

## New Discovery, Newer Speculation

Review of  
*Enacting Love: How Thomas Merton Died for Peace*  
 By John Smelcer  
 Foreword by Paul Pearson  
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Reviewed by **Christine M. Bochen**

Everyone has a story and, in the ever-widening circle of those who have encountered and embraced Thomas Merton, everyone has a Merton story. For some, it is about how they first heard about Merton or came upon one of his books. For others, it is a story that highlights the resonance of his message or celebrates seeds of personal transformation planted deep in their spirits. For those fortunate to have known Merton personally – old friends, novices, fellow monks, correspondents and the like – the stories are rich in memories of times shared, conversations enjoyed, letters exchanged. The stories are as many and as varied as are the story-tellers. Those of us who read and study Merton never tire of listening to these stories. Indeed, we are hungry for them, especially for those told by those who knew Merton personally. And, as the number of those who can share stories of their interactions and relationships with Merton dwindles, we treasure their every word. The recent publication of *Awake and Alive: Thomas Merton according to His Novices*, edited by Jon Sweeney, is a reminder of how much we long for and delight in these memories and testimonies.

*Enacting Love: How Merton Died for Peace* adds two stories to our cache, one engaging, the other highly problematic. First there is the story of the recovery of Merton’s personal belongings, safeguarded for decades by Robert and Helen Marie Grimes. How Merton’s things came into their hands and how author John Smelcer came to play a part in the recovery of the Merton memorabilia makes for an engrossing tale. But, as the sub-title suggests, there is another story: the retelling and reinterpretation of Merton’s death – its manner and meaning – as assassination and martyrdom.

The book includes a Foreword by Paul Pearson, seventeen unnumbered chapters, an Afterword by the author, a list of books cited, and brief biographies of Smelcer and Pearson. The book is dedicated to “Thomas Merton and his brother and sister in Christ – Robert and Helen Marie Grimes (formerly Brother Irenaeus and Sister Mary Pius).” New to most Merton readers, John Smelcer is a prolific author of more than 60 books on a wide variety of subjects and the inaugural writer-in-residence and blogger at the Charter of Compassion, established by Karen Armstrong (see 241).

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**Christine M. Bochen** is Professor Emerita of Religious Studies at Nazareth College, Rochester, NY, where she held the William H. Shannon Chair in Catholic Studies. A founding member and past president of the International Thomas Merton Society, she has edited *The Courage for Truth*, a volume of Merton’s letters to writers, *Learning to Love*, the sixth volume of Merton’s complete journals and *Thomas Merton: Essential Writings*; she co-edited with William H. Shannon *Cold War Letters* and *Thomas Merton: A Life in Letters* and coauthored with William H. Shannon and Patrick F. O’Connell *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*.

In his Foreword (vii-xiv), Paul Pearson previews the story of how two trunks of Merton's personal belongings came to the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY. As Director and Archivist of the Merton Center for more than two decades, Pearson has witnessed the growth of the Center's collections through many noteworthy donations and acquisitions. Nevertheless, hearing John Smelcer's "astonishing story" of the Merton artifacts stored in two trunks in Missouri and traveling there to see them and to bring them back to the Merton Center, Pearson came to share Smelcer's excitement and awe. Pearson was especially moved by the sight and feel of Merton's iconic jacket with his laundry number prominently marked on the lapel. It was the third number: two monks had "owned" the jacket before Merton. Addressing the reader, Pearson writes: "you might be able to imagine the emotion I felt in seeing, indeed, in holding in my hands, this iconic item of Merton's clothing that had been hidden from the world since Merton's death in 1968. . . . that moment led to tears running down my cheeks. . . . it was like having the physical embodiment of Merton standing in front of me" (xi). The hand-me-down jacket and the frayed, worn and repeatedly repaired clothing contained in these trunks were a stark and "very powerful reminder of Merton's humility and self-effacing nature" (xiii). Fortunately, this donation arrived in time to be included in an exhibit entitled "Thomas Merton: Familiar Stranger" which opened at the Frazier Historical Museum in Louisville on the last day of Merton's centennial year – January 30, 2016.

