



Fire Sermon

Jamie Quatro

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Married twenty years to Thomas and living in Nashville with their two children, Maggie is drawn ineluctably into a passionate affair while still fiercely committed to her husband and family. What begins as a platonic intellectual and spiritual exchange between writer Maggie and poet James, gradually transforms into an emotional and erotically-charged bond that challenges Maggie's sense of loyalty and morality, drawing her deeper into the darkness of desire.

Using an array of narrative techniques and written in spare, elegant prose, Jamie Quatro gives us a compelling account of one woman's emotional, psychological, physical, and spiritual yearnings—unveiling the impulses and contradictions that reside in us all. *Fire Sermon* is an unflinchingly honest and formally daring debut novel from a writer of enormous talent.

Fire Sermon Details

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Author : Jamie Quatro
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From Reader Review Fire Sermon for online ebook

Shawn Mooney says

Quatro's portrayal of her protagonist's marriage and family life was so rich, un clichéd, and deeply deeply powerful that this was a 4-star read for me despite having hate-read much of the central story, about her affair: that core narrative was, by comparison, weak, uninteresting, marred by some of the worst sex writing in all of literature, and laden with literary and religious pretension. But the family story was so incredible that I can't help exclaiming that Quatro is a writer to watch.

I have much more to say in my BookTube review: <https://youtu.be/nuk6WeRqt-U>

Esil says

Fire Sermon is a short intense book that can be read in one sitting. It flits back and forth in time, as Maggie struggles with her faith, her love for her husband Thomas, and her desire for possible lover James. I suppose the underlying story is familiar, but the execution is potent and at times beautifully written. The sex is fraught, and at times explicitly so. The emotions are uncomfortable, but not shocking to be shocking--rather, they feel like the honest complicated emotions of a conflicted person. And once I fell in step with its rhythm, I really appreciated the fragmented writing--snippets of thoughts, emails, conversations, and inner dialogues with Maggie's Christian God and a real or imagined therapist. It all comes together nicely -- including the choice Maggie makes at the end. This won't work for readers looking for straightforward stories or narratives, but it's definitely worth a try if you're open to fiction that is more meditative and non linear. Thanks to Netgalley and the publisher for an opportunity to read an advance copy.

Blair says

Maggie is brought up in an evangelical family. She marries, and has children, young. Twenty years later, feeling trapped – and sick of her husband Thomas's pushy approach to sex – Maggie has an affair with James, a poet. *Fire Sermon* jumps back and forth through time, and in and out of Maggie's own first-person account, as it chronicles her life. That affair, as much an emotional and intellectual relationship as it is physical, is at the core of everything. Maggie traces her timeline backwards, obsessively analyses her desire for James, and wrestles with her faith. The battle between head and heart, the battle between one's ideas of God and sin, how a person understands their own behaviour in the context of their upbringing, education and personal history: these are the themes of the book.

My favourite parts were the letters and emails between Maggie and James. You see both characters come alive with ideas, the sparks flying from their intellectual connection before they've even laid eyes on each other. Other parts didn't work quite so well for me. There are slips into prose poetry, which is a style I just don't seem able to penetrate, absorb, or otherwise inhabit; these passages I found soporific and lifeless. I also struggled to put the pieces of Maggie's character together – from page to page she sometimes feels like a different person, not in a contains-multitudes way, but a not-entirely-cohesive-characterisation way.

And, I don't know – it's another story about comfortable, successful, attractive middle-aged white people having an affair, and I guess on some level I couldn't help but figuratively roll my eyes and sigh. I feel like these books *always* insist on telling us the characters are still really fit, look younger than they are, only have

the slightest physical imperfections/signs of ageing, as if to depict them otherwise would make the sex disgusting or incomprehensible. Not this specific book's fault that I've come across this so many times before, obviously. But... blah.

Fire Sermon is a lyrical exploration of marriage, religion and the heat of obsessive passion, with some beautiful lines and images. Quatro gives us an interesting perspective on the cheating plot – I liked that Maggie approached the ethical questions raised by her affair through the twin prisms of her faith and her expertise in philosophy. I suppose my problem was that I didn't find the affair itself, or the people involved in it, interesting enough. Anna Raverat's *Signs of Life* remains my favourite infidelity narrative, and though it's much more idiosyncratic and conceptual, I preferred Catherine Lacey's *The Answers* as a story about a woman from an evangelical background learning to deal with relationships, love and sex.

