

***Sigrid Undset: Reader of Hearts.* By Aidan Nichols. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2022. 218 pp. \$17.95 paper.**

Norwegian novelist Sigrid Undset (1882–1949) is little known to U.S. audiences. She wrote prolifically, mostly novels set in both contemporary and medieval Norway, but also on political and theological topics, particularly after her 1924 reception into the Roman Catholic Church. She is probably best known for her massive three-volume trilogy *Kristen Lavransdatter*, the tumultuous life story of a fourteenth-century woman, followed almost immediately by the four-volume *Master of Hestviken*, all published originally between 1920 and 1927. She was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1928. Her work was praised and criticized at the time for its earthy frankness and high theological-spiritual drama. She was both sharply critical of the organized feminism of her day and passionately committed to expressing the full personhood of women, making the case for the centrality of women’s work to civilization. She was, in short, a writer who deserves to be better known than she has been.

Aidan Nichols’s brief “life and works” volume could function as a short introduction to Undset, but its reach may be limited by the relative narrowness of the audience it seems to be addressing and by the somewhat piecemeal approach it takes in doing so. Its nine chapters (plus a perfunctory two-paragraph concluding chapter) consist of six with a biographical focus and three discussing Undset’s themes as a novelist, theological controversialist, and hagiographer. Because the biographical chapters describe the novels and many of the theological questions in some detail as part of the chronology of Undset’s life, the thematic chapters are somewhat redundant, but at the same time they cannot quite stand alone as essay-length treatments of their topics.

The hagiographic chapter discusses Undset’s two volumes of chapter-length essays, one primarily on early-modern saints of personal importance to her and one on seven Norwegian saints. It concludes with Undset’s book-length study of Catherine of Siena. The chapter consists of capsule summaries of each saint’s life, concluding with a one-paragraph discussion of the “twofold upshot” of Undset’s hagiography.


Historians would likely approach the issues Nichols discusses differently—wanting more context and explication of the category of “pagan,” for example, which Nichols uses to refer to pre-Christian religious belief in Norway. Nichols’s background and interests, though, lie more in theological aesthetics and in the defense of traditionalist Catholicism against the threats posed by modernity. Recent historiographical work has added new evidence and context to nomenclature like “pagan” or “Renaissance,” making either/or binaries more richly complex. Greater use of such work here could have made equally complex Undset’s interactions with the ideas of her day and of the past. To ask for this, however, may be to ask for a different book.

I first became aware of Undset’s work when I was writing about U.S. Catholic literary culture in the early twentieth century. Undset was often Exhibit A for those making the case that Catholicism could continue to produce great literature in the modern (and modernist) era. At the same time, her work caused controversy in Catholic debates over “realism”; Catholic critics approved of her realism in the sense that her novels assumed the reality of the spiritual as well as the temporal world, but they criticized

her realism insofar as it referred to her frankness about bodily and sexual details. These literary arguments revealed a great deal about the terms under which U.S. Catholics sought success and acceptance as writers and intellectuals in the mid-century United States.

Nichols's Undset study could well end up serving as a useful primary source for analogous Catholic debates in the current era. He seems to presume an intramural audience both in his use of language (referring, for example, to someone who "becomes a neophyte" [100], without explaining the term's technical meaning as one of the stages of preparation for baptism) and in discussions such as the one in Chapter 8 of the early twentieth century's fine gradations of the application of Mystical Body theology. He is impressively familiar with Undset's work and that of others writing about her, in both English and Norwegian. His discussions, however, sometimes feel like seminar room chat among people already conversant with the novels and with the theological questions that most interest Nichols, particularly Undset's narrative renderings of the key elements of Catholic dogma.

Writing about literature and theology can be a form of intellectual history. Given the breadth of Undset's interests, experiences, and writings, exploring her work through the lens of broadly informed Catholic theology could draw in readers from many fields: theology, yes, but also medieval and modern history, art history and aesthetics, women's studies, the history of fascism and the Second World War, modernism in literature and art, and any number of others. Instead of spreading a table and inviting all these to the feast, Nichols focuses on an audience already convinced of the truth of Catholicism and presents Undset to them as a skilled champion whose conversion they can point to as a victory for their side. It is difficult not to feel he missed an opportunity to make her achievement clear to those not already so convinced.

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***American Crusade: Christianity, Warfare, and National Identity, 1860-1920.* By Benjamin J. Wetzel. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022. x + 215 pp. \$47.95 cloth; \$31.99 e-book.**

Benjamin J. Wetzel, an assistant professor of history at Taylor University, has written an engaging monograph centered on examining how leading white mainline Protestant ministers viewed questions of war and peace from the American Civil War through World War I. Focusing principally on the writings of Lyman Abbott, Henry Ward Beecher, Horace Bushnell, Harry Emerson Fosdick, and Newell Dwight Hillis, *American Crusade* maintains these ministers embraced a militant Christian God of war. All these clerics saw the American republic as sanctified, and they called on their compatriots to fulfill God's providential plan by supporting a crusade against white southerners in the American Civil War, Spaniards in the Spanish-American War, and Germans in World War I.