

The Final Retreat

Stephen Hough

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Stephen Hough is best known as a pianist, but he's also an accomplished composer, painter and writer, too. His first novel, *The*

Final Retreat, is a fictional memoir penned by Father Joseph, a parish priest who is struggling with his faith and sex addiction. As Joseph reaches breaking point – having been blackmailed and raped by a male prostitute – he goes on an eight-day silent retreat. The story is told through a diary that the priest keeps during this period, bookended with a news cutting and emails that hint at the tragic conclusion.

The text is littered with musical references: one sex worker plays melancholic Chopin waltzes; a priest has a taste for operatic divas. Hough describes the book as being more Sibelius than Tchaikovsky; it can be difficult to pinpoint the story arc, but the emotional development is profound.

Hough's graphic realism will not appeal to everyone: there are vivid depictions of gay sex, masturbation and implied contradictions about Catholicism. Depression, suicide and self-harm are major themes throughout. There is frequent use of that four-lettered word – and many quotes that would be unprintable in this publication. But it's not for shock value – it's all part of a carefully considered world that is intriguing (and disturbing) to inhabit. *Claire Jackson* ★★★★★