



## Playing St. Barbara

*Marian Szczepanski*

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The secrets, struggles, and self-redemption of a Depression-era coal miner's wife and three daughters play out against a turbulent historical backdrop of Ku Klux Klan intimidation and the 1933 Pennsylvania Mine War. Their intertwined lives eerily mirror the 7th century legend of St. Barbara, patroness of miners, reenacted annually in the town pageant. Tested by scandal, heartbreak, and tragedy, each woman will write her own courageous ending to St. Barbara's story.

## Playing St. Barbara Details

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Author : Marian Szczepanski

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## From Reader Review Playing St. Barbara for online ebook

### Lloyd Russell says

Marian Szczepanski's debut novel, Playing St. Barbara, is quite a book. It's difficult to describe and was difficult to rate. But I'll get to that. 1st, here is a synopsis of the book from Goodreads:

The secrets, struggles, and self-redemption of a Depression-era coal miner's wife and three daughters play out against a turbulent historical backdrop of Ku Klux Klan intimidation and the 1933 Pennsylvania Mine War. Their intertwined lives eerily mirror the 7th century legend of St. Barbara, patroness of miners, reenacted annually in the town pageant. Tested by scandal, heartbreak, and tragedy, each woman will write her own courageous ending to St. Barbara's story.

It took me almost 100 pages to get into the rhythm of this book. But here's the thing: The next 100 pages really picked up, and the last 180 pages flew by. Despite the slow start, I'm very glad I read it, and I still gave it a 3/4. Goodreads and Amazon readers were more generous with their ratings than me. Goodreads averaged 4.4/5 with 15 ratings. Amazon averaged 4.55/5 out of 9 people. But that's a bit misleading. 8 people gave it a 5, and 1 gave it a 1 (a ridiculous rating for a ridiculous reason). By and large, that's a lot of love.

Let me tell you what I particularly liked. I really liked the setting and the history. Marian makes you feel the brutal nature of the mining industry in the late 1920's through the early 1940's. I also really liked some of the ancillary characters, especially the ones associated with the eldest daughter, Norah. In fact, I felt the most emotional connection with Norah, more so than her 2 sisters, Deirdre and Katie, and their mother, Clare. The father, Fin, was a beast. Some of what he did was tough to read (after just seeing the movie 12 Years a Slave, what Fin did to his family was not so different from what many of the slave masters did to their slaves).

So, all in all, it's a very good read. If the 1st part of the book hadn't been a bit slow, I would have given it a 3.5. As it is, there's nothing wrong with a solid 3. If you can pull yourself away from Coben, Brown, Child, Baldacci, et al, then pick this one up. It's different from the usual cast of literary characters. And it's got some meat to it.

P.S. I LOVED the ending.

List of Characters: If you go to Marian's website - [www.marianszczepanski.com](http://www.marianszczepanski.com) - and click on the heading For Reader, you can actually get the entire list of characters. This can be very helpful, take my word for it.

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### Kate says

I had the opportunity to hear Marian Szczepanski speak about this book and to purchase a signed copy. Having grown up in a coal "patch" town, even though my dad wasn't a coal mine, I really appreciated the research that she did and the way she so accurately portrayed what life was like for those who worked and lived in the "coal". While the characters are all fictional the author based some of their stories on the current work that she does with battered women. I know from growing up that women were often battered in the

coal towns as we saw it firsthand, even in the 1950's. I would like to see her do a sequel to this book perhaps focusing on some of the other characters that weren't central to this story but could be quite interesting. This is a keeper and one I will most likely read again.

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### **Sharon Chance says**

"Playing St. Barbara" is a fascinating look at one family's experience during the turbulent time period in Pennsylvania's coal mining history. Author Marian Szczepanski tells the heart-wrenching story of the Sweeney family through the voices of mother Clare and her three daughters, Dierdre, Norah and Katie and through their eyes the reader gets a very personal look at how hard life was for the women of the mines back then, and the struggles they went through because of and for their men.

This historical novel is well written with a mesmerizing cast of characters that will resonate with readers. Many emotions revolve through this story, ranging from romance to heartache, joy to sorrow. Szczepanski mixes in historical facts with this brilliant tale and readers will thoroughly enjoy the experience.

