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# Strange Century, the Fourteenth

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**L**IFE in the provinces of 14th-century France was one of strife, pestilence and death. The world held little beauty, particularly for women, and even less for female bastards rumored to be born of saints. Despite this setting, *Mirabilis* lushly unfolds the complicated story of Bonne Tardieu, whose name literally means God's bastard. Bonne's mother was a local saint. Her grandmother remains cloistered in a church cell, shrieking poetic prophecies to the town. It is 1372 and her village is under siege, starving and dying as the townsfolk rage impotently against yet one more mob of invaders. Bonne was orphaned young, when the Catholic Church locked her mother and some village women who believed in her holiness inside the local church and incinerated them, leaving the ruins as a reminder to those who might step out of line. Bonne has made her way in the world, surviving by picking nits out of her clients' hair, doing laundry, and now, due to her miraculously prolific breasts (and the death of her own child), as a wet nurse for hire.

Bonne's life is already complicated, thanks to her odd companions: an ill dwarf with a tragic past who now passes for a child in her care, and a madman master stonemason whose self-imposed celibacy is tried regularly as he takes his daily sustenance from Bonnie. The Holy Fathers of the Church (one of whom is rumored to be her earthly father) keep a close watch over her due to her unholy pedigree. But events are further complicated when she meets her eventual patron, Radegonde Putemonnoie. This beautiful, defiant pregnant widow must bear a son or surrender her fortune and enter the loneliness of convent life, with only her husband's sarcophagus for companionship.

The relationship that develops between the two women is fraught with struggle, not only because of the rumors and fears of the Church and mob, but also due to the class difference that gives Radegonde her power. Still, there is a haunting beauty in

JOY PARKS

*Mirabilis*

by Susann Cokal

BlueHen Books (Penguin Putnam)  
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the sexual awakening within Bonne, a powerful eroticism that seems luminous in contrast to the dark and frightening times. The reader readily accepts this current between the women. We want to believe that these comforts, this defiance, might have been possible in such an age.

Then suddenly brave, I lick at la Putemonnoie's mouth.

Virgin! I am kissing her. Or she is kissing me: I feel her warm, firm lips against mine. I kiss the way I've been kissed before, by Laurent licking, dabbing at the outside of her mouth, leaving a wet trail around the rim.

Her lips open, suck at me. Surprised, I feel her teeth, her tongue. Down below I feel myself opening like a flower, petal by petal, fold by fold, while my tongue becomes a finger probing into her. Her tongue is soft, and the tip is cleft; I run mine along this hollow, as if in an embrace.

While the author's scholarship is subtly present throughout the novel (anyone with a smattering of French or Latin will revel in the names of the characters), it does not detract from the story. The book is intelligent, almost hypnotic in its language and rhythms. And *Mirabilis* truly is a story in the best sense of the word. It is mythical and lyrical. It is told from several points of view, through asides narrated by several characters, a device that enhances the complexity of a highly imaginative tale.

As fantastic as it might be, the eroticism and sensuality of the book are so irresistible that they force the reader to submit to them. In the bloom of her love for Radegonde, Bonne literally pours forth a miracle as her breasts become the means of survival for the embattled town. Having spent a lifetime being judged for things beyond her control, she now decides who will suckle and who will go hungry. Her criteria reflect the humiliations she has endured. It is at this point that Bonne's nobility shines forth, a true sense of justice in an era when morality is

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determined by the amount of one's tithe to the Church.

Cokal's infinitely rich prose adds to the sensual earthiness of the story. In what might be one of the most innocently, but sensually, described acts of lesbian passion, the author writes:

She lifts mine for me, my borrowed skirts. She purses her lips and blows to cool me—but I don't cool...

And now a mouth is nibbling where no mouth has sucked or nibbled before. But then again, how natural: another course in the night's endless feast, this bite a kiss, too, as the tapers burn steady and the sweat rolls down my neck. ... And as I stretch my neck, I feel a pulling down below, where the other mouth is, as if the folds were sewn up and are now ripping free.

Joy Parks has contributed reviews to numerous publications, including The Bloomsbury Review and The Women's Review of Books.

How will she know when to stop? When I come unwound completely?

It is a false miracle that places Bonne at the center of the town's goodwill, and turns the tables on Ragemonde, who is arrested for witchcraft and must endure the terrible birth of a daughter in a dank, rat-infested cell. Bonne is there for her, helping in the delivery and attempting to use her new-found status to save her lover's life. The unexpected ending proves that freedom in the face of oppression is a complex thing.

*Mirabilis* is original, humorous, and fascinatingly bizarre, an enigmatic story wrapped in a gauze of feminine sensuality. The wet nurse's fecundity serves as a powerfully erotic symbol in a horrific and fearful age. *Mirabilis* defies logic and reason. It is like the lives of the saints that mark its pages: larger than life, compelling, unforgettable. ■