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Journalist in disguise

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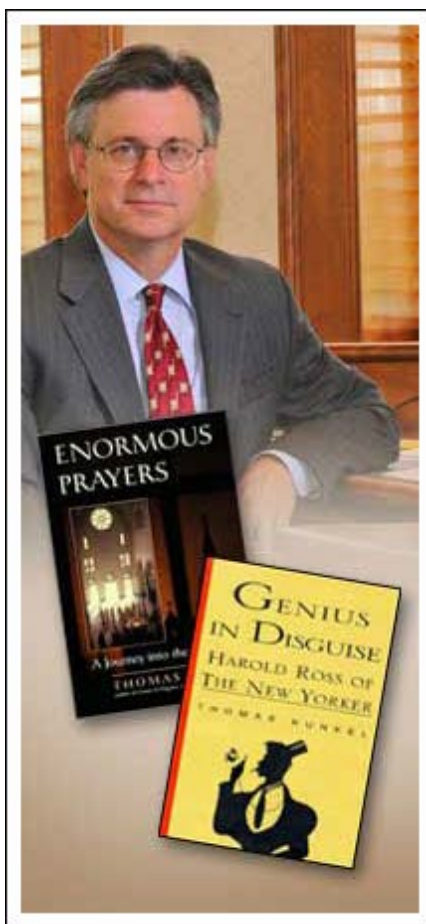
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President Thomas Kunkel

Kunkel's "Genius in Disguise: Harold Ross of The New Yorker" and "Enormous Prayers: A Journey into the Priesthood," the two books I will focus on for this article, are fine books that should be read by the St. Norbert community.

By now you all know that Thomas Kunkel is the seventh president of St. Norbert College. He was the dean of the Philip Merrill College of Journalism at the University of Maryland for eight years, the president of American Journalism Review, and has worked for numerous newspapers – The San Jose Mercury News, The Miami Herald, The Cincinnati Post

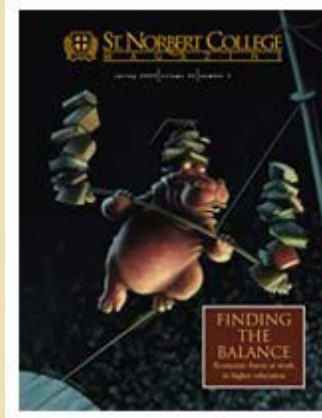
Journalist in disguise: A look at two books authored by President Thomas Kunkel

By John Pennington, Professor of English

"I don't care what is written about me so long as it isn't true." Dorothy Parker (1893-1967), American writer and wit, founding member of the Algonquin Round Table, and one of the original advisory editors of The New Yorker magazine, wrote those words, certainly with a tinge of irony.

When I agreed to write a review of two books by St. Norbert College's new president, Thomas Kunkel, I thought about Parker's quip, not ironically, but quite literally: "What if I don't like these books? Well, then, John, write a review that isn't true!"

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Journalist in disguise
A look at two books authored by **President Tom Kunkel**.



Stepping out of the picture
An artist reflects on his recent

and The New York Times, to name a few – in a variety of roles that ranged from reporter to managing editor.

But what some of you might not know is that he continues a practicing journalist in disguise, having authored “Genius in Disguise” and “Enormous Prayers,” and edited or co-edited “Letters from the Editor: The New Yorker’s Harold Ross” (2001); “Leaving Readers Behind: The Age of Corporate Newspapering” (2001, with Gene Roberts and Charles Layton); and “Breach of Faith: A Crisis of Coverage in the Age of Corporate Newspapering” (2005, with Gene Roberts).

“Genius in Disguise: Harold Ross of The New Yorker” (Random House, 1995)

Kunkel told me that he was inspired to write “Genius in Disguise” by a gift his mother gave him when he was a teenager – James Thurber’s “Years with Ross.”

“Well, I fell in love with Ross,” admits Kunkel, “as did everyone who read it. But later, when I actually became an editor myself, I would re-read Thurber’s portrait and realize that this Ross could not possibly have been the whole story – there had to be more to him than this broad, comic one-dimensional character.”

Kunkel’s goal in his book, then, is to provide an honest flesh-and-bone portrait of Ross – warts and all – while providing a detailed history of the genesis of The New Yorker from 1925 (the year of its first issue) to 1951 (the year Ross died).

The book is divided into four parts: “Prologue; Child of the West: 1892-1924”; “A Magazine of Sophistication: 1925-1938”; “Season in the Sun: 1939-51”; and “Epilogue.” “Genius” is so chock-full of historical and cultural details related to the development of The New Yorker and its role in American culture that a short review can only do disservice to the book. In other words, I urge you to read this excellent work to see just what I mean.

Kunkel claims that The New Yorker, under Ross’s stern control of the magazine, was a major marker in American cultural history: “Ross’s New Yorker changed the face of contemporary fiction, perfected a new form of literary journalism, established new standards for humor and comic art, swayed the cultural and social agendas, and became synonymous with sophistication. It replaced convention with innovation.”