John Smelcer's writing style is informal and his tone conversational. Some chapter titles, designed to be catchy ("The Most Famous Monk in the World") come off as cutesy ("A Nun and A Monk Walk into a Wedding Chapel") or even demeaning, though, I am certain, unintentionally so ("The Intrepid Little Nun"). The book is peppered with photos – more than fifty in all. They include snapshots from the family collections of Robert and Helen Marie Grimes, some photos taken at Gethsemani, some referencing historical events, a few illustrations of Merton's notes and letters and a photo of Abbot Flavian Burns' homily at Merton's funeral. A series of photos documents the recovery of Merton's belongings – including a couple of Smelcer wearing Merton's iconic denim jacket and other items of his clothing. (I must admit that I found these photos disconcerting though I expect that some readers may not.) There are also photos of John Smelcer with Paul Pearson and Helen Marie Grimes taken at Smelcer's home, the Merton Center at Bellarmine and the Frazier Historical Museum. The cover photo, showing Merton seated on the ground with a beer can beside him was taken at Gethsemani by Sr. Mary Pius (Helen Marie Grimes) in 1968.

In the first two chapters, "The Most Famous Monk in the World" (3-13) and "The Assassination of Thomas Merton" (15-28), Smelcer introduces Thomas Merton as "an American prophet" who was the "Conscience of America" advocating for civil rights and speaking out against racism and war. Challenging the prevalent explanation of his death on December 10, 1968 as an accidental electrocution, Smelcer asks: "But what if his death wasn't accidental? What if, instead, Thomas Merton was assassinated, his murder made to look like an accident?" (5). Acknowledging and lauding the work of Hugh Turley and David Martin, authors of *The Martyrdom of Thomas Merton*, who argue that Merton was assassinated by the C.I.A. and the truth was covered up by Merton's own confreres who proffered the cause of Merton's death as electrocution, Smelcer accepts their conclusions at face value. (Others have not.) Explaining why he wrote his book, Smelcer writes: "While writers like Hugh Turley and David Martin have delineated the conspiracy, what they have not been able to identify clearly is  *motive*. Why was Thomas Merton assassinated when he was?"

What was the crucial thing that had to be stopped at that exact time? Why not wait until he returned to Kentucky?" (28). These are questions Smelcer strives to answer.

In the next two chapters, "The Monk Who Fell Out of the Sky" (29-52) and "The Intrepid Little Nun" (53-83), Smelcer introduces readers to two individuals who would play key roles in the preservation of Merton's personal belongings. Drawing on journals and notes as well as official records, Smelcer tells the story of Robert "Bobby" Grimes, who enlisted in the U. S. Army in 1939 at age fifteen and in May 1943 was shipped to a base in England. Smelcer recounts Robert's harrowing experiences first in aerial combat as a tail gunner and then as prisoner of war. Sgt. Grimes was released in June 1945 and subsequently awarded a Purple Heart. Struggling to find his way, he read Merton's autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, and in 1951 entered the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani. As Brother Irenaeus, he was assigned to the Print Shop and then to the Tailoring Shop. Helen Marie grew up in Pennsylvania. Convinced that she should "devote her life to serving God" (60), she refused a proposal of marriage and joined a cloistered community, Sisters Adorers of the Precious Blood, in Brooklyn, taking the name of Sr. Mary Pius. Inspired by Merton's writings, she was determined to meet Merton and seek his spiritual counsel. Encouraged by the priest who served as abbot [*sic*] of her religious community, she traveled to the Abbey of Gethsemani and asked to see Merton. Smelcer describes the meeting this way: "Despite the planned thirty minutes, they sat and talked in the guest house parlor for a couple of hours, and it was decided that she would return to the nunnery in Brooklyn and that he, Thomas Merton, would work with the powers that be back home to get her reassigned closer to Gethsemani so that he could become her spiritual teacher and adviser" (66). Smelcer reports that Father Louis wrote to her superiors "requesting dispensation (special consideration/allowance) for her to be transferred closer to the Abbey of Gethsemani" (67). Sr. Mary Pius "found herself assigned to the Sisters of Loretto Motherhouse in Nerinx, a mere thirteen miles from Gethsemani. . . . Sister Mary Pius was granted dispensation from her convent back in Brooklyn, a formal sabbatical, of sorts. She was further instructed that she could not wear her religious habit during this period, though she was required to uphold her vows and religious observations" (68). She met Brother Irenaeus, who was assigned to drive Merton and "chaperone" his visits with Sr. Mary Pius (70). Smelcer reports that as their friendship grew, Merton confided in Sr. Mary Pius. Smelcer writes that "Helen Marie may have been the *only* person Father Louis could confide in about his feelings" for the young nurse with whom he had fallen in love in 1966 (76). (In fact she was not – James Laughlin, "Ping" Ferry, even Joan Baez were all aware of the relationship.) For her part, Sr. Mary Pius kept his confidence – not disclosing what he had shared. Meanwhile, Sr. Mary Pius and Brother Irenaeus were falling in love. Smelcer quips that "All three [he is including Merton] were suffering from lovesickness in one form or another" (78). Before he left for Asia, Merton reportedly confided in Sr. Mary Pius for what would be the last time: "On that little hill, with the smell of freshly cut hay on the wind, Thomas Merton divulged his secret, a secret she would safeguard for the next half century . . . a secret that had the potential to change history" (82-83). It is this "secret" that Smelcer reveals in subsequent chapters.

