

IN REVIEW

Rochester woman's book a 'millennial'

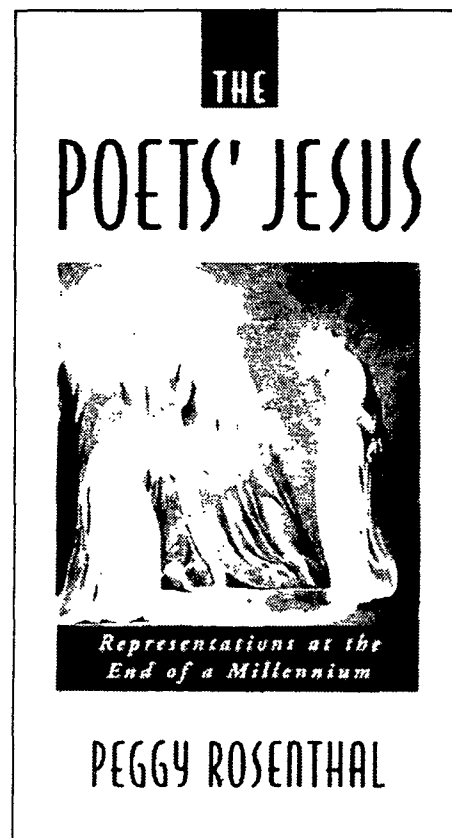
The Poets' Jesus: Representations at the End of a Millennium, by Peggy Rosenthal; Oxford University Press; 189 pages; \$29.95

Reviewed by Joseph J. Feeney, SJ
Guest contributor

Last spring I ran a seminar on the contemporary Catholic imagination in America, and at the end I asked my students to write about their own religious imaginations. One found a surprise: She discovered she had a religious imagination. But she shouldn't have been surprised: everyone has one — a set of images (sights, smells, touches, sounds, tastes) that uniquely embody God and religion for that person. Cultures have religious imaginations too, and in *The Poets' Jesus*, Peggy Rosenthal, lecturer, retreat-giver, and Ph.D. in English, explores poetic portraits of Jesus in many cultures, especially in the 20th century. She imagines "changing cultural contexts as stage sets," noting "where Jesus is placed on stage, what costumes he wears, what roles he plays, and who or what else is out there with him." Wonderfully, she also revels in the poems themselves and in their ability to touch a reader.

The first chapter, "Jesus Christ and More," is a whirlwind 20-page survey of 18 centuries: Jewish-Christian hymns in Paul and John; early Eastern praises (Christ as "celestial milk out-pressed from a young bride's fragrant breasts," as holding all creation "in His womb"); Western poems in Latin and Anglo-Saxon (Christ as shepherd and "Tree"); Jesus is allegorized (Hildegard of Bingen, Dante), humanized (the Franciscan tradition), a baroque lover (John of the Cross, sonnets in New Spain and France), a contemporary German (Luther), a presence in the poet's soul (the Metaphysicals), a self-discoverer (Milton), a Chinese sage (Zhang Xingyao), a teacher of morals (the Enlightenment), a "dear Redeemer" (Pietism).

The second chapter — again a survey, but not as breathless — looks at 19th-century Romanticism. It examines the century's "swirling personal/philosophical/religious currents" that focused on the



individual self. Poets swirled in those currents, too, as the century between 1770 and 1870 (Goethe to Renan) linked theology and poetry and proclaimed the Poet as Seer. Writing more of "Jesus" than of "Christ," Goethe (who believed him divine) and others (who didn't) found Jesus in glade and storm, on lofty mountaintop and in poetic creativity. Blake found him in reintegrated humans, as an artist, as "the Resurrection & the Life," and as "the Lord, the Universal Humanity." Emerson found everyone as divine as Jesus. Whitman found him the great egalitarian, and everyone was more divine than God.

