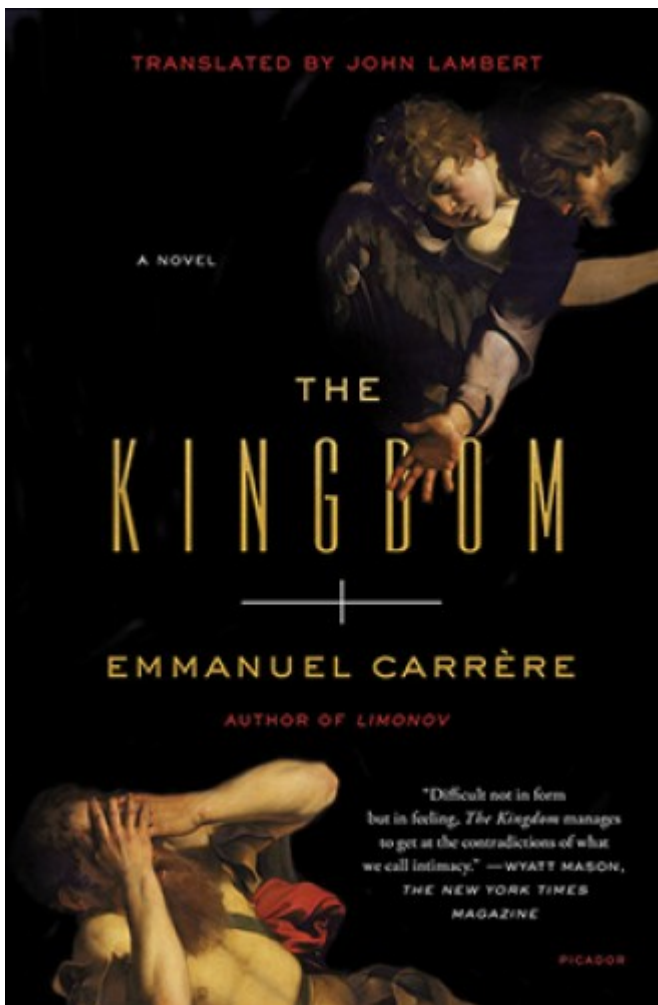


The rise and fall of Emmanuel Carrère's faith

***The Kingdom* is a mess, but it refuses to be wholly dismissed.**

by [Philip Christman](#) in the [October 25, 2017](#) issue

In Review



The Kingdom

By Emmanuel Carrère, translated by John Lambert
Farrar, Straus and Giroux

The Kingdom arrives in the United States already coronated. It drew raves in translation last year from British reviewers, and the novelist-journalist-screenwriter-celebrity Emmanuel Carrère is an intellectual star in his native France. Carrère tells the story of his brief but intense time as a believing Christian 20 years ago, then maps that personal conversion (and later deconversion) onto the story of Christianity's early centuries. Like that history, *The Kingdom* is a mess, one that refuses to be wholly embraced or dismissed.

Other reviewers have likened *The Kingdom* to a novel—in particular, the autofictions of Karl Ove Knausgaard and Chris Kraus, which mix personal confession and autobiography with long, essayistic digressions on ideas, people, or works of art by which the author remains transfixed. But aside from the opening and closing sections, Carrère puts his own story—distractingly—in service to the book's informational content.

Most of *The Kingdom* resembles not a novel or autobiography but a highly engaging series of lectures, taught by the sort of shamelessly biased, engagingly sloppy, inappropriately digressive college teacher whose students love him (this type is usually a him) but who will never get tenure. His analogies and examples dazzle and sometimes blind; he is always ready with the kind of explanatory anachronism that a fully licensed expert knows too much to risk. He says Paul's conversion is like Philip K. Dick's famous mystical experience, and that Hellenic Jewish proselytes are like bourgeois Americans who dabble in Buddhism. Are these comparisons true? Are they helpful? They're certainly memorable.

Carrère is flippant and earnest by hairpin turns. He takes sides in scholarly debates with only a few cursory words for the other team. In this case, his sources follow a predictable pattern. If fundamentalism wants to deny any tensions at all between the biblical writers, Carrère prefers the authorities who deny any harmony, any possibility of unity-in-difference among the earliest Christian writers. They, and he, reduce all tension to radical antinomy. Luke is a careful portraitist and scene-setter; therefore Paul's abstractions must have utterly bewildered him. John is portrayed in the other Gospels as somewhat impetuous; therefore, the other disciples were trying to discredit him. (It's also just possible that Luke, like most of us, was good at more than one thing, and that the Gospel writers had one or two concerns more pressing than settling scores.)

Like a charismatic but problematic teacher, Carrère, in his rush to reach his audience and get it all said, pulls most of his illustrations and examples from the life closest to hand: his own. So as Carrère tells us about Paul's conversion, his friendship with the calmer and more irenic Luke, and his confrontations with James, we also hear a great deal about Carrère's other books, his marriages, his depression, his friends and enemies. At one point—this instance has already become notorious—Carrère needs an illustration to explain why religious art that uses human models is more powerful than the kind drawn from pure imagination. He likens the difference to that between professional and amateur pornography. He follows this with several pages of ecstatic *ekphrasis* devoted to his current favorite clip, which, he assures us, he has watched many times during the long dull afternoons devoted to composing the lengthy volume we are now reading.

Carrère's self-obsession resembles Knausgaard's or Kraus's: first it irritates you; but then its comprehensiveness, its detachment from ordinary concerns about looking bad, comes to seem like a weird form of egolessness. There is something bracing about reading someone who calmly agrees with you that he's an idiot and who never stops incriminating and implicating himself. Certainly it's easier for readers to navigate their way around Carrère's biases than around those of writers who efface any mention of themselves and hide their prejudices in their adjectives and their omissions.

In the end, Carrère's interest in himself becomes a window onto something important. The early passages about his Christian period do something that I wasn't expecting: they edify. Carrère's conversion was violent, almost Pauline. It empties him and turns him inside out and upside down like a pocket. We need to remember what that feels like—that trusting single-mindedness that focuses on Christ, confident that he will bear our worldly anxieties.

The older Carrère is no longer able to make this motion of belief. But he has shamelessly represented that younger self on the page with an honesty that confronts and challenges us, and even, one comes to suspect, himself. The encounter with that earnest young man seems to change Carrère, who, near the end of this carefully agnostic book, finds himself at one of the L'Arche communities singing praise songs and dancing with a young disabled girl, "forced to admit that today, for an instant, I got a glimpse of what the Kingdom is."

*A version of this article appears in the October 25 print edition under the title
"Church history as memoir."*