



Saint Training

Elizabeth Fixmer

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'Dear Reverend Mother,

'My name is Mary Clare O'Brian and I am in sixth grade. I would like to join the convent right after eighth grade before I start liking boys too much. I'm already having problems with boys liking me. Gregory in my class throws spitballs at me and told my best friend he likes me. I haven't told him that I want to be God's bride yet. Do you think I should?'

Mary Clare is on the lookout for a miracle.

Mary Clare O'Brian is determined to be a saint when she grows up (the halo will help cover her frizzy hair). But lately none of her prayers seem to be working the way she wants them to: her mother is losing her faith, her parents can't pay all the bills, and her brother receives a draft notice for the war in Vietnam. Mary Clare has a plan to help, but it just doesn't seem to be working. How is she supposed to become a saint when her world is falling apart?

Saint Training Details

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From Reader Review Saint Training for online ebook

LeAnne says

Mary Clare is not the most likeable character. Maybe that is because I see too much of myself in her. She is sure that the route to sainthood is through keeping careful track of her sins and confessing them. Not content with becoming a nun, she plans to be the Mother Superior. She even begins a correspondence with the Superior of a convent by asking the requirements for her job. Mary Clares concern with sainthood is humorous, but how many of us focus on obeying the rules more than enjoying Gods grace? The issues are complicated. Living in the grace of God does not mean ignoring his holiness or flaunting his guidelines for godly living. It would have been interesting if the author had contrasted a character going overboard the opposite directionpresuming on Gods grace, which is only touched on in one scene with Mary Claires little sister.

This book is much more Catholic than I have previously seen in Christian fiction. I learned a lot about first communion, confession, saints and other aspects of 1960s Catholicism. It is historical fiction set in the tumultuous period just after Vatican II when civil rights and the Vietnam War loomed large in the culture as a whole. As Mary Clare grows through her experiences, we see her opening herself to the ambiguities of life, accepting that people are different and understand Gods will in different ways. In some ways this struck me as an adult book, almost a memoire of a time that is past. It is hard to imagine modern youth preoccupied with sin and striving for sainthood.

The writing is good; the characters believable. The third person narrative felt a bit more remote than the first person things I have read lately. Definitely worth a read.

loraknits says

I read this book as a "pre-read" for a younger teenager. It was cute but since the author states that it is semi - autobiographic, I was bothered by a few details. Most notably, the Mother Superior in the story does not seem to know the difference between St Teresa of Avila and St Therese of Liseaux (The Little Flower) and the books that were written by the saints. This is minor to the story but major to me and my children :-)

Short Reviews says

4.5 stars. This book reminded me a lot of those folks from 19 kids and Counting, whose only less creepy. I've always felt bad for girls in overly religious families growing up, as they had more chores to do than their brothers did, and more responsibilities in general. Double standards were rife! The saying 'boys will be boys' was used often.

So when I saw the blurb of this book, I thought, I wonder if I'm going to relate to this, even though I'm not of the same religion?

I did end up relating to this very well, and I found Mary Clare very a very fiery and insightful character. She was a delight to read!

11 year old Mary Clare is the oldest girl to 8 siblings, with one on the way. She is raised in a religious household, and does **a crazy amount of chores for someone her age**, from making dinner, to getting all the kids' clothes ready for the day, to looking after the kids!

Her dream at the beginning of the book is to become a nun, and not just a nun, but the Mother of all Nuns. She wants the glory and respect that comes with being a Mother of all nuns. And so, she writes letters to Mother of all Nuns, asking her all sorts of questions on how to make it the top. Some of her letters were simply about her life problems, and how was she going to fix it?

One thing I noticed about Mary Clare is that she really loves fixing problems!

Whether it's her family's money issues or world problems, or the civil war that was currently happening.

I know babies are a gift from god, but if a family already has more kids than they can afford, shouldn't they stop having babies? I overheard Mom and two of her friends saying that the Church won't let them take the new birth control pill. Why not?

Sincerely, Mary O'Brien.

And when Mary Clare tried to compare nuns to priests, she sounded mad because she was mad. Priests got to say Mass, perform all the sacraments, touch the host... and they could become pope. The closest nuns could get to the altar was to clean the sacristy and wash and iron the priest's vestments. They could never become cardinals or bishops or the pope.

