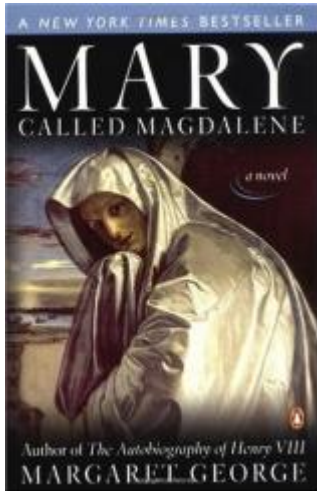


## Mary, Called Magdalene

by Margaret George

---



### About the Book

Weaving together hints from the New Testament, Gnostic gospels, and other ancient texts, **Mary Called Magdalene** portrays the life of the mysterious figure of Mary Magdalene, "Apostle to the Apostles," and companion to Jesus. Here Margaret George creates a new portrait of one of the most controversial figures in biblical scholarship: a strong, independent woman, given to visions and gifted with a unique faith in Jesus and his message.

The daughter of a successful fish processor, Mary is raised in a religiously observant family in the town of Magdala on the Sea of Galilee. As a girl, she finds an idol made of ivory, an image with half closed eyes and sensual lips. Though it is against the strict Jewish teachings against graven images, she cannot resist its power and takes it with her, hiding it from her family. The idol turns out to be a demon, who begins speaking to Mary and then possesses her. Though she marries and has a baby girl, the demons that haunt her persist and multiply, until finally she is near death from madness. Seeking a cure, she leaves her family and small daughter. After a powerful rabbi is unable to heal her, she travels into the desert alone, determined either to be killed by the spirits that possess her, or to mount a final struggle and be rid of them forever. Soon after their victory over her, she comes upon a crowd of people gathered around a wild looking man preaching repentance: John the Baptist. It is here that she meets Jesus. When he commands the evil spirits to leave her, they do, and through this healing she is initiated as his disciple. The book's depiction of Jesus's travels throughout the region-with Mary and his disciples at his side-will be familiar to those acquainted with the gospels of the New Testament. Just as in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the Jesus of *Mary, Called Magdalene* performs miracles such as curing blindness, lameness, and leprosy. George's interpretation of the message that Jesus has come to share with the world is simple and compelling: The kingdom of God is at hand, and to be prepared one must love God with all one's heart, worship sincerely rather than just for show, and love one's neighbors and enemies alike.

Assuming her family will rejoice at the good news of her cure, Mary is devastated to learn on her return to Magdala that her family has cast her out, and has no interest in Jesus's message. Now fully in the realm of fiction-the New Testament offers no details of Mary's personal life-George's depiction of Mary's family's reaction mirrors the Biblical reaction of Jesus's own family when he first returns home. Through these domestic conflicts George explores the themes of earthly versus heavenly family, and the necessity of sacrifice in any hero's journey. Early legends depicted Mary Magdalene as a reformed sinner or prostitute; recently some have speculated that she was Jesus's wife. Neither has any scholarly validity. George avoids both of these images, depicting Mary as a spiritual seeker and bereaved mother and widow, whose feelings for Jesus inevitably heighten over the course of their companionship, as she struggles with her desire for his love as a man, not just as a messenger of God. That Jesus is unable to offer her the earthly love she seeks compounds her suffering and sacrifice. George portrays Mary and the other disciples not as evolved beings like Jesus, but as mere humans suddenly faced with the opportunity to live a most unordinary life. Though Mary has the gift of prophesy, she fears her visions and the way they set her apart. Her gift-and her closeness to Jesus-inspires some jealousy among the disciples, who, despite their faith, continue to struggle

with their own pettiness and prejudices about the proper role of women. It is clear that often even Mary would trade it all—her visions and her special relationship to Jesus—to be the simple wife and mother she imagined she would be. Jesus, of course, is betrayed, executed, resurrected, and ascends to heaven, leaving Mary and his disciples to face the challenge of spreading the message without the messenger. Mary spends her life tending to the persecuted believers, always expecting Jesus's return. For the rest of her days, she struggles with the loss of her family and daughter. A gripping story of one woman's deepest despair and journey of faith, *Mary, Called Magdalene* explores themes of dedication and deliverance, the tension between romantic love and love of God, and the necessity of suffering and persecution to test the heart. Torn between her belief in Jesus's message, and the love for her family, her love of Jesus as a man and her love for him as God, Mary bravely and painfully remains faithful to her heart's calling to the truth. Through her example, George calls on us to consider life's biggest questions: what it means to be called by God, and how each of us might answer.

