# 'Fire' misses mark; western is unforgettable

Catholic News Service

Rapid Fire (20th Century Fox) is a vehicle for Brandon Lee, son of 1970s karate movie hero Bruce Lee, to try for second-generation stardom.

He does exhibit some balletic grace and astonishing speed as he demolishes impossible numbers of adversaries, but the movie ends up being just a series of very violent confrontations and bloody shootouts.

Director Peter Hyams slickly exploits this murderous violence as exciting entertainment. The story, however, is such a formula-action yarn the preview audience actually hooted when Lee predictably sleeps with the only woman in the movie. It's all a mishmash of mindless killings best ignored.

Due to excessive violence, a brief sexual encounter, occasional nudity and much rough language, the U.S. Catholic Conference classification is O morally offensive. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is R - restricted.

### Unforgiven

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Redemption comes hard for a grizzled ex-gunfighter who takes up his guns one more time in Unforgiven (Warner Bros.).

It's a harsh life in 1880 Kansas for widower Will Munny (Clint Eastwood), a starving pig farmer trying to raise two small kids and forget his premarital years of alcoholic crime



Luke Wynne-20th Century Fox Jake Lo, played by actor Brandon Lee (with gun), is the actionadventure hero of the 1990s in Rapid Fire.

Along comes the Schofield Kid (Jaimz Woolvett), irresistibly inviting him to share a \$1,000 bounty for the heads of two cowboys who cut up a prostitute in Big Whiskey, Wyo. Munny takes his old partner, sure shot Ned Logan (Morgan Freeman) for good measure — and for good reason as the Kid turns out to be uselessly near-sighted.

Meanwhile Big Whiskey's fearsome Sheriff Daggett (Gene Hackman) has banned any firearms in town and already run out one prospective bounty hunter (Richard Harris). Maintaining law and order with an iron fist, Daggett's personal code of justice allowed the cowboys who mutilated the prostitute to go free once they reimbursed the whorehouse owner. Now he is determined to prevent any hired assassins from collecting the reward the town's infuriated prostitutes have posted.

As also produced and directed by Eastwood, Unforgiven offers complex portraits of its characters and the moral choices they make. Blown away with the tumbleweeds are the black hats, the white hats and the mythic Western hero.

In its place is an unsentimental study of men in whom good and evil are constantly struggling and evolving. The Eastwood and Hackman characters are a fascinating study in contrasts: Eastwood's Munny is truly repentant but unable to deny his mur-

derous urges when put to the test, while Hackman's sheriff is a brutally despotic lawman whose courage is only revealed incrementally.

Equally fine performances from Freeman and Woolvett flesh out the two other bounty hunters who ultimately have no stomach for their mission. Frances Fisher also stands out as the feisty prostitute demanding respect and equal treatment under the

Technical aspects of the Western such as editing, cinematography, costumes and sets are polished, with only the hesitant pace a distraction --- especially to those who associate cowboy movies with fast-paced action.

David Webb Peoples' script finely observes the contradictory natures of its characters and though crime may seem to pay for Munny, his moral downfall is clearly viewed as tragic.

This is a richly textured revisionist Western where even villains have some decency and heroes are more flawed human beings than plaster saints. This may not make for easygoing escapist fare, but it just may make Unforgiven unforgettable.

Due to intermittent violence motivated by revenge and vigilante justice, fleeting bedroom shots, an uncritical acceptance of prostitution and occasional rough language, the USCC classification is A-IV — adults, with reservations. The MPAA rating is R restricted.

## Book should satisfy both Merton novices and veterans

Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master - The Essential Writings, edited with an introduction by Lawrence S. Cunningham; Paulist Press (Mahwah, N.J., 1992); 437 pages; \$14.95.

By Monsignor William H. Shannon **Guest contributor** 

Merton books continue to be published with amazing frequency. This is a most valuable one. Although not included in Paulist Press's well-known series. Classics of American Spirituality, it is similar in format to the books in that series, namely, there is a fairly lengthy introduction to the writer whose works are being presented, followed by sizeable selections from those works.

This volume offers a brief foreword by Merton's former secretary, Brother Patrick Hart; an insightful preface by Dr. Anne E. Carr, a professor of theology at the University of Chicago Divinity School; and finally - before one gets to the Merton selections — the introduction to Merton by the book's editor, Dr. Lawrence S. Cunningham, chairman of the department of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

The introduction is a gem, as the clean, crisp style that characterizes Cunningham's regular book notes in Commonweal is evident. His writing has the simplicity of a good Cistercian monastery: everything is there that needs to be there and nothing more. He uses words carefully; he never overuses them. This has made it possible for him to get a great deal said

about Merton in a mere 36 pages. I mention four points from this rich introduction.

 At the center of Merton's spirituality is his monastic commitment: he saw reality with the eyes of a monk.

• Merton's spirituality, rooted in the monastic life, cannot be understood apart from the many aspects of his life (his vocation as writer, theologian, social critic and bridge-builder between East and West) which both colored that spirituality and were affected by it.

• Merton's influence continues to grow, because he managed to do what other important spiritual writers of our century have not he entered into the wider world of cultural discourse. This gives "a peculiar weight and a

ring of authenticity to his words."

• For many people Merton is the "Spiritual Master," who inspires not by dominating but by sharing insights and offering encouragement and guidance. It is Merton's role as "Spiritual Master" that dominates this book and serves as the guiding principle for the selections Cunningham makes from Merton's writings.

The "Essential Writings?" Perhaps. Cunningham nowhere explains why he chose this adjective. I would have preferred a subtitle more modest and less definitive, such as "Selected Writings." But perhaps this is to quibble. Without a doubt anyone who knows the Merton corpus will agree that the editor has made wise and judicious choices that live reasonably well with the rubric of "essential writings."

The selections are put in two categories: Autobiographical Writings (160 pages, six items: The Seven Storey Mountain and five journals), and Spiritual Writings (191 pages with 12 items). Each item carries a brief and helpful editorial introduction placing it in the Merton corpus and giving the reason for its choice.

One might ask the kind of audience for which this book is destined. It is without question an excellent book to give to someone who is making the acquaintance of Merton for the first time. It will, as the editor intends, whet their appetite for more Merton.

It could also find a happy home with those who are well acquainted with Merton, but would find it most helpful to have in one volume a healthy selection of his writings on spirituality. This would especially hold for those who look to Merton as their spiritual master.

A third type of audience that this book would especially fit would be a class on Merton or a study group wanting to deepen understanding of his writings on spirituality.

The book is pleasingly designed, the cover gracefully adorned with a Meatyard photograph. The publishers are to be congratulated for making this valuable contribution to Merton studies "financially friendly." In today's economy, \$14.95 is a modest price for a 437-page paperback.

Monsignor Shannon is professor emeritus at Nazareth College of Rochester.

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