

MANSEAU Peter, *Vows : The Story of a Priest, a Nun, and Their Son*, Free Press , 416 pages, \$15.00  
2006

## **Editorial Reviews**

### **Amazon.com Review**

Peter Manseau's deeply personal memoir is a meditation on family, church, faith and self. Oh, and God too. The story of rejecting the faith you are given, only to embrace it again in some form (or at least make peace with it) may seem familiar, but lost within the loving detail of Manseau's writing the reader discovers it anew. A spirit of tenderness and generosity permeates the pages of this story, but always leavened by unflinching honesty, the salt that keeps the flavor from the first page to the last. Manseau brings us into his sense of wonder as he traces the journey of his priest-father and his nun-mother who, if they had stayed true to their initial calling into the Catholic church, would have ensured he and his siblings never came to exist. *Vows* also brings us into the strong Boston Catholic culture of half a century ago, and near its end we find an unexpected left turn into the very heart of the sexual abuse scandal that has rocked the Roman church in 2005. But however intrinsic to the book these elements are, they only inform the story, and never overwhelm it. Primarily, as he traces the journey first of his parents, and then himself, we are left with a sense of joy over seeing how life itself tends unruly and writes its own story while we are busy making our plans. And though religion itself is on every page of the book, in forms both personal and institutional, the heart of the book is its humanity.--*Ed Dobeas* --*This text refers to the [Hardcover](#) edition.*

### **From Publishers Weekly**

In an engrossing memoir, a young and talented writer limns the lives of his parents, a former nun and a priest who chose to marry but never renounced his ministerial orders. The co-author of *Killing the Buddha* and founding editor of the online magazine of the same name, Manseau draws on family memories, church records and mountains of material dredged up in the wake of the clergy abuse scandals to bring to life the vibrant working-class Boston Catholic culture of a half-century ago. He describes, from the inside out, a world of ecclesiastical obedience and principled rebellion, public virtue and private vice. He also dissects the ambivalent but loving heritage of parents who found themselves, by choice and by accident, on the vanguard of a religious reform movement that, to the outsider, seems rooted more in hope than in reality. As Manseau recounts, his father's status as a "married priest" put the family in an odd no-man's land peopled by married priests and former nuns, hoping for official ecclesiastical acceptance. Readers seeking detached biography will not find it in this wry and deeply affectionate tribute. Seductively well written, occasionally polemical, Manseau chronicles a son's attempt to make peace with the mysteries of faith and family. (*Oct. 11*)

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--*This text refers to the [Hardcover](#) edition.*

### **From [AudioFile](#)**

This insider's look at the sometimes perverted operations of the Catholic Church of the 1950s will leave listeners eager for a sequel. But the author buries the lead, and Patrick Lawlor, in a nasally voice, seems to sense it. Sure, it's compelling that Manseau's parents were a former nun and a former priest. Sure, the story of how that upbringing shaped him is interesting, though long-winded. But as Lawlor plods through the tedious descriptions, you can almost feel him trying to "get to the good parts." Manseau should simply tell us his parents' story. Lawlor might then be inspired to breathe and to illuminate the story's compelling theme: "The

deepest level of communication is wordless." D.J.M. © AudioFile 2006, Portland, Maine--  
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### **From [Booklist](#)**

In this fascinating memoir, Manseau juxtaposes his own spiritual awakening with the story of his parents: a former nun and a priest who refused to renounce his vows when he married. The child of a married priest, he grew up confused and conflicted by and with the Catholic Church. Though he initially rejected his religious heritage, he later experienced an extraordinary journey of faith that prompted him to retrace the rocky path his parents chose to tread. As he reaches back into his intimate family history, the tumultuous evolution of the American Catholic Church in the 1950s and 1960s is vividly re-created. Though committed to their vocations and to ministering to Boston's inner-city poor, Bill Manseau and Mary Doherty decided to make a controversial leap of faith, marrying and raising a family while somewhat naively waiting for the sanctification from Rome that never came. An ultimately upbeat affirmation of faith and family love. *Margaret Flanagan*  
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### **Review**

