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**Scrabble Tiles Can Help Decipher the Devil's Messages:
From Baby-Killing Nuns to Baby-Wanting Witches
in American Fiction and Culture**

Thomas Aiello

Rosemary Woodhouse sat on the floor of her apartment in 1966, frantically trying to make scrabble tile anagrams from the title of the book *All Of Them Witches*. She then attempted the same thing with "Steven Marcato". She finally found the name of her neighbor in the arrangements, cluing her in to the grand diabolical experiment of her pregnancy. Maria Monk stood on hard convent ground in 1834, receiving orders from her Mother Superior to fetch coal from the cellar. Upon her journey through the cavernous basement, she came across a deep hole, perhaps fifteen feet in diameter. There was lime strewn all around it, cluing her in to the grand diabolical practice of murdering the offspring of priest-nun rape. Both characters stood as representatives of the American Protestant desire to protect themselves against perceived threats.

Maria Monk's *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery of Montreal*, the revised edition published in 1836, sold over 300,000 copies by 1860, only outsold by *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Ira Levin's *Rosemary's Baby*, published in 1967, was also a bestseller—seventh on the fiction list for that year—and became a film that was a box office success. Though published 131 years apart, the books carried many similarities that contributed to their popularity. They both featured a heroine who entered a dark, mysterious, labyrinthine house (Monk the nunnery, Rosemary the Bramford apartment building), both heroines were subject to the horror of the "evil" taking place in each building (Monk the rape and torture of herself and the other nuns, as well as the murder of any baby born of those rapes; Rosemary the rape by the devil, brought about by the trickery of the building's residents trying to bring about the spawn of Satan). There were also notable differences. Rosemary was generally unaware of the evil goings-on around her, while Monk was all too aware. Rosemary grew, in the end, to begrudgingly accept her fate (at least, if nothing else, her role as mother), while Monk escaped the convent all together. Monk's tale was presented as fact, Rosemary's as fiction.

The most significant difference, however, is that the early nineteenth-century secret evildoers were Catholics, while the late twentieth-century secret evildoers were Satanists. Were the two antagonists switched, neither book probably could have been published, much less purchased by hundreds of thousands. Though the formulas were similar, the enemies were very different. The anti-immigrant nativist sentiment of the early 1800s made people far more disposed to fear/hate Catholics. The Protestant Puritan roots of the country and the growing uneasiness at the onset of the industrial revolution (and its attendant immigration) made Catholics a far greater threat to the God-fearing populace of the 1830s. Satanists, certainly, were not filling the available jobs in new American industrial centers. In the 1960s, by contrast, the ultra-religious Cold War climate that had been burgeoning for two decades since the close of the Second World War was far more concerned with the prospect of "evil." Those American values of the 1830s were now threatened by Soviet Russia, and communism

and its attendant atheism were portrayed as the apotheosis of evil. In the 1960s, Christians were easy to understand, non-Christians, because of the Soviet threat, were suspect. So there was a different sort of Christian/American distrust permeating the populace in the two eras—the first, afraid that Catholic immigrants would infiltrate the country and erode the bedrock Protestant foundations of the nation; the second, afraid that Communists would infiltrate the country and destroy the Christian democracy they so cherished.

Monk's *Awful Disclosures* outraged the American populace. Investigators flocked to Montreal to examine the Hotel Dieu Nunnery, but when they arrived, they found no corroborating evidence to back Monk's claims of debauchery. Monk's mother claimed her daughter's head had been run through with a slate pencil as a child, thus triggering a mental imbalance. William L. Stone produced his own narrative, *Maria Monk and the Nunnery of the Hotel Dieu, Being an Account of a Visit to the Convents of Montreal and Refutation of the "Awful Disclosures"* (Franchot 160-161). The Catholic response and the refutation of the most outlandish of Monk's claims attempted in small measure to counter the quick sales of her account, as well as other similar accounts of the era. A group of nativist, anti-Catholic ministers helped ghostwrite Monk's account and profited from the healthy sales. Monk's feelings of betrayal and the swirling controversy surrounding her caused the author to flee New York for Philadelphia in 1837. Though the events of the last twelve years of her life remain relatively unknown, Monk died in poverty in 1849 (Billington, "Maria Monk" 286, 296).

