

MISSION IN FICTION

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By

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Missionaries are still generally untainted in the mind of the people of our age, otherwise so sophisticated and disenchanted. Their sacrifice in leaving the comfortable cocoon of their country and culture is recognized, the witness of their lives at the service of the poor upheld and their words have the ring of truth. Even their death is often met with violence since it has been assessed that an average of one missionary every week is murdered somewhere around the world.

There is a fascination which surrounds the persons of the missionaries and their enterprises that has sometimes captured the imagination of fiction writers and film-makers. From the heroes of the *The Mission* of Ronald Joffe (1986) to the silent victims in the recent *Tears of the Sun*, missionaries continue to make their appearance on the big screen and in books.

This is the presentation of five novels that have as their main character a missionary. Fiction can be telling more than reality if for no other reason than it is selected and arranged in order to convey a certain message or to create strong emotions. A feeling can say much more than many explanations. At the origin of fiction there is always a nutshell of reality that links fiction with the joys, ideals, pains and tragedies of the different generations.

Heroes of our time

In *The Keys of the Kingdom* and in *Death comes for the Archbishop*, it is the admiration for the person of the missionaries that prevails. The approach to evangelization and the crossing of cultural barriers is still fairly simple. Like in a black-and-white movie, it is the heroism of the missionary that stands out. The strange, unusual circumstances of their work only constitute a colorful backdrop to their bravery.

In this way, Willa Cather confesses her admiration for the French missionaries that evangelized the Far West of the United States. She writes: “One of the most intelligent and inspiring persons I found in my travels in the West was a Belgian priest, Fr. Haltermann, who lived with his sister in the parsonage behind the beautiful, old church at Santa Cruz, New Mexico, where he raised poultry and sheep and had a wonderful vegetable and flower garden. He was a florid, full-bearded farmer priest who drove about his eighteen Indian missions with a spring wagon and a pair of mules. He knew a great deal about the country and the Indians and their traditions.”

Eventually it was Archbishop Lamy, the first bishop of New Mexico, who inspired her and became the protagonist of her novel. She was intrigued and curious about how such a distinguished and well bred man would withstand the daily life in a rough and crude frontier environment.

Culture Shock!

Different is the point of arrival in the case of *Black Robe* and *I have heard the owl call my name*. Also Brian Moore draws his protagonist from the admiration for the gestures of the Jesuit missionaries to the Native Americans, the Red Skins.

But it is the nature of the people whom the missionary come in contact with that comes to the fore. The missionary is aware of the emergence of these peoples. The yardstick is no longer the culture of the white man. He has come not only to teach but to learn. Sometimes it is a culture shock, as in the way Fr. Noel Chabanel, missionary to the Huron in 1640, one of the Canadian Martyrs, reacts to the life style of the Indians: “He detested Indian life- the smoke, the vermin, the filthy food, the impossibility of privacy. He could not study by the smoky lodge fires, among the noisy crowds of men and squaws with their dogs and their restless, screeching children”.

And yet, there is more that what meets the eye. Brian More writes: “In my search for writing *Black Robe*, I moved to the *Relations*, the voluminous letters that the Jesuits sent back to their Superiors in France. In the *Relations* themselves and their deeply moving reports I discovered an unknown and unpredictable world.

These letters are the only real records of the early Indians of North America. They introduce us to a people that bear little resemblance to the “Red Indians” of folklore.

The Huron, Iroquois and Algonquin were a handsome, brave, incredibly cruel people, who at that early stage, were in no way dependent on the white man and in fact, judged him to be their physical and mental inferior. They were warlike, and for reason of their religion, subjected their enemies to prolonged and unbearable tortures.”

Brian Moore in *Black Robe* wants to represent how the Indian belief in a world of night and in the power of dreams clashed with the Jesuits’ preaching of Christianity and paradise after death. Eventually, the details of the story narrated in his novel can be a commentary to the circumstances of the martyrdom of the Canadian Martyrs: Isaac Jogues and his seven companions who lost their lives from 1642 to 1649.

French Jesuits were the first missionaries to go to Canada and North America, after J. Cartier’s travels opened Canada to the white man in 1534. Their mission region extended from Nova Scotia to Maryland. These eight saints preached the gospel to the Iroquois and Huron Indians, and, after being tortured, they were martyred in the area of what is now Auriesville, New York. Ten years after the death of St. Isaac Jogues, Kateri Tekakwitha of the Algonquin tribe, the first North American Indian to be canonized, was born in the same village in which he died.

The task of enculturation: learning from them!