I highly recommend this novel.

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### **Nancy says**

I found the historical portion of the book to be the best part of this book. The setting is a coal mining town near Pittsburgh following the Great War and The Great Depression. The crux of the story is the fate of women in such dire circumstances. The miners work in dangerous mines for pittance, shop at the company store, and live in company housing. There is never a way out of debt. They want to unionize but are bullied by the KKK.

The book covers a couple of decades and the women in an Irish/German family. Their fates greatly differ and their struggles are vast, particularly with their alcoholic, abusive father/husband. It is not as depressing as it may seem. Daily lives intertwine and the neighbors are willing to assist, forgive, and bring dinner when tragedy strikes and it is not uncommon.

I found there were too many people to keep track of. If I were to read it again, I'd draw out a socio and genogram to keep them all straight. I also struggled with the pronouns and wondering who was being referred to and when. It took more concentration for me than I wanted to give it.

Yet the material is fresh and the story is one we would likely find in variation in our own family histories.

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### **Grace Troxel says**

This review first appeared on my blog, Books Without Any Pictures:  
<http://bookswithoutanypictures.com/20...>

Playing St. Barbara by Marian Szczepanski is the story of four women living in a Depression-era coal mining town in Western Pennsylvania. Clara marries a coal miner and union leader, but Fin is an abusive asshole,

and one of the first things he demands in their marriage is that she change her name to something that sounds less German. Their relationship continues to go downhill as she bears him three daughters, Deirdre, Katie, and Nora. *Playing St. Barbara* shows each woman's struggle to escape her situation and create a better life for herself.

Deirdre's rebellion comes in the form of a lover who happens to be a cop. Fin can't handle it, because he sees all cops as oppressive and can't disassociate them from the violence against the union that occurred earlier in his life. Then there's Katie, who is in love with a boy in town, but also dreams of joining a convent and becoming a teacher. After Deirdre and Katie leave home, Nora continues to stay at home, because she feels as if Fin will likely kill Clara if there's nobody there to stop him. Nora spends her weekends seeing films and dreaming of one day becoming as fashionable as her favorite stars. And then there's Clara, who secretly uses contraceptives so that she won't have to bear Fin any more children. Each character faces her own challenges, and each becomes empowered in a different way.

I loved reading *Playing St. Barbara* because it was set in a town similar to the one where I grew up. Reading the novel gave me a glimpse into what sort of lives my grandparents might have led (minus the domestic abuse, of course). Szczepanski explored many of the major issues that people faced at the time—low wages, alcoholism, and the fact that coal mining companies controlled every facet of life, including where you lived, where you shopped, and how you socialized. There was a lot of tension between different ethnic groups, as well as the general feeling that you had to become Americanized to be successful. My only wish is that *Playing St. Barbara* could have painted a more balanced picture of the unions; since Fin was the main representative of unionization that we saw, it was harder to see that normal people really did have valid concerns when standing up to mining companies. Overall though, I thought that *Playing St. Barbara* did a fantastic job showing how average people lived and the challenges that they faced every day.

As a part of the blog tour, I had an opportunity to do an author interview with Marian Szczepanski. If you haven't already, you should check it out. Szczepanski explains some of her motivations behind *Playing St. Barbara*, which was partly inspired by her work at a domestic violence hotline.

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### **Richard Jespers says**

*Playing St. Barbara* begins in 1929 with an eighth-grader's winning essay describing the seventh-century legend of St. Barbara, patron saint of miners. The salient features of Barbara's life—a cruel and unyielding father, her unbending conversion from paganism to Christianity, her apparent disappearance into the earth—play out in various ways throughout Szczepanski's novel, and it is important for the reader to internalize the saint's story before moving on.

The narrative reveals the lives of three daughters, one of whom writes the winning essay, and the wife of a coal miner, primarily during the decade of the 1930s in southwestern Pennsylvania. As an aside, in 1957, my family's car broke down in a coal mining town in this region, and we spent three days there in a "hotel" waiting for our car to be repaired (my parents wound up buying a new Pontiac before we returned to our home in Kansas). Coal dust was so prevalent that my mother felt compelled to wipe every chair before we sat down, even the toilet seat. She must have prayed before each meal we ate, that we would not breathe in any more of the powder than necessary. Such fine dust is spread throughout this story like a black veil.

