

The Crooked Made Straight

Review of
Writing Straight with Crooked Lines: A Memoir

By Jim Forest
Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2020
vii + 326 pp. / \$30.00 paper

Reviewed by **Gordon Oyer**

Though a successful biographer of Catholic resisters to war (including Thomas Merton as well as Dorothy Day and Daniel Berrigan), Jim Forest's books, reminiscences and lectures have shared only pieces of his own significant immersion in that heady milieu. In *Writing Straight with Crooked Lines*, he now turns full focus on his own full life to assemble those pieces, expand beyond them, and gift us with a delightful and insightful memoir of that journey. Some pieces borrow from his prior writings, but most are fresh, and all blend nicely into a cohesive and engaging story.

Good memoir/biography includes willingness to tackle the unflattering downs as well as the gratifying ups that knit together the complexities of any human's life. Forest's opening chapter, "Telling the Truth" – a caveat on memory's fallibility – coupled with a title drawn from the Portuguese proverb "God writes straight with crooked lines," shows that he aspires to score high on that particular scale. In this, and in most measures of story-telling, he succeeds.

At least a couple core threads hold together the story Forest narrates through sixty-seven concise and fast-moving chapters. One thread, his life-long engagement to promote peace and reconciliation, is supported by themes of cultivating conscience for discernment and balancing acts of resistance with service in peace organizations. The other key thread – an ever-expanding spiritual awareness and commitment – reveals his innate attraction to aesthetic experience and beauty as a significant aspect of that spirituality. Traces of his interest in art, poetry, fiction, photography, museums, etc. often surface, enhanced by a couple examples of his own artistic skill. Beyond these threads, Forest offers personalized glimpses of several iconic mentors whose friendship he gained along the way.

The book encompasses three broad phases of Forest's life. The first spans the period from childhood through entry into the Catholic Church and identification as a conscientious objector to war. He engagingly exposes details of his early years that portend or shape what would come during adulthood, such as early fascination with words and occasional stubbornness against pressure to conform. He describes how imagery of nuclear detonations and a sense of impending

Gordon Oyer, holds an M.A. in history from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and recently retired from an administrative position in the University of Illinois system. He is former editor of *Illinois Mennonite Heritage Quarterly*. His book *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest* received a 2015 Louie award from the International Thomas Merton Society for distinguished contribution to Merton studies. He has served as co-chair of the ITMS Nominations Committee.

nuclear destruction became seared into his young imagination.

Forest also portrays how his parents, dedicated Communist Party workers, shaped his later life in ways both helpful and not. They passed along their Marxist sensitivity to racial and class inequity and exposed him to the consequences of politically radical views, including FBI surveillance and imprisonment. But despite their Marxist orientation, they were not "at war with God" (4), as he puts it, and permitted spiritual space for Jim to explore his own beliefs. Forest's parents divorced when he was two, and though he felt loved and accepted, their separation helped destabilize his childhood and perhaps set a pattern for later relationships. Jim joined the Navy at seventeen and served at the US Weather Bureau near Washington, DC, which, despite his later rejection of war, offered then-needed stability and structure. While there, Forest's spiritual impulses blossomed into his conversion to Catholicism, and after stumbling across copies of *The Catholic Worker*, he began to visit its New York community. That influence, coupled with realization that his Navy work contributed to planning the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion, prompted a rapid chain of events culminating in his discharge as a conscientious objector.

This launched the second and best-known phase of Forest's life: his immersion in New York City's faith-based, activist-driven community of resistance to war. It climaxed with participation in the Milwaukee Fourteen draft board raid and consequent imprisonment, and ended with his move to the Netherlands. He forged a dizzying array of memorable friendships, worked with diverse organizations, and learned hard lessons in navigating personal relationships, building a family, being a father. The trail of mentoring friendships he accumulated included Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, Daniel and Philip Berrigan, Tom Cornell, A. J. Muste, Thich Nhat Hanh, Alfred Hassler of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) and David Kirk of Emmaus House. This era began at the Catholic Worker and proceeded through various editing and writing jobs, helping found the Catholic Peace Fellowship, and serving on FOR staff – all against a personal backdrop of fatherhood, three marriages that did not endure, and challenges to make ends meet.

