

ities—suggests that many of the novel's proposals are simply unworkable, including the behaviorist educational system and the elaborate work-credit arrangement. Kuhlmann asserts that Twin Oaks succeeded partly because its founders were willing to move away from Skinner's model, and partly because it developed a profitable business making hammocks. Most important, as the author discovered, the survival of Twin Oaks depends upon a consistently large turnover of members, which maintains newcomer enthusiasm for the communal experiment while preventing the institutionalization of discontent.

As an exploration of Skinnerian intentional communities, this account is a moderate success. The discussion of actual and defunct communities is informative, although more research on Los Horcones would have been welcome because it might have challenged the author's thesis that such experiments are virtually doomed to failure. Kuhlmann may be right in arguing that Skinner invented an unachievable Utopia. But that doesn't explain why we, as a society, continue to aspire to remote, planned communities that exist on the edges of Somewhere.

—James Gilbert

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

The Poet of the Psalms

IN JOSEPH HELLER'S 1984 NOVEL

God Knows, a wry first-person retelling of the life of King David, the monarch and psalmist quips that although no book of the Bible

is named after him, his story is the best one in there: "Moses has the Ten Commandments, it's true, but I've got much better lines."

These lines now find a deft interpreter in former U.S. poet laureate Robert Pinsky. Pinsky's own poetry, which can leap from one register of speech to another, experiments with the collisions, as he has put it, between "the worldly and the spiritual, the petty and the noble." An ear for such incongruities turns out to be just the sort of sensitivity needed to reimagine the life of David in this beautifully written book.

Pinsky observes that although we never get to see Achilles humbled by old age, for instance, or Lear in his youth, David's life, told mostly in 1 and 2 Samuel, comes to us complete. We see him as both handsome upstart shepherd and anguished old man, as "under-

THE LIFE OF DAVID.

By Robert Pinsky.
Schocken. 209 pp.
\$19.95

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dog boy and calculating ruler,” and in an extraordinary range of roles between: “the skilled guerilla fighter, the great poet, the royal adulterer, the heartbroken father, the uniter of kingdoms.”

Pinsky brings to life David the musician, the “sweet singer of Israel” who composes many of the Psalms and achieves some of the Bible’s highest poetry, the irresistible lover whose very name means “beloved,” and the inventor of the idea of the Temple—the man who brings the Holy Ark to Jerusalem, where he sets about transforming his people “from a masked, uncataloged, exclusionary, taboo-ridden culture of tribes to a visible, enumerated, inclusive civilization.” But David is also the brutal warrior who kills Goliath, presents his predecessor King Saul with a dowry of foreskins from 200 massacred Philistines, sends Bathsheba’s husband to his death, and inspires the popular Israelite saying “Saul hath slain his thousands and David his ten thousands.” He is, in sum, both a flawed hero and a poet who sings the praises of heroes, as his eloquent elegies for Saul and Saul’s son Jonathan attest.

Pinsky’s book is neither a work of translation and commentary, like Robert Alter’s *The David Story* (1999), nor a scholarly attempt to get at a historical leader who lived in the 10th century B.C.E., like Steven L. McKenzie’s *King David* (2000). Instead, in lending the David story an imaginative density the biblical text possesses only in latent form, thereby freeing the original’s sheer narrative power, Pinsky’s volume resembles a modern performance of the classical Jewish art of exegetical embroidery known as Midrash.

All the more evident, then, is the one flaw in this brilliant act of conjuring a life by artfully retelling it: Pinsky glosses over the ways in which the David story has been received into cultural memory through the ages. He deprecates, for instance, traditional rabbinic interpretations that depicted David as pious, attributing them to “the hungers and terrors of the Diaspora.” This attitude seems to derive from Pinsky’s innate suspicion of religious modes of understanding: “David is more enigmatic than any purely Christian or Jewish paradigm: more tangled at the roots, and more proliferating, larger.” (Whereas Christian theologians have attempted to read David as foreshadowing Jesus, Pinsky instead suggests that the first son of Bethlehem

“can be understood as rendering Jesus a tremendous afterthought.”) The resistance to reductivist narrowings of meaning, admirable in itself, here prevents Pinsky from opening himself to the sometimes exquisite layers of reading that have accreted around this great story—one of which, thankfully, is now his own.

—Benjamin Balint

Mission of Mercy

MARY JORDAN AND KEVIN SULLIVAN, husband-and-wife correspondents for *The Washington Post*, open *The Prison Angel* with a thunderclap. During a combined 40 years as journalists, “we have interviewed presidents and rock stars, survivors of typhoons in India, and people tortured by the Taliban in Afghanistan. We had never heard a story quite like hers, a story of such powerful goodness.” The story is that of Mother Antonia, an elderly nun who voluntarily lives in Tijuana’s notorious La Mesa prison.

It’s hardly where one would expect to find the woman born Mary Clark in 1926, a pretty blonde raised in Beverly Hills who married and divorced twice, had seven children, and achieved professional success selling office supplies and real estate. She started volunteering for a variety of charities in the mid-1950s, and in 1965, one of them sent her across the border with supplies for La Mesa prisoners. It was as if “she had come home.”

She made increasingly frequent trips to La Mesa, feeling that she was “being led.” After her second marriage ended in 1972, she decided to become a nun in order to be of greater service: “An American housewife could bring donated clothing and be appreciated by the prisoners in La Mesa, but a Catholic sister would be far more trusted,” the authors write. When none of the orders she applied to would accept a middle-aged divorcee, she wrote her own vows, designed and sewed her own habit, and chose the name Antonia in honor of her California mentor, Monsignor Anthony Brouwers. In 1978, with her children grown, Mother Antonia

THE PRISON ANGEL:

Mother Antonia’s Journey From Beverly Hills to a Life of Service in a Mexican Jail.

By Mary Jordan and Kevin Sullivan.
Penguin. 237 pp. \$24.95