Karr As A Religious Poet

Mary Karr describes herself as a black-belt sinner, and this -- her fourth collection of poems -- traces her improbable journey from the inferno of a tormented childhood into a resolutely irreverent Catholicism. Not since Saint Augustine wrote Give me chastity, Lord -- but not yet! has anyone brought such smart-assed hilarity to a conversion story.

Karrs battle is grounded in common loss (a bitter romance, friends deaths, a teenage sons leaving home) as well as in elegies for a complicated mother. The poems disarm with the arresting humor familiar to readers of her memoirs, The Liars Club and Cherry. An illuminating cycle of spiritual poems have roots in Karrs eight-month tutelage in Jesuit prayer practice, and as an afterword, her celebrated essay on faith weaves the tale of how the language of poetry, which relieved her suffering so young, eventually became the language of prayer. Those of us who fret that poetry denies consolation will find clear-eyed joy in this collection.

My Personal Review:
When it comes to Donne or the early Eliot, readers are drawn by the poet's edginess. Think about "The Relique" or "St. Narcissus." In Mary Karr's collection "Sinners Welcome," Karr trafficks in the essential difference between the incarnational God and the Olympian god: God (at least one of the three persons) underwent the human experience by having walked among us. These bold poems by Karr both startle and reward the reader.

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