Less dramatic is the experience of Mark, the young pastor of *I have heard the owl call my name*. It is a slow, reverent and delicate entering into the ways of life of the Indian tribe to which he is assigned. It is as if somebody were telling him: “Take off your shoes: the soil you are treading is sacred!” Sacred because before you came to preach the Gospel to these people, God had arrived already. His Spirit had already influenced their approach to life. So everybody tells Mark that he must learn, but it is a lesson of the heart. Most beautiful are the words that the Bishop tells Mark about the Indian people’s feelings for their village:

“The Indian knows his village and feels for his village as no white man for his country, his town, or even for his own bit of land. His village is not the strip of land four miles long and three miles wide that is his as long as the sun rises and the moon sets. The myths are the village and the winds and the rains. The river is the village, and the black and white killer whales that herd the fish to the end of the inlet the better to gobble them. The village is the salmon that comes up the river to spawn, the seal that follows the salmon and bites off his head... The village is the

talking bird, the owl, that calls the name of the man who is going to die, and the silver-tipped grizzly that ambles into the village...The fifty-foot totem by the church is the village”.

There is a kind of homesickness for the old ways of the tribe, consecrated by a long tradition and threatened by the ways of the white people. There is bitterness and sadness when the youth of the tribe go to the cities and take to drink and drugs; when they cease to respect the elders and lose their religion in the jungle of the metropolis. Mark is aware of this tragedy and shares the puzzlement of the elders in the same time that he tries to be close to the young and help them not to succumb to the allure of the city.

Between Liberation Theology and Globalization

Light years distance separates the last book, *The Confession of Joe Cullen* from the others. It is the late production of a great American leftist writer, Howard Fast, who is better known as the author of *Spartacus*, the major novel from which the blockbuster movie with Kirk Douglas was made.

The environment is not some remote area of the Third World, but New York: the Bronx, Manhattan, Brooklyn or the outskirts of Los Angeles. It is there, in the urban labyrinth, that Joe Cullen tries to bury his sin: to have contributed to the murder of a missionary, captured from within the Indios of Nicaragua and thrown out of a helicopter to his death. The world in the hand of unbridled capitalism is the modern time jungle and the hero/victim is Fr. Francis, the USA priest who has left the peace of his home diocese in order to share the fate of the Indios in Nicaragua. There he witnesses the massacres of the *contras* and eventually is captured and sent to his death.

Here Mission is Option for the Poor, it is taking sides, even to the point of understanding the armed revolution that struggles to change the structures of sin and egoism of the capitalist society. The fate of these revolutionary movements is not bright; there is very little hope of their victory since the collapse of communism in Russia. It is symptomatic that this novel was written exactly in 1989, the fateful year of the crumbling of the Berlin Wall.

The society of the “real” socialism has been a failure. With its going out there goes out also the utopia, the dream of a socialist, just society. There is in the book, a sense of despondency towards the condition of society, a bitterness that borders on cynicism. The only person that maintains some idealism is the priest who is murdered. That is why his person affects all the other characters of the novel. He is the catalyst of goodness and bravery in a world that is rotten to the core.

"DEATH COMES FOR THE ARCHBISHOP"

There is something epic – and almost mythic – about the beautiful novel by Willa Cather, *Death comes for the Archbishop* (1927), although the story it tells is that of two human lives, linked by the missionary vocation and lived simply in the silence of the desert. In 1851, Father Jean Marie Latour comes as the Apostolic Vicar to New Mexico, accompanied by his vicar, Fr. Joseph Vaillant.

What they find is a vast territory of red hills and tortuous *arroyos*, American by law but Mexican and Indian in custom and belief. In the almost forty years that follow, Latour spreads his faith in the only way he knows – gently, although he must contend with unforgiving landscape, derelict and sometimes openly rebellious priests, and his own loneliness.

Bishop Jean Latour and his vicar, Father Joseph Vaillant, in the course of organizing a new diocese in the territory of New Mexico, struggle to establish pioneer missions in the area. Latour and Vaillant are lifelong friends and, while they share a certain homesickness for their own country, are completely dedicated to their life's work. Latour is an aristocrat and an intellectual, a man of endless charity but at the same time a private person. Vaillant is practical, vigorous, and cheerful. The novel follows their struggles: the Navajo and Hopi Indians are reluctant to be drawn to the faith; the Spanish clergy already in the territory oppose the missionaries, while the harsh climate and unrewarding land tax them to the uttermost.