In his story's final phase, Forest recounts his move to Holland as the International Fellowship of Reconciliation coordinator (later general secretary); marriage to his current partner of thirty-eight years (and kidney donor), Nancy Flier; building bridges between Western Christianity and the Russian Church during the Soviet Union's closing years; becoming Russian Orthodox; transitioning to a self-employed writer. In this period he also added Henri Nouwen to his list of friends.

Forest chose his memoir title well. Throughout his narrative one can trace numerous "crooked lines" of choices and happenstance that culminate in unlikely outcomes. Most obviously, his childhood of transition and the insecurity of split households headed by Communist parents matured into a life of deeply rooted spirituality. Many less sweeping examples of zigzag circumstance also surface. As just one, soon after he arrived at the Catholic Worker, the choice by some to change distribution of foodstuffs in their community led to internal contention, which led to the departure of the newspaper's managing editor, which led Dorothy Day to appoint nineteen-year-old Forest to the position, which led to his correspondence with Thomas Merton, which led to Merton's long-term mentorship and friendship. Through sharing such pieces of his life, Forest reminds readers how choices, conflicts, foibles and coincidences – even when leading through terrain of doubt and discouragement – may be

redeemed through reliance on grace and desire to follow one's conscience.

As with any good memoir, Forest also provides opportunities to reflect on larger questions. One chapter shares his opposition to abortion as a nonviolent stance, yet suggests paths that need not conform to predictable polarized camps: "Every effort should be made to find alternatives without criminalizing those who, in desperation, have abortions" (241). When recounting his move to the Netherlands, he observes how its orientation that "tolerance is a better solution than intolerance" (254) contrasts with US social organization. Holland's much lower abortion rate results not only from better sex education and birth control access, but the state's "strong and solid" support for women with children. "Health services leave no one out. It's not a sink-or-swim culture" (252).

Forest also reports his ambivalence over often being labeled a "peace activist." Peace work can put "the would-be peacemaker in a social context in which conflict can be intense and nasty," where allies often "dissent not only with various aspects of mainstream society but often with one another" (241). At the Catholic Worker, those he served "were at times easier to live with, more patient and compassionate, than those who had come to serve" (127), and he learned that "it takes courage and a carefully formed conscience for your thoughts, words, and actions not to be shaped by whatever social group you happen to be part of" (110). Different mentors presented different postures toward activism. Merton may not have approved of certain acts, yet Forest "also knew he would have been supportive of me personally and would have helped me in any way he could" (194). Whereas some pushed him to be more active, Thich Nhat Hanh prioritized mindfulness and "exerted no pressure to do more than I was doing to end the war in Vietnam" (186). And so, rather than become someone "arrayed with protest badges" and "troubled if not currently in jail for another act of civil disobedience," Forest determined that "discernment is needed," as is deference to "my sometimes pushy, problematic conscience," which "every now and then manages to prod me into doing troublesome things" (315).

But Forest's final chapter on "Mentors" offers an especially poignant reflection for Merton students. He recalls Thich Nhat Hanh naming several mentors, Merton among them, then adding, "But Jim is not any of the people he admires. . . . Who is Jim Forest?" The question forced him to confront his temptation to construct a "mask," an identity derived from his admiration of others. He concludes: "Whoever God had in mind in calling me into existence, it was not a mish-mash of others, however admirable. Finding mentors and learning from them was essential, but finally I had to discover my own true face" (317). Here he lifts up a task for each of us. In helping us address that task, *Writing Straight with Crooked Lines* offers more than a well-told life story. It provides a vehicle to help reflect on our own path to discovering our own unique "true face."