



**THE  
MAGDALENE  
MYSTERY**

**CHRISTINE  
SUNDERLAND**

“So much Gnostic and sub-Gnostic nonsense has been written about Mary Magdalene that it comes as a relief, as well as a pleasure, to read Christine Sunderland’s novel. Unlike many other popular writers, she is well aware that truth is often stranger than fiction—and much more fascinating. Accordingly, though the plot of her book is indeed fictional, Christine has throughout based it on the most reliable evidence and writes from an orthodox point of view, weaving complex material into a gripping tale surprisingly easy to read. One that takes us not only to Provence—where lies the heart of the mystery—but on a guided tour of several of Rome’s most inspiring churches.”

MICHAEL DONLEY, PH.D.

Author of *Saint Mary Magdalen in Provence, The Coffin and the Cave* (Gracewing, 2008)

“*The Magdalene Mystery* has history, intrigue, romance, and predatory Internet behavior. It is an up-to-date mixture that intertwines past and present in Christian life and practice. Where else can you see a single parent and a theology professor compete with a cyber-predator to find a manuscript revealing the real Saint Mary Magdalene? It made me yearn to visit Rome again!”

PAUL S. RUSSELL, PH.D.

Author of *Looking Through the World to See What’s Really There: One explanation of the first step towards religious belief* (AuthorHouse, 2004)

# Novels by Christine Sunderland

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## THE TRILOGY

Pilgrimage

Offerings

Inheritance

Hana-lani

The Magdalene Mystery



*The Magdalene Mystery*

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“Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.”

EXODUS 20:16, THE NINTH COMMANDMENT

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“The first day of the week cometh Mary Magdalene early,  
when it was yet dark, unto the sepulchre,  
and seeth the stone taken away from the sepulchre.”

JOHN 20:1

## PROLOGUE

### Roma

IN THE FADING LIGHT FATHER KEITH GILBERT BENT OVER THE PAGE, reading his words with care. Soon it would be time for Vespers, and the yearnings of hours past would return, the echoes of other bells and other chants, the flicker of flames before ancient altars, here in Rome and throughout Christendom. Soon one of the postulants would help him to the chapel, and Father Gilbert would be grateful.

The old priest knew he must finish this letter to Kelly, the child he had neglected and for whom his heart ached. Others had typed much of it—but he must add his own script.

*May 9, 2010*

My dear goddaughter,

If you are reading this, I shall be with our heavenly Father.

From this great distance, from this historic and holy city of Rome, I have watched and prayed for you. Your parents' death was a great loss. They were like my own children.

Images of Martin came to him. The young academic had visited Saint Mary's with his Katherine, looking for a suitable site to be married. In the process of marriage counseling, it was not long before Martin was converted—"fell in love with God," as he often said later. Katherine renewed her faith, returning to her roots, she claimed. They were received by the Church, and Father Gilbert blessed their marriage vows. Martin drank up the faith like a traveler in the desert. He served as acolyte at the altar. Katherine, too, with her serious dark eyes, learned quickly, eventually teaching Faith Formation classes. Then Kelly was born, such a joy to everyone. They had waited so long. They had prayed so many prayers for a child.

Father Gilbert studied the letter to his goddaughter.

You have been always in my prayers. You are intelligent, but do you use the mind that God has given you? Do you know what you

believe? Do you know *why* you believe? Do you understand truth, and how one finds it? Today many authorities will compete for your allegiance. Indeed, the creed of emotions has supplanted rational thought, so that truth and reality are vague and wispy things.

He asked himself, *Is this too much—too heavy a beginning?* But he continued.

Kelly, a great weight has been on my heart. I feel responsible for your parents' death. If they had not been with me, if they had not been involved in my work on the Magdalene, they would not have died. My grief at times is overwhelming.

I vowed to finish the work they died for. I continued the research. I increased funding and staff for the newsletter we founded, *Opus Veritatis*: the telling of the truth, the correcting of the lies, the making straight the crooked paths weaving through arts and letters, those half-truths that pollute the minds of the young and vulnerable. It was—and is—our great work, to fearlessly set the record straight.

Now, with this letter, I re-own my duty to you, for *duty*, defamed as the word is today, is the conscience and discipline of love. I pray I am not too late.

I believe my hour to meet our God is near, to see his face at last, not merely to hear the melody in time but to sing with his angels and saints. My body is decaying. I gladly relinquish it and look forward to my new and resurrected one.

