

dearth of advanced-placement classes? Does coming from a top prep school help or hurt? How does Harvard University manage to reject a quarter of its applicants with perfect SAT scores? Doesn't every school need a talented oboist? Just what strange deals, back-of-the-envelope calculations, and personal crusades shape the next generation's elite?

A writer for *The New York Times*, Steinberg was given extraordinary access to Wesleyan University's admissions office and to the applications—and lives—of a half-dozen aspirants to the Connecticut school. College admissions, he finds, is “messy work,” filled with subjective judgments. Wesleyan's process tries to predict whether a student will “add” to the community, handle the rigor of the curriculum, and succeed after college. It seeks what admissions officers term the “angular” rather than the “well-rounded,” the student with, as Wesleyan's dean of admissions said in 1964, “the best chance of accomplishing something in his lifetime, as opposed to the dabbler.”

Admissions officers have seen it all: the fresh cookies, the daily postcards, the recommendations from senators and celebrities, the essays crafted to pull at the heartstrings. But sheer chance may make a more decisive difference.

One applicant devoted his essay to comic books; the Wesleyan officer who read the application, as it happened, “loved the X-Men.”

The officials strategize, too. Some colleges reject the most highly qualified applicants, “not wishing to waste an acceptance” on anyone who probably won't attend. (*The U.S. News & World Report* rankings, which matter to those good schools without centuries of prestige and tradition, rely in part on the percentage of accepted students who enroll.) And the schools hunt down, with free airfare and professor one-on-ones, the most desirable candidates.

This book has a less epic quality than, say, Ron Suskind's *A Hope in the Unseen: An American Odyssey from the Inner City to the Ivy League* (1998), but it depicts the admissions process with clarity and sympathy. Some readers may be troubled that admissions officers act not just as talent scouts but as social engineers, and that luck plays such a prominent role. Yet the officers' decisions, as they choose among far too many highly qualified applicants, are not arbitrary. Steinberg shows that they consider teacher recommendations as much as ethnicity, accomplishments as much as geography, and diligence as much as creativity.

—CHRISTOPHER MOORE

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN MUSIC.

By Mark Allan Powell. Hendrickson Publishers. 1,088 pp. \$29.95

Although *Rolling Stone* describes the world of contemporary Christian music as a “parallel universe,” there can be little doubt that, with annual sales approaching \$1 billion and such artists as Amy Grant and Jars of Clay regularly crossing over onto secular charts, the Christian music scene is thriving. By 1998, according to *Billboard*, contemporary Christian music accounted for a larger share of recording industry revenue than jazz, New Age, classical, and soundtracks combined.

Now, contemporary Christian music has its own encyclopedia. The massive and mind-numbing tome, with well over a thousand double-columned pages, provides more than

any sane person should care to know about everyone from rockers Larry Norman and Whiteheart to pop artists Michael W. Smith and Sandi Patty, as well as Bob Dylan, who for a time told concert audiences that “Jesus is the way of salvation.” The entries provide biography, discography, and a description of the musical styles of each artist or group, and the introduction offers a brief history of contemporary Christian music.

Scholars are now engaged in a lively debate about the origins of contemporary Christian music. Some trace its roots back to 19th-century shape-note singing in the South, although Powell insists that its history goes back no farther than the Jesus movement of the late 1960s. Today, contemporary Christian music embraces styles ranging from heavy metal to ska, and an equally lively debate is taking place over

whether lyrics have to be explicitly Christian, or whether the disposition of the artist alone suffices to define music as Christian.

Although he is a professor of New Testament at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio, Powell writes that rock 'n' roll "has done a lot more for the good of humanity in the last 30-plus years than all the theologians on the planet." His entries are analytical, occasionally amusing (not often enough, perhaps), and frequently opinionated.

He notes, for instance, that Pat Boone helped make rhythm and blues safe for a skittish general audience in the 1950s, an effort that met with opposition—southern pastors burned his records and accused him of plotting "to destroy the moral fiber of white youth." Powell observes: "Boone can be viewed either as pillager or promoter; there is no question that he benefited commercially from the racism of white music fans by getting hits with songs by people who couldn't get a hearing themselves, but there can also be little doubt that he did as much as anyone to deconstruct that racism. Indeed, one might say that he worked to put himself out of business: He labored to teach white America to like the R&B music that he obviously loved, and to the extent that he succeeded in doing this, his fans found they no longer needed him."

The book is cumbersome (a companion CD-ROM replicates the text and provides links to artists' web sites), and it omits some useful data, such as artists' dates of birth. Still, the volume represents a significant achievement, and its appearance marks the coming of age of contemporary Christian music.

—RANDALL BALMER

GIRL MEETS GOD.

By Lauren F. Winner. Algonquin Books. 303 pp. \$23.95

Lauren Winner never met a sacrament she didn't like, and she has had more chances than most of us to test the pleasures of sacramental life. The 27-year-old daughter of a Reformed Jewish father and a lapsed Southern Baptist mother, Winner grew up Orthodox, her parents having decided to raise their kids Jewish. Smart and bookish as well as dutiful, Winner embraced her reli-

gious training enthusiastically. She observed religious holidays, studied with a Hebrew tutor, joined a Jewish meditation group, and read every book she could find about Jewish history, Jewish ritual, and Jewish law. Like the graduate student she was shortly to become, the teenage Winner mastered the available literature, tested every observance, and had her adolescent identity shaped by her faith experience and commitment.

No wonder her parents, by then divorced, were surprised to learn, shortly after Lauren's enrollment at Columbia University, that their daughter had decided to become an Episcopalian.

This book is about her transition to a new faith, though it's neither a repudiation of Orthodox Judaism nor a celebration of Protestantism's putatively unique virtues. Instead, it's an account of a scholarly, warm-hearted, sometimes impulsive, always deeply thoughtful young woman searching for, and possibly finding, an incarnational experience (that is, apprehending the presence of Jesus in human form). The saga includes moments of near-comedy (when Winner's Columbia-based Episcopalian rector asks her to give up, for Lent, "the thing you love most"—reading—she agrees, though reluctantly, and holds to her disciplined self-denial for most of two days) and, of course, puzzlement, but no one can doubt Winner's straight-ahead seriousness.

Girl Meets God is not so much organized as constructed, like a particularly elaborate salad. Its sections are based roughly on the elements of the Protestant liturgical year, though the connection between memoir and liturgy is frequently a stretch. The story proceeds in fits and starts, often reversing itself and leaving only marginally developed many of its potentially potent elements: a married friend's determination to have an affair; Winner's on-again, off-again relationship with a suitor she discards with a phone call; an open-eyed enjoyment of sex and alcohol.

Winner's book is learned and discerning about the two religious traditions she knows best, and unpretentious in exploring her abandonment of one in favor of the other. If there's a lesson here, it may be, simply, that God is love. Couldn't happen to a nicer woman.

—C. MICHAEL CURTIS