

## EXCERPT



### **The Art of Living in Season** *A Year of Reflections for Everyday Saints*

April 9, 2024 | \$25, 240 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0696-2

Continuing the tradition of nativities peopled by *santons*, Sylvie Vanhoozer brought these “little saints” from her native Provence to England, Scotland, and the United States. Now she invites readers to join the tradition in the rhythms of nature and the church calendar through weekly reflections and her own botanical illustrations.

## An Invitation to Come and See Christ

Every year throughout the South of France, in villages set amid hills dotted with olive trees and scented with thyme and juniper, enchanting little parables unfold—part of a unique tradition unknown to most outsiders. At Advent, *santons*—“little saints”—appear in the shoebox-sized manger scenes, or *crèches*, that appear in the dining or living rooms of people’s homes just as they have always done since the nineteenth century. These *santons* are clay figurines, just three inches tall, painted colorfully in period dress. Each carries a simple gift for the baby Jesus, products from their own *terroir*, that distinct local place that nurtures their growth. These *crèche* scenes do not so much represent the story of the Christmas night as restage it, setting the birth of Jesus in the *terroir* of the people of Provence. This is where my own story starts.

But it is only the beginning. For these little clay figures, which I recall from my own childhood home, have become part of popular culture, so much so that they have come to represent the people of Provence and their way of life. Yet always in the background lies the Christ child. He is an integral part of this scene as well. Many *Provençaux* may not talk about him, nor know much about him, yet he still belongs to the scene. He is every bit as essential to the *crèche* as the olive trees and villagers. His quiet presence hallows the land. He is what renders these clay figurines of plain villagers something special: He makes them “little saints,” set apart to serve him and his story. (For more details on the historical background of the *santons*—and pictures!—see my website [www.theartoflivinginseason.com](http://www.theartoflivinginseason.com).)

Unlike other manger scenes, the Provençal *crèche* does not so much depict a static scene as provide a stage for a Christmas pageant. Action! For these little saints are on a mission, a *pilgrimage* to Bethlehem (now transported to Provence). A strong desire to see the baby Jesus urges the pilgrims on. They come because they want to present their gifts: not gold, frankincense, and myrrh (those come too, in due course), but simpler gifts related to their everyday vocations: a baker brings baguettes, a weaver brings wool blankets, a farmer brings produce from his field, and so forth. The songs and stories that accompany these pilgrims make them very human, so like us. Each little saint is cast in a specific role; each has a story of their own, within the greater story of Christmas, and each comes with their own fears and foibles. When they finally find the *crèche*, they offer Jesus what they have: their gifts, yes, but their fears and foibles too. And they receive something back.

So, perhaps, do the larger saints, the twenty-first century children and adults who keep the *crèche*—call them “everyday saints.” For, thanks to this singular custom, Christmas in Provence is a story that involves not simply clay figures, but every son and daughter of Adam, the original clay figure. This is a story that invites ongoing participation, and not just at Advent. This is a story not just to believe in, but to live in, and to live out. To the one with eyes to see, the *crèche* is an invitation to step into Advent—and perhaps beyond it.

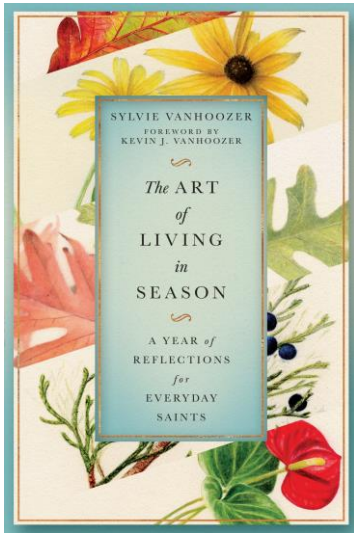


Tara Burns, print and online publicity  
800.843.4587 ext. 4059 or [tburns@ivpress.com](mailto:tburns@ivpress.com)

Krista Clayton, author interviews  
800.843.4587 ext. 4013 or [kclayton@ivpress.com](mailto:kclayton@ivpress.com)



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*“Sylvie Vanhoozer’s winsome and infectious compendium is about learning in practical and endearing ways to use our imaginations and behold Jesus becoming incarnate in the seasons of our days. But more profoundly, it is about letting our lives be transposed so we become characters in the story of God in Christ. Here you will find something for body, mind, and spirit to cluster round Christ’s earthy throne of grace. This book will make your soul grow.”*

—Samuel Wells, vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, London

This is why, during my own years of pilgrimage from my homeland of Provence to new lands—California, the mid-Atlantic, England, Scotland, the Midwest—I began to wonder: what if, once Christmas is over, I continued the pilgrimage, in spiritual company with the santons, through all the seasons of the year? What if I were to follow Jesus *outside* the crèche in order to keep on doing, throughout the year, what these little saints did in Advent and Christmas? Could I bring an offering to Jesus daily, in my place and time, as the santons did in theirs? Could joining their pilgrimage help me answer the question, “What am I doing here?” Could it help me get out of bed in the morning? It would take intentionality, a discipline of paying attention to the seasons in which I find myself: the seasons of the church that teach us about Christ’s life and ministry; the seasons of nature that reveal the goodness of our Creator; the seasons of life that unfold God’s plan for my story. Could I approach every new season, whether I was in Bethlehem, Provence, or somewhere else, with the wonder and expectation of Advent? If so, what would that look like?

