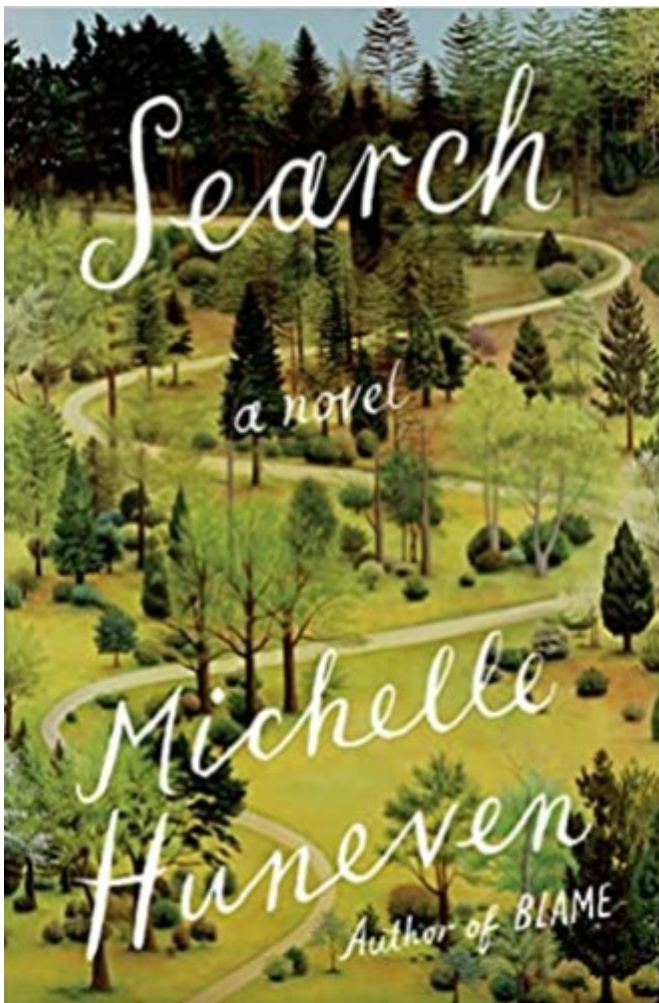


Michelle Huneven's homage to church life

## **A novel posing as a memoir that is really a sympathetic comedy**

by [Heidi Haverkamp](#) in the [February 2023](#) issue

### **In Review**



### **Search**

A Novel

By Michelle Huneven

Penguin

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These days there is little sympathetic comedy about the church. On screen, viewers are offered choices such as *The Righteous Gemstones*, *Keep Sweet: Pray and Obey*, and *Honk for Jesus. Save Your Soul*. In popular media, church life and church people mostly get skewered as luridly hypocritical or unbearably dull. In real life, church story lines may be less operatic but are growing more dire: attendance is dropping, clergy are quitting, and volunteers are exhausted. Amid this reality, Michelle Huneven's new novel offers hope, comfort, and a comic reality check for those of us who continue to throw our lot in with this wacky, disorganized, earnest experiment we call church.

Huneven is not an ordained minister, although she went to seminary, was once in the discernment process, and has been a member and lay leader for decades at the Neighborhood Unitarian Universalist Church, a congregation in Pasadena, California. This woman knows church. *Search* is a novel posing as a memoir, and I often forgot that the protagonist, Dana Potowski, is not Huneven and that the Arroyo Unitarian Universalist Community Church ("the AUUCC," delightfully and appropriately pronounced *awk*) is not a real place. The details Huneven provides about church life, including conversations between members and observations about staff, grounds, worship, finances, and belief, were all too recognizable to me—sometimes uncomfortably so.

Also familiar were the reservations and doubts of the book's characters, especially the narrator, Dana. In the first chapter, she confesses: "I wasn't sure I still wanted to go to church. Almost everything in the Sunday worship had begun to annoy me." More often than I care to admit, I feel this same way. But I had never encountered words like these in print, only in private conversation.

It's not that Dana is angry or writing off her congregation. Her life is intertwined with this church. The AUUCC changed her life by welcoming her into spirituality and community. But now, 24 years later, its foibles are getting to her. She isn't growing anymore. She thinks about quitting. What church member or clergyperson hasn't been there?

As she teeters on the edges of the congregation, Dana is asked to serve on the search committee for a new senior pastor. This suddenly commands her attention and loyalty—as well as her desire to secretly take notes for a new novel. As you can imagine if you’ve ever been on a search committee (or any church committee), a plot full of intrigue, drama, and absurdity ensues.

There are myriad details of mainline church culture in this novel that will be familiar to most *Century* readers. Dana finds Sunday worship tedious because she can’t stand the new handbell choir. The pastor makes the congregation repeat inspiring phrases as part of each week’s benediction. An elderly matriarch’s pledge is larger than anyone else’s. Every meeting includes a meal, and everyone lives in dread of being asked to serve on another committee. There is a recipe in the back of the book for Chicken Fiesta, “ubiquitous at AUUCC potlucks,” which originated 20 years earlier as an all-church cooking project when the congregation couldn’t afford a caterer.

Perhaps unfamiliar to many, however, will be the novel’s immersion in Unitarian Universalist church culture, which I enjoyed learning more about. For instance, committee members discuss whether some candidates’ belief in the presence of God is “too religious.”

*Search* is both an homage to and a critique of the church culture its author has loved and lived through. While often laugh-out-loud funny, the story is also heartbreaking. Committee members circumvent and undercut one another. They talk behind each other’s backs. They stay up until the wee hours of the morning, struggling to reach consensus on their final candidate. If you are serving on a search committee right now, you might want to wait and read this book later. The ending is particularly hard to read and, while not unrealistic, felt heavy-handed to me.

Many secular critics have expressed confusion about what is at stake in *Search*. Why does the narrator care so much about this church when so much about it is so annoying and awkward? Who would really stick around for this stuff?

Many of us, apparently. Church can be annoying, dull, and exasperating; it can break your heart; many people leave and never come back. But others can’t seem to stay away. There is persistent hope in attempting to create a community based on belief in a loving God or a transcendent unknown. *Search* does not hold back from the sloppy and sinful moments that so often happen in our church communities, but it holds on to what lies at the core of congregational life for so many of us: fellowship,

a longing for holy mystery, and working toward a better world. Sometimes this leads to hypocrisy, hubris, and disaster. But more often, the search is in fact sincere, hilarious, and full of grace.