After *Rosemary's Baby* became a bestseller in 1967, it became a successful film the following year. The novel was Ira Levin's first in fourteen years, following his 1953 thriller, *A Kiss Before Dying*. Its success, along with the success of Roman Polanski's film version, prompted a far more rapid publication schedule, with Levin producing three novels in the 1970s. The story also highlighted new theological and feminist turns, directly mentioning *Time* magazine's coverage of Thomas J.J. Altizer's Christian Atheism and clearly portraying the pitfalls of pregnancy in modern times (Fischer 4). *Rosemary's Baby's* 1836 predecessor finds neither atheism nor Satanism as problematic hurdles, but *Awful Disclosures* does find a significant pitfall in pregnancy. The resemblance of the two works, however, moves far beyond the birth narrative.

Maria Monk's *Awful Disclosures* begins in Victorian gentility, assuring readers that though the acts of the portrayed Catholics are vile, "the virtuous reader need not fear" (4). Monk promises to be discreet. She first describes her early childhood and the varieties of nunnery in Montreal. The group with which she would eventually be involved was the Black Nunnery. Though the name serves to conjure illusions of evil, "black" was simply the color of the nuns' robes. Monk came from a nominally Protestant, relatively irreligious family, though she attended religious schools. Unlike Rosemary, when Maria entered the convent, she was fully acquainted with the exhausting ritual of the building's religion.

"At length," wrote Monk, "I determined to become a Black nun" (23). After inquiries were made, Maria was accepted into the convent as a novice. With no individual rooms, she was afforded no privacy. She spent her days learning the rituals required of her, but soon she grew tired of the nun's life and left her novitiate behind. After a disappointing life outside the cope of the church, including a hasty marriage, Maria paid her way back into the nunnery with money stolen from her mother and

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loaned from her friends. She was surprised upon her return to find that "great dislike to the Bible was shown by those who conversed with me about it" (39). She persevered, however, and took the veil in a ceremony that required her to lie in a coffin on the altar of the church. After the haunting ceremony, her Mother Superior informed her, "One of my great duties was to obey the priests in all things; and this I soon learnt, to my utter astonishment and horror, was to live in the practice of criminal intercourse with them" (47).

The priests reassured her that doubts were the enemies of all properly devout Catholics. And yes, they also told her, sometimes infants are born. "But they were always baptized and immediately strangled! This secured their everlasting happiness" (49). Monk estimated that hundreds of babies died during the time of her brief tenure in the Hotel Dieu.

Father Dufrésne was the first priest to rape Maria, but rape, she soon discovered, was a regular—near daily—event at the Hotel Dieu. The emphasis on regimentation as a purifying element spread to even the less pure of the nunnery's activities. Lying to the relatives of novices also became commonplace, and Maria's doubt was met with a priest's approbation: "What, a nun of your age, and not know the difference between a wicked and religious lie!" (71). What was good for the Catholic church was good for God. The priests, in fact, wielded unbridled power: "They often told me they had the power to strike me dead at any moment" (78). Priests even used confessions as staging grounds for rape, once raping a fourteen-year-old girl to death.

The supposed Catholic hatred of Protestants remains a refrain throughout Monk's narrative. At one point in the narrative, Maria is even told not to pray for Protestants. She notes that the Protestant Bible was considered throughout the convent as a dangerous book. The story even circulated among the nuns that a priest refused to help quell a city fire until it threatened Catholic neighborhoods. Similar stories constantly filled the nunnery. Murders and rumors of murders hid behind every corner, but Maria soon gave empirical evidence, describing her forced participation in the suffocation of a fellow nun as punishment for disobedience. Along with murder, infanticide, and rape, Monk also accused the convent of keeping a makeshift prison in a dark, near-deserted basement below the Hotel Dieu.

As if this were not enough, penances for mundane offenses were particularly exaggerated. Kissing the floor was common, as was consuming meals with a rope tied round the neck of the penitent. Nuns drank the water used to wash the feet of the Mother Superior. They branded themselves with hot irons, they whipped themselves, they stood in a crucifixion pose for extended periods of time (175-79).