In the shortest chapter in the book "The Abbot's Orders" (85-87), Smelcer reports that after Merton's funeral, Abbot Flavian Burns directed Bro. Irenaeus to collect and dispose of Merton's belongings. Smelcer speculates that the abbot may have feared that "hordes of zealous fans might descend on the monastery and ransack the place in search of Merton memorabilia" (86). Brother

Irenaeus packed Merton's possessions into three trunks and "drove them someplace for temporary safe-keeping" (85-86). The trunks would remain hidden in Robert's possession and, after his death, in Helen Marie's until 2015 when Smelcer learned of their existence.

The sixth chapter, "The Abbot's Homily for Thomas Merton" (89-99), reports that both Brother Irenaeus and Sr. Mary Pius attended Merton's funeral mass and burial on December 17, 1968 – a week after his death. Helen Marie was deeply moved by Abbot Flavian's homily – especially when the Abbot shared what Merton had said to him before his trip: "The possibility of death was not absent from his [Merton's] mind. We spoke of this before he set out – first jokingly, then seriously. He was ready for it. He even saw a certain fittingness in dying over there amidst those Asian monks, who symbolized for him man's ancient and perennial desire for the deep things of God" (91). Smelcer reports that Sr. Mary Pius requested a meeting with Abbot Flavian Burns and former Abbot James Fox to share what Merton had supposedly told her. "Helen Marie calmly recounted Merton's plan to sneak out of Thailand after the conference in Bangkok, and to make his way to North Vietnam, where he would surrender himself as a prisoner of war. As a conscientious objector and non-combatant – a hostage for peace – his captivity might help bring about the end of the war by influencing public sentiment against the war back home and abroad" (93). Concerned that his mail might be intercepted by the F.B.I. or C.I.A., Merton had sent out a letter to friends (including Sr. Mary Pius) in which he stated: "I have no intention of going anywhere near Vietnam." According to her recollection, "Abbot Flavian replied that Father Louis had told him and Abbot Fox the same thing, namely his plan to surrender himself to the North Vietnamese to help end the war" (95). Smelcer calls the reader's attention to two letters: a letter Abbot Fox wrote to "My dear Fr [*sic*] Louis," dated October 6 and Merton's response from Calcutta, dated October 20. Smelcer observes that Abbot Fox's letter "reads exactly like someone saying goodbye . . . as if the author wanted to say his piece before it was too late. . . . It is clear in the letter that Abbot Fox knew that Thomas Merton was not going to return to the abbey any time soon, if ever" even though (in Smelcer's version of his itinerary) he was scheduled to return in less than two months (97). Merton's response, Smelcer notes, was "heartfelt and respectful" (98). Abbot Flavian told Sr. Mary Pius and Brother Irenaeus, who had accompanied her to the meeting, not to speak of their conversation. Smelcer put it this way: "Abbot Flavian counselled the little nun [*sic*] never to publicly disclose what Father Louis told her that day, saying that it was better that the world thought Father Louis had died of a heart attack or by freak accident rather than to disclose the alarming possibility" that he had been killed (99).

