



Wives of the Saints

Alice McDermott

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Alice McDermott's short story considers the instrumentality of women—who are sometimes perceived and understood only in relation to men—within Catholic spaces, academia, and beyond. How do institutions like the Church or the academy change when they engage with women as subjects, rather than as instruments?

2. Frances, the beloved student facilitator, is at once Catherine's mirror and her foil. We can see in Frances a trace of who Catherine once was—and perhaps who she is not anymore. What does Catherine see in Frances, and Frances in her? What does the story reveal about the relationship between the young and their elders? Is this relationship necessarily marked by insecurity, envy, or tension? Why or why not?

3. Catherine describes herself as "the flat-footed, celibate chronicler of other peoples' transcendent love." Are there other people, in the story or beyond it, who inhabit a similar role? What purpose—and what pain—can be found in this role? Does it speak to a greater Catholic experience?

4. Catherine's book, *The Wives of the Saints*, is a "biography of a handful of women who had been the mistresses or love interests or lifelong correspondents of famously saintly men." What does the focus of Catherine's book contribute to this story and its themes? Are there overlooked women in Catholic history who you would want to hear about?

5. *The Wives of the Saints* is, in part, meant to prove "that there was no such lack...[of] 'feminine influence' in the lives of these holy men." Is there such a thing as this necessary "feminine influence"—and what is it? How do we acknowledge the role of these women without engaging in reductive gender essentialism?

6. Catherine's energetic book tour appears to be something of a "last hurrah" for *The Wives of the Saints*. As she explains, "the delayed Amazon delivery was not a fluke. *Wives of the Saints*, out for over a year now, was edging slowly toward the precipice of Unavailable." Does this realization change the way you read Catherine's book tour? Are written texts immortal? What obligations do academics, readers, and writers have to their texts—and the ideas they contain?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING:

"Why Not Women?," Alice McDermott, May 2024: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/why-not-women>

"Household Names," Michael Peppard, June 1, 2018: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/household-names>

"Illuminations," Alice McDermott, July 7, 2017: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/short-story-alice-mcdermott>