The father, Finbar Sweeney, is an abusive brute. Not a day goes by that he doesn't verbally abuse his wife, Clare, or physically harm her by way of a brutal slap or unwanted sexual advances. Not a day goes by that he

doesn't abuse one of his three daughters. All three seem like shards of the same person, and they are, in a sense, all reflections of their mother, Clare. It may be because of their suffering that Clare in some way consumes what seem like magic seeds to free her body of a number of pregnancies.

One bright thread in the lives of the coal miners and their families is the annual St. Barbara pageant (the other is baseball), offered up to the martyred life of the patron saint of miners. Each of the Sweeney daughters, very close in age, is called upon to play the life of the saint over several years—and each in her own way fails. The event emphasizes the class differences in that the play is directed by a woman the youths call The Queen, a wife of an "upperhiller," a woman whose husband is in management. However, The Queen must depend on the miners' children to play the parts and is not always pleased with their performances.

Each of Clare's daughters, in her own way, manages to escape from the town: the eldest by marrying well, another by becoming a nun, though she sacrifices her own love of a man to do so, and the third by her very wits, bidding good-bye to the town and venturing off to nearby Pittsburgh to start a new life. Clare, too, long-suffering wife must make a decision with regard to Finbar. After the mine experiences a huge explosion and collapse and Fin must spend time in the hospital, she goes to see him every day, and each day, unless sedated, he lashes out at her. Temporarily free of his ill treatment at home, she, of course, drinks in her freedom. Her friends and daughters urge her to leave Fin, an act of desperation at a time and place where the strictures of the Roman Catholic Church are clear, where most women wouldn't leave their husbands for any reason. But the women in Clare's life are clear: Finbar, alcoholic brute, is never going to change.

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### **kim says**

I really liked this book, so much so, that I am having a bit of trouble getting into my next read. This one is going to stay with me for awhile. It is hard to actually get my thoughts down in a coherent way. The book is set in a depression era coal mining town in Pennsylvania and centers around the Sweeney family. The 'head' of the family is Fin, an abusive, alcoholic who beats his wife, Clare, regularly. The have three daughters, Norah, Dierdre, and Katie. It is impossible to describe how much I disliked Fin and how angry he made me. There were a couple of moments where he acted almost human, and then I was mad because I had to consider not being so mad!

Each of the three girls makes her escape from their life in the coal patch town, and each in a different way. But Clare continues to make excuses for Fin, and worse, blame herself, because it is what 'she deserves'. I had a difficult time watching her continue to put up with the crazy old man!

One thing I really enjoyed about the book was the interaction of the women in The Hive, the company town where they all lived. Many families had immigrated from different areas of Europe and I really enjoyed the bits of Italian, German, and Slovak thrown in. It reminded me of my Grandma! I grew very fond of several of the neighbors.

I did have a little difficulty at the beginning of the book. There was some vocabulary I was not familiar with, and descriptions on the mining process. I spent a bit of time googling. I'm not complaining, because I expect good historical fiction to challenge me and teach me. But the story would have moved a little faster if I'd had a glossary in the back of the book to refer to. However, once I got past the first few chapters, I could not put this book down!

The other part some readers may have difficulty with is the amount of violence. Not only was Fin a mean drunk, but domestic violence was a way of life for him. In addition, there is cruelty and violence in the form of the Klan and the Cossacks during the mining wars and strikes. But it was part of the story and part of the times, and was realistically told.

This would be a GREAT choice for book clubs. The discussions would range from domestic violence and why a woman would choose to stay in that situation, to the history of labor relations and violence during strikes. This book just begs for a good discussion! I was sorry to see the book end and to have to say goodbye to these women!