I recall that you like mysteries, and with this letter I challenge you. To be sure, all life is a mystery, as is the Holy Trinity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Our world is charged with God's grandeur, as the poet Hopkins said, for it is full of mystery and miracle. But the mystery of which I speak is more of a personal quest, with a true grail to be found.

I have been studying the early Church, those first centuries of Christianity. Many writers are interested in Mary Magdalene, the sinner and saint, said to be the woman with the jar of ointment who washed the feet of Christ, the woman with the seven demons from Magdala. She has been known as many Marys, but who was she really?

I have traced her through the centuries and have recorded my conclusions. Your quest is to find this writing, the work of my life. For the story of the Magdalene is the story of the first-century Church. And the story of the first-century Church is the story of Jesus and his

resurrection. It is a story that gives the modern world reason to believe.

Should you solve this mystery, not only will you receive your legacy, but you will hear the Magdalene's melody. And I pray the tune will touch your heart and soul as it has touched mine.

Do you accept my challenge, Kelly? If you do, then come to Rome, to the Church of Santa Susanna. Ask to see my associate, Father Fitzroy. He shall give you your first clue.

To begin, you must solve the following puzzle. The answer will gain your audience with Father Fitzroy. Also contact Dr. Daniel C. Weaver in Berkeley, a professor of New Testament Studies, a member of Saint Mary's. He will help you. Show him this letter.

May God be with you, and one day, may you see Our Lord face to face.

With all blessings and love,  
Until we meet in heaven,  
Your Godfather Gilbert

PSLES DRCEE AOT

*Not a deed,  
Nor a rhyme,  
It tells of a seed  
That grew in time.*

*It holds the heart  
And calls the mind,  
But is only a part  
Of a greater find.*

*From ancient of days  
It ruled the soul  
And led to praise  
As bells did toll.*

His chest aching, the old man reread the letter and said a short prayer. His fingers shook, and he struggled to control them as he scrawled his name, jerking the letters across the page. He folded the thin paper, worked it into an envelope, and sealed the triangular flap with wax, a dove above a heart, the emblem of his order, *Opus Veritatis*.

Relieved, he turned to the open window and gazed over Rome, massaging his chest. The evening was drawing near, the day ending, and the bells of the

city clanged. The light in the room in the *monastero* was dimming, and already he could hear men and women chant the Psalms in the chapel. He focused watery eyes on the envelope and scratched the address: *Kelly Ann Roberts, 618 Oak Grove Road #15, Walnut Creek, California 94595, U.S.A.*

The wooden crucifix on the wall had always given him strength and now he waited upon it. He folded his hands, closed his eyes, and rested in the image. Then, full of certainty, he opened his eyes and made the Sign of the Cross over his head and heart.

Father Keith Gilbert reached for his cane. He pounded the wooden floor twice and watched the door, waiting for the postulant.

## Kelly

THE DREAM SHE DREAMED WAS ETHEREAL, pulling her higher and higher, as if wings fluttered beneath her hands and arms, and although she felt fear, it was a fear promising happiness.

*And so Kelly Ann Roberts climbed, rooted on earth, each step leaden, as she watched for boulders and tried not to glance down. The cliff face offered footholds, shallow ledges in the massive wall of rock, but there were also shiny surfaces, slippery, deadly. She focused on the stone and the ascent, and when she glanced up, more sky breathed upon her, changing from brilliant blue to deep and starry like a Van Gogh painting.*

*As she climbed, she heard a distant melody, feather-light and in a major key, or was it minor now, weaving through her, louder with each step, a harp or a violin or a piano. She climbed, full of fear and hope and wonder....*

\*

Sensing the dream slip away, Kelly tried to hold it close, but failing, sat on the edge of her bed and willed its return, failing again. Nevertheless, she carried with her through the early morning both the fading memory and an increased longing, as she woke her son, helped him dress, and prepared their breakfast. Would that she could return, re-enter the place where she had been, but soon she was rinsing cereal bowls, positioning them in the dishwasher, and the sweetness, the music, was gone.

More important matters faced her this Saturday in May, matters of loss, matters of death. As she dressed for her godfather's funeral, she drew her heart and mind together to meet the coming hours. She knew she would mourn Father Gilbert, not as she mourned her parents, but as someone who was part of her history, and she would have to face this loss. She supposed this was the purpose of funerals, to help with the facing. She hadn't seen him in many years, but he had kept in touch with cards at Christmas and Easter and occasional lengthy letters. Only last year he sent her a colorful, gilded icon, and she found it comforting to place it near the door, blessing her going out and coming in. Yes, the funeral would make sense of it all.