## Discussion Guide

1. Jesus's family rejects him when they learn his intention to travel and preach rather than run the family business. Mary's family casts her out when she joins with Jesus. What does this say about the nature of family? Is it possible to find one's true family outside of blood-ties?
2. The people of Jesus's hometown of Nazareth do not welcome him or wish to hear his message. Why would the people he grew up with reject him? Why would it be easier to preach to strangers than to long time family and friends?
3. Compare Judas' conversion (finding Jesus's answers to be "rational" and "persuasive") to that of the other disciples. What is the difference between believing with your head and believing with your heart? Does it make a difference?
4. Mary is unhappy that she has the gift of visions and says she would rather be ordinary. What does it mean to live an ordinary life? Given the choice, would she have chosen an ordinary life?
5. Why does Jesus reject Mary's proclamation of love? Do you think Jesus loved her in the same way as she loved him but felt unable to act on it, or do you think he was truly only interested in her as a spiritual companion? Could Jesus have done what he did had he had a wife?
6. Jesus is persecuted by the Romans, and suffers in death on the cross. Mary is also persecuted, by opponents of Jesus and also by her own family. She suffers her entire life over her separation from her daughter. Is it necessary to suffer? Is that the only way humans are able to deepen spiritually? Could Jesus have spread his message without suffering? Compare his life to the life of Mohammed, who lived to be an old man, and died peacefully.
7. Does a person's commitment to the truth necessarily mean that he or she will be persecuted by society?
8. There is a desire among Jesus' followers to make him the King of Israel who will throw out the Romans. Why are the crowds more interested in Jesus as a secular king than a heavenly one? How does this compare to the current struggle for power in the Middle East?
9. The Bible mentions very little about Mary Magdalene. Why would the Bible not mention her more? Throughout **Mary, Called Magdalene** there is resistance to Mary's spiritual leadership because she is a woman. Why would men not want a woman in positions of spiritual leadership? What is it that women threaten?
10. Jesus comments that, "There is no way to avert evil," and later that "John the Baptist's death is wrong." What is your understanding of evil? Why would an all-powerful God allow evil, or something "wrong" to occur? Is evil necessary so that we may understand its opposite?
11. People who have visions are discounted as crazy in our culture. If you began having visions, would you believe them? What would it take for you to believe them? Would you give up your own life, your spouse, and your child, if you felt you were being called by God to spread the truth?

## Author Bio

Margaret George is a rolling stone who has lived in many places, beginning her traveling at the age of four when her father joined the U.S. diplomatic service and was posted to a consulate in Taiwan. The family traveled on a freighter named after Ulysses' son Telemachus that took thirty days to reach Taiwan, where they spent two years. Following that they lived in Tel Aviv (right after the 1948 war, when it was relatively

quiet), Bonn and Berlin (during the spy-and-Cold-War days) before returning to Washington DC at the height of Elvis-mania where Margaret went to high school. Margaret's first piece of published writing, at the age of thirteen, was a letter to *TIME Magazine* defending Elvis against his detractors. (Margaret has since been to Graceland.)

But it was earlier in Israel that Margaret, an avid reader, began writing novels to amuse herself when she ran out of books to read. Interestingly, the subject of these was not what lay around her in the Middle East, but the American west, which she had never set foot in. (Now that she lives in the American midwest she writes about the Middle East!) Clearly writing in her case followed Emily Dickinson's observation "There is no frigate like a book" and she used it to go to faraway places. Now she has added another dimension to that travel by specializing in visiting times remote from herself.

Neither of these horse sagas got published, but the ten-year-old author received an encouraging note from an editor at Grosset & Dunlap, telling her she had a budding talent but should work on her spelling.

It was also in Israel that Margaret started keeping land tortoises as pets, an interest which she still follows today. She had a great affinity for animals and nature and that led her to a double major at Tufts University in English literature and biology. Following that she received an MA in ecology from Stanford University---one of the earliest departments to offer such a concentration. Today she is active in environmental and animal conservation groups.

Combining her interests led her to a position as a science writer at the National Cancer Institute (National Institutes of Health) in Bethesda, Maryland for four years.