★★★★1/2

4-1/2 Stars

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*This book review is included in a tour by TLC Book Tours. I received a copy of the book in return for an honest review.*

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### **Shannon (Giraffe Days) says**

*Playing St Barbara* takes us right into the struggles, desires and secrets of the Sweeney family in a harsh landscape: the coal mines of Pennsylvania from 1929 to 1941. Finbar Sweeney is an Irish coal miner with a foul tongue, a talent for baseball and a mean streak that manifests into physical violence against his wife, Clare, and sometimes even his daughters. Norah, Deidre and Katie. Clare has buried three infant sons already and lives in dread of bearing a healthy, thriving boy; or rather, she lives in dread of having a son who will one day turn into a man just like his father. She buries her German heritage, even though she's more American than Fin is, having been born there, but secretly teaches her daughters the language.

Clare wants nothing so much as to see her girls go on to a better place than the Hive, the dirty, impoverished cottages in the coal mining town, kept separate from their betters, the "Upperhillers", the wives and families of the men who run and supervise the mines. But breaking out of the cycle of poverty is one thing; breaking away from the domineering presence of their father is something else altogether. While Clare wants the best for her daughters, they in turn want to protect their mother and see her happy and free, for perhaps the first time in her life. But can Clare break the habits that have been beaten into her, and forge her own way?

Szczepanski brings life on the edge of a dangerous and filthy coal mine to life in *Playing St Barbara*, a tense, often harrowing account of life - for women especially - in a harsh and unforgiving world. It's a world that Szczepanski has brought vividly to life through her descriptions and characters. I felt the coal dust in my pores and the stifling repression of poverty, classism, racism and sexism. The fear and uncertainty, but also the love and grieving, the perseverance and stoicism and quiet burning strength of these women.

Each of them - Deidre first, then Katie and lastly Norah, when she's twenty-nine - play the lead role of St. Barbara in the annual St Barbara festivities play. Saint Barbara was a young woman living centuries ago in Turkey, whose father, Dioscorus, was a "wealthy pagan" and "very protective of his daughter. He built her a tall tower, so the world's evils would not harm her." While he was away travelling, a priest converted Barbara to Christianity and she "ordered the builders to add a third window to her bathhouse, symbolizing the Holy Trinity." Her father, returning, was furious, and when she refused to recant her new religion before the provincial ruler, she was sentenced to death by beheading. Her father requested "permission to carry out

the execution himself." But after he beheaded her in the forest, an angel appeared, lifting her body and taking it away.

Barbara is honored as the patron saint of miners because she experienced an untimely end and was buried by an angel deep inside the earth. It is customary to place a picture or statue of St Barbara, holding a sword and standing beside a tower, at the entrance to a mine. Pit workers who escape after explosions and roof falls often tell stories of a bright light leading them to safety. [from Katie's prize-winning essay]

Against the menacing backdrop of terrorising Ku Klux Klan, who burn crosses and destroy people's vegetable gardens at the merest hint of union organising (which Fin is always at the forefront of), the symbolism of these girls, sacrificed for their father's narrow, iron view of the world and their place in it, carries a stale taste of fear through the entire novel. It's no sure thing, that any of them will get a happy ending, and that makes it all the more nail-biting.

All the girls and women are different. Deidre is the fiery one, the one who, at seventeen, wins the role of playing St Barbara even though she's from The Hive, and a Sweeney to boot. The play is being organised and directed by a woman they call The Queen - Beatrice Finch, the wife of the mine superintendent. But then she meets Billy McKenna, a young, red-haired cossack (a policeman), who is, in Fin's eyes, enemy number 1. She gets a belting from her father just for looking at him in church, but she's not easily repressed, and she's the first of the three girls to seek her own path, with the help of her mother and her mother's cousin Trudy, a single woman living in Pittsburgh where she works in the Heinz test kitchen and provides a willing escape route - and much-needed funds to get there.

Katie is the youngest sister and the scholarly, smart one who was moved up in school. She wants to be a teacher, and is contemplating going to a convent to become one. It costs two hundred dollars, which they don't have, and a friend who went but left after just a few months tells her how horrible it is. While cousin Trudy and her church's congregation work to raise the money for her admission, Katie lets herself be seduced by her handsome boyfriend, Jack. But when Jack gets caught up in Fin's new union plans, things go from bad to worse and Katie, like Deidre, needs an escape from The Hive and Uniontown.