Little did I know, as a child growing up in Provence, how transformative these little clay figures would later become in my life. Their story has become my story, an invitation to “come and see” the Christ child. I came; I saw; I followed. Over the years, I have become not a fixture in the crèche, but an everyday saint. Like the santons, I come to Jesus, and then, inspired by these little figures, I follow Jesus out of the manger, through all the seasons of life.

—adapted from the prologue



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BIO



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*"Sylvie has taught me to pay attention as, together, we pass through the seasons of life, some familiar (spring and autumn), others new (losing one's parents). Each of us has now written books asking, in our own respective ways, what Christian discipleship means and looks like in the twenty-first century: Who am I, for Christ, today in this place? Every Christian should consider this question in all seriousness. There is nothing more important than being Christ's man or woman, a representative of his reign, now, in this place."*

—Kevin Vanhoozer, from the Foreword

## **Author, Artist, and Everyday Saint**

"This wonderful book is artistic in every way. Sylvie Vanhoozer's study is a powerful reminder that we need to honor seasons in our lives, just as Scripture and the church calendar require, artfully punctuating life's significant moments. The book is deeply rooted in location, often southern France where Sylvie grew up. Thus it is incarnational in the best sense, as all good art should be.

Two types of illustration permeate the book. First, the *santons*—figures for the crèche from Sylvie's native Provence—'saintlets' which, unlike the haloed figures of classical art, are simply local personages: the baker, the farmer, the seamstress . . . and by implication, you and me. Second, there are marvelous botanical illustrations of plants and vegetables that go with each season, such as the bell flowers for Easter or the thornbush for passion week. This book is not just to be picked up each morning but to be savored all year. As Kevin, Sylvie's husband puts it in his foreword, it is 'life changing.'"

—William Edgar, author of *A Supreme Love: The Music of Jazz and the Hope of the Gospel* and professor emeritus of apologetics, Westminster Theological Seminary

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**Sylvie Vanhoozer** is a writer, botanical artist, and everyday saint from Provence, France. She and her husband, Kevin, met in a small town outside of Paris, France. Upon their initial meeting she shared that she had no intention of leaving her homeland, partial to her garden in southern France. Now throughout their forty years of marriage, she has made herself "at home" abroad. From Provence to England and the midwestern plains, Sylvie has come to see, know, and appreciate the land, people, and flora along the way, taking time to not just simply look at things but rather to really see them as a kind of spiritual discipline. It is her own personal existential pilgrimage that led to the writing of this book. Sylvie currently lives in Libertyville, Illinois with her husband. They have two grown daughters.

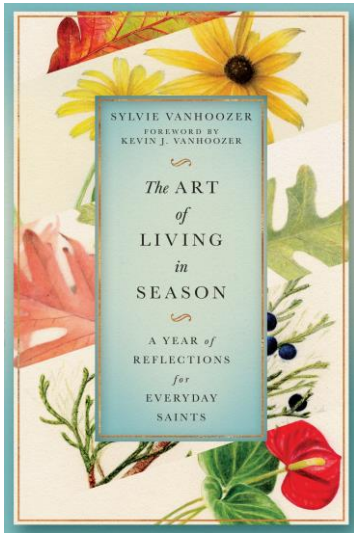


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## Q & A



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*“So what then are we to do with this book so unlike any other? It is a work of art. Might we allow this book to ask us questions, make us wonder, tell us new and ancient stories of other places, other times? And surely, if we listen, if we pay attention, we will see and learn. We will be charmed; we will be changed. For yes, this lovely book is just that fine.”*

—Linda McCullough Moore, author of *The Book of Not So Common Prayer*

## Attentive Anticipation for the Gifts We Can Bring to Christ Everywhere and at All Times

### How would you say your past informed the content of this book?

**Sylvie Vanhoozer:** I come from a country rooted in rich Christian traditions (France) that still provide a meaningful framework for life, even for those, like me, who were not raised in church. When I left my land to cleave to my husband, I deeply felt my lack of roots. I learned how to flourish where God was planting me by developing what my family came to call my “art of living in season,” which includes the seasons of nature, the church’s special seasons, and the ordinary seasons of life. Many others—neighbors, church friends, my husbands’ students—when they hear about this ask, “How can I do this in my place?” Others who have not been to our home have the same questions.

It is these past experiences that give me hope that this book will help reawaken readers to the possibility of offering everyday gifts to Christ in their own places and seasons, the better imaginatively to indwell Christ, his story, and his kingdom wherever he has placed them.

### In what way is this book a companion for people who desire to follow Jesus where they are and in what they are doing?

**Sylvie:** Learning how to follow Jesus at all times and in all places requires “the art of living in season.” This book is a companion to everyday saints in that it trains us to grow into the fullness of Christ, whether we are waiting, watching, or walking through every season of life. The little saints, santons from the south of France, together with their stories and anecdotes drawn from the French crèche, become the models and inspiration for everyday saints everywhere. Their stories—with a special focus on the ordinary gifts they offer Christ—become extended parables of what it looks like to live in the kingdom of God, in Christmastime and beyond.

### Santons, little saints from the south of France, are a distinctive part of this book. What else would you say sets this book apart?

**Sylvie:** The santons, as well as the anecdotes from Provence, are used to illustrate everyday discipleship. Other distinctive elements focus on planting roots in and cultivating a local terroir as a way of planting roots in Christ and cultivating the life of Christ in our own local places. There is also the call to attend to the places we inhabit, as evidenced by my own seasonal botanical illustrations throughout the book. Finally, I emphasize the idea that Advent is not just one season, rather an attitude to pursue in all seasons; an attentive anticipation of the gifts we can bring to Christ everywhere and at all times. This attitude is a gift that Christ can bring to us if we are open to receiving it.



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