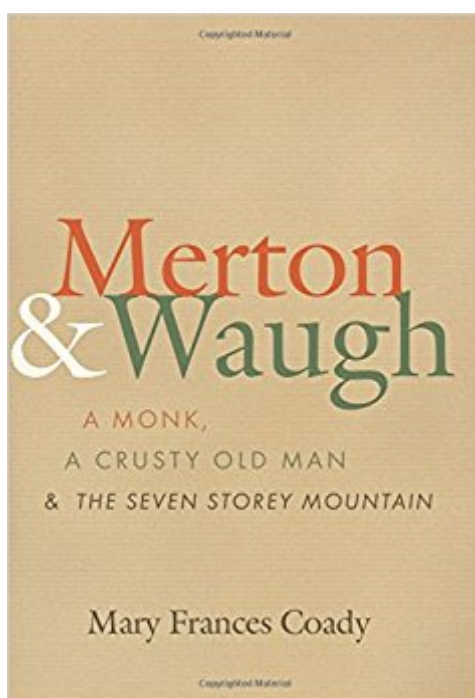




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# **Merton And Waugh: A Monk, A Crusty Old Man, And The Seven Storey Mountain**



## Synopsis

From 1948 to 1952 the lives of Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, and British novelist, Evelyn Waugh, were closely intertwined. During these years, Waugh became enthusiastic about American Catholicism, in particular, monasticism as seen through the eyes of the author of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. He agreed to edit Merton's autobiography and the subsequent *Waters of Siloe*, for publication in Britain. In this close examination of their friendship, through their correspondence, we see Waugh's coaching of a younger writer, and Waugh's brief infatuation with America. Most of all, we witness Merton the writing student and spiritual master and Waugh the master of prose and conflicted penitent. And we see how the two men diverge as the Second Vatican Council takes hold of Catholicism and the solid spiritual ground beneath them gives way.

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## Customer Reviews

"Dedicated readers of Evelyn Waugh and Thomas Merton know of the connections between two major Catholic writers, especially of Waugh as editor and writing coach for Merton's work. But in this brief but thoroughly researched book, Coady provides important new details about Merton's role not just as willing student but as spiritual advisor to Waugh and puts those details into the cultural and religious context of the years after World War II in clear and sometimes eloquent fashion." —Robert Murray Davis, author of *Brideshead Revisited: The Past Redeemed* Thank-you to Paraclete Press for sharing Merton and Waugh: A Monk, A Crusty Old Man, and The Seven Storey Mountain (2015) with the Emerging Scholars Network (ESN)! In an age

of virtual friendships, Mary Frances Coady's weaving of personal correspondence flavored with mentoring, a brief personal visit with a long distance mentor, a wrestling with vocational direction, and a search for one's voice when immersed in a steady stream of writing when one longs for silence, hit a chord. Coming even closer to home, during this important season of writing/editing, I was particularly struck by the tension between a steady stream of writing with the challenge to choose one's words and publications carefully in order for them to be focused and have a lasting impact. Pray for discernment as we sharpen the ministry of the Emerging Scholars Network through resources such as Scholar's Compass.

—Tom Grosh IV, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship

Mary Frances Coady's new book, subtitled "A Monk, A Crusty Old Man and The Seven Storey Mountain", is a fascinating new collection of correspondence between the Catholic novelist Evelyn Waugh and the Kentucky-based Trappist monk and author Thomas Merton. Through 20 letters and accompanying critical and biographical commentary, she reveals a story of two men united by a shared faith but divided by style. The battle between eloquence and plainness is a literary debate hundreds of years old, with both sides suggesting the other is deficient in some way. Is it harder to write simply, or is a paucity of vocabulary evidence of a limitation of imagination and ability?

Initially, in this version of the debate, Waugh seems very much to have the upper hand. Although Merton does not know this when he first writes to Waugh, Waugh has been employed by Merton's publisher to edit the English edition of his book *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Writing to Waugh, he is guileless about his methods of composition, telling him: "I cover pages and pages with matter and they get lost, torn up, burned and so on." If this humorous self-depreciation was intended to elicit sympathy from Waugh, it didn't work. Instead, the novelist's criticisms were direct, Waugh noting that "Americans tend to be very long-winded in conversation and your method is conversational", and telling him "it is of course much more laborious to write briefly".

Merton is clearly trying to impress Waugh with the diversity of his output: "At the moment I am faced with a programme of much writing because we have to raise money to build some new monasteries. Most of what I have to do concerns the Cistercian life, history, spiritual theology, biographies etc. But [I am also] writing poetry and things like that for *New Directions*, and a wacky surrealist magazine called *Tiger's Eye* that I think I had better get out of."

