



Father Gaetano's Puppet Catechism: A Novella

Mike Mignola, Christopher Golden

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From the creator of *Hellboy*, an illustrated novella that brings *Twilight Zone* originality to the written page...

In the aftermath of a critical World War II battle, Father Gaetano is assigned as the sole priest at the Church of San Domenico in the small, seaside Sicilian village of Tringale. The previous pastor has died and there is a shortage of clergy at the moment, so until another can be spared, the young priest must say all of the masses himself. Mass is not Father Gaetano's only responsibility, however. The war has created many orphans, and thus the San Domenico rectory has been converted into an orphanage which is also his domain. The children are a joy to him, but they have lost so much, and many have begun to question their faith and their God, and his attempts to teach them catechism are in vain . . . until he finds an old puppet theatre and an ornate box of puppets in the basement. Handcrafted by the building's former caretaker, now absent, the puppets seem the perfect tool to get the children to pay attention to their lessons. But after dark the puppets emerge from that ornate box, without their strings. While the children have been questioning their faith, the puppets believe Father Gaetano's Bible stories completely. But there is such a thing as too much faith. And the children's lives will never be the same again.

Father Gaetano's Puppet Catechism: A Novella Details

Date : Published October 16th 2012 by St. Martin's Press

ISBN : 9780312644741

Author : Mike Mignola , Christopher Golden

Format : Hardcover 163 pages

Genre : Horror, Fantasy, Fiction, Sequential Art, Graphic Novels



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From Reader Review Father Gaetano's Puppet Catechism: A Novella for online ebook

Orrin Grey says

I love novellas, and this one is beautifully presented. A nice size, attractive hardcover, and with illustrations by Mignola. And it's a good, simple, straightforward tale of the quiet supernatural, which I love. And it's about puppets, which I love. (Pretty much all of Mignola's illustrations are just pictures of spooky puppets, a fact about which you will not find me complaining.) The length made for a very pleasant read, very slow burning, which I sort of liked, but in the end I think there was too much buildup, too many threads brought into play, for the amount of payoff we ended up getting, maybe. I did really like the abruptness of where things were left, though, and the way that you didn't really get to see how this affected a lot of the characters, and didn't get any resolution to some of the plot threads.

Dan says

More of a thriller than horror. Nothing really happened until almost the end of the book. An okay read.

Robert Kelly says

Thoughtful, creepy, and lots of fun.

Michael says

Thanks to Goodreads First Reads and St. Martin's Press for an ARC of Father Gaetano's Puppet Catechism: A Novella.

Set in Sicily ravaged by World War II, Father Gaetano takes over the Church of San Domenico's rectory/orphanage. While he leads mass and tends to his parishioners, Father Gaetano takes most pride in teaching the children the Bible and the value of God in their lives. As most of the children have lost loved ones in the war, this turns out to be a difficult task. Father Gaetano stumbles upon a puppet theater left by a previous caretaker, and comes up with a way of engaging the children through the Bible stories of David and Goliath, Noah and the flood, and more. When the puppets begin to take on a life of their own, Father Gaetano finds he has more than he bargained for.

The book was engaging, easy to follow, and well-written. The story unfolded beautifully. While there were only a few directions this book could go with its subject matter, there were still some surprises along the way. The character development was superb. We learn of Father Gaetano's struggle with his own faith, nine-year-old Sebastiano's innocence and imagination, as well as Father Gaetano's and Sister Teresa's flirtations with desire. The characters' stories and description gave them reality and depth that a real person would have.

Joseph R. says

World War II Sicily is home to much hardship. The church of San Domenico has just lost its priest so young Father Gaetano is assigned. The parish rectory has been converted to an orphanage that is supported by nuns from the next-door convent. The children (a mixture of boys and girls) are taught by the nuns but catechism class falls to Father Gaetano. He has trouble connecting to the children until he discovers a puppet theater with plenty of puppets. A former caretaker left them behind. Most children are delighted to see them again, especially Sebastiano, who keeps the clown Pagliaccio as his favorite. He talks to the puppet at night when his roommates are asleep. The puppet talks back, but naturally only when children are around. While the clown is benign, the other puppets take to their roles a bit too literally. Father Gaetano transforms the puppets into biblical characters. Noah worries about the ark, David and Goliath fight. Things take a disastrous and macabre turn when Father Gaetano changes a puppet into Lucifer, who takes his role too seriously.