I received an advance review copy of Fire Sermon from the publisher through Edelweiss.

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LauraBeth says

There's a lot to distill in this book and I should preface this review with the disclaimer that I probably have way too many filters that I'm viewing the content through, to be able to review this book in a way that seems adequate, fair and non-judgy.

Here's the bottom line: it's another book about a bored housewife who is entering into middle age, has an affair and convinces herself that her affair partner is actually the man that she should have ended up with. Sound familiar? That's because it is. Does the author know it's familiar? Yes (she even has a passage in the book where her character imagines her agent turning down a book based on the same premise because of its familiarity). So Quatro tried to put a twist on the story and attempted to align longing with spirituality. Some of her musings on religion came off to me as deadly accurate and some came off as bad theology.

Along similarly uneven lines, I thought the writing veered between well-crafted and terrible (I think Quatro is a gifted writer but she may write better short stories than novels). There are some "deep" discussions that transpires between the main character, Maggie and her affair partner, James - but it all seems so... smug and self-serving. Sometimes it's akin to listening to a pretentious conversation between two university professors who have never held a job outside of academia, nor have talked to anyone outside of academia (or it's like reading those eye-rolling emails between Natalie Portman and Jonathan Safran Foer). It's almost as if the philosophical conversations had to cover up the simple cliché that the characters were trodding down a well-worn path that is as old as time. Maggie has convinced herself that she has finally found love with James, when in reality, she just found someone as insufferable as she is (although insufferable, I genuinely liked how flawed a character that Maggie was and appreciated that she had a lot of self-awareness for how the optics appear when she talks about herself and the affair).

I liked Maggie's head vs heart tug of war but as far as the actual story goes, the head won and the heart lost. Maggie knows theology on an intellectual level but it seems she's never connected religion to her heart (which seems why her efforts at equating desire and longing with spirituality seem novel to her). She does seem to have connected the written word to her heart, which seems to be why she fell for James, a poet, in the first place. At some point in the story she compares theology to poetry and this was where I was hoping she'd finally make the connection of theology to heart but it seemed to eclipse her.

As far as characters reconciling guilt from sin with forgiveness from God, I think *The End Of The Affair*

does it better. I was never sure as to why exactly Maggie wore religion like it was a shackle and a prison sentence (other than that pesky belief that Christianity frowns upon adultery). Since Maggie was someone who was raised in the church, she seemed to miss the sermons about freedom - and for all of her university knowledge of theology - this critical tenet seems to go unobserved. But it's not only religion that confines Maggie - everything for Maggie is a prison sentence: her husband, her home, her career as a writer, her kids. Maggie is the sort of person who can (and does) go on vacations that are accessible to the wealthy and find misery while on it.

Since this book tried to align longing and desire with theology - I thought that it would have been better had Quatro overlaid the the story with the four major Biblical themes of Creation, Fall, Redemption and Restoration. But as it stands, the book neglected to explore the last two. I do think that hidden in the sub-text of this book is the message of grace and forgiveness (but it gets lost and instead dwells on guilt, shame and self-loathing). The author wants the reader instead to come away with the belief that the frame-work of marriage is valuable because it's the one deterrent to tame our desires. In short, she tweaks the Pence/Billy Graham rule (never be alone with a woman because it could offer a tempting scenario), to society needing marriage because without it, we'd all just be flooded with uncontrollable temptation, mate like rabbits and never be satisfied:

Excerpted from book: "But what if (Brothers, Sisters, bear with me) the institution of marriage was given to us as an intentional breeding ground for illicit desire?...Hear: without the prohibitions against fornication and infidelity, we would sate and sate and sate again, looking always for the next object in which to find fulfillment, we would gratify our longings until we had nothing left to long for, and the ability to long itself died off."

This book may feed the head but it left my heart wanting much more.