Monk also emphasizes the building itself and its dark corridors as a principal character in the horrific drama. After learning the Hotel Dieu's floorplan as best she could, Maria decided to escape, maneuvering her way through the labyrinthine corridors into a world free of the evils of Catholicism, on to New York, where freedom-loving Americans guarded against the papist menace.

More than a century later, in the same town, the fictional Rosemary Woodhouse hoped that she and her husband Guy would be approved for residency in the exclusive Bramford apartment building. After inquiries were made, Rosemary and Guy were accepted into the building as residents. Her friend and surrogate father, Edward Hutchins, disapproved. He told the couple stories of bizarre deaths, ritual murder,

cannibalism, witchcraft, and satanic ceremony. Hutchins, known to Rosemary as "Hutch," described the life of Adrian Marcato, an 1890s witch who claimed to have conjured Satan. The Bramford was "a kind of rallying place for people who are more prone than others to certain types of behavior," Hutch argued. "Or perhaps there are things we don't know yet—about magnetic fields or electrons or whatever—ways in which a place can quite literally be malign" (27). Like the Hotel Dieu, the Bramford apartment building is itself a central character in Levin's narrative. Its dark hallways, mysterious residents, and secret passages loom over Rosemary's long pregnancy. Though the author never explores the connection further, Hutch tells the couple that the church next door owns the old Victorian building, inherently implying that church apathy contributes to the dark doings inside.

Rosemary's alienation in the old building is relieved initially in a way Maria's never is—she does her laundry with Terry Gionoffrio, a drug addict and prostitute taken in by Roman and Minnie Castavet, the couple living in the apartment adjacent to the Woodhouse's on the seventh floor. Terry wears a charm around her neck filled with foul-smelling "tannis root," given to her as a gift by her new surrogate family. The relationship is brief, however, as Terry commits suicide later that week—a tragedy that leads to Rosemary and Guy's own acquaintance with the Castavets. Consolation leads to gratitude, which leads to a dinner and a secret conversation between Roman and Guy. Though Rosemary and her readers do not discover the scope of the conversation until the novel's conclusion, Roman lures Guy into a Satanic quid pro quo—Rosemary's womb for Guy's professional acting success.

Ritual is paramount in the Bramford as it is in the Hotel Dieu, and the Woodhouses wryly comment on the bizarre chanting coming from the Castavet's next-door apartment. Although rituals constitute Maria's torment in *Awful Disclosures*, it is the secrecy surrounding them that constitutes Rosemary's. And whereas Maria is raped by priest after priest, Rosemary is raped by the devil himself. Even this traumatic event is shrouded in secrecy, as a drugged chocolate mousse kept Rosemary drifting tenuously in and out of consciousness through the entire ordeal. Meanwhile, Guy's acting career begins to flourish as his chief rival for a major part inexplicably goes blind.

While *Awful Disclosures* catalogues the various atrocities in the Hotel Dieu, *Rosemary's Baby* allows Rosemary and the reader to construct the possible scenarios of evil hidden behind the compulsions of her husband and neighbors. When Hutch finds even more evidence for treachery amongst the Bramford, he immediately falls into the clutches of an unexplained coma. And, Hutch excepted, no one outside the hotel sees the evil hidden inside the corridors of the dark building. Monk emphasizes the same secrecy—the cloister of the imposing structure adding magnitude to the dark deeds perpetrated within its walls.

Chosen outsiders, however, are "in" on the plot. The Castavets urge Rosemary to replace her obstetrician with their own, Abraham Saperstein. "He delivers all the Society babies and he would deliver yours too if we asked him," Guy concurred, "[w]asn't he on *Open End* a couple of years ago?" (139). Saperstein, however, is party to the larger Satanic plan. Like the priests who come from all over Montreal to secretly partake in the rape of nuns, Saperstein continues a regular practice of helping others in his daily life, but spends his spare time at the Bramford, participating in the ritual and ensuring that Rosemary's pregnancy continues according to the Castavets' plan.

