

Thomas Merton and Patrick Knowlton

I have read two memoirs this year.* The first is one of the most famous such examples of the genre ever written, [The Seven Storey Mountain](#), by the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton. That book sold over 600,000 copies in its original hardcover edition and, in one version or another, has remained continuously in print. Its Kindle edition, as of this writing, has 681 customer reviews with an average customer rating of four and one half out of five stars. Amazon reports that the book has been published in over twenty languages and has influenced a wide range of readers from Graham Greene to Eldridge Cleaver. The *National Review* also includes it in its list of the 100 best non-fiction books of the 20th century.

Altogether, Merton authored more than 70 books and probably as many books have been written about him. The Thomas Merton Center of Bellarmine University records a [plethora of new books](#) on Merton, including [The Martyrdom of Thomas Merton: An Investigation](#), by Hugh Turley and the current writer.

The International Thomas Merton Society (ITMS), formed in 1987, has 46 chapters in the United States and there are 19 chapters and affiliated societies in other countries. The ITMS has biennial four-day conferences at various locations.

Patrick Knowlton's memoir is [As If It Never Happened: Stories of a Young Boy's Secrets, Fears, Love and Loss](#). It was published in September of this year. So far it has seven reviews on Amazon, most of which seem to come from the small New York State community of Warners, in the Syracuse metropolitan area, where Knowlton grew up.

Knowlton's memoir covers only his earliest recollection through elementary school, which in Warners ended with the fifth grade. Merton's story also starts with early recollections, in Prades in the Catalan part of France, follows his schooling there, later in a boarding school in Paris, then to another boarding school in England, a year at Cambridge, through the rest of his undergraduate years and graduate school years at Columbia University where the strongest influence on him probably came from the famous English literature professor and literary critic, Mark Van Doren, on to his almost one year teaching at Saint Bonaventure in Olean, New York, and then to the Monastery of Gethsemani in Kentucky.

Merton's parents were artists who met in art school in Paris, his father from New Zealand and his mother from the United States. His mother died just when he was entering elementary school and his father died when he was finishing up at the boarding school in England. His extended family was prosperous, though, as evidenced by the formal schooling he was able to afford. Merton had a fascinating early life, compared by some with St. Augustine in its waywardness, and he certainly seemed to have both the pedigree and the formal training to be a professional writer.

Knowlton, like Merton, is a Catholic, and like Merton, he is a quite serious one. One gathers that from his book. Knowlton is what is sometimes called a cradle Catholic, while Merton was a convert. Other than the fact that Merton also had New York roots—his mother's parents lived in Douglaston, which is now part of Queens—their Catholicism is just about where their similarities end. Knowlton had none of Merton's privileges. In fact, he grew up about as underprivileged as it gets. His father was apparently the black sheep of what seems to have been a decent and respectable family. A petty criminal, he left his wife and five children, of whom Patrick was the youngest, before Patrick even knew him. Patrick's mother was very sickly and bedridden through all of his early years. She was unable to work, and the family lived a hand-to-mouth existence on public assistance. The fear that she would die and that the family would be broken up hovers over practically every page of the book.

In contrast to Merton, Knowlton is anything but a professional writer. He is listed as a co-author with John Clarke and Hugh Turley of the 1999 book, [Failure of the Public Trust](#), on the Vince Foster death case, but since that book was originally a court document, its principal writer was Knowlton's lawyer, Clarke. Knowlton happened to be a key witness and, like Turley, was also a researcher on the book. His life, I gather, like his early years, has primarily been a scramble for survival, taking him into several lines of work. He is an exceptionally talented guy, though, with some rare and remarkable gifts, so his scramble has largely been a successful one.

