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Niall Williams

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In the tradition of Jim Crace's *Quarantine* and Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent*, *John* is a stunning, lyrical reimagining of John the Apostle in the final years of his life, by the critically acclaimed and bestselling author of *Four Letters of Love*.

At a time when Americans remain skeptical about religion but still thirst for spiritual fulfillment, Niall Williams's extraordinary and masterful new novel reveals a universally appealing message of hope and love.

In the years following the death of Jesus Christ, John the Apostle, now a frail, blind old man, lives in forced exile on the desolate island of Patmos with a small group of his disciples. Together, the group has endured their banishment, but after years awaiting Christ's return, fissures form within their faith, and, inevitably, one of John's followers disavows Christ's divinity and breaks away from the community, threatening to change the course of Christianity. When the Roman emperor lifts the banishment of Christians, John and his followers are permitted to return to Ephesus, a chaotic world of competing religious sects where Christianity is in danger of vanishing. It is against this turbulent background--and inspired by Jesus's radical message of love and forgiveness--that John comes to dictate his Gospel.

Immensely impressive--and based on actual historical events--*John* is at once an ambitious and provocative reimagining of the last surviving apostle and a powerful look at faith and how it lives and dies in the hearts of men.

John Details

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Author : Niall Williams

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Robert says

This is one of the most intense and engaging books that I have ever read. I have recommended it to all the people I know whom might be able to appreciate it. In terms of historical fiction it is amongst the top. Length of read is not long. Wished it was much longer, but somehow it was just right all the same. Williams writing style in this book (first I have read) is something akin to lyrical prose. Truly brings out the dichotomy between faith and doubt; two sides of the same coin I believe although he doesn't say so explicitly in the book. Authors not at the end does allude to it. Also shows, I think what is truly the opposite of faith...fear. But enough of my metaphysical meandering. I finished reading it during a thunderstorm, which if possible, I highly suggest to anyone wanting the full theatrical experience, add to that some candlelight instead of electric light and...well hope for you the same as I received. Truly an inspiring book and the weaving of actual Scripture into the text is flawless in my opinion; immanently believable. Can't say enough good things.

L. Scott says

A wonderful imagining of John's life, character, and witness. Lyrical and dramatic.

sisterimapoet says

Interesting that I noted on the last Williams book I read, The Fall of Light, that he had seemed to adopt an almost Biblical tone.

He takes it one step further here, imagining his way into the life of John the Gospel. As an unbeliever I approached it as the level of mere story, and as that it worked. The characters came to life, the setting and actions and plot all woven together by Williams deliciously descriptive semi-archaic prose.

Not an easy page-turner, but an ultimately satisfying study of human interactions and faith.

John says

I gave it 3 stars for being well-framed. It's not the clearest read ever...wait that's kinda like me

Jerry says

Tough read because it is written so starkly and because it is so relentlessly depressing - but I stuck with it, partly because I was so relentlessly depressed. In the end, I felt rewarded by its sheer power. I can understand why someone would give up on it, but for me it's one of those books that stays with you (read it

two years ago) when so many others just blend together. It's like watching a bunch of romantic comedies and then seeing "Schindler's List".

Linda says

Interesting book about what life might have been like for John the Apostle. A little hard to get through at times, but the book was written with as many facts as could be verified. I'm glad I read to the end, I got a good idea of the way of life in those times, and how difficult life was for followers of Jesus Christ.

S.M. Muse says

What an amazing journey through faith.

Dale Harcombe says

Without knowing anything about this novel except that I had liked other books by this author and that I liked the cover, I brought this book home from the library. If I had known it was about the apostle John, I may not have brought it home. But it was a day of a child screaming in the library and I had to get out, so I never read the back cover blurb as I normally would do. Before you get the wrong idea, it is not that I am against religious or historical novels. John is in fact my favourite gospel writer, which is why I may have hesitated to read a novel about him. But circumstances decreed I did bring this book home and even though there were some parts to do with people suffering from leprosy and disease that were hard to read, I could not put it down for long. When it is not dealing with the excesses of illness it is beautifully written. Some passages just leave you breathless with their beauty.

