

Mentor for a New Generation

Review of

Thomas Merton: Poet, Prophet, Priest

by Jennifer Fisher Bryant

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Reviewed by Jeffrey T. Kiernan

In the spring of 1965, Thomas Merton wrote to Francesca Guli, who had sent him a copy of a manuscript of her book on Dante for children. (The book, *The Boy and the Stars: A Lyrical Tale of Dante Alighieri, the Boy*, was published later that year.) In his letter, Merton commented favorably on the manuscript and expressed his hope that the book would “do very well and...bring a lot of children to know Dante so that they will read him later on.” This same sentiment, I believe, can be expressed regarding Jennifer Fisher Bryant’s biography of Merton. That is, I hope that Bryant’s book will receive a wide readership and encourage young readers to read more about and by Merton as time goes on.

This biography contains thirteen brief chapters, a sixteen-page section of well-chosen photos, a selected bibliography, and a suggestions-for-further-reading section. I was glad to see Jim Forest’s biography of Merton included, although it was listed as *Thomas Merton: A Pictorial Biography* and not as titled in its revised and updated version, *Living With Wisdom: A Life of Thomas Merton*. This type of error and some inaccurate or incomplete descriptions in the text (e.g., the mass is described as being “performed,” Divali is described as a *Buddhist* festival that Merton took part in while in Calcutta) are the only shortcomings I found worthy of note.

Bryant writes in an engaging style. She is consistent in highlighting and developing aspects of Merton’s life that have the most appeal to young readers. For example, in writing about some of Merton’s experiences during his time as a teen at Oakham School in England, she states that

during this period, Tom was experiencing his life on two levels. On one level, he was broadening his cultural knowledge under Tom and Iris Bennett’s influence and developing his intellectual skills at Oakham. On another level, however, he still wrestled with feelings of emptiness over his father’s death, suffered keenly from teenage awkwardness (he was tall for his age, and he found girls attractive but intimidating), and was generally confused about who he was, what he believed in, and where he was headed.

These themes of learning new ideas, a deep sense of loss, and questions of identity, purpose, and meaning all resonate with young people today. Thus, young readers should be able to see something of themselves in Merton and readily relate to him.

Bryant concisely portrays other major areas of Merton's life, including his becoming a Catholic, his time at Columbia, his teaching at St. Bonaventure, his on-again, off-again vocational call to the priesthood, his relationships with his friends, his entering Gethsemani, the tension of his career as a writer with his development as a monk, life in the monastery, his writing about and involvement in the civil rights and peace movements, his "looking to the East," and his actual journey to the Far East in 1968. As mentioned above, Bryant is always alert to convey Merton's story—regardless of the specific topic—in a way that appeals to her target audience. For example, her evocative presentation of Merton's experience with beggars in the streets of Calcutta and other aspects of Calcutta life is most engaging.

Bryant's book is part of Eerdmans Publishing series of books for young readers, "Men and Women of Spirit." The series is described as a "collection of biographies for young readers [that] explores the lives of remarkable men and women of faith whose extraordinary accomplishments continue to inspire people today." Further, the series seeks to highlight the spiritual journeys of men and women of faith, "journeys that transformed their lives and still have the power to inform and inspire our own spiritual journeys." Among others, biographies of Dorothy Day and Lucretia Mott are part of the series. Among publishers and librarians, the term "young readers" has a variety of meanings. However, Bryant's book could be fruitfully read by students from upper elementary age through the middle school years and into the high school years. This is because of the wide range of reading abilities present in students today.

When Merton was alive, he was the spiritual mentor to many people—including young people. For example, he had written to an eighth grade student, Betsi Baiten, in the fall of 1967 counseling her, among other things, that "the Gospel teaches us to love others as ourselves, and to see in the enemy the same amount of good and evil as we find in ourselves." Readers of *The Merton Seasonal* are well aware of Merton's continuing ability to mentor. Toward the end of her book, in describing the aftermath of Merton's untimely death, Bryant writes that "Gethsemani had lost a brother, America had lost one of its most respected writers and thinkers, and many others around the world had lost a dear friend and spiritual mentor." Hopefully, a wide readership of *Thomas Merton: Poet, Prophet, Priest* will help many of our younger generation to begin to know the treasure that is Thomas Merton.