In the seventh chapter, "A Nun and a Monk Walk into a Wedding Chapel" (101-13), readers learn that the couple married on December 10, 1969, exactly a year after Merton died. The chapter includes snapshots of their wedding (including a shot of the cake baked by the monks). In the 1980s, the couple moved from Kentucky to Missouri, where they worked at Unity Village – "a mecca of interfaith studies and New Age Spiritualism" (106). The chapter ends with a letter Helen Marie wrote to friends after Robert's death in 2009, following a stroke in 2005 which left him paralyzed in body but ever closer to God in spirit. The letter is a tribute to Robert – "a living, shining example of loving kindness and patience," grateful "even for the smallest service rendered to him" (108).

As the chapter title "The Pilfering of the Thomas Merton Collection (1970-2015)" (115-26) suggests, some individuals who learned that Helen Marie and her husband had Merton's possessions, did their best to get their hands on them. For example, there was the nun who "implored Helen

Marie to give her something of Merton's to cherish" (116) and persuaded Helen Marie to part with Merton's rosary and a few items of clothing, and the boss in the diner where Helen Marie worked who persuaded her to give him the academic hood marking the honorary doctorate the University of Kentucky awarded to Merton in 1967. Merton had sent the hood to Br. Irenaeus along with a note saying "This useless object belongs with a degree I got. I suppose it ought to be kept someplace?? Anyway, if you have a corner to store it away, I would be grateful" (120). Decades of "pilfering" would reduce the contents of the three trunks to two (126).

Smelcer was, in the words of the title of ninth chapter, in "The Right Place at the Right Time" (127-34). He was writing in a coffee shop when he fell into conversation with someone who knew of a woman who had "objects that had belonged to Merton" (128). Smelcer recalls meeting Helen Marie Grimes in her home in June 2015: "I introduced myself as a writer, university professor, as an archeologist, oral historian, as a fellow Catholic, and like Merton, a student of world religions, and someone who was trained by the Smithsonian Institution in the proper care of museum artifacts" (129-30). For Helen Marie, John Smelcer was the answer to a prayer and she was grateful to Father Louis who, she believed, had answered her prayer. She told Smelcer the story of how she and her husband came to have Merton's belongings and shared notes and photos that supported her story.

In the tenth chapter, "The Naysayers" (135-47), Smelcer reports putting on Merton's clothing; "Think what you will, but I even tried on some of his clothing. I wore them in arrangements mirroring photographs of him: his denim jeans, white tee-shirt, blue work shirt, blue denim jacket, and navy blue cap. . . . I even tried on his religious vestments, including the white cassock and black scapular he wore when he met the Dalai Lama in northern India in late 1968" (135). Each reader will decide what he or she thinks. But I expect that some will find it cringeworthy as do I. The "naysayers" included a very good friend, a priest who had served in the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Religious Affairs at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, who told Smelcer to destroy all of Merton's possessions. The very qualities and actions that led some to admire Merton caused others to revile him – including some Catholic priests. Such responses prompted Smelcer to "read voraciously" everything Merton published (142) and to speak with those who knew Merton personally. Doing so, Smelcer learned that Merton was "not an outcast or heretic" (142). Indeed, Pope John XXIII and Pope Paul VI "considered Merton to be one of the greatest living Christian writers" (142). Interweaving Merton's story with his own, Smelcer testifies that Merton's "'Christian-ness' was resolute" (145) and that his efforts to promote interfaith understanding did not diminish his Catholic faith.

