

A Novel Twist on Merton's Death

Review of
The Bossuet Conspiracy
 By Bill Goodson
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Reviewed by **Robert Waldron**

After my encounter with Paul Hourihan's novel *The Death of Thomas Merton* with its subtitle: "A Confessional Portrayal of the Last Day in the Life of the Famous Catholic Monk and Writer," I was leery of reading another fictional account of Merton's life and death. (Why read fiction when we have so much of Merton's autobiographical writing, both prose and poetry?) In fact, Hourihan's book was downright distasteful, written by a disgruntled ex-Catholic who on the first page suggests that everything Merton wrote was "rubbish" and full of his "own emptiness." To Hourihan, Merton's life was a tragedy because he remained a Christian, failing to embrace the locus of Truth, to be discovered only in Yoga, Vedanta and Indian mysticism.

Needless to say I couldn't finish the book.

Bill Goodson's novel *The Bossuet Conspiracy*, on the other hand, is the opposite of Hourihan's: first, it's written by a man who obviously admires Merton; secondly, by a man who believes that Merton teaches an authentic spirituality for modern people.

Since 1968, many people have been fascinated by Merton's death. The seemingly unanswerable question is: "Was his death the result of a conspiracy?" In pre-Watergate America, such a question would have been dismissed as absurd. But we are a more sophisticated people today, and conspiracy theories don't sound so much like theater of the absurd. I remember reading Matthew Fox's autobiography *Confessions: The Making of a Post-Denominational Priest* and being rather surprised that he believed that Merton might have been assassinated. He writes, "I once asked a CIA agent who was in Southeast Asia at the time whether they killed Merton. 'I will neither affirm it nor deny it,' he said. 'Could you have?' I asked. 'A piece of cake,' he replied." A rather enigmatic exchange, and although it's intriguing, it really doesn't prove a thing.

But proof be damned, for Bill Goodson's lively imagination has concocted a rather wild storyline, laying blame for Merton's death at the hands not of the CIA but of a secret, ultra-conservative Catholic organization called the "Bossuet Society," whose aim is to save the church from the infection of ecumenism. On its hit list are the Pope and Thomas Merton. Yes, it's crazily far-fetched, but a willing suspension of disbelief makes Goodson's novel fun to read.

Plot: an international cartel headed by Manuel Matsuku, son of a Japanese father and a Mexican

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mother, is spearheading a plan to purchase 105,000 acres of land now used by Fort Campbell in Kentucky. Matsuku plans to build “the largest entertainment venue in the world.” He names the enterprise after his deceased mother, Dolores, thus the name “Dolores Project.” He considers his mother a saint; she was a devout and influential Catholic friendly with the Pope and with Thomas Merton. Her significant role in Merton’s death is revealed at the end of the novel.

The only obstacle to Matsuku’s purchase of Fort Campbell is Senator Jonas Crockett, who has mustered enough votes to stop the closing of the military base. Thus begins the blackmail of the senator’s alcoholic nephew Trey Crockett, guilty of violating his psychiatric license; blackmail leads to murder and the involvement of the Mexican Mafia; the plot thickens when Trey’s son Scott and his daughter Rachel become involved. Aficionados of Merton’s writing, they try to solve the connection with Merton and a certain monk, Dom Phillippe Flaget, confidant to Dolores Matsuku, now an elderly resident at Merton’s abbey.

The author is obviously quite familiar with the Abbey of Gethsemani; his best scenes occur at the monastery where Dom Phillippe is on his deathbed. He possesses letters to which no one but he has ever had access. A friend of Merton’s, Flaget was at the site of Merton’s death in Bangkok, Thailand (and also knew about the plan to kill Merton but didn’t warn him); the letters reveal why Merton was killed and how Manuel Matsuku’s mother was involved. The novel’s climax occurs when Matsuku reads the letters just minutes before the vote on the closing of Fort Campbell (Matsuku has achieved a majority vote) in Washington, DC. If he goes ahead with winning the vote, the letters will be published and his revered mother’s reputation will be ruined. There are three letters, two from a Cardinal of the church and one from Madame Matsuku. Keeping the revelation of the letters’ content to the very end of the novel is Goodson’s cleverest strategy.

I have two suggestions for the author. The press releases he uses in the book should be identified as fictional or factual. I also found some of the dialogue to be awkward and would suggest that the rule to follow in novelistic dialogue is “less is more.” I should say that a certain innocence comes through the plot and characters: one has to force oneself to believe in the bad guys. But, again, with a jaunty willed suspension of disbelief, one can thoroughly enjoy Goodson’s thriller. So, if you’re one of the millions of readers who suffer from a gullibility for conspiracy theories then this novel is for you. And it will definitely serve as a good beach book this summer.

But a word of caution: keep in mind that although some of the book is based on real events in Merton’s life, Goodson’s book is fictional. There’s no proof (as far as I know) that there was any conspiracy involved in Merton’s death: A faulty electric fan fell on him as he was coming from the shower, and he was electrocuted.

Fortunately, we can’t say “end of story,” for in many ways it was just the beginning. . . .