Larry H says

When Garth Greenwell, whose book *What Belongs To You* (see my review), absolutely blew me away last year (it even ranked in the top five of the best books I read in 2016), took a pause from his social media hiatus to encourage people to read Jamie Quatro's *Fire Sermon* because of its absolute beauty, you can believe I listened.

I've got to say, Greenwell didn't steer me wrong. This book contains some of the most gorgeous prose I've read in some time, although the book as a whole didn't quite hit a home run for me. Still, there's so much raw emotion here—love, loss, hope, regret, fear, grief, wonder, and need—so it's really something.

"Was it something we carried in ourselves—something I sent out to you, and you sent out to me? Or did it exist independently, a *potential* fire hovering in the middle space between us, appearing only when we looked at one another? In which case, the second we stopped looking, the fire disappeared."

Maggie and Thomas met in college and married shortly after graduation. Maggie is a scholar, but is willing to put her educational pursuits on hold while she raises the couple's two children. She is happy (for the most part) doing her part to be the dutiful wife, devoted to her husband, her children, and God. While their relationship isn't perfect, she knows Thomas loves her passionately, and she feels secure in their life together.

When she resumes her teaching career, she begins a correspondence with James, a poet. At first, she is dazzled by his talent and marvels at their shared interest in theological writing, and their correspondence is

professional and intellectual. But little by little, their communication transforms into something deeper, something that offers temptation, fantasy, perhaps even hope. When they finally meet, they are overcome by their feelings, and Maggie realizes all she has been missing her entire life.

Yet all too quickly, as strong as their feelings for each other run, they are consumed by guilt. Maggie must reconcile her devotion to God with her infidelity, her desire to throw everything away for James with the vows she took to love her husband until death do they part. They try to avoid seeing each other, even talking to one another, sticking solely to correspondence, but even that is tremendously difficult.

Will God forgive her? Should she confess to Thomas, even if that might jeopardize the family she holds so dear? Does she even deserve all that God gives her? Should she follow her heart, and stop caring about the consequences?

"(But would you leave a husband who, when you wake in the middle of the night, your body slick with sweat—dreaming you had to say goodbye to a man you slept with, once upon a time, but the man doesn't care, he has better things to do, he doesn't mind that he'll never see you again and the pain in your chest is so acute it forces you awake, gasping for air—this husband gets up to bring you a glass of water, then holds your hand across the mattress until you fall asleep? A man who, when your son brings home a girl who dropped out of high school and wants only to get married and have a kid, sits with her for an hour and talks about the benefits of higher education, offers to pay for her to take the GED and apply to colleges? Would you leave such a man? Or would you think: confess, repent, he is the one who should leave?)"

Fire Sermon examines one woman's struggles between the life she promised to live when she was 21 years old and the life she believes she so desperately wants, essentially a battle between duty and passion. At times powerful, at times quietly poignant, this is a book full of passion, conflict, need, and faith.

The book jumps between past and present, between Maggie's relationship with Thomas and her time with James, and also includes a great deal of theological conversation between Maggie and James, and Maggie's own conversations with God and an unidentified person. As someone who doesn't have much awareness of theology, while I understood the point that Quatro was making, I felt like those portions of the story slowed everything down and didn't quite work for me.

Maggie is a fascinating, fiery, flawed character, and Quatro draws her with such complexity. I was so taken by the storytelling and the language she used here, and I absolutely need to read her story collection now. Even though this book didn't quite knock me out, it's a story that really made me think, and I can't stop marveling at what a fantastic writer Quatro is.

See all of my reviews at itseithersadnessoreuphoria.blogspot.com, or check out my list of the best books I read in 2017 at <https://itseithersadnessoreuphoria.blogspot.com/2018/01/the-best-books-i-read-in-2017.html>.

Jennifer says

My first "wow" book of the year, so I'm celebrating with a star rating. Good lord this book is good. Video review coming soon.

Jaclyn Crupi says

The most intellectually stimulating novel about infidelity I've ever read – and let's face it if you read lit fiction you've read a lot of books about infidelity. There's so much James Salter in this book and it had me aching to re-read him. Quatro has done something very special and literary and poetic here.

Edward Goetz says

I really like this book and the author's distinct voice. The book reminded me of Ian McEwan's "On Chesil Beach," a favorite of mine. There is a somewhat similar plot regarding marriage.

