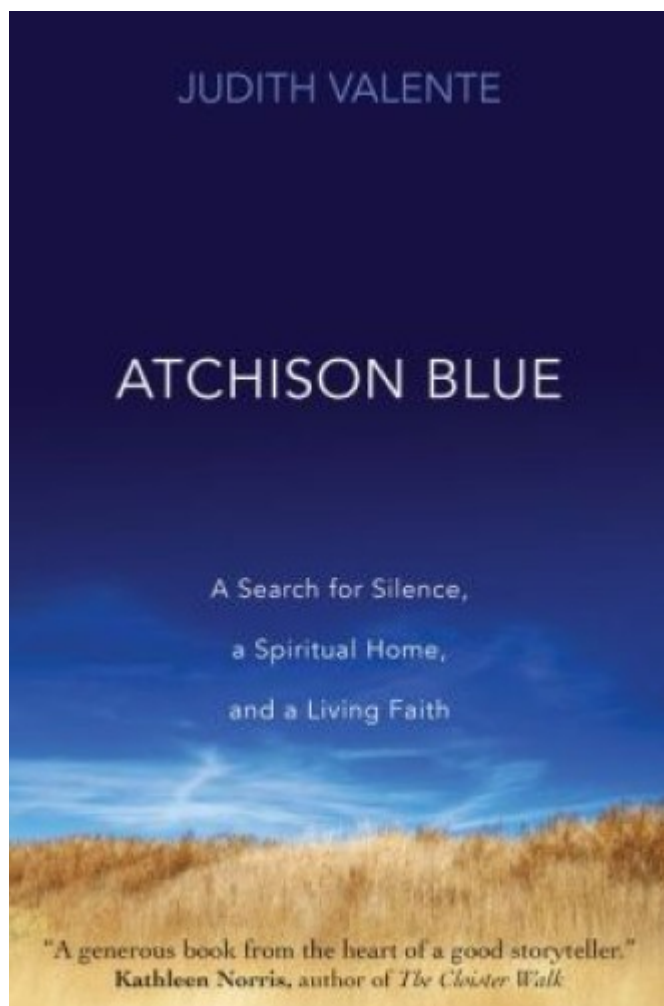


Atchison Blue, by Judith Valente

reviewed by [Deborah Smith Douglas](#) in the [September 18, 2013](#) issue

In Review



Atchison Blue

By Judith Valente
Ave Maria Press

Judith Valente's memoir takes its title from the distinctive color of the stained-glass windows in the chapel of Mount St. Scholastica, a community of Benedictine sisters in Atchison, Kansas. Time, strong light and relentless wind have transformed the

original, conventionally bright color of the glass to a striking clear blue-gray reminiscent of the sea. It is said to be found nowhere else.

Atchison blue is an apt metaphor for the general wisdom of monastic life and the specific way it is lived out in one particular place, as well as for Valente's own transformation, over time, by the light of the Gospels and the lives of the sisters.

When Valente first came to Mount St. Scholastica, she was a religion news correspondent for PBS television and a prize-winning poet. She intended only, as part of her own packed schedule of professional obligations, to lead a weekend retreat for other busy professionals. But under the clear gaze of those blue windows, she was suddenly aware of her own deep exhaustion and confusion, of her need for "silence, a spiritual home, and a living faith."

Disconnected from her Catholic roots by scandal within the church, longing to mend broken relationships within her new husband's family, wearied by clashes with colleagues at work, and secretly—and increasingly—fearing death, Valente craved the peace and quiet of the monastery and the counsel of the serene women who had vowed to live and die within its walls. She began to return to the Mount for regular retreats until she was spending about a week out of every month there for nearly three years.

With sometimes startling candor, Valente tells the story of her personal journey, detailing the concrete ways in which all of those hidden struggles surfaced and were addressed in that place and in that company. She admits that she has found no simple solutions or easy answers; her struggles continue. But she has found abiding hope and a new quietness of mind with which to persevere.

Although she refers to the Rule of St. Benedict in the course of these musings, especially the elusive Benedictine charism of *conversatio morum* (usually translated as ongoing conversion of life, a constant turning toward God), Valente is more concerned with lifting up the witness of the mostly elderly sisters whom she has come to love.

This is due in part to her journalistic instinct and in part to an explicit decision to pay homage to the remarkable Benedictine sisters still at the Mount lest there be "no one left to tell." The community is vibrant and sizable as women's monastic communities go these days, but there is a poignant urgency to Valente's desire to ensure that their stories will not go untold.

In her affectionate portraits of various sisters—illuminating their fidelity to God, their compassion for the poor, their opposition to war and violence, and the tender way they care for each other in sickness and death—Valente has honored these women. She also evoked my own remembrance of the Catholic sisters I have known and loved.

Monastically speaking, I have found my own spiritual home with the Camaldolese Benedictine monks of Big Sur, California, but Valente has reminded me of the debt I owe to and the love I have for many of the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati. Though their imposing brick Victorian motherhouse on a bluff over the Ohio River, from which generations of nurses and teachers were sent out into the world, is nearly empty now, I treasure the sisters and the time I've spent among them. I am grateful for their loving hospitality to me and their example of lifelong fidelity to God—and I am similarly concerned for their future.

While writing elegiacally of the sisters at the Mount, Valente nowhere mentions one threat to their slowly disappearing way of life: the Vatican's sharp 2012 rebuke of American sisters—as represented by the Leadership Conference of Women Religious—for their focus on the plight of the poor and marginalized and for their lack of sufficiently vocal opposition to abortion and same-sex marriage. Investigation of the LCWR and various women's congregations is ongoing.

Although it more closely resembles Mitch Albom's *Tuesdays with Morrie* than Kathleen Norris's *The Cloister Walk*, Valente's memoir will be a welcome introduction to monastic retreat for those who have not yet ventured across the threshold of one of those priceless, irreplaceable sanctuaries. And anyone who already knows the amazing grace of silence, solitude and prayer offered in a monastic setting will resonate with Valente's story. Like the blue windows in the Atchison chapel, any Benedictine experience will be both like and unlike any other: uniquely valuable, potentially transformative, at once universal and deeply personal.