In "Abbey of Gethsemani or Bust" (149-65), Smelcer tells of his motorcycle ride to the Thomas Merton Center in Louisville to show its director, Paul Pearson, photos of Merton's belongings and images of photographs Helen Marie had in her possession – including the one that appears on the cover of *Enacting Love*. One of the photos exhibited at the Center was Merton's shot of a mountain in Alaska which John Smelcer recognized as a mountain in his tribal region (see 156). Smelcer was deeply moved: "I was thrilled. . . . in the last weeks of his life, [Merton] had stood on the land of my tribe and marveled at the rugged beauty surrounding him, awed and inspired enough to snap this photograph. More than that, he had stood at the very same place I have stood many times in my life. The connection was somehow spiritual. I felt a kindred connection to the man that I had not felt before. . . . Suddenly, I felt like my role in the discovery of Merton's worldly possessions

was less coincidence and more providence. I know that sounds presumptuous, but it's how I felt and how I continue to feel" (157-58). Smelcer went on to the Abbey of Gethsemani, hiked the trail to Merton's hermitage, and visited Merton's grave, and walked the grounds of the Sisters of Loretto Motherhouse where Helen Marie had lived.

In "Easy Come, Easy Go" (167-71), Smelcer recounts that, like Helen Marie, he too was approached by people who wanted to acquire or purchase objects that had belonged to Merton. He confesses to installing a battery-powered alarm and even booby-trapping the basement door to protect the collection. It was something of a relief when Paul Pearson took possession of the materials. The chapter ends with this statement: "I could not have known then that it was not the end" (171) as Smelcer turns his attention to advancing the claim that Merton was assassinated because of his opposition to the Vietnam War and his intention to surrender himself to the North Vietnamese as a "peace prisoner" or "hostage for peace" (215).

In the thirteenth chapter "Franz Jägerstätter: Merton's Model of Moral Courage" (173-84), Smelcer lifts up the example of the Austrian peasant who refused to serve in Hitler's army and was arrested, imprisoned and beheaded as an "enemy of the state." Helen Marie recalled that as he was working on *Faith and Violence* Merton "was keen to tell" her and Robert about Jägerstätter (174). Synchronously, as Helen Marie was telling her story, Smelcer was working on a young adult novel, *The Field*, about a young German whose character "is based loosely on Franz Jägerstätter" (176). Smelcer contacted Jägerstätter's only living daughter who provided an afterword. Maria Dammer-Jägerstätter wrote: "My father stood by his conviction as a conscientious objector and refused to harm others in what he saw as Hitler's unjust and unprovoked war. His decision was not out of fear or cowardice, but out of courage and conscience" (177). Helen Marie told Smelcer "that in a number of conversations between her and Merton in 1968, especially after the assassinations [*sic*] of Martin Luther King, Jägerstätter's example of moral courage clearly had a profound effect on Merton, who began to feel that his actions of protest against the unjust war of aggression in Vietnam paled in comparison to Jägerstätter's sacrifice" (182). Merton reportedly felt "ashamed," "like a coward," and "impotent"; he "needed to do something" (183).

In January 2016, Helen Marie was delighted to visit the Merton Center at Bellarmine University and view Merton memorabilia familiar to her – such as his manual typewriter and 35mm camera – and to attend the opening of the Frazier Museum exhibit which included some of the objects long-stored in the trunks. She was publicly recognized for safeguarding Merton's belongings and donating them to the Center. Following the opening, Paul Pearson and Mark Meade, assistant director of the Merton Center, hosted Helen Marie, John Smelcer and his family for dinner at a local restaurant – just across the street from the house where Helen and Robert Grimes had lived for fifteen years. As the conversation turned to Merton's death, Smelcer recalls that Paul Pearson mentioned that "Merton might have been killed by the C.I.A. because he had planned to sneak into North Vietnam and surrender himself to the North Vietnamese as a 'hostage for peace' – in order to influence public sentiment against the war and possibly bring about its early end, thereby saving countless lives" (188). Neither Smelcer nor Helen Marie said anything about what they knew – the "secret" they shared. Smelcer writes that he "was struck by the term 'hostage for peace.' Helen Marie always said 'peace prisoner' when she spoke of Merton's plan. Years later, Pearson clarified what he'd meant that evening, saying that according to Merton's friend, Jim Forest, it was Daniel

