

MARY JESSICA WOODS MEDIA KIT



ABOUT MARY JESSICA WOODS



MARY JESSICA WOODS was raised and homeschooled in the Chicago suburbs, where she read as many adventure stories as she could get her hands on. At the age of ten, she realized she was doomed to be a writer and has been following the muse ever since. Still seeking adventure, she headed out west to Wyoming Catholic College, where she climbed mountains, rappelled off cliffs, and studied the Great Books.

After graduating *summa cum laude* with a bachelor's degree in the Liberal Arts, she returned to the Midwest to work as an editor. Mary also volunteers as an editorial assistant for the literary magazine *Dappled Things*, and her nonfiction has appeared in *America Magazine*, *Catholic World Report*, and *First Things*. In her mind, she spends most of her time on distant planets or alien spaceships, but she actually lives in rural Michigan. Follow her work at maryjessicawoods.com.

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MARKMAKER



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He swore to paint the truth. Now he is living a lie.

For the Noxxiin people, tattoos define identity: they commemorate birth, ancestry, accomplishments—even crimes. As a tattoo artist living on an ancient generation ship, Mariikel Serix has sworn to record the truth. So when he becomes an unwilling accomplice in the banishment of an innocent man, he is horrified that he has broken his oath—and his eyes are opened to the misery of the Underbelly, the realm of the outcasts.

Despite the risk to himself, the young markmaker begins secretly helping the ship's exiles. But more trouble is brewing. The Serix guild, which regulates the ceremonial tattoos, engages in a power struggle with the Ascendance, a domineering political faction—and the conflict threatens to destroy the fragile peace among the Noxxiin clans. Amidst this discord, an enigmatic artist named Haza'ruux singles out Mariikel to be his apprentice, for hidden reasons of his own. As Mariikel ventures deeper into a maze of political strife and ancient clan secrets, he realizes that his pursuit of justice may not only cost his reputation—it may cost him his life.

ADVANCED PRAISE

Mary Jessica Woods has built out an imaginative sci-fi world in which questions of identity, birth, and death cannot be ignored, as we so often do in ours. I read it start to finish, from the underbelly of the ship to the glowing marks of power, and was sad when it ended. Here, for those with eyes to see, the truth is traced out as surely as an invisible mark upon the heart.

FATHER MICHAEL RENNIER, *Dappled Things Magazine*

A mesmerizing debut! *Markmaker* explodes the highest potential of sci-fi, uniting a vivid and intricate alien world, full of poignantly real characters, with deep, lingering themes. *Kaz'valiim*, Mariikel. I hope we meet again.

ELEANOR BOURG NICHOLSON, author of
A Bloody Habit and *Brother Wolf*

MARY JESSICA WOODS

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ADVANCED PRAISE, CONTINUED

Markmaker is an extraordinary first novel, beautifully plotted and elegantly written. From the first pages, it engages the reader in the struggle of its young narrator with the contradictions of a world that has lost—and not only literally—the gravity of its great past. Woods begins with a simple premise: suppose tattoos were not personal expressions, but symbols with the whole force of the law behind them, and suppose that instead of being a “tattoo artist,” the markmaker occupied an almost priestly role while the marks themselves bore an almost sacramental power. Without a trace of pretension, the story is a parable of what it means to wear our deeds publicly as our justification before others, and also what it means when malice and power distort these visible signs and subject the innocent to injustice. Woods takes the reader into scenes that are deeply moving in the confrontation between mercy — literally, a transgression against the strictness of the codes — and the misery of an exile and humiliation as palpably abject as leprosy. The characters of the closed world of the ancient ship spring to life in all their dimensions, and in the gathering complexities of the plot, the challenges to the constructed hierarchy expose the limitations we both inhabit and enforce upon other. This book is a vivid accomplishment: it makes its reader feel the presence of greatness, first as a mere rumor, and then as a reality earned and enacted.

