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Sister Mary Jean Dorcy, O.P.

Index of Authors

[A](#) [B](#) [C](#) [D](#) [E](#) [F](#) [G](#)
[H](#) [I](#) [J](#) [K](#) [L](#) [M](#) [N](#)
[O](#) [P](#) [Q](#) [R](#) [S](#) [T](#)
[U](#) [V](#) [W](#) [X](#) [Y](#) [Z](#)

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I WAS BORN IN ANACORTES, WASHINGTON, ON March 10, 1914, the youngest of nine children of William and Emma (Knapp) Dorcy, both natives of Michigan who had come West a few years before I was born. My father was Irish, my mother a combination of several nationalities of which Dutch, German, Scottish and Spanish had contributed the most. In assessing the sources of my writing and illustrating work, I think it is probably accurate to say that the imagination came from my father and his wonderful heritage of Irish fantasy, and the technical skill from my mother, who had incredibly skillful hands.



My education up through first year in college was in public schools; I graduated from Anacortes High School in 1931. At the end of my freshman year at the University of Washington, I entered the Dominican novitiate at Everett (the motherhouse has since been moved to Edmonds), Washington, where I made profession in January 1934. After profession I returned to college at the Jesuits' Gonzaga University in Spokane; here I received my Bachelor's degree in 1941. Three years later I received a Master of Fine Arts degree at California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland.

It would sound much nicer if I could truthfully say that my writing career began with a revelation from Heaven that I was marked for such an apostolate; or that a great talent in writing inclined my superiors to demand that I take up, however reluctantly, that which is mightier than the sword. However, it would be much nearer the truth to say that I began writing at the age of six, because I had the measles and my sister didn't. Veracity also forces me to add that whatever course my life might have taken, whatever my superiors or associates might have thought, I would probably, somehow, have kept on writing; not through any sense of being a chosen one to do a certain work (though I certainly believe that God plans the means, as well as the end, of our works) but because once you start writing you cannot very well get off the roller-coaster.

The opening gun, then, was an unprinted item about a family of canaries running to eight pages of my mother's best writing paper and illustrated with my sister's new water colors (which she had gone to school and left unguarded). My mother, according to this book was "a perty bird," a statement that never, to the day of his death, failed

to get an amused chuckle out of my father. I was "a plane bird." Psychiatrists need lose no time over this admission of inferiority; I was the youngest of a big family of gifted children, I admired them unto worship, and to them first of all I attribute my dogged pursuit of the muses. They were patient with my early efforts, and they never laughed at the wrong time. I mention this forgotten manuscript because it was in so many ways typical of what my writing career would always be. First of all, it came about in a haphazard way that has characterized so many of the unplanned joys of my life. Secondly, it established a pattern that I was to follow until it became physically impossible to do so, that I would do both text and illustrations for my books, simultaneously and without any conscious thought about it. Thirdly, it was the first of countless times that family, friends, and community have backed me loyally and given me the help and the materials to continue. This, I think, is the rock on which many beginners founder. A writer cannot work in a vacuum, he must have the inspiration of those around him, and their understanding love.

The only truly brilliant thing I have ever done was to enter the Dominican Order, that vast storehouse of sanctity, learning and charity which allows even a very small depositor to take out great fortunes of spiritual and intellectual assistance.

Early in my postulate, the Mother Superior-against my better judgment, it may be said!-started me out writing for publication. During my novitiate years, my Novice-Mistress made up her mind that there was no reason at all why I should not cut out silhouettes. So, backed by the moral support of my lawful superiors and surrounded by the keen and realistic views of my companions, I went with trepidation into the business of writing for someone besides myself. In the years since then, I have come to recognize just how desperate a business it is, and how tremendously important the press can be; but ignorance was my only equipment at the beginning, along with a dazed determination to be obedient.

In the past ten years my research has settled into a pattern which allows a maximum of help from a discouraging set of circumstances. I have access to an excellent library, well-stocked with Dominican records, and have several times gone to Eastern libraries where Lady material or special Dominican material can be found. Since 98% of these records are in some other language, there is the question of accurate translation, which has been generously handled by the Dominican Fathers with whom I work on any doctrinal or hagiographical matter. Always when I need help, it comes along from somewhere, and people have been unfailingly kind. In ordinary circumstances, I think, people are much quicker to criticize than to praise; perhaps Our Lady- who is my general manager- understands that I am not the rugged sort who can get along entirely on my own, sufficient unto myself and unconcerned what the rest of the world thinks. It makes me very happy to receive letters from Mexico and Iceland and India from people who have read my books, and to know that my silhouettes are hanging on the walls of a convent near the South Pole and in a rectory in Denmark and in Bangkok and Ireland. Last year I met a young Dominican student from Hong-Kong who says he learned to read English from one of my books, and there is a young couple in the midwest who each year make up the family Christmas card with one of my silhouettes as background and their lovely children in front. A mission chapel in Louisiana has two of my pictures on the walls, beautifully enlarged and painted by the parishioners; and every Christmas there are the wonderful letters

from people all over the world, more than outweighing the inevitable scars and struggles of a tough profession.

There still remains the identifying question as to whether I am a silhouettist who also writes books, or an author who also illustrates. It will be simplest if I just say that I do not know, and have no strong feeling either way.

My silhouettes have been used not only in my own books but also as magazine covers and illustrations, and by the N.C.W.C. News Syndicate as features in all the English-speaking and Spanish-American countries for several years.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Sister both wrote and illustrated *A Shady Hobby*, by Jean Frances Bennett, pseud. (Bruce, 1944), a hobby book of silhouette cutting; *Mary My Mother* (Sheed, 1945), a Mary book for small children; *Our Lady's Feasts* (Id., 1946), a Mary book for teenagers; *A Crown for Joanna*. (Id., 1946), a life of Blessed Joanna of Portugal for teenagers; three volumes of Dominican Saints for Children: *Hunters of Souls*, *Truth Was Their Star*, and *Army in Battle Array* (Bruce, 1946-47); *Our Lady of Springtime* (St. Anthony Guild, 1953), lyrics; *Shepherd's Tartan* (Sheed, 1953), essays on convent life; *Fount of Our Joy* (Newman, 1955), Lady legends for dramatization; *Master Albert* (Sheed, 1955), life of St. Albert the Great for children; *The Carrying of the Cross* (St. Anthony Guild, 1959), meditations for women; she also wrote *Shrines of Our Lady* (Sheed, 1956), *Mary* (id., 1958), *St. Dominic* (Herder's Cross & Crown series, 1959); and she illustrated a number of books written by other authors.

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