

## BOOKSHELF

# Book Review: 'The Visionist' by Rachel Urquhart

After killing her abusive father, a teenager finds refuge in a Shaker community.

By **MOIRA HODGSON**

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It is 1837 on a hot August afternoon in a Shaker schoolhouse. A group of young girls, struggling with their penmanship, try to remain alert. All of a sudden one of them leaps to her feet and begins to sway uncontrollably, wailing and babbling in tongues. Soon others join her, and before long the room resounds "with the clamor of an asylum."

The Shakers in Rachel Urquhart's first novel, "The Visionist," see this event as a direct message from God. Her story takes place five years later, when the real religious revival it inspired (known as the Era of Manifestations) was at its height. Girls in settlements up and down the East Coast were falling into trances and receiving signs from the world beyond. They were revered as "visionists."

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THE VISIONIST

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*By Rachel Urquhart*

Little, Brown, 345 pages, \$26

The Shakers were known for their music and the wild, ecstatic dancing of their services, not to mention the fine workmanship of their furniture and clothes and their knowledge of farming and medicinal herbs. They also

adopted orphans and indentured destitute children. Mother Ann Lee, the sect's founder, believed in confession, communal living and equality of the sexes but forbade carnal relations as a sin. (Since she'd had four stillborn children and was abandoned by her husband, I can see why.) In the Massachusetts Shaker community where Ms.

Urquhart's novel is set, the



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floors of the wide hallways dividing the men's quarters from the women's are dusted with flour at night. "Swept clean by an elder each dawn before the other believers had risen. The fine powder spelled out in footprints the sins of those who might endeavor to leave their rooms under cover of darkness."

In "The Visionist" Polly Kimball, a 15-year-old farm girl, is unwittingly drawn into this world. After being repeatedly raped by her alcoholic father, Silas ("the son of stoop-backed, black-toothed marginals"), she convinces her mother to flee with her and her brother. But just before they take off she drops a lamp, setting fire to the house. Her mother, now destitute and unsure whether her husband has survived, indentures the children for their safety to a nearby Shaker community called the City of Hope. Here Polly is cruelly separated from her brother but forms a close friendship with a young Shaker, Sister Charity.

At Polly's first Sabbath in the meeting hall, Sister Charity is astonished to see the girl stand apart from the rest, "hair ablaze, the whiteness of her skin giving off a light all of its own . . . In her wails and cries resided all the Earth's pain and sadness, yet she

appeared so radiant, like an angel warrior delivered into The City of Hope to help us fight against the doom she embodied." The assembly immediately recognizes Polly as a visionist.

Polly's vision, in fact, is not related to God at all but to the Devil incarnate: her drunken father and his "acid stink." She is remembering how, when he forced himself upon her at night, she would distract herself by imagining "throng of angels misting around her like whirling clouds." But one person is not entirely convinced by Polly's "vision": Elder Sister Agnes, overseer of the women in the City of Hope. She warns Polly that she will be watching her closely in the future.

"The Visionist" alternates among three points of view: those of Polly, Sister Charity and Simon Pryor, a county arson inspector who is sent to investigate the fire at the Kimballs' farm by a rich landowner interested in acquiring the property. Pryor is given the unforgettable lines: "I have always found the sweet breath of a cow in high summer more delicious by far than any maiden's. Perhaps that is why I have never married."

Ms. Urquhart's prose is graceful, though occasionally interrupted by wince-making sentences such as: "She appeared on a day that dawned as bleak and searingly cold as a metal blade left in the snow." There are characters with crosses to bear and scruffy villains straight out of Dickens. "The Visionist" reads in parts like a Victorian thriller: Will Elder Sister Agnes, who has a dubious agenda of her own, force Polly to confess? And will Pryor, nosing around the ashes of the farm, discover the truth? But "The Visionist" is more than a mystery. Ms. Urquhart also takes a close look at the notions of justice, faith and morality that prevailed at the time and the struggles of those trying to live "pure" lives.



When Pryor, in pursuit of his inquiries, shows up on horseback at the City of Hope, he is impressed by its tidy walls and fences. "The brilliant fields seemed spread like a perfect quilt around the settlement. . . . Despite the dimming light of late afternoon, a clean, white-painted house bustled with the comings and goings of oddly dressed men and women, each passing through their separate doors with never a glance exchanged between them." In a painstakingly researched novel framed by a suspenseful plot, Ms. Urquhart gives the reader an intriguing glimpse behind these doors.

*Ms. Hodgson is the author of "It Seemed Like a Good Idea at the Time: My Adventures in Life and Food."*