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Inside a Sadistic Sisterhood at the End of the World

In Agustina Bazterrica's new novel, "The Unworthy," a dystopian future ravaged by climate change has stripped the world of food, water and human connection.



Credit...Pauline Mauruschat

By Laura van den Berg

Laura van den Berg is the author of six works of fiction, most recently “State of Paradise.”

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Writers have long been preoccupied with the end of the world, though perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the true preoccupation is with whatever new, tenuous social order struggles up from the rubble. What would starting over look like? And are human beings doomed to create dystopian conditions wherever they go?

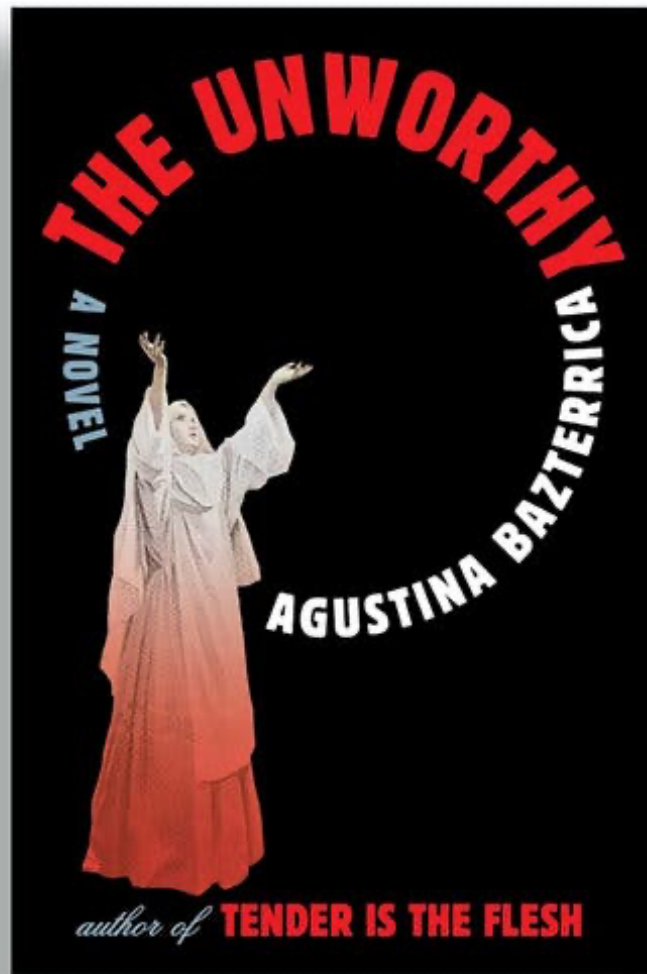
In the Argentine writer Agustina Bazterrica’s brilliant, chilling new novel, “The Unworthy,” the young, unnamed narrator enters a religious order called the House of the Sacred Sisterhood after spending an unspecified amount of time wandering a landscape ravaged by climate catastrophe. Is this place, overseen by the Superior Sister and an unseen, all-powerful He, a refuge or a nightmare? And what exactly happens when a member of the unworthy class is elevated to the rank of the Chosen?

These are among the questions that propel this slim, suspenseful novel. Amid global hunger and drought the Sacred Sisterhood has managed to cultivate a steady food supply — even if it involves eating a lot of crickets — and drinkable water. But danger abounds. The hierarchy is at once enigmatic and brutally enforced. Sacrifices are demanded. The punishments for infractions, administered by the sadistic Superior Sister, include whipping, disfigurement and being buried or burned alive.

The mind-bending violence crushes any possibility of fellowship between the women who have found their way to this place (in the opening chapter, the narrator recounts dropping cockroaches into the pillowcase of another sister and then sewing up the slip). The unworthy are quick to turn on one another, claws out and teeth bared, in the name of survival.

The horror is made visceral by Bazterrica’s feverish, mythic prose, translated from the Spanish by Sarah Moses: “There’s something sick in the wind, a warm stupor of venom and insects. A curse creeping out of the devastated lands. We can feel the vibration of something destructive coming into being. ... Something was throbbing in the air, silent and bestial.” Some sentences break off midstream; others contain words crossed out. We witness the narrator’s struggle to wrest the unspeakable into language.

Image



The act of writing sustains her. She writes in the blue ink left behind by the monks who once tended this land; she writes with charcoal made from plants; she writes with her own blood. The writing is a mortal risk: She must hide these pages meticulously, so they're not discovered by the Superior Sister. She creates a record of both her cloistered, terrorized life with the Sacred Sisterhood and the world she knew before. The memories of her mother and of Circe, her companion after the apocalypse, are especially vivid and anguishing.

Like Lauren Oya Olamina in Octavia Butler's "Parable of the Sower," this dystopian narrator feels compelled to make a record of the end times; for both women, to write is to preserve a drop of agency, of humanity, in a blasted world, where survival often demands a willingness to commit unfathomable violations. "Without mercy you survive," Bazterrica's narrator says. To write is to process the new reality that is taking shape, the new story that is unfolding, and that will no longer die with her. "Why put myself in danger with this book of the night?" the narrator writes. "Because if I write it, then it was real."

The scrap of humanity the narrator has preserved through the act of writing is awakened when a mysterious stranger, Lucía, appears inside the walls of the Sacred Sisterhood. She seems to be a wanderer, as the narrator once was, and is taken in. Before long, Lucía displays otherworldly powers and, perhaps even more shockingly, a sense of compassion.

“The Unworthy” is a novel filled with secrets, and part of the thrill is cracking open one forbidden door at a time. Given that it’s populated almost entirely by women, it’s striking that patriarchal violence is at the center of the Sacred Sisterhood’s rotten core.

Solidarity between the unworthy, then, becomes a way to fight back. A secret bond forms between Lucía and the narrator, one that reminds them both that communion with others will always generate more strength than remaining crouched in suspicious solitude. These glimmers of hopeful connection are, of course, radically fragile — at any moment the two could be discovered and killed — but they are nevertheless critical to the narrator’s emotional opening. In the novel’s final moments, she remembers what survival is really for.