

First

MARY JOHNSON'S AN UNQUENCHABLE THIRST

WHEN we meet Mary Johnson on the first page of her debut memoir, *An Unquenchable Thirst: Following Mother Teresa in Search of Love, Service, and an Authentic Life*, published this month by Spiegel & Grau, she is on her way to meet with a literary agent about turning the previous two decades of her life into a book. It seems a common-enough scene from a writer's life, but for Johnson getting to that point was almost miraculous.

The oldest of seven children in a Catholic family, Johnson grew up in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and Beaumont, Texas. In 1977, at the age of nineteen, she entered Mother Teresa's order, the Missionaries of Charity, having seen the elderly nun's face on the cover of *Time* magazine two years earlier and feeling "as if the world had suddenly opened itself and revealed my place in it." From early days as an aspirant in the South Bronx to periods of service in Washington, D.C.; Winnipeg, Canada; and Rome, the two decades during which Johnson was called Sister Donata (meaning "freely given") were full of conflict. As a nun Johnson wrestled with desire, questioned her faith, and watched the shape of her dreams change. And she did so in close proximity to one of the most venerated figures of the twentieth century. Johnson came to know Mother Teresa as a real and complicated person, not just the potent symbol that initially captivated her and the rest of the world.

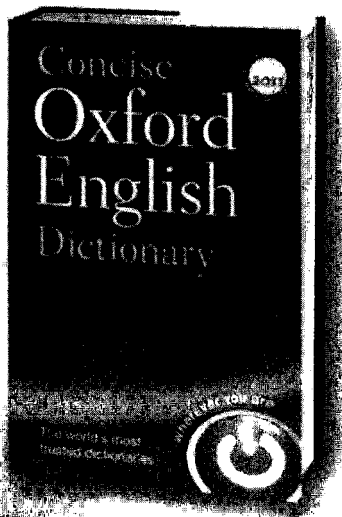
"I imagined myself becoming a woman who was valued for the love she shared," Johnson writes in her memoir. The purity with which the sisters expressed that love—for God and the world's poorest people—appealed to her on a gut level. After becoming a sister herself, Johnson found that her boundless love, and her ability to express it, was stifled by her superiors' insistence on obedience and humility. Her independent nature and commitment to higher principles may have helped draw her to the Missionaries of Charity, but it was those same traits that ultimately made it impossible for her to stay. Johnson left the order in May 1997.

When she left, all she had was a plane ticket, five hundred dollars in cash, and the conviction that she needed to change her life. Having lived such a sheltered existence for so many years, she was unprepared for life outside the convent. "I



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had never seen an ATM before," Johnson says. "I didn't know how to work a microwave. I didn't know how to pump my own gas." Back in Texas, she spent a period living with one of her sisters, and some time in a residential center for "priests and nuns in crises of various sorts." She worked in the gift department at JCPenney and as a liturgist for a local church, a position she describes as one of the only things she knew how to do.

As she was taking these tentative steps toward creating a new life for herself, she was also starting to write about her old one. "I was reflecting on my experiences from the day that I left the sisters," mostly in private journals and other writing not intended for an audience, she says. "Writing about the

experience was a way of processing it." There was a lot for her to sort out about that stretch of time, and trying to untangle what she had been through was often difficult.

In the fall of 1998, Johnson enrolled at Lamar University to finish the undergraduate degree she'd started at the University of Texas in Austin more than twenty years earlier. She persuaded the professors of her fiction and poetry classes to let her write memoir in fulfillment of some of the assignments. "I began by writing about the easier, safer parts of my story—the joys of working with the kids from the public housing projects in Washington, D.C.; an essay about Mother Teresa; and a few poems," she says. "Using words in artful ways" brought on "a joy I'd experienced only

EXCERPT

An Unquenchable Thirst

I had first met Mother on the cover of *Time* in 1975, an image that rendered Mother in watercolor under the headline "Living Saints." When I'd spotted the magazine in my southeast Texas high school library, I'd dropped into a chair to read it, skipping French class, drawn by the magnetic call of the nun's soulful eyes. I read of the desperate needs of the poor dying on the streets, of babies abandoned in dustbins. The photo that impressed me most showed a young Indian nun peacefully bent over a man whose legs, nowhere thicker than a baseball bat, were bound in rags. The man's ribs formed prominent ridges on his bare chest, while his eyes, sunk deep in their sockets, were riveted on the face of the nun cutting his nails. I felt as if the world had suddenly opened itself and revealed my place in it. Since my preparation for First Communion, I'd known that loving others was life's most important calling. That conviction had grown through the years as I'd experienced love's power, and the pain of its lack, for myself. There in the library, with a seventeen-year-old's clarity, I knew that I was meant to follow this nun in Calcutta who loved those most in need of it.

That week I wrote my first letter to her, addressing it simply *Mother Teresa, Missionaries of Charity, Calcutta, India*, begging her to take me as one of her own sisters. Eighteen months later, in a convent in the South Bronx, over my parents' objections, Mother pinned a crucifix to my blouse, saying, "Receive the symbol of your Crucified Spouse. Carry His light and His love into the homes of the poor everywhere you go." I did just that for twenty years.

I tucked the latest issue of *Time* under my arm and climbed the agency's front steps. I uttered no prayer. Through years of wrestling with my own dark nights, I'd replaced marriage to God with a different sort of integrity. I reached to ring the bell, ready to tell my secrets to the agent and to anyone else who would listen. I would have told them to Mother if I could. Mother Teresa would have called my secrets blasphemy, but I call them freedom. I even call them love.

