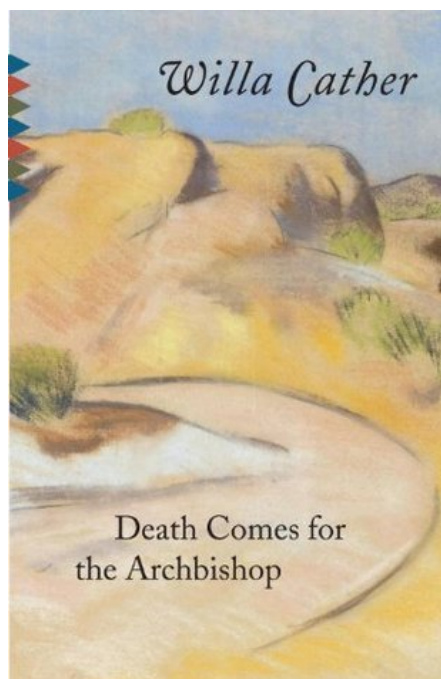




Death Comes for the Archbishop

Willa Cather

[Download now](#)

[Read Online](#) ➔

Death Comes for the Archbishop

Willa Cather

Death Comes for the Archbishop Willa Cather

There is something epic—and almost mythic—about this sparsely beautiful novel by Willa Cather, although the story it tells is that of a single human life, lived simply in the silence of the desert. In 1851 Father Jean Marie Latour comes as the Apostolic Vicar to New Mexico. What he finds is a vast territory of red hills and tortuous arroyos, American by law but Mexican and Indian in custom and belief. In the almost forty years that follow, Latour spreads his faith in the only way he knows—gently, although he must contend with an unforgiving landscape, derelict and sometimes openly rebellious priests, and his own loneliness. One of these events Cather gives us an indelible vision of life unfolding in a place where time itself seems suspended.

Death Comes for the Archbishop Details

Date : Published June 16th 1990 by Vintage (first published 1927)

ISBN : 9780679728894

Author : Willa Cather

Format : Paperback 297 pages

Genre : Fiction, Classics, Historical, Historical Fiction, Literature

 [Download Death Comes for the Archbishop ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online Death Comes for the Archbishop ...pdf](#)

Download and Read Free Online Death Comes for the Archbishop Willa Cather

From Reader Review Death Comes for the Archbishop for online ebook

Dhanaraj Rajan says

The Verdict:

It is an excellent piece of literature. Instantly, it has become one of my personal favourites meaning it would be read by me for many more times in the future. In short, I will carry it with me as long as I have the ability and sanity to read and understand.

An Introduction:

This book is about two ‘pioneering French missionaries’ and their missions in New Mexico. The novel is based on the true life stories of Archbishop Jean Baptiste Lamy, the first Archbishop of Santa Fe and his companion, Joseph Projectus Machebeuf and their mission among the Mexicans and the Indians of New Mexico in the 19th century. So, this novel is about two Catholic priests and their missions.

When the novel was published the critics never claimed that it was a novel in its classical sense. Willa Cather responded saying: “Why bother? Many more reviewers assert vehemently that it is not a novel. Myself, I prefer to call it a narrative.”

And so, it is a Narrative. And she is right. The ‘novel’ is divided into nine episodes excepting the prologue. And each episode is purposefully divided into short chapters. Each chapter is a valuable literary artistically well cut out with much care and love. Each chapter and each episode shines brightly to outshine the other chapters and the episodes. Willa Cather, the master craftsman delights the reader right at the beginning with a precious gem and in the following chapters maintains the wonder and the reverence of the reader with the equally perfect writing without a moment of slack or dullness.

The Treasure Trove:

1. The Landscape:

The descriptions are evocative. With the missionaries we too can feel travelling the hard sand and rocky trail of New Mexico on the horse backs. We, readers too can climb with the missionaries on one of the mesas of the Indians; we participate in some of the Indian rituals; we are made to live in an adobe house; etc. Along with the landscapes; some revealing reflections accompany us – I specially loved the one in which the Bishop compares Indian way of living in the nature and the modern people’s way of living in the nature.

A worthy long quote:

It was the Indian manner to vanish into the landscape, not to stand out against it. The Hopi villages that were set upon rock mesas were made to look like the rock on which they sat, were imperceptible at a distance. The Navajo hogans, among the sand and willows, were made of sand and willows. None of the pueblos would at that time admit glass windows into their dwellings. The reflection of the sun on the glazing was to them ugly and unnatural even dangerous.They seemed to have none of the European’s desire to ‘master’ nature, to arrange and re-create. They spent their ingenuity in the other direction, in accommodating themselves to the scene in which they found themselves. This was not so much from indolence,

the Bishop thought, as from an inherited caution and respect. It was as if the great country were asleep, and they wished to carry on their lives without awakening it; or as if the spirits of the earth and air and water were things not to antagonize and arouse....The land and all that it bore they treated with consideration; not attempting to improve it, they never desecrated it.