The seven later chapters, the heart of the book, study the 20th century's movements and cultures. Modernism's Jesus is "pale and shrunken" for Arthur Hugh Clough, sadly unresurrected; for Baudelaire, wimpishly abandoning humans to the Devil's corruption; for Ruben Dario, ruefully ceding to a pagan Pan; for Pound and Eliot, part of a wrecked civilization.

for the Dane Ole Wivel and the Russian Vladimir Lvov, regrettably just a human. A chapter on Arabic poetry — "the voice of society's soul" — offers an archetypal Christ: a great prophet, sufferer for the people, risen life-giver and mythic figure like Tammuz, Adonis, Ishtar and the Palestinian martyrs.

As I read the book, I rejoiced, I bounced in my steps, I flung out hosannas (I usually don't bounce or fling hosannas). Why? *The Poets' Jesus* offers featherlight learning, fresh poets (Hungary, New Zealand, Korea, Germany, Chile, Syria), bright comparisons, clear summaries, apt examples, fresh insights: "Twentieth-century poets came to know that placing the person of Jesus in the spotlight on center stage would be to risk sending most of their audience nervously toward the exits." With a keen sense of each poet's intellectual and theological context, Rosenthal not only probes the religious imagination but also studies — from obviously fresh sources — the history of theology and the history of belief. She expresses both the simple importance of Christ/Jesus and the iconic centrality of the cross. In doing so she takes seriously both content and imagery: a brisk antidote to the excesses of theory.

A short book, *The Poets' Jesus* is brilliant in taking two limited areas — poetry and the figure of Jesus — and turning their intersection into a grand survey of intellectual history and the history of belief. And an initial surprise — how each writer or culture makes Jesus into a self-image — fast grows into wonderment: how the self-mirroring or culture-reflecting Jesus is really history's lovely re-incarnating of the incarnation.

The subtitle is apt; for reading, for thinking, even for meditating, *The Poets' Jesus* is a millennial book.

Father Feeney is a professor of English at Saint Joseph's University, Philadelphia, Pa., and co-editor of *The Hopkins Quarterly*.

Rosenthal is a parishioner at Blessed Sacrament Church, Rochester.

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Lessons from Our Children teaches adults

Lessons from Our Children: A Tribute to the Wisdom of Kids, by Joan Aho Ryan. Health Communications Inc. 205 pp., \$10.95.

Reviewed by Sr. Dolores Monahan, SSJ
Guest contributor

Throughout our lives we often hear (and tend to believe) that we can become "what we set our minds to." Is this perhaps called the adult work ethic? Children remind us that we can become more when we open our hearts and mind's eye, our being, to a spontaneous awareness of the goodness and everyday surprises around us. These same children let us know the wisdom and truth of one of Ziggy's cartoon statements, "We are called human beings, not human doings."

"But you are famous, Mom. You're famous for your love," a 10-year-old clearly tells her mom. As her other two children chime in, "Mom" is comforted and laughs, at a time when she thought life was bleak and was in despair. As she lovingly looks at her children she states, "How wonderful it is, after all, to be famous for your love. I could not ask for a greater gift."

As a new mom writes her story she reflects, "Before he was born, I was a prisoner to my schedule. I assumed that everything had to be done at the assigned time. ... This tiny human being, who is barely two feet tall, has skillfully rearranged my priorities, helping me to see

things for what they really are. ... I've learned to behold each moment, to see things I would never have noticed before."

These are excerpts from *Lessons from Our Children* where we see children as the wise teachers who help adults keep a true perspective in life. Our author, Joan Aho Ryan, has captured this inborn wisdom of children in her compilation of stories containing lessons adults have learned from children. These short and extraordinarily ordinary stories are delightful as they over and over again tell of adults who are taught and gifted by children. The gifts and lessons abound. Laughter, honesty, courage, spontaneity, love, compassion, acceptance of sameness, dwindling of differences, setting priorities, living with pain, sincerity and gratitude are only a few of the gems that the children share and help to reestablish in the "experienced" adults' lives.

Ryan, a communications consultant and native New Yorker, has led advertising and public relation agencies in New York and California. She is the author of *Lessons from Mom: A Tribute to Loving Wisdom*, and *Lessons from Dad: A Tribute to Fatherhood*.

