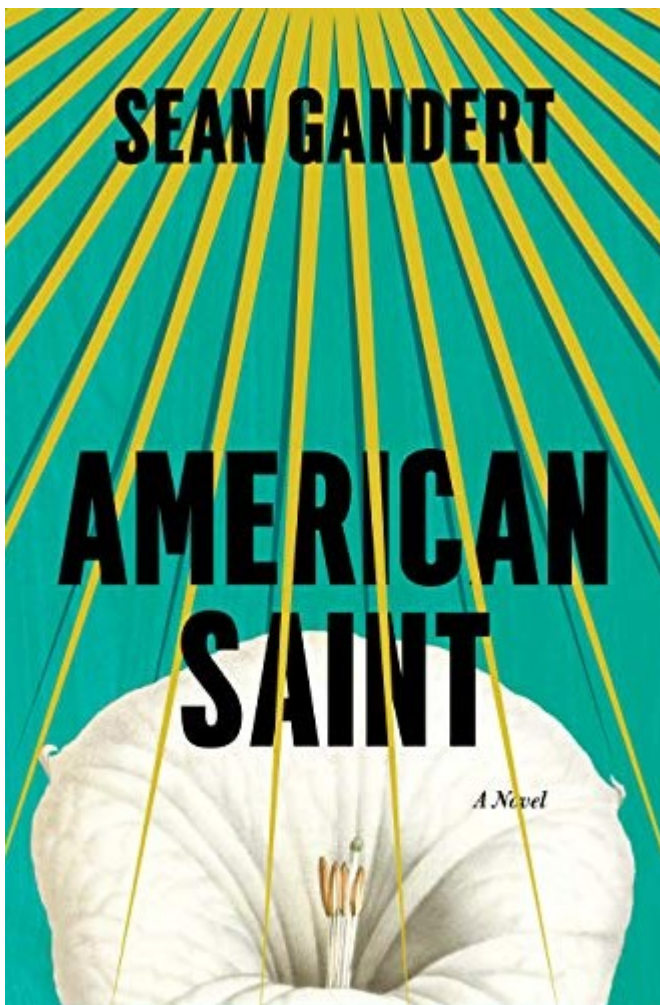


Would we recognize a modern-day messiah?

Sean Gandert's novel asks us to decide if a man is a saint or a sham.

by [Melissa Earley](#) in the [December 16, 2020](#) issue

In Review



American Saint

A Novel

By Sean Gandert

47North

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Reading *American Saint* is like reading one of the Gospels as it's being developed. It tells the story of Gabriel Romero, a young man from Albuquerque, New Mexico, who starts his own church. He gains widespread notoriety, first for his miracles and then for political activism. The book's epigraph is a dictionary entry for hagiography: "1. :the biography of a saint / 2. :a pejorative term, used to describe a biography that stretches the truth to idealize its subject." It's unclear which definition more closely fits the account that follows.

Gabriel's story unfolds through first-person testimony by people who know him. Among the witnesses are his mother, a former lover, a follower, a friend, and a rival. Is Gabriel a saint or a sham? Is he a true believer or a heretic? A miracle worker or a con artist? These questions are hard to answer, which makes the book a compelling read that illuminates the complexity of faith.

There is no reliable narrator, just these witnesses, whose accounts build a tangled web of overlapping contradictions and confirmations. Just as contemporary readers of the Gospels cannot pull out of them an unfiltered portrayal of Jesus, there is no single picture of the protagonist in *American Saint*. What each witness tells us about Gabriel reveals as much about their own biases, personal agendas, and personalities as it does about him.

We occasionally hear directly from Gabriel in the form of quotes and letters (which are mediated by the other narrators, and thus may not be entirely reliable). Gabriel's thoughtful ramblings and probing questions only complicate the picture of this potential saint. In a letter to a friend who is also a priest, he poses this thought experiment:

Suppose Jesus Christ was not God. Don't stop reading, please, Father. Just suppose he was simply a well-meaning man who inspired untold millions of people with his good works and sacrifice. He brought peace to those who needed it, but the whole walking-on-water bit, and the part with Lazarus, not to mention the resurrection itself, those were all made up.

Certainly many contemporary people view Jesus this way—and not just those who count themselves as spiritual but not religious.

But Gabriel pushes the question further, asking his friend to reckon with its implications for ministry:

Would that mean that every priest in the world is a liar? Would it mean all of us are perpetuating this same lie? Or would it make us artists of a kind, like Picasso, taking those lies and sculpting them into something true and real for the people we speak to? Would that mean everything we preach is true, after all?

Pastors, active church members, and religion scholars often hedge when it comes to the miracle stories in the Gospels. Early in my ministry, steeped in the writings of the Jesus Seminar, I liked saying that if they found Jesus' bones, it wouldn't affect my faith. After all, his resurrection was about more than a resuscitated corpse.

That sounded good at the time. But as I read *American Saint*, I found that it mattered to me whether Gabriel was using the magic tricks he'd perfected as a young man to convince his followers he was performing miracles. And then I discovered, to my surprise, that it matters to me whether Jesus really did miracles. Further, if I believe the miracle stories are exaggerations, do I owe it my congregants to pull back the curtain? Or should I perpetuate the lie, sculpting it into something beautiful that serves the greater good?

Each character in *American Saint* has to make a decision about what they will do in response to knowing Gabriel. No one can remain neutral. Constantly present, but silent and unnamed, is the one to whom the characters address their accounts. Although it's never explicitly said, this person seems to be doing research on Gabriel—to write a hagiography, perhaps, or to determine sainthood.

Periodically the characters address this interviewer directly. (The book's memorable first line is, "I don't care what you heard, my mother was not a witch.") This direct address raises the stakes of the narrative, putting us in the place of the unnamed interlocutor. As we read about Gabriel, we cannot remain neutral any more than the characters can. And as we're making a decision about what we will do in response to knowing Gabriel, we may also find ourselves deciding—along with him—what we will do in response to knowing Jesus.