2. The Spiritual Reflections:

I found this book to be a spiritual treasure trove as well. There are passages that can lead you to contemplative arrest, that is, after reading those passages or the reflections one will not be able to read further without stopping over to mull over the message/to stay in a contemplative mood. The Eighth Episode (The Great Diocese) is one such example.

A Quote:

“Where there is great love there are always miracles,” he said at length. “One might almost say that an apparition is human vision corrected by divine love. I do not see you as you really are, Joseph; I see you through my affection for you. The Miracles of the Church seem to me to rest not so much upon faces or voices or healing power coming suddenly near to us from afar off, but upon our perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears can hear what is there about us always.”

Willa Cather has made some splendid observations on the Catholic Church and has splattered the novel with some fantastic Catholic reflections. And the fact to be noted specially here in this context is that Willa Cather was not a Catholic.

3. Character Studies:

The characters of both the Bishop and his Vicar are easily perceptible – Bishop is quiet, meditative, ideal, courteous and gentle and the Vicar is active, impulsive, practical, joy loving and easy to form a relationship. Reading these characters working together in a mission is narrated in an interesting manner. The differences, in fact, keep them together. And the reader can feel that in the writings.

The missionary priest’s longing for the home, his own people, his own language, his own food is also aptly mentioned. The Catholic priest’s solitary life at times accompanied by loving thoughts of a life surrounded by family also gets mentioned.

Finally:

It is about a person who in his last days could claim thus: **“I shall not die of a cold, my son. I shall die of having lived.”**

At the End: I loved everything of this edition (Virago Modern Classics) right from the cover design, the introduction by A. S. Byatt and the presentation of the book.

RandomAnthony says

Death Comes For the Archbishop is a book that appears to be about almost nothing but is really about a lot.

The novel addresses the lives of two French missionary priests in the American southwest. They travel, establish churches, get a little older, part, meet, part again, and talk through the nuances of their faith and expanding roles in the Catholic church among Mexicans and Native Americans with wildly different perspectives of faith but respect for good men. I like how Cather avoids what can best be described as an event or conflict-based storyline; in other words, no great villain emerges for the missionaries to vanquish. No climactic battle scenes take place. My heart rate was never challenged. The two men form relationships with the new (to them) land's natives and maneuver diocese politics. They exchange visions of how the church should exist in the territory. They become each other's quiet support and exist with the type of friendship that, over many years, requires few words.

I think Cather slightly romanticizes some of the hardships; she'll brush off a week traveling on a donkey's back with a few picturesque sentences. You damn sure fucking well will not see me riding a donkey anywhere, and if I did, you better write more than a couple goddamn sentences about the trip. Anyway, I can live with that minimization because I think Cather's going for less of a traditional description of missionaries' travails (and to be fair, she does have the priests encounter a couple harrowing situations) and more of a serene meditation on how men of faith reflect upon their lives both on a day to day basis and at the end, when they know they're facing their final hours. The novel's final twenty pages are a beautiful tribute to a character who has lived his life the best he could, with grace and depth, and wonders where the time has gone. I don't know if death is that easy. I doubt it. But I see at what Cather's aiming, and hell, there's nothing wrong with what she's trying to do. She's shooting for noble stars.

This book reminded me particularly of two other writers. First, and this is more place than style, is Cormac McCarthy, who writes brilliantly about similar terrain but, uh, *definitely* tackles the stories of the landscape in different ways. The second is Marilynne Robinson and her *Gilead*. I love Robinson's book and would wager she's a Cather fan because these two excellent novels share quite a bit between them.

Somebody told me *Death Comes For the Archbishop* is a Cather departure, but this is the only Cather book I've read, so I can't speak on that level one way or the other. This novel was different than I expected: I guess I thought all Cather's work involved intrepid frontier women or something and I stumble upon a book about two priests wandering around New Mexico. Whatever works. I liked the novel, really, and I imagine I'll pick up another of her books eventually.

Margitte says

1851. Central New Mexico. Catholic priests. Indians. Mexicans. The story of the Catholic Church in this new American territory. The friendship between two priests who leave their native, beloved France to become the church leaders in the new territory with the remote Santa Fe as their destination.

