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BOOK PROFILE: *CHOSEN* BY MARK MILLAR

A profile of *Chosen*, written by Mark Millar with the artistic talents of Peter Gross, Jeanne McGee, and Cory Petit. Ed. Dave Land. Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, 2005. 77 pp. ISBN 1-59307-213-9. Paper, \$9.95.

Scottish author Mark Millar's controversial, three-issue comic book, *Chosen*, which was published serially in 2004, is collected in an impressive soft-cover edition. This collected edition is stocked with a new introduction, two new postludes by two Catholic monks, an interview with the author, a cover art gallery, and a record of the e-mails between Millar and Dark Horse Comics' editorial staff during the proposal phase of the *Chosen* project. Millar—who is best known for his critically-acclaimed and commercially-successful mainstream comics, *The Authority*, *The Ultimates*, and *Wanted*—in *Chosen* creates an apocalyptic and blatantly heretical comic about the second coming of Christ that he describes in his initial emails to his editors as “*Harry Potter* for Christian fundamentalists.” Ironically, the heterodox nature of *Chosen* ends with a radical interpretation of Christianity that is at once deeply heretical and faithful to Millar's own Catholicism.

Chosen tells the story of Jodie Christenson, a young boy who believes that he is the Second Coming of Christ. The evidence certainly suggests this: he survives a terrible truck accident, a prophet tells him that he is the returned Christ, he suddenly has remarkable religious knowledge, and has fantastic healing powers. His healing powers are noticed by the other kids around their town of Peoria, Illinois, and eventually take the notice of parents, teachers, and other adults in the town. Jodie's mother confesses to him that she and her husband had never had sex and that she was a perpetual virgin; she further instructs him to read the book of Revelation to learn more about himself. Framed as an autobiography in the comic, Jodie recounts a psychological analysis of himself as an adult looking back on his own childhood: knowing that he is the Second Coming, he tries to give up pornography, masturbation, and swearing—common vices of pre-pubescent boys—but he just cannot triumph over his flesh.

Chosen presents an occasional relationship that develops between Jodie and Father Tom O'Higgins, who appears first as a chaplain at the local hospital, following Jodie's traffic incident, offering pastoral care to Jodie's parents—even though it is obvious that the priest is struggling with his own faith. Jodie's mother, who knows the “secret” that Jodie is the Second Coming, carefully asks Father O'Higgins, “How do *you* think Jodie survived that accident?” The priest answers: “To be honest, I haven't a clue.... In less *enlightened* times, we might

have called it a *miracle*, I suppose." O'Higgins is clearly exhibiting what appears to be a reserved, doubting, *Tillichian* Christianity, stopping just short of calling something miraculous a miracle.

Later, after Jodie recovers and begins to believe for himself that he is the Second Coming, he seeks out the doubting Father Tom O'Higgins for advice. Father O'Higgins counsels Jodie that the Bible should not be taken so literally; he suggests that instead the Bible should really be a "guidebook for life," and that its words should not be taken so ultimately to suggest that Jodie—or anyone, for that matter—could be the Second Coming. Jodie responds, "I can't believe I'm hearing this," convinced himself of his own identity; and lies to the priest that he won't talk about such heretical ideas anymore.

Following this, Jodie's notoriety heightens in town, and Father O'Higgins needs to directly address the situation with Jodie. He finds Jodie smoking at a local street-corner and eerily invites him into his car, "alone," and then a remarkable exchange takes place:

Father O'Higgins: You did *not* heal the blind, Jodie. A little boy with a prescription just thinks he can read a little better without his glasses. You did *not* heal the blind.

Jodie: Why can't you accept the simplest explanation of what's happening here, Father?

Father O'Higgins: Because unlike the rest of the town, I seem to be *immune* from mass hysteria.

Jodie: What you mean is you're the one guy in town who doesn't believe in *God*.

Father O'Higgins: What?

Jodie: Why do you think nobody even comes to your church anymore? You say the words and you do the actions, but you could be mowing the lawn for all you care....

Father O'Higgins: You watch your mouth, son.

Jodie: When did you stop believing, Father? When that drunk old bishop made a pass at you in seminary? When the cancer took your mother? When that homeless guy stuck a knife in the back of your brother's head?