As hard as Mary tries to be devoted to god, sweet to everyone and never get angry, she's only human. She gets mad at her many siblings. She kicks her Sister/Teacher (by accident, but she doesn't regret kicking the asshole). She loves being the center of attention, which is partially why she wanted to be nun in the first place! I felt bad for her, because I could see why she was so attention-seeking at times; when you have that many siblings, especially if you're one of the oldest, parents will have less time for you, and more time for the younger ones.

This bit made me laugh though:

'Move over,' Mark demanded. 'You're taking up too much space.'

Mary Clare squished over in the seat as much as she could to give him room, but she glared her brother.

Fine, she thought, he can just rot in hell.

Mary Clare's mother is just discovering feminism, which was an interesting twist on the whole religious family thing going on throughout the book. Mary Clare didn't like it at first, but I think she was more worried about what her father and the community would think.

'Why are you reading that Fredian book?' Mary Clare asked. 'You know Dad doesn't like "women's libbers".'

'I'm reading it because finally someone is acknowledging that being a housewife and mother are not going to fulfill every woman. Women need to get meaning through things other than their husbands and families. We need to use our minds, our creativity. We need to be more than baby machines.'

Mary Clare had never seen her mother this animated. She seemed like a different person.

'Think about it! Women define themselves through men. If a man is successful, his wife gets to feel successful. If he's not then she's not. And the reason this book - this thinking - is upsets your father so much is that he's scared he'll lose something if I look beyond him to be fulfilled.'

Yes!! You go Mary Clare's mum.

Mary Clare ends up sticking up for her mum in the end, when her mother decides to take a job as school teacher, and the people in her community weren't happy about it.

Mary took a deep breath, stood with as much dignity as she could muster, and looked the nun straight in the eye.

'My mother WANTS to teach. She WANTS a career. And the money she earns from teaching means that I don't have to help with tuition.' She walked out, her chin held up high.

This book was an excellent read! The cover didn't do it justice IMO. I can't believe I was going to skip over this book just because of how it looked... yeah, I admit it, I judge by the cover sometimes. Not proud of it though.

Anastacia says

Though I am not at all Catholic, I wanted to read this book about a young, conflicted Catholic girl because my husband is very much an adult, conflicted, Catholic male. The main character in "Saint Training" is a sixth grader who starts the book wanting to become a nun, goes to a Catholic school, and helps take care of her large family. It's a short book, filled with all the heartbreak any kid goes through. I read it in one sitting, and my heart aches for Mary Clare & what she goes through with her family, from her confusion with religion, to liking boys & struggling to help with family responsibilities while trying to be a kid. I think anyone who was raised a Catholic should read this book!

Shel says

REVIEW: Saint Training

Fixmer, E. (2010). Saint Training. Grand Rapids, MI: Zonderkidz.

233 pages.

Appetizer: It's the spring of 1967 and sixth grader Mary Clare O'Brian has begun to write letters to the Mother Superior of a convent asking for advice. Mary Clare has the goal of becoming a saint. But with all the daily complications of having to look after her many brothers and sisters, her mother's fascination with reading *The Feminine Mystique* and a competition to write an essay on "What a religious vocation means to me...", Mary Clare is having trouble living up to her saintly aspirations.

She starts to realize how complicated life can be. Not only in terms of being good, but also in terms of her own family. Her mom, who is pregnant for the umpteenth time, wants to do other work than caring for her many kids at home and Mary Clare is left to do a lot of the work of caring for her siblings and wondering how her family can afford to care for another child. One of her brothers wants to enlist to go to Vietnam with his best friend, while another older brother wants to get status as a conscientious objector to the war.

The author, Elizabeth Fixmer, does an excellent job of presenting Mary Clare's faith as she goes from blind obedience and making deals with God to questioning aspects of Catholicism, earning "saint points" and beginning to view how complicated issues of faith in the real world can be.

