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'The Testament of Mary' by Colm Toibin, Viking

The greatest story ever told has been enjoying something of a revival. We have had Pullman's 'The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ', Naomi Alderman's 'The Liar's Gospel' and now Colm Toibin throws his hat into the ring with 'The Testament of Mary', the life and death of Jesus as told, in sorrowful retrospect, by his mother.

The text began life as a successful play but Toibin is an accomplished raconteur and the transformation to this brief but pungent novella is seamless. As with Pullman and Alderton his is a revisionist version of the Gospel stories and indeed the Gospel writers figure as the story's crucial, and sinister, puppet masters.

We are on the island of Ephesus, ancient home of the many-breasted Artemis and traditionally the place where Mary lived out her life following her son's death. In the canonical myths, John, the disciple whom 'Jesus loved', is charged by Mary's son, at the point of death, with her care and she is spirited away to the island where, in his role as Evangelist, the beloved disciple allegedly composes one of the Gospels.

In this account John (who is never named) is the shadowy villain of the story, the so-called 'guardian' whose role is to coerce rather than protect. Mary lives a life of constraint, taking rare pleasure in the emotionally cooler worship of the pagan Artemis, her only autonomy exercised in her rejection of male society. For this is a feminist Mary whose experience of the male society in which her son moved has dismayed her. She recounts some of her son's famed exploits: the healing of the cripple at Bethesda; his night appearance to his disciples on the waters of the Sea of Galilee. But the defining story is the raising of Lazarus, the charismatic young man whom Mary's son (he too is never named) brings back from death.

Toibin is not the first to conjecture that this was one of Jesus's least humane miracles but his version of the remarkable event is one of the most compelling. Life after death is rendered as a daily trauma, both for the death-in-life victim and for his grieving sisters. His would-be-corpse casts a grim shadow over the exploits of Mary's son and is the source, we gather, of the establishment's surveillance of both him and his family.

The effect of this is to provoke what is the most radical element in this story. Rather than taking the body of her crucified son in her arms, as in the traditional images of the *Pieta*, this Mary does a bolt, fleeing from the authorities under the dubious aegis of John, who relocates her in Ephesus. And here he, and we presume other disciples, attempt to persuade her of the version of her son's life they will promulgate in their Gospels.

It is a bold idea, and as always with Toibin beautifully crafted. But as a mother, and a less noble than one, it strikes me as less 'real' than the familiar

fabled behaviour of Mary. The truth of the original does not lie in its factual accuracy but more in its mythic reality. I always admire Toibin but for lasting resonance I still prefer John's version.

Salley Vickers' new novel 'The Cleaner of Chartres' is out next month.