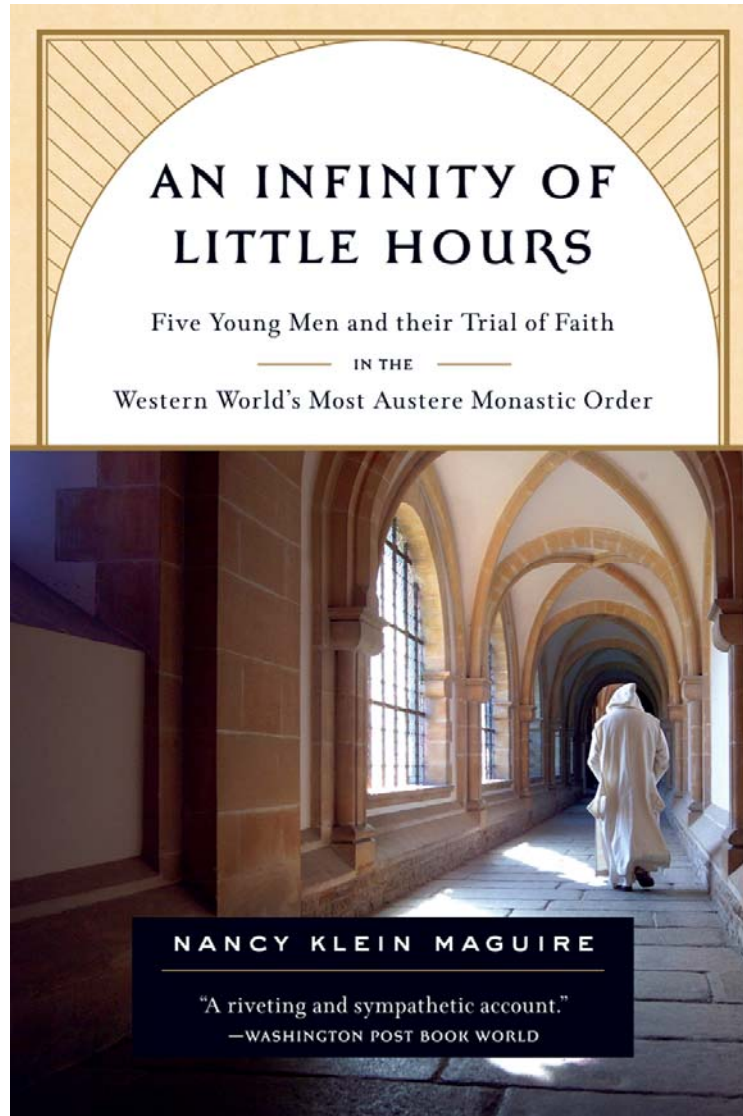




## A Reading Group Guide for



# AN INFINITY OF LITTLE HOURS

Five Young Men and their Trial of Faith

IN THE

Western World's Most Austere Monastic Order

NANCY KLEIN MAGUIRE

"A riveting and sympathetic account."

—WASHINGTON POST BOOK WORLD

**The Carthusians are a reclusive order. How did you gain access to Parkminster, and how commonplace is it for outsiders, especially women, to be allowed inside the monastery?**

My husband is an ex-Carthusian; I learned that the Prior of Parkminster, the English Carthusian monastery, had been in the novitiate with him. In desperation, I called the Prior. The answering machine requested that all communication be by fax. After endless revisions, I faxed an introductory letter. To my utter amazement, the Prior responded the next day, extending an invitation to visit. I had hoped, at best, for a very formal hour of conversation. The Prior had said that if I were discrete, I could use the library on the grounds of “a professional person in the execution of her duties.”

The Prior was a quick read; he interviewed me in about five seconds. I knew that, in some sense, he had accepted me. When all the monks were in their cells, the Prior’s representative led me into the monastery by a side entrance. Out of my mind with excitement, bogged down with two tape recorders, hours of tape, and film, I entered another world, another century. I surreptitiously took pictures as rapidly as I could on the longest possible route to the library. During this visit, instead of the expected formal hour, I talked to the Prior and another monk from the 1960-65 class for about twenty hours.

I visited Parkminster again in 2003 and talked to the new Prior, and again with the former Prior, and the other monk from the 1960-65 class

Before Vatican II, it was nearly impossible to get inside a Charterhouse unless you were a male relative of one of the monks, and then you were only allowed a bi-annual visit. Women were simply never allowed inside. For example, one of the monks in *Infinity* tells the story:

In Church, last year, I got appendicitis. I turned orange and was feeling a real wrench in my gut. I collapsed on the floor, all two hundred pounds of me. Father Prior stopped the prayers and called for an ambulance. So, imagine me stretched out on the floor of the cold church. I heard the sirens blaring as they came down the road into the Charterhouse. I heard the brothers open the gates to the entrance. I calmed down a bit. Help was on the way.” He raised his voice just a bit, continuing in an understated way, “But, then, I heard the ambulance leaving. Father Prior had seen that a nurse, a woman, was in the ambulance! The ambulance had to back out, and leave the woman outside the Charterhouse. Then it returned for me.” He thought about it for a minute and said rather cheerfully, “at least they did come back.

A Queen has the right to enter a Charterhouse in her own country, but Queen Victoria, on the occasion of her Golden Jubilee, needed a letter from the Pope to visit the Grande Chartreuse. Since Vatican II, women are allowed inside for professional reasons. For example, a female nurse took care of Dom Guy, one of the monks in *Infinity*, when he was dying. Women are also allowed inside to evaluate books in the library or to do various kinds of repair work.