For a reader who might not be very religious, a lot of the Catholicism could be a little overwhelming. I also felt like an older reader or adult would have to explain a bit about feminism for a younger reader to get the book. (In fact, the only aspect of this book that might not have to be discussed, is the historical setting. This book was a little too history--light for my personal tastes. Especially since the opening paragraph is about racial tensions and how Mary Clare imagined herself providing support to a black student she imagined being integrated at her Catholic school. I felt like a promise made early in the story was dropped, allowed to roll under a chair and forgotten until the very end.)

My favorite part of Saint Training was the exchange of letters between Mary Clare and Sister Monica. As the story continued, Mary Clare began to ask a lot of important questions. I found this very engaging.

But toward the end of the book, this also became frustrating, because Mary Clare revealed major plot developments in her letters without them being mentioned in the narration before. I found myself flipping back and forth between pages, wondering if I had missed something.

Overall, I liked that Saint Training took on issues of faith and social justice. I liked Mary Clare's childlike faith and the way that she took on adult concerns and worries over her family. But I did find some of the religion and jumps in the narrative to be a bit overwhelming at times.

Dinner Conversation:

"March 25, 1967

Dear Reverend Mother.

My name is Mary Clare O'Brian. I am in sixth grade and I am writing because I want to become a Good Shepherd nun. I like the Good Shepherd nuns best because you work with unwed mothers and their babies. I love little babies." (p. 7)

"Mary Clare finished her Social Studies test and turned it upside down to wait for the rest of the class. It was easy, mostly easy, and on the subject that Mary Clare had heard a lot about at home around the dinner table: civil rights. She couldn't believe that Negroes had to sit on the back of the bus in the South and even drink from different water fountains. They were fighting for basic rights, especially the right to vote. Mary Clare liked to imagine that a Negro girl entered her very class at Saint Maria Goretti School. She would show her around, become her friend, even hold the drinking fountain on for her.

Now her face scrunched into a yawn she fought to control. She was tired from being up almost all night--first listening to her parents fight, then praying for the perfect plan to make things better for her family. After she came up with the perfect plan, she couldn't sleep at all.

She was going to become a saint." (p. 11)

"Lord, help my family. Please, please give us enough money so Mom and Dad can be happy again. She stopped. She was sick of this prayer. Why wasn't God answering? HE used to answer her prayers all the time." (p. 15)

"Now she knew the problem: God would only listen to her if her soul was pure. If she was going to make her mother happy again, she would have to be a saint right away.

She made a plan. She would study, she would practice saint-like behavior, and she would become a nun.

Many of the girl saints had been nuns before being sainted, so she figured becoming a nun was the perfect stepping stone to her real goal. She'd be so darned good she wouldn't have a thing to confess on Saturdays. Mary Clare explained the deal to God. If you take care of my family--give them enough money, make my parents happy...I'll become a saint. She repeated it several times in case it was hard for God to hear through all of her sins." (p. 16)

"Don't just tell them what you think they want to hear, Mary Clare. Don't get into the roles everybody expects from a woman--where your identity is what the Church tells you it should be. 'God's servant, and God's bride'...that's all part of the feminine mystique," she said. "Everybody knows what nuns do and the vows they take. Go inside your heart and tell them who you are."

Mary Clare was confused. She didn't know what the feminine mystique was, and she was pretty sure that to win this contest she had to pretty mu

Andrea says

This book was not what I expected at all. From reading the blurb, I expected it to be a light-hearted read. It was not. Instead it was a coming of age novel set in the midst of Vietnam, Civil Rights, Vatican II, the women's right movement, and set in a traditional, Catholic family.

The premise of the book is that Mary Clare O'Brian (a girl raised in a large Catholic family, going to Catholic school) wants to become a Mother Superior and a Saint and begins writing a Mother Superior to find out how she can get her job when she grows up. Mary Clare is a "religious" girl - she tries to convert the neighbors, is scandalized when anyone speaks negatively about Priests or Nuns (although it is okay that she calls the principal of her school Sister Agony), etc. Her motivation, however, for becoming a saint is so that her family will stop fighting, and her mom will want the new baby that she doesn't want (the family already has nine kids), and enough money to pay for tuition and her younger sister's first communion (for example). This is an extremely heartfelt portrait of a young girl struggling to come to grips with her reality.

