

# A BOOK WORTH KNOWING

Review of

**Ron Seitz**

*Song for Nobody: A Memory Vision of Thomas Merton*

Foreword by Patrick Hart, OCSO

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Reviewed by **Robert Marshall Shepherd**

*Song for Nobody, A Memory Vision of Thomas Merton*, by Ron Seitz, is the latest in a seemingly endless series of books, poems, articles and dissections written about the Trappist monk. Weavings, quilts, photographs, paintings from photographs . . . even, renderings of visions and dreams about Merton have also surfaced and been reproduced, not always successfully. Some have been quite wonderful; others merely excrescences.

*Song for Nobody*, the title of which comes from a poem by Merton, falls somewhere in between, but well above the average. Those of us who knew Merton look for truths and insights in tributes and outpourings from sources who also knew the man. Other sources were influenced by his writings, and knew him though letters. Still other contributors, born later, or after his death, are too recent to have known him during his lifetime. But whoever the individual behind each tribute, each seems impelled, indeed compelled, to write, lecture, paint, or otherwise communicate the respect, admiration, curiosity, fascination, and/or awe felt about the man and his work.

Today, Merton's writings are universally known and revered. To some, he is a quasi-saint. Those who knew him and his writings, find him fascinating. The man, his life, and his work are an intriguing puzzle, inviting continual study and speculation.

Merton has provided many with a *raison d'etre* for living. He has given us a cause, a cachet, an identity, whether as a Merton scholar, researcher, lecturer, critic, reviewer, name-dropper, gossip, photographer, or any combination of the above. Each has felt divinely, or self-appointed, an authority uniquely qualified to interpret the man and his work.

Since his death in 1968, causes and crusades have been launched in Merton's name by well-meaning admirers. All



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purport to understand and define, some better than others, the man, the writings, and the persona.

But I doubt that anyone ever really knew Tom . . . not his abbot, his brothers, his friends, or his biographers. He compartmented and separated those he knew, and no two persons ever saw exactly the same side, though they might well have been together with him at the same time. Tom was many things to many people, and each individual found in the man his or her own unique set of qualities by which he or she was fascinated and mesmerized.

The aspects were many, but perhaps most fascinating of all was the apparent, to some, dichotomy between his love for God, as a dedicated and devoted monk, and, at the same time, his obvious delight in being a man, in love with the joy of life and living, fascinated and concerned by humanity, and the eternal tragicomedy of life.

When I called for Tom at Gethsemani during the summer of 1967, it was our second meeting. He was waiting for me outside the enclosure. Dressed in denim, he sported a large button on his chest. At a distance, I thought it read "The Celibate Life," but on closer inspection, I found it read instead, "Celebrate Life!" And celebrate life, Merton did. That's what the man was really about.

Interested in everything, his pursuits and causes were myriad, as was the number of his friends and acquaintances. He affected the lives of all he met. However limited our acquaintance, each of us was touched, moved, and somehow changed, by the man and his presence.

Ron Seitz, the author of this book, was no exception. He too, was indelibly affected by Merton. Reading his memoir brought a rush of memories. I too, had read and been moved by *The Seven Storey Mountain*. I too, had felt the need to meet Merton, to talk with him about myself and my problems. I, too, had questions about God, and about the purpose of existence, and I wanted to cocoon myself, and bask in the warmth of his advice, his ideas about life and how it should be lived. I did not, for one instant, doubt that he would want to hear everything I had to say, or that he would have all the answers!

Ron Seitz, too, looked to Merton for answers. *Song for Nobody* is a record of his long search for answers . . . not only answers, but approval . . . approval by someone . . . anyone? But he preferred approval from Tom. The book is a memoir of ten years of questioning by Seitz, an impassioned and emotional intellectual searching within, plumbing at the same time, the mind and soul of the monk of Gethsemani for answers he desperately wanted to hear.

"But then," he writes ". . . so full of open-mouthed need and hope, I wanted and prayed to know that there was something somewhere still good and untainted by all of the vulgarity and noise that cluttered my own soul.—What I sought in the person of Tom Merton."

But Merton, equally impassioned, intellectual, and emotional, was also questioning. He was seeking his own answers, and I have a strong feeling that Ron Seitz never quite got precisely the answer of the approval he was seeking. No matter how much Tom was willing to share with him, it would never be quite enough. Seitz was searching for absolutes, but there are no absolutes in life. I think Tom knew this, and knew he could not give Seitz an answer because ultimately, there are no answers.

Seitz writes movingly of the relationship with Merton. Though his observations are often perceptive, they are always colored by his own problems, and by his personal vision of Merton. But he does capture something of the spirit of the man . . . his joy, his exuberance, and the Zen of his intense involvement in and preoccupation with the NOW.

Seitz is especially eloquent in describing his feelings of loss and abandonment at Merton's death. He, and each of us who knew the man, was touched deeply by the event . . . a death so cold and impersonal, so totally unforeseen, inappropriate and unnecessary, that twenty-five years later, the hurt and the pain are still there, buried deep within. Our grief has not softened, as it has with other losses. We still feel an overpowering sense of sad deprivation.

As Dan Walsh cried out, weeping on learning of Merton's death, "It's like I've been split down the middle. Like someone took half of me away. He was part of me . . . I don't think I can ever be the same again."

Two days after Tom's death, Seitz received a postcard from Ceylon. Its picture side showed a bullock cart passing before a white-domed temple. The card, dated December 3, bore a brief message and Christmas blessings.

That same day, I, too, received a card from Ceylon, posted the same day. Tom sent greetings and Christmas blessings to my wife Hanna and me, and asked about my trip to Greece. The picture on our card was that of the gigantic statue of Buddha he had found so intriguing.

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Ron Seitz has written from a consuming and persistent need to exorcise his own doubts, and to come to terms with his own uncertainties about writing, the agonies and ecstasies of creating, his true self, and the road not taken . . . a monastic vocation.

The book is eloquent, touching at times in its honesty and naivete . . . the writing sometimes awkward. Seitz uses a combination of haiku, prose, and highly individualistic poetic style to express his memories and emotions, and I found the resulting unevenness and inconsistency somewhat disturbing.

The author has allowed himself the luxury of writing an intimate memoir, moving in its raw earnestness. To me, who does not know him, he seems overly hard on himself, hypercritical, and prone to occasional self-pity.

But then no man can really ever know the mind of another. What I do know is that Seitz is a man worth knowing.

So is his book.