual view of the fate of the Jewish people, and the Priest, who meets Rachel in the Museum (the Cloisters), is struck by Abelard's views which condemn Catholicism's "condemnation" of Jews at "Christ-killers" which "influenced" Hitler.

I put some terms above in quotation marks, since this book is a work of fiction, and I do not have the qualifications to assess the full story as author James Carroll tells it. I know a little about these topics, maybe more than a little about some, but I still consider myself unable (and somewhat unwilling) to try to separate fact-from-fiction from authorial-intent in my reading and thoughts about the novel. I will say, as story, it is very gripping and does present at least the bare outlines of what happened in history.

I also know that (in 1980s) I did study the "predominant" medieval-to-modern view about the Atonement in college: Anselm's Cur Deus Homo was required reading [propitiation]. I learned only a little about Abelard and Heloise, and did not have exposure to much other than their relationship and his brutal treatment (by Bernard of Clairveaux and the pope).

What I personally will say is that I find Carroll's presentation of Abelard's God-is-Love-exclusively (therefore, no Atonement necessary) to be something I would question, if Abelard was truly the great thinker, scholar of Scripture -- as he is presented in this book -- since other points met in both Hebrew and Christian canons are omitted.

I was intrigued by this book; I saw in it what may be a more competitive contemporary view of God's relationship to all people than what passed as Christian in the Middle Ages or in the mid-1950s. [The Cloister was copyrighted in 2017]. Having said this, I did find the story to be very interesting reading. I would like to learn more about Abelard and Heloise! I knew their son was named Astrolabe!

CoffeeandInk says

The Cloisters is a novel of ideas that made me feel as breathless and on edge as I do when reading a thriller. With masterful writing and pacing, the author creates two worlds for the characters to inhabit—1140s Paris and the scholastic sphere of the brilliant Peter Abelard and Heloise, and their inevitable, and separate, retreat from the world.

How this all fits into Nazi occupied Paris, concentration camps, and on to post WWII New York City is an amazing literary feat. Entering this hall of mirrors is the Catholic priest Kavanaugh and the Jewish docent for the Cloisters, Rachel. Rachel's father is the link back to Abelard and Heloise, as before the war he was a

scholar in Paris working on a study of Abelard's work *Dialogus inter philosophum, Judaeum, et Christianum*, (Dialogue of a Philosopher with a Jew and a Christian) 1136–1139. She carries Abelard's book *History of my Calamities* with her wherever she goes. When the priest seeks the shelter of the Cloisters during a rainstorm, they fall into conversation, and she spontaneously hands it over to the priest.

The themes of obligation and exploitation, retreat and annihilation, manipulation and survival are golden threads to follow through this labyrinth. A beautifully horrifying and shattering story.

Thank you NetGalley and Doubleday. I'd give this novel 10 stars if I could.

Sharon says

Carroll has written three story threads in three different time periods. I was ignorant of Peter Abelard and Héloïse but I will never forget them and what they stood for against unbelievable odds. I knew that the Catholic Church had been complicit in the Holocaust but oblivious to the centuries old teaching that as "killers of Christ" they were worthy of scorn, to be wantonly killed - Jews! God's chosen people!! The second thread takes place during the Holocaust and illustrates the anguish of this evil teaching.

Abelard was an apologist for the Jewish people, portraying them with "total sympathy and respect - an equal to the Christian. The Jew is not an object of conversion, or doomed to an eternity of hellfire." This is what he taught his students which put him in opposition to the Catholics leaders of France to his physical peril.

The modern day thread follows a chance encounter between a Jewish woman and an Irish Catholic priest who begin a tentative friendship after being drawn together through their fascination with the teachings of Abelard. Both are grappling with grievous issues in their lives that were "out of bounds" but come into focus through conversations about the 12th century lives of Peter and Héloïse. Abelard's philosophy said "no" to the militant Christ and "yes" to the Prince of Peace, and it was his teachings that opened the door to Father Kavanagh's inner introspection, though he ultimately credits Héloïse for his greatest understandings.

Carroll, a former priest and practicing Catholic, is not indicting the Church, but he is throwing open the windows and doors and inviting modern Catholics to stop feeling guilty, and to see that more is present, not in the sacrament or in the Church but in the people of the parish themselves, to celebrate. Kavanaugh finally recognized that God's love for him was no longer contingent on his being a priest. This book is brilliant and certainly more intellectual than I am capable of processing in one reading, all the philosophy and theology, a book of challenge and hope.

Edward says

Writing a novel that moves back and forth between Abelard and Heloise, those famous 13th century lovers and a modern couple, is a high risk endeavor that could have easily resulted in an overly schematic pairing of "star-crossed lovers." Carroll, to his credit, avoids any excessive sentiment that falsifies the experience of these couples. He has written a compelling novel that uses Abelard and Heloise as an historical perspective to depict issues that go beyond their remembered doomed romance.