The "puppets come alive" trope in horror has been done many times before. Even though it is familiar, the authors do a good job building tension and crafting a great finale to the story. I enjoyed that part very much.

On the other hand, the theology is distractingly sketchy. The authors get some details wrong, like the scene where Father Gaetano is surprised by one of the puppets and takes the Lord's name in vain. Then he feels humiliated "at his breaking the Third Commandment." [p. 91] While different denominations in the Judeo-Christian tradition divide up Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 differently, in the Catholic tradition, "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain" is the second commandment, not the third. The nuns are called "Domenicans," which at first I thought was a made up order, though perhaps they are named after the Orphanage of San Domenico or the authors just don't know how to spell Dominicans. Father and the children have many discussions about free will but they are all superficial and unsatisfying. Worse yet, the discussions are barely connected to the puppet horror story, a missed opportunity.

Mignola's occasional drawings (mostly of the puppets) are fun and do give a boost to the puppet horror theme. The ultimate fate of the characters (both human and mannequin) is exciting and satisfying. Some judicious editing and rewriting could have made this a great, rather than an average, book.

Christopher says

Loved it. Won on a Goodreads giveaway and very delightfully surprised at how enjoyable it was. I'm guessing most people would know the authors right away as the ones who did Hellboy and other popular comics but since I've never been a fan of that genre, I went in without any preconceptions. You know from the beginning (especially if you've read the back cover) what the basic story is, and there's really no surprises to it: a priest, some nuns, some orphans, and a box of puppets - only so many directions to go from there. The pleasure was in the telling. Very well written and the characters are actual and believable three-dimensional figures with color and life given to them that really fills out the story, and the same goes for the puppets. The story itself is not terribly frightening but enough tension builds to still keep you on the edge of your seat until the very end. A very good pre-Halloween read.

charlotte says

I mostly picked this up for the title and the cover. The artwork has the same angular creepiness as the Hellboy comics (as you'd expect from Mike Mignola), and, well, how can you not want to know the story behind *Father Gaetano's Puppet Catechism*?

The plot's not bad, but the characters never quite grabbed me. I *should* feel for the children orphaned by WWII, the young priest struggling under the weight of his responsibilities, the veteran nun looking after her charges...and when hints of puppets moving on their own start dropping, I should feel more creeped out. But the treatment isn't quite subtle enough. Too much telling, not enough showing.

The themes of religious faith, free will, and the relationship between creator and creature would have been like candy to me in my teens. But the authors lay these on a little too thick. It's a shame, because the storyline would take care of this on its own. The novella probably could have been a short story, and more effective.

Kylie says

This is a charming novella that deals with pain and loss of faith in the aftermath of war, as well as doll horror. It is written with an economy of detail and a simplicity that makes it appropriate for a variety of ages, but isn't lacking depth.

I can't help thinking it would make a good film.

Patrick says

I like Mike Mignola's comic books, but this was just bad. Dull, over-explanatory prose; dialog that no one, in Sicily or elsewhere, would ever speak; and a simplistic story which, if it had been reduced to 20 pages, would still have been overlong (Are we like puppets in the hands of God? Gosh, I don't know Goliath!), made this a slog, even though it only took a few hours to read.

Craig says

This short novel is a good examination of faith and religion in the face of catastrophic loss due to war; the supernatural element is rather obvious, and serves as something of a literary metaphor for the religious structure. The illustrations are nice but aren't as big of a part here as they have been in other Mignola/Golden collaborations. It's a quietly sad story, with both the puppet and human characters nobly persevering against temptation, loss, and fear.

