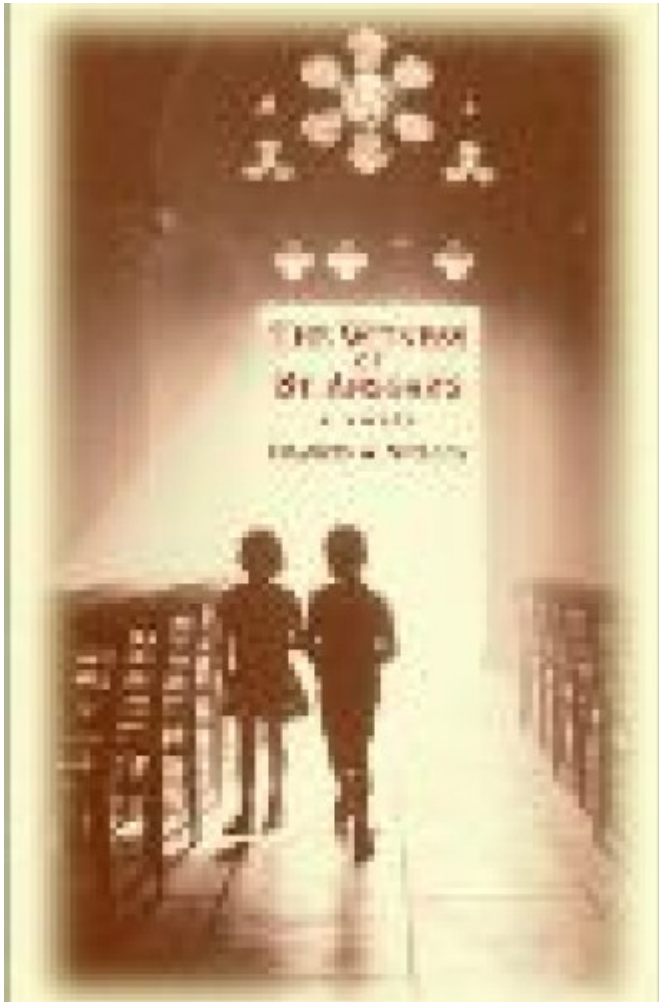


Neighborhood saint

By [Edward L. Beck](#) in the [October 17, 2006](#) issue

In Review



The Witness of St. Ansgar's

Francis W. Nielsen
Steerforth

When i finished this book I wanted to read it all over again. It's that kind of work. For cinephiles, think *Dead End* meets *Going My Way* with a bit of *Sleepers* thrown in for

realism and good measure. Films instead of books come to mind because *The Witness of St. Ansgar's* evokes strong visual images easily imagined on the big screen. And while the story might be a bit too folksy for today's Hollywood standards, the emotions that the book elicits linger long after the rolling of the credits (in this case, a touching epilogue by Francis Nielsen's wife).

Published posthumously (Nielsen died in 1990), this episodic novel details 12 years in a parish in the immigrant tenement neighborhood of Hell's Kitchen on Manhattan's West Side during the Depression. The German section where the "Dutchies" live (the nickname is from *Deutsche*, or German) is in a state of flux, as is the parish of St. Ansgar's, where we are introduced to Friar Benigno, the saintlike priest around whom the charming stories in this gem of a book revolve. As he works among poor parishioners (just as his role model St. Francis did in 13th-century Assisi), we meet a rich cast of characters: wife beaters, cops on the take, drunks, lusty wives and the "nuts" in the church, whom Benigno characterizes as "the whirlers, the genuflectors, the holy water sprinklers, the statue strokers, the cross kissers, the communion rail clutchers."

Emerging in high relief from this colorful panoply of characters is a boy luminous in his simplicity and goodness—Mario, who at age seven becomes the assistant to the sacristan, Friar Benigno. The novel unfolds mostly from Mario's point of view as he is mentored by Benigno in matters of church and life. "Benigno taught him Latin, rehearsed him in the service ritual, and after a while Mario found himself running every day to St. Ansgar's. It was not to pray, to meditate, it was to be there, be there near Benigno . . . yes, to be there, a need, to catch the light, the colors of the stained-glass panels, the airy shafts slanting from the clerestory, and the great hush walling out the noise of the throbbing city. Yes, Mario ran to be there."

