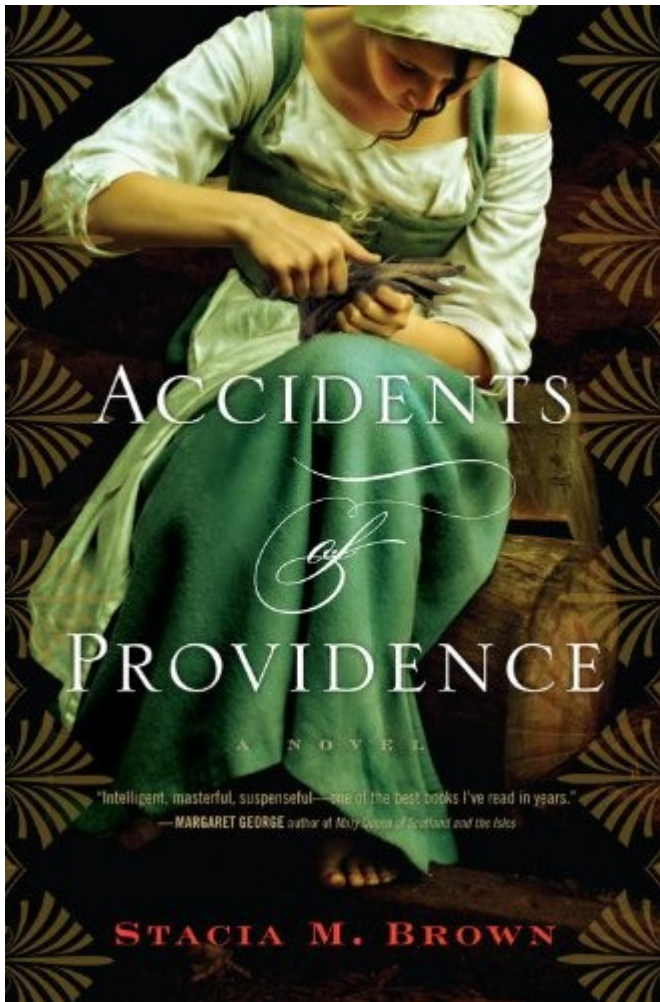


Accidents of Providence, by Stacia M. Brown

reviewed by [Ian Curran](#) in the [February 4, 2015](#) issue

In Review



Accidents of Providence

By Stacia M. Brown

Mariner

In a piece written a couple of years ago for the *New York Times*, Paul Elie laments the absence of serious engagement with the Christian faith in contemporary American fiction. Christianity, he argues, may appear as a cultural artifact; as a

curious, ironic, or possibly toxic backdrop to the real action of a story; as something that a novel's characters experience when they are growing up; or occasionally as an unexpected intrusion into otherwise secular lives. But that is all. Elie scans the literary horizon and wonders what happened to the O'Connors, Percys, and Updikes of the world, those writers "who can dramatize belief the way it feels in your experience, at once a fact on the ground and a sponsor of the uncanny, an account of our predicament that still and all has the old power to persuade."

Elie should read Stacia Brown's debut novel, *Accidents of Providence*. Brown, who has a Ph.D. in historical theology from Emory University, displays that unusual combination of exceptional literary talent and theological acumen that Elie finds wanting in American letters. Short-listed for the 2014 Townsend Prize, the novel is a work of historical fiction set in London during the turbulent period of the English civil wars. At once a romance, a murder mystery, and a theological parable, *Accidents of Providence* is a profound meditation on the nature of love and friendship, the active presence of God in the world, and the unavoidable spiritual tensions that arise between law and grace, necessity and possibility, self-sacrifice and self-preservation, and ultimately cross and resurrection when people try to live out their Christian convictions amid the complexities and ambiguities of human history.

The novel opens in November 1649 following the victory of the Puritan-dominated parliament over the Anglican-supported monarchy, the execution of Charles I, and the dissolution of the House of Lords. The parliamentary army fashions itself as the champion of the people but has suppressed the Levellers, a democratic movement composed largely of religious dissenters agitating for popular sovereignty, equality, voting rights, and religious tolerance.

