

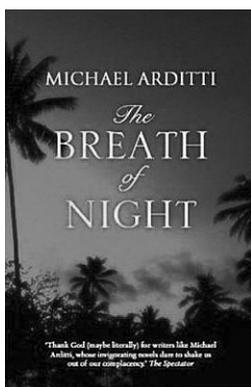
Emotion, Faith and Serious Doubt

The Breath of Night: A Novel

Michael Arditti.

Paperback: Arcadia Books (London), 2013

Review by Jon M. Sweeney



If the author of this novel is a name unfamiliar to you, let's change that. You should know Michael Arditti. Or at least, if you appreciate literary fiction laden with themes of religious doubt, lost and found faith, and explorations of how sin, the secular, and sanctity are related, you'll enjoy every new Michael Arditti novel.

Arditti is often referred to as a sort of 21st century Graham Greene, and the setting of his latest story makes me wonder if he's even now trying to foster the comparisons. The Marcos-era Philippines would have made the novelist who set his own memorable tales in locales such as the Congo, Haiti, and Vietnam, feel right at home.

You'll have trouble finding this book in a brick and mortar American bookshop or library, which is a shame. Arditti's publisher is based in England and when they don't sell the U.S. rights to a publisher over here, they distribute their UK edition in the States. This never results in many copies getting "out there" into the marketplace.

Meanwhile, Arditti's publication history in the U.S. is patchy. His first two novels, *The Celibate* and *Pagan and Her Parents*, were published here. The latter was shortlisted for the Lambda Fiction award and was retitled *Pagan's Father* by the U.S. publisher, Soho Press, in 2003. That was a long

time ago, and Arditti hadn't made a full turn toward exploring spiritual and religious questions in his fiction by that point. Since 2003, none of his books has found an American home, even as Arditti's popularity has steadily grown in England. I know that he has American readers, but they tend to be the few who import books from abroad, sometimes after hearing a Church of England vicar mention one in a sermon while on vacation.

The Breath of Night is a compelling novel of ideas, emotion, faith and serious doubt. It tells the story of Philip Seward, who is asked by his dead fiancée's mother to take his journalistic talents and unemployment to the Philippines in order to investigate the possible sanctity of her brother, Julian. Julian had worked for decades as a priest among the poor during the Marcos regime, and was ultimately murdered by anticlerical Marxist guerrillas. His death brought with it a cult-like following, and reports of several miracles taking place among those who prayed to Julian for intercession. The dead fiancée's mother wants it all to be true, and her brother to be declared a saint.

Early on, Philip describes himself as a "middle-of-the-road Anglican," a skeptic and a rationalist, someone who believes that the world would be a happier place without much religion. And yet he's the paid investigator and chronicler of a seemingly holy man.

Philip soon learns that when Julian's body was unearthed, it was said to be "bathed in a mysterious light" and "a bird appeared out of nowhere and hovered above it." He approaches such accounts with a level-headed skepticism that most of us would appreciate. Then, when he asks why miracles don't seem to take place at the graves of saintly people back in England, he's told it is because miracles occur in places where people still pray for them, which they no longer do in the West.

If you enjoyed Ron Hansen's *Mariette in Ecstasy* (1991), you'll find *The Breath of Night* to be similarly thought-provoking. I also saw parallels between Arditti's latest and my favorite Greene novel—the lesser known *A Burnt-Out Case* (1960), which tells the story of the aptly named Querry, a world

renowned cathedral architect who quits life and heads for a leper colony in the Congo. Throughout *Burnt-Out*, and even by novel's end, you never know for sure whether Querry was saintly or just plain awful. The two aren't so much opposite poles as they are mirror images of each other.

In the Philippines, Philip does his research, reading letters that Julian wrote home describing both his love for the poor and his disgust for the rich. Philip looks in on the worldview of a man who was impressed by Filipino piety, such as the reverence of children who would devotedly kiss a wooden figure of Christ. He reads how Julian, together with a priest from a neighboring parish, instituted a network of Basic Christian Communities. And, is it possible that he actually levitated once while saying mass?

Eventually, Julian becomes too threatening to someone or someones. A trumped-up murder charge is placed upon him and he is thrown in jail, then exiled by the Filipino government. Nevertheless, holy man that he appears to be, he insists on returning to the people he loves, and as soon as he does, they kill him.

Gradually, it is revealed that Julian's family—which means, by extension, the family of Philip's dead fiancée—has made a fortune off the backs of the very Filipinos that Julian was ministering to, and in fact, Julian was there, at least in part, to atone for some family sins. Also, Philip is not at all left alone to his journalistic endeavors. The family employs an agent, Max, in country to guide the impressionable younger man. A driver is provided for Philip, too, named Dennis, who proves to be a bit more than anyone would desire in a tour guide.

I won't tell you how it ends.

Jon M. Sweeney is the author of *The Pope Who Quit*, optioned by HBO, and forthcoming from Jericho Books in June 2014, *Inventing Hell*.

While preparing this review of The Breath of Night, I had a brief email exchange with Michael Arditti. I share it with you here with the author's permission.

1. Are there any contemporary novelists, on either side of the Atlantic, whose work you find to be particularly sensitive to issues of faith?

I tend to prefer the classics since there aren't many contemporary novelists who explore issues of faith. However, I greatly admire Marilynne Robinson.

2. You are often compared to Graham Greene. Do you appreciate the comparison? And if so, which Greene novel was most important to you?

On one level, of course the comparison is most flattering, although I am always wary of comparing writers, whose *raison d'être* is individuality. I re-read several of Greene's novels after finishing *The Breath of Night* and was surprised by how often his foreign settings were merely exotic backdrops against which Western (usually romantic) dramas were played out. The exceptions for me (and my favourites among his novels) being *The Power and the Glory* and *The Heart of the Matter*.

3. What's the subject and setting of your next novel? Can you tell me something about it?

My new novel is set in the world of provincial journalism and concerns a decent man (the editor and proprietor of the newspaper) struggling to maintain his values in a fragmenting culture and vanishing community.

4. May I ask how you would describe your own faith, today?

I would describe myself as an idiosyncratic Anglican who, as a priest friend puts it, has to cross his fingers when it comes to several of the Thirty-Nine articles. At the same time I find myself deeply sympathetic to the sentiment of the Sufi mystic Ibn Arabi that "No single religion can fully express the Reality of God."