I liked this book very much because you see Mary Clare grow from a girl rigidly following (or trying to follow) the teachings of the Church to one who develops a mind of her own. She lives through her mom going back to school and working outside the home (a huge scandal in the neighborhood), a friend getting killed in Vietnam, her brother protesting the Vietnam War, and violent Civil War protests. In the midst of this turmoil, Mary Clare finds her own voice, her own opinions, and realizes that she doesn't really want to be a nun.

The book clearly showed her pride and confusion of her faith. This is illustrated when she meets the Mother Superior she has been corresponding with throughout the book. The meeting follows a bishop standing up for the Civil Rights movement and calling "The Religious" to take a stand for what is good and right. After hearing this announcement on the radio she feels great pride for her Church. However, when meeting the Mother Superior, she gets a differing opinion when Mother Superior feels that "The Religious" should stay out of politics. This conflict confuses Mary Clare but also illustrates that not everyone has all of the answers (which serves to make her even more confused.)

I was torn between giving this three or four stars. Just when Mary Clare's character started developing into a meaningful character, the book end abruptly. However, I settled on four stars because it is a book that actually had me asking questions about myself and my faith. I am not Catholic, but was raised in a religious household. I saw myself as unbending as Mary Clare when I was in middle school and early high school - seeing everything in black and white, right and wrong. I've grown into my own self with my own opinions, thoughts, ideas...and a few crises of faith along the way. I wanted to see more of THIS development in Mary

Clare. This book made me question (more than I already do) dogma and organized religion. See Mary Clare agonize over her sins, and being perfect, and disappointing God, made me question if the church was a place to raise children. But then I see how my brother and I have grown into thoughtful, caring, people....I know that it depends on the family and the people we grow into.

With this much thought in one book - I give it four out of five stars

Leigh says

Mary Clare is 11 years old and the oldest girl of 9 children in a large Catholic family in 1967. She makes a deal with God that if He will provide their cash-strapped family with more money, she will become a saint...MC strikes up a correspondence with a Mother Superior of a convent in a nearby state and asks her all the tough questions...but in the end finds out that even Mother Superior doesn't have all the answers about God and His ways....and that everyone's beliefs and ways of seeing God are different. I loved Mary Clare and her spunky ways!

Martha says

I've won this book in a Goodreads First Reads giveaway. I look forward to reading it.

11/10/10 Received it today so I will start reading it in a day or 2. It looks good.

11/15/10 Loved this book. Quite funny in the beginning, but dealt with some very serious subjects of the time (Viet Nam war, civil rights, women's rights) along with spiritual issues and family life. This young lady did quite a bit of growing up over the summer of 1967.

Courtney says

Right off the bat, we need get straight that St. Teresa of Avila wrote Interior Castle and that Interior Castle is not her autobiography. St. Therese the Little Flower's autobiography is Story of a Soul. I cannot believe for one moment that a Mother Superior would make that kind of major mistake (approximately page 40 of the book) and I'm quite surprised neither the author nor the various people mentioned in the author's acknowledgement caught that mistake. For a story around the correspondence between a 6th grade Catholic school girl and a nun, I cannot excuse this mistake.

This book what not what I was expecting. I thought it was going to be a cute story about a 6th grader who wants to be a saint that would bring back some of my Catholic school memories. Instead it was more of the author's memoir (as she states in her afterward) written as fiction. I thought it seemed more of a commentary of the changes in the Catholic Church and society as a whole in the 1960s and about coming of age during that time. The author mentions changes in the Church that came as a result of Vatican II but makes no mention or acknowledgement of the Vatican II documents themselves. I was expecting to see a reference or citation in the afterwards or acknowledgements but there is none.

After finishing the book, I feel the only audience is women who went to Catholic school in the 1960s. This is not a middle-school or high school book. As a Catholic school girl of the 1980s, I did chuckle at a few

things, but not enough to recommend this book.

Thank you Goodreads First Reads for my copy of this book.

Kelly Hager says

Mary Clare O'Brian wants to be a nun. Well, REALLY, she wants to be Mother Superior. And if we're being completely honest, she wants to be a saint. This is historical fiction set in the late 1960s and she's full of bargains with God. She'll be the best person ever if things start getting better for her family. But they don't. Her mom starts acting weird and her brother gets drafted and then her mom scandalizes the neighborhood by wanting to get a job outside the home.