Berrigan – the Jesuit priest, social activist, and anti-war protestor – who had suggested to Merton the idea of a [*sic*] going to North Vietnam as a ‘hostage for peace,’ or as a human shield” (189). Smelcer notes that Merton wrote about the conversation in his journal (which he anachronistically refers to as “restricted,” the term customarily used to describe the private journals before their publication), but he apparently misunderstands the somewhat cryptic note, and presumably Paul Pearson’s reference to it as well. Merton’s journal entry for May 10, 1967 refers not to Merton but to Berrigan himself as hoping to go to Hanoi: “Dan Berrigan looked like a French worker priest in beret and black turtleneck windbreaker. A good uniform for a priest. He wants to go to Hanoi, but may get thrown out of the Jesuits for doing it.” (Berrigan did indeed travel to North Vietnam in February 1968, not as a peace hostage but as part of a small American delegation to accompany three released prisoners of war, about which he writes in his book *Night Flight to Hanoi*, published later that year.) Smelcer ends this chapter (188-91), which he entitled “Enacting Love,” with mention of a letter (written by Br. Benedict to John Howard Griffin on August 20, 1971) that corroborates Helen Marie’s story of meeting Merton and coming to know him as her spiritual director and friend as well as her “spiritual marriage” to Robert Grimes (190-91).

In the next chapter, “A Distillation of Faith” (193-203), Smelcer begins with a question which he answers in the affirmative. “Even if Daniel or Philip Berrigan, or someone else suggested to Merton the idea that he surrender himself as a ‘peace prisoner’ or ‘hostage for peace’ to the North Vietnamese while he was in Southeast Asia, would Merton have seriously considered the notion? If the kinds of things Merton was studying at the time are any indication of the evolution of his thinking on war and peace and justice, the answer is a resounding yes” (193). Drawing on Merton’s own writings, particularly on a lengthy essay in *Seeds of Destruction*, “The Christian in World Crisis: Reflections on the Moral Climate of the 1960’s,” which Merton wrote in 1964, Smelcer points to ways in which Merton’s reading of early Church Fathers, St. Augustine, Meister Eckhart, Pope John XXIII and Dietrich Bonhoeffer helped to clarify and strengthen his understanding of what it means to be a follower of Jesus: a peacemaker. By fall 1968, Smelcer concludes that Merton “could sit no longer. He felt like he needed to go out and ‘pull the world to safety,’ to wrest it away from destruction” (202).

In the penultimate chapter, “Absolute Power Corrupts Absolutely” (205-13), Smelcer reminds readers of the “secret” that Merton shared with Helen Marie and with his current and former abbots: that “he thought he would die while on this journey” and that “the United States government [specifically the C.I.A.] might be responsible for his death” (205). Once again, Smelcer poses questions: “But were Merton’s concerns unfounded? Would an agency of the American government assassinate an American citizen – and a renowned priest at that – while he was traveling abroad?” (205). Smelcer’s answers: “no” to the former question and “yes” to the latter. As evidence, Smelcer states that President John F. Kennedy was assassinated “arguably by the C.I. A.”; the C.I.A. planned to assassinate Fidel Castro; a “prominent historian” cited numerous examples of C.I.A. attempts to “eliminate enemies of the state”; the C.I.A. may have orchestrated assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr.; the F.B.I. surveilled Malcolm X (206-209). “Taken together, is it really that difficult to believe that the C.I.A. may have assassinated Thomas Merton . . . and made his death look like the result of a freak accident or natural causes?” (209). Smelcer concludes the chapter citing the view of Brother David Steindl-Rast who remembered Merton saying that the trip “he was

about to embark on was going to be very dangerous” (212). At the time, Brother David “imagined Merton meant the usual pitfalls of foreign travel” (212). After Merton’s death, he “wondered how it was that Thomas Merton knew that he might not return from Asia alive. After I related Merton’s clandestine plan as described to me by Helen Marie Grimes, Brother David replied that it all finally made sense” (213).

