

Lazarus Short Guide

Lazarus by Morris West

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Characters/Techniques

A host of characters populates *Lazarus*, and West constantly shifts the point of view among them to give readers a varied perspective on the action. As one might expect, the author's primary focus is on Pope Leo XIV, formerly Cardinal Ludovico Gadda, an Italian who has succeeded the mystic Gregory XVII upon the latter's abdication. Gregory had thrown the Church into turmoil by claiming to have had a private revelation of the end of the world, and by proposing radical alterations in the way the Church should conduct its affairs. Leo XIV, a hard-line traditionalist who has worked to reaffirm the traditional teachings and practices of the Church, undergoes a spiritual experience as a result of his heart surgery. One of the central concerns in *Lazarus* is Leo's attempt to reverse the policies he established before his surgery; he finds considerable opposition both from within and without the Vatican. Simultaneously, he becomes an assassination target for Arab terrorists who want to make a political statement about their power in Europe. Hence, Leo, his advisors, and friends must cope with a looming threat to his personal safety while trying to deal with the monumental change in philosophy the pontiff wishes to bring about in the Church.

As he does in most of his novels, West introduces a number of characters of various nationalities whose lives are intertwined with his protagonist's.

Anton Drexel, an elderly German who is the senior Cardinal at the Vatican, helps Leo overcome his doubts about reforming the Church. He also takes Leo to his farm near Rome to recuperate, and there introduces him to the group of handicapped children he supports. Among them is Britte Lundberg, a brilliant child whose mother is a nurse at the clinic where Leo's heart surgery is performed. Tove Lundberg, a Swede, is a sensitive woman who nevertheless cannot believe in religion; she presents a gentle foil to Leo's insistence on the religious dimensions of human activity. Sergio Salviati, Leo's surgeon, is an Italian Jew; through him the pope comes under the protection of Israel's secret intelligence agency, the Mossad. Two Irish priests also play key roles in the book: Malachy O'Rahilly is the pope's personal secretary — and an alcoholic; Matt Neylen, a junior Vatican diplomat, suffers a crisis of faith and leaves the priesthood. These characters provide ample opportunities for West to introduce the conflicts that Leo must confront and, through the pope's reactions, to make shrewd observations about the possibilities — and limitations — that men of goodwill have to shape the world for good.



Social Concerns/Themes

Lazarus is West's third novel about the modern Roman Catholic papacy. In it, conservative Pope Leo XIV undergoes major heart by-pass surgery.

He emerges from the operation a new man in several respects, most notably in his view of the future of his Church.

Through his protagonist, West explores the inner workings of the Vatican bureaucracy and how Church politics influence the doctrines that Catholics throughout the world are expected to follow. At the heart of the novel are two central questions. Should the Church continue as it has for centuries, recognizing the pronouncements of past popes as inviolable dictates, binding for all time? Or is it time for Rome to admit that dogmas imposed by former pontiffs need to be modified to fit changing societies and advances in technology?

West is on the side of those who would like to see the Church initiate reforms and promulgate more relaxed rules regarding subjects such as birth control. West's views are expressed obliquely yet clearly in his careful delineation of characters who represent differing viewpoints within the Church. Those who opt for a revision of the Church's position on many social issues and who question the current methods by which the Church is run, receive more sympathetic treatment.

Indeed, the protagonist himself moves gradually from a hard-line position on issues of doctrine toward a view that decentralization in decision-making and toleration of differences are in the best interests of the Church.

As in several of his earlier novels, notably *The Clowns of God* (1981) and *Cassidy* (1987), West gives substantial attention to the problem of international terrorism. When his protagonist chooses to have his heart by-pass operation at a private clinic in Rome, he becomes a target of opportunity for Middle East radicals who wish to assassinate him as a means of demonstrating their ability to kill anyone, anywhere. The Mossad, the Israeli intelligence agency, steps in to protect the pontiff, foiling the terrorists' scheme. The terrorists come to consider the success of their mission a point of honor, and much of the last quarter of the novel builds to the climax of the terrorist assassination attempt.

The combination of these themes suggests West's deep philosophical interest in questions he considers of vital importance. How can people live the good life in an increasingly complex and dangerous world? Can one good person make a difference? Can religion offer a plausible antidote to the chaos and evil that seem to dominate everyday living, not only for those in positions of importance in society, but for the common man and woman as well? The events he depicts in *Lazarus* offer glimmers of hope that the answer to all these questions is a qualified "yes." But the novel is hardly a resounding affirmation that man has much hope for changing the world for good at any time in the near future.



Related Titles

Although it can be read independently of its predecessors in West's trilogy, *Lazarus* contains many references to the two other novels that deal with the issue of the Roman Catholic papacy: *The Shoes of the Fisherman* (1963) and *The Clowns of God* (1981). In each, West traces the career of an extraordinary pope who is forced to confront a world where technology offers new challenges to traditional Roman Catholic teaching. The three major characters are strikingly different, yet their responses to the crises they face share certain important similarities.

When pressed to act, they do so with a firm faith that God will guide their actions and that anything done from motives of love for their fellow humans will somehow come to good. All three novels suggest — with subtle irony — both the efficacy of the religious approach to solving world problems, and the inadequacy of such methods in circumstances where other men act without respect for individual or collective human dignity.

On one level, *The Shoes of the Fisherman* provides an inside look at the hierarchy of one of the world's most extensive and powerful social bodies, the Roman Catholic Church. The extent to which seemingly religious decisions are made for political reasons provides an eye-opening view of modern organized religion and its relationship to society as a whole.

The Shoes of the Fisherman is also the story of the effect one good man can have on the world around him. The concerted efforts of one willing to abandon the status quo can, in West's view, make a difference both within organizations and in the lives of those touched by this dedicated individual.

Finally, the novel also presents a vision of the world of the 1960s from an unusual perspective. The problems of the world superpowers appear in a different light when viewed from within the walls of the Vatican; the apparent hopelessness of deteriorating world conditions is contrasted with the spirit of optimism that the pope displays, and his willingness to take personal risks offers a slim hope for improvement in international relationships.

West suggests that the pope in his novel may serve as a model for leaders of other groups to follow in confronting the problems of living in the nuclear age.

The Shoes of the Fisherman is dominated by the central figure, Kiril Lakota, the first Russian pope. A man of genuine goodness who has suffered much in the real world before assuming his position as head of the church, his struggle to make genuine Christian principles work in the world about him provides the main interest for this tale.

Kiril's efforts, Christlike in both intent and simplicity, somehow touch all of the other characters whose stories are told in the pages of this novel. West is careful to weave the lives of all these characters into an encompassing pattern that extends even beyond



their direct contact with Kiril. Through these interlocking separate stories West creates a microcosm of the world itself, a place of constant contacts that shape both individual and social destinies.

The motion picture version of *The Shoes of the Fisherman* was released in 1968. It was directed by Michael Anderson. It stars Anthony Quinn as the Russian cardinal who becomes the Pope. The supporting cast includes Laurence Olivier, David Janssen, Leo McKern, Vittorio de Sica, Clive Revill, Paul Rogers, Barbara Jefford, Oskar Werner, and John Gielgud. Where the novel is thoughtful, the motion picture is clumsy, and its conclusion is awkward and leaves too many questions begging. The performances are haphazard, with Quinn and McKern (as the cardinal who thinks he should have become the Pope) turning in good ones that make their characters interesting, but with other performances being stiff.



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