

Pastor Stef's Book Review – June 2017

Every year I anticipate the *Christianity Today Book Awards*. The awards are given to a variety of books in several different categories, which is unfortunate for my pocketbook. In the category of fiction, the 2017 top book went to Suzanne M. Wolfe for *The Confessions of X (2016)*. I was particularly intrigued by this book because of its attempt to write the story of the woman who was Augustine's mistress before his conversion to Christianity.

Augustine is one of the greatest theologians the church has ever produced - kind-of the Wayne Gretzky of theologians. Augustine lived at a crucial point in church history when Rome fell to the Vandals (354-430AD). His thinking has influenced the church for centuries and, next to the Bible, was the main influence on the Protestant Reformers 1100 years later. As for his mistress, little is known about her except the few comments Augustine makes about her in his autobiography *Confessions*. We don't even know her name, thus the title of Suzanne's book is both a play on Augustine's autobiography *Confessions* and the unknown name of his mistress - *Confessions of "X"*. What we do know about her is that Augustine lived with her for ten years and they had a son together before they split up due to his conversion.

I have always felt the "divorce" of Augustine and his mistress a great tragedy and wish the two would have simply gotten married. The fact that they didn't had a lot to do with the church's repressive views of sexuality that, unfortunately, Augustine popularized even more and almost made into a dogma for the church for centuries. (Augustine believed that even sex within marriage was sinful if it was engaged in for anything but procreation. Even then, one was not to experience too much pleasure while in the act). But I digress....

I started reading *Confessions of X* interested in what Suzanne would make of Augustine and "X"'s relationship, knowing that it would be mostly speculation. Suzanne portrays the relationship as one of deep love and devotion and, I felt, went overboard in making it too sappy and sentimental. All of this made their parting even sadder, but certainly humanized both "X" and their relationship. Augustine's short, post-conversion reflections, mainly reflects back on the sinfulness of their relationship.

At this point I must admit to quitting half way through. I am not a fan of historical fiction as is and wouldn't have even tried this one if it wasn't for its characters and the award it won. But even then, I just couldn't keep going without becoming intolerably bored. (My wife did finish the book). So why include this as my "book of the month" review? Well first off, it did win the 2017 *Christianity Today* book award for Christian fiction, so obviously others like it. Second, obviously not everything I like to read is what others like. And third, it does *indirectly* introduce people to one of the greatest Christian thinkers ever. It this book causes them to want to learn more about Augustine and maybe even try reading one of the greatest Christian classics - his non-fiction *Confessions* – then great! (We have an abridged contemporary English – and abridged - version in the church library). All those are good reasons to give this book a try. You can also stop half way through like me if you don't like it. ☺

Post-script (by Nancy Piva)

I *do* enjoy historical fiction. I like to read a good story set in another time, and learn something of what it would have been like to have lived then. I love learning about history, especially when I can enjoy a romantic, adventurous, suspenseful story at the same time! I have read Augustine's *Confessions*, and I was hoping to learn a bit more about him and his lady-love through the *Confessions of X*. However, Suzanne Wolfe's story strays even from the few facts we do have, especially regarding Augustine's fidelity to his mistress, his mother's relationship with her, and the reasons for their parting. Their relationship is overly romanticized and, yes, a bit sappy. If you want to know some facts about their relationship and parting, you are better googling "St. Augustine's Mistress". If you want to enjoy a romantic but tragic story then, by all means, take up and read!