GLENN ARBERY, president of Wyoming Catholic College
and author of *Bearings and Distances* and *Boundaries of Eden*

Mary Woods weaves a riveting story of an unlikely alien hero who flaunts the restraints of his unusual culture, and while doing so, holds up a mirror to fallen humanity. I couldn't put it down. Any true lover of science fiction has to read this book.

ANN MARGARET LEWIS, author of
Murder in the Vatican: the Church Mysteries of Sherlock Holmes
and *Star Wars: The Essential Guide to Alien Species*

Markmaker opens as science fiction but slowly and surreptitiously moves into the realm of the fantastic. The result is a rare achievement, science fiction that retains a sense of ultimate wonder about the world.

JEREMY HOLMES, Associate Professor of Theology,
Wyoming Catholic College, and author of
Cur Deus Verba: Why the Word Became Words

MARY JESSICA WOODS

SAMPLE INTERVIEW

Tell us about your book.

Markmaker tells the story of Mariikel Serix, an alien tattoo artist living in a society where everyone's life history is written on their skin. He is devoted to his craft, but after he is coerced into giving a mark of banishment to an innocent man, he realizes that the tattoos he reveres are not always as truthful as they seem. He has to grapple with this moral dilemma while facing increasing persecution from the Ascendance, a warmongering political faction that wants to use the ceremonial tattoos for its own ends.

It's an intense, character-driven story set in an immersive alien world, with political drama, mystery, and a hint of magic.

Where did the idea for the story come from?

The world of *Markmaker* began as a tabletop role-playing game created by my friend Donan Scholl. We were classmates in college, and I was a player in his sci-fi RPG, entitled Watchpoint. I absolutely fell in love with the world Donan had come up with—the extensive lore, the zany characters, the space fantasy vibe. I'd never written science fiction before, but I was so taken with the setting that I started writing my own spin-off stories based in the Watchpoint universe.

After graduation, a few of us from the role-playing group stayed in touch and continued sharing stories and lore. One day, Donan wrote a list of the ceremonial tattoos used by the Noxxiin, one of the main alien races in the Watchpoint world. This fascinated me—I'd been wanting to write a story about the Noxxiin for a while, but I'd always felt that I didn't understand their culture well enough. The list of tattoos, however, gave me a real glimpse into their

way of life. It also raised intriguing questions like: what is the role of the Noxxiin tattoo artist? What are the laws surrounding this crucial art? And what kinds of moral dilemmas would arise in a society where these marks define your identity?

The idea of a rogue tattoo artist—a markmaker who is at odds with the laws of his own craft—sprang to mind and immediately grabbed my interest. I named this new character Mariikel Serix, and the rest is history.

Exile is a major theme in Mariikel's story. What is its significance, and how did you handle this idea in the novel?

For the Noxxiin, family bonds are everything: in society, in law, and even in their religion. Their concept of salvation involves maintaining their connection—represented by their clan tattoos—with their honorable ancestors. So exile, for them, is not merely a legal question; it has a spiritual component, more like excommunication.

Mariikel does not have an actual exile-mark, but for most of the story, he still feels like an outcast. Even though he has a loving family and a strong community, he has long carried the subconscious sense of being an outsider. This feeling only intensifies once he realizes he has broken his markmaker's oath. So he naturally sympathizes with others who struggle to belong—which is why he feels compelled to help the ship's exiles, even when it means defying



MARY JESSICA WOODS

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the laws he's been trained to preserve.

There is a sense, too, in which the whole Noxxiin race is in exile. For centuries, they have been nomads, travelling through space in their fleet of massive generation ships. Now they have returned to the planets that their ancestors fled long ago, only to find them colonized by humans—or, as the four-eyed Noxxiin like to call them, half-sights. But the Noxxiin, like humans, are a fallen race. Their fervor to regain their homeland turns into a desperate war, leading them to commit atrocities that violate their own laws and ancient traditions. Ultimately, their quest to reclaim the ancestral planets echoes a deeper yearning for a spiritual home—like our own human longing for a state of lost grace.

