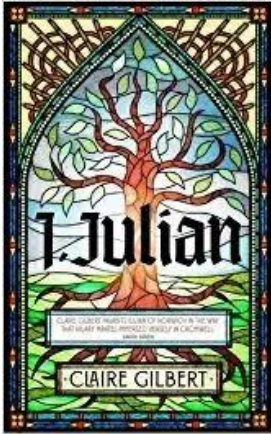


Book review: **I, Julian** by Claire Gilbert

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This is an extraordinary book. Intriguing, rich and moving, it is a fictional autobiography of Julian of Norwich.

If you're not familiar with Julian of Norwich, it is worth recollecting here firstly what is actually known about Julian who is known sometimes as Mother Julian or Lady Julian. She is recognised as a most important English Christian mystic, spiritual writer and theologian.

This fictional autobiography beautifully and convincingly reimagines her whole life and work and does so fully, richly and believably. It is a rewarding book.

We know that Julian lived in the 14th century. When she was 30 years of age she was seriously ill. On 8th May 1373, as she was close to death, the parish priest administering the last rites held before her a crucifix above the foot of her bed. Gazing on the crucifix, over the next several hours she experienced astonishing, direct visions of Jesus. She reported later that she began to lose her sight and feel physically numb, but gazing on the crucifix over the next several hours, she experienced a series of 15 visions of Jesus and a 16th the following day.

Mysticism is a much debated concept but a mystic in Christian terms can be generally understood to be one who seeks and has a distinct, direct, personal, experiential union with God. By its nature such an experience is essentially ineffable and overwhelming. Although such mystical experiences would normally be indescribable, some who can be called mystics, such as Julian, have been able to write about them.

Julian completely recovered from her illness and there is general agreement that she wrote about the visions she had experienced, first of all shortly afterwards and then again many years later at greater, more reflective length. From her writings we can know that Julian was a devout but unpretentious, humble and down to earth woman, "unlettered" as she describes herself, but intelligent and thoughtful.

Her experience of the visions compelled her to become an anchoress, a vocation which consumed the remainder of her life. An anchoress, or anchorite, is a hermit, living solitarily until the end of their life in a cell attached to a church. The cell would be bricked up with a 'squint' or small window onto the church to see therein and a window facing to the outside world at street level. The cell would not have been like a prison or sparse bedsit but probably a comfortable room with access to another room for a maid to look after Julian, bring her meals and so on. Julian the anchoress would not be entirely secluded but would have the support and affection of the local community as well the clergy oversight of the attached church.

In return Julian would have led a life of prayer, study and contemplation on behalf of the community and would offer spiritual advice and counselling for the frequent and often regular visitors who would come to her cell window for her ministry.

It appears that for 20 years or so as an anchoress attached to a church in Norwich, Julian brooded on the visions that she had received all those years ago and finally wrote at length about them, describing them, reflecting and meditating on them and their meaning. The resulting book, generally known by the title *The Revelations of Divine Love*, is widely acknowledged to be one of the great classics of the spiritual life. The theme of her writings is the great love and compassion of God. She reflects in accessible and precise ways a distinct Christian optimism which is not

dominated by sin and the Fall. Her spirituality is palpably animated by grace and love. *Revelations of Divine Love* is generally acknowledged as a classic of profound, inspiring and uplifting spiritual writing. Julian is thought to have been the first woman to write a book in English which has survived. *The Revelations of Divine Love* is available in various modern editions including paperback.

All of this is captured fully and superbly in this moving and engaging fictionalised autobiography. Written in the first person; it takes the reader vividly and movingly all the way through Julian's life and work from childhood to the end of her life and in memoriam. The story also captures clearly the often tumultuous everyday world of the 14th century.

The author, a Lay Canon at St Pauls Cathedral, is a writer on ethics and spirituality in public life among other interests and has written here a powerful book that I found comes across as a non-fiction story. I had known and read about Julian of Norwich, perhaps a bit distantly, but this book made her 'real' to me. I found myself going back to read *The Revelations of Divine Love* again after many years.

If you're not familiar with Julian of Norwich, this fictionalised autobiography is a great, very readable, introduction. If you are familiar, however vaguely, it could even lead you, like me, to revisit Julian, maybe towards a deeper appreciation of her and her legacy.

Incidentally, the 8th May is kept by the Church of England as one the 'Lesser Festivals' in remembrance of Julian of Norwich. St. Julian's Church in Norwich is today a Grade I-listed parish church rebuilt on the site of the original church to which Julian was attached and a statue of Julian stands outside Norwich Cathedral.

Peter Wright