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The Cure

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Not too many novels for young readers begin with a quotation from the Book of Job; but then not too many novelists argue a case for Christianity as urgently as Michael Coleman in **The Cure**. Initially, we seem to be in yet another dystopian future. The Northlands have been laid waste by a nuclear explosion, engineered by religious extremists. In response, the Republic has suppressed all Faiths, while adopting the forms of religious practice around a deification of Science. A new calendar dates from the birth of 'The Saviour', Charles Darwin. The language of 'The Writings' is that of the King James's version, but now Eve's choice for knowledge is to be celebrated, not condemned. The offshore monastery on Parens Island, where the young protagonists are despatched, has been transformed into a psychological rehab centre. The inmates live out a monastic regime, attending the Gatherings of Lauds, Sext, Vespers and Compline. They may wear albs and cowls, but the staff will stop at nothing - even brain surgery - as they manipulate rebellious young minds into mindless conformity. Echoes of **Brave New World** and **1984** indeed.

This novel might have been more engaging if the conflicting ideas had been embedded in action rather than argument. There are too many passages - for example, descriptions of seminars - in which these ideas are explored at length. Only towards the exciting and thought-provoking conclusion does the pace accelerate. More fundamentally, Mr Coleman does not play fair. He portrays the Christianity that the Republic seeks to crush as rich, sustaining and courageous; a home for intellectual and spiritual freedom, coupled with personal discipline. Opposed to that, he sets a godless culture shaped by an unswerving belief in Science which comes close to parody. (Is this his riposte to 'His Dark Materials' - the inmates are required to recite 'The Lyrene Promise'?) Any argument for Christianity which carries conviction must surely allow that those without religious belief may also, from a variety of motives, act with compassion, creativity and generosity. To imply that the only alternative to Faith is the arrogant rationalism of the Republic's notion of Science is to simplify to the point of distortion; and that is selling readers short.

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