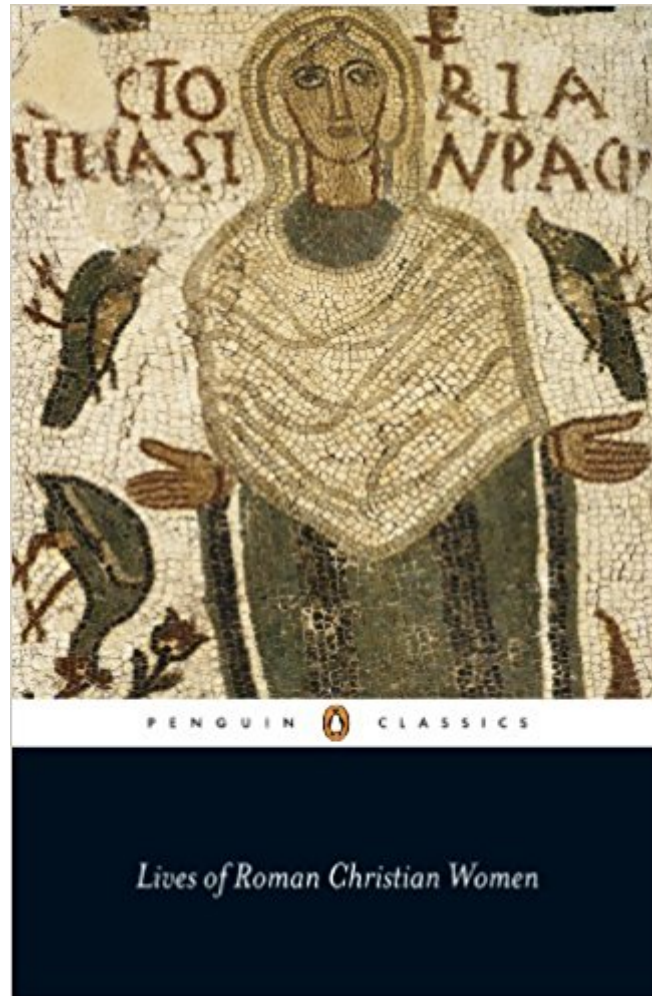




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Lives Of Roman Christian Women (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

'Perpetua shouted out with joy as the sword pierced her, for she wanted to taste some of the pain and she even guided the hesitant hand of the trainee gladiator towards her own throat' *Lives of Roman Christian Women* is a unique collection of letters and documents from the third to the fifth centuries, celebrating Christian women from across the Roman Empire. During a crucial period in which Christianity transformed from a persecuted faith to the official religion of the Empire, these writings reveal the women who chose to dedicate their lives to Christ, by embracing martyrdom or by adopting a life of poverty and prayer, renouncing not only wealth but also their duties as wives and mothers. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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Customer Reviews

Carolinne White was born in London and read Classics and Modern Languages at St. Hugh's College, Oxford. She wrote a doctoral thesis on Christian ideas of friendship in the fourth century, published in 1992. After two years spent teaching Latin at the University of South Africa in Pretoria, she returned to Oxford where she worked on the supplement to the Liddell and Scott

Greek Lexicon and taught Patristic and Medieval Latin. She now divides her time between work as an assistant editor on the Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources, translation work and her four children. Her publications include a translation of the correspondence between Jerome and Augustine (1990), *Early Christian Lives* (Penguin, 1998), an anthology of Early Christian Latin Poets in translation (2000) and *The Rule of Benedict* (Penguin, 2008).