It feels good to open a book that was written in the 1800s. and listen to the voices of the people who populated that part of history . Their long-forgotten tales open brand new and fresh before our very eyes. It feels good to catch the melody in the prose, and capture the essence of the gentle souls of the characters.

blame my teacher. I wasn't forced to read the book except insofar as he gave us a list of "great American literature" and told us to choose a book and write a paper on it. As the crusader knight in "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade" opines: "He chose poorly." My own life experiences at the time ill prepared me for what makes Cather an important writer; unfortunately, it was just another boring assignment best finished as soon as possible.

As you might deduce, I have much warmer feelings for Cather now than I did 20+ years ago. Though I'm not going to rush out and devour everything else she's written, I thoroughly enjoyed reading *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

It's a loosely structured collection of anecdotes that chronicles the missionary activities of two French Catholic priests - Jean Latour (the "archbishop" of the title) and his close friend and vicar, Joseph Vaillant - in the newly established diocese of Santa Fe. The year is 1848, when the US has taken the territory from Mexico, and the spiritual condition of the region's priests and parishioners is deplorable. Over the next 40 years, the two men re-energize their congregation and are continually reaffirmed in their faith. Though friends, Fathers Latour and Vaillant couldn't be more different - both physically and mentally. Latour is aristocratic and often uncomfortable associating with his desperately poor and ignorant flock; Vaillant comes from peasant stock and enthusiastically throws himself into the ministry. Both men come to love deeply both the land and the people; a love returned by their charges.

While not a "slow" or "long" read (it's only 299 pages in my edition), I found it a "calming" read. Even in the most "active" parts such as "The Lonely Road to Mora," where Latour and Vaillant barely escape the murderous attentions of a scoundrel and rescue his abused Mexican wife, there's a quiet rhythm to the story that carries the reader along. This passage from "Eusabio" both reflects what I'm trying to convey and describes it (if one equates "Indians" with the book as a whole): *...Indians going to and fro on the long winding trails across the plain, or up into the Sandia mountains. They had all of them the same quiet way of moving, whether their pace was swift or slow, and the same unobtrusive demeanor...* (p. 235).

There were several passages that particularly impressed me while I was reading. The first comes in "The Miser," where Cather takes the opportunity of the death of a parish priest to observe the sacral nature of traditional beliefs about death. And by "sacral" I don't mean anything specific to a particular religion but rather the idea that death is *a moment when the soul made its entrance into the next world, passing in full consciousness through a lowly door to an unimaginable scene*, rather than simply the moment *when certain bodily organs ceased to function* (p. 170).

Probably the most difficult part in reading this book was empathizing with Latour or Vaillant. I'm not by any stretch of the imagination religious - I fear I have lapsed far from my Catholic heritage - and getting into the heads and motivations of these characters could be difficult. For example, a cynic could easily read Vaillant's constant trolling for contributions as a crass effort to bilk the peasants of what little wealth they possessed. There were, however, passages that helped me. The one I have in mind is in "Auspice, Maria!": *It was just this solitariness of love in which a priest's life could be like his Master's. It was not a solitude of atrophy, of negation, but of perpetual flowering. A life need not be cold, or devoid of grace in the worldly sense, if it were filled by Her who was all the graces...* (p. 256). And then there's the final, deathbed scenes, including: *More and more life seemed to him an experience of the Ego, in no sense the Ego itself.... The mistakes of his life seemed unimportant; accidents that had occurred en route...* (p. 290).

Of course, no review of a Cather novel is complete without some mention of her powerful descriptive ability. I've **been** to New Mexico and I didn't see half of what she saw (alas). From the first few pages, Cather paints word-pictures that vividly put the reader into the scene: *The Cardinal had an eccentric preference for beginning his dinner at this time in the late afternoon, when the vehemence of the sun suggested motion. The light was full of action and had a peculiar quality of climax - of splendid finish. It was both intense and soft, with a ruddiness as of much-multiplied candlelight, an aura of red in its flames. It bored into the ilex trees,*

illuminating their mahogany trunks and blurring their dark foliage; it warmed the bright green of the orange trees and the rose of the oleander blooms to gold; sent congested spiral patterns quivering over the damask and plate and crystal (p. 4).

There's another passage where Cather describes a sunrise illuminating snow-covered mountains but I neglected to mark it; you'll have to trust me that it's a glorious description.