But the missionaries are totally committed and then help comes – chiefly from their devoted guide, Jacinto, and the frontiersman Kit Carson. Their success is completed by the establishment and consecration of the Cathedral of Sta. Fe. The two friends are separated when Father Joseph is made a bishop and sent to Colorado; but death is near and they die within a short time of each other, their work done.

Out of these events Cather gives us an indelible vision of life unfolding in a place where time itself seems suspended. The narrative is based on the careers of two French missionaries, Jean-Baptiste Lamy and Joseph Machebeuf, who worked in the New Mexico territory in the middle of the 19th century.

The novel is considered a classic of American literature and continuously reprinted. With it Willa Cather not only confirmed her character as novelist noted for her portrayals of frontier life in the American plain, but achieved a measure of universality in describing the heroism of the missionaries that transcends that particular time and place.

"BLACK ROBE"

Black Robe by Brian Moore (1985) is the powerful tale of a Jesuit missionary's struggle with the fierce natives of an unforgiving land – and with the heavy burden of his own unforgiving conscience.

It is the gripping description of a journey by the protagonist in 17th century Canada, an untamed country claimed by French, traveled by the Jesuits but belonging to the Natives. He goes on a mission to relieve a dying priest. With empathy and insight, the writer portrays Father Paul Laforgue's ardent longing to be a martyr for Christ; the sexual torment of young Daniel Davost, Laforgue's protégé who has been seduced by a native girl; and the mixture of superstitious fear and hatred that they provoke in the native tribes.

The travelers are captured, beaten and tortured. The priest arrives at his destination only to find the confrere in charge dying and the local Indians decimated by a fever brought by the white men.

The tension that ensues when these two white men come in contact with the natives will test all their beliefs. The clash of cultures that the writer presents is indeed brutal, but it is not futile.

In the novel's closing scene, Laforgue who has despaired of his own worthiness to be a martyr, despite withstanding torture, abandonment by Davost and the murder of the priest he came to replace, agrees to baptize the native villagers who are being ravaged by the plague; not necessarily because he believes that their conversion is genuine or that it will save them, but simply because he loves them and because, finally, he believes that God loves them all.

Despite the brutality and destructiveness of these initial encounters between the Black Robes and the Indians, it is this ethos of Christian love that eventually won the day and brought civilization to Canada and its native population.

Black Robe became a successful film in 1991 by the direction of Bruce Beresford.

Mission in movies

“Black Robe”: An Epic of Endurance

The mission to the Native Americans (Red Indians) was a tough enterprise that strained the resistance of the missionaries and even provoked martyrs. This 1991 film by the direction of Bruce Beresford from Bryan Moore’s novel of the same name, is a magnificently staged tragic story about a XVII century expedition of a Jesuit priest through remote areas of New France (Quebec).

Saga begins in 1634 at Fort Champlain, where newly arrived French Jesuit Paul Laforgue is assigned to a difficult and dangerous journey 1500 miles North to the mission outpost of Ihonatiria, in 17th century Canada, an untamed country claimed by the French, traveled by the Jesuits but belonging to the Natives. He goes on a mission to relieve a dying priest. With empathy and insight, the director portrays Father Paul Laforgue’s ardent longing to be a martyr for Christ and the mixture of superstitious fear and hatred that he and his companions provoke in the native tribes.

He is accompanied by a handful of friendly Algonquin Indians, led by chief Chomina, his wife and daughter and young son. Also joining the party is a young French carpenter, Daniel Davost who develops a passionate relationship with the Algonquin girl. The travelers are captured, beaten and tortured. The priest arrives at his destination only to find that the missionary confrere in charge is dying and the local Indians are decimated by a fever brought by the white men. The tension that ensues when these two white men come in contact with the natives will test all their beliefs. The clash of cultures that the film presents is indeed brutal, but it is not futile.

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Inner Beauty

“THE INN OF THE SIXTH HAPPINESS” (1958) is a sprawling film by the director Mark Robson about the adventures of a protestant woman missionary, Gladys Aylward, in China, during the Japanese invasion. The career of the young woman is shown in its difficult beginnings, in the struggle of enculturation and the heroic dedication to the safety of the Chinese children during the war. In every circumstance, the inner beauty of the protagonist stands out, interpreted in a superb manner by Ingrid Bergman. For this film, Mark Robson got an Oscar nomination as Best Director.

The movie is based on Alan Burgess’ novel: *The Small Woman*, which describes the adventures of a real person, Gladys Aylward as a missionary to China. She gets there under her own steam, overcoming opposition and prejudices. Gladys’ early scenes as she struggles to get to China are brilliantly done with humor and a sense of urgent dedication.

