

*A Thoughtful Thriller*

*The Death of a Pope, a Novel*, by Piers Paul Read (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 215 pages.

Reviewed by Christine Sunderland

This literary thriller addresses weighty and timely themes: not only challenges to belief in an unbelieving world, but the devastation of AIDS and sexual license, the disparity between first and third worlds, rich and poor, and the role of a Church guided by tradition. Secular versus religious, Muslim versus Christian, new versus old: who are the real combatants today? Our world is complex.

The author has chosen his characters wisely. An idealistic London reporter becomes enthralled with a charismatic relief worker, getting more than she bargained for. Her uncle, a conservative priest, watches over her, praying, guiding. A young British agent from Scotland Yard is pulled into the plot, as he seeks to thwart a terrorist threat. The stories intertwine in a fast-paced plot in which the smuggling of nerve gas is set against the death of John Paul II and the papal election. We move from London to Rome to Uganda to Cairo and back to Rome. With its careful syntax and spare structure, the story progresses to a profound and unforgettable conclusion.

It is appropriate that the priest, Father Luke Scott, is a member of a committee that translates liturgical texts, a job which, he explains, is hardly dry: "It's a minefield . . . . There are doctrinal implications in the choice of words." With this key statement in the first pages, Luke leads us through a maze of moral choice, emphasizing the importance of language to preserve truth, the truth of one's faith, one's humanity, one's role in history. Luke continues, "A wise man once said that one of the attractions of Catholicism is that it saves one from being a child of one's own time." Indeed. This priest will speak for tradition, for belief in a timeless creed, for the Church itself.

And who will speak for secular or religious liberalism? Through Juan Uriarte, a Catholic relief worker in Africa, we hear the seemingly reasonable demand to use any and all possible ways to alleviate suffering. Does the end justify the means? When a child dies of AIDS in your arms the answer must be yes, he says. Uriarte points to history to prove that individuals must act to ensure change: "We have ideas. We have convictions. They have consequences. We must take responsibility for the effect on others of what we believe." And Uriarte is a believer, seeing himself as Joan of Arc or Saint Louis, as God's warrior, doing what must be done. Is the answer in Africa to repeal the Church's rule on birth control, to distribute condoms? Is the answer to make war? The author presents the liberal justification for the end justifying the means, for revolution; he presents both sides, and we might very well sympathize.

But more than a thriller about a terrorist plot and more than a treatise on ends/means, belief/unbelief, old/new, conservative/liberal – more than any of these gripping aspects – *The Death of a Pope* delights the reader with poetic language. "Dreams are usually meaningless – rubbish tipped out of the subconscious mind – yet sometimes so powerful." And there are moments of poignant insight, when the young journalist Kate says, "It's difficult when you find you don't speak the same language as the people you love."

Numerous themes lie quietly beneath the surface in this novel, hinting at depth and asking for greater development. There is the thread of love – the love of family, the love of justice, the love of God. Tears are shed and blotted, the spittle of an old man is wiped away, bleeding stumps are wrapped in bandages. Body and soul weave together, from the wounds of flesh and horrors of war in Africa to the Body and Blood of the Eucharist, "This is my body given for you . . . ." Just so, body and blood is sacrificed in these pages, and we become, in some linguistic way, made slightly newer creatures.

*The Death of a Pope*, although fast paced and possibly too short at 215 pages, gives the reader much to contemplate. Then again, its tight structure may add to its potency and poetry, creating a thoughtful thriller, a rare gift in today's literary world.

Piers Paul Read, born in Beaconsfield, England in 1941, has written numerous nonfiction and fiction works, including *Alive: The Story of the Andes Survivors*, *The Templars*, *On the Third Day*, *A Patriot in Berlin*, and *Alice in Exile*. He is a frequent contributor to *The Spectator*, and lives in London.

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