

What Am I Reading For?

Review of
What I Am Living For:
Lessons from the Life and Writings of Thomas Merton
 Edited by Jon M. Sweeney
 Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2018
 xvii + 197 pages / \$16.95 paper

Reviewed by **Gregory J. Ryan**

With this book in their hands, readers already familiar with Thomas Merton will feel like a kid in a candy store, delighting in twenty tasty confections collected and edited by Jon M. Sweeney. New readers, once inside the candy store, will satisfy their sweet teeth with enough goodies to send them to read Merton's books for themselves.

If confession is good for the soul, I will go one better and confess two things: 1. When I started this book, I had no idea who many of the contributors were. That's on me, since my reading habits over the years have pretty much narrowed down, almost to a pinpoint (a Merton pinpoint!). 2. I came to this book expecting to *like* it; I went away from it *loving* it.

Jon Sweeney's output, much like Merton's, is prodigious. Chances are you have seen Sweeney's work in one place or another. His award-winning work has appeared in many books, magazines, journals and newspapers. His book *The Pope Who Quit* has been optioned for television by HBO. Busy man! A family man, with a wife and two children, Mr. Sweeney must spend more time writing than eating or sleeping!

For the present book, Sweeney asked people, of various backgrounds and faiths, some well-known and some less so, to share how Merton's life and writings have influenced their own lives, and what they think Merton still has to say to people today. The roster of contributors includes: Bishop Robert Barron; Sylvia Boorstein; Ilia Delio, OSF; Robert Ellsberg; Daniel P. Horan, OFM; Paula Huston; Pico Iyer; Sue Monk Kidd; James Martin, SJ; Kaya Oakes; and Paul Quenon, OCSO. If the remaining ones are less well-known (to me, anyway), they are no less important to this book.

The volume opens with a Merton quotation which establishes the premise for the book: "If you want to identify me, ask me not where I live, or what I like to eat, or how I comb my hair, but ask me what I am living for, in detail, and ask me what I think is keeping me from living fully for the thing I want to live for" (*My Argument with the Gestapo*). There follows a helpful "Chronology of Merton's Life and World Events (1915-1968)" and a list of "Abbreviations" of Merton titles that are referenced throughout the book. "Author Notes" are found at the end of the book, along with a list of

Gregory Ryan and his wife Liz wrote and illustrated the children's book, *The ABCs of Thomas Merton: A Monk at the Heart of the World* (Paraclete Press, 2017). He is coordinator of the ITMS Chapter at St. Rose Parish, Belmar, NJ. A Benedictine oblate, he also leads a weekly Christian meditation group there (www.WCCM.org).

sixty-three “Selected Works of Thomas Merton Published since 1944,” helpfully arranged in eight categories. The “Notes on Contributors” brings the book to a close.

As I normally do, I started with the Contributors Notes since I was unfamiliar with more than half of the writers. That way I was able to pick and choose which people or topics intrigued me most and then go from there. You may want to do the same.

“Part I: Lessons from the Life and Teachings of Thomas Merton” (1-98) has seven articles ranging in length from ten to twenty pages. Though only one article, “Meeting Thomas Merton for the First Time,” by Mary O’Neill, OP (13-27), concludes with a set of questions for personal reflection, readers will naturally find themselves reflecting as they read other articles: *What am I living for? Who am I becoming? How are my horizons expanding? What kind of friend am I? How do I enter into dialogue with those around me? In what ways do I explore various facets of my life?*

At our recent monthly Merton discussion group, members found lots to like in “Part II: Life Lessons in the Light of Merton” (99-182), consisting of thirteen shorter, more personal pieces, none more than eight pages long. Not surprisingly, they were all drawn to Ilia Delio’s piece on one of Merton’s core themes: realizing our true identity (151-57). If the “dazzling light” of our true nature is found in the human heart, discovered through prayer, then “Our praying to God is God praying in us. Our lives and God’s life are so intertwined that loving God is God loving God’s own self in us!” (154). One member of the group, a jazz fan, appreciated Kevin Burns’ writing (105-109) about how his life was changed by both Thomas Merton’s writing and Keith Jarrett’s music: “I was confident that somehow this author/monk could somehow help me to ‘understand the question’ – especially when the soundtrack to his words was the beguiling harmonic reach and breathless melodic energy of Keith Jarrett” (107). Jarrett was expressing in sound what Merton was expressing in words.

Suffice it to say that whatever your interest in Father Louis may be – music, poetry, peace, prayer/meditation, interreligious dialogue, friendship, personal development and more – you will find something of value here.

On the book’s Amazon.com page, Mr. Sweeney explains: “I’m grateful this book is reaching a lot of people. I asked the contributors to stick . . . to the Merton essentials . . . and to explain what Merton’s life and teachings have to say to 21st-century people. I think they succeeded.” This reviewer thinks readers will agree. They *have* succeeded – and then some. Get this book, put your feet up, and enjoy these Merton bon bons!