

The Story of Ruth

Twelve Moments in Every Woman's Life



Joan D. Chittister

Art by John August Swanson



Dedication

This book is dedicated to Gail
in whom lives the spirit of both Ruth and Naomi
and because of whom I am mindful of the marrow of each always.

Joan D. Chittister

My interest in painting "stories" or narrative art comes from my mother's family accounts of their leaving Mexico during the revolutionary times. Her stories of compassion, heroism, and sacrifice help me remember my immigrant roots. I dedicate this book to her, Magdalena Velasquez Swanson, born in 1909 in Chihuahua, Mexico.

The inspiration for my art for *The Story of Ruth* is the refugees, immigrants, and cultural groups who move throughout the earth in history, seeking a place to live in peace and dignity. Their stories continue and connect us to the journey of Ruth and Naomi.

Another person who encouraged me to work on this theme is my pastor, Fr. Michael McFadden, O.S.A., who spent several years in Latin America working in U.N. refugee camps. His stories of these refugees helped me understand the courage, hope, and strength that are part of the journey and story of the refugees Ruth and Naomi.

John August Swanson

TEN ELDERS OFFERS HIS RIGHT TO BOAZ RUTH AND BOAZ
MARRY THEIR SON LOBED BRINGS JOY TO NAOMI



Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
<i>Artist's Notes</i>	xi
<i>Ruth and Naomi: Your Story and Mine</i>	1
1. Loss	7
2. Change	15
3. Transformation	21
4. Aging	29
5. Independence	37
6. Respect	45
7. Recognition	51
8. Insight	57
9. Empowerment	65
10. Self-Definition	73
11. Invisibility	79
12. Fulfillment	85
<i>Bibliography</i>	91
<i>Endnotes</i>	92

Artist's Notes

In the spring of 1990, I began to study the biblical Book of Ruth, seeking the episodes in the story that could be the most visual. The preliminary sketches and drawings developed into a series of miniatures. As I developed the drawings, I decided to unify the twelve panels of the artwork. I arranged the design so that there are three rows of four panels — the panels in each of these rows have the same horizon line. The first row has a connecting line with the hills. The second row has a connecting line with the barley fields. The third uses the horizon line along with incorporating architectural arches to frame the panels. In the collected miniature panels of *The Story of Ruth*, I was able to portray a more complete narrative than I would have by relying on only one large scene. This use of the narrative in multi-panels has a connection to ancient and medieval art. I was inspired to create the same intensity and concentration that I found in Byzantine icons and the miniatures found in medieval illuminated manuscripts.

In the late summer, I completed the watercolor painting. When exhibited, it

moved many people. It was then that I began to consider developing it into a hand-printed limited-edition serigraph. I would be the publisher. I began the phone calls and correspondence to schedule the publishing of *The Story of Ruth*, and began to work with the printers at Advanced Graphics Studio in London in the spring of 1991.

At the studio we planned all technical phases of the printing. I decided to print the serigraph with an image size of 27½" x 34¼" (larger than the original watercolor painting). To create the serigraph, I planned the sequence of the colors and used many glazes of transparent inks to saturate each of the panels with warm, rich colors and patterns. I drew a stencil for each of the 48 colors printed. For the decorative borders, I layered various printings of metallic gold inks to add embellishments and designs. Above each panel I drew and printed the lettering for the accompanying text with bright colors. I am happy with the result of spending many months to print the serigraph *The Story of Ruth*.

Now Joan Chittister and I — she as writer and I as artist — have merged our

creative energies to retell this ancient biblical story. This has been for me an exciting collaboration. Joan is a prophetic voice asking us to look and understand this poignant and powerful story with its relation to lives today around the world.

This is not only a women's book — we all can learn from Joan's reflections on Ruth's story. I hope men will see it as an opportunity to grow in awareness and sensitivity. There is a healing that takes place when someone accompanies another on life's journey, especially when this journey is filled with struggles. In the story of Ruth and Naomi, we see hope emerge out of loss and tragedy.

