

BOOK REVIEW: *'I am Margaret'* by Corinna Turner

Reviewed by Kathryn Hennessy

'I am Margaret' is the debut novel from young Catholic writer Corinna Turner, the first of a tetralogy, with the first three books already available to buy.

The novels are set in a dystopian future in which any form of religious belief is punishable by death (and a most horrific death at that). Given this basic premise, it is not surprising that since the main character, Margaret, is a Catholic, the books make rather grim reading. Indeed, they pull no punches and are at times shockingly brutal: in these pages you'll find not just shootings and bombings but attempted rape, mutilations, and all manner of despair and betrayal. However, all this is balanced by the overriding message of the story – told in the first person by Margaret herself – as she struggles to fight against the brutal and repressive system into which she has been born. The tale is shot through with her prayers, her courage and her fidelity as she takes on the powers that be in an almost (but not quite) hopeless effort to radically change the world. The books are also a romance: at the very beginning, Margaret becomes engaged to a young man and this relationship proves the focal point and the inspiration for the battles which ensue.

The books are thought provoking in their portrayal of a world which, for those of us watching nervously the strident progress of an aggressive atheist secularism, does not seem too far-fetched. Without giving too much away, Margaret's world is governed by the 'EuroGov', a ruthless, efficient and brutal regime. Girls are given a mandatory contraceptive implant at the age of 11 (which will be temporarily removed upon 'registration' with a suitable partner to allow the birth of the required two children – a licence for an extra child can be purchased for an inordinate sum). But many girls and boys will never be allowed to register: in fact they will not be allowed to live past the age of 18. At 18 every young adult must undergo a process called 'sorting', a series of tests to distinguish the genetically near-perfect from the less than perfect. Those who fail the test are shipped off to 'facilities' where they will be kept healthy until the day comes when they will be (literally) recycled: their useful organs will be harvested for re-use and the remaining ashes will be returned to the grieving parents. As you may have guessed, Margaret fails her sorting but her boyfriend passes, and so the story begins. Again, not to give too much away, much of the tension in the book as experienced by Margaret stems from the fact that as a Catholic she faces the ultimate punishment – death by 'Conscious Dismantlement.' I'll leave that to your imagination, but let's just say it makes the death of St Margaret Clitherow (on whom the character is loosely based) look like a picnic in the park.

The target audience for the *'I am Margaret'* books is 'young adults' (the main characters are all 18), though on the back cover they are designated as suitable for 14+. Bearing in mind that I am writing this review as a forty-something parent and not as a member of the target audience, I do have a few caveats. I would not personally recommend the books for anyone under 16 (for my own children I'd be happier with 18!). Obviously there is the brutality to consider. I think that my own older children would be fine with that (boys raised on war movies), but this is something a parent considering giving the book to a sensitive teenager would need to bear in mind. Similarly, the book is dealing with relationships between 18 year olds in a world, much like our own, in which teenagers are expected to be sexually active. The books deals with this quite tastefully inasmuch as there is nothing explicit, but an older reader is certainly likely to raise an eyebrow at certain points (would an 18 year old? I'm not sure). Moreover, the running theme for the two main characters (as engaged but not yet married) is the struggle to maintain a chaste relationship. Some parents might be uncomfortable with some of this material, though as one mother has pointed out, for a lot of teenagers this message (i.e. that chastity is possible even if one struggles) is one that needs to get across but is something novels for teens do not often portray. The chapter dealing with NFP (in the

third book) is likely to nettle more traditionally minded Catholics, assuming as it does that fertility charting is a necessary and virtuous element in Catholic marriage (“unless,” to quote Margaret, “you want, say, fifteen kids in as many years and probably no wife at the end it”). This sounds more like Eurogov propaganda and would perhaps have been more appropriate coming from the un-Catholic boyfriend than the Catholic Margaret.

Considerations such as these aside, I found the books quite gripping and often stayed up later than was good for me wanting to find out what would happen next: the books are certainly page turners, full of action and quite gripping, even if at times it is with a grim sort of grip that one is held. I would not ordinarily read anything written in such a modern style in which conventional rules of grammar are often sacrificed for effect, but this is very common in contemporary literature and is unlikely to bother most 18 year olds. It is a credit to Corinna that despite this, through both the characterisation and the excitement of the plot, she is able to hold the interest of an 'untargeted' and very critical reader. I can say that the events and characters in the books stayed with me for quite a while (though, given the nature of the work this is not always a pleasant experience!). The books don't always make comfortable reading, raising as they do disturbing questions about where a society without faith might be heading and how those of us with faith will be treated in the future. Disturbing as they are, however, such questions do need to be asked. As a priest who recently read the first ***I am Margaret*** book observed, live dismantlement is already going on in abortuaries across the world, and the recent videos released from Planned Parenthood have only confirmed that the atrocities being committed therein are even greater than we could possibly have imagined. These actions, coupled with the chillingly blithe justifications being given by the perpetrators, show that Margaret's world is not so far off as we might have hoped.

I suppose the real litmus test is to ask whether, having read the first three books (kindly given to me by the author herself), I'm planning to carry on and read the fourth. The answer is yes, I certainly plan to, and if you ever get as far as the end of book three, you'll understand why. 'Chilling yet compelling' might be a good tag line for these books!