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The smell of the "tannis root" gives him away. Eventually—using the tannis root and a methodical piecing together of available clues—Rosemary uncovers the entire plot, including Saperstein's participation, and decides to escape. Her attempt, however, is not as successful as Maria's. Though her range of motion extends beyond the confines of her building, Rosemary is still unable to escape. She makes contact with her former obstetrician, who feigns sympathy before turning her over to her husband and Saperstein. Like Maria's Dr. Nelson, who volunteers at the charity hospital, Rosemary's doctor does not believe in the evil-doings surrounding her because he has no reason. "We're going to go home and rest," Saperstein told his fellow doctor. Rosemary's unwitting betrayer smiled. "That's all it takes, nine times out of ten" (266-67).

Soon after Rosemary returns to the Bramford, she goes into labor. When she awakes from sedation, the Bramford residents give her the sad news that her baby, a boy, died soon after birth. The group daily takes Rosemary's milk and claims to throw it away. She soon discovers the plot, however, and makes her way through a secret passage (again the treachery of the building itself) into the Castavets' apartment, where her baby—the son of Satan—is resting in a black bassinet. Satanist tourists from all over the world are present, fawning over her son and taking pictures. Though Rosemary never acknowledges the hold of the Satanists over her child, she finds joy in her son, regardless of whether his eyes are the yellow eyes of the devil or not.

The stories are very similar, and the heroines of each narrative experience surprisingly similar circumstances. But Maria Monk could never have been supplicant in the hands of Satanists. Her feigned Victorian gentility could not even allow her to describe her sexual encounters with priests. In presenting herself as a victim because she was a proper lady—it was, after all, her dignity as a female that made these crimes so heinous—Monk's narrative takes a romantic tone to emphasize that her heroine (herself) was, in fact, a lady. Further, Satanists were virtually unheard of in nineteenth-century America, and certainly posed less of a threat to the average reader of popular literature than did Catholics. Similarly, Rosemary Woodhouse could never have been supplicant in the hands of infanticidal, rapist Catholics. American culture's political correctness would never have allowed such a book to become a bestseller. During the Cold War, Catholics were fellow Christians and Christians were the last line of defense against the atheistic communist menace. Americans were encouraged to hate and fear communism, but economic theories are often obtuse and do not properly permeate the popular mind. The Soviet rejection of religion as counterproductive to a communist society, however, was an act that every Christian American could understand and fear, thus uniting them in their status as believers.

The Protestantism following the American Revolution was a liberal, tolerant Protestantism, flush with the ideals of the new nation, but its welcoming spirit did not last. Immigration did its part, particularly Irish Catholic immigration, as Europeans sought jobs created by the growth of cities in the New World. In the 1820s, America's fastest-growing city was Rochester, New York, a product of the Erie Canal, completed in 1825. A transportation revolution brought roads and railroads along with the canal, and upstate New York became a vital center in the new United States. Paul Johnson argued in *A Shopkeeper's Millennium* that the religious revivals that followed this growth were the result of the tumult brought by economic change (15-18). More likely,

however, the economic growth of the region and the religious revivalism that swept through the area fed off one another in a reciprocal relationship that sustained both.

Either way, the resulting religious fervor set the region "on fire" for God, creating what historians now understand as the "burned over district" of upstate New York. The leader of this Second Great Awakening was Charles Grandison Finney, a former lawyer who modernized the revival experience by creating a formula for the salvation of souls. Finney argued that certain tactics could be employed to convince someone of their own iniquity and need for God's grace (Hambrick-Stowe 103-04). He prayed for people in his audience, by name, he created an "anxious seat" whereby people who needed a salvation experience could sit, with the audience looking on, and find saving grace. His tactics worked. Finney's success and the broader American acceptance of the evangelical principles of the Second Great Awakening made fundamentalist Protestantism the standard by which all other faiths were judged. And Catholicism was far from fundamentalist Protestantism (Billington, *The Protestant Crusade* 41-42).