This is a book that can empower each of us. It is a way to look at our own stories and appreciate them better. Then we can "accompany"; then we can be part of the journey with others — women, refugees, and the poor. For the story of Ruth is a universal story of the poor, the marginalized, and the refugee. This story gave me an insight into the struggles and lives of our universal human family, all our ancient ancestors, and the lives of all our families. For me, *The Story of Ruth* opens my heart to see generosity and compassion that still transcends history and peoples. It is a story from which we still have much to learn.

John August Swanson



Ruth and Naomi: Your Story and Mine

The Book of Ruth is a woman's story about a woman's life. Written thousands of years ago — anywhere from 500 to 1000 B.C.E., depending on which linguistic clues we choose to follow — it is, nevertheless, a perennial. Composed, faith tells us, under the inspiration of the Divine, it calls us to reflect in every generation on what it means to be a whole woman, a spiritual woman, yet today. It models what every woman alive lives still. It is an icon of what it means to be a woman of God, to live under the impulse of the Spirit, to be a creative part of God's creative power. One moment at a time it takes us from one life moment to another to show us how God works in us all, to remind us to what God calls us all, whatever the period, whatever the place. It is a silhouette of every woman's life frozen in time and held up for reflection.

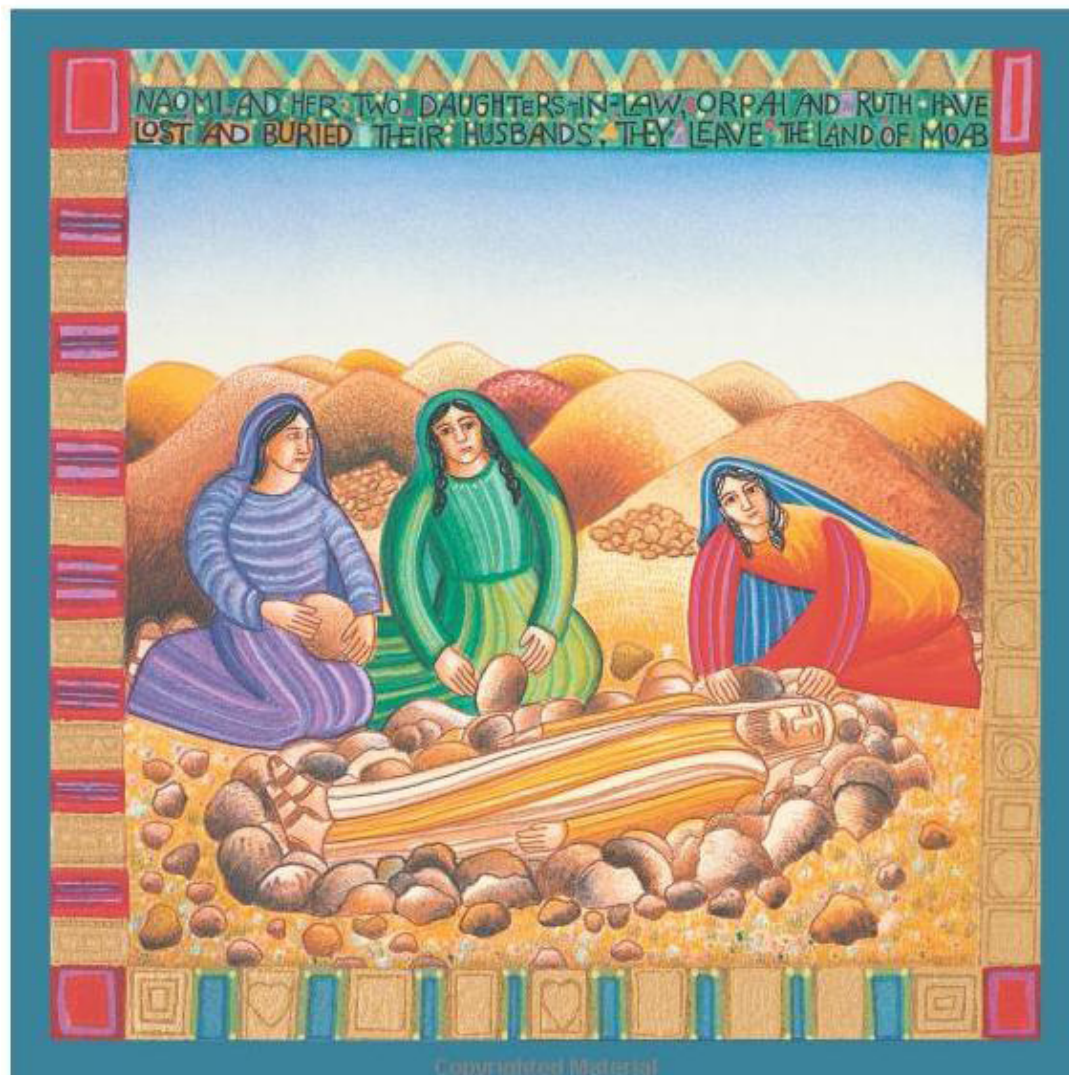
Life, it seems to me in retrospect, is only incidentally made up of chronological pieces specific to this person in this place at this time. Instead, life, its substance and meaning, is really made up of a series of defining moments — moments of loss, risk, change, transformation, relationship, and survival — that