To achieve this measure of influence, Ross nurtured a stable of writers that became a who’s who list of significant American writers of the 20th century. The storytellers included E. B. White, James Thurber, Dorothy Parker, John O’Hara, Ring Lardner, John Cheever, Irwin Shaw, J. D. Salinger, Shirley Jackson, Vladimir Nabokov, Eudora Welty, Mary McCarthy. The artists included Peter Arno, William Steig, Charles Addams; the editors Katharine White, James M. Cain, William Shawn; the reporters Janet Flanner, John Hersey, Rebecca West, Philip Hamburger, Brendan Gill; and the critics Robert Benchley, Lewis Mumford, Edmund Wilson, Louise Bogan. What is also notable is the magazine’s inability to embrace such writers as Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald and William Faulkner.

Even Kunkel seems amazed at the sheer brilliance that The New Yorker could muster: “[The New Yorker] represented an almost magical confluence of an idea, a time, and a place, arriving just after New York emerged as a world city, yet before the pervasive presence of television: that brief window when an erudite little ‘comic paper’ could be a major

work.



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cultural force in a way that is unthinkable now.”

For me, most fascinating was to witness how The New Yorker methodically achieved this cultural significance, which it still maintains today.

In the famous prospectus for the magazine, created in the fall of 1924, Ross writes that the magazine “will be a reflection in word and picture of metropolitan life. It will be human. Its general tenor will be one of gaiety, wit and satire, but it will be more than a jester. It will not be what is commonly called radical or highbrow. It will be what is commonly called sophisticated, in that it will assume a reasonable degree of enlightenment on the part of its readers. It will hate bunk.”

Ross continues by proclaiming, “The New Yorker will be the magazine which is not edited for the old lady in Dubuque. It will not be concerned in what she is thinking about. This is not meant in disrespect, but The New Yorker is a magazine avowedly published for a metropolitan audience” Yet the magazine evolved into one that would interest more than just an elite, urban readership.

The magazine found itself in an awkward position in 1929 with the economic crash and the subsequent depression – The New Yorker tended to avoid the stark realities of the day and insisted on publishing its witty and comic pieces, which even Ross suspected might be a moral failing of the magazine.

When World War II broke out, the magazine had to decide whether it would engage in reporting this world event, which also meant taking a political stance. It did. The New Yorker sent reporters overseas, often into the war zones, providing some of the most incisive journalism during the war.

A major decision, at least in my reading of this history, was the magazine’s choice to dedicate one full issue in 1946 to the publication of John Hersey’s “Hiroshima,” a work that recounted six Japanese survivors of the atomic blast that depicted, as Kunkel relates, “human suffering on an apocalyptic scale.” With that issue, The New Yorker gained gravitas and matured into the publication that it is today.

Kunkel’s respect for Harold Ross does not cloud his judgment on the limitations of Ross as husband, friend, and as editor. But Kunkel contends that Ross’s force of will and indomitable personality were the main reasons for the success of The New Yorker.

As a newspaper editor himself, Kunkel admits his kinship with Ross. “In the narrowest sense, editors lay twitchy hands on someone else’s work, fixing it, patching it, polishing it, and generally trying to keep it upright,” suggests Kunkel. “In the broadest sense, however, they set the agenda, standards, and tone for a publication.”

Kunkel concludes that an editor “must assuage prima donnas, compel laggards, and sober up drunks,” which succinctly captures skills needed to negotiate with college professors! “Equal parts shaman and showman, [editors] must have an unwavering vision for their publication, convey it to a staff, and then sell it to the great yawning public. ... Harold Ross arguably did it better than anyone who went before him, and not a few people would say anyone since.” That Kunkel admires Ross’s acumen as editor bodes well for St. Norbert College: his description of an editor seems remarkably similar to qualifications needed to be a successful college president.

Enormous Prayers: A Journey into the Priesthood (Westview Press, 1998)

To introduce “Enormous Prayers,” I want to return to our friend Dorothy Parker, who is alleged to have said, “I went to a convent in New York and was fired finally for my insistence that the Immaculate Conception was spontaneous combustion.”

Some might laugh at Parker’s audacious and irreverent comment, some might find such a remark sacrilegious at best. Kunkel ends “Enormous Prayers” with a joke about a truck driver who has just picked up a passenger, a priest. Previously, whenever the driver spied a lawyer on the sidewalk, he ran him or her over with joyful enthusiasm. When the driver recognizes another lawyer on the sidewalk, however, he swerves because of his passenger, but hears that familiar thump.

“‘Oh, I’m so sorry, Father,’ the driver said. ‘I thought I’d missed that guy.’ ‘It’s OK,’ the priest replied. ‘I got him with the door.’”

Kunkel’s book was published in the midst of the Catholic Church scandal, an incendiary spontaneous combustion that bruised the institution to the core – and blanketed accusation on every priest, it seemed. When Kunkel relates the joke, he concludes that the tide is slowly changing, that lawyers have rightly returned to “the butt of jokes and priests mere accomplices.”

