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THE GLOBE AND MAIL 

October 18, 2013

How Bill Bryson gave travel memoir writer Jane Christmas the green light

By STAFF

*Jane Christmas, the popular travel memoir writer, turns inward with her new book, **And Then There Were Nuns**, which recounts a year in convents to discover a simpler yet more contemplative life. Here, she reflects on the influences that have shaped her as writer*

Jane Christmas, the popular travel memoir writer, turns inward with her new book, *And Then There Were Nuns*, which recounts a year in convents to discover a simpler yet more contemplative life. Here, she reflects on the influences that have shaped her as writer.

When you started to write, which writers did you revere?

Early on, I was pointed toward Bill Bryson by a friend who felt my style shared an affinity with Bryson's style. It was a timely literary introduction: Bryson's travel stories with their humour and dollops of historical digressions validated my style just when I began doubting my abilities. I also admired H.V. Morton and Jan Morris. A few travel-memoir-specific books captivated me: James Chatto's *The Greek for Love*; Tahir Shah's *The Caliph's House*; and Washington Irving's *Tales of the Alhambra*.

Did you imitate any of them?

Bryson's style gave me the green light to continue writing in a style that came naturally to me even though our focus is different: He doesn't dig into emotional territory like I do – maybe it's a female thing. Travel changes us. While I was drawn to travel writing initially, I found that my style became less about the physical journey and more about the one taking place within me.

How did you forge a distinct voice? How did you escape their influence?

My style came naturally, and it was one that I thought might be engaging for the reader. I don't think one escapes being influenced by anything: certain writing techniques, style, or a preferred narrative pacing gets unconsciously adopted if it works with your literary voice.

What is the most dangerous influence or type of influence for a young writer?

Two things:

1. A lot of contemporary Canadian writing tilts to the dark and morose, giving the impression that humour "cheapens"

literature. There is a rich literary tradition in Canada for the comedic: Berton, Mowat, Davies, Shields, Richler all had a light touch. Young writers perusing the bestseller list probably think that "dark and depressing" is the preferred style. There's a lot of literary snobbery out there, so I would caution writers against changing their style for the sake of literary conformity.

2. Instructors who encourage writers to join writing groups to share early drafts and plot ideas. When I first heard that advice I was terrified. I don't share my drafts or ideas with anyone, except my agent and my editor. In the case of *And Then There Were Nuns* I did send a few early chapters to a monk/author friend for his input, and to a couple of sisters at the religious communities where I stayed to correct any factual errors. It freaked me out to do that but it was necessary in this case.

Which perhaps unexpected book(s) share a commonality with *And Then There Were Nuns*? What would you think of as its distant cousins?

A.J. Jacobs's *The Year of Living Biblically* because like my book his challenges religious dogma and sees the absurdity in some of organized religion's practices. Henri Nouwen's *The Road to Daybreak* but only in the sense that Nouwen and I share a thematic commonality about seeking "home" in all its manifestations. Thomas Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain* from the standpoint of Merton's innate rebellious spirit reconciling itself with the strictures of religious life. That book made me feel less of a weirdo while I was discerning my own vocation.

Which author(s) do you think are most influential today?

A subjective question! Within the religious genre Merton continues to be influential, as does Jean Vanier. But literature evolves; literary tastes evolve. It's hard to find current religious authors who aren't afraid to be audacious and slightly irreverent. The days of religious piety are over: there are plenty of examples of piety masking despicable deeds and misogynistic behavior. A lighter, more honest approach would make the church look human. The reality is that religious people are actually quite funny, even profane. You need outrageousness and irreverence to shake things up, and to get the conversation moving.

Who (in this case What) do you wish were more influential?

The Bible is underrated. Churches have a knack for airing the most boring bits of the Bible each Sunday, with the same readings on heavy rotation. Yet, there are lyrical and heart-pounding passages that get overlooked: some of the Psalms (for poetry), the Song of Solomon (for love and romance), and the Book of Wisdom (for dramatic storytelling, particularly the story of Judith, a gutsy, heroic leader who boldly used sex as a weapon).

Whose sentences are your favourite, and why?

My favourite sentences come from the 15th-century *Book of Common Prayer*, used by Anglicans. Written around 1540 by Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, its language and imagery is soothing, but more importantly, it speaks to the adult experience. Take this one, which is said just before Holy Communion: "We do not presume to come to this thy Table O merciful Lord, ... We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table ..." The imagery of not being deemed good enough to eat the crumbs falling from Christ's table is such a humbling one. Society has hard-wired us to be at the head of the table, the head of a department or organization, but in this prayer you can feel your ego falling to its knees.

When you are in a period of writing, do you change your reading habits for fear of being unintentionally influenced?

I usually stop reading when I'm in a writing phase because I'm too busy writing!

This interview has been condensed and edited.

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