I loved this book. Faith is obviously a huge part of the book but not in an obnoxious or overly preachy way. I'm not Catholic but I felt this book did a great job of explaining certain beliefs and rituals without it disrupting the narrative flow.

This book is perfect for middle-grade readers (late elementary school and middle school) and it's also a really interesting look at life in the 1960s. I didn't know, for example, that some dioceses were involved in the civil rights movement (and cheers for the ones that were).

This is an absolutely delightful book and I love Mary Clare O'Brian.

Jill says

A refreshing coming of age novel. I think this has the potential to become a book club favorite if it reaches adults. I don't think it has much teen appeal and would be better suited for women 35 - 70.

SundayAtDusk says

It is the spring of 1967. Mary Clare O'Brian, who is in 6th grade in a Catholic school, is the fourth of nine children, and the oldest daughter. Due to her family's financial problems, Mary Clare turns her thoughts to supernatural ways to help out her family. She decides to try to become a saint, in hopes God will help out her parents, if she is intended to be a saint. Mary Clare is a practical girl, though. She does not just rely on prayers to get what she wants. She practices saint-like behavior, and develops a plan where she'll first become a nun, then a mother superior, and then a saint.

Ironically, as Mary Clare begins her journey of learning how to be a submissive, saintly soul, her mother is starting a journey that will end her days of being a "baby making machine". She is making plans that will get her a college education and a job, so their very large family can get out of debt. This leads to a summer where Mary Clare is basically the main cook, cleaner and child caregiver in the family. The males in her family do absolutely no cooking or cleaning, except for cleaning out the garage. Remember, this is the 1960's. Her father, who either works from home or is on the road, does not want his wife to get a job, because it would "orphan" the children, and make him seem incapable of supporting his family. He greatly appreciates Mary Clare taking over for her mother, while her mother goes back to school.

How Mary Clare reacts to the summer of 1967 is what is so important about this book. With her ambitions to be a saint, and her intense desire to help her family, she could have easily decided to become "mommy" to everyone in the family, to out mother her own mother, to never complain, to always be the one who does everything for everyone . . . for the rest of her life. In other words, she could have developed a major martyr complex, secretly felt sorry for herself forever, and even passed down her martyr complex to a future daughter. But Mary Clare does not do this. While she does all the required work, she does sometimes complain and, more importantly, she realizes she does not want to be subservient for the rest of her life.

This is not a harsh story. This is actually a very kindhearted story, and a very intelligent story. The Catholic Church has probably produced more women with martyr complexes than any other organized religion. It also is having to pay millions of dollars in our current times to people who were sexually abused as children by priests. It is martyr type women who allow grown men to behave like children or adolescents, who put up with alcoholic or abusive men, who sometimes turn a blind eye to child molesting. The men of the Catholic Church did not stop the pervert priests; they simply transferred them to other places where they could molest again. Where were the women of the Catholic Church when all of this was going on? Where were the nuns and the mothers of the children? Why did they not see what was going on and stop it? This is not to suggest women are responsible for the action of men, as so many men who do atrocious things like to believe. This is to ponder the question if women were not subservient in the Catholic Church, would there now be dioceses going bankrupt due to pervert priests and their superiors who protected them?

This book does not bash men or the Catholic Church. While showing some of the Church's shortcomings, it also shows things many Catholics were very proud of back in the 1960's, such as priest and nuns joining in on civil rights marches. It quotes a speech by Archbishop Cousins of Milwaukee in August of 1967, where he stated: ". . . permit me to say that it is the sacred duty of the faithful, the priests, and the Religious of our time and of our Archdiocese to root out of their hearts and to free their communities of any prejudice that would make men anti-Jewish, anti-Negro, anti-Mexican or anti- anything else that would render them anti-Christian in practice".

Unfortunately, it's doubtful the archbishop was thinking about women when he said "anti- anything". It is doubtful he was concerned about prejudices against women, especially those in his own church. But Mary Clare was concerned about this matter. *Saint Training* ends in the fall of 1967, with her addendum for the "Religious Vocational Essay Contest". The Mary Clare who wrote the addendum was not the Mary Clare who wrote the original essay. In her addendum, she states: "I think the people who originally thought God wanted women to be submissive to men were men. They heard what they wanted to hear ."