More importantly, the joke humanizes a very mysterious profession: “To me these priests are special precisely because they are ordinary people who have made this extraordinary commitment. They have the same limitations and vulnerabilities as the rest of us, yet they carry on in faith and hope, trying to do the best they can, refusing to be crushed by the culture or the odds. ... We are the beneficiaries of their work, yes, but also of their example.”

Kunkel introduces the reader to 28 priests from a wide range of geographical regions in the United States. In doing so, Kunkel captures the individuality of each man while highlighting some of the central challenges that face the Catholic Church today: they include the question of celibacy; the ordination of women; the role of pro-choice Catholics; the dwindling priest population; the social activism of the Church; and the continual impact and controversy of Vatican II.

The title – “Enormous Prayers” – comes from the Roman satirist Juvenal, who wrote: “Enormous prayers, which Heaven in anger grants.” This melding of “prayer” with “anger” provides the tension that drives the overall book. Or as Kunkel writes: “Yet as my mind fixed on that phrase ‘enormous prayers,’ I began to consider it in a different context. I thought back to that powerful and heartfelt Our Father [prayer], and then I thought about the entreaties those same priests, on their own, send up every day, asking for guidance and strength. These are enormous prayers, too, ones I suspect they are pleased to have Heaven answer, whether in anger or otherwise.”

Kunkel related to me that the inspiration for “Enormous Prayers” was partly a result of external pressure: “Once the Ross book was coming to a conclusion, my editor at Random House began to press me about my next project.

“This was ’94, ’95, and there were a variety of Catholic controversies in the news at the time. It occurred to me that as much as gets written about priests, there was little out there that really described what it was like to be a priest, to live the everyday life in light of these contemporary difficulties.”

Each profile is guided by a gentle framework: Kunkel introduces the reader to a priest whose experience also brings into focus a key issue facing the Catholic Church generally and priests specifically.

For example, Monsignor William H. Shannon from New York is “senior clergy” who is “unabashedly progressive (some say liberal).” A Thomas Merton scholar, Shannon believes that the Church’s position on celibacy is “a question of policy [and] could be altered rather easily, should Rome ever become so inclined.” As to the ordination of women, Shannon contends that this issue is “much thornier ... because the Church has always considered that a theological issue, a fundamental tenet – and therefore an impossibility.” Shannon, bucking tradition, believes that the Church’s position, in the final analysis, is “never ... terribly persuasive.”

If Shannon represents the more progressive side of the Church, then Father Robert Lacombe from Greenville, R.I., 31 years old when Kunkel met him, is a new breed of “neoconservative.” Unlike Shannon, Lacombe believes that celibacy “can only be possible through the nurturing of very strong and intense prayer. You can’t rationalize it. You can’t understand it psychologically, because it seems to be so foolhardy psychologically. But when understood spiritually it makes a heck of a lot of sense.” In reference to Catholics who are pro-choice, Lacombe takes an unwavering position: “You can rationalize in favor of free choice, but that free choice leads to murder. I then [say] that if you are a proponent of abortion that you are not disposed to come forward to Holy Communion. More priests should challenge their people in this way.”

Some readers will align themselves with Shannon, while others will gravitate towards Lacombe, but readers will more clearly see, by reading Kunkel’s portraits, how complex such issues are for priests – and for Catholics in general.

I was surprised to find how often Vatican II was mentioned in the profiles, equally split, it appeared, between positive and negative comments from the priests. When I asked Kunkel about this, he responded by saying that “frankly, the main impression I had about Vatican II from these conversations was the strong sense of disappointment from the older priests that what they considered the great promise had been arrested by the administration of Pope John Paul II. It was an interesting dynamic, in fact.

“While a few of my older interviewees certainly were conservative, in general I found that the older the priest, the more liberal his outlook; the younger, the more conservative.” When pushed further Kunkel admitted that “indeed, a good accessible book on the abiding impact of Vatican II on the Catholic Church, especially in America, would be a welcome volume.”

When I heard that Studs Terkel died on Oct. 31, 2008, at age 93, I pulled from my bookshelf a bright red, worn copy of, arguably, his most famous book, “Working.” I read “Working” in 1976 as part of the Education by Objectives (EBO) course taught by **Dr. Robert Boyer** at St. Norbert College. (EBO later transformed into Freshman Seminar, which has now been replaced by the pilot program Communio.)

While I did not remember any of the names of the people Terkel interviewed for his book, I did remember how their work was part of their identity, their being – the farmer, telephone operator, janitor, hairstylist, mail carrier, supermarket clerk, to name a few. And I remember vividly the steel worker and his son, who had become a priest.

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Though I never met any of Terkel's people in person, I felt that I actually knew them on some elemental level. I feel the same way about Kunkel's priests and about Harold Ross and his cronies at The New Yorker. Contrary to what Dorothy Parker suggests, I will tell the truth about "Enormous Prayers" and "Genius in Disguise": I urge you to read these books, for the sheer pleasure and for the edification that they will bring to you. We have welcomed Thomas Kunkel as our president. Now let us welcome him to our bookshelves.

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