

## Thoughts in Solitude

Review of

*My Life in Seventeen Books: A Literary Memoir*

By Jon M. Sweeney

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Reviewed by **David Belcastro**

While this memoir is personal, the essays it includes are, I hope, universal in application for all readers and lovers of books. They show how the books we carry are more important than the food we eat (xvi). This closing comment from Sweeney's prologue caught my attention because of a book that I have been carrying with me for the past several years, Thomas Merton's *Thoughts in Solitude*. In his preface, Merton informs the reader that even though his intuitions on life alone with God are personal, they are shared in the belief that they are relevant for others. For the past month, I have carried (as Sweeney defines carrying a book) these two books that eventually converged and informed my thoughts for this review.

In *Thoughts in Solitude*, Merton writes about two kinds of books and reading experiences. At the beginning of chapter fourteen (62-64), he explains:

Books can speak to us like God or like the noise of the city we live in. They speak to us like God when they bring us light and peace and fill us with silence. They speak to us like God when we desire never to leave them. They speak to us like men when we desire to hear them again. They speak to us like the noise of the city when they hold us captive by a weariness that tells us nothing, gives us no peace, and no support, nothing to remember, and yet will not let us escape.

Sweeney offers the reader a retreat from the noise of the city to a place of contemplative silence and peace. He is a bibliophile whose search for books is an integral part of his spiritual quest for God. For him the scent of a book rises like incense and an out-of-print book is held like a holy relic. It is the convergence of these two loves that make *My Life in Seventeen Books: A Literary Memoir* of interest to Merton readers who desire to read in a sacred way. His reflections, while at first glance they appear suitable for casual reading, engage the reader at a deeper level. From time to time this becomes apparent, for example when Sweeney expresses a significant challenge to spiritual formation in the twenty-first century: "Religion has lost its power for stories and storytelling. The narrative is broken and the mythos is largely evaporated. Stories are what have always preceded and seeded faith, but in most traditions the living communication of personal experience has been dampened by way too much didactic" (56).

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**David Belcastro** is Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies at Capital University, Bexley, Ohio. He earned a Ph.D. from the University of St. Andrews in Patristics while serving as Assistant Minister in the Church of Scotland. He is a former president of ITMS and former co-editor of *The Merton Annual*.

The books that Sweeney selected for his memoir were not necessarily his favorite books nor even ones that changed his mind more than others, but rather ones that he carried with him (see xi). These books begin not with the first reading but with an unexpected find in a bookstore or on a dusty shelf and somehow over a period of time became woven into Sweeney's life. For example, there was Martin Buber's *Tales of the Hasidim* that he "stumbled upon" at Bonanza Street Books in Walnut Creek, California. It was on the new arrival display. He describes his selection of the book in a most curious way. "I picked it up and turned it over, probably in a way similar to how bread makers examine the bake of loaf just out of the oven. I have seen a baker tap the bottom of a sourdough with his thumb, brush a forefinger across the top of the loaf, and then breathe in its aromas" (3). It was the photo of Buber, however, that sold the book. The photo of Buber not only led to the purchase of *Tales of the Hasidim* but eventually to employment at a Jewish publishing house in Vermont and marriage to a rabbi. And there is Tolstoy's *Twenty-Three Tales* that he discovered in a Boston bookstore. Sweeney compares this bookstore to "an art museum" where one may have "a spiritual experience – even a religious experience" (54). Reading Tolstoy's revealed for Sweeney how stories can renew one's religious life that may have become "exhausted by so much organized religion" (57). Sweeney's stories of *finding* books are as interesting as the books he finds. And as the two finds noted above indicate, something more is going on in his memoir.

That something more has to do with his notion of *carrying a book*. Even after spending two years thinking about what it means to carry a book, the question remains something of a mystery to him. Does he carry the books or do they carry him? Living with this question, he offers the following insight for the reader's consideration:

the sort of carrying to which these interrelated essays refer is more the transitive verb kind, the way that one adopts something, or resolves to do something – for instance, the way a committee or court might carry a motion. There is also the intransitive sort of carrying, which applied to some books in my life as well: I am transmitted, the way the sound of church bells ringing in a city might carry for miles. With bells, this makes good sense, but this wouldn't and couldn't happen with books without some sort of magic, kismet, or enchantment, and with just the right coalescence of person and situation: the ideal moment. These chapters are all about those moments when both the time and the book being carried have been sacred. (xi)

One such ideal moment (actually not so ideal as the reader will discover!) was Sweeney's reading of Monica Furlong's biography of Merton, related in the chapter titled "Monica Furlong's *Thomas Merton* and How to Ruin a Honeymoon" (39-42). Sweeney describes this book as a "lifeboat" during a long and difficult period of his life. He carried the book back and forth to the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky where he "flirted with the idea of a monastic vocation." While he did not become a monk, Merton planted a seed that found good soil and rooted deep within Sweeney's heart. The seed was a simple yet significant question – a question that was never to be answered but rather one that initiated a lifelong quest for his true self.

Sweeney's thoughts on what it means to "carry a book" addresses a significant shift in cultural behavior. Even as an avid reader, he noticed changes in his reading as a result of carrying a phone along with his books. Modern technology occupies much of our time that

would have been set aside for reading. This cultural shift has significant consequences. Rose Horowitz in a recent article published in *The Atlantic* entitled “The Elite College Students Who Can’t Read Books” (334.4 [November 2024] 14-16) reports that students who have been shaped by electronic devices are arriving at college unprepared to read books. This requires universities to offer remedial courses and professors to reduce the required number and length of books. She mentions two additional and even more troubling problems. First, there is the loss of an “empathy that transports a reader into the mind” of someone from another time or a contemporary with a radically different way of seeing the world. Second, critical thinking and self-reflection are diminished if not completely lost without the regular practice of sustained immersion into a book.

There is a second concern raised by Sweeney. It is the academic study of literature that prevails in schools and colleges. *Carrying* a book offers a remedy to the prevailing academic approach to literature and religion that has dampened personal experience by too much didactic teaching. It should be noted that Sweeney is well-educated in modern approaches to literature and religion, sufficiently so to know that there is more to both literature and religion than the printed text. As the reader follows Sweeney through bookstores and listens to his stories that weave books and life into a complex narrative, one becomes aware that there is a significant difference between “knowing about” and “knowing” a book. The latter requires the kind of empathy, self-reflection and critical thinking noted above. It results in knowing the mind of a book’s author, the time and place in which the book was written – and perhaps just as important, knowing the one who is reading the book. To get what books have to offer, you have to carry them, and this is, I believe, the primary lesson of *My Life in Seventeen Books*. In the prologue, Sweeney says that the “time and the book being carried have been sacred.” That awareness of the sacred becomes most apparent in the last paragraph of his memoir:

When I come to the end of this life, I think certain books will be left as a barometer of who I was, but they will sit on shelves quietly, with a private understanding. Ultimately, they have been useful to me alone, and when I am alone. They will mean little to anyone else. Of no particular rarity or measurable value, they will disperse to the winds, which is not what I hope happens to that other most useful and least revealing, yet uncreated, part of me. (133)

While Sweeney’s books may sit silently on his shelves and be of little interest to others, his memoir will be a blessing to those who carry it with themselves as they, like Sweeney, journey through life with books as sacred companions.