For now she chose her clothes carefully, deciding on a conservative black blazer from her days at the bank, a cream camisole, and a heather gray pencil skirt. As she reached for pearl earrings she could hear five-year-old Matt playing in the next room, making grating noises for his trucks—the front loaders, the mixers, the forklifts, the graders—and the sounds soothed her. Not for the first time she wished there was a father in Matt’s life, but she had no regrets that she chose to have the baby.

Kelly loved her son more than she loved herself. She often thought it was them against the world, although the melodrama—and the triteness—of the phrase annoyed her. *She* was better than that, doing what must be done and not wanting praise or pity, but at the end of the day, after bath and story and prayers and a snug tuck-in of the worn sheets under the soft mattress of her child’s bed, she would scrutinize her pinched face in the tarnished bathroom mirror and feel so lonely, so scared. She had turned thirty last week, and as she soberly reflected on the passage of the years, decided she had more dark nights than bright days, anxiety shadowing her. Above all, she wanted to be safe, and safety was never quite within her reach.

Working for the bank, she had felt safe, at least financially, but since the layoffs her monthly bills had eaten into her small savings. How would she ever make ends meet? Her English degree hadn’t helped her with employment, and she had worked hard for that BA. She had applied to other banks and businesses, but with no luck. Her apartment in Oakview Gardens was the cheapest she could find. Where would she go if she couldn’t make the rent?

Kelly stepped to the small window of her bedroom and peered through the mini-blinds, angled discreetly, to the neat beds of oleander and juniper, trying to calm her approaching panic. What would become of her? She turned to the bureau and the instant photo taken in the booth at the mall. She and Carter were happy, joking that day, making silly faces at the quickly shooting camera. Why didn’t he want to get married? She had been in love with him, or so she thought. Evidently, he had not been in love with her.

She had led a quiet life, homeschooled and bookish, and perhaps, looking back, was somewhat sheltered from the real world. But to Kelly, sex meant love and not lust. Sex meant marriage and family. When she brought up the question of their future, Carter’s eyes had shifted away. Into his silence she poured her urgent demands, hating the shrill sound of her voice. Within the month he was gone, and she steeled herself to not return his calls, calls that never came.

He had been her first love, her first intimacy, her first heartbreak. Before

Carter, she had refused guys again and again, recalling her mother's moral admonitions and dreading disease. With Carter and his smooth way about him, she felt comfortable. She trusted him. Yet, in spite of his tenderness, he was often distant in his lovemaking, as though they engaged in a delicate sport where timing mastered the moment. The experience was a mistake she did not repeat and promised herself not to repeat in the future.

When she discovered she was pregnant, Carter had urged an abortion, but once she saw the ultrasound, she knew what she would do. The tiny arms and legs moved to the thump of the baby's heartbeat. She could see the head, the eyes, even the genitals. The volunteers at the pregnancy center helped her through the remaining seven months, offered adoption services and follow-up care. When she decided to keep her baby, they encouraged her to go back to church, to find a support system, since she had no family nearby. She had never looked back, never second-guessed her choice. Today, she could not imagine life without her child. She could not think of breathing without her son, Mathew Michael Roberts.

With her index finger she nudged her tortoise shell glasses higher on her nose and eyed a polka-dot scarf, then thought better of it, for she *was* attending a funeral. Did one wear such decorative things to funerals? She recalled her parents' funeral ten years earlier with a too-familiar pain.

Kelly twisted her long thick hair into a bun, securing it with pins. "Matt, use the bathroom, honey. We need to get going, or I'll be late." Where had she put her godfather's last letter?

"Will Josh and Ethan be at Andrea's?" Her son's voice rose with interest.

She checked the desk drawer, pulled out the tissue envelope with the Vatican postage, and slipped it into a side pocket of her handbag. "They should be, since they live there now." How did Andrea manage, having custody of her grandsons, and at her age? But Andrea always managed, and once again Kelly was grateful for the friendship of this elderly widow who lived next door and loved children.

Kelly heard the toilet flush, and her son, stooped under a backpack crammed with trucks, joined her in the hall. His eyes were serious, she thought, as though mapping the afternoon with his friends. She glanced at her watch and checked the front room. TV off. Lights off. Sliding glass door locked with metal bar in place.