First met with hostility by the natives, the missionary gradually gains their esteem and affection. She falls in love with a Eurasian colonel, Lin Nan; contributes to the conversion of a powerful mandarin to Christianity and becomes involved in the Chino-Japanese war. Finally she guides a group of a hundred children to the safety of a northern mission by leading them on an arduous journey across the ragged mountains and through enemy territory.

The fanciful title refers to a kind of hostel that an elderly woman missionary had built and was running in an isolated area of China with the purpose of hosting the muleteers in transit, giving them at the same time food, shelter and Bible stories. The inn is then run by Gladys, after the elderly missionary who had started it, dies in an accident.

The beauty of the Gospel stories stands out in the unusual setting, among those rough, unrefined people and witnesses to the resourcefulness of the missionary women, the forerunners, somehow, of the very many evangelical missionaries who nowadays are converting China with the power of the Bible, in the home-churches.

RAGGED HEROISM

In The Devil at 4 o'clock (1961) by Mervyn Le Roy, the director of Quo Vadis, the wavering faith of a missionary priest is awakened by the selfless sacrifice of three convicts. The extraordinary circumstances of the volcanic eruption which threatens the life of the children in a lepers' hospital stirs the heroic dedication of the priest, who, in an unusual way, reminds us of Saint Damien of Molokai.

The movie opens with the vision of the sky where a small airplane is flying towards a tiny island lost in the Pacific ocean. Aboard is a young priest, Fr. Perreau, and three convicts destined to Tahiti penitentiary. The unexpected stop in the island is due to the fact that the elderly missionary there, Father Doonan, is been relieved of his duties by Father Perreau. Some years back, Father Doonan had stumbled on the island's carefully hidden secret: the presence of leprosy among the children. Since then the missionary has built a hospital for them on the side of the island's spent volcano, but has been completely rejected by the people of the island. As a consequence, he is experiencing a deep crisis of faith and has taken to drink.

Meanwhile, the three convicts are put to work at the lepers' hospital. All is seemingly normal until the island's volcano begins to erupt and the governor orders an evacuation. The children are still on the slope of the volcano, in the hospital, and Father Doonan is desperate to rescue them. When the captain of the ship which is evacuating the people of the doomed island agrees to wait for them, the missionary convinces the convicts to accompany him and they are parachuted with him in the area of the hospital in order to rescue the children and staff.

They face fire, lava, and earthquakes as time runs out. Eventually most of the children and the staff are rescued and board the ship to safety. But the three convicts and Fr. Doonan fall victim to their generosity and disappear in the conflagration that annihilates the island in a volcanic paroxysm.

The fictional small South Sea Island of Talua makes a colorful setting for this tale of rough heroism and sacrifice not least for the exceptional special effects of a place being blown to pieces by the volcanic eruption. Based on a novel by Max Catto, the plot is off the beaten path for an adventure yarn. Fr. Doonan is impersonated by a gigantic Spencer Tracy who delivers one of his more colorful

SENSELESS SLAUGHTER

The 2003 military thriller “Tears of the Sun” presents an unusual challenge for the brave protagonist, impersonated by Bruce Willis. The uniqueness of the mission affects the hardened soldier because of the humanitarian responsibility which he shares with Dr. Lena, an expressive Monica Bellucci. But the missionary interest of the movie lies more in the description of the background scenes, where a senseless slaughter, often too true in reality, shows in what kind of circumstances the mission in Africa has effectively taken place in the recent past.

Loyal veteran navy S.E.A.L Lt. A.K. Waters is sent into the heart of war-torn Africa on a hazardous assignment to rescue Dr. Lena Hendricks, a USA citizen who runs a mission hospital. When the beautiful doctor refuses to abandon the refugees in her care, Lt. Waters finds himself having to choose between following orders and the dictates of his own conscience. Conscience eventually prevails and together they begin a dangerous trek through the deadly jungle, all the while being pursued by a rebel militia group with only one goal in mind: to neutralize Lt. Waters’ unit and kill the refugees in his care.

At the beginning of the film, we see the members of the commando unit being parachuted into the isolated area of the mission station in order to take to safety the lady doctor in charge of the small hospital, because of the situation of chaos in the country, with the unruly militia roaming about, looting, raping, killing. The huge columns of black smoke billowing over the jungle announce the approaching of the danger.

There is no time to waste. Dr. Lena understands the emergency, but refuses to be saved without the patients of her hospital. The stubbornness of the doctor forces the commander to abandon the chance of being airlifted by an army helicopter and decide to start the long and dangerous trekking towards the huge refugee camp placed just on the other side of the border.