But his humble-bragging falls on deaf ears, with Waugh replying: "You are plainly undertaking far too many trivial tasks for small returns banging away at your typewriter on whatever turns up."

Indeed, if a reader were to approach this book without previous knowledge of Merton's much-loved and

genuinely inspirational works, it might seem as if it were the collection of letters between a literary master and a bumbling amateur. There is a black humour worthy of Waugh's fiction in the way Waugh keeps repeating the word "silence" when he changes Merton's titles for the English editions of his American books (The Seven Storey Mountain becomes Elected Silence, The Waters of Siloe becomes The Waters of Silence), as if wishing the monk would just shut up. Coady increases this impression by including equally tart observations from Merton's agent Naomi Burton, who tells him: "I think it's perilously near the time when you are going to lose readers through over-publication" and warning him off publishing a previously rejected novel. And yet, while Merton is always deferential (sometimes wincingly so) to Waugh in matters of literary style, he seems to have the upper hand when it comes to faith. When Waugh takes on a commission from Life magazine to write about American Catholics, he appears to struggle with the task although he did, of course, get the raw material for his novel The Loved One from the experience. Coady appears to raise an eyebrow about Waugh's behaviour in America while touring Catholic colleges, implying that his appetite for expensive food and intemperate quantities of alcohol as well as insistence on luxury during his travels may not have been as conducive to religious contemplation as Merton's self-abnegation. Ironically, it was Merton rather than Waugh who ended up in hospital with stomach problems. Waugh becomes increasingly dismissive of the value of Merton's work, noting that he doesn't think it's possible to combine a Trappist's life with that of a professional writer, and suggesting that the contemplative life should produce cheese and liqueur rather than books. But Waugh's faith is challenged by his depression and as Coady notes by the 1950s his interest in American Catholic monasticism had disappeared altogether. She believes that Waugh became bitter about changes in the Catholic Church in the 1960s, and highlights the difference in vivacity later in life between the "physically enfeebled" Waugh and the lively Merton, who, she believes, was still in his prime when he died from an electric shock in Bangkok. Owing to its short length and its deliberately narrow focus, this pithy book doesn't really give a full flavour of either author, but it's essential reading for anyone interested in Catholicism and literary criticism. No doubt Waugh would admire its brevity, but it would take Merton's prolixity to fully untangle the multitude of ideas and resonances here. •Matt Thorne, Catholic Herald

Merton's prolific correspondence also included letters exchanged with Evelyn Waugh as the famed author edited the British edition of Merton's autobiography. Waugh

challenged Merton to—in sometimes cranky language—to become a better writer. A collection of their letters, *Merton and Waugh: A Monk, A Crusty Old Man, and The Seven Storey Mountain* by Mary Ann Coady, was published in March by Paraclete Press. Lynn Garrett, Publishers Weekly

In August 1948, a 33-year-old Cistercian monk in Kentucky was bemused and delighted to receive a letter from Evelyn Waugh. “Dear Brother Louis,” it began, “My criticisms were really personal. I didn’t like your criticisms of the Franciscans. God knows I have no business to lecture other people about charity but I expect a higher standard from [a] professed Religious than from myself. Not a good start, one might think, to a friendship. But that is what ensued, albeit a sporadic and mostly postal one. By “personal” here, Waugh seems to have meant “subjective”, and by “really”, “in fact”. This book pairs the two sides of an extraordinary correspondence linking it with biographical narrative. Much of the latter is borrowed, and all of the letters have appeared before in various places. Mary Frances Coady has permission only to quote two-thirds of the Waugh letters because the full texts are being saved for Alexander Waugh’s *Personal Writings* volumes of the *Complete Works* being published by Oxford University Press. This restriction can make for some partial readings but she has ingeniously focused the range of disparate materials into a fragmentary joint biography. It might not be particularly “scholarly” but it is certainly engaging. I could imagine it becoming essential reading for creative-writing students, or for those interested in mystical theology. The criticisms Waugh was referring to in his letter were those in one he had written to the New York publisher Harcourt, Brace about Br. Louis (Thomas Merton’s) *Seven Storey Mountain* (1948), a spiritual autobiography that was to become an international best-seller but was then being prepared for publication in America. Harcourt had sent galley proofs to Waugh, Graham Greene, Claire Boothe Luce and Bishop Fulton J. Sheen in the hope of a puff for the jacket. Waugh was probably the last of these from whom a reply was expected. With *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) and *The Loved One* (1948) immediately behind him, he was the pre-eminent Catholic novelist of the day. He also came trailing clouds of gory encounters with cold callers. Much of his recent correspondence, even with friends, had been savagely misanthropic. Merton, on the other hand, was obscure yet optimistic, and humbly cocksure. He was contemplating his misspent youth among the fleshpots as background to the story of his conversion and vocation. His writing was slangy, sometimes flippantly humorous. Surely Waugh would despise his work? Not at all. He was full of admiration, and not only provided a scintillating endorsement for the publisher but also offered anonymously to edit *Seven Storey Mountain* for publication in the UK: it eventually appeared in 1950 as *Elected Silence*. Merton had first written to Waugh on 12 August