Katie studied the garish face in the mirror. The girl beneath the pancake was no longer the Katie who nearly fainted with delight when the cast list was posted. Who calmly delivered the high school valedictory speech. Who sat for an hour in Fr. Kovacs' tiny parlor, patiently answering questions about her vocation. Without warning, Tina had vanished, taking that Katie with her.

Who, then, was this painted-up person left behind? This brazen stranger eager to shed her clothes in a coke oven? The pageant's audience surely would see through the pancake and satin. How could a girl of questionable virtue and dubious vocation convincingly play a saint?  
[p.175]

Norah, the eldest, was "going steady" with Paul, a lovely young man with a gift for mechanics. But the years kept passing and still they never married, until finally she sent him on his way. Clare is upset and believes

Norah won't marry because she feels protective of her mother, and needs to look out for her and help her around the house. She believes that if she tells Norah the secret of her dead baby brothers and the sin she committed to ensure she'd have no more babies, Norah will finally leave her. But nothing is that simple, and it takes more than the airing of old grief to dislocate Norah from her childhood home. Instead, she finds herself a new job and a new title: a "career girl", with a taste for fine clothes and accessories. When there's a collapse in the coal mine and it looks, for a moment, like Fin hasn't survived, everything shifts for Clare and Norah, and in a way, they each wake up to the sad truths of their lives and what they've endured, and what they're wasting.

Clare is the one who carries the novel, and the common thread through all the stories. She is the broken woman, a shadow of who she might have been had circumstances been different. But I didn't find her pitiable. She carries with her a quiet, stoic dignity that has, perhaps, been forged in the fire of Fin's abuse. And it's easy to sympathise - and empathise - with her feelings towards her dead sons, babies that she loved and yet feared - and feared for. She is the character you most want to rescue, who frustrates with her inability to change the course of her life. If you want to understand why women put up with domestic abuse, Clare will give great insight. Szccepanski handles it with tenderness and subtlety; the reasons come through without any heavy-handed telling, and that makes it all the more heart-breaking.

I never did quite understand the Ku Klux Klan - I don't know much about them except the general, cross burning and the lynching of black people, for example. I've never read much about them or seen a documentary about them, and *Playing St Barbara* didn't fill in any gaps in my knowledge on that front. The many attempts to form miners' unions, the strikes and the backdrop of war (the Depression is skipped over between the Katie and Norah stories) adds context and is relevant to the story, but I didn't come away from it with a better understanding. This doesn't really detract from the story, overall, but I do like to learn as I read.

It is a bit slow to get going, and there's a long cast of characters to keep track of (though the author has helpfully provided a list on her website, including nicknames, which I recommend you print and keep handy!), but it rewards perseverance. This is a historical period and setting that you don't read about all that much, and Szccepanski has done an admirable job of bringing it to life in rich detail and investing it with the full range of human experience and emotion. You can easily relate to these people, despite never having experienced what they have: empathy comes easily.

There are beautiful, positive and even happy moments, to balance the sad in this book. The writing and pacing is strong and steady, and it carries the weight of the period. I could easily picture it as a TV series, especially with all the drama (I think because there have been series that are equally dramatic and heavy, from a similar period - mostly British of course). I hated the format of the book, though - this is one of my peculiarities, in that the typeface (font), line spacing, ink and all the rest of the *appearance* on the pages themselves, have a huge impact on how I read a story, how I connect with it and what I get from it. If this had been printed by Harper, for example, it would have been a more beautiful, poignant reading experience, because they know how to package a book. The cover is great, but the story deserves better treatment, nicer paper, a finer font, to reflect the inner beauty of the Sweeney women in their blackened, grimy world.

*My thanks to the author for a copy of this book via TLC Book Tours.*

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### **Angele says**

*Playing St. Barbara* begins on a baseball field in the 1930s--but the players aren't boys or professional

athletes. Instead, they are hard-bitten Pennsylvania coal miners locked in a fierce inter-town rivalry, which serves both to mirror their daily struggles against bosses and grinding labor and to provide a temporary release from them. One of the best, most reckless, and most ruthless players is Fin Sweeney, union activist and all-around troublemaker. Fin's drab and seemingly dutiful wife--whom he calls Clare--and his three blooming young teenage daughters (Deidre, Norah, and Katie) are watching from the hill. And then a handsome young cop working for the mine owners makes a move...

