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Review of Michael Kinnamon, *The Nominee: A Novel* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2024)

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Michael Kinnamon. *The Nominee: A Novel*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2024. 240 Pages.

REVIEWED BY ROGER W. WEDELL¹

“The Nominee” is a work of historical fiction, based on the very real experiences of the author from February through October 1991 when he was the nominee for General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Through his alter-ego, Matthew McAvoy, we are led on a journey that begins with him being told he is one of three finalists and ends with the vote count eight months later.

Early in the narrative we discover that Dr. McAvoy is Dean of Disciples Seminary in Lexington, Kentucky and that he is well-known as a scholar of church history, with special interest and ability in ecumenical and interfaith dialogue. While his work in administration and ecclesial diplomacy is highlighted throughout as excellent preparation to be GMP, it stands in contrast to a lack of experience in local church ministry, which is identified as a substantial defect. This becomes a point of contention during his time as the nominee. We meet a large cast of characters (25+ named individuals and 10+ organizations that function as characters) who inhabit Dr. McAvoy’s extended family, the seminary, the denomination, collegial organizations, and even a local eatery. Primary characters include Margaret, his wife; Abigail, his 9-year-old daughter; Zachary, his 3-year-old son; Frank, his father; Duane Porter, current GMP; Raymond Crawford, Moderator and Chair of the Nominating Committee; his deceased mother, and even Alexander Campbell. Abigail is a delightful foil to her father’s sometimes detached scholastic personality and plays a significant role as “truth teller,” as only a precocious fourth grader-soon-to-be-a fifth grader can.

The surface storyline is a narrative of an established process for selecting a denominational official. That process is upended when it becomes known that Dr. McAvoy is a dues-paying member of the Gay, Lesbian and Affirming Disciples Network.

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As that single issue (the place of queer people in the church) explodes into “THE” issue, we watch as the nominee moves from casual, somewhat uninformed dues-paying member to ally to outspoken advocate, speaking with passion about how the centrality of Scripture informs his theology, administration, and life. We watch as the threats against him and his loved ones intensify and as a more nuanced understanding of Christian unity emerges. We witness his growing confidence as an individual and as a leader. We catch glimpses of a man who struggles internally with what it means to be a family, what it means to be in a true marriage of equals, how one lives into an unknown and unknowable future. We are given insight into how one achieves clarity even in a singular moment of rejection.

The deeper story is about conflict – personal, familial, institutional, and cultural. The usual culprits affect the characters: how to allocate time across multiple demands; whose priorities take precedent; whose beliefs are “truer;” how to build or maintain community in times of division; what does leadership look like in times of conflict. At one point, Dr. McAvoy identifies the conflict between liberals and conservatives as “the most pressing church unity issue of our era.” (77) What becomes clear is that this conflict is much broader and more insidious, becoming what we now experience as the politization of our common life. “The Nominee” (neither the novel nor the person) does not resolve these conflicts. At the end, we do learn that taking a vote is not a satisfactory resolution.

I read many works of historical fiction, but this is the first with which I have first-hand experience of the narrative. In 1991, I was active in the real-life counterpart to The Gay, Lesbian and Affirming Disciples Network and attended the assembly in Tulsa. As I read this novel, I was frequently distracted by questions regarding “historical” and “fiction.” I already knew how the story ended; at least I assumed I did. I was there. I could not silence the voice in my head that asked if a specific incident really happened or if that character was so-and-so. Perhaps more fiction and less history would have helped reduce these distractions. The writing style is clean and clear, reflecting the scholarly background of the author. “The Nominee” is an enjoyable read and worth the reader’s time.