A final thought: There's a powerful element of nostalgia and grief over lost traditions and the destruction of nature. Latour, in particular, recognizes the worthiness of civilization, after all his Church is a product of it and the cathedral he eventually erects, a symbol, but he rues the loss of simplicity and the natural rhythms along which life runs: *Beautiful surroundings, the society of learned men, the charms of noble women, the graces of art, could not make up to him for the loss of those light-hearted mornings of the desert, for that wind that made one a boy again. He had noticed that this peculiar quality in the air of new countries vanished after they were tamed by man and made to bear harvests.... The moisture of plowed land, the heaviness of labor and growth and grain-bearing, utterly destroyed it; one could breathe that only on the bright edges of the world, on the great grass plains or the sage-brush desert* (p. 275).

Jaline says

Coming to the end of this book was like a sad farewell to some very good friends. Father Joseph, Father Letour, their many friends and acquaintances who built solid and strong relationships with them over the years, and their country. Oh my. Their beautiful country.

Father Joseph and Father Letour, both originally from France, were sent to the land of New Mexico shortly after it had been annexed. They were young men whose mission was to bring spiritual counsel and comfort to the people of this New World, and to build and expand their congregations where possible. Their lives were dedicated to this purpose and this book describes the many adventures and successes and setbacks that they encountered over the years. Although the characters are fictional in this book, the life of Father Letour who became a Bishop and then Archbishop closely parallels the timeline highlights of Father Jean Baptiste Lamy, the real-life priest who became the first Bishop of New Mexico and later, the Archbishop.

This story is captured in some of the most picturesque and beautiful prose I have read. The descriptions of the people and of their lives and lifestyles are in-depth and as vivid as being there. Where Willa Cather's poetic prose shines even brighter is her descriptions of the land and the flora and fauna of this amazing part of the world. Her words painted landscapes in my mind that were so alive I could smell the air and breathe the sky.

This is not a book to rush through – it is atmospheric and slow, like riding out among the mesas on mules and conserving energy for the journey ahead. I love a book with a pace that makes me adjust to its timing, that makes me sit back and pay attention, to take notice, to take the time to appreciate its story and visual wonders.

This book has all of those qualities and I am impressed beyond measure. These qualities may not be right for everyone, but for me, at this particular time, it was perfect.

Jennifer (aka EM) says

Beautiful, scenic - my fave bits were the descriptions of the SW landscape and the hints that Cather gives us of how hard that life was for the two RC missionaries who head out to save the souls there. But what it didn't give me - which is what I like in my priestly books - is an intimate view of either their struggle with their faith or their devotion to it when challenged.

Cather teased me with the stuff that I wanted to know much more about -- the relocation and slaughter of the Navajos and the Church's complicity in that. The tenuous balance between the vanishing Mexican and Indian cultures as the whites moved in.

I think I was looking for more character development and more plot than this was ever intended to have, so in the end, I had to settle for the loveliness of the descriptions of landscape, and the gently evolving relationship between Fr. Vaillant and Fr. Latour.

Cather describes beautifully the Indians' spiritual relationship to the land:

"But their conception of decoration did not extend to the landscape. They seemed to have none of the European's desire to "master" nature, to arrange and re-create. They spent their ingenuity in the other direction; in accommodating themselves to the scene in which they found themselves. This was not so much from indolence, the Bishop thought, as from an inherited caution and respect. It was as if the great country were asleep, and they wished to carry on their lives without awakening it; or as if the spirits of earth and air and water were things not to antagonize and arouse. When they hunted, it was with the same discretion; an Indian hunt was never a slaughter. They ravaged neither the rivers nor the forest, and if they irrigated, they took as little water as would serve their needs. The land and all that it bore they treated with consideration; not attempting to improve it, they never desecrated it."

Cather's level of environmental consciousness, there and elsewhere (the description of the setting of the Archbishop's cathedral was similarly evocative), and her understanding of the native American relationship to nature, seems so prescient (and so beautiful), writing from 1927.

What she didn't give me, what I wanted to see, was some level of consciousness and conflict among those whites - and the two priests in particular - that the colonization of the land and the souls there was *wrong*. Instead, she shows me the Archbishop on his deathbed, stating: *"I have lived to see two great wrongs righted; I have seen the end of black slavery, and I have seen the Navajos restored to their own country."* I suppose this perspective, from a character whose vantage point is so close in time to the occurrences, is as much as can be hoped for in the way of a political statement.

Aubrey says

3.5/5

Once before he had been carried out of the body thus to a place far away. He had turned a corner and come upon an old woman with a basket of yellow flowers; sprays of yellow sending out a honey-sweet perfume. Mimosa - but before he could think of the name he was overcome

by a feeling of place, was dropped, cassock and all, into a garden in the south of France where he had been sent one winter in his childhood...

