

My Book of the Month – *Silence*, by Shusaku Endo (1923 – 1996)

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This is an extraordinary novel in which Endo explores, against the history of Christianity in Japan, questions of faith, doubt and suffering – the struggle to maintain belief in God, in a world that is hostile to Him, and in which He seems to be silent. This book won the 1966 Tanizaki Prize for a work of the highest literary merit, and is generally considered to be Endo's masterpiece. Sadly, it was nearly 50 years before it became readily available in English. I have never read the experience of faith, and doubt, rendered so accurately in a work of fiction.

Endo wrote from the unusual perspective of being both Japanese and a practising Christian (Catholic). He was baptised at a time when Christians were less than 1% of the Japanese population. Endo had great difficulty reconciling his Catholic faith with Japanese culture, and his experience of that conflict drew him to the stories of the Portuguese missionaries of the seventeenth century, who were forced to 'apostasise' (or publicly renounce) their faith.

In 1549, Christianity was first introduced to Japan by Francis Xavier, one of the co-founders of the Jesuit Order. After an initial flourishing, the political situation turned violently against Japanese Christians and many were killed or forced to 'apostasise'. Christianity survived only in underground communities and was ruthlessly persecuted and suppressed wherever it was found. In 1632, the Catholic world was shocked by the news that Father Ferreira – the Portuguese leader of the Jesuit mission in Japan – had apostasised and was collaborating with the Japanese authorities.

When *Silence* begins, it is 1640 and Father Sebastian Rodrigues, an idealistic Jesuit priest, sets sail for Japan determined to help the Christian community, and to discover what happened to his former teacher and mentor, Father Ferreira. Rodrigues cannot believe the rumours that he has heard about him.

Rodrigues' journey takes him deep into Japan, into the hands of people who are determined to crush his faith, and who present him with complex and terrible moral dilemmas.

I highly recommend listening to Episode 122 of the *Backlisted* Podcast (11 October 2020) (www.backlisted.fm), where the novelist Sarah Perry chose this book for discussion, and where the panel also discussed the application of its ideas to the particular global suffering of the last year or so.

You may also want to watch the film made by Martin Scorsese, released in 2016 and starring Liam Neeson. Martin Scorsese wrote the introduction to the Picador Classic edition of *Silence*, which is currently available. Intriguingly, he describes *Silence* as a novel "that has become increasingly precious to me as the years have gone by", and writes that:

"Silence is the story of a man who learns – so painfully – that God's love is more mysterious than he knows, that He leaves much more to the ways of men than we realise, and that he is always present ... even in His silence. ...

I picked up this novel for the first time almost twenty years ago. I've reread it countless times since, and I am now preparing to adapt it as a film. It has given me a kind of sustenance that I have found in only a very few works of art."

Silence would be a great choice for a book club discussion.

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