She eyed the open kitchenette. Nothing appeared to be on. Lady Jane, their black-and-white longhair, lapped water from a dish near the fridge. Laddie, their red tabby, slept soundly on the worn armchair near the window, basking in a pool of sun. The room with its familiar furnishings encouraged

her with a sweet sense of belonging, as though ensuring her return. *Home*. As she gazed at the bookshelves, she recalled Andrea's novel, found it, and slipped it into her bag.

Moving toward the door, she saw that Father Gilbert's icon tilted a bit, and she straightened it. Nancy from church had explained it was called "Trinity." The image depicted three angels who, in the form of men, visited Abraham, but Kelly could not recall the Old Testament story. Even so, the gilded image intrigued her, and she wondered for not the first time whether angels existed, or whether they were the product of wishful thinking as some claimed. For that matter, had Abraham ever existed? Her anthropology class had dismissed these "holy tales" as cultural phenomena created by society's psychological needs. Even so, the colorful painting on wood glowed with reassurance, as though beauty and form were enough. Could she hold onto beauty and form? Could she trust them?

Matt grabbed the edge of her jacket and pulled down hard. Taking his small hand, she opened the front door, stepped into the morning light, turned, and carefully fitted her key into the lock. The bolt slid, clicking hard into the jamb.

They followed the path to Andrea's and, as Kelly expected, her neighbor greeted them with an open smile and crinkly blue eyes. She wore a plaid apron tied loosely over blue jeans and dusted with flour, and was sliding her fingers down the fabric, drying them. Her gray hair, feathered short, reminded Kelly of the British actress Judi Dench, whom she greatly admired, and Andrea did indeed have the classic face of a star—the high cheekbones, the sculpted nose, the wide smile. She must have been stunning when she was younger, Kelly thought, although today she simply looked tired. Kelly hoped she wasn't adding to Andrea's already heavy load, and thought once again how much she appreciated the babysitting co-op in her apartment complex. She would babysit Josh and Ethan soon. She would repay her.

"Something smells good." Kelly stepped into the apartment, a reverse floor plan of her own. But here, Andrea's earlier life with Mr. Fairchild filled the room. The worn antiques were pleasingly old-fashioned: mahogany tables, Queen Anne chairs, damask slip covers, silver-framed mirrors, Impressionist prints enhanced with oils, cameos arranged on a roll-top desk. Recognizing Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* playing, Kelly was eased by the ordered tempo.

"Bread. Yeast rolls. The boys love 'em." Andrea turned to watch Matt as he ran to the back room to play with her grandsons.

"Everyone loves them." Kelly laughed and handed her the novel. "And I loved *this*."

“I thought you would! *Children of Men* is amazing. Popped my socks right off! Can you stay for a bit? A little coffee? A cinnamon bun?”

Kelly shook her head with true regret. “I wish I could, but I can’t. I’m late already.” She set her purse on an ottoman and searched inside for a slip of paper. “Here’s my number, the church number, the doctor.”

“I have all that.”

Kelly nodded. “I know, but just in case, I’ll set it by the phone. And here’s Matt’s asthma medication and inhaler.” Her heart clutched when she recalled Matt’s brush with death last year, across the street in the field of mustard grass. Who knew he was asthmatic? And how quickly it had come on—one, two, three hours and his lungs had filled with liquid. His eyes had swollen shut. His stomach had cramped in pain. She drove like a madwoman to Emergency, where they pumped him with an intravenous solution. Within weeks they found he had multiple allergies, but mainly to grasses, and Kelly worried how she would keep a boy away from lawns, from parks, from yards. Was such a thing possible?

“Right.” Andrea peered at her with extra encouragement. “Now don’t you worry. He’ll be fine. Everything will be right as rain.”

Her friend’s truisms wrapped Kelly like a soft shawl, and she found Matt and hugged him. “I’ll be back soon, sweetie. You be good for Andrea.”

He wriggled from her grasp and returned to his friends.

She checked to see that her cell phone was on and slipped out the door, waving to the elderly woman, grateful for the invisible thread connecting them, a thread that unwound slowly as she drove away, her heart sinking with each mile. As she turned onto the freeway, she checked her gas gauge, usually hovering around the quarter mark. While her Taurus got good mileage, she rarely had enough cash to fill up the tank and she was trying to save her credit card for emergencies. She eyed the dial: enough for Berkeley and return.