Scott Danielson says

This review is of the audiobook edition, and was posted originally at SFFaudio (<http://www.sffaudio.com>):

When this audio novella came in for review, it took a few days to make the connection: Mike Mignola is the creator of *Hellboy*! I'm a fan of the Hellboy movies (directed by Guillermo del Toro), but haven't picked up any of the comics. If anyone has a recommendation for a particular volume I'd like to give it a go.

Mignola and Christopher Golden, the writing team that produced some Hellboy novels, wrote this. The Amazon description calls it "an illustrated novella". I haven't spotted a copy of this at a bookstore, but I'd like to so I can see the art. Mignola, in an interview with Geek's Guide to the Galaxy gives Christopher Golden full credit for the writing, so I suspect that this audiobook contains little of Mignola's input.

The story did have a *Hellboy* (or even a *Pan's Labyrinth*) feel to it. Dark, a bit sad, with something spiritually sinister about. It's about an Italian orphanage in World War II, shortly after the Allies' victory. Father Gaetano, recently assigned there, and a group of nuns struggle to connect with the grieving children. One of the kids finds puppets and a puppet stage in the basement, and Fr. Gaetano decides to put it to use. The kids become more interested as he, with their help, paints the puppets as Old Testament characters, then performs stories with them.

And then, the problem - the puppets come to life at night, and they take on the persona of the Bible characters they have been decorated to portray. Not knowing this, Father Gaetano plods along with his plans, and he wants to tell the story of Lucifer's fall.

This wasn't a bad novella, but it wasn't stellar either. An interesting idea, and there are some great scenes, but even at novella length it feels a bit padded out. Still, it's worth a listen, in my opinion. Or a look if you can find the hardcopy. Nick Podehl is a terrific narrator.

Johnny says

It would not be a "spoiler" to suggest that anyone who has ever watched a *Night Gallery* or *Twilight Zone* episode with a ventriloquist is going to know what will happen in *Father Gaetano's Puppet Catechism*. If one has never seen movies about malevolent dolls named "Chuckie" or even considered what might have happened if *Pinocchio* had longed to work for Murder, Inc. rather than being a "real boy," there would still be enough foreshadowing in this fascinating novella to let you know what was going to happen.

Yet, in spite of the portending feeling of potential disaster one feels while reading this little book from the creator of *Hellboy* and *B.P.R.D.* (an acronym for Bureau of Paranormal Research and Development) in collaboration with the author of *The Boys Are Back in Town*, this is a marvelous story. The action takes place in a rectory turned into an orphanage on the island of Sicily. It is late in World War II and the orphans have actually been orphaned by Allied bombing preparatory to Ike's "second invasion" in Italy. The story involves a young, compassionate priest who finds a puppet theater and begins to transform the puppets into characters from Bible stories in order to teach catechism to the orphans.

Being victims of tragedy, the orphans aren't satisfied with platitudes about God's goodness and God's grace. They ask probing questions about theodicy, the problem of evil. They are bothered by those who lost their lives in Noah's flood and don't wholly grasp the padre's insistence upon "free will" over determinism. They are horrified by the transformation of "Punch" into Lucifer and the priest's account of War in Heaven and fallen angels. They wonder how they could be protected from such a fall if the angels couldn't be. Yet, the priest's words help some of the children.

In fact, after the puppet show on the war in heaven, a nine year old explains to the others: “Like with the angels, God gave them Heaven. He just wanted them to take care of it. Maybe we’ll have Heaven when we die, but right now, He gave us the world, and He wants us to take care of it. Isn’t that just another way of saying, ‘be good?’” (p. 125) Yet, other children felt like the idea of free will was constrained by ideas of punishment and reward (p. 124). One can readily see how the victims of warfare would sense this theological problem more acutely than modern individuals.

Even though the book has a transparent plot and covers serious theological questions, Mignola and Golden do a marvelous job of creating characters which are not uni-dimensional. The priest is chaste, but clearly has desire for one of the nuns. The priest is confident, but sometimes displays very natural confidence issues. I liked this one conversational exchange before the first puppet catechism.