Father O'Higgins: SHUT UP!

Jodie: Don't you realize, even your brother's *murder* is all just part of a great big *plan*?

Jodie's narrator concludes this exchange, "My existence meant that God was as real as McDonalds and Burger King." Paired with the liberal priest's crying head leaning against the driver's wheel of his car, we can only assume that Jodie spoke the 'truth' and read the priest's heart, and the priest reacts with shame—but reacting also with the fear that all of the fantastical beliefs of the Catholic faith he had academically suppressed are literally real. Jodie's adult narrator later mocks Father O'Higgins, during a visual presentation of the priest offering the Eucharist (that is, performing a *miracle*) in a near-empty church, proclaiming that the priest had rejected him because "I was performing all those spectacular miracles that that poor, confused old priest was only telling *stories* about[.]"

The surprise ending comes in the last three pages. Jodie is taken from his parents, still a teenage boy, and is informed that he is not really the Second Coming. A woman tells him that she will take him to his father. "We're going to meet *God*?" he asks. She replies: "No, silly boy. Whatever gave you that idea?" He answers, "But *God's* my *Father*, isn't he?" The deadpan answer only confuses him more: "Only in the sense that he incarnated *first* and made all the living things, but I'm talking about your *immediate* father, little prince. The *other* one."

"*Other* one?" he asks.

"Why, *Satan*, of course. We're going to meet *Satan*." Jodie's adult narration comes into the present; and he observes that he just assumed that when his mother suggested that he learn his role in the apocalypse by reading the book of Revelation, that he was the hero of the story. Wondering about who might really be the Second Coming of Jesus, the adult Jodie makes clear that he stands "on *opposite* sides" with him "in this final confrontation," though he assumes that he has more in common with Jesus than one might guess, as "boys with overbearing fathers." Then one of the people listening to the story interruptedly reports, "Air Force One ready for boarding, Mister President."

While *Chosen* suffers in its narrative, as many comics do, from an overuse of hyperbole to push its story along at times, one could argue that the heterodox nature of the story, at least in how it is presented until the last few pages, *plays* with the trope of heretical hyperbole on its unsuspecting reader. One might be quick to be offended by the foul language and nearly anti-Catholic portrayals of Father O'Higgins, but the story ends with a devastating observation about Bush-era conservative politics. Jodie and Father O'Higgins' exchange also strikes resemblance to Catholic apologist John Eck's condemnation of Protestantism, that one should not forget that the Devil quotes scripture in the Bible and that Biblicism is simply not epistemologically enough for a sustainable theology. Following this, *Chosen* suggests that Protestant Christian fundamentalism is part of an evil plan that in fact is an elaborate form of Satan worship, especially in its religious ordination of political figures.

Why should readers of *The Journal of Cultural and Religious Theory* care about *Chosen*? *Chosen* is not unique in its heretical play of orthodox Christianity; perhaps the most similar artifact from popular culture to *Chosen* is Kevin Smith's terribly misguided and embarrassing film *Dogma* in its portrayal of simultaneously foul-mouthed and righteous characters. While *Dogma* and others, along with *Chosen*, suggest that the true Christian divinity is not to be found in churches, but in strip clubs and boys meeting in the woods to look at pornography, they offer a clear message about a reversal of the sacred and the profane; namely, that they have *reversed*.

This reversal of Christianity in recent popular culture is what is to be noticed by radical theologians. Similar radical reversals, predicted and demonstrated before by our radical prophets Thomas Altizer and Mary Daly, have occurred in other media, such as Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*, Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* book series—of which the first book's film adaptation, *The Golden Compass*, was the subject of a major media protest by the Catholic League in late 2007. *Chosen* joins these artifacts of popular culture, embodying the radical reversal embodied by Blake in "The Everlasting Gospel":

The vision of Christ that thou dost see
Is my Visions Greatest Enemy
....
Thy Heaven doors are my Hell Gates
...
Both read the Bible day & night
But thou readst black where I read white (ln. 1-2, 8, 13-14)

It seems that popular culture is now finding new ways of expressing a new radical naming of Christ and Satan in our time.

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