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Musings: A Column on Local Culture



By Deahn Berrini Leblang | Email the author | September 4, 2011

Arts

The Power of Prayer

The latest book by Swampscott author Nancy Lusignan Schultz investigates a nineteenth century faith healing.

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We all know people who struggle with their health — some at the end of their lives, others throughout their lives battle pain or decreasing mobility.

To be close to individuals saddled with illness is to understand the desperation that often surrounds the hope of a cure or a relief from pain, as well as the strengths the sick sometimes acquire.

Nancy Lusignan Schultz has plucked such a story out of the past, placed it in a historical context, and given the reader much to ponder in her latest book, *Mrs. Mattingly's Miracle*.

At the heart of *Mrs. Mattingly's Miracle: The Prince, The Widow, and The Cure That Shocked Washington City*, published this spring by Yale University Press, is Mary Carbery Mattingly, sister of Thomas Carbery, mayor of Washington DC.

In March 1824, racked by breast cancer for 7 years, Mattingly's body was a stinking mass of sores and pain and she was close to death when local priests and friends launched a plan to save her life.

Inspired by reports of his healing powers, they had written Prince Hohenlohe, a German nobleman and priest, who prescribed a precise plan involving nine days of novenas and a Mass in Washington timed with a Mass in Germany.

On March 9, 1824, when the Eucharist was brought from the Mass in DC to Mrs. Mattingly's bedside, by all accounts she ate the wafer and within minutes was up and about and putting on her stockings, all signs of disease vanished, the stench of sickness now replaced by the sweet "odor of sanctity."

Within days of her cure, thousands of people flocked to Mary Mattingly's door.

What followed had little to do with the woman Mrs. Mary Mattingly and everything to do with the power that is associated with controlling such a story, and with how nascent Catholicism developed in a still new country and how that Catholicism was received by the status quo Protestant culture.

And like most stories set in the antebellum south, slavery, race, and gender also played major and surprising roles.

Schultz, who lives in Swampscott with her husband and two sons, is the chairperson of the English Department and professor of English at Salem State University, where she has taught for 23 years.

She begins each chapter with a ghost story placed in the time and place of the narrative, and Schultz never loses sight of the woman at the center of the controversy. In the years that followed her healing Mattingly, a devout woman before her cure, yearned for the quiet life of a nun, but more valuable to the church as a laywoman, she was never granted permission, ending her days 31 years after her miraculous cure on her brother's estate, which is now the grounds of Walter Reed Hospital.

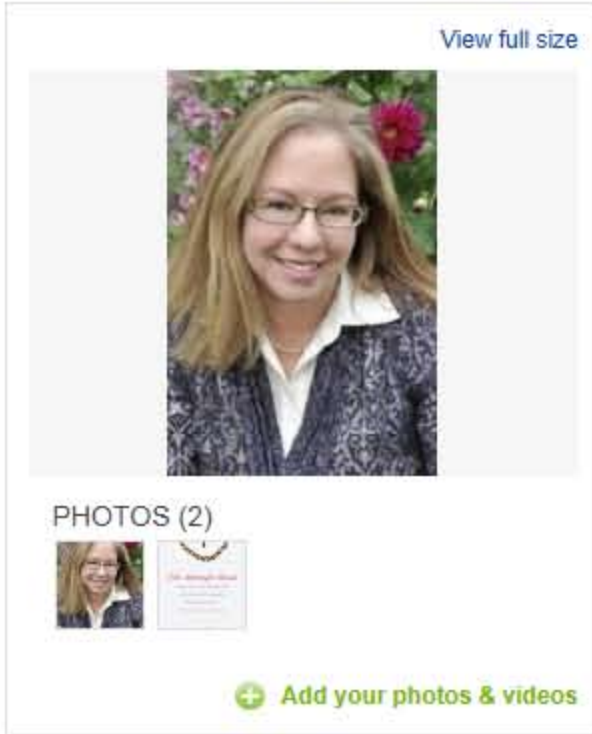
While we may never know exactly what happened on that March evening in 1824, Schultz would argue that what questions we ask and what we are willing to believe is a fascinating examination as well.

Engrossing and written in an easy, accessible style, the book will appeal to those who love American history, or have an interest in faith healing, the Catholic Church, and issues of race and gender in the antebellum south.

Mrs. Mattingly's Miracle can be found at the bookstore of the House of the Seven Gables in Salem, and on Amazon.

For more information on this and Schultz's other books, visit: <http://www.mrsmattinglysmiracle.com/>

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