

Solange De Santis

Our Lady of the Lost and Found, Diane Schoemperlen,
Penguin USA, 346 pages

In this graceful novel, the Virgin Mary appears to a thoroughly modern Christian – a fortyish female writer who attended Sunday school as a child but hasn't been in a church since except for weddings and funerals. She admires faith in other people but describes herself as a “neoagnostic,” complete with the usual clichés: “I did believe in *something*.”

One ordinary April day, she walks into her living room to water the plants and finds a middle-aged woman standing there, wearing a navy blue trench coat and white running shoes. She is holding a large purse and has one of those ubiquitous black wheeled suitcases. “It's me, Mary. Mother of God,” she says, explaining that she's tired and needs a week's rest before a heavy schedule in May, traditionally dedicated to her.

The writer, dumbfounded, shows her to the spare bedroom. Over lunch, Mary warns her that, should she write of this episode, she must remain anonymous and the words “this is a work of fiction” must appear before the title which, in this novel, they do.

It's just one lovely, clever touch in this imaginative book. There isn't a heck of a lot of action; the writer and Mary spend a quiet week together, taking meals, going for walks, visiting the mall (Mary has a bank card). The writer weaves the stories of Mary's best-known appearances – Fatima, Lourdes, Guadeloupe – with the tale of her current visit. In several beautiful chapters, she thinks about the meaning of history, of time, of the great human parade and the mysteries of faith. Mary's visit, of course, changes her life, but she is still a modern woman: “I am still alone and sometimes I am still afraid. I still don't understand about evil.” But she also concludes that Mary's “story will continue whether I am writing it or not,” and that brings some measure of peace.

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solange@solangedesantis.com