

Hallucinating Thomas Merton

Review of

The Knowledge of Good and Evil

By Glenn Kleier

New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 2011

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Reviewed by **Jonathan Montaldo**

When the editor of *The Merton Seasonal* requested that I review Glenn Kleier's second novel as a "big favor," I hesitated and then became suspicious. I had not written a review for over ten years, and I am not a reader of fiction, but why the special pleading? Now I know: this is the worst book I have had to plow through in my memory, with sighs much louder than Al Gore's during his presidential debate with our ex-president. This novel is a disaster in more ways than I shall enumerate here.

To be fair to Mr. Kleier, a resident of Louisville, Kentucky, I just checked on Amazon.com, and his new novel has garnered forty-seven review-comments thus far with an average rating of four stars. He is doing something right for the twenty-five reviewers who give his novel five stars, but I don't know what it is. My mother would have said, "They need their heads examined." My sentiments are firmly with those seven readers who give his book one star with comments titled as "Theology For Dummies – Real Dummies"; "Poorly Written Nonsense"; "A Bad Dan Brown Ripoff"; and "So Bad, It Wasn't Released. It Escaped!" I have never read Dan Brown's novels, so I cannot judge, but the other three comments have my full assent.

Thomas Merton has an important role in this novel. Even though Kleier points out that "characters, organizations and events portrayed are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously," he hallucinates details of Merton's life for his novel's agenda and blurs the line between fiction and facts. He even has a photo of Merton by Sybil Akers posted on his website, as one of the illustrations of real people and places mentioned in his novel. His insinuation of Merton's motives through real-life events and his descriptions of Merton's character in this novel amounts to "identity theft." Merton's integrity is unprotected in this poorly conceived and badly written piece of pulp fiction.

The novel begins with an accurate description of Merton's death in Bangkok, but then hallucinates that, walking toward the fan, Merton's "eyes glow with the fervor of the Great Secret" that Merton had planned to share with conference attendees and the world on the night

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of December 10, 1968. Merton learned his “Great Secret” (“proof of God and the Afterlife!”) at Polonnaruwa, as he stood barefoot before the statue of the reclining Buddha. Merton had sent a letter to his brother monks at Gethsemani in which he described his extraordinary experience in Ceylon, which Merton referred to as a revelation to him of “the Ultimate Reality.” The Abbot, identified correctly as Flavian Burns, commands that all his monks keep the contents of the letter secret (lol – if I wanted a rumor to circulate on all the earth’s continents by nightfall, I would make a morning call to a monk at Gethsemani). Two copies of the journal entry that Merton had written, about his revelation of “The Ultimate Reality” in Ceylon, were mailed by him to theologian Karl Barth and to an unknown person in Paris identified only as “My Valentine.” Barth, reading the letter’s contents, has a heart attack and dies the same day as Merton (notice the “blur” between fiction and fact). “My Valentine” is not the actual “M.” in Merton’s journals. The real “M.” in this novel is hallucinated as having entered a Carmelite monastery in Louisville and is identified as “Marjorie Jones.”

Again slurring the lines between fact and fiction, Kleier has a “List of Sources Consulted” for his novel on his website, along with the photographs of actual persons, like Merton, and places, like Gethsemani, already mentioned. He could not have consulted his sources deeply, however, as he continually writes without a firm grasp of details; for instance, he uses “the dom [*sic*]” when he refers to the abbot. He uses St. Joseph’s Infirmary when he means to describe events at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital. He has everyone in the Vatican referring to the Pope (identified as Ratzinger’s successor) as “Papa.” Kleier is unconsciously hilarious when he writes dialogue for his other-than-American characters. He will have a German speaking a sentence like, “Vas ist das you have said?” His Italian characters don’t speak good Italian either: a character writes “il mio bella” rather than “la mia bella.” But all Klier’s loosely controlled writing is nothing compared to his “fictitious” insinuations as to Merton’s true character.

A fictional monk of Gethsemani, Lucien Gant, breaks the silence about Merton’s letter to Gethsemani, describing the “Ultimate Reality” to the novel’s protagonist, Ian Baringer (an ex-priest making a retreat at the abbey) who then asks Brother Lucien:

“What made you break your silence now?”

“I don’t know exactly. Something told me I should pass word along before all who read the letter are gone. In many ways you remind me of Merton. It just seemed fitting.”

“Merton’s Asian Journal – was it edited here or in Rome?” If the manuscript was edited here, maybe he could find it. But if it had fallen into the ecclesiastical abysses of the Vatican . . .

“Rome,” Lucien said, sinking Ian’s hopes. “The Curia always vetted Merton’s writings prior to publication because of his unorthodox views [!!!]. He was forever giving them heartburn. Like the time he took a lover.”

“And Merton’s mistress in Louisville?”

“The dom eventually found out and confronted Merton, and that ended it. Merton wasn’t about to destroy his career over a romance. See, ‘M’

wasn't the only girl whose heart he broke as a monk [!!!].”

Ian was speechless. One of the world's preeminent theologians, a philanderer! [!!!]

At this moment in my reading, my anger was visceral. I fantasized about gathering a contingent of *Mertonistas* in Louisville, and marching on Kleier's residence, brandishing torches. If Kleier's bad novel becomes a bad movie, which it might, since he can't seem to write a chapter longer than four pages, so that a reader is subjected to “scenes” throughout, there is no telling how much damage this novel's screen treatment might do to Merton's actual reputation. Whoever is in charge of Merton's “name” and licensing should be hiring an attorney to request a “cease and desist” judgment against use of Merton's character as it might be fictionalized in a movie of *The Knowledge of Good and Evil*.

Should you be dissatisfied that this review has not summarized the plot of this novel in all its improbable details, visit Amazon.com, and be content. My goal has only been to warn you of this novel's existence. But should you take this warning lightly and/or want to punish yourself for Lent, buy this book.