It's rare these days in reading that I'll come across a childhood thought or form, especially during my customary long bouts of first reads rarely broken by a revisit. These rediscoveries are not even guaranteed to be pleasant, for there is so much more to be aware of these days in terms of the lies youth is bred upon and only shamefully realized much later in time. So it was a marvel, then, that I found this pulsepoint of evocation in not one, but two pleasant forms, first in the synopsis and second in the cover illustration of my eventually happened upon edition. I am now determined to keep the name Sally Mara Sturman in mind for reasons of artistic acquisition, as well as a far off dream of a book of my own that needs favorable presenting to the world.

The childhood experience is Brian Jacques' Redwall series, and the key binding factor is the wealth of sense that strongly flows without ever overwhelming. There are other, stronger similarities, the most obvious being the religious setting of Redwall Abbey and its far more orthodox counterpart the Catholic Church, but that is only surface tension. I may have missed whatever theological imports Jacques slipped in with his mouse friars and novices, but it was far from the weighty bearing Catholicism had on every aspect of far more adult book. What was planted then and sprouted now is my love for rich simplicity, lofty in its appreciation of landscape imagery and earthily enthusiastic over the descriptions of food both gourmet and plucked.

I would like to leave that precious feeling at that, but I must say that my issues with the book can be summed up with this:

"No matter, Father. I see your redskins through Fenimore Cooper, and I like them so.

Cather followed through with this in lavishing all of her attention on her Bishops and Priests and cutting every other category of character short, whether Mexican or Native American or female. The two main characters themselves may have been well intentioned and marvelously appreciative of their aesthetic surroundings, but there was far too much romanticization of one culture imposing itself on all the other for my tastes, whether it was the US clearing out land of its original inhabitants or missionaries seeing the unconverted as 'childish' and 'out of date' and converting them accordingly. I'm especially amazed at how unfavorably Cather treated her female characters; I don't expect authors to be especially able at crafting fictional personas based on amount of shared characteristics, but I've read male authors who were less misogynistic in their treatment.

Despite that, I truly did enjoy the book, and want to accord it a rating that matches that enjoyment. So, 4.5 stars for the pleasure, minus 1.5 stars for the contentious issues, and another half star awarded for the absolute beauty of the front cover.

...the violet that is full of rose colour and is yet not lavender; the blue that becomes almost pink and then retreats again into sea-dark purple...

Diane Barnes says

What can I say about this book? It was beautiful, it was peaceful, it was perfect. A book I will re-read periodically, when I need to leave the world behind.

There is no real plot other than the lives of two French priests who come to Santa Fe in 1850 to create a Catholic mission to serve the Indians and Mexicans. Father LaTour and Father Vaillant will be riding their

mules in my head forever, spreading kindness.

Beautiful, peaceful, perfect.

Lobstergirl says

I'm glad I didn't know Kit Carson would be a character in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*; if I had, I might never have opened the book. Indeed, a weight of glumness descended on me as I realized the entire narrative would take place in New Mexico Territory, between the years 1851-1888. I foresaw dust, and tumbleweed clumps, unrestrainedly tumbling through bleak moonlike terrain. These things hold little allure for me; they're why I don't watch westerns. And it's true, the novel is filled with descriptions of mesas, canyons and arroyos, junipers and whitewashed pueblos, sedges and piñon trees, mules named Contento. The main subject is the missionary and diocesan work of the Catholic Church among Mexicans and Indian tribes. But the writing won me over, slowly, with sentences like

Wherever the footing was treacherous, it was helped out by little hand-holds, ground into the stone like smooth mittens.

Smooth mittens. And a Spaniard speaking English in a "thick felty voice." There's a purity and simplicity to Cather's writing, yet it's not exactly lean and spare. It's full of adjectives and similes but it's never overdone. Cather will pause amid a fairly prosaic recounting of what some people are doing somewhere to spend 200 words on a grove of cottonwood trees, and every word belongs there. Every once in awhile the elegance will shock you:

Elsewhere the sky is the roof of the world; but here the earth was the floor of the sky.

Travelling with Eusabio [a Navajo:] was like travelling with the landscape made human.

The novel advances slowly and steadily, which is how it should be read. (I think it would be an enjoyable audiobook; not all books are.) It's a novel of accretions, fittingly like the geological formations in the landscape Cather repeatedly describes. The accretions are vignettes in the missionary life of Bishop Jean Marie Latour. Nothing astonishing or jolting happens, really, from a narrative standpoint. It's not until the end of the novel that we realize the depth of friendship between the handsome introvert Bishop Latour and the homely extrovert Father Vaillant (no, it's not what you think).

Ultimately this is such a pure novel - pure of heart, pure of intent, pure of sentence - that it's impossible to imagine it being written today - or if it were, being taken seriously by reviewers.

