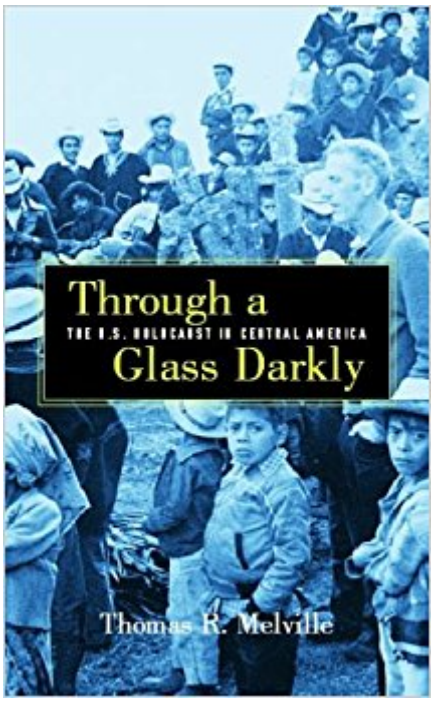
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Through A Glass Darkly



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Synopsis

Through a Glass Darkly tells the story of Ron Hennessey, an Iowa farmer who returned from the Korean War to discover that farming no longer held much allure. Hennessey joined a Catholic missionary society and after nine years of study was ordained a priest and sent to Guatemala. The book describes Hennessey's conversion from being an unapologetic patriot from America's heartland to a staunch opponent of Ronald Reagan's policies in Central America - policies that occasionally threatened Hennessey's life. Hennessey's story has a subtext: America's ideals of freedom, democracy, and progress-with-justice have been violated abroad by one U.S. president after another. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

Thomas R. Melville served as a Catholic Maryknoll priest in Guatemala for ten years before being expelled in 1967 by Guatemalan and Church authorities for his role in planning (with other religious, both native and foreign) the formation of a Christian unit to graft onto the guerrilla movement that was fighting Guatemala's military rulers. Melville's religious training -- as a youngster in Boston and later in Maryknoll -- prompted him to ask why successive U.S. administrations financed repressive governments in Guatemala and Central America and why antigovernment guerrillas were labeled "terrorists" while U.S. advisors and their students were hailed as "freedom fighters." --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Through a Glass Darkly by Thomas Melville. Reviewed by Larry Egan Government corruption, hit

squads, ecclesiastical intrigue, blood and guts and a lone person fighting the forces of evil sound like the ingredients for Dan Brown’s next thriller. But this is Tom Melville’s biography of Ron Hennessey, Maryknoll Priest, and his struggle in Guatemala to help his parishioners in El PetÃƒÂ©n and later in San Mateo Ixtan survive between the military forces of the government and the guerilla forces attempting to overthrow the various military regimes of the 70s and 80s, Tom starts with Ron’s early life in Iowa. His family,-sharecropper farmers,-provide a conservative but deeply socially involved environment in which he develops his own commitment to others. His service in Korea opens his eyes to the suffering and needs of others outside the US. In his own way he helps them-within and outside "the rule". This eventually leads Ron to Maryknoll. As a classmate and friend of Ron since he joined Maryknoll, I found the book really portrayed Ron as we knew him. The class of 64 had a great habit of giving its members nicknames. Ron’s was VOM (The Vile Old Man). He was the senior student and famous for his earthy farm humor. You never knew whether Ron had just given you a compliment or a real zinger. Ron always allowed you to draw your own conclusions. Ron arrived in Guatemala in 1964 and served in several parishes in the Quetzaltenango area with Mayan Indigenas. This area was adjacent to Huehuetenango, the major commitment of Maryknoll in Central America at that time. Like most of us Ron was aware of the exploitation of the indigenas by the local power structure dominated by the Ladinos (Spanish speaking mestizos). But he tended to see it as a local issue rather than a systemic one.Tom Melville’s own experiences and reaction to the situation was not embraced by most of us in the region. Butit moved many of us to study the situation more globally and in a more systemic manner. Tom refers to his and Marge’s own involvement with the guerillas in a few short sentences and in some footnotes and moves on. He is telling Ron’s story and not trying to score points or -fight old battles.As Ron witnesses the genocide of the various military regimes of Arana, Rios Montt and Lucas Garcia he begins to agonize how he can best serve the people with whom he works. He is never comfortable with overtly promoting the guerillas’ cause since he was never convinced that they would produce positive changes for the indigenas, though he unquestionably favored them as the lesser of two evils. He also knows that what ever he says will influence people and likely get some of them killed. This struggle is the underlying thread of all that Ron does. He second-guesses himself at times. He gets angry with himself, the Church and God, but continues in the struggles despite his doubts and lack of clear and precise answers.As the massacres began to increase Ron actively sent eyewitness accounts to his three nun sisters in Iowa and asked them to publicize the atrocities in the US press. His later conversations with the US Embassy officials who try to get him to change his statements to a "more balanced" view are right out of Alice in Wonderland. Embassy officials then proceed to misquote

