

*Saints and Villains*, by Denise Giardina

reviewed by [Craig J. Slane](#) in the [July 15, 1998](#) issue

By Denise Giardina, *Saints and Villains*. (Norton, 487 pp.)

Denise Giardina's novel tells the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in a way that deftly humanizes him and brings him to life. Indeed, some may consider her interpretation too human and take offense at her detailing of moral indiscretions committed by the young Bonhoeffer. Yet even Eberhard Bethge's authoritative biography pivots on the judgment that "the theologian becomes a Christian." Giardina captures this "conversion" by depicting the ethical tensions in Bonhoeffer's relationships and showing the metamorphosis in his musicianship.

Giardina creates a compellingly plausible psychological portrait by artfully maneuvering in and out of key themes: Bonhoeffer's move from cowardice to moral courage; his intensely personal involvement with the Jewish question; his frequent social awkwardness; his progress away from academic stuffiness toward a vital and earthy spiritual passion; his lifelong affliction with feelings of isolation and melancholy and the indelible impression made on him by his year in America. Through a slight adjustment in the chronology of 1934 Giardina is able to weave together a small piece of Bonhoeffer's life with that of T. S. Eliot. Eliot at the time was writing *Murder in the Cathedral*, his play about the martyrdom of Thomas Becket, and the connection foreshadows Bonhoeffer's own martyrdom.

While the majority of Giardina's ancillary characters are people who were actually part of Bonhoeffer's life, some are fictionalized, some are composite sketches and some are pure invention. All of them are vividly construed, but two are especially intriguing. Hans von Dohnanyi, Bonhoeffer's brother-in-law, gently ushered him into the underground resistance movement. He illustrates the precarious position of the Nazi resisters, their meticulous yet tedious work and their continual frustration at Hitler's elusiveness. Following the failure of one of the plots on the Führer's life, a distraught Dohnanyi remarks, "It is as though God protects him." Bonhoeffer refuses this interpretation, saying, "No . . . God must play some other part in the workings of this world."

Elisabeth Hildebrandt, an invented Jewish character based on Bonhoeffer's girlfriend of the '30s (and his actual Jewish friend, Franz Hildebrandt), accompanies the protagonist while he encounters Germany's escalating anti-Semitism. Through Elisabeth, Bonhoeffer continually finds himself in a moral crucible. Ultimately, she is a means of grace for him.

Giardina depicts Bonhoeffer's year in America (1930) as his awakening to the horrors of social injustice. He travels to the South with his Union Seminary colleague Fred Bishop and witnesses the brutal exploitation and systematic death of black laborers. As the two struggle to understand the will of God in such circumstances, Bishop's insight into the call of God intrigues the young, religiously formal Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer remains hesitant while Bishop plunges headlong into costly social action.

However, back in Germany, Bonhoeffer finds Bishop's example invaluable when he is forced to choose between his love for Germany and his love for Jesus. On the eve of crucial church elections, with the permission of Martin Niemöller, Bonhoeffer offends a gathering of German pastors by raising a stark option: German nationalism or Christianity. When the pastors defend their love of Germany, Bonhoeffer hears the voice of Fred Bishop whispering, "But do you love Jesus?"

The novel's one weakness is its failure to weave together the psychological and theological aspects of the Bonhoeffer story. Though Giardina, an Episcopal lay preacher, is far from theologically illiterate, I frequently wished she had provided a religious structure within which to understand Bonhoeffer's ethical choices. But though I know Bonhoeffer's story well, Giardina's portrait involved me and occasionally caused me to inspect and sometimes to alter some of my own assumptions. The book owes its success to Giardina's rich imagination and to her impressive historical knowledge.