“Pieces of a Puzzle” (215-22), the last chapter, begins with modest claims: “I only know that the story I have told here supports the notion that Thomas Merton may have been assassinated and that he knew before he left on his Asian Journey that his travels might end with his death, one way or another. He even had the idea of who his assassin(s) might be” (215). Smelcer’s choice of words – “notion,” “may have,” “might” – signal possibility rather than certainty. I am struck by an observation that Smelcer makes earlier in the book: “The question is not are the events portrayed above *true*, but whether they are *credible*” (27). That may strike readers as a low bar, but it is one that is by no means obviously cleared. After listing – once again – what Smelcer says “we know,” he concludes: “Taken together, the assembled evidence strongly suggests that Thomas Merton, a Catholic priest, died in that ancient and most revered of Christian traditions, as commanded by Jesus himself: to be a peacemaker (Matthew 5:9) and to lay down one’s life, for friends or otherwise (John 15:13), and that he did so willingly out of love for his fellow man, for all mankind” (220). Smelcer’s hope is that Pope Francis “will initiate steps towards recognizing that Thomas Merton died a martyr in attempt to save tens of thousands of lives needlessly lost in an unjust war. He did so willingly and out of an abundance of love for every human being, and in fulfillment of Jesus’s obligation to seek peace” (222).

As he tells readers in the Afterword (223-32), Smelcer continued to visit Helen Marie monthly and to interview her, sometimes assisted by his wife, Dr. Amber Johnson, an archaeologist. During that time, Helen Marie was diagnosed with throat cancer. Less than two years later, her cancer was in remission, but her dementia was progressing and by early 2018, Smelcer “was pretty sure she didn’t know who I was” though her “long-term memories remained somewhat intact though I no longer accepted what she told me on face value” (226). By the end of 2018, Helen Marie had to leave her home. Helen Marie Grimes died in January 2022. On a personal note, Smelcer confesses that at Helen Marie’s insistence, he kept one thing from the trunks – one of the silk ties Merton had purchased in Bangkok. Helen Marie had “pleaded that I should wear the tie whenever I spoke publicly about Merton” and he has done so (228).

As I conclude this review, I offer a general observation, a few criticisms, and some words of caution to readers. First, an observation: I have no doubt that writing this book was for John Smelcer a labor of love. Smelcer’s admiration for Thomas Merton is unquestionable. His appreciation of and affection for Helen Marie Grimes is apparent throughout the book (though I shudder each time he refers to her as “the little nun”). His excitement at the discovery of Merton’s belongings and his role in orchestrating their safe arrival at the Merton Center is infectious. Second, some criticisms: every book can benefit from the services of a skilled editor. *Enacting Love* is no exception. Rigorous editing would address some stylistic and technical concerns by tightening the narrative, regularizing citations, checking quotations for accuracy (particularly in “A Distillation of Faith”), and deleting repetitions. A careful fact-check would eliminate some irksome errors and discrepancies; for example: the 1997 ITMS conference was in Mobile, not Pittsburgh (7); *The Seven Storey Mountain*



was published in 1948, not 1947; Merton's Trappist Psalter was in Latin, not French and his flagellant was made of rope, not leather (86).

Finally, a caution to readers regarding the alleged manner of and motive for Merton's death by assassination. In the interest of full disclosure, I admit that I am suspicious of all conspiracy theories – whatever or whoever the subject – including Thomas Merton. I am stumped by a statement that Smelcer makes in “The Assassination of Thomas Merton,” the second chapter: “The question is not are the events portrayed above *true*, but are they *credible*” (27). Smelcer's hope is that “the preponderance of evidence presented in the following pages – circumstantial and otherwise – will reveal the *likelihood* that assassination is precisely what happened to Thomas Merton that fateful day on the outskirts of Bangkok” (27). The motive, Smelcer argues, was to prevent Merton from following through on his “secret” plan to cross into North Vietnam and offer himself as a hostage for peace. Smelcer is relying on the memory and testimony of Helen Marie Grimes recalling her conversations with Merton and the abbots. Perhaps anticipating skepticism on the part of some readers, Smelcer writes: “What struck me most about my interviews with Helen Marie was the way in which she clearly remembered these conversations [Smelcer is referring to her conversation with Abbot Flavian Burns and former Abbot James Fox] even fifty years later. She swore to the accuracy and truthfulness, so much so that she attested to them in a signed and witnessed affidavit” (98).

