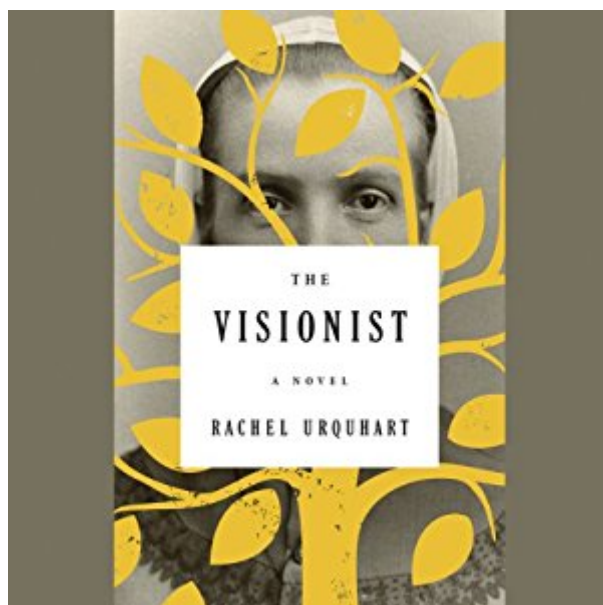


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# The Visionist: A Novel



## Synopsis

An enthralling debut novel about a teenage girl who finds refuge - but perhaps not - in an 1840s Shaker community. In this exquisite, transporting debut, 15-year-old Polly Kimball sets fire to the family farm, killing her abusive father. She and her young brother find shelter in a Massachusetts Shaker community called The City of Hope. It is the Era of Manifestations, when young girls in Shaker enclaves all across the Northeast are experiencing extraordinary mystical visions, earning them the honorific of "Visionist" and bringing renown to their settlements. The City of Hope has not yet been blessed with a Visionist, but that changes when Polly arrives and is unexpectedly exalted. As she struggles to keep her dark secrets concealed in the face of increasing scrutiny, Polly finds herself in a life-changing friendship with a young Shaker sister named Charity, a girl who will stake everything - including her faith - on Polly's honesty and purity.

## Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 12 hours and 8 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Hachette Audio

Audible.com Release Date: January 14, 2014

Whispersync for Voice: Ready

Language: English

ASIN: B00H8ZRF30

Best Sellers Rank: #347 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Fiction & Literature > Short Stories  
#347 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Fiction & Literature > Religious Fiction #964 in Books > Literature & Fiction > Genre Fiction > Religious & Inspirational > Historical

## Customer Reviews

In this transcendent prose, the brutal life that Polly lives before the fire stands in striking contrast to the life of the Shaker community in which she finds refuge. She bears a deep secret of the times that drove her brother and herself to be brought the community for refuge. Her mother, driven by her secrets, and burdened by her failure to protect her children in the past, flees into the world once again. Polly inadvertently finds herself heralded as a Visionist, one who sees the love of the Founder during the ecstasy of her first service. The descriptions of the rapture of the faithful and the pleasure of a simple life enmesh the reader even as Polly is woven into the settlement. Yet the fissures in the

village appear, and the venom of the world remains in hearts. In the hearts of her one true friend and in the strengthening of the fire investigator's determination to help her, I see the traces of true spirit. This book bravely approaches the "Narrow Path" to goodness. The answer is not as it is held by many, but I believe the author has achieved a lovely dance of her own. Certainly it is not simple. I found the book subtle and beautiful in its approach to the seekers within it. The Shaker dream is lovely in its simple quest and heartbreaking when it fails in some souls. The questions rebound in the reader's mind making this a gifted piece of writing.

I chose this book because it is historical fiction. I also enjoy mysteries. I found it to be an easy read and learned much about a topic unknown to me. I'd especially encourage people who enjoy historical fiction to read this debut novel.

I liked this book very much for the look at my past- neighbors the Shakers, though this takes place in Tyrington, MA, not Watervliet, NY. Young Polly has a father who rapes her, who is drunkard, who beats her and her mother, and caused her younger brother to be brain- damaged. When their house burns down, she gathers her mother, her brother and leaves. Her mother deposits the children at the local Shaker settlement. The work is similar to what Polly is used to, but the dancing in the first Meeting she attends, makes her flashback to her father and the Shakers think she is their first Visionist. She tells them she saw angels. What I didn't care for about this book, is interspersed between chapters from Polly's point of view, her first friend Sister Charity and the leader of the settlement, Elder Sister Agnes is chapters from the fire inspector's Simon's point of view. His history, struggles with blackmail and a bully were pedestrian. The mystery in this novel was no mystery and unnecessary, in my opinion. I read this because the author did a very good interview with Joe Donahue of The Book Show on WAMC.

The three narrators of Rachel Urquhart's *The Visionist: A Novel* braid the story line together by describing events from their specific and distinct points of view. The structure is unusual but delivers the narrative through a very compelling panorama. The novel takes place in mid-19th century New England and is centered within a fictional Shaker community. Urquhart clearly delved deep into the history of Shakers and the details she weaves in make the book come alive and sparkle with authenticity. I was particularly drawn in by the description of an otherworldly event in the novel's prologue that juxtaposes the torpor of a late summer New England afternoon with the wild entrancement of a group of Shaker children. This event marks a start to the Era of Manifestations -

a strange period in Shaker history when young Shaker women experienced supposed ecstatic enthrallment with the spirit of Mother Anne Lee, founder of the Shakers. This topsy-turvy religious environment, within a sect that already isolated themselves from "the world", makes an extraordinary context for a story examining identity, faith and friendship. It is a rare pleasure to read a book of this caliber.

Some years ago I was travelling in Kentucky on business. I could stay at a local Holiday Inn or I could stay at a bed and breakfast that had been a former Shaker colony. I took the Shaker inn. I wandered around the buildings, observing the excellent craftsmanship and speculated on what a utopian society Shaker life must have been. The Visionist shows a more complete view of Shaker life and the separation of kids from their parents and siblings from one another is something I would never have guessed was a common practice in Shaker communities. I enjoyed the story and was satisfied with how everything played out in the end. A well written and truly enjoyable book. I highly recommend it.

Our book club read and discussed this book. Unusual for us, we all would highly recommend. The author writes from the perspective of three main characters, all complex and all in great detail. Having reviewed the history of the Shakers around the topic of their visionists, we can attest to the author's knowledge of this phenomena in the mid-19th century for the Shakers and other sects. Even those of us who were quite familiar with the Shakers learned more about them.

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