

## A Novel Perspective

Review of

*Scherib*

By Bill Goodson

Philadelphia: XLibris, 2008

254 pages / \$19.99 paper

Reviewed by **Robert Waldron**

Bill Goodson's novel *Scherib* is his sequel to *The Bossuet Conspiracy* (2003), a fictional look at the death of Thomas Merton. Readers of the latter will recognize familiar characters and settings, such as Dr. Trey Crockett and the Abbey of Gethsemani. Goodson's labyrinthine plot is at times confusing, interweaving at least four storylines, but if you stay with the novel, its mystery all unravels in the end so that the reader feels thoroughly satisfied and entertained.

Without giving away the novel's secret, I do not believe my mentioning that Thomas Merton is again at the center of this narrative will interfere with the reader's appreciation of the novel. *Scherib* also addresses sensitive issues like priestly infidelity, pedophilia and the ins-and-outs of church politics, as devious and complicated as American twenty-first-century politics. When Goodson writes about Merton and his life, however, he is at his best. It is obvious that he admires Merton, but he also knows enough about his life not to canonize him, a tendency of Merton aficionados.

Before 9/11, many would think that the blowing up of TVA dams would be a far-fetched plot, but Goodson makes it believable. He also sensitively addresses the plight of a young woman, Jenny Peale, intent on discovering the identity of her father, a mystery whose solution is the high point of Goodson's novel. The love affair between Trey and Governor Pat Beason is an intriguing one, again delicately handled since Trey is now five years sober, a practicing psychiatrist who is currently counseling an archbishop with a past. There is also the Church's sex-scandal as a backdrop, seemingly a worldwide one with priests molesting a number of young people throughout the Catholic world – its importance is underscored by an appearance by the late pope. Goodson is to be lauded for his ability to write about such a horrific theme as pedophilia without losing his objectivity and for resisting the impulse to be didactic. As a novelist, he understands the fundamental fact that characters are people; thus, they are flawed, some less seriously, others grievously.

Goodson might be well advised to more often push the delete button to his dialogue, it being too garrulous and often unnecessary because it sheds little light on the characters, theme or plot. Novelists who have trouble with dialogue should read Robert Parker. His dialogue is brief and succinct: say what you have to say and no more. Terse, snappy dialogue also moves a novel along at a faster pace, especially effective in a thriller novel like *Scherib*. I would have liked more scenes at the Abbey of Gethsemani, with more description of its ambience and perhaps the appearance of more monks. The maxim of teachers of writing is "Write what you know." Goodson knows Gethsemani, and it would have been intriguing

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**Robert Waldron** is author of four books on Thomas Merton, most recently *Thomas Merton, Master of Attention* (2008), as well as numerous other works of spirituality, and a novella with a monastic setting, *Blue Hope* (2002).

(and fun!) to spend more time there.

*Sherib* is still a fine read. Most readers will be astonished by how Goodson interweaves Thomas Merton into his novel. Here Goodson is daring and provocative – some may think too provocative, but this reader rather liked what his imagination conjured up for his readers. There will surely be Merton fans (and likely a few Merton scholars) who will be unhappy (if not offended) by Goodson's plot surprise. All I can say to them is: *Sherib* is a novel, a work of fiction. So relax.