What was something that surprised you during the writing process?

Many things surprised me during the writing of this book, but one of them has a name: Haza'ruux Serix. Haza'ruux was not even my own creation; he first appeared as one of Donan's characters in the Watchpoint RPG. When I wrote the first draft of

Markmaker, I originally included Haza'ruux on a whim, as a fun little cameo from the game. However, he promptly informed me that he was appointing himself as Mariikel's mentor and taking control of the plot, and there was nothing I could do about it. I surrendered without protest—it's best not to argue with the mad markmaker of Clan Serix.

What are some stories that influenced you while writing this book?

There are so many! I have always loved stories that are a mash-up of fantasy culture and sci-fi technology—a couple childhood favorites include James Gurney's gorgeously illustrated *Dinotopia* books and the (underappreciated) Disney film *Atlantis: The Lost Empire*. The idea of a society that has a high level of technology but also has an ancient, almost tribal culture has always appealed to me. I also enjoy sci-fi stories where the central conflict is deeply moral and personal, such as in Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game* and Christopher Nolan's film *Interstellar*. For the politics plot of *Markmaker*, I took a lot of inspiration from the TV series *The Expanse*—the first two

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seasons do an excellent job of combining compelling character arcs with interplanetary political intrigue.

There are plenty of non-sci-fi influences on this book as well. I think the narrative voice owes something to C.S. Lewis's *Till We Have Faces*, which is a retelling of a Greek myth. That book, although set in a pre-Christian world, is still one of the most emotionally raw and spiritually honest novels I have ever read. I also took a cue from *Watership Down*—that classic (and terrifying) tale about a society of rabbits—which has one of the most compelling depictions of a fictional religion that I have ever seen. Finally, towards the end of *Markmaker*, I found myself unconsciously using imagery that was reminiscent of the *Aeneid*. This was funny to me—I confess, I like Homer better than Virgil—but once I realized I was using that classical trope, I totally leaned into it.

The Noxxiin culture is ostensibly pagan—their religion revolves around ceremonial tattoos and ancestor worship. Given the setting, in what way can *Markmaker* be considered a Christian or Catholic story?

First of all, it is a Christian story insofar as it is a moral story. As George MacDonald once said about fairy tales, the fiction writer can invent new worlds and fantastic settings, but he cannot change the order of good and evil. The Noxxiin are not human and do not have the same salvation history that humanity has. But they still recognize natural law, the existence of a divine creator, and the reality of a spiritual realm beyond this physical world.

Second, this story can be considered Catholic in its sacramentality. The Noxxiin treat their tattoos in much the same way that we treat our sacraments—a physical sign of an invisible reality, which confers spiritual power or protection. At the beginning of the writing process, I was quite unconscious of

this influence, but so many early readers pointed it out that the connection quickly became clear. The markmakers are priestly figures; even the ceremonial words they say while painting tattoos are reminiscent of liturgical language. I credit much of this to my experience of being Byzantine Catholic—the Eastern expression of Christianity has a distinct poetry and physicality of worship that is very beautiful and evocative. Some of that ethos made its way into my imagination of Noxxiin society, as well.

My primary hope is that people will enjoy the novel as a good story. If they experience truth or beauty while reading it, I believe I have done my job as a Catholic author.

What are you writing next? Is there a sequel to *Markmaker* in the works?

I did leave Mariikel and company in something of a predicament—so yes, I hope to write a sequel or two to complete his story. It may take me a while to wrangle all the characters; they are currently running wild in my brain with total disregard for the needs of plot structure. I would also love to write another book with Mariikel's cousin, Askko. He is a warrior for the Ascendance (the antagonistic faction in the novel), but he's a good person at heart. He also has a propensity for getting into trouble, which of course makes for great drama. And those are only two of the many characters I would like to write about. Suffice to say there are plenty of stories left to be told in this world!