Michelle says

The intensity of love with the dark elements of religious obsession is explored in Jamie Quatro's debut novel: *Fire Sermon*. Multiple levels of longing combined with the fury of passionate lust fuel an illicit relationship outside the routine stability of marriage. Maggie, a wife, mother of two college age students, was a writer based in Nashville where she connected with her lover. Maggie and James had been corresponding by email, text and phone conversations before his arrival in Nashville to teach a poetry workshop. An explosive sexual encounter followed which took place at the Hyatt Hotel.

Maggie, was raised in a strict Christian environment. The religious guilt she felt over her love and desire for James was unending. While probing her affair with James, her therapist reminded Maggie that before her obsessional focus on James, she had been in love with numerous other men who weren't her husband. Maggie protested; explaining that these men were not the real deal compared to James. Maggie's reasoning was immature and juvenile; she appeared to be shallow and totally selfish. The fact that she inherited a million dollars from her wealthy uncle didn't help. At her second meeting-up with James, and he was texting his wife, Maggie observed:

"I wondered if I was one of the many, just another woman whom he'd taken up a clandestine conversation, one more frisson fueled by hurt and loneliness and the need to tap into some kind of creative energy, some in-loveness however fictitious to keep him working, and if his wife, knowing this pattern of his, was, rightfully mercifully insinuating herself between us."

Thomas, Maggie's handsome husband, was an MBA in the financial sector. Blindly devoted to his wife, he was perplexed with her lack of sexual interest in him, and surprised Maggie with a sex toy in hopes of spicing up their love life. Of course, Maggie wasn't thinking about Thomas or their marital woes. The premarital sex (fornication) she had with Thomas resulted in pregnancy and their early marriage, may have been a trigger that started her anxiety and obsessional thinking, as she pondered the temptations of Christ and considered confessing her affair.

In this strangely complex and unusual story, it was unclear why Maggie's therapist didn't help her sort her emotions following her affair or address her source of marital unhappiness. For such a pious individual, as Maggie, to experience such a tidal wave of guilt without holding herself accountable or responsible to change suggested an undisclosed serious emotional or mental illness. Despite this, we have a fascinating portrayal of an inner emotional conflict within a solid marriage. 3* GOOD. With thanks to the Seattle Public Library.

Neil says

I don't think this book is really about what the book blurb suggests it is about. If you read the blurb, you think you will be reading a story about a woman (Maggie) who gradually falls in love with a poet she has an exchange of correspondence with (James). Then she has to deal with the guilt she feels over that because she is still committed to her husband (Thomas) and her two children.

If I am honest, that would not be a very interesting story. Maggie is an author and at one point she even says about her story:

"I imagine writing all this down and giving the manuscript to my agent. This has been done to death, she says. I won't be able to sell this."

Some extra interest is generated by the fact that the narrative uses multiple formats (flashbacks, journal entries, counselling sessions and the correspondence between Maggie and James) and is written in a very non-linear fashion. In fact, the book starts after the events described in the blurb and then jumps around, so you can be forgiven for thinking you are reading the wrong book for a while.

But I think where the real interest in this story comes from is revealed in a counselling session that is recalled very early on in the book. Maggie's counsellor reminds Maggie that she has, in fact, been in a similar situation three times before. Maggie is convinced the other three were false starts and this with James is the real thing. Her counsellor reminds her that is how she felt about the other three.

This means we are not just reading about "Maggie meets James, they fall in love but they are both married so how will they cope?". If you read the blurb, you might think that is what you are going to get. We are instead reading about Maggie who, for some reason, cannot find fulfilment in her marriage and repeatedly looks outside of it, even if she often stops things before they go too far. James is the most recent and the most intense example of this, but he is not the only one. So, when the publisher's webpage about the book says this is a

"compelling account of one woman's emotional, psychological, physical, and spiritual yearnings—unveiling the impulses and contradictions that reside in us all"

this is actually a far better description of a much more interesting book. And the resolution is a realistic view of how people can sometimes come to terms with those contradictions.

