



Christine Palamidessi

WHERE OLD WORLD SPIRITS HAUNT NEW BEGINNINGS

By Faith Schantz

One of the special talents possessed by Alicia Barzini, a surgical nurse and the heroine of Christine Palamidessi Moore's first novel "The Virgin Knows," is to coax the souls back into the bodies of her patients when they leak out during operations.

The other is to beam her vision toward her twin brother Carlo, spying on his life in post-World War II America from her home in Italy.

When Carlo moves to Boston's North End to find his dreams, Alicia warns her mother not to pray for his return. "Nothing costs so much as what is bought by prayers," she reminds her. After their parents die, however, Alicia spends her evenings sewing for the Catholic "Benevolent Society" — and praying.

Made miserable by her dedication to follow the rules while her brother follows the future, she alternates prayers for the destruction of his new family with pleas for God to ignore her most recent curse.

VIRGIN KNOWS

Christine P. Moore

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While Renato runs a theater and Jassy lives to sing, Virginia works for one of Carlo's successful business ventures. She manages Spediamo, a shipping company for Italians moving back to the Old Country, and others, such as the Boston branch of the Benevolent Society, whose business is less straightforward.

Alicia reserves most of her curses for the free-spirited Jassy, and it is Virginia who becomes their agent.

Writing in a style as clear as watercolor painting, Moore (a Pittsburgh native) mixes fantasy, religion and superstition with fully rounded characters and an amusing plot that moves from Laszlo Toth's destruction of the Pietà to the Farm in Tennessee. This is a world where Alicia would have had her brother's beautiful eyelashes if he hadn't pushed past her to be born first.

The narrator's virginity, in a memorable passage, exits her body to deliver a lecture. As novel-reading is only a civilized form of spying on one's neighbors, there is a particular kind of gleeful pleasure in accompanying Alicia on her invisible missions to Boston.

"THE VIRGIN KNOWS"

By Christine Palamidessi Moore
St. Martin's Press. \$22.95.

The scenes of Alicia's first real visit... there are equally charming, as the modern-thinking Jassy and Virginia try to understand the Italian woman's point of view.

During a discussion of virgin-worship, Jassy advises her, "Never trust a man who thinks you can't be as good as God's mother." Alicia's delicate explanation of virginity as an honor that a woman presents as a gift to her husband "stuns" Virginia. "I never thought of it that way," she says. "Too bad for me. I got rid of mine a long time ago — the first opportunity I had."

The virgin disregards their advice, but by the end of the book she knows enough to learn from an elderly nun who is even more down to earth than Virginia.

"If no one was jealous too much life would be lived," the nun tells Alicia. "Too many connections would be made and no one would understand that love requires dependence, attachment, and always