

LISCHER, Richard, *Our Hearts Are Restless: The Art of Spiritual Memoir* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), pp. 379. ISBN 978-0-19-764904-6 (cloth) \$34.96.

In Richard Lischer's *Our Hearts Are Restless: The Art of Spiritual Memoir*, the author of two spiritual memoirs proposes that memoir, with its limitations – the unreliable memory and the unstable subject – is the most intimate genre. Comprised in Lischer's volume are twenty-one figures, some expected and familiar, others intriguing in their inclusion. This book takes its title from Augustine's *Confessions*. In it, poetry, letters, diaries, novels, biography and memoir are captured as genres of the soul, and craft a pattern of meaning, writes Lischer in his introduction. Of the work of biography, Dorothy Day will say it is a sacrament.

What Lischer aims to do here is expand the notion of spiritual memoir. The first part of this compendium focuses on Augustine's and Thomas Merton's conceptual framework for spiritual autobiography. Lischer outlines the youth and conversion of Augustine in the fourth century, and his twentieth-century counterpart, Thomas Merton, who began writing his spiritual autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*<sup>1</sup> before the age of thirty. They are well-chosen counterparts, indenturing the time-resilience of soul story-makers, and, it has been said, spiritual masters.

Lischer focuses on Merton's spiritual autobiography though, surprisingly, without exploration of Merton's journals, other than to mention *The Asian Journal*.<sup>2</sup> While saying of Merton, no one traces the journey with such "exquisite beauty" (48), Lischer will challenge the designation of spiritual memoir as a life that ends in conversion. Perhaps in explaining his concern, he might have referred to both examples as foundational accounts of spiritual life. Examining the wider oeuvre of C. S. Lewis, Kathleen Norris, Ann Lamott and others, Lischer examines their memoirs as each charts a path of transformation. *The Seven Storey Mountain* is a plumbline through time in spiritual pursuit. For readers not familiar with any or some of Lischer's subjects, this book serves as a fine introduction and enticement for further reading.

Here, in writings of the soul, are the essential and primal accounts of women-mystic writers, talis-woman Julian of Norwich, who read Augustine and crafted her own singular memoir "of her soul" (72); Thérèse of Lisieux, (the "Little Flower"), in her work *The Story of a Soul*, speaking of Love's furnace, the metaphor of fire and refinement that Merton will

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1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948).

2. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973).

write of. Emily Dickinson also belongs to this tribe, and Lischer holds that her poetry and letters constitute “an autobiography of her soul like no other poet” (86), and that “no less than Augustine, Merton and Julian, she will separate herself for the sake of her art” (92). Dickinson and Etty Hillesum, like Augustine, embark on a “mystical dialogue with a divine listener” (155). Lischer further adds living women writers to this stage. Kathleen Norris “takes the Christian memoir to a new frontier” (277) wherein healing is wholeness, not perfection.

Not grouped by gender but according to seven paths in Lischer’s study of Christian memoir, it is Lewis’s essential text on mourning, *A Grief Observed*, that “allows the heart to speak for itself” (194). Of Richard Rodriguez’ *Darling: A Spiritual Biography*, Lischer claims it is the ability of fine writing to raise questions you never considered (231). The Puritan John Bunyan introduced “an opening for doubt and despair in the life of faith” (105). Some ask not, is there a God, but rather, what kind of God (237). Harriet Jacobs interrogates the white Christian church. Dorothy Day, James Baldwin and Heidi Neumark examine inner transformation as the outward extension of living among the poor and hungry. Lischer concedes that James Baldwin is an unlikely spiritual memoirist, but his writing is an honest account of being human with a spirit (332). Hillesum and Dietrich Bonhoeffer seek intimacy with God in a time of extremity – their writing brushing up to the limits of memoir in death. Each would know nothing of the “after.” Eloise and Abelard, Hillesum, Bonhoeffer, Lewis and Reynolds Price are grouped together under the path, “stripping of the altar” in Holy Week, here, a metaphor for vulnerability, and healing. (Heidi Neumark writes of this liturgical practice in her Baptist New York City church.)

Most of the writers in Lischer’s book focus on the practice of love and of love’s transformative power. Many write on the practice of forgiveness; some within the confines of community, adhering to Simone Weil, who advises not to start with the greatest offense as the path of forgiveness. Lewis echoes Weil in this. Lischer himself writes with unsparing honesty, “We forgive God for making us from the humblest of material, dust, then for returning us to the same. And we forgive him for granting so little time in between to be shattered by love” (297). Readers will find a liturgy for their own spiritual expression.

Lischer states that those who seek God inwardly mark the criteria for the book. Simone Weil is not among those present. Frederick Buechner is also absent. This reviewer expected to find them here although the book opens with an epigraph by Buechner and briefly references Weil. At the same time, the presence of Dennis Covington, and the Appalachian church

practice of snake handling, seems less obvious. Perhaps the criterion for inclusion is place, which, for Lischer, is integral to the spiritual memoirs of Norris, Day, Baldwin, Neumark, Rodriguez and Merton (all American). Witness that for Rodriguez, place is in tension with home: home is the place you needed to leave (347). For Covington, it is the nomadic seeking for places where the Holy Spirit is active (343). Such would correspond to Merton, who ever longed to journey, despite his Trappist vow to stability of place. Perhaps paradox and place, inward and outward, also become a rubric for Lischer's criteria.

At the outset Lischer states that his criterion for inclusion is books in which grace and art complement one another (9). This is a collection of correspondences of the soul wherein disparate voices speak with and to one another across time. Style, tone and voice are essential elements for the intimacy and honesty of spiritual biography/memoir; indeed, some of the most beautiful and compelling words of this volume are the writer's own in this highly recommended collection: *Our Heart Are Restless: The Art of Spiritual Memoir*.

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