In this latest book *Lessons from Children: A Tribute to the Wisdom of Kids*, she continues to celebrate family as the base for life knowledge and wisdom that often underlie understanding and perception of self and others.

Story contributors range from familiar names like Christopher Reeves and Bill

Cosby to 85-year-old Sally Brungart and 11-year-old Jon Emery. The foreword is written by the founder of Free the Children, 16-year-old Craig Kielburger, who at the age of 12 was dismayed by a newspaper headline that read, "Battled Child Labor, Boy, 12, Murdered!" The article told, "about a young boy from Pakistan who, for sixteen dollars, had been sold into slavery as a carpet weaver and had spoken out against child labor in defense of his peers." Craig gathered research and discovered that there are about 250 million child laborers in the world. He was inspired to form a group of 12-year-olds who were motivated to take action, and thus started the organization called Free the Children — which at present is an international network of children helping children. The foreword concludes with Mahatma Gandhi's words, "... if there is to be peace in the world it must begin with children." How true!

In *Lessons from Our Children*, Ryan has given us yet another way to listen to children, to let their delight and simple wisdom nourish the adult in us and reawaken the child. Don't "Kids say the darndest things?"

Sister Dolores Monahan SSJ, directs retreats in Geneva and at Notre Dame Retreat House, Canandaigua; teaches prayer classes at St. Michael School, Newark; does spiritual direction; and facilitates prayer program series in Geneva.

Videos offer slim pickings

NEW YORK (CNS) — The following are home videocassette reviews from the U.S. Catholic Conference Office for Film and Broadcasting. Each videocassette is available on VHS format. Theatrical movies on video have a U.S. Catholic Conference classification and Motion Picture Association of America rating. The appropriate age group for the video audience is indicated in most of the reviews.

'The Art of War'

Mindless action thriller in which a shadowy agent (Wesley Snipes), wrongly accused of assassinating the Chinese ambassador to the United Nations, sets out to unravel a murky conspiracy, using deadly force at every opportunity. Director Christian Duguay presents brutal violence as exciting, but dizzying visuals, a pounding soundtrack and choppy editing only serve to emphasize the lack of any compelling narrative. Excessive violence and mayhem, sexual situations, some nudity, occasional profanity and intermittent rough language. The U.S. Catholic Conference classification is O — morally offensive. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is R — restricted. (Warner Bros.)

'Atlantic City' (1981)

Aging, down-on-his-luck con man (Burt Lancaster) becomes involved with a young woman (Susan Sarandon) whose husband is killed in a heroin deal, leaving them with the proceeds from the sale. Director Louis Malle powerfully evokes the seedy side of a gambling town while focusing on a small-time loser who takes one last shot at the big time and thinks he can succeed. Some violence, drug dealing and brief nudity. The U.S. Catholic Conference classification is A-III — adults. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is R — restricted. (Paramount)

'Autumn in New York'

Forgettable romantic drama about an aging playboy (Richard Gere) who discovers true love with a feisty, much younger woman (Winona Ryder), whose grave illness may abbreviate their time together. As directed by Joan Chen, performances are hammy and the corny plot predictably leaves swell shots of fall in the Big Apple as the sole attraction. A few sexual encounters and fleeting rough language. The U.S. Catholic Conference classification is A-III — adults. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG-13 — parents are strongly cautioned. Some material may be inappropriate for children under 13. (MGM)

'Me, Myself & Irene'

Extremely vulgar comedy in which a Rhode Island state trooper (Jim Carrey) with split personality disorder falls for a young woman (Renee Zellweger), being pursued by deadly crooks and cops. Directors Peter and Bobby Farrelly's crude road romance showcases Carrey's manic physicality but hits new lows in aesthetic offensiveness with its gross body fluid sight gags and racial stereotyping. Implied sexual encounters, brief violence, near nudity, toilet humor and comic treatment of incessant rough language and profanity. The U.S. Catholic Conference classification is A-IV — adults with reservations. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is R — restricted. (New Line)

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