The emphasis on fundamentalist Protestantism grew into strong anti-Catholicism, and the first anti-Catholic newspaper, *The Protestant*, appeared in 1830. Four years later, prompted by an escaped novice who told of unspeakable acts of Catholic treachery, much as Monk would do, a Boston mob stormed the Ursuline Convent and burned it down (Maury 53-54). Not surprisingly, anti-Catholic secret societies and religious groups became commonplace. In the early 1850s, two of those secret societies, The Order of the Star-Spangled Banner and the Order of United Americans, joined together to form a larger political body. Members, sworn to secrecy, were told to reply "I know nothing" to queries. Thus, the Know-Nothing Party began, and grew to more than one million members by 1854. This anti-Catholic sentiment was rampant throughout the antebellum period, and Monk's tale is one of many similar, though less popular, stories of Catholic debauchery. Susan Griffin argues that American nativism gave authors a "cultural shorthand" for depicting Catholic characters, allowing these popular melodramas—all presented as exposés rather than fictions—to flourish (17).

As the nineteenth century became the twentieth, however, religious belief became more important than the specific church in which it appeared. From 1926 to 1950, church membership increased at over twice the rate of the national population growth. In 1953, ninety-five percent of Americans claimed to be Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish (Gallup 1293). The following year, ninety-six percent of Americans claimed to believe in God, and in 1957, ninety percent of the population believed that Jesus was divine (Gallup 1482). Sunday School enrollment increased markedly in the 1950s, as did new church construction, and a majority of citizens clearly identified an increasingly important role for religion in their lives. In 1958, almost 110 million Americans held religious affiliations, compared to eighty-five million in 1950 (Gallup 1481). In such a climate, those who do not believe at all are far more dangerous than people who simply believe differently.

In 1954, the US Congress added the phrase "under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance. The bill passed unopposed. In 1955, the body added the slogan "In God We Trust" to American currency. The following year, "In God We Trust" became the official national motto. Throughout the decade, the House Un-American Activities

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Committee investigated potential communists. One of the tell-tale signs of a communist was a lack of religion. The Soviet Union was the new great enemy after the fall of Nazi Germany, and though most average Americans could not specifically identify the specific "evil" in Russian economics, they could find fault in a nation professing atheism (Fried'9). As a counterbalance, evangelists and politicians publicized American religion as the first line of defense against communism. Christianity was Christianity, whether Catholic or Protestant. At least it was not atheism (read: communism).

In 1960, seven years prior to the publication of *Rosemary's Baby*, Americans elected a Catholic president, John F. Kennedy. Though the evidence must necessarily remain circumstantial, it is unlikely they would have elected an atheist, much less a Satanist. They never have. Just as a Catholic president would be unthinkable in an era when the anti-Catholic Know-Nothing party garnered over one million members, an atheist or agnostic candidate could never proclaim himself (or herself) to be representative of the US constituency. Though Rosemary Woodhouse was born a Catholic, she had renounced her faith for the agnosticism of her husband, and both ridicule religious faith throughout the first chapters of *Rosemary's Baby*. Thus, Congress asserted from the halls of government that atheism leads to communism, and Levin elaborated on the proposition by portraying atheism as leading directly to the devil himself.

In 1963, Lee Harvey Oswald assassinated America's only Catholic president. Significantly, however, it was communism, not Catholicism, that prompted the murder. That same year, the Supreme Court removed public prayer and Bible reading from public schools, a decision that prompted outrage throughout the nation (*School District of Abington Township v. Schempp*, 374 US 203). Madalyn Murray, the petitioner in the case, became a target of American resentment following her victory, suffering the murder of her cat and graffiti accusing her of communism. Vandals inflicted severe property damage and threatened her family with death. She received threatening correspondence from across the nation. "You filthy atheist," wrote one disgruntled citizen, "[o]nly a rat like you would go to court to stop prayer. All curses on you and your family. Bad luck and leprosy disease upon you and your damn family." "Lady," said another, "you are as deadly to our city as a snake. Return to Russia. (Signed) A True Believer in our God who gave you the air you breathe." Finally, direct death threats also emanated from Murray's mailbox: "You will repent, and damn soon a .30-.30 (rifle bullet) will fix you nuts. You will have bad luck forever. You atheist, you mongrel, you rat, you good for nothing s ___, you damn gutter rat. Jesus will fix you, you filthy scum" (Howard 92).

