



Run to the Mountain: The Journals of Thomas Merton, V. 1

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When Thomas Merton died accidentally in Bangkok in 1968, the beloved Trappist monk's will specified that his personal diaries not be published for 25 years -- presumably because they contained his uncensored thoughts and feelings. Now, a quarter of a century has passed since Merton's death, and the journals are the last major piece of writing to appear by the 20th century's most important spiritual writer.

The first of seven volumes, *Run to the Mountain* offers an intimate glimpse at the inner life of a young, pre-monastic Merton. Here readers will witness the insatiably curious graduate student in New York's Greenwich Village give way to the tentative spiritual seeker and brilliant writer. Merton playfully lists everything from his favorite lines of poetry and songs to the things he most loves and hates.

Thomas Merton was an inveterate diarist; his journals offer a complete and candid look at the rich transformations of his adult life. As Brother Patrick Hart, general editor of the series notes, "Perhaps his best writing can be found in the journals, where he was expressing what was deepest in his heart with no thought of censorship. With their publication we will have as complete a picture of Thomas Merton as we can hope to have."

Run to the Mountain: The Journals of Thomas Merton, V. 1 Details

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Carolyn Hoffman says

Reason for reading: I hope to eventually read all of Merton's published journals. I'm starting with Volume 1 as that seems the best place to start. Plus, I hope to learn more about how he moved into his vocation.

Shelly Dennison says

Not always an easy read because of the journal format - very much working through stuff on paper. Mix of literary stuff, travel and spirituality which gave plenty to think about but sometimes left me a little baffled. Some odd switches of thought too but this is just a reflection on how humans think. Very rewarding story of a search for a vocation.

John says

Do I live for books like this? The 1st volume (of 7!) of Merton's published journals covers the period - mostly in New York - following his conversion right up to his entry into the Order of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance (Trappists) and the monastery at Gethsemani in Kentucky. This is roughly from the 1939 to late 1941, and the global destruction and possible apocalypse signaled by the World War plays much in Merton's thinking, conversion, and vocation. There is a madness loosed upon the world, a full spectrum of satanic evil from Hitler's war machine and the holocaust to the awful pablum of Madison Avenue advertising vulgarity and the destitution and humiliation of the poor under modern capitalism. Merton sees - and is horrified - by it all. His search is very much a search for a firm ground, for a faith and practice that can burn through all this suffering and alienating shit to a transcendent peace. His social insights, observations - the great chapters on his trip to Cuba - are sharp. He is also a disciplined and sympathetic reader. The journals are packed with lists and ratings of books and long reviews. He's humorous too - as in the lists of things like "20 places the world could do without" or somesuch. His search for deep knowledge and account of our psycho-social insanity leads to intensifying Catholic religious life - attending Mass(es) every day, honoring the Feasts, fasting, etc. All to disabuse himself of pride, to wear away his "self" and discover and live for a deeper ground and truth. His practice and faith become total - then it's a choice of either giving up everything (possessions, writing, everything) to live at the service of the most destitute at Friendship House in Harlem, or commit completely to a life of strict monastic discipline and contemplation with the Trappists. He cries out, literally, for the later, and becomes a monk.

Dawn Downey says

I picked this up while my husband and I were on retreat at a Trappist monastery. I blazed through it. I'd never read Merton, and I wanted to stop to contemplate his insights, but he gave me something I seemed to be starving for, so I gobbled it up. I was greedy and obsessive. Vol. 1 covers the years 1939-1941, just before he became a monk. The final entry is dated two days before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. He writes

about the war in Europe from the perspective of a draft-age man living through it day-to-day, reacting to the headlines, speculating about Roosevelt's intentions. This immediacy will be irresistible for anyone who loves history. As a grad student living in Greenwich Village, Merton taught at Columbia University. He was a poet and novelist (unpublished at the time), so this volume includes candid responses to rejection letters from New York publishers. The New Yorker magazine rejected one of his poems because it was "a parody of Emily Dickinson," and since New Yorker readers didn't read Dickinson, they wouldn't understand the connection. Merton protests in a journal entry. "I never read a line of Emily Dickinson." Writers, take heart ... you're in excellent company. I was struck by Merton's absolute visceral knowledge of God's love ... as well as the deep insights he had even in his twenties. His writing caused me to have a couple of epiphanies about my own life and faith. At 500 pages, it's an enormous book, (and only the first of seven volumes) but down to earth, funny, inspiring. I found it transformative. I'm going to jump right in to Volume 2.