him out of context.Ron’s distaste for Cardinal Casariego and his policies is clear. His growing friendship for Archbishop Romero comes through in ways that probably will surprise many. His willingness to publicly expose Casariego and the Papal Nuncio’s machinations in the Vatican against Romero are an illuminating but little known aspect of the larger struggle in the Church in Central America. Pope John Paul II should at least question his choice of informational sources if not his own part in the devastation of the local churches of Central America in this period.The members of the Maryknoll Central American Region elected Ron regional superior four times,-twice before he began his public campaign to publicize the atrocities-and twice after. Ron always joked that academically he was 41st in a class of 40. People chose Ron as their leader not because of his intellectual prowess, but because of his honesty and commitment to justice for all. His willingness to work with everyone and slowly but surely call it as he saw it resonated with the region. This comes out clearly in his dealings with Bill Woods and Bill’s subsequent death. His investigation which finally leads Ron to the conclusion that Bill and his five companions were indeed killed by the Guatemalan military powers will add lots of new information for many. Tom uses two literary techniques in telling the story. The first is translating the rudimentary Spanish of the local indigena people into idiomatic (pidgin?) English. This is particularly effective in capturing the flavor of some of the discourses. The conversations that Ron has with five guerillas who arrive at the rectory at midnight are a microcosm of the ideological and human concerns that were dominating the area. Despite significant differences in outlooks, the guerillas and Ron part "friends". Tom also weaves the past history of Guatemala, from the conquest to the elections of ArÃƒÂ©valo and Arbenz in the fifties, to the later military regimes of Castillo Armas and his successors. This background is essential for placing Ron’s life in the wider context of the situation of Central America. For those who know the region this is effective. For those coming to the region for the first time the jumps in chronology may be a bit difficult to follow at times.While there are a few things that I would have a different interpretation of or different take on, they are minor and in no way detract from the author’s main thrust. The book does not use Ron’s story to provide a vehicle for a larger social thesis but presents the social, religious and political realities of Central America as the context in which Ron had to make painful decisions.This book should be a must for all persons who value justice.. It recalls the idealism and conviction that they have felt in their own life. For those who knew Ron it recalls in vivid detail his laconic wit, pithy sayings and deep commitment to serving the Mayan Indians of the altiplano of Guatemala. It also should be on the mandatory reading list for the Vatican School of Diplomacy. It highlights the role that nuncios play in the political and religious life of the people they serve and the devastating influence they can have if they forget that they are Church people before they are

political operators. The State Department should also put it on its list of books diplomats should read. Why the people of the world like Americans and hate the foreign policy of the US Government, Republican or Democratic-is graphically presented. US Government officials who lie to protect the integrity of US policy and bishops who lie for the good of Holy Mother Church are apt bedfellows. Tom names names. Lastly anyone involved in Peace and Justice work will find in the book an inspiration to continue the struggle to help those in the two-thirds world.

Perhaps the best books I have ever read. Ron Hennessey just jumped to the front of the line of people I would like to meet in heaven. Melville does an extraordinary job of not only examining the conflict in Guatemala from all sorts of angles, but also the conflict within Ron Hennessey.The book does warrant the warning that it is not for the faint of heart. I think I went into a funk for a short while during the time I was reading the book because the topic is so heavy and usually quite disheartening. I typically don't dream, or at least remember my dreams, but I was actually experiencing nightmares. However, in the end, despite all the anger and dismay that gets conjured up, it is a beautiful experience getting to know father Ron. The legacy of this story is one of love. He had the heart of a martyr, but somehow managed to not get killed. Through living, his story has now made it into a book and the rest of us can learn some of the intimate details of just what took place. I read this book because I was interested in the history of Guatemala, but what I take away from it is a deep respect and appreciation for priests and martyrs.

This is a book for which many have been waiting. Genocide is a difficult subject to think about, let alone read about in gruesome detail. The stark facts about the genocide of the indigenous Mayans in Guatemala during the 1970's and 1980's have been reported by others, but not in an easily readable format. Other sources have attempted to spell out the role of the US government in the genocide, but more in a legal or academic tone. There are many documented accounts of individual massacres in Guatemala. These individual stories are important, but are more in the nature of individual snapshots. This book tells the longitudinal story in measured detail and in a personal manner through the life story of Maryknoll priest Ron Hennessey. The book pulls the reader in by describing the gentle nature of the indigenous Mayans and their struggle for survival in their simple villages. Those who are fortunate to escape early death due to malnutrition and poor health care are faced with the new threat of the Guatemalan military. The unspeakable torture and murders are so much more meaningful after identifying with the villagers through Hennessey. The question screams out in the reader's mind: "What did these gentle people do to deserve their fate?" The book presents

a thorough explanation of the role (both active and passive) of the US government in the genocide. This book will appeal to those with a strong interest in Latin America, but also to the general reader with interests in US foreign policy. One warning -- most readers will feel emotionally drained after experiencing the horrors of the Guatemalan villagers through the eyes of Ron Hennessey.

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