He begins his modern story in the 1950's, introducing a sympathetic Catholic priest, and a Jewish woman

who survived the trauma of World War II. They meet in a chance encounter at the Cloisters in New York, near Father Michael Kavanaugh's parish church. Rachel Vedette is a docent there, and she notices him reading a book by Simone Weil, the French Jewish-Catholic pacifist.. That leads to a discussion of the criticism of Weil's anti-semitism

Kavanaugh is a bit naive and is enlightened by Vedette about Christian persecution of Jews through the centuries. It is here that Abelard emerges as one of the few Christian thinkers who questioned the notion of Jews being "Christ-killers." His liberal thought, unusual for the middle-ages, leaned heavily toward a God who loved all of humanity. Interwoven with his thinking was his romantic involvement with Heloise who bore a son. Ironically, that is all most people know about Peter Abelard.

At this point, a reader might think that Kavanaugh is going to become romantically involved with Vedette, but Carroll skirts that development, instead concentrating on a series of betrayals that move the novel forward. They all to some extent involve individuals who encounter conflict with the institutional traditions of which they're a part.

Kavanaugh learns of a priest who was a sexual predator, and of the sacrifice of a good friend which allowed the priest to continue in the church. A coverup, justified by a notion that the church's reputation would be harmed and would be damaging the faith of Catholics. It provokes a crisis in his life as to what he should do.

Vedette is a profoundly damaged woman who has to confront her past when she betrayed her beloved father, a Jewish scholar murdered by a Nazi soldier. She has numbed herself and it is only through the interaction with Kavanaugh that both begin to mutually emerge as individuals, not bound to a traditional past.

On a larger scale the long historic persecution of the Jews culminating in the Holocaust of World War II, amounts to systemic betrayals of conscience on the part of the Catholic Church. Abelard and Heloise were an example of individuals, enmeshed in the hypocrisy, past and present, of the Church. Abelard was eventually tried for the heresy of defending Jews,, and was pitted against Bernard of Clairvaux.

After their liaison, for which Abelard was castrated, both remained in the church as an abbot and a prioress. Abelard is the more intellectual figure, protesting to the end of his life the process and outcome of his condemnation. To Heloise, such legalities were mostly irrelevant. What mattered to her was their coming together in a loving and intimate way.

Carroll's novel looks at the complex ways that individuals seek their freedom under confining cultural rules. The Catholic Church comes in for justified criticism, but it's never made into an oversimplified scapegoat. It's more representative, I think, of the social restrictions that institutions build around us. We never entirely break free or leave them, just, as one character puts it, "only move to the edge."

Denice Barker says

I finished this book a couple of weeks ago and can't get it out of my mind. After thinking about it for a couple of weeks I don't know how to tell you it's worth every minute of your time and do that telling justice. Bear with me and then go buy the book.

I had, somewhere in my life, heard the names Heloise and Abelard. I knew theirs was a love story but that's I all. I didn't know their time, their story or their purpose. I do now.

The many layers of *The Cloister* include the story of a Catholic priest, Father Michael Kavanagh, a Holocaust survivor from France and museum guide, Rachel Vedette, and their crossed paths. One day Fr. Kavanagh has a conversation with Rachel at The Cloisters. He is there spontaneously one day while working through a chance encounter with a friend from another time, Runner Malloy. Neither Fr. Michael nor Rachel realize what that chance encounter would mean to their lives. What is chance, anyway?

Rachel's father was a Medieval scholar and his life's work was dedicated to bringing back the honor Abelard was denied in his own time. Abelard, a philosophy scholar and monk, was discredited for his relationship to the Jews and Rachel's father worked his way minutely through Abelard's writings hoping to reinstate his philosophy with the world. Rachel protected her father's work with her life and after her conversations with Fr. Michael she trusts her father's writings to him. Nothing sinister here. No car chases as she tries to get them back.

Are you still with me?

Heloise and Abelard's story is one of those immortal love stories and we are told their story interspersed with Rachel and Fr. Michael's. It is a love story deeply felt. It is also an affirmation of the Jews to their place in history. In their place in philosophical thinking.

The thinking in this novel is deep and intense and brain altering. Yet it's not so much so there is no audience for this story. It's the most thought provoking novel I've read in years. I haven't forgotten it, I will read it again (and maybe again) and think about it when I'm not reading it. And, in my opinion, that's just about a perfect novel.

Jodi says

Might I suggest not using a publisher as a therapist?

Nancy says

Religion, Philosophy and Romance

After an unsettling meeting with an old friend from seminary, Father Kavanagh wanders through Central Park. To escape the rain, he takes shelter in The Cloisters. He's hoping to be alone, but Rachael Vedette, a museum guide, wanders into his sanctuary. Their unexpected conversation changes their lives.

Rachael is a survivor of the Holocaust in France. Her father, a Medieval scholar, studied Abelard in the hope of bringing Abelard's ideas to the modern era and garnering him the honor he deserves. Rachael protected her father's work throughout her own ordeal, now she feels compelled to share it with Father Kavanagh.

