

I want more for Deesha Philyaw's church ladies

I want a sequel where they don't have to hide their sexuality.

by [Lillian Daniel](#) in the [June 16, 2021](#) issue

In Review



The Secret Lives of Church Ladies

by Deesha Philyaw

West Virginia University Press

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Deesha Philyaw's phenomenal debut collection of short stories is a page-turner, and not just for clergy who tend toward a prurient interest in church dysfunction. The title says it all. These are stories about women with secrets—and their most intriguing inner imaginings concern the churches they were raised in.

This is not to say the stories take place in church. Scenes are set in the bedrooms and steamy cars of lovers whose unions would not be blessed in public worship, with many of these women wondering what their Christian relatives are thinking. Even when they have walked away from those congregations, the main characters of each story—all Black women—are haunted by the church that has shaped them in some way.

In the rollicking first story, two women who are best friends meet for an annual New Year's Eve tradition of getting drunk and making love. One is out and comfortable with her sexuality; the other is a proper single church lady who can only bring herself to engage in lesbian sex once a year and under the influence of alcohol. The rest of the time she accepts inane dating advice from a pastor who tells her that she must make room for that mythical missing man by having a less full life.

This seems to be the message the church often gives its women in Philyaw's ecclesiastical world. In the male voice of a clueless pastor or the clucking of a protective older laywoman, the church wonders why the younger generations of women aren't chasing an old-fashioned, happily-ever-after, heterosexual marriage dream that few of the characters will find, including those giving the advice.

In one particularly poignant story, a young girl watches her mother have an affair with the local pastor, week after week, as he drops in for a roll in the hay and a piece of hot peach cobbler. After the pastor leaves, any leftover cobbler is always thrown away; the daughter never gets to eat a bite. Her mother's nurturing kindness is reserved for the one man who will not return it in public. Later, the girl teaches herself to make her mother's peach cobbler, but will she be able to teach herself to be more loving than the woman who raised her?

In this story and others, the church is of little help. The pastor tries on occasion to stick up for the daughter, encouraging her mother to be gentler with her. But the mother is preparing her daughter for a hard, cold world that the pastor, in his privileged life, cannot understand. The moral sway he exerts in the pulpit eludes him when he's just another man eating peach cobbler at the kitchen table of his

mistress. The church, if it is to be seen through the pastors in the book, is clueless: occasionally kind but ultimately weak.

But the church Philyaw shows through her characters' recollections of transcendent worship still holds power, and more powerful yet is the church of funeral suppers and fellowship. In some stories, the church separates families. In others, the church is where they come together across political lines and generational gaps. When a randy old man makes a play for a young woman at her father's funeral, the church ladies rally for revenge with hilarious results.

It is no surprise that this book was a finalist for the 2020 National Book Award for Fiction and winner of both the 2021 PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction and the 2020/21 Story Prize. Philyaw's writing is beautiful, especially the dialogue. The characters still stick with me as if each one were the subject of a full-length novel. The collection left me imagining the ways these characters might meet up with each other in a longer form work, which I would snap off the shelf. I can imagine the most memorable among them bumping into each other in the choir on Sunday morning or stumbling home from the bar late on a Saturday night.

In some stories, the church folk choose a hard and narrow road, often recalled in flashbacks by the family member they have cut off for sleeping with the wrong person. But in others, Christians exude a warmer welcome and a "live and let live" attitude, although it is seldom connected to anything they seem to have heard in church. What's missing is a picture of a church where people are not condemned for their sexuality.

A portrayal of that ideal kind of church risks negating the truth held by the stories in which the church does injure its own children. Still, I found myself wishing that Philyaw would, in her next work, turn her world-building skills toward creating a mighty female pastor character, one who triumphantly outreaches the weak-kneed, cobbler-eating preacher and goes on to perform a big old church wedding for my favorite same-sex couples in this unforgettable collection of stories.