Within this web of political intrigue and religious conflict, Brown weaves the story of Rachel Lockyer, a glove maker who embarks on an affair with Leveller leader William Walwyn and finds herself the target of an investigation into the death of her illegitimate child. With compassion and humanity, Brown introduces a cast of characters who both reflect their time period and are large enough for us to relate to as modern readers. One thinks especially of the cantankerous investigator Thomas Bartwain and his sapient wife Mathilda; prominent Levellers John and Elizabeth Lilburne; the merciless pastor William Kiffin; Rachel's pious mother, Martha, and her headstrong brother Robert; and the upright widow Mary du Gard, who is Rachel's employer and friend and also the major witness against her.

The plot hinges on the conflict between a legalistic approach to Christian morality and one centered on the great commandment to love God and neighbor. Bartwain, who is the one responsible for charging Rachel with murder, represents legalism, although as his name (“Bar-twain”) suggests, he comes to experience a crisis of conscience over the law. The statute in question, the 1624 Act to Prevent the Destroying and Murdering of Bastard Children, makes the concealment of the death of an infant by an unwed mother a capital crime. As Bartwain begins to realize, this law deals only with the material facts of a case and does not allow for a consideration of motive, intention, or special circumstances in judgment of a woman’s guilt.

Legalism is allied with the forces of death and violence in human history, whereas the relationship between Rachel and William, for all its faults, stands as a symbol of “the power of love” (the title of one of William’s books) emerging in the world. The death of Rachel’s infant, as well as the events surrounding Rachel’s trial and execution, prove the exception to the rule, exposing the limits of legal reasoning and the need for law to be balanced by the greater demands of love and mercy.

The law is also an expression of our human tendency to try to control the unsettling effects of our passions and the vagaries of our lives. As Bartwain insists to his wife, “The law is beautiful. The law is order. If we have not law, we have nothing. We descend to anarchy and noise, and one man will kill another for a roasted hen.” The law is seen as necessary, but too much fixation on the law shuts out the wild possibility of grace, which erupts from the margins of our experience and in unexpected, improbable ways. The accidents of the book’s title—the accidental encounter of Rachel and William, Rachel’s accidental pregnancy, her child’s accidental death, the accidental collapse of the courthouse scaffolding, and the accidents involved in a hanging—disrupt the predictable course of events and point to the workings of a providential deity who is not the result of careful human planning.

The novel is also about spiritual transformation. Rachel inwardly wrestles with the two gods of her Calvinist father and her Catholic mother, one who predestines everything and one who leaves some wiggle room for freedom and chance, and she undergoes a spiritual awakening as she learns to see herself as a recipient of God’s unpredictable love. Rachel’s character assumes various roles: sinner and saint, redeemed and redeemer, fallen woman and “people’s martyr.” She becomes, finally, that rarest of literary creations, a female Christ figure, the beloved daughter of God

who undergoes a kind of death and resurrection. In the end, Rachel redeems Bartwain, who overcomes his bondage to the law because of her case; William, who speaks of her as his savior; Martha Lockyer, who calls her a miracle, and Mary du Gard, who assumes responsibility for the proper burial of her child.

Brown shares with the literary naturalists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries an acute sense of the tragedy and misery of the human condition and of the historical and psychological forces that shape human destiny. She paints a bleak picture of London at the midpoint of the 17th century, with its inhumane treatment of women, prisoners, and homeless persons, its oppressive legal system, and its streets flowing with human waste.

Yet in a manner reminiscent of the works of Annie Dillard, Brown also discovers beauty and transcendence amid the omnipresent horror and writes with a lyricism that suggests a greater arc to the human story than a purely naturalistic perspective entails. The active presence of the divine in the world is such that even God's nonhuman creatures—turtles circling their tanks in the Whalebone Tavern, where the Levellers meet; starlings soaring above Newgate Prison; an owl screeching in the courthouse rafters—all seem to participate in the drama of Rachel's deliverance.