In Marian Szczepanski's debut novel of working class immigrants (which draws on local and familial history) men are viewed from the outside. It is women--Deidre, Norah, Katie, and the unfolding mystery who is their mother--who narrate this story. These four women and the people around them move, like America in the Depression years, through personal and political struggles that are by turns uplifting and sordid, tragic and triumphant. The Sweeney women want and try to do good--but they also want more, and better. Better even than being chosen to play the beautiful martyred virgin who also is the patron saint of miners--St. Barbara--in their town's annual pageant.

Whether you are--like the author and this reviewer--a descendent of immigrant working people (in my case, Italian paper mill hands and Lebanese peddlers/shopkeepers who immigrated to a lonely corner of New York State), or whether the world of *Playing St. Barbara* is utterly new and strange to you, I promise that you will be drawn into this compelling novel.

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### **Lenore Pettinger says**

Great story about a time and industry I knew very little about. I knew of coal miner's strikes, the brutal working conditions, the Union organizing. On a personal level, the story is somewhat frustrating that an abused wife finds no way to stand up for herself until her 3 daughters escape the father's house. This time frame is late 1920's - early 1940's. The mores, prejudices, and limitations of the times are prevalent. One example is that the 30-year-old daughter is a 'spinster' because she is not married and must live at home until she gets the gumption to leave.

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### **Darlene says**

*Playing St. Barbara* is the debut novel of Marian Szczepanski and it's a powerful one that will stick with you long after you turn the last page. Marian takes us back to a time in history that I've not read much about and that is of life in a coal mining town back in the 1930's during the depression. She takes us back in time and immerses us not only in her character's lives but also in the atmosphere of time and place. This novel can feel quite bleak but it also shows the power of relationships between mothers and daughters and the courage it takes to once again love yourself enough to change your future.

The novel is told from the viewpoints of the three daughters Deidre, Norah, and Katie along with their mother Clare and always in the background is their father Fin, a very volatile and abusive man who handles the hard life of a miner and the poverty of the times by turning to alcohol. Deidre is one to stand up to her father and she takes it to the extreme when she decides to take up with a boy from the Company police. Katie seemed to be the delicate one to me wanting to dedicate her life to the convent but still loving the boy from her neighborhood that's always been sweet on her. Now Norah is the one with secrets but also a desire to be something more than just another girl from the wrong end of town. However her secrets keep her tethered to

home and her mother. Clare just made me sad. Overpowered by a man who took away her identity and life she struggles with secrets from the past that have her believing this is the life she deserves. Each of these women must learn to find their own way to a better life. Throughout it all the legend of St. Barbara lingers.

Clare was my favorite of the women even though I got so frustrated with her for enduring the abuse she did although she had her reasons. I think it's hard to imagine but you have to take yourself back in time and feel what it would be like to be living such a hard life in a coal mining town such as Clare was. It's a life full of hard work and fear of losing your men in the mines. Add to that an abusive husband and that life of hardship multiplies tenfold. Clare needed to find her voice again but does she have the strength after all the hardships she's endured? Or will she just accept her lot in life?

I enjoyed this novel. It transported me to another time and place where I became invested in the characters and the lifestyle of this coal mining town. Playing St. Barbara is a great piece of historical fiction and I'll be looking forward to reading more from Marian Szczepanski!

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## **Linda says**

### **Big Demands All Met!**

I'm a sucker for a book or a story that can plunge me into another era. I like being pulled into a fascinating part of history I know little about, and then feeling as if I am living with these people. And as if that weren't enough, I like a touch of the mystical, the magical, or the spiritual woven delicately into the mix.

A big demand, right?