One imagines Mary Clare did not hear she won the contest. One also imagines a real Mary Clare back in 1967 would not have acquired so much wisdom at such a young age. Nevertheless, Mary Clare is a good role model for girls, Catholic or not. She does not end up taking the road to sainthood, but instead chooses the road to womanhood--an admirable type of womanhood, where women are not martyrs and not subservient to men.

P.S. Above is my original 5-star review for *Saint Training*. I was one of the book's biggest fans, until I decided to research Archbishop Cousins, who is highly admired in this book, in both the story and in the "author's notes". It turns out Archbishop Cousins protected, aided and abetted Father Lawrence Murphy--one of the worst child molesting priests in the United States. It is estimated Father Murphy may have sexually abused up to 100 children in a Catholic school for deaf children. When Archbishop Cousins found out about this, instead of turning the priest over to the authorities or even kicking him out of the priesthood, he transferred Father Murphy to another diocese, where he would work with and sexually abuse more children.

I find it hard to believe the author of *Saint Training* did not know this, since she is a Catholic from the Milwaukee area. I find it even harder to believe, that if she indeed did know this, she put Archbishop Cousins in this children's book, and spoke of him in such an admiring way. Did she think his good words

about civil rights cancelled out his bad deeds involving Father Murphy? One reason I liked *Saint Training* so much was because the young protagonist of the story, Mary Clare, appeared to be heading for an adult life where she would never condone the bad behavior of men, including Catholic clergymen. Another reason is because the book appeared to be written by someone who truly loved children. But yet we have the glowing presence of Archbishop Cousins . . . five glowing stars get knocked down to a tarnished one.

(Note: I received a free ARC of this book from Amazon Vine.)

Tara Chevestt says

I thought this was a very enjoyable read. The heroine, a sixth grade girl named Mary Clare thinks that she will "bargain" with god and become a saint or a Mother Superior if god brings happiness and financial security to her parents..

It had me laughing from the get go. "I would like to join the convent right after eighth grade before I start liking boys too much. I'm already having problems with boys liking me. Gregory in my class, throws spitballs at me and told my best friend he likes me."

As the book continues though, Mary Clare begins to ask questions of her religion for the first time. Issues like birth control, civil rights, and the Vietnam war become hot topics in the Catholic church and in Mary Clare's household.

I love Mary Clare and appreciated the issues she addresses through her. The humor was terrific. I laughed at the bare bottom in church and Mary Clare's "confession"... "I wasn't sure if that counted as one sin or two. I thought it would be safer to get absolution for both."

The book would have gotten a five from me but for one thing: I didn't like Matthew, the draft dodger. Matthew is in the seminary. He's a proud Catholic. I wanted to jump in there and scream at him though.. "You wouldn't even have the freedom to be Catholic or be in the seminary if a war had not been fought!" I didn't appreciate all the hoopla in the book about him avoiding the Vietnam war.

Favorite quote: "...being a housewife and mother are not going to fulfill every woman. Women need to get meaning through things other than their husband and families. We need to use our minds, our creativity. We need to be more than baby machines."

Valley Cottage Library says

SUMMER READING CLUB: "A good period book about the Catholic Church and her influence on youth at that time in the 1960s."

Brandy says

This was a Goodreads First Reads Giveaway, and I thought it was absolutely wonderful. Mary Clare is an 11 year old girl in 1967 whose family is going through a really rough time. To combat the problems she sees tearing her family apart, she decides that she needs to become a saint. To do so, she elicits the help of a

Mother Superior who runs a nunnery that places the babies of unwed mothers with good, Catholic parents. It's a coming of age story on a different scope of some, like Judy Blume, in that Mary Clare has to reconcile what she has been taught in her Catholic school with what the world is like. She must contend with the "sins" of her own selfishness, the rise of feminism, the emotions of the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, and the theological debates that rage within her church that threaten to void all that she knows and holds dear. She comes to understand that the world of adults is full of interpretation, and her interpretation is both similar and different--and that that's OK.