Lacking Merton's formal education, Knowlton could hardly have written anything to rival any of Merton's later books, but in this reviewer's humble opinion, surprising as it may seem, and as surprising as it was to me to discover, Knowlton has written the better memoir. It fairly crackles with dramatic tension on every page. Menace and danger are around every corner. At the same time, the book is full of warmth and strong emotion. The reader is simply forced to care a great deal more about the young Patrick than he cares about young Thomas. Patrick is a spirited, adventurous, all-boy boy of the Huckleberry Finn stripe who was apparently doted on by a number of female characters in the book, but was a bit of a handful for them, as well. I found it almost impossible to put the book down, which I could not say for *The Seven Storey Mountain*, although I certainly did enjoy reading the latter.

Neither of the memoirs is political, although the main thing about them both that attracted my attention is how each ran afoul of what has come to be called the Deep State. The height of the Cold War also provides a degree of political overlap between the two writers. The young Patrick really believed that a bombing attack was imminent when his school had drills in which the students took cover under the writing platforms attached to their desks, desperately worrying about what might happen to his bedridden mother should the real thing occur. It caused him to run afoul of the school authorities when he conducted his own version of the drill, slipping away from school to check on his mother. About the same time, Merton's writing had turned heavily political, causing him to run afoul of Trappist order authorities in 1962, who forbade him to publish his powerful work, *Peace in the Post Christian Era*, which decries the nation's flirtation with nuclear warfare.

Merton's non-political writing had made him famous, and the more political he became, the more difficult it became for him to get attention. Knowlton gained unwanted fame of a sort purely by accident, and it was entirely in the political realm. He happened to stop off to take an emergency leak in Ft. Marcy Park, Virginia, off the George Washington Parkway beside the Potomac River, on the afternoon of July 20, 1993. Two other cars were in the parking lot at the time, one of which was occupied by a swarthy young man who observed him, he thought, menacingly. He did not realize it, of course, but at that time Deputy White House Counsel Vincent W. Foster at that time already lay dead in the back of the park. What Knowlton observed does not comport with the official suicide story, and what he and his lawyer Clarke and the researcher Turley would learn from further investigation comports even less with the suicide story. One may gain some acquaintance with Knowlton and his experience by watching the video, [The Vince Foster Cover-up: The FBI and the Press](#).

I say that Knowlton gained "fame of a sort," because the national opinion molding apparatus (NOMA) has done its very best to keep Knowlton's very existence a secret. An outstanding recent example of their efforts is the fact that his name was hardly mentioned during the [recent dust-up](#) over the nomination of Judge Brett Kavanaugh for the Supreme Court, even though the young Kavanaugh, as a lead member of Kenneth Starr's Whitewater "investigation" team, had attempted to discredit the witness Knowlton by painting him as a cruising homosexual in his interrogation of Knowlton before the Whitewater grand jury.

The lack of public knowledge about Knowlton is not for lack of trying by this writer. If one goes to [DCDave.com](#) and types "Patrick Knowlton" into the "Find" box, 88 separate sites on my blog come up. At the top of the second page of such sites is this poem:

Patrick Knowlton in the News

*Headline: Witness in Foster death loses conspiracy appeal
Washington Times, January 9, 2001, p. A7*

Before he'd arrived at the end of the line
A little publicity would have been fine,
Shedding some light and putting some heat
Upon all those justices' honorable feet.
But they wait till The Nine in their wisdom refuse
To give him a hearing to bring us the news.
It's a story, alas, that is getting quite old:
A citizen's wronged; then he's out in the cold,
And once it's too late, the public is told.

Even then, very few were told. It was during Knowlton's travails with the Starr team and [with the FBI](#) that I learned about a couple of the qualities that makes Knowlton an outstanding writer of childhood recollections. My education came mainly through Turley, who knows Knowlton far better than I do. Knowlton is keenly observant and he has an extraordinary memory. Writing dialogue is a skill that in most cases takes quite a bit of practice and training, but, incredible as it may seem, one gets the impression that Knowlton in his book is just repeating it all from memory. The same thing applies to his descriptions of things, from the furnishings of a room to what a person might have been wearing at a particular time. Things that I don't think I would be able to describe a few minutes after having seen them he describes a half century later. The old saying, "Little pitchers have big ears," warning adults of what they say in the presence of children, seems to have been about a hundred times more appropriate in the case of the young Knowlton than for the average person. He apparently soaked in everything, and it stuck with him. He even seemed to pick up on things that weren't even said, just from people's mannerisms.