What are we to make of it all? Frankly, I don't know. I do know that retrieving memories and reconstructing conversations decades later can be a dicey business, and one might certainly raise the question of credibility about Helen Marie's assertion that Merton's present and future abbot were aware of Merton's supposed plans to offer himself as a hostage for peace, and still allowed him to travel to Asia. Such a claim is wildly inconsistent with the caution both superiors consistently showed regarding Merton's traveling outside the monastery. There is no question that Helen Marie herself believed that both Merton and his abbots had told her this, but the reliability of these memories of events almost a half-century earlier, by someone who would soon be afflicted with serious dementia issues, is at least highly questionable. Furthermore, both Helen Marie, and consequently Smelcer, were apparently completely unaware of Merton's actual Asian itinerary. Merton was certainly not scheduled to return to the U.S. immediately following the Thailand conference, as is repeatedly asserted by the author, who has clearly not paid even the most cursory attention to the dozens of references in Merton's journal and correspondence to his actual plans, which included spending Christmas at the Cistercian monastery of Rawa Seneng in Indonesia, where he was to lead a retreat (which had been arranged even before the conference plans in India or Thailand were finalized), to be followed by a possible return to India (mentioned in his December 7 journal entry), a likely visit to the Trappist monastery in Hong Kong, and definitely a period of time in Japan, to be spent with his Jesuit correspondents at Sophia University in Tokyo. His December 6 and 7 journal entries leave no doubt that he was intending to fly to Djakarta immediately following the conclusion of the Thailand conference, and in his December 8 letter to Br. Patrick Hart he speaks of his looking forward to being at a Cistercian monastery for Christmas. Even more telling is his November 9 letter to Fr. Flavian outlining his plans for Indonesia and Japan and requesting permission to come home by way of Europe in order to visit Buddhist monasteries in Switzerland and Scotland, at the recommendation of the Dalai Lama, and so to extend his trip to the beginning of May – a request that would be absurd if he were planning to go to Vietnam, with the abbot's foreknowledge! The

following day he writes a brief message to his Anglican friend Donald Allchin about his hopes for this extension of his travels so that he would be in Britain in May, and asks, “Can we do Wales then?” Unless we posit that all these references and many more, not only in letters but in his private journal, are part of an elaborate (and ultimately unsuccessful) smoke screen to throw off his putative assassins, surely the “preponderance of evidence” overwhelmingly weighs against the scenario Smelcer proposes. Moreover, the repeated assertion by Smelcer that Merton would somehow have thought that his presence in North Vietnam might have changed the course of the war and saved thousands of lives suggests a fantastically inflated sense of self-importance (evidently shared by his nefarious pursuers) that is certainly inconsistent with Merton’s characteristic realism, modesty and common sense about his own reputation, what Paul Pearson in his Foreword refers to as “Merton’s humility and self-effacing nature.”

A few things are certain. Those who have gone to God – Thomas Merton, Abbots Burns and Fox, and Helen Marie Grimes – can no longer answer our questions about matters this book raises. Indeed, to them, the questions no longer matter. Theories about the circumstances of Merton’s death will continue to claim our attention. So be it. What matters most – to me at least – is that we honor the legacy of Merton’s life work as monk and writer in all the ways we are able. How we do that is for each one of us to decide.

A last word: as I write, I am looking at a photo of Thomas Merton wearing the iconic denim jacket. The photo, as I remember, was taken by Naomi Burton Stone, who gave it to Bill Shannon, who passed it on to me. I look forward to seeing the jacket on display at the Thomas Merton Center the next time I visit. I will be sure to whisper a word of thanks to Robert and Helen Marie Grimes – and to John Smelcer!