

Frameworks for Faithful Living

Review of
Our Hearts Are Restless: The Art of Spiritual Memoir
 By Richard Lischer
 New York: Oxford University Press, 2023
 379 pages / \$34.96 cloth

Reviewed by **Bonnie Thurston**

Readers of *The Merton Seasonal* are likely to be most interested in the third chapter of Richard Lischer's recent book *Our Hearts Are Restless: "Journey through Purgatory: Thomas Merton"* (46-65). But it is helpful to put this chapter in the context of the provenance and purpose of this highly recommended book's author, Professor Emeritus at Duke Divinity School and himself the writer of two spiritual memoirs. He explains that the volume was written during the pandemic and a time of "geopolitical barbarism" (2). "We write what we suffer," he notes, and "autobiographical writing is a witness to human life. It is testimony to the miracle of its continuance" (3). The book's focus is spiritual memoir. The author's intent is "to stimulate interesting conversations among the characters treated" (10). He analyzes and comments on the memoirs of those he has included and compares the works and lives of the writers with one another.

It is a most remarkable cast of characters, some well known (St. Augustine, Julian of Norwich, John Bunyan, Etty Hillesum), others lesser known (Agnes Beaumont, Harriet Jacobs, Dennis Covington). Writers from earlier eras like Emily Dickinson, Peter Abelard and C. S. Lewis appear with more contemporary memoirists such as Kathleen Norris, Anne Lamott and James Baldwin. The criteria by which they were chosen are that each reflects "a depth that can only be called 'honesty'" (8), and that for each "God is a living reality" (9). It is not only in the chapter on Dorothy Day that the reader feels "the density of the world" (9) in which the memoirist lives.

The twenty-one people Lischer includes are grouped in seven "paths" or "plots": "Search and Surrender"; "Revelations"; "How Goes the Battle?"; "The Stripping of the Altar"; "Pilgrimages"; "New Every Day"; "Nomadic Faith." For Lischer, each offers "companionship, guidance, and hope" (11). I would add: challenge, recognition and ultimately, joy. This collection of lives provides the material Lischer interprets, often by comparing two surprising figures, for example in Part II, Julian of Norwich and Emily Dickinson and in Part IV, Peter Abelard and Reynolds Price. "At its best," he notes, "Christian memoir provides the framework for the fully integrated life of faith" (277). The frameworks and integrations differ widely, but aspirations and goals are often similar.

Bonnie Thurston, founding member and third president of the International Thomas Merton Society, has written or edited over two dozen books on scripture, theology and spirituality and is also the author of six collections of poetry. Her book *Shaped by the End You Live For: Thomas Merton's Monastic Spirituality* was published in 2020.

Thomas Merton, in chapter 3, follows two on Augustine of Hippo. According to Lischer, “Since Augustine, no one has traced the journey of faith with such exquisite beauty as Thomas Merton,” whose work has “two explicitly delineated tenses: then and now” (46). There also “will be a third tense: After” (46) *The Seven Storey Mountain*. The chapter focuses on this 1948 volume, published when Merton was 33. It is divided into various sections: Tom Merton (Merton’s biological family); Under the Shadow of His Wings (boarding schools); England Demythologized (Cambridge University); Friends and Books (Columbia University); Father Louis (conversion); and the self-evident subjects: Gethsemani; After; and M.

I read the autobiography very differently from Lischer. For example, having visited Oakham and read accounts by Merton’s classmates, I think “Dickensian” (49) and “the despised public schools of England” (50) are unfortunate descriptions. I’d also very much like to have had a footnote identifying the friend to whom “Tom” confided his fatherhood of a child, a much debated incident (53). Of this event, the use of quotations marks (57-58) borders on the misleading. I don’t agree that the book “radiates contempt for [Merton’s] pre-conversion failings” and “for others as well” (56).

Those who know the monastic tradition, and Gethsemani in particular, will find some descriptions and asides troubling: “busy work of the monastery” (57), “dehumanizing demands” (60), “Stasi-like monitoring of mail . . . and calls” (62). If description of life at Gethsemani is inaccurate, observation of Merton’s “glory of self-sacrifice” (58) is not. But from which of Merton’s writings did Lischer that conclude monastic routine was “drying up his spirit” (61)? What were his “several nervous breakdowns” (61)? Merton and M. were not “romantic equals” (63).

All that being said, much of Lischer’s analysis of Merton is spot-on. Merton was certainly too young to be “released into the custody of a dangerous freedom” (51). That Merton’s brilliance “stems from the fusion of two great powers: his literary gifts and his spiritual aptitude” (60) is exactly right, and key to the monk’s achievements (and failings), which are those of “an exceedingly fragile human being” (60). For Merton, writing was indeed a form of praying (see 61). His love for M. “cannot be separated from his growth as a human being” (63). God had “melted him down and made of him someone altogether new” (65), which is why I think Lischer frequently uses Merton as a touchstone to evaluate other lives in the book.

Lischer does not describe how his subjects write, but summarizes and evaluates the life stories they tell, how “God is essential to the shape of a life” (4). He does so in energetic prose that often exhibits wonderful, wickedly funny turns of phrase. While I often wished for notes/references, I admired Lischer’s judicious, helpful and courageous interjections of his own life experience as it related those of others. I found the variety of lives effective for purposes of comparison and valuable for my own (old-fashioned but accurate word) edification.

For me, the challenge of Lischer’s readings of Merton was like the “severe mercies” of C. S. Lewis (chapter 12). They led me to question my own convictions. This is seldom pleasant, but usually beneficial. I commend the practice to convinced-of-their-own-readings Mertonites. This volume is both entertaining and valuable for those interested in discovering the myriad ways God reaches out to, nurtures and reshapes very different people. The author has succeeded in fulfilling his intention to delineate, through a wide range of particular narratives, how “Christian memoir provides the framework for the fully integrated life of faith” (277). I recommend it.