1948. The Trappist's tone was unnervingly intimate for a stranger. "I need criticism," he wrote, "the way a man dying of thirst needs water." His problem was that his trade was writing: "Father Abbot gives me a typewriter and says 'Eöwrite' and so I cover pages and pages and they go to several different censors and get lost, torn up, burned. Then they get pieced together and retyped and go to a publisher who changes everything." Books had always poured out of him: poetry, novels, theology, hagiography and now autobiography. Waugh did not approve of this as a literary strategy. Mountain was good, he thought, it was important, but it was aesthetically ill-disciplined. And so began a course of instruction. "With regard to style," Waugh remarked, "it is of course much more laborious to write briefly. Americans, I am sure you will agree, tend to be very long-winded in conversation and your method is conversational. I relish the laconic." These letters are full of priceless advice: "Never send off any piece of writing the moment it is finished. Put it aside. Go back to it a month later." Merton's approach in this, and in another book Waugh edited, *The Waters of Siloe* (1949; published in the UK as *The Waters of Silence*, 1950), represented "pattern-bombing instead of precision-bombing" it is not art. And Merton had a problem, Waugh thought, with his multiple implied readers: "[Y]ou do not seem to have decided whom precisely you are addressing." This was about *The Ascent to Truth* (1951), Merton's ambitious discussion of St. John of the Cross. As always, there was a distinction in Waugh's mind between the spiritual message and the art of writing. But there was also a connection: crystallise the expression and the theology would shine more brightly. Under this amiable assault, Merton reacted with humility and wit. He had only two hours daily to hammer out his thoughts and thus to subsidize the monastery, the beneficiary of his royalties. He did not have Waugh's freedom to discipline his art. His was discipline of another sort in which art was subsidiary and oddly functionalist. As it happens, he was enormously successful as a writer, Mountain remaining at the top of the US bestseller lists from Christmas 1948 for 62 weeks. And as the correspondence progresses, the roles tended to reverse. Waugh the schoolmaster confesses his "general bad temper" to his pupil and eventually seems to have turned to him for advice about the aridity of his soul. Sadly, these crucial letters from Waugh have disappeared but we can guess at their content from Merton's replies: "Like all people with intellectual gifts, you would like to argue yourself into a quandary that doesn't exist. Don't you see that in all your anxiety to explain how your contrition is imperfect you are expressing an instant sorrow that it is not so and that is true contrition. A nice thought but Waugh must have

cringed at the double negative. **•The Tablet**

"This volume deepens our understanding of Merton's early years as monk and writer and fleshes out one of his most intriguing relationships with a fellow writer. Engaging, informative, and illuminating!"  
**Christine M. Bochen, William H. Shannon Chair in Catholic Studies, Nazareth College**

Merton has way more fans than Waugh at this stage in the game -- but in my case, both of these amazing writers have directly affected my spirituality. So the fact that this small volume of their letters has been published is a cause for rejoicing. Although their correspondence was short, the completely unique personalities of these men come through in every letter. The only glitch is at the end of the book, when the action is wound up quickly with an account of each man's death. The author describes the Second Vatican Council as "a breath of badly needed fresh air for most Catholics" and dismisses Waugh as a stick-in-the-mud because of his extremely negative reaction to the destruction of traditional Catholicism after the council. The implication is that Merton, the "hippy monk", was thrilled with the "fresh air" of the council. Nothing could be further from the truth -- see Jim Forest's biography of Merton (*Living with Wisdom*) for more details. This biography -- one of the best on Merton -- is not listed in the references of this book, so perhaps the author did not do as much homework as she should have.

As a engineer who wishes to someday author a book, I found the letters between Merton and Waugh full of advice. Advice on writing and on living. As someone who has read their books their letters provided greater insight into their writing and lives. I wish that others can find how our lives change as we grow in our lifetime.

Met all expectations; delighted with the content; condition of the book, excellent, and service of the book seller.

helps understand both authors nicely

I highly recommend this new Book on Merton as well as Waugh...very well done and a treasure for anyones Merton Collection... suggest to read as an example how Merton reacted to lewtters and advice from Waugh...

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