Most of the novel is set on the Isle of Patmos. John reflects on his life and the teaching and his experiences as a disciple of Jesus. Scripture is seamlessly woven into this novel. It also raises a lot of questions that I suspect may be on people's minds today as we look at our world and the things that are happening. Questions like if God exists why doesn't He act? 'Why does evil and pestilence prosper?' Why do people we care about die in painful and horrific ways? Is there one of us who hasn't asked those questions at times? I found this a thought provoking novel. I liked the way this novel raised questions and also the way it brought the apostle John and his followers to life. It also shows the conflict and doubts of some who initially were followers and that right from early days of Christianity there were those who sought to distort the message. It's a novel that is not going to appeal to everyone but it is worth reading and I would thoroughly recommend it. It is interesting after having read the novel to read the author's note at the end too.

Erika says

some amazingly beautiful passages.

Cat. says

This story starts nearly at the end of John the Evangelist's life as he is exiled on Patmos with a small cadre of followers, all waiting for Jesus' return. John was promised that Jesus would come back before John's death. As the community has aged, younger members start wondering how much longer John can possibly live...and then wonder if he is mis-remembering...and then thinking that it must be because of [some unnamed] sin that Jesus hasn't returned...and then that Jesus may not return after all because after all the Son of God couldn't actually die....

OK, so if you haven't followed the early fractiousness of the Church in the first century after Jesus' death and resurrection, much of this is going to come over as completely confusing, and some as absolute heresy. Well, some if it was determined to be heresy in a later council (Nicaea? I'm not sure).

What this book is doing, I think, is trying to show how John got from being a follower and friend of Jesus to evangelist to Church Father and author of the fourth gospel. It also explains why the tone and focus of the gospel of John is so different from those of the other three gospels.

Nice book. Confusing, a bit, and it would be good for a book club for that reason.

Deborah says

I kept changing my mind about this book throughout the whole read- between, "This is disturbing" and "This is enlightening."

Jason Riehl says

This book is very well written.
I'm looking forward to reading other works by Niall Williams.

Marvin says

An intriguing, unusual book. About 2/3 of the novel is set on the island of Patmos, with John as an exceedingly old man with a small community of disciples in exile long after he has recorded his Revelation; the last third takes place in Ephesus, as their exile is ended and they try to renew their evangelizing efforts in that hotbed of new religions. The likely fluidity of the Christian faith in those early years is effectively portrayed, as is the fervent expectation that Christ's Second Coming was imminent. The author also effectively weaves in familiar (and not so familiar) passages from John's Gospel, his letters, and the Book of Revelation. Ultimately, the message is the same as in Williams's earlier novel, *As It Is in Heaven*, that the really important thing is not so much the details or large visions that religious communities vacillate about focusing on, but the small expressions of love in community. This is all expressed in very poetic language. For example, as the small band travels from Patmos to Ephesus on a fishing boat, we read, "As has been their way for years, they pray the twelfth hour, and, bent in the boat travelling the sea waves, are as in the side gallery to an invisible altar. The blue is unbroken above them. Seeing them so the fisher captain is moved

and steadies the sail. Abashed by the reverence and being witness to the peculiar intimacy, he looks away into the wake. In the trailing white water he sees a silver school of fish. It glitters just below surface, a great wide V, following, fleet, as if pulled in undertow. In all his years of throwing nets he has never seen so great a number. He studies the waters about them, what might betoken this uncaught catch, what manner of thing is happening. But the sea on all sides is as ever and reveals nothing. He takes a step on to some wooden crating for a better view outwards and down. In the full scope of his vision, as far as the furthest ripple they have left in the sea, is this gleaming arrow of fish. It comes in their after-waters catching light, then shadow, then light again. [Such images of light are prevalent throughout:] Though the boat moves cross-current toward Ikaria, the fish follow, a silent suite, opaque as souls, profound as mystery. Such might last a moment, might in ordinary fish life be the happenstance of tide and timing, a brief meeting of man and creature in the sea hectic, but this is something other. The fish follow. While the disciples pray, bowed in the boat, the multitudinous school swims after and grows greater until it seems a portion of light itself fallen from above and by means unknown attached to this strange cargo of Christians."

Or, during a storm near the end of the novel:

"The storm proper comes in the night. The sky over Ephesus booms with thunder. Such noise as is makes shake stone jars and statues. The moon and stars are taken. The sea comes inshore on a high tide, throws boats like toys, makes mud of dust and slides it elsewhere. In the dark all huddle and pray. . . . What is thrown about but entire kingdoms? one tells. Here in the heavens is battle engaged. How the sky holds it is mystery. Something must fall through.

And at first this is lightning. A rend is cut and forth flashes a white spear. Of jagged edge a sky javelin flies. The city is illumined, made small by the vastness of light; its antique history, its fabled greatness are as nothing beneath the force loosed from the dark.