mark every woman's passage through time in a way separate from the men around her and that shape her as she goes. All of them stand stark and unadorned in Ruth, pared to the marrow and clear in their challenges. The way we deal with each of these moments determines who and what we really are, who and what we are intended to be, who and what we can become both spiritually and socially.

The Scriptures call it the Book of Ruth. I am not convinced of the full truth of the title. It is at least the Book of Ruth and Naomi, and maybe, actually, The Book of Naomi, the older, wiser woman who having lived through one kind of life wants a better one for Ruth. The younger woman, Naomi knows, looks up to her as model and mentor and friend, and will follow in her footsteps. But which footsteps and how if she is to be everything God wants her to be?

The story as it's told is a simple one: It is the story of two women — one old, one young — both childless and vulnerable, both marginal to the systems around them — who find themselves

CHAPTER ONE Loss



Ruth 1:1 In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land; and Elimelech, a man of Bethlehem in Judah, with his wife and two sons went to reside in the country of Moab. . . . Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women. . . . Then the two sons also died.



The Book of Ruth begins in tragedy. Three women are left with three dead husbands and no means of support. It is a crossover moment in time. It is the moment that leads these women — and we ourselves, perhaps — to God's new time.

Moments of great loss throw a woman back on her own assets. With little in the way of external resources to barter — money, social connections, education — it is what a woman is inside herself that will have to count. It is her faith in the ultimate logic of God in her life that is her only real resource. Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah are women coping with loss. Like most women in the world even today, the lives of Naomi and her daughters-in-law are tied to the fortunes of the men whose work and position have shaped their worlds. They have lost the men in their lives and, with the men, their social status and economic security as well. What happens to them now rests entirely on them and their trust in the fullness of their own creation. It is a moment of deep spiritual revelation.

Naomi is an old woman without assets. Ruth and Orpah are young women with sparse options. They can try to find a man to support them, if they're lucky, or they can remain widows and throw themselves on the grudging mercy of the community at large. Naomi and Ruth

and Orpah are alone in the world now. They have only one another. And God.

Like everyone ever born who goes through sudden, defining loss of any kind, these women find themselves faced with the question: Who am I when I am no longer who and what I was? Like the rest of us for whom the very foundations of our lives are given to shifting from day to day, there are no miracles in sight to save them, no angels on the road to point the way. Nothing. Everything they had, everything they ever thought they wanted, is gone. There are no anchors to steady them, no safety nets to catch them. Now they have only themselves on which to depend. Only the Spirit of God to lead them on through a world that has little place for them at all.

Women everywhere know the feeling, have felt the helplessness that attends abandonment and marginalization. Women know what it's like to be the eternal outsider looking in. Women know the sense of powerlessness that comes from being only a woman in a world shaped primarily for men. What can possibly be the will of God for a woman at a time like this? What does God have in mind for women when it seems that the world has little or nothing in mind for women at all — once motherhood ends, or there is no man to support them, or there is no institution to define them, or there is no one and