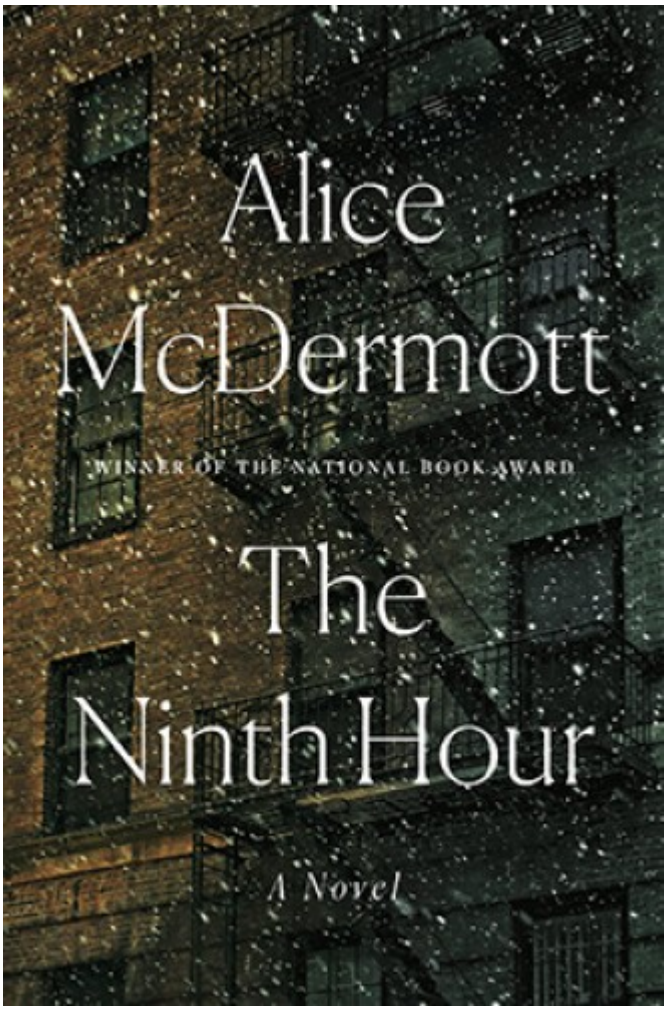
Catholic sisters and their difficult vocation

Alice McDermott ponders a mystery: How is it that women hear the calling and find the strength to love and support their neighbors?

by David Crowe in the April 11, 2018 issue

In Review



The Ninth Hour

A Novel

By Alice McDermott
Farrar, Straus and Giroux

Alice McDermott offers an elegant and moving book about the mystery of women's callings. Telling the story of a houseful of nuns (but they're fun nuns!) in early 1900s Brooklyn, McDermott focuses on the indigent poor and working poor in a time marked by stunning wealth and wage inequality. As she shows the strength and inventiveness of women battling poverty and then plunges a few of these women into a moral and ethical dilemma, she seems to be pondering this mystery: How is it that women—especially Christian women in urban America—hear the calling and find the strength to love and support their neighbors faithfully in a harshly competitive country?

McDermott won both a National Book Award and an American Book Award for *Charming Billy* (1998), which, like *The Ninth Hour*, begins with the problems of a wayward alcoholic Irish husband in Brooklyn who's in love with a beautiful immigrant girl—and a little in love with death. McDermott knows how to tell a compelling story, think freely about the Christian life, and write in a beautiful yet casual prose. (Think of Louise Erdrich, or Jhumpa Lahiri, or a Willa Cather who loves stylish sentence fragments.)

In this novel, McDermott seems at first a kind of historian of social welfare. Her nuns not only work tirelessly for those in need, but they model a compassionate and professional form of social welfare. The state did not provide it, so Catholic sisters did. These sisters are effective nurses, laundresses, teachers, daycare providers, money raisers, cooks, administrators, and theologians. They are remarkably selfless—one nun not even allowing herself a bathroom break during her hardworking day, others cleansing vomit and blood stains from bandages and clothing day after day. McDermott reminds us that there never was a moment when America didn't need a social welfare system staffed by dedicated professionals.

But McDermott's stories are vividly personal too. As the novel opens, an elderly nun named Sister St. Savior, exhausted from a day raising mission funds on the street, notices that policemen have come to a tenement building in the neighborhood. The sister climbs the stairs to discover that a young husband and father has committed suicide by kitchen gas, in the process nearly burning down the entire building. Sister

St. Savior meets the new widow, a pretty Irish woman named Annie. The sister's first observation is acute and veteran: "This much the nun was certain of: the husband had cherished this girl with the beautiful hair. Love was not the trouble. Money more likely. Alcohol. Madness."

The trouble was all of those things, as well as despair. Though the husband, a trainman on the Brooklyn local line named Jim, loved his wife and daughter, Sally, he "liked to refuse time." In fact, he "delighted in refusing it." This young man simply could not make sense of time, figure out a reason for living, give himself to work that mattered, and commit to that work for a lifetime. So he drank and despaired.

Despair is not a problem for McDermott's nuns. They take Annie and Sally in hand, and soon Annie is working in the basement laundry of the convent. Sally plays with makeshift toys on a secondhand rug under the eyes of a kindly nun who irons linens all day. Soon enough, the nun's dutiful Christian love for the new residents grows more personal and parental.

The novel's title refers to a time of afternoon prayer the nuns observe when at home in their convent, a large, comfortable former mansion that offers quiet respite from the mean streets. One day one of the nuns gives the "ninth hour" another meaning when she begins offering Annie some afternoon time off from her work in the laundry. "Do you need a breath of fresh air?" Sister Jeanne asks. "Do you want to run out and get yourself a soda?" "Do you want to do some shopping?" Annie accepts these offers and creates her own ninth hour of the day.

Over time, Annie finds something more personal and ecstatic to do in the afternoons, and this activity produces the novel's tension and its crisis. The crisis is made more complicated by Sally's growth into a very bright young woman torn between being married to Christ, like her friends the nuns, and being married to one of the weak young men in the neighborhood. Confronting her mother's problems will help Sally make up her mind about her true calling as a woman and believer.

In spite of its preoccupation with nuns and their scripted hours of selfless work and prayer, this is a freethinking novel. The sisters who perform their labors of love have to be rule breakers, for the "rules of polite society," one of the willful nuns says early on, "complicate the lives of women: Catholic women in particular and poor women in general." McDermott's sisters interpret Catholic theology and local ethics flexibly. Maybe even lawlessly.

Sister St. Savior, who tells a few fibs in the attempt to get Jim buried in sacred ground after decent rites, is “mad for mercy.” Her slightly heretical and determined sense of mercy is prelude to the novel’s crisis a few hundred pages later, when a younger nun who had been mentored by Sister St. Savior reaches a shocking and complicated conclusion about what a good Christian may do to help a loved one in a moral crisis. This crisis epitomizes the novel’s theology, which suggests that it is never simple to be a good Christian.