"This is a strange and marvelous story, told with unerring grace. In the Manseau family, the call to religious service is like the call of the ancient Sirens. And yet they survive. Peter Manseau's writing is keen-eyed, lyrical, muscular, and more, and while *Vows* is a story about big ideas -- religion, devotion, sacrifice -- it is above all a love letter to his own family."--  
Stephen J. Dubner, coauthor of *Freakonomics* and author of *Turbulent Souls*

"[*Vows*] forms a history of how the priesthood evolved -- and how people navigate the boundaries between religious tradition and modern life. In the process, Manseau paints a picture of liberal -- and devoutly religious -- Catholics facing up to the church's authority."--  
Terry Gross, *Fresh Air*

"With the grace of a gifted storyteller and a son's love for his parents, Peter Manseau tells a story that's not been previously told....*Vows*...isn't sensational or hostile, but rather a revelatory and nuanced exploration of his parents and their relationship with the Catholic Church, which has both blessed them and wounded them." -- Paula Voell, *The Buffalo News*

"There are moments in *Vows*...when the prose is so achingly beautiful that the reader must stop for a moment.... If you've ever graced a pew or wondered about the people who do, *Vows* goes a long way toward explaining faith."-- *Hartford Courant*

### **Product Description**

*Vows* is a compelling story of one family's unshakable faith that to be called is to serve, however high the cost may be. Peter Manseau's riveting evocation of his parents' parallel childhoods, their similar callings, their experiences in the seminary and convent, and how they met while tending to the homeless of Roxbury, Massachusetts, during the riot-prone 1960s is a page-turning meditation on the effect that love can have on profound faith.

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### **Prologue**

My parents don't remember their earliest conversation. What was said when, who spoke first and why: these are details almost forty years gone. All my father can tell me is that he met my mother in his storefront ministry center in Roxbury late in the spring of 1968. A year before, he had rented an abandoned funeral home on Shawmut Avenue, propped open the doors to thin the stench of flowers and embalming fluid, and hung a sign out front declaring that all were welcome. A few months later, someone threw a metal trash can through the plate-glass window beside the entrance. He covered the hole and cleaned up as best he could, but there was no end to the mess that had been made.

When my father describes the room in which he met my mother, he is always sure to mention the biblical murals that decorated the walls. I suppose he likes the image of the two of them surrounded by life-size portraits of prophets and saints, but my mind is drawn instead to all that stubborn glass, to tiny slivers working their way deep into the shag carpet, catching light whenever the overhead fluorescents were on.

Wednesday evenings, Dad tells me, he would walk down Fort Hill from the All Saints rectory and preach in his storefront to whomever would listen. Sometimes he drew a crowd that filled five rows of folding chairs: families from the Lenox Street housing projects, drunks from Blue Hill Avenue, a handful of sisters from the convent nearby. One night the woman who would be my mother was among them. They all sat together with the soles of their shoes crunching the carpet below; singing, clapping, praying in a building that still wore scars from the previous summer, the season when the city burned.

That's how I imagine the scene of my parents' meeting, as a series of contrasts and contradictions. Standing between a cardboard-patched window and scripture-painted walls, half-buried shards twinkling like stars beneath them, they made their introductions in the middle of a storefront with nothing to sell. He was a Catholic priest wearing a white plastic collar like a lock around his neck. She was a nun in a virgin's black veil.

What did they say? Too much has happened since then; it's no surprise they can't remember the simple greeting that started it all. Whatever the words might have been, I know they were spoken in a place full of the kind of faith with which I was raised, the kind of faith that knows how close hope and pain are to moments of possibility; the kind that sees something holy in that broken glass at their feet, splinters of grace that cut as well as shine.

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journey first of his parents, and then himself, we are left with a sense of joy over seeing how life itself tends unruly and writes its own story while we are busy making our plans. And though religion itself is on every page of the book, in forms both personal and institutional, the heart of the book is its humanity.--*Ed Dobeas* --*This text refers to the [Hardcover](#) edition.*

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