

Spelling Out Merton for a New Generation

Review of

The ABCs of Thomas Merton: A Monk at the Heart of the World

By Gregory and Elizabeth Ryan

Brewster, Massachusetts: Paraclete Press, 2017

32 pages / \$16.99 cloth

Reviewed by **Jani and Ryan Scruggs**

In our home the evening is a time to read. After supper our children don their pajamas, brush their teeth, and then cuddle up on the couch with either Mom or Dad (the other has the joy of cleaning the kitchen). The question, then, is always: what should we read tonight? Our children each have their favorites: for Rowan (age 6) it is *The Hobbit* or *Robin Hood* – really anything packed with adventure; Danae (age 5) prefers the *Little House* series; and Charlise (age 3) wants *Winnie the Pooh*, so she can walk around and say, “Tut-tut, it looks like rain.” We, on the other hand, just want to be close to our children and to revel in their enjoyment of a good book.

But there are other reasons we read to our children. In *After Virtue* Alasdair MacIntyre suggests that “I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’” And so, he continues, “It is through hearing stories . . . that children learn or mislearn . . . what the cast of characters may be in the drama into which they have been born and what the ways of the world are. Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words” (216). So we read stories to help our children discover the *meaning* of their disparate actions, and to begin to identify with those characters whose lives are shaped by virtue. Of course, the story that gives meaning to every other story, and in which we each must find our place, is the drama of God’s redemptive action in the world. This means introducing our children to scripture and to the ongoing work of the Spirit in the life of the church. Here above all it is the saints (formally canonized or otherwise) who can and should serve as exemplars. Stories of the saints have the capacity to capture our imaginations for Christ, to reorient our desires to the Good and to inspire us in holy living. (Think of the impact of Thomas Merton’s own autobiography in the last century.) Needless to say, when we heard of a book for children on Thomas Merton we were elated.

The ABCs of Thomas Merton introduces young (and old!) readers to the “big ideas about Thomas Merton” (31) by walking them through the alphabet: “A is for abbot. . . . B is for Saint Benedict. . . . C is for cowl. . . .” The “ideas” arising from each letter are only a few sentences long and are comprehensible for children as young as four, or perhaps even three. We learn briefly of Merton’s

Ryan and Jani Scruggs live in Montreal, Quebec with their four children (Rowan, Danae, Charlise and Mariah). For the last six years Jani has been a full-time mother and homemaker; she has a master’s degree in counselling and is also an avid painter, potter and jeweller. Ryan is a doctoral student in Religious Studies at McGill University; a former Shannon Fellow (2007) and Daggy Scholar (2009), his articles on Merton have appeared in *The Merton Annual*, *The Merton Seasonal*, *The Journal of Ecumenical Studies* and the Merton Society of Canada volume *Thomas Merton: Monk on the Edge*. He is currently an ITMS International Advisor.

parents, the geography of his childhood years, and of his early education; of Benedictine monasticism in general, the Trappists in particular, and of Gethsemani and some of its prominent structures (the fire tower and the hermitage). We are introduced to a few of Merton's more significant influences and acquaintances (the Dalai Lama, Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.); and, finally, to some of the great themes in Merton's writing: Jesus, Mary, nature, nonviolence, peace, prayer, silence, solitude, wisdom and Zen. It is hardly (and certainly not intended to be) exhaustive, but it offers a smorgasbord of delightful Mertonian dishes. In a mere thirty pages, and approximately two thousand words, the reader is ably and enjoyably introduced to Merton.

The book is also adorned with seventeen water-color illustrations painted to suggest the appearance of stained glass. The ink-drawn lines are mostly angular and the translucent watercolors produce the effect of light streaming through each page. The images are simple ("like they were made for kids," my son comments), but what strikes us most is their stillness: every image communicates silence and peace. The human figures especially exude a reverence that has the potential to draw the reader into a place of prayerful meditation. This is a special gift in an age when so many children's books offer the aesthetic equivalent of a trip to the circus (not that this is *always* bad). In this way the book invites the very experience that its content promotes: contemplation of God. This would certainly please Merton, because for him "art [is] contemplation" (*Seven Storey Mountain* 222) by which he means that "all true art . . . makes us alive to the tremendous mystery of being, in which we ourselves, together with all other living and existing things, come forth from the depths of God and return again to Him" (*No Man Is an Island* 36). This is no inconsequential matter and should more often concern both parents and publishers, for as Merton says in another context: "bad art is harmful . . . and genuinely spiritual art – exercises a powerful formative influence on the Christian soul" (*Disputed Questions* 155). While not every letter of the alphabet is illustrated, there is at least one image visible wherever the book is opened.

Our one quibble concerns the intended audience of the book. It seems to us that there is a certain incommensurability between the form and the content of the book. Whereas we said above that the content could be grasped by children four years old (or perhaps three) and above, books that follow the A-B-C format are typically aimed at children younger than four years old. After this age children are more drawn to books with a narrative arc. As a case in point, in reading this book to our children they were intrigued by the images and happy to learn a little more about this person their Dad is always on about, but they were not enthralled the way they are when we (repeatedly) read, e.g., Jim Forest's *Saint Nicholas and the Nine Gold Coins*, Tomie de Paola's *Patrick: Patron Saint of Ireland* or Diane Gibfried's *Brother Juniper*.

However, none of this is ultimately intended to dissuade the reader from purchasing this beautiful little book about Merton; in fact, there may be few better ways to promote the life and thought of this expansive "saint" than to introduce him to the next generation at an early age. Perhaps more than anything it is an invitation (to the Ryans or to others) to follow the example here set forth by writing more stories about Merton. Given that we live in an age overloaded with information but sorely deprived of wisdom, it seems more imperative than ever that we provide our children with stories that can gather together disparate facts into a *meaningful* account. *The Seven Storey Mountain* is ample evidence that there's no lack of drama in Merton's life leading up to his permanent vows as a Trappist monk; but I also think that the right author could extend that narrative into the second

half of Merton's life, despite his vow of stability, by teasing out of his considerable corpus of (often semi-autobiographical) works the story of his soul's journey into God and the world.

Dreaming aside, we are grateful for what we have: *The ABCs of Thomas Merton* is a welcome addition to our library of children's books. The Ryans are to be commended for producing a book that is faithful to Merton both in its historical description and in its artistic expression. Merton truly is "a monk at the heart of the world," a world in which he is increasingly relevant as spiritual guide and thus as an exemplar for our children.