Again the thunder. Now with it further javelins. A first she of rain pelts down. Drops larger than the eyeballs of camels. Wind whips, takes down what is upright. Cloths, coverings, poles, lengths of netting, rope, stools, crates, all fly.

The storm does not stop. Unabated in the dark is the fierce conflict. A hundred crashes of thunder, more are counted. Lightning whitens the arrows of the rain.

And in this broken night, the disciples come to the bedside of the Apostle. They, too, are fearful and seek assurance.

What happens? Is this weather only? Or is it now at last that the end of time comes?

The thunder crashes. The lightning illumines their frailty.

'Master?'

'We pray,' John says.

They pray then the Introit of their community. The words that may be their last in this ending of the world. 'In the beginning was the Word,' John says, and the others are enjoined. 'And the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not.'

If the ending is now, it will come on the words of the beginning. If it is now, it will be on their profession of faith."

Julia says

heh? It was a book after reading, I have no idea what I read. It is not the topic, I usually enjoy biblical stories, it was the writing style - horrific.

Kevin says

I just could not get into it, even after a few chapters.

Carol Cabbiness says

John is a fictional account of the Apostle John in his later years after his 'revelation.' The book begins with his exile on the isle of Patmos with his gathering of disciples.

This book is captivating and yet beckons the reader to slow down to the pace of life of exile. The author uniquely captures the imagery and descriptions of the island, the disciples, and the meditative life of John. The story line includes a disciple who begins an alternate faction and the apostles eventually release from exile and return to Ephesus.

This book was hard to put down.

VeeInNY says

A story of the beloved apostle, now "the Ancient" as he leaves Patmos. The author notes, "This is a novel, not history, not biography...." This is a book of dread and melancholy braided with faith filled expectancy. The writing is so precise, I struggled to name it.... until I found another review describing as "starkly written." Can heartily recommend a worthy read, both as story and as craft...

Chris Sittler says

The last of the Apostles that followed Christ, John (almost 100) is blind and his body ravaged by old age. Him and his apostles have been exiled by the Romans to the island of Patmos for the last two years. During this time a schism erupts between his loyal followers and a group that renounces Jesus as being the Son of God and John as anything but an old man. As sickness and storms plague the island, John gets word that the exile has been lifted and they can leave the island. John must decide to risk the hate and mistrust of the outside world or risk dying on the island.

Overall, this was a good story. I like how the author leaves it up to you to determine if some of the events in the book are divine or just mundane.

My only problems are:

1. At times it felt like there were too many characters. Some would only be mentioned once at the beginning and then brought up again near the end.
2. The story could easily have been shorter. Too much time was spent on describing what Papias (John's servant) does during the 40 day fast.
3. No resolution to what happened to two main characters who were left on the island. Did they die or not?

Probably good for 13 and up. Younger readers will probably get bored, plus there is an extended sequence with a character and two dead infants that might cause some nightmares.

Kangarucci says

John: A Novel (by Niall Williams, Bloomsbury, 2008) is about the last years of John the Apostle, exiled on the Island of Patmos and then, after the persecution by the Emperor Domitian, at Ephesus where he died aged a hundred, or thereabouts. I'd been given the book by a friend with a warning: I can't think of who else I could recommend this to. Why me, I asked. Well you're a Catholic, she replied, as though that self evidently explained all. Yeeeess, I said – that always helps. Used to be, by the way...used to be. She was right, of course - being herself a Once-a-Catholic-Always-a-Catholic, and therefore congenitally responsive to the kind of cosmic drama that suffuses such spectacles as High Mass or the Sacrament of Ordination ... "You are a Priest forever, according to the order of Melchisidech" ... It took me a while to get into it - to find my Once-a-Catholic feet - but, OMG! when I did I was so moved by the experience that I actually went to the Good Friday service a few days later. And who knows....

Heather says

most of this book takes place on the island of patmos, and as such there is abundant imagery regarding weather and the sea. as someone who's spent a lot of time by the ocean, i enjoyed many of williams' images.

naturally williams also dedicates a vast amount of the book to one's inner dialogue of faith. it was nice to read a book, finally, where such multifaceted battles of the heart and mind rang true. each of the characters primarily only have one viewpoint, and i would argue that most believers cover the entire territory of the book in themselves, at some point, at least williams covered all that terrain.

in the end, my primary complaints relate to the above - not much character metamorphosis, and even when it comes, it's awfully predictable. and the only twist, near the end, does not live up to its promise.