Rating this book is tricky. It was only towards the end and then thinking about it afterwards that I thought about the relevance of the counselling session at the start. So, the actual reading experience was a bit confusing as I wasn't sure what I was supposed to be reading about. But then thinking about it moved up a star, taking it to 3.5 stars. But you can't give half stars, so it gets rounded down rather than up because there are several sex scenes and I didn't find them sexy!

In the end, after some thought to clarify what I think it is about (I could be wrong, of course), this turned into an interesting read.

My thanks to the publisher for an ARC of this book received via NetGalley.

Jill says

Jamie Quatro is a fine writer and the last 50 pages of this book were so elegantly written that I wished the entire book had lived up to this promise. But like writers before her, Jamie Quatro strives to align an understanding and devotion to God with a so-called sinful extramarital affair. For this non-believer, it did not work.

Maggie is married to Thomas, an imperfect man and father of her two children, who strives and often succeeds in being a good husband. Somewhere along the line, she begins a platonic relationship with James, a formalist poet, who writes about “the apocalyptic suffering created by a market economy.” If that weren’t insufferable enough, both of them seem to view what is portrayed as an intimate and sensual affair through the lens of classic Catholicism.

The problem is that the theological overlay competes with the hot passion we, as readers, are supposed to experience through Maggie’s need to have unmet desires met. It is evident that these two are platonic soulmates but true lovers? It didn’t quite come across. And, for those of us who are non-believers, the emphasis on the intellectual denied the big question at the heart of religion: Did Christ in fact, exist in the way it was reported by acolytes 400 years after his death?

It becomes increasingly obvious that Maggie is playing mind games to deceive herself and perhaps the reader, about her real needs. Granted, she is in desperate need of religious dialogue. While her exchanges with James are intriguing to read, they seemed head games as opposed to ultimate physical/emotional love—a forced conflation of theology with passion.

But oh, the last part. when Maggie is able to state in a clear-eyed manner, “I admit to using my religious beliefs to manipulate, resisting temptation as a means of feeding my own desire.” Or this: “You will say I am condoning sin. Constructing an intellectual scaffolding to justify what should be renounced.”

As the intellectual scaffolding begins to be dismantled, we see this novel’s true potential: the tale of a yearning woman, married to a good man, who meets her intellectual soulmate and who, like Icarus, flies too close to the flames. Her big question: “What if God...ordained marriage...to place us into a condition in which erotic desire might thrive.?” By untethering her characters to explore that question, this would have been a very good book indeed.

Diane S ? says

I am leaving this unrated. The author has I know intellectually done something unique. Combining guilt, infidelity, marriage and children, while struggling with Christian values. But I can't connect to these characters, so well written but alas not for me.

Jeannie says

I picked this up at my library yesterday after reading an excellent review by Larry H here on GR. What an addictive read, I could not put it down!

Jessica Sullivan says

"The chase itself will turn us into monsters if we don't give it up."

This is an excruciatingly intimate little novel about a woman, Maggie, balancing her devotion to her husband, Thomas, with her desire for another man, James.

Vignettes of Maggie's family life—all the mundane snippets—are juxtaposed with her intellectually, spiritually and emotionally charged email correspondences and encounters with James. Complicating matters even more is Maggie's Christianity and profound devotion to God.

Novels that center around religion typically turn me off, but *Fire Sermon* portrays Maggie's faith in such a metaphysical and intellectual manner that it utterly captivated even me—so I urge you, don't write this novel off because I guarantee you it's much more than what it appears to be. I devoured it in two sittings.

Fire Sermon is a gorgeous and cerebral book about the nature of desire and longing—particularly the forbidden kind—and how one woman learns to cope with it.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

I devoured this book in a day. I loved the varied styles and timeline that moves around, the lyric writing, and the subject matter. It is an honest look at a long marriage, and the attraction, connection, and other forces that can pull you away or bring you back. Since both central characters are academics, they have pretty deep conversations about religion, philosophy, desire, guilt, and I enjoyed this part of it too.

I will be ordering my own copy for rereading!

ETA: This is a great article about the religious aspects of the novel.

Thanks to the publisher for providing early access to this title in exchange for an honest review. The book comes out January 9. More from this author please.
