

Sex addict's story

An important novel that lays bare a priest's pain, says **Paul Edmondson**

The Final Retreat **Stephen Hough**

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FR JOSEPH FLYNN confesses to his bishop about his years of sexual promiscuity. He is met with compassion and sent on an eight-day retreat to Craighourne Monastery.

This novel, by the world-famous pianist Stephen Hough, takes the form of a bruisingly honest, confessional notebook during Fr Joseph's time away. His reflections include his earliest sexual awakenings, being bullied by his damaged mother, his neurotic need to be accepted, his addiction to male prostitutes, and the effects of blackmail.

Hough's intermittently poetic prose is as precise as his music. He carefully paints a world of voracious desire and chronic loneliness, as the 60 short, tautly written chapters take us ever further into the protagonist's mire. The novel's truthfulness might shock some readers. This is a non-erotic narrative about sexual addiction arising from a deeply rooted fear and repression of sexuality in the Roman Catholic Church.

Fr Joseph's faith has dried up; his vocation has fallen silent; his priesthood has turned to sand. Liturgy and sacrament have ceased to be meaningful, and human relationships have become banal. What confronts us is a self laid bare both literally in squalid sex and metaphorically on retreat, a priest's dark night of the soul, and his inability to escape.

Hough makes all this seem as raw and true as the pain of extreme grief. I found myself longing for the protagonist to realise the *via negativa* of his experience. The woman taken in adultery, the anointing of Jesus at Bethany, and Judas's suicide are invoked, but Hough admirably avoids self-indulgence and moralising.

The book is a beautifully printed hardback with attractive endpapers, and includes a colour reproduction of Anton Kolig's nude *Seated Youth* (1919). Hough's novel is important, brave, and controversial. It deserves to become a classic of its kind.

The Revd Dr Paul Edmondson is Head of Research and Knowledge and Director of the Stratford-upon-Avon Poetry Festival for the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust.