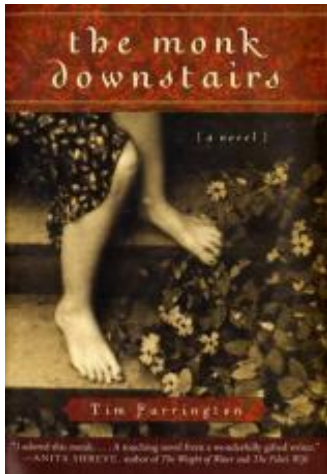


The Monk Downstairs: A Novel

by Tim Farrington



About the Book

Rebecca Martin is a single mother with an apartment to rent and a sense that she has used up her illusions. "I had the romantic thing with my first husband, thank you very much," she tells a hapless suitor. "I'm thirty-eight years old, and I've got a daughter learning to read and a job I don't quite like. I've got a mortgage. I'm making my middle-aged peace with network television and tomorrow is just another day I've got to get through. I don't need the violin music." But when the new tenant in her in-law apartment turns out to be Michael Christopher, a warm, funny, sneakily attractive man on the lam after twenty years in a monastery and smack dab in the middle of a dark night of the soul, Rebecca begins to suspect that she is not as thoroughly disillusioned as she had thought.

Her six-year-old daughter, Mary Martha, is unambiguously delighted with the new arrival, as is Rebecca's mother, Phoebe, a rollicking widow making a new life for herself among the spiritual eccentrics of Bolinas. Even Rebecca's best friend, Bonnie, once a confirmed cynic in matters of the heart, seems to have lost her sensible imperviousness to romance, and urges Rebecca on. But none of them, Rebecca feels, understand how complicated and dangerous love actually is.

As her unlikely friendship with the ex-monk downstairs grows by fits and starts toward something deeper, and Christopher wrestles with his despair while adjusting to a second career flipping hamburgers at McDonald's, Rebecca struggles with her own temptation to hope. But it is not until her mother suffers an unanticipated crisis and Rebecca is brought up short by the realities of life and death, that she begins to glimpse the real mystery of love, and the unfathomable depths of faith. At once a romantic comedy and a tale of spiritual renewal, **The Monk Downstairs** is a love story in every sense of the word, a tender exploration of the unforeseeable ways in which individual journeys interweave, and of the ways we are changed by the opening of the heart.

Discussion Guide

1. Michael Christopher initially tells Rebecca that he left the monastery because he "had a fight with his abbot." Why do you feel he really left the monastery? What was he looking for? What did he find?
2. When the story opens, Rebecca has reached a point in her relationship with Bob Schofield where he feels emboldened to propose marriage. In refusing him, she realizes that she has been tempted to "settle," to compromise her longing for deep love and intimacy, for the sake of security and simple companionship. Her friend Bonnie suggests that she might be holding out for "the fairy tale thing," while her mother, who has known a fulfilling marriage, tells her briskly that "there's no need to settle for mediocrity." What do you think? What is the balance between realistic compromise in intimacy and the longing for "a marriage of true minds"?
3. In his first letter to Brother James, Michael Christopher says, "There is a prayer that is simply seeing through yourself, seeing your own nothingness, the emptiness impervious to self-assertion. A prayer that is the end of the rope. A helplessness, fathomless and terrifying." Is this an aspect of spirituality you can relate to? What is the difference, if any, between a dark night of the soul and mere depression or despair?
4. What is Rebecca's view of God at the beginning of the novel? What is her view of love? How do these evolve through the course of the story?
5. Mother-daughter relationships are central to the novel. Compare and contrast Rebecca's relationship with Phoebe, her mother, and with her own daughter Mary Martha. What sides of her does each relationship bring out? What kinds of love does each bring into play? What kinds of frustration?
6. What are the crucial points at which Rebecca and Michael Christopher are able to move closer? At what points do they fail to move toward intimacy, and instead move away? Why?
7. Michael Christopher's troubled relationship to his former abbot, Fr. Hackley, has obviously been central to his religious life, and his struggle to come to terms with it continues to be so even after he leaves the monastery. What is your sense of what the real issues were between the two men? How does the evolution of Christopher's understanding of his former abbot reflect his own spiritual development throughout the book?
8. Similar to Michael Christopher's need to make some peace with Abbot Hackley and what he represents, is Rebecca's challenge in coming to terms with her ex-husband, Rory. What is your understanding of the history between the two? How has the relationship affected Rebecca's view of love? How do the changes in Rebecca's attitude toward ex-husband reflect her own development throughout the book?
9. Rebecca is ambivalent about her job throughout much of the novel. Like her longing for true intimacy, her craving for a fulfilling career is in delicate and conflicted balance with her sense of what is realistic. In what ways does her work at Utopian Images fulfill her and exercise her real gifts? In what ways does it stifle her? How realistic is it to hope for a career that is more than a tedious way to pay the rent?
10. St. Augustine defined a sacrament as "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace." There are at least two examples in the novel of unorthodox "sacraments:" the baptism of Sherilous's baby at Stinson Beach, and

Michael's Christopher's administration of last rites to Phoebe in the hospital. What is your sense of the spiritual "validity" of these impromptu rituals? What is a true sacrament?

11. Michael Christopher says, "We don't hear much of the danger of prayer, but it is the deepest sea and I believe there are many who are lost en route." What is your sense of the sea of prayer and its hazards? Is it really possible to be lost?

12. In their conversation in the kitchen in Chapter 5, Michael Christopher tells Rebecca the story of the failed love that propelled him into the monastery. How much of his commitment to the religious life do you think was a positive longing for God, and how much was simple flight from the challenges of intimacy and work in the real world? Is a true monastic vocation possible?

13. On the morning after their first night together, Rebecca and Michael Christopher run aground on his reluctance to let their relationship pass into a more public knowledge. What is your reading of the situation, and of Christopher's conflictedness? Do you think Rebecca overreacts?

14. In one of his letters to brother James, Michael Christopher describes God as "an unfathomable darkness," and the peace of God's presence as a perfect silence and "a kind of nowhere." How does a radical unknowing like this differ from atheism? In theological terms, Christopher's spirituality could be characterized as a *via negativa* or "apophatic" approach to God, a focus on God's ultimate unknowability, in contrast to the more familiar *kataphatic* path in which God is known and loved through an emphasis on divine attributes such as love, mercy, and justice. What is the place of a dark night spirituality such as Christopher's? Is it compatible with life in "the world"? Wouldn't it be better if he just, like, lightened up a little?

15. How does her mother's crisis affect Rebecca? How does it affect Mike? How does it change their relationship?

16. Do you think Rory is really ready to change, after the judge lets him off the hook? Does his relationship with Chelsea have a chance to succeed?

17. One of the book's central themes is stated in the contrast between the active Martha and the devotional Mary in the book epigraph from Luke 10. Discuss your own sense of the balance between the life of busy service and the contemplative life, and how the theme plays out in the novel.

Author Bio

Tim Farrington is the author of the highly acclaimed novels **The California Book of the Dead** and **Blues for Hannah**. His stories and essays have appeared in *The Sun*, *ZYZZYVA*, and *San Francisco* magazine.

Critical Praise

"[A] funny, touching love story...laced with elements of spiritualism but never veering far from reality."

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