

Keith Miller, *The Sins of Angels*. Hornsea, UK: PS Publishing, 2016. Pp. 206. Hardcover, £20.00.

Much like his first two novels, *The Book of Flying* (2004) and *The Book on Fire* (2010), Keith Miller's third novel, *The Sins of Angels*, is a meditation on reading and writing swathed within the cloak of a fantasy novel, this time with elements of the mystery genre thrown in as well. Reading Miller's previous books made me proud to be a bibliophile because his work captures the essential joy that books bring; his new novel inspires the same feeling. While one character laments that "[n]o one's interested in a good tale anymore," this is exactly what Miller gives us.

The Sins of Angels tells the story of George Zacharias and his fellow detective Tomo, who come across an angel, Sophia, who has fallen from another realm into the streets of Cairo. The men spend the book trying to protect Sophia from Lucien Yaldabaoth, a wealthy autodidact with an amazing library who wants the angel for purposes that remain the novel's central mystery until its end. Alongside this plot, which I will refrain from describing further in order to leave its mystery intact for readers, *The Sins of Angels* includes frequent philosophizing about angels and their relation-

ship to religious belief. These conversations are influenced by both traditional sacred texts such as the Bible and contemporary angel-related literature such as José Rivera's *Marisol* and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*. The best fantasy novels raise real-world issues for readers to ponder, and *The Sins of Angels* is no exception. It investigates questions such as whether a love of beauty inevitably devolves into idolatry, whether it is ever possible to find sanctuary from evil (or, in Mennonite terms, to be "in the world but not of it"), and what kinds of texts reveal the divine.

In reference to the last question, it is interesting to note that all of the important books described in the novel—even the recently composed ones—are handwritten even though printing technology exists in the book's story world (as do other modern items such as cars and machine guns). This element of *The Sins of Angels* emphasizes writing as one of its subjects, and is also one way the novel roots itself in the fantasy genre: its atmosphere is ancient and otherworldly despite seemingly being set in the "real" world.

The Sins of Angels's major contribution to the field of Mennonite literature is its genre, as there are precious few pieces of Mennonite fantasy literature. Miller's novels and Sofia Samatar's *A Stranger in Olondria* and *The Winged Histories* are the only ones I am aware of, though if one broadens the category to speculative fiction (i.e., fiction that is in some way not mimetic because it takes place in a story world that is not our own or where otherwise impossible things happen) there are others, including Stephen Beachy's *Zeke Yoder Vs. the Singularity*, Corey Redekop's *Husk*, Emily Hedrick's *True Confessions of a God Killer*, some of the stories in Greg Bechtel's *Boundary Problems*, and Casey Plett's short story "Portland, Oregon" from *A Safe Girl to Love*. It is thus important that Miller's work pushes the field in new directions as it looks to attract new audiences. Like Miller's previous novels, *The Sins of Angels* is not explicitly Mennonite (and I am not sure whether it would even be possible for pure fantasy to be so), though its protagonist has a Mennonite last name. Some might argue that it would be blasphemous to consider angels fantastical rather than Biblical, but there is something stubbornly secular about the book even though it implicitly argues that reading itself is a sacred act, and that the divine may be found in all books. In any case, the act of writing about the lush, imagined worlds found in Miller's novels certainly defies ideals of plainness, whether of the literary or sartorial variety. However one chooses to classify it, *The Sins of Angels* unquestionably brings something new to Mennonite literature.

Tomo is *The Sins of Angels*'s major flaw. Although he is technically Zacharias's boss, Tomo plays the sidekick role, and in this role is portrayed as a caricature rather than a character. He is defined by his physical appetites, constantly lusting after a woman or his next meal, and this portrayal veers from the comedic into the stereotypical. There is too much of the Lone Ranger's Tonto or Inspector Clouseau's Cato in him. For example, while it is beautiful writing because of its frank, unique subject matter, the first physical description we get of Tomo includes the "blue lint in the hairy furrow between his buttocks" as he is bending over to fix a clogged pipe. He is immediately painted as a servile, foolish-looking person. Miller's previous novels have protagonists who go on their quests alone, and it would have been preferable for him to stick to this formula in *The Sins of Angels*. In the scenes when Tomo is absent, he is not missed.

Overall, though, *The Sins of Angels* is worth reading both for those interested in Mennonite literature and those simply looking for an enjoyable way to pass an afternoon. It leaves one anticipating Miller's future work and hoping that it takes less than six years for his next book to appear.

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