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INTRODUCTORY ARTICLE

TRUTH IN THE FLESH: TATTOOS AND TRADITION IN THE WORLD OF MARKMAKER

When I first began writing *Markmaker*, I had nothing but a name and a premise: Mariikel Serix, an alien tattoo artist who had broken his oath to paint the truth. I didn't know why he was an oathbreaker; I assumed he was involved in forgery or smuggling or some other criminal venture. But I didn't know for certain. He wouldn't tell me.

Instead, during that initial draft, I had to follow him—from the prestigious tattoo studio where he worked, through the vast worldship where he lived, down into the darkness of the Underbelly, the realm of the exiles. And there I watched him take his pens and freely give marks to a destitute young mother and her newborn child.

Oh, I thought. *Oh*. So that was the kind of person I was writing about.

This man was not a mercenary, seeking wealth or power. Neither was he a renegade, breaking the law for the thrill of it. He was an artist, born into a tradition that he loved and revered—a tradition which, nevertheless, he

found himself compelled to defy for the sake of these outcasts.

There is a trope in young adult fiction—and even in adult fiction, especially in sci-fi and fantasy—of

the rebel. In these stories, the hero encounters an oppressive social order and, spurred by righteous anger and aided by a band of loyal friends, overthrows that order to establish a more just regime. There is nothing wrong with this trope; it speaks to a certain truth and makes for dramatic storytelling. But personally, I sometimes wish for more nuance in the execution of this plot. We are all formed by the cultures into which we are born. The flaws we perceive are not merely “out there” in society; they also exist in our own hearts. And often, the discarding of tradition—even a tradition with real failings—simply wrecks more damage on a culture that is already deeply wounded.

So I didn't want to write a hero who rejected his tradition. I didn't want a protagonist who could hold



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himself apart from his heritage and condemn it. But he could not be blind to injustice, either. Instead, he had to undergo something even more painful: the crucible of loving his inheritance while also recognizing its evils.

Mariikel is the ideal character to suffer this dilemma. He is a markmaker, a tattoo artist, in a world where tattoos are the primary expression of status, law, and religion. This makes him a keeper of civilization, a guardian against the crimes that threaten the social order. But this order is not perfect—as Mariikel discovers when he finds himself compelled by political pressures to give a mark of banishment to an innocent man. Not only is the law he upholds corrupt, but he is also an agent of that corruption, complicit in a visceral, personal way. He feels his fault like a defilement of body and spirit—a falsehood in the flesh.

This is an excruciating revelation. But Mariikel does not respond by giving up his profession. He cannot. His tradition, though broken, is the only one he knows. Instead of rejecting his flawed heritage, he turns towards it. He faces the abyss of his people's guilt. As an act of atonement, he descends into the Underbelly to bring marks to the exiles.

So Mariikel *is* a rebel—but he is a thoroughly

reluctant rebel. The irony, of course, is that he breaks the law not because he is a bad markmaker, but because he is a good one. His conscience points him beyond the limitations of the law towards the living wellspring of truth. He defies tradition not to overturn but to renew it.

This renewal comes about not by revolution or legal reform, but rather by the individual encounters that Mariikel has with the exiles. As Haza'ruux, the old hermit-artist, tells him, he can see beyond ink to the truth of hearts. With each tattoo that he gives to the outcasts, he gropes unconsciously towards a purer form of his own tradition—a law aligned to the complexity of reality, offering both justice and compassion to those in need.

This pursuit of a truer tradition is a painful and often lonely journey, as it thrusts Mariikel outside the conventions of society and into direct conflict with the order he is sworn to protect. But even as he suffers this isolation, he unwittingly founds a new community among the people he serves in the Underbelly. In this unlikely renewal of tradition, love overcomes the failings of the law. In the end, even the mark of exile becomes a strange bond of kinship—a sign of contradiction for all who know the grace that comes through suffering.

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