Still, what this reaction should demonstrate is the general consensus that Catholicism was no longer the problem. While Rosemary Woodhouse sat in Abe Saperstein's obstetrical office, she read a *Time* magazine, the cover of which asked "Is God Dead?" Though Rosemary's story was fiction, the issue of *Time* was real. The cover story offered a relatively elementary summation of Christian atheism and wondered about the existential crisis of American faith. "Belief," it quoted University of Chicago theologian Langdon Gilkey as saying, "is the area in the modern Protestant church where one finds blankness, silence, people not knowing what to say or merely repeating what their preachers say" ("Toward a Hidden God" 83). Though Gilkey describes Protestants, the article quotes Protestants and Catholics throughout under the

broader description of "Christian." Jo Agnew McManis noted soon after the novel's publication, "Levin has made us believe, at least for the moment, in witches" (36). If all else fails, she seems to be saying, remember that it is a novel. Unlike Monk's tale, readers need not be afraid when the book is finally concluded.

Literary scholar Robert Lima noted that the period was one "of ecumenical realignment" (215). He describes the Castavets as Satanists spurred to action by debates such as that in *Time* magazine. Just as Rosemary's religious uncertainty led her down a path of unrighteousness, society's uncertainty about its true religious state leads to works like Levin's (215). That uncertainty, however, was a function of social progress. The hardened certainty of the 1830s led to the hatred and demonization of Catholics, and thus to the exponential sales of works such as Maria Monk's *Awful Disclosures*. By the 1960s, the hardened certainty against American believers, whatever their belief, had dissipated. As a result, Levin's *Rosemary's Baby* saved its demonization for demons themselves, a far less destructive target for the maintenance of stable society.

A stable society was just what the United States felt it needed in the face of the communist threat. The strong anticommunist stance of the Catholic Church ensured that it would not be categorically included with the possible "enemy within." Thus, a faux-nonfiction account of the murderous, perverted tendencies of Catholics would have never been welcomed by a Christian community united against the communist monolith, but it became the second bestselling book of the nineteenth century. A fictitious account of the birth of Satan's son that would have never eluded the Victorian genteel sensibilities of an antebellum editor became a 1967 bestseller. Both found success because they responded to the contemporary American religious culture that surrounded them.

As Rosemary fiddled with her Scrabble tiles, trying desperately to make *All of Them Witches* into clues, her baby began kicking inside her. "You're going to be a born Scrabble-player, she thought" (221). Some of her frustrated attempts at anagrams were "comes with the fall," "who shall meet it," and "we that chose ill"—three phrases that Maria Monk, 131 years prior, would have understood all too well.

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Özet

**Kelime Oyunu Taşları Şeytanın Mesajını Deşifre Etmeye Yardım Edebilir:
Amerikan Romanı ve Kültüründe Bebek Öldüren Rahibelerden Bebek İsteyen
Cadılara Geçiş**

Maria Monk'un 1836 tarihli *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery of Montreal* ve Ira Levin'in 1967 tarihli *Rosemary's Baby* filmlerinin her ikisi de karanlık ve gizemli labirentvari bir eve giren kadın başkahramanlar sergiler. Her iki başkahraman da bu binalardaki "kötü"ye maruz kalırlar. Erken ondokuzuncu yüzyıl kötülükleri Katolik iken, geç yirminci yüzyıl kötülükleri satanisttir. Bu iki kötü karakter birbiri ile yer değiştirmiş olsaydı her iki kitap da basılmayabilirdi. 1800'lerin başlarında gelişen göçmen karşıtlığı duygular insanlar arasında daha fazla korku imgeleri yaratmayı başarırken; 1960'ların ultra-dinci Soğuk Savaş iklimi de ateist "kötü" imgesini getirdi. Topluma sızan Amerikan güvensizliği farklıydı—öncekiler Katolik göçmenlerin ülkeye sızıp ülkenin yapıtaşları olan Protestan kurumlarını yıpratacağından korkarken, sonrakiler Komünistlerin ülkeye sızıp çok sevdikleri Hristiyan demokrasiye zarar vermesinden korkuyorlardı.