Her marriage at the end of that time meant moving, first to St. Louis, then to Uppsala, Sweden, and then to Madison, Wisconsin, where she and her husband Paul have lived for more than twenty years now. They have one grown daughter who lives in California and is in graduate school.

Through all this Margaret continued to write, albeit slowly and always on only one project at a time. She wrote what she refers to as her 'Ayn Rand/adventure novel' in college and her 'Sex and the City' novel in Washington DC. It was in St. Louis that she suddenly got the idea of writing a 'psycho-biography' of Henry VIII. She had never seen such a thing done but became convinced the king was a victim of bad PR and she should rescue his good name. Her background in science meant that only after thoroughly researching the literature and scholarship on Henry VIII would she embark on the novel itself. She sought the guidance of a Tudor historian at Washington University for a reading list, and proceeded from there.

It was actually fourteen years between her initial idea and the publication of *THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF HENRY VIII*. The book made an impression for several reasons: first, because no one had ever written a novel sympathetic to the king before; second, because it covered his entire life from before birth until after his death, making it almost a thousand pages long, and third, because it was so fact-filled.

Following *Henry VIII* in 1986, she wrote *MARY QUEEN OF SCOTLAND AND THE ISLES* (1992) and *THE MEMOIRS OF CLEOPATRA* (1997.) Now *MARY CALLED MAGDALENE* is published in June of 2002, to be followed by *HELEN OF TROY* in 2006. *THE MEMOIRS OF CLEOPATRA* was made into an ABC miniseries in 1999, starring Timothy Dalton and Billy Zane. It has been translated into thirteen languages, including Finnish and Korean.

What started as an offhand idea has blossomed into a way of life---becoming a biographer and spokesperson for those whom history has misunderstood. She chooses people that appeal to her rather than having a specific agenda, but because of the years of intense scholarly research required, she must limit herself to subjects either in the ancient world or in renaissance Britain.

Each subject leads her to explore places and meet people she would not have access to otherwise, and that means that each book is an adventure in itself. For example Margaret has a collection of vintage posters from Elizabeth Taylor's "Cleopatra," including one in Czech.

Margaret is not home as much as she would like--- despite a life of travel she really likes being at home---but when she is home she likes to pursue her interests in tortoises (she belongs to the New York Turtle and Tortoise Society), as well as archaeology (she is a member of the Archaeological Institute of America), movies (the Wisconsin Screenwriters Forum), photography and outdoor activities.

Margaret's family is of Scots/English/Irish background; one branch were Quakers who came to America in the early 1700s. Finding no land left in Pennsylvania they migrated south through the Cumberland Gap and settled in Tennessee and Kentucky. Another side of the family settled in Mississippi. The patriarch of this branch was known as "Hard Money Scott" because he always demanded cash for purchases and paid in hard cash himself. Supposedly Tories captured him during the Revolutionary War and held his feet over a fire to get him to reveal where his money was hidden, but the old skinflint refused and ended up with burnt feet but with his Scott Treasure intact. He had buried it near Scott's Ferry in South Carolina and the family legend is that it's still there. Today it's under a dam. If it's there at all...

Margaret was born in Nashville, Tennessee. Her parents shared the love of words, ballads, and story-telling

associated with the south; her father came from a town near Oxford, Mississippi, where Faulkner lived and wrote "the past is never gone, it's not even past"; using language well and fancifully was a way of life there. Margaret's father was an eloquent speaker and writer and when she read Cicero's description of Caesar's writing--'his vocabulary is so varied and yet so exact' she knew he could have been describing her father as well. She dedicated MARY QUEEN OF SCOTLAND AND THE ISLES to him.

Through family lines of both birth and marriage Margaret may have inherited the Kirkpatrick "Curse of the Black Swan." In medieval times it was said that any Kirkpatrick sighting a black swan would instantly be stricken and die. Since there were no black swans in Scotland at the time, was there much danger of this? Nonetheless descendants are warned to stay away from bird sanctuaries that might harbor a black swan. Since the black swan is native to Perth, Australia, Margaret will not be vacationing there. (It has been suggested that the black swan in the curse was actually a heraldic device rather than a real one. But why take chances?)

---

**Mary, Called Magdalene**  
by Margaret George

**Publication Date:** May 27, 2003  
**Genres:** Fiction, Historical Fiction  
**Paperback:** 656 pages  
**Publisher:** Penguin (Non-Classics)  
**ISBN-10:** 0142002798  
**ISBN-13:** 9780142002797