Two chapters of this book were assigned reading for a Roman Empire class - but it was so interesting I read the rest of it. White has collected a great selection of works from the first 3-4 centuries of Christianity that describe individual women and the lives they led. Like much of women's history, we have little in their own voices, but much description in men's writings. The writings in this book range from famous patristic authors such as Gregory of Nyssa and Jerome, down to ones I had never heard of such as Palladius. They range from eulogistic letters to advice on how to raise a virtuous daughter to a story of two women martyrs and the miracles surrounding them. Half of the selections in the book are by Jerome, who was known for being a spiritual and intellectual mentor for wealthy Roman widows. Jerome, despite being perhaps the greatest biblical scholar of patristic Christianity, was also a difficult man to be around. It was said that Paula the Elder, who he writes a forty-page paean to, was the only person who could put up with his moods and soothe his temper. (This was, of course, further proof of his holiness.) This book also includes his "Education of Little Paula," exhorting the parents of this young girl to shield her from idle gossip, educate her only in Christian authors, and rarely let her leave the house for fear of spoiling her virtue. From a faith perspective, some of the stuff in here was hard to connect with. Paula the Elder's abandonment of her children for the sake of her leaving society and becoming a wandering ascetic? Nope. If Paula tried that today she'd be tried for child neglect. I do not resonate with miracles of martyrs very much either. But it is hard to not be inspired by some of the exemplars of holiness in this book, especially when described in Jerome's brilliant rhetoric so crammed with biblical allusions. Thankfully, Penguin Books has another volume titled *Early Christian Lives*, so I can read up on men's lives too. Even better, it's the same translator and editor, British scholar Carolinne White, whose introduction to this volume was illuminating and readable.

When we were in Rome, I saw a book called "Lives of Roman Christian Women." The bookstore was charging an outrageous price for it, but I wrote the title down and put it on my birthday list. I received it for my birthday, and got around to reading it in October. It wasn't quite what I'd expected. The first woman is Perpetua, a martyr in Carthage in the 3rd century. I knew of her life

from a book called the Bronze Ladder, and once had been her for Reformation Night. Hers is truly a story of courage and faith, inspiring and challenging. But from there I became less and less excited. I was expecting more stories like Perpetua's, but instead I read of ascetics. They denied marriage because they felt it was earthly and bad. The unspoken but clear worldview was that if you are the bride of Christ, then to marry on earth is adultery. This is not what we see in scripture, and the Bible even warns of people who will forbid marriage and says they are devoted to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons (1 Timothy 4:1-5. this also speaks of forbidding certain foods, which many of these women did). Instead of holding marriage in high esteem as a picture of Christ and the church and understanding that it is a calling some are called to and others are not, they wrote it off as a distraction. Many held to Augustine and his teaching above scripture, but even more than disagreements I have with some of Augustine's teaching, they fell prey to Platonic philosophy. They thought the flesh was bad and should be denied almost all comfort, whether in extreme fasting, dressing in rough clothes, or sleeping on a hard bed. I could understand having a bad bed if you can't afford a good one because you're giving your money to God's work - but some of these women did it just because, and slept on soft beds if they were sick - it wasn't that they didn't have a good bed, they just thought it was more godly to sleep on a hard bed. Often they were inward focused and their personal holiness was so extreme and took so much time they had little or no time for other believers or evangelism to unbelievers. One thought that came to me repeatedly was that they denied things Jesus did, in a way that was almost the student being greater than their Master. "Jesus may have drunk wine, but you shouldn't drink wine." What they aspired to was good, but often poor teaching and bad theology led them to unbiblical extremes. But that's not to say that there weren't things to learn. A re-occurring statement in the book was about how they shouldn't really be called women because they were so manly. I had to think about that for a while, and finally concluded that while compared to most Roman women they were very strange, it should be the norm for Christian women to be sturdy and courageous. Not prim-and-proper fragility but women who can face lions and hardship. While I disagree with the extremes to which these women took their asceticism, I think there is much for us to learn. These women devoted themselves to caring for the poor and worshiping God. They put off materialism and gave freely of their money so they could store up more in heaven and use what God had given them. We could use more of this. So often we live in a luxury mentality rather than a "wartime" mentality, as John Piper says. However, this does not mean we need to live like prisoners of war, like many of these women thought. So, while not becoming ascetics, still we can learn from their radical discipleship that encompassed all of their lives, not just Sundays and 10%. There are two questions to ask here -- Are we denying self,

taking up our crosses, and following Him? Or is our Christianity comfortable, feel-good, prosperity theology that is so caught up in materialism? Are we giving, serving, and sacrificing for Christ?- In doing that, are we denying things that are good gifts, like marriage and foods (1 Timothy 4:1-5) for unbiblical reasons? In Lives of Roman Christian Women, there are things we should shy away from, but there are also important lessons for us to learn from 800 years later.

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