“Sister Teresa frowned. ‘To perform for children? Why should you be nervous?’”

“In such moments, we are reminded that we are still only children ourselves, in our hearts,’ Father Gaetano said.” (p. 66)

Finally, even though I knew what was coming, the climactic event was well-conceived, fascinating, and had a redemptive element in it. Indeed, I believe the epilogue dealing with one of the puppets is an important statement about redemption and shines a light on the meaning of the entire book. Even when Mignola touches the classic tropes of horror, there is a fascinating element of hope and redemption underneath the trappings of evil. I’ve always enjoyed his graphic novels, but this is the first time I’ve read a pure story by him (and his collaborator). It was definitely a joy to discover.

Jason says

this book is only 163 pages long - and it didn't really start til like page 100. There is a good, simple, creepy short story here that either, 1) an editor didn't condense or 2) an editor loved the story and wanted it extended to a novella. Either way - it was a mistake. I almost stopped reading this book and gave up several times. I should have. Very disappointing. Boring for most, and then when not - too little too late.

Kat Hooper says

Originally posted at FanLit. <http://www.fantasyliterature.com/reviews/father-gaetano-s-puppet-catechism/>

There is just no way I can resist reading a novella called Father Gaetano’s Puppet Catechism, especially when it’s written by the guy who created Hellboy. As I expected, I was rewarded with just over 4 hours of constant audio entertainment.

The young priest Father Gaetano has just been assigned to a church in Sicily that has taken in children who were orphaned during World War II. The nuns love the children and are doing the best they can, but they are happy to have Father Gaetano’s help with the teaching. In the aftermath of war, most of the children have lost their families and they’re dealing with the most difficult of all theological questions: How can God let bad things happen to good people? Father Gaetano admires the children for not being willing to settle for such platitudes as “God still loves you” or “it’s all in God’s plan” and he looks forward to teaching such

inquisitive minds. But how can he teach these precious children the deep truths of God in a way they can understand?

When he finds a box of beautifully-crafted puppets and a puppet theater in the basement, Father Gaetano decides to use these tools to teach his lessons. He and one of the boys work hard to paint and dress the puppets for their roles. The puppets are a big hit with most of the kids, though there's one boy who is afraid of them. It turns out that he has a reason to be; the puppets come alive at night. They sneak into one of the boys' rooms and play out the roles that Father Gaetano gave them during the day. The priest and the nuns, of course, don't realize what's going on... Not until Father Gaetano, in his quest to make the children understand why bad things happen, decides to teach the children about the origin of sin. For this lesson, therefore, he creates a Lucifer puppet... Uh-oh....

I thoroughly enjoyed Father Gaetano's Puppet Catechism. It's well-written and exciting, the characters are developed quickly and sufficiently, the story manages to be both sweet and delightfully creepy. I particularly appreciated the beautiful portrayal of the nuns' and the priest's self-sacrificial love for orphans — this is what real Christianity is supposed to look like. I loved how Father Gaetano didn't dismiss, but rather respected, the children's questions. I loved the way the story abruptly switched tone and became suddenly very dark. I won't tell you what happens, but it was a great ending!

I listened to Brilliance Audio's version read by Nick Podehl. Podehl has a great voice, but his pacing isn't perfect. He has a way of drawing out or emphasizing words in a slightly unnatural way, but this is more noticeable than distracting. I sped up the playback slightly and didn't notice it after a while. I wouldn't hesitate to recommend the audio version, but you should also know that the print version of Father Gaetano's Puppet Catechism has a few black and white illustrations by Mike Mignola.

Mommacat says

This dark fiction novella needed a lotta splainin' to this non-catholic gal here. And even tho I'm not religious, I like the stories that blend religion and horror. But more than half of this novella by two kickass authors built up the religious theme (I get it now!) before winding down to the scary stuff. I liked it, I just wish there had been more of it.

For you Catholics, it might present some questions. I don't know. Who am I to say? But my final rating was 3 1/2 stars and a recommend if this sounds like your thing.
