

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

sold her home in San Diego and moved into La Mesa.

For nearly three decades now, this “cheery little woman in a black-and-white habit” has dispensed blankets, peanut butter, advice, prayers, and hugs to murderers, rapists, thieves, transvestites, schizophrenics, psychotics, the sick, and the poor (some of them incarcerated because they can’t pay a \$10 fine). The prisoners so respect Mother Antonia that she can stop a riot. For its part, the Catholic Church has come around. When Pope John Paul II visited Mexico in 1990, Tijuana’s bishop chose Mother Antonia to carry the offertory gift to the altar during Mass. In 2003, the church permitted her to found the Eudist Servants of the Eleventh Hour, for middle-aged and older women who want to dedicate their lives to serving the poor.

The episode that perhaps best exemplifies Mother Antonia’s outlook concerns an assassin named David Barrón. After he and fellow gang members murdered one man and severely wounded another, Barrón himself was killed by a ricocheting bullet. “I knew nobody else would be allowed in to

see him, and maybe no one else would want to,”

Mother Antonia tells the authors. So she goes to the morgue, arriving just after the autopsy. Across Barrón’s torso are tattoos of 19 skulls—one for each person he’d killed, the police tell her.

Mother Antonia touches Barrón’s hair and considers what drew him to the gang: “He finally found a place where he could say, ‘I belong. I don’t belong in school. I don’t belong with friends. I don’t belong in church. I don’t belong in my family. But I belong here. These are my guys. . . . I will die to be with them. I’ll kill to be with them.’” Mother Antonia doesn’t excuse Barrón’s crimes, but she prays to God to have mercy on him.

Deeply researched and elegantly written, *The Prison Angel* offers important insights into the Mexican justice system and the problems afflicting the U.S.–Mexico border. But above all, it takes its place among the best spiritual biographies of recent years. It is, indeed, a story of powerful goodness.

—C. M. Mayo

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