### **How were you received by the monks – both as an outsider, and as a woman?**

The monks received me as one of themselves. I never felt that being a woman barred me from access to them, nor did being an outsider. I found them emphatic, generous, and in an odd sense, kindred spirits.

### **What inspired you to write this book?**

For twenty years, I had been obsessed by the execution of the Charles I, the king of England. I desperately wanted to go back in time and actually see what happened. Twenty years later, I saw a real opportunity to go back into history, not into the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but into the 11<sup>th</sup> century. When I found out that the Carthusian order hadn't changed in nearly a thousand years, I had a new historical obsession. I had found, by sheerest accident, a slice of frozen history, an unopened window into the eleventh century. Not only the monks' liturgies and customs, but even their garments, were those of the eleventh century. History had frozen there. I found practically nothing in print about the Carthusian order, but I was hooked. My 25 years of research at the Folger Shakespeare Library took over, and I determined, whatever it took, whatever it cost, to discover the life of these monks.

Writing a cultural history of hermit monks who don't speak presented an irresistible challenge. Tracking down ex-monks of the pre-1965 era became a daunting research project. The quest became an historical obsession which lasted for over six years during which time I deciphered tiny handwritten letters and notes as well as digressive and thoughtful e-mails. The process was endless and energizing, leading from one monk and ex-monk to another. My network and archive kept expanding.

### **You say that ex-Carthusians can be difficult to live with – why?**

Once a Carthusian always a Carthusian. A Carthusian who remains for even 4-5 years has learned extraordinary self-directedness. He has lived alone successfully, with almost unlimited time to himself. Monks typically neither need to receive or give attention. They need a lot of solitary time, and, especially in their early days in the Charterhouse, the monk may not have paid attention to other people. On balance, however, an ex-Carthusian is a great husband because his level of commitment and trust is total.

### **The reaction of the Carthusian community has been very positive, and several monks and ex-monks have said that your portrayal of the Carthusian way of life is remarkably accurate. How easy was it to get inside the mindset of the monks?**

The entire project was difficult. But getting into the mindset of the monks was the most difficult. I had to learn the monastic language and literature, use their unique Latin vocabulary, and invest nearly seven years communicating with them, via fax, email, letters, and telephone calls. And, even then, only after I met the monks in person, did they become transparent. There was an amazing trust between us. I felt as if they were my brothers.

### **Being a scholar, did you identify with the monks' desire for solitary study?**

Yes. I find that being a scholar requires a tremendous amount of solitude and concentration. I can only write in solitude. I find it a lonely business, but one to which I am addicted. I wrote most of the book on an 80 acre piece of the Virginia mountains. I found that I thrived on solitude while writing this book. I also learned how difficult it is to keep a sense of stability and self-worth in isolation.

**Are you religious, and if so, how did writing this book affect your spirituality?**

I would describe myself as spiritual, and the book deepened that trait. In my early life, I was very religious. I was raised in a town that was about very Catholic and I went to Catholic schools. I suppose that in a sense I am Catholic much as someone born into a Jewish heritage is Jewish. Later, I became a typical Washingtonian--pursuing people who could advance my career. I now find myself more interested in God than I have ever been. I don't have any answers, but I am looking for them. My further books will be religious in the sense that they will continue to look for meaning, or, as I would say colloquially, "something that is bigger than humans." One of my favorite monks says: "God is over it all." I am very interested in God.

**Why do you think, in recent years, people have become more fascinated with religion and spirituality?**

After 9/11, I realized at a very deep emotional level that I couldn't count on physical supports, even on personal supports. The only security I found was in going deeper into myself. I suspect this happened to many Americans, and as terrorism continues, and countries across the world see it on television every night, perhaps we all move inside ourselves trying to find something that is stable.

Dom Augustine Guillerand, a famous Carthusian writer, writes, "The true secret of secure and durable peace resides in detachment from superficial realities and events which form the surface of our lives. . . they leave us empty. We have need of something else, and that durable reality is in the depths of our soul."

When I started writing *An Infinity of Little Hours* in 1999, people had never heard of Carthusians. Philip Groening (director of *Into Great Silence*) and I completed our Carthusian projects within months of each other: Groening in November of 2005 and myself in February of 2006. Why? Why did the order open its doors to two outsiders after nearly one thousand years of silence? Perhaps the order recognized the need for contemplative experience—or perhaps it simply needed new members.

## Discussion Questions

1. Were the descriptions of the monks and their lives what you expected? Were the types of people who decided to become monks those that you would expect?
2. What do you think were the novices' motivations for pursuing the monastic life? Were other factors, besides religion, involved?
3. Which people did you think were going to "make it" to solemn profession? Were you surprised by those who were actually professed?
4. The monks, just like the rest of the world, seem not to be without their prejudices. What kind of prejudices do they have? Are they different from those of the outside world? How do you think these prejudices arise?
5. What do you think of Dom Joseph's approach to his novitiate? Do you think that he was a good novice master? What does Maguire seem to think?
6. How do politics and hierarchy affect the character of Charterhouse life? Novices must be "voted in" to be solemnly professed. Do you think this is a fair system?
7. Why do you think that reading (as opposed to discussion) is considered such an important part of a Carthusian monk's life?
8. The Carthusians always resisted intrusions from the outside world, yet they invited Maguire into their world, and recently allowed filmmaker Phillip Gröning to make a documentary (*Into Great Silence*) about them. Why do you think they have lately opened their doors to outsiders?
9. Could you see yourself entering such a monastery? What do you think you would find the hardest part about being a Carthusian monk?
10. Is there any question you would like to ask these young men, now in their senior years?