Hugh says

My only previous experience of reading Cather was last year, when I enjoyed *My Ántonia*. This book is very different, but shares the same frontier spirit and once again allows Cather the space to indulge her descriptive talents.

This one is largely a factual story, although she changed the names of her leading characters. The Archbishop of the title Jean Latour can only be Jean-Baptiste Lamy, the first Bishop of New Mexico, and his vicar (and later Bishop in Colorado) Joseph Vaillant can only be Joseph Macheboeuf. The introduction by A.S. Byatt makes her debt to writings both by and about these men clear, but the book is

still an extraordinary evocation of a lost world.

My only criticism is that the characterisation is a little too black and white - a more modern writer would probably have been more critical of the Church and less willing to accept descriptions of miracles at face value. Cather's sympathy for the plight of the local native Americans does demonstrate a modern progressive attitude, and many of the stories she relates are extraordinary and vividly described without showiness or melodrama.

Annet says

But in the Old World he found himself homesick for the New. It was a feeling he could not explain; a feeling that old age did not weigh so heavily upon a man in New Mexico as in the Puy-de Dome. ...In New Mexico he always awoke a young man; not until he rose and began to shave did he realize that he was growing older. His first consciousness was a sense of the light dry wind blowing in through the windows, with the fragrance of hot sun and sage-brush and sweet clover; a wind that made one's body feel light and one's heart cry 'Today, today', like a child's....

What a wonderful, beautiful book... I'm lost for words right now.

More in the days to follow. Beautifully written book. A slow read, take it all in.... the language, the content....

Can't believe I hadn't heard from this author yet, but thanks to Goodreads I have, will certainly explore her works, as recommended to me by the good Goodreads friends here, thanks!

Already an interesting detail: I read Blood Meridian of McCarthy recently which is staged in the same time and area as this book. Both books beautiful. While McCarthy's book is dark and full of blood, this book is full of thought and quiet beauty..... I just realized I read these two books shortly after each other... food for thought as well.

More to follow definitely. Just need to sleep on it, the beauty and stillness of this story... Highly recommended!

Henry Avila says

Two young French priests newly out of the seminary, in France, where they first met, (destined to become bishops of the Catholic Church, in the New World , one an Archbishop) became close friends until death struck. Jean Marie Latour (Jean -Baptiste Lamy, the original Archbishop of Santa Fe, New Mexico) and Joseph Vaillant (Joseph Projectus Machebeuf, Denver, Colorado's, first bishop) recruited by the Irish born bishop from Cincinnati, Ohio for missionary work in America, where only a relatively few Catholics lived , while still in their native land. They sneak away from the families, too painful to say goodbye, it will cease to be home soon. The men are quite different, Jean well- educate, tall, healthy , good- looking , feels comfortable with his "superiors" both civilian and clergy. While Joseph a small human, rather ugly by prevailing standards, sickly too, the opposite of his friend... not as intelligent, but a drive to save souls that is second to none, the poor people flock to the unpretentious priest. These simple facts strangely, are mostly true...names have been changed not to protect anyone but to make this story , if not 100 % accurate, close enough, more entertaining. Willa Cather brings her considerable talent, to this book and gives poignancy to what could have been a rather dry , dull story of these dedicated , brave, tireless clergymen , working for God. Later both are sent to the primitive New Mexican frontier town of Santa Fe the capital, Jean as its bishop and Joseph the Vicar, where the hostile inhabitants despise the new rulers, yet the mainly French priests there are well respected... Constant lonely journeys through blazing deserts, snowy mountains, treacherous grounds, fierce storms of sand or rain or fiercer Indian tribes in the 1850's, the U.S.'s , unknown southwestern territory, little populated and recently conquered from Mexico. This is the isolated almost

empty of vegetation , gigantic diocese... the entire terrain , they try to administer ...compromising someday the states of New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado and Utah , many years before they join the Union. The Vatican has given them very wide authority...thousands of miles of roads to travel...the clergymen spend few days in the shabby homes they occupy in Santa Fe. On top of mules is their real homes, going from one poverty stricken Pueblo or scattered settlement, to another, performing happy marriages and baptizings or sad funerals , building churches and saying Mass in distant places, numerous times for fifty years...almost perishing repeatedly, in this unforgiving country of Indians with their own religion, devout Mexicans and Protestant Americans, somehow they will try to live in Peace. The Archbishop has a fantastic dream...to build a beautiful, yet unassuming cathedral in the small, destitute town of Santa Fe. An appealing saga of men who can never surrender ...in the endless struggle to reach the goal of salvation, not for themselves but for the people.

