

Silence, by Shusaku Endo

selected by [Frederick Niedner](#) in the [October 14, 2015](#) issue

In Review



Silence

by Shusaku Endo
Taplinger Publishing Company

Shusaku Endo's novel recounts the spiritual descent of an earnest Portuguese priest and his small, beleaguered flock of believers in 17th-century Japan. Ever since I discovered it in 1979 thanks to a review by Douglas John Hall, it has remained

among my top three candidates for items I would want to have with me if I were stranded on a desert island. *Silence* captures the ambiguities and paradoxes of theology of the cross more perceptively than any other piece of Christian writing save for Mark's Gospel. In *Silence*, as in Mark, we see or hear God only in the absence of God, in the depths of godforsakenness.

I have taught *Silence*, frequently as part of a general education first-year core course in which we consider what we live for and for what or whom we would die. I have also taught it in upper-level courses probing themes related to Christian vocation and in senior capstone seminars in theology. In each context, we have conducted an ecclesial trial at the end of our time with the novel. We sit as prosecutors and defenders of Father Sebastian Rodrigues, who, at Christ's urging, or so he believes, commits apostasy to save the lives of his peasant faithful. Every group of students has struggled mightily, but all of them have ultimately condemned Rodrigues's apostasy and tossed him from the church. Each time the verdict has proved heartbreaking. And each time it seemed necessary. Just like that long-ago crucifixion.