

Book Review

Ron Seitz, *Song For Nobody: A Memory Vision of Thomas Merton*. (Liguori, Missouri: Triumph Books, 1993), pp. 188, cloth, \$19.95, ISBN: 0-89243-486-4. (Distributed in the UK by Redemptorist Publications.)

Twenty-five years after the death of Thomas Merton his friend and fellow poet, Ron Seitz, tells in his own unique style in *Song For Nobody*, (a title taken from Merton's poem of the same name), of his relationship with Merton. Seitz, who was formerly Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Louisville, and an accomplished poet and essayist, first met Merton in 1958 when Seitz was in his early twenties and a friendship developed between them which lasted right up until Merton's death in 1968. Seitz describes this book as a "remembrance portrait" and in the form of a journal recounting the first few days after he heard of Merton's death in December 1968 as well as a few days around the twentieth anniversary of it in 1988 He recalls the ten years of their friendship.

Over the years many books have been written about Merton, largely biographies and explorations of various areas of his theology, as well as a few more personal accounts of his life. It is into that last category that *Song For Nobody* falls. Though it contains a certain amount of biographical information and is beautifully illustrated by black and white photographs mostly by the author, this book is first of all a very personal account of Seitz's friendship with Merton. Seitz's own love and admiration for his friend comes across clearly but they in no way obscure the picture that he draws of Merton. A number of times I felt that Seitz's style of writing, which he describes as a "novelistic, fictional technique of characterization and dialogue" (p.188), obscured his description of Merton and that the book was, at times, more about Seitz than about Merton.

Every book about Merton brings out one particular facet of the many which go to make up the complete person and the one that Seitz brings out is Merton's humanity. Through the pages of this book the real Merton comes across as we see his friendship with Seitz develop and grow. We see the to and fro of a real human relationship, the love, the wisdom, the humour and, I feel, come to know Merton in a new way.

Three events that Seitz recalls of Merton's last days in Kentucky illustrate this admirably. Firstly, his description of Merton at lunch with himself and his family and how he plays with the children and dances with them. (p.164) Secondly, a description he gives of a shopping trip in Louisville to buy a jacket for Merton's Asian trip and the foolery that the two men get up to in the shop and the innocence with which Merton handles money as he pays for the jacket. (p.165) Finally, just before Seitz takes Merton to the airport, Merton takes time

to deal with a question Seitz had asked him previously, and answers it with great simplicity and wisdom, reassuring him that "if God is really here, in this room, in this place - as we know he is, eh ... we can't be in too much trouble, now can we?" (p.172)

This book compliments very well the descriptions of Merton's last years by Michael Mott and by John Howard Griffin in their biographies by providing a real insight into one of Merton's great friendships during that period. Through the insight that Seitz brings in this book a different side of Merton is seen, a side not normally seen in a critical biography, the real warmth, depth and humanity of Merton. I feel that this book will be of considerable appeal to all those interested in the life and writings of Thomas Merton and if any further recommendation is needed then Patrick Hart's comment in the foreword "at last here is the Merton I knew" (p.11) should, most certainly, be sufficient.

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