Julie Durnell says

This book was so amazing well written-Willa Cather is at her best here. Each chapter was more like a painting than just words on a page. Beautiful and evocative setting of the southwest. The relationship between Bishop Latour and Father Vaillant, beginning when they were young men headed to seminary, slowly evolves along with their faith in God (Catholicism is beside the point here) until death comes for them both. The Mexican peoples and native American tribes are wonderfully portrayed, one aches at the brutality of forcing the Navaho from their land, which was thankfully restored to them.

Sue says

Although I have read this book before, that was long enough ago that this was essentially like reading the book for the first time.

I believe this is the fifth of Cather's books that I have read (this both the first and the most recent) and confirms my appreciation for her skills in presenting the landscapes of the American West, the developing American way of life as it pushes west, and the varying and various peoples who lived on and from the land. Cather had mentioned the canyons of the Southwest in *The Song of the Lark* while otherwise describing the development of the plains.

Here, everything is devoted to the vast desert territory of the Southwest, land that has been newly added to the nation. The titular character is sent to Santa Fe to establish an American bishopric and we live the following decades with him.

It had been nearly a year after he had embarked upon the Mississippi that the young Bishop, at about the sunset hour of an afternoon, at last beheld the old settlement toward which he had been journeying so long: ...Across the level, Father Latour could distinguish low brown shapes, like earthworks, lying at the base of wrinkled green mountains with bare tops,--wave like mountains, resembling billows beaten up from a flat sea by a heavy gale; and their green was of two colors --aspen and evergreen, not intermingled but lying in solid areas of light and dark. (p 21)

This was to be Latour's home for the rest of his life.

He came to know the countryside, the Mexicans, the various Pueblos and their customs. Cather describes the beliefs and ways of all quite carefully. There are aspects that are dated but there are parts that are amazingly current. In describing Latour's trip through the desert with a Mexican friend and their Indian guide, Cather writes:

When they left the rock or tree or sand dune that had sheltered them for the night, the Navajo was careful to obliterate every trace of their temporary occupation....Father Latour judged that, as it was the white man's way to assert himself in any landscape, to change it, to make it over a little (or at least leave some mark of memorial of his sojourn), it was the Indian's way to pass through a country without disturbing anything; to pass and leave no trace, like fish through the water, or birds through the air. It was the Indian manner to vanish into the landscape, not to stand out against it....It was as if the great country were asleep and they wished to carry on lives without awakening it... (pp 233-234)

There is much history in this novel, history of the settlement of the Southwest since the arrival of the Spanish, history of the Catholic Church in America by way of this Bishop's life in Santa Fe, reflections on the often sad past in Indian Country and the new changes with continued western expansion.

In one last selection from the novel I will give a sample of the descriptive prose Cather does so well. In other novels she describes the Plains. Here it is Acoma Pueblo:

Ever afterward the Bishop remembered his first ride to Acoma as his introduction to the mesa country. One thing which struck him at once was that every mesa was duplicated by a cloud mesa, like a reflection, which lay motionless above it or moved slowly up from behind it. These cloud formations seemed to be always there, however hot and blue the sky. Sometimes they were flat terraces, ledges of vapour; sometimes they were dome-shaped, or fantastic, like the tops of silvery pagodas, rising one above another, as if an oriental city lay directly behind the rock. (p 95)

I strongly recommend this novel to those wishing to delve into American classics.

Fabian says

Highlight here is the incredible depiction of two missionaries who undertake the megaharsh task of

converting the Navajos of New Mexico to Catholicism. It describes what happens when a new policy, or way of life, is instilled into people who are far away from the Old World. There are little vignettes of savagery, of holy manifestation (including a very succinct telling of San Diego and his visitation from the Virgin Mary), of hypocrites (of course!!!), etc. It is a vivid book, full of life & imagination.

Though it's not classified as anything but a classic, it is part Western, part faux-biography. Yeah, the Archbishop of the title could have lived, & probably did. Willa Cather never visited the world she so valiantly and expertly writes about in such poetic demeanor. That she gives her work an authentic sense of wonder is evidence of an active mind & an inspired pen.

Diane S ? says

Late 1800's and The Catholic Church sends two priests to reawaken the lessening faith in New Mexico and eventually other territories. Every chapter tackles a new story, a different priest, and the lives they are living in the different missions. Some had quite an opulent lifestyle, some had children and some had amassed a great deal of money. The descriptions of the landscape are masterfully done, and the distance between them that the Bishop had to travel was awe inspiring, especially on mule. A few brief appearances by Kit Carson, who was portrayed as respected by many was a welcome treat.