She glanced at the envelope peeking out of her handbag on the passenger seat. Father Gilbert had said to contact Daniel C. Weaver, a professor who attended Saint Mary’s, but neglected to give her a number. Kelly hoped he would be at the funeral. Searching her memory, she couldn’t recall him. The letter was intriguing, but surely there was another way to receive her inheritance. She couldn’t afford to go to Rome, she couldn’t leave Matt, and she couldn’t take him with her. But her godfather had written that she would greatly benefit from the trip, and she could sure use the money....

# PILGRIMAGE

Christine Sunderland

It was a day  
when nothing should have gone wrong...  
but everything did.

Madeleine Seymour will never forget what happened twenty-two years ago in her own backyard. She's still riddled with guilt. Hoping to banish the nightmares that haunt her and steal her peace, she travels to Italy with her husband, Jack, on a pilgrimage. As a history professor, Madeleine is fascinated by the churches they visit...and what they live about the lives of the martyrs. But can anything bring her the peace that her soul longs for?

[www.ChristineSunderland.com](http://www.ChristineSunderland.com)

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# OFFERINGS

Christine Sunderland

Jack's haunted by fears of the past.  
Madeleine holds a powerful secret.  
And Rachelle is running away.

For the last seventeen years, her husband, Jack, and son, Justin, have been Madeleine Seymour's world. Then, during Justin's wedding reception, Jack collapses. Jack needs surgery, and he insists it be performed by the doctor who perfected the procedure. But the doctor isn't reachable, and time is running out.

Dr. Rachelle DuPres, plagued by memories of a deadly failure, flees America to search out her roots in her ancestral village in Provence, France. But as she tries to locate the graves of her Catholic uncles and her Jewish parents, will their roles in the Holocaust bring more angst—or the answers she so desperately seeks?

*A poignant story about choices made along the way...  
and the miracles of the heart.  
Set in the breathtaking beauty of France.*

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# INHERITANCE

Christine Sunderland

She risked everything to save a life...  
But who would save hers?

Vietnamese-American Victoria Nguyen, seventeen, flees to England with a powerful secret...and a determined senator on her trail.

Madeleine Seymour, a history professor, and her husband, Jack, a retired wine broker, travel from San Francisco to London to purchase property for a children's home—and find much more than land at stake.

Brother Cristoforo, a black Franciscan from the Seymours' Quattro Coronati orphanage in Rome, wrestles with demons of his past and present.

Woven through the mists of Lent to new life on Easter Day, *Inheritance* draws the lives of these four characters together to a stunning, unforgettable conclusion.

*A poignant story about choices made along the way...  
and the miracles of the heart.  
Set in the breathtaking beauty of England.*

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# HANA-LANI

CHRISTINE SUNDERLAND

Only opening their hearts will keep them  
from plunging into the dark abyss.

Old Nani-lei lives in Hana-lani, her family home in rural Hawaii. She looks after her grandson Henry, 52, and his daughter Lucy, 6, who have returned to Maui from Berkeley after the death of Maria, Henry's wife. Henry and Maria, both professors, had been working on *A History of Ethics*, and now the grieving Henry struggles to finish it.

City girl Meredith Campbell, 36, fast-paced, self-centered, and beautiful, believes her body will ensure her happiness. After losing her job and finding her lover unfaithful, she flies to Maui, sure he will follow...but her plane crashes near Hana-lani.

As their worlds collide in a natural world both beautiful and dangerous, Henry will be forced to act on his words, and Meredith will come face-to-face with her own life choices.

*A poignant journey that unravels T.S. Eliot's "permanent questions"—  
what is goodness, truth, and love?*

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## About the Author



**CHRISTINE SUNDERLAND**, author of *Pilgrimage*, *Offerings*, *Inheritance*, and *Hana-lani* (all OakTara) has long been fascinated by the nature of historical truth, particularly in reference to the first-century Christian Church and the veracity of the New Testament Gospel accounts. Her many visits to Rome and southern France have inspired this exploration of the claims of the twentieth-century “historical Jesus” movement and the novels of Dan Brown.

She serves currently as Managing Editor of the American Church Union (*Anglicanpck.org*). She has recently edited for the ACU a second edition of the retreat addresses of Raymond Raynes, C.R., *The Faith*, first edited by Nicholas Mosley in 1961.

Christine holds a B.A. in English Literature *cum laude*. She is an alumna of the Squaw Valley Writers Workshop and the Maui Writers Retreat. She lives in Northern California with her husband and two amazing cats. She writes wherever and whenever she has a chance.

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