The novel revolves around the story of Heloise and Abelard, an iconic love story that echoes through the centuries. It is also the story of Rachael and Kavanagh and the struggle to bring the story of the Jews into the rightful place in philosophical thinking, a task that Abelard paid dearly for.

This is a beautifully written book. It's a book to be savored, not read quickly. The love story and the foray into philosophy and religion present much food for thought. The characters are real people struggling with mighty issues. The author did an excellent job of making both the middle ages and the modern era into backgrounds that enhanced the novel.

I enjoyed both the romance and the philosophy. It's a book worth reading more than once.

I received this book from Net Galley for this review.

J.S. Dunn says

As another reviewer said, Breathtakingly tedious. Gave it a 3 only because of the depth of research but the multiple settings do not work.

Karen says

The Cloister - James Carroll, Mar 6, 4.56, 384 pages

A well-researched piece of historical fiction written by former priest James Carroll. It is based on historically significant people, fascinating subjects who I'd never before heard of.

It is a multi-layered read that spans hundreds of years and begins with philosopher/nun Holoise d'Argenteuil arriving at the Cloister garden to meet the Abbot where he will lead her to the the body of her much older lover Peter Abelard, reflecting on their doomed affair and condemnation. Fast forward 800 years when priest Michael Kavanagh and Holocaust survivor Rachel Vedette, a docent and scholar have a chance meeting at the Cloister that will change their lives. This was the first I heard of Abelard and d'Argenteuil and their historically important story told through different perspectives and eras was complex and very well-done.

Amy Gennaro says

I was given an advance copy of this book by NetGalley in exchange for my unbiased review.

WoW! An excellent book that tells the epic love story of Heloise and Abelard and the importance and context of Paul Abelard's teachings. The story moves between 12th century time of these lovers then tells the story of a father and daughter living in the Polish ghetto during World War II, and finally in a small Irish Catholic parish in New York City in the 1950's. I know that these stories don't really seem to relate to one another, but the author uses these more modern stories to illustrate the impact of the teachings of Paul Abelard and how the Catholic church ignored them.

I have long not understood how the Catholic church has long blamed Jews for the death of Jesus Christ. This will definitely give you insight into how this has been perpetrated through the years.

It was extremeley well-written and flowed seamlessly between the stories. I could not put the book down. I heartily recommend this book!

Sherri says

This is a good introduction to Abelard and Heloise, beyond the romance. Their story runs parallel to the tentative friendship of Father Michael and Rachel, a museum tour guide and Holocaust survivor. Both carry burdens from loss, regret and secrets.

There is much history, theology and philosophy in both stories, it will challenge the reader's notions of what they think and why, it may upset some readers and give vindication to others. Some knowledge of pre-Vatican II Catholicism helps too. A lot of thought and research went into this. Among other things I learned about thralls, illegitimate Church slaves.

The ending gives resolution, not a perfect happy ending but a sense of peace, relief and even absolution.

Lisa says

The Cloister is a rich and demanding reading experience. Carroll skillfully weaves together three narratives from three historical settings-1950 New York City, Nazi-occupied Paris and medieval France. I found the novel quite engrossing - but because all the characters are grappling with religion and ideas, it demands concentration.

Father Michael Kavanagh and Rachel Vedette both find solace in the writings of Peter Abelard and Heloise, whose love story is one of the narratives. These writings and Kavanagh's conversations with Rachel, help him finally face the history of anti-semitism in the Church and the Church's complicity in the Holocaust. For Rachel, they are a way to hold on to her father, a scholar who studied Abelard, who was killed by a Nazi.

I really appreciate when a novel sends me off to learn more - and this one certainly did! I have already read a few of the letters of Peter Abelard and Heloise and am finding their story fascinating. My only criticism is that occasionally the novel felt like a vehicle for Carroll's message about religion and morality. But overall he pulled it off - beautifully.

Beth Cato says

I received this book from the publisher via Netgalley.

A stunning book, beautifully written. Carroll brings to life the story of Abelard and Heloise, but not to focus on the tragic nature of their romance, which resulted in Abelard's brutal castration. No, he depicts the love that arises when two brilliant people come together, each feeding the other's brilliance. The result of that love echoes through the centuries to change the lives of two people in New York City in the aftermath of World War II: a Catholic priest, left staggered by the return of a friend from his youth, as he realizes his own poignant isolation in the clergy; and a young woman, a Jew from France whose father studied the texts of Abelard, and essentially died for it during the war.

There are layers upon layers here. This book is not a melodrama. It's about nuance. It's about people being people. It's about surviving, at great cost. It's about losing God, and finding him again. It's about the history of Catholicism and Judaism, and how churches--like people--have a difficult time realizing their errors or

making an effort to correct them.

This is a book that will haunt me, in the best sort of way. I am left with a profound need to not only read more about Abelard and Heloise, but to look for more of James Carroll's work.