The greater intensity of feeling that we have in our early youth, similar to our more acute sense of taste that made us less tolerant of sharp flavors also seems completely preserved in Knowlton's writing, another very rare quality. By the time that most of us are articulate enough to put such feelings into words, we no longer have them. That is not the case with Knowlton. Perhaps it is because of his incredible memory. He still feels things the way the 10-year-old Patrick Knowlton felt them because he still remembers things as though it were yesterday.

He also had a very eventful, indeed, frightening and precarious early life. That's the main thing that makes the book so hard to put down. The book is a cliffhanger all the way through, and it's packed with good guys and villains. Two of the latter stand out in particular, and here we'll try not to give too much away. He calls them only the Big Man and the Evil Woman. At the beginning of one lived in the period of school, his loving and well-meaning uncle and aunt surrendered Patrick and his older brother into the clutches of what these days would be called abusive professional foster parents. They were not altogether different from the one described in this [New York Daily News article](#). It also serves as a chilling reminder of [how broken](#) our foster-parent care system is, as it has largely supplanted church-supported orphanages. As memoirs go, the experience most closely resembles what slaves went through when turned over to the slave breaker as described in the autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (a chapter that was later virtually plagiarized by James Michener in *Chesapeake*). Unlike his older brother, Patrick might well have been the most spirited resister to breaking that the couple ever encountered.

From that experience, and much else in that book, one gains very good insight into the observation by Hugh Turley in the [recommended video](#) that a "lot of people might have been frightened away" when confronted by aggressive FBI interrogators insisting that the photograph they showed to Knowlton was of the same vehicle that he saw parked in the lot at Fort Marcy Park and later mercilessly and repeatedly harassed on the streets of Washington, DC, but not Knowlton. Not only did he have complete confidence in his powerful memory, but also the foster care episode provides great insight into his force of character. He has a very great sense of right and wrong and simply does not cave in to what he perceives as evil, whatever the consequences. In a straightforward crime case, Knowlton would have been and is almost literally one in a million. Even worse than that for the corrupt authorities, Knowlton had previously become friends with a thoroughly honest and courageous lawyer, John Clarke, who lived in the same Foggy Bottom apartment building that he did (shades of [Richard Jewell](#)). What are the chances of that?

Like Thomas Wolfe, I am a native of North Carolina and have a good deal of familiarity with Wolfe's hometown of Asheville. I must say, though, that I didn't find Wolfe's autobiographical *Look Homeward Angel* nearly as interesting and engaging, or even as well written, as Knowlton's book.**

I also happen to have read autobiographies by the famous writers, Jack London and Theodore Dreiser, and they both come across as very fine, upright, and likeable people. Later I read biographies of each of them that do not rely upon what these authors wrote about themselves, and it turns out that the picture that they painted of themselves is pretty close to the opposite of the truth. Perhaps such literary skill was one of the things that made them such great writers of fiction. From his performance in the Foster case, though, and from what I know of the man personally, the child described in *As If It Never Happened* is truly the father of the man.

From the direction that his life later took, one can also say the same thing about *The Seven Storey Mountain* and Thomas Merton. But if someone were to ask me to recommend a book as a Christmas present for someone this year, whether the recipient was interested in politics or not, whether they were Catholic or not, or whether they were a man or a woman, I would definitely recommend Knowlton's memoir over Merton's. I am also confident that my recommendation would later be appreciated.

* Not counting two accounts of life in North Korea and on the run in China, [A River in Darkness: One Man's Escape from North Korea](#) and [The Girl with Seven Names: A North Korean Defector's Story](#).

** Check out my Amazon reviews of two other memoirs, [The Divided Land: A Tale of Survival in War-Torn Korea](#) and [Off the Rim: Basketball and Other Religions in a Carolina Childhood](#) and the fictionalized memoir, [The Voices of Heaven](#).

David Martin
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