*Playing St. Barbara*, the debut novel of Marian Szczepanski, does all four things sublimely. From the first page, she plunges you into the dangers faced by the women in the Sweeney family, dangers that come from factions within their Depression-era mining community itself, but also from larger, oppressive factors like the Klan, and most haunting of all at times, abuse and danger within their own household. The novel centers around events associated with the 1933 Pennsylvania Mine War, but it is far more intimate than that. As these women—a mother and her three daughters—negotiate the inevitable cruelties of scandal in such a tightly woven community, as they struggle against both physical danger from a violent society in a violent time, against social prejudices on multiple levels (not the least of which is a lack of mercy for victims of domestic abuse so much more rampant then than now)—what took my breath away besides the depth of realism and compelling pathos, was the fact that I was struck by one thought: This story echoes exquisitely some of the greatest struggles the American experience faces today.

*Playing St. Barbara* presents a highly unique story of four women and uses it as a mirror to reflect the political pressures and social prejudices that still affect women today.

When I review a piece, I like to share a favorite line that is not a "big moment"; a line that will give nothing away but still underline a feature I want to highlight about the larger piece. A favorite line in a less significant scene that made me smile is this:

"Decent women wouldn't step one foot inside her shop if they knew about this...I sure won't once I fit into regular clothes again." She bit primly into her club sandwich.

It is insightful technique to tell such a constantly advancing, serious tale with Szczepanski's deft gift of lacing it with humor, irony, depth of character, and rich atmospheric detail.

One more thing on that point:

Right from the start I was gripped by a scene in which the mother is scrabbling on hands and knees, looking for something she's hidden, and leaving herself mysterious, carefully obscure little clues. (I won't ruin the surprise by telling you what she is looking for or why, but if that doesn't pull you in, you're not paying attention.)

Finally, let me close by returning to that fourth thing that thrills me in a good piece of fiction—finding a hint of the mystical or spiritual woven throughout a tale. Playing St. Barbara is a play on words, as you might have guessed. And I am not giving away the larger secret in that play by revealing to you that these women's stories play out in eerie parallel with the life of St. Barbara herself, the patron saint of miners. I closed this book with a deep smile of appreciation for what I like to think of as Szczepanski's quiet miracle.

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### **Ima says**

Playing St. Barbara is a revealing tale of the lives of women of Pennsylvania's early 20th century coal-mining community. Encompassing the essence of true historical fiction, this novel is well-researched. The details are amazing, from the coal company and its reach over the lives of its workers, to the myriad phrases of different languages incorporated into the dialogue. At times, the details could be overwhelming if I tried to pay too close attention. Even so, it made reading feel real, like these characters, though fictional, could really have lived at that time, in that place.

A great read. Highly recommended.

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### **Roberta says**

Marian Szczepanski is a better speaker than she is a writer. I saw her on her recent promotional tour and she was so intriguing, in fact, that I decided to purchase her book, a book that had held no real appeal for me before that evening. She spent nine years researching and writing this book. I feel like it took me nine years to read it. Her characters are caricatures: Clare is the timid, abused wife, Fin is the drunken, abusive, predictably Irish spouse, Norah is the ambitious career girl, and so on. They all seem one-dimensional. I found it incomprehensible until nearly the end of the book why Clare always spoke German. It was annoying to have to read the German, then to have to read the translated English. Late in the book you find out that she is actually Clara and that mean old Fin forced her to abandon her heritage and pretend she's Irish.

I felt obligated to finish reading this since I enjoyed Marian's presentation so much, but it is not a book I would recommend.

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### **Sheila DeChantal says**

Sometimes.... historical fiction blows me away. I felt as though I had donned my own pair of coal mining

boots as I sunk dust deep into this amazing read. This was such a change from what I have been reading so far this year and I enjoyed it so much. Sometimes I forget how much I enjoy good historical fiction. And really, who better to tell it? Author Marian Szczepanski whose own grandparents were immigrant miners.

I have a feeling I will be gushing about Playing St. Barbara for some time to come. It was amazing to me, who honestly knew little of this history, how the KKK played a role in what happened. Exasperating, breathtaking, and awe inducing.... Playing ST. Barbara is a must read for lovers of historical fiction novels. I want to say more, but more than that, I want YOU to read this book.

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