Love Cather's writing, she always has such a firm grasp of time and place and this short book did not disappoint.

Richard Derus says

Rating: 5* of five

This book is a survivor. Closing in on 90 years after its initial appearance, it's still on must-read lists. For a good reason: It's a neither-fish-not-fowl book. As a history, it's a good novel; as a novel, it's fascinating history. Enough fiction was larded onto the flesh of New Mexico's post-annexation history to make this a tasty roast.

Like a roast, it's served in slices, as the stories of Latour/Lamy's progress in creating the Archdiocese of New Mexico are too numerous to tell each effectively. The storytelling mode makes the book feel less like an indigestible wodge of starchy glop, the unhappy fate of *THE SONG OF BERNADETTE*. Religious subjects of novels are more often in the Bernadette mode, sadly, since there is little in dramatic storytelling more engrossing than the journey inward to spiritual revelation.

The events from the factual Archbishop Lamy's life that Cather chose to dramatize are among the best: The horrors committed in religion's name at Acoma stand out for me. There was an oppressive theocracy in place at Acoma, run for the sole benefit of a greedy priest whose cruelty was shielded by his isolation in the vastness of the Sonoran desert. The ending of that tale is very satisfying.

If you haven't ever read this book, please do, it's a beaut.

Andrew Schirmer says

Bach almost persuades me to be a Christian, Virginia Woolf quotes the painter and art critic Roger Fry, the subject of her tender biographical work, as saying. Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop* nearly did the same for me in regards to the Roman Catholic Church--an organization so bilious, corrupted, and scandal-ridden these days it would take a miracle for them to make a proselyte out of me.

Indeed, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is a sort of miracle. Nine short chapters of uncluttered prose encompassing the efforts of French missionary priests in the American Southwest. FF Latour and Vaillant (ignore the lazy names--ooh, the pedantic aristo and the "valiant" poor one--ha ha!) are sent to New Mexico with the purpose of expanding the reach of the Church in these territories, newly annexed to the nascent United States of America, after the Mexican-American War. The holdover Spanish clergy are entrenched, and some have lapsed into incontinence and corruption. Latour and Vaillant set about their work constantly aware of the futility confronting thousands of years of old-new-world tradition with their new-old-world religion. They simply do what they can.

The delicate rhythm of the desert monotony is felt through the writing, events happen and then they end. Kit Carson appears as a side character and it's almost shocking how such a legendary personage hardly interrupts the flow of things. An errant priest strikes his servant dead in a moment of ferocious anger, and is executed by local Indians:

They carried him down the ladder and through the cloister and across the rock to the most precipitous cliff--the one over which the Acoma women flung broken pots and such refuse as the turkeys would not eat. There the people were assembled. They cut his bonds, and taking him by the hands and feet, swung him out over the rock-edge and back a few times. He was heavy, and perhaps they thought this dangerous sport. No sound but hissing breath came through his teeth. The four executioners took him up again from the brink where they had laid him, and, after a few feints, dropped him in mid-air.

Justice.

It strikes one that the inhabitants of the Southwest--Indians, Mexicans, Americans, Europeans--are rendered nearly without prejudice by Cather and by Father Latour, though Americans and protestants generally get it pretty bad.

And when death finally comes for the now retired archbishop, there is no melodrama or tears. Just the peaceful assurance of having lived one's life well.

Ben Winch says

Oh... my... God. This is *beautiful*. I'm only halfway through it but I don't care how it ends; every chapter is so complete in itself, every word such unmitigated pleasure that I would be stunned – absolutely floored – if Cather somehow fumbled the ball in the next 150 pages. This is *it*. The work of a writer with nothing to prove. A writer so humble, her words so transparent, that she seems to disappear behind the curtain of the text, her elegant shadow barely visible in its folds. At age twenty, hearing Nina Simone sing 'Black is the Colour of My True True Love's Hair', I felt my heart couldn't contain that song; it *must* consume me. Now I feel the same about *Death Comes For the Archbishop*. It's bigger than me. Will I ever comprehend it? Will I ever be wise enough, my heart big enough, my life *lived* enough? Also in my twenties, I read *I Heard the Owl Call My Name* with wonder; now I find that book is like a single episode in this one. Cather's prose is so sensual, her transmitting of physical experience so direct, that I feel I have just returned from a New Mexico

all gold and orange and green and baking in stark sunlight as I ride my mule towards shelter behind cool cloister walls. Some books resist analysis, the smart review, the quick response. Many years from now I will still be groping for a sober word to say about this. Out and out love is all I can give it right now. An absolute masterpiece. You ask me, she's second only to Poe in the Great American Writer stakes.