Mark says

Interesting enough but I somewhat cringe at the sheer amount of masochism and self loathing Merton puts in himself, into his decisions, and his doctrinaire approach to spiritual things. Not being Catholic and free of what seems to be an almost universal tendency within Catholic believers to hold themselves and the rest of humanity guilty- for something!- I'm also put off by his admission he only really "feels safe when in a church." My how sad. As if all God's great handiwork outside that little building - the mountains, stars, and galaxies- count for nothing at all. I never felt anything inside a church but boxed in, and never necessarily, awed. His reliance on prayers to saints strikes me- as an unrepentant pantheist of a generally Protestant nature - as silly. If there's but one God and you're all so holy enough to do so yourself, best to go straight to the big guy *himself* and ask him, since "asking is half the battle." Where he is admirable however, despite all that, is his quest for a real humility in his personal life. Like most Christian monks of all eras and ages, he seeks to imitate Christ in charity and in selfless giving to those that are disadvantaged and turning away from glories and self-aggrandizations and many of the things people take into account when discussing "famous writers." This is a portion of his life when he was facing- as many did, in an era when conscientious objection was a very very risky approach to take in any case-an involuntary life in the military and the coming World War or voluntarily hiding out in monastic life. But unfortunately the book ends just before Dec.7, 1941, and we never get to know which way the road took him, necessarily. That you must do by going to Wikipedia, I suppose! Or slog through some successive volume, which by now after nearly 500 pages I feel much like running for the hills from myself.

Jane says

I love Merton! Gifted writer. Writes about everything and nothing. Is filled with contradictions and that makes him such a great writer.

Paul Birch says

Best read after Seven Storey Mountain and New Seeds Of Contemplation. If you want to know more about Thomas and the struggle of vocation. Lovely writing, very few bits you have to skim over. The Cuban writing is wonderful, all the time you can tell there is a parallel struggle going on just under the surface, and boy does it surface. The struggle that is in all of us to find true meaning and the path to vocation.

Sophronia Scott says

My journey with Merton began with reading "The Seven Storey Mountain" but that book, though I enjoyed it thoroughly, left me with the feeling something was missing. Then I learned SSM did undergo a certain level of editing/censorship by his superiors that possibly changed the tenor of the book. Eventually I learned about Merton's journals, extensive journals, covering most of his lifetime and published, as stipulated by his will, many years after his death. The journals take up seven volumes. This book is the first.

Reading it definitely gives me the mostly unvarnished Merton I sought. I say "mostly" because he sometimes edited himself, tearing out pages after he wrote them. It was fascinating to observe him in his formative 20s. His brash reviews of the art he saw at the World's Fair in Queens and the books he'd read showed a brilliant mind at work, often with a youthful impatience. But the youthful Merton could also be tedious and melodramatic, especially toward the end of this journal which stops right before he enters the Trappist monastery Gethsemane.

I won't blame Merton for this--in fact it endears him to me more because he proves to be no different than other brash, confused young men. I loved his account of his travel to Cuba, of the saints he becomes enamored with, and his struggle to figure out how exactly he's meant to serve God. His drawings were pretty funny too! This volume is a great beginning and makes me look forward to reading the remaining 6.

Rob the Obscure says

If you are a fan of Merton, this series of his posthumously published journals is essential. It contains stunning information.

Andrew says

Thomas Merton wrote the clearest, most sincere, important works of Christian spirituality of the 20th century. This is the first of his lengthy series of journals (of which dozens are published.) This is definitely early Merton: opinionated in literature, conflicted about his future, and deep in study of Catholic theology and saints. Intelligent and honest analysis of the world that, though it was written at the onset of WWII, doesn't feel outdated because Merton's focus is on the underlying causes in the world, rather than the events themselves.

Jessica says

I'm still early into the book but I'm enjoying it so far. It gives one a real flavor of what a young Thomas Merton was like in his premonastic days when he was struggling with decisions and ideas. His love for God is evident and his enthusiasm towards pursuing Him more fully is inspiring.