While the parishioners of St. Ansgar's are quick to whisper about Benigno's sanctity, the gruff and ever humble priest dismisses such chatter with a wave of his hallowed, calloused hand. Holiness is something reserved for saints, while Benigno simply tries to keep the Rule of St. Francis as a committed friar. If we as readers view his dedication as extraordinary, perhaps it is because we also meet friars whose commitment seems compromised by their aching humanity and their inability to find the anchoring balance of Friar Benigno.

Friar Roland, on the other hand, "was stalwart and handsome with slick black hair, black beard, rosy complexion, and intensely blue eyes. . . . When he strode through

the church in his habit, his sandals slapped against his bare soles as if they were applauding.” Turns out it isn’t only his sandals that are applauding. Soon all the young women are lined up in the front pews of the church in their Sunday best, suddenly having found religion. None is more smitten than Lizzie, “who was never going to see thirty-five again, and who had three kids, and who was the wife of Blackjack Talbot, an Irish cop.”

He’s not called Blackjack for nothing. When he learns of his wife’s amorous pursuit of Friar Roland, he gives her a beating that knocks out her front teeth, preventing her from ever smiling again. “What can you expect from a local girl marrying an Irishman?” Such are the lives of the people of St. Ansgar’s parish.

If Friar Roland cannot be held accountable for his good looks and naïveté, Friar Venard, a visiting teacher from the country whose arrival is announced by lilac aftershave lotion and whose hair is as well groomed “as if he spent time arranging it,” does not appear as innocent. When Friar Venard takes a shine to young Mario, Friar Benigno hovers like a mother bird protecting her young. Mario’s eyes, which Friar Roland extols as “gorgeous,” cannot meet the gaze of this obviously besotted and troubled priest, who literally tries to burn away the passion that burns inside him. Friar Venard is eventually sent to the motherhouse in Wisconsin while Mario is left with bad dreams and a consoling Benigno. In light of the recent pedophilia scandal, readers might feel that this encounter is handled without due gravitas, but the feelings the episode evokes are masterfully elicited by a writer who knows when not to say too much.

The power of these stories lies in the tutorial brilliance of a simple friar who mentors a boy he comes to love as the son he can never have. We connect viscerally with this relationship because Benigno is the kind of guide we ourselves would like to have. When a tortured, scrupulous friar collapses under the weight of imagined guilt, Benigno uses the event as a teaching moment for the confused Mario. Benigno tells Mario to put a small pebble in his shoe, then asks the sockless boy to walk. Soon the pebble begins to bite into the young Mario’s skin. “It hurt you, huh? Suppose you have that small stone in your conscience where it keeps biting you, cutting you, always stinging you. That’s what it means to be scrupulous.” Whether Mario is an active participant or an observant onlooker, he is formed in the able hands of a master who knows how to mold integrity and goodness from the raw materials of openness and wonder. As readers we place ourselves in those same confident hands, hoping for a similar result.

As we read the 17 stories that make up this illuminating novel, we come to care deeply about the saintly friar and the boy who becomes a man against the backdrop of a changing neighborhood and a changing church. Nielsen's detailed and finely hewn writing moves us to grow sentimental about a time and a church that has long since passed into the annals of history. Timeless and universal themes of love, forgiveness, humanity and hope filter through on every cherished page.

By the end of the novel Benigno, who has grown old and sick, reluctantly pushes Mario out of the nest and into the inferno of World War II in the homeland of the ailing friar, but not without first giving him a special graduation gift, one that will prove to be the symbol of a miracle still awaiting the unsuspecting young man. Though Benigno is suspicious of miracles ("You see, Mario, people want the miracle because they don't have no belief in faith"), he ironically is the source of the life-altering miracle that Mario experiences; it is a sign of the holiness that Benigno is too wise and humble to claim. By the time I turned the last page of the book, I felt that I had experienced my own minor miracle.