From *An Unquenchable Thirst: Following Mother Teresa in Search of Love, Service, and an Authentic Life* by Mary Johnson. Copyright © 2011 by Mary Johnson. Published by Spiegel & Grau, an imprint of the Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc.

rarely during my twenty years as a nun.” At the same time, she registered for an online memoir-writing course offered by the University of California in Los Angeles, “just because I wanted to learn more about it and explore the possibilities.” All her professors offered steady encouragement, praising her writing and her compelling, unusual story, and helping her see that what she was working on could be a book.

After graduating from Lamar with a BA in English in 2000, Johnson enrolled in the low-residency MFA program in creative writing at Goddard College in Vermont. Deciding to pursue the degree was a big deal for her: Her job with the church paid just fifteen thousand dollars a year and she was squeamish about taking out a loan, so she would be putting about two-thirds of her salary “toward getting the education that would enable me to tell my story.” It would be hard, she figured, but worth it. Then, the summer before her first semester, she had some amazing luck.

The church Johnson worked for sent her to Ghost Ranch, an education and retreat center in New Mexico affiliated with the Presbyterian Church, for a week of continuing education. When she arrived, all the groups she wanted to join for the week were closed, and she got stuck with her fifth choice—a women’s retreat. On the first day, when the women sat in a circle and introduced themselves, Johnson was blunt about her reluctance: After twenty years in a convent, she told them, “I really don’t trust women, especially older women.” She stayed at a remove from discussions and activities until the retreat leader pushed back a little, asking Johnson “to tell the group what it is you need.” The inquiry was a shock to Johnson’s system, and she had to give it real thought. After taking some time to consider it, she came back and told the group, “What I really need is a room of my own. I need privacy and support to write my story.”

Later that day, there was a knock on her door. Johnson opened it to see a

woman from the group she would soon come to know well: Darlene Bassett. “A room of your own?” Johnson remembers her saying. “I can help you with that.” Bassett was a retired executive who had come to Ghost Ranch in the hope of figuring out the next step in her life. Deeply moved by Johnson’s situation, Bassett recognized that she was in a position to help—so she offered to pay the tuition for Johnson’s MFA if Johnson would help her start a foundation to support other women writers.

While the gesture was certainly unexpected, Johnson was perhaps not as shocked as some people might have been. “As a sister, I was used to people suddenly appearing with something we needed for the poor—food or diapers or a helping hand,” she says. “Even after I left the convent, people continued to help me in astonishing ways.” She was thrilled to have an advocate so literally invest in her, and also invigorated by the thought of helping other writers tell their stories. “I longed for a new community,” she says. Working with her new benefactor, she found one in the organization they created: the A Room of Her Own Foundation.

In Johnson’s first two semesters at Goddard, her adviser was Kenny Fries, who had also been the instructor of her UCLA course. Fries helped her work through some of her fears about doing such personal writing and encouraged her to focus on craft. In her second year, a different adviser, novelist Sarah Schulman, took a more urgent approach. “What you have here is a book,” Johnson remembers Schulman saying. “I don’t really care too much at this point what the words are going to look like on the page, I just want you to write down everything you can before you forget it.”

So that’s what she did. “The happy things were easy to write about, and I enjoyed remembering them,” she says. “But the difficult things were sometimes very, very difficult to get down.” At one point, while working on a particularly intense section about a fellow nun with whom she had a fraught,

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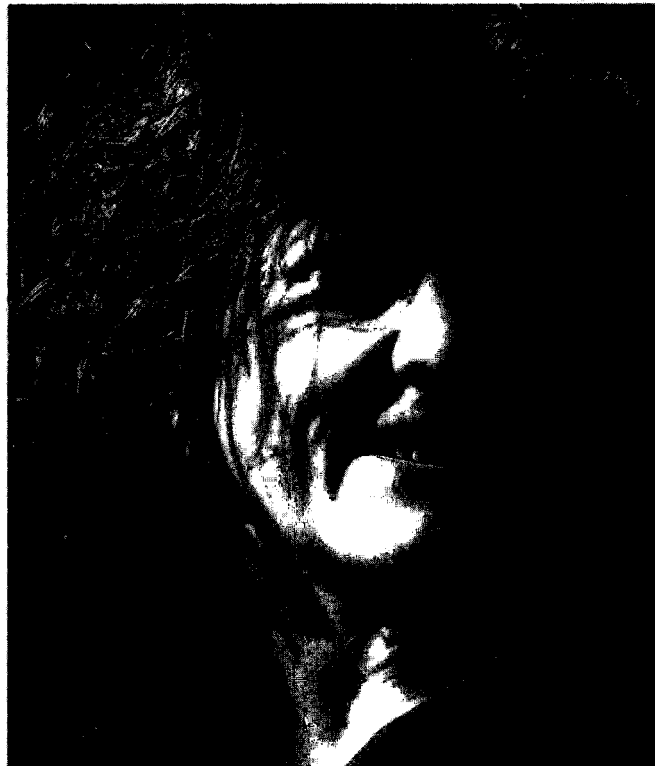
intimate relationship, Johnson became so overwhelmed that she fainted. “After that I had a hard time writing about those things when I was alone,” she says. “I’d seek out places where other people were around—libraries and cafés. Nobody had to know what I was doing or why I was there, but just being around other people somehow made it easier for me to write.”

There were other obstacles to getting the words on the page. “When I was with the sisters, we spoke English among ourselves no matter where in the world we were,” Johnson says. “But nearly everyone spoke it as her second language—in some cases her third or fourth.” As a sister, she learned to use “the simplest, most basic words,” to ensure that she would be understood. After she left and started writing, she found herself searching for words she hadn’t used in a long time.

Totaling some seven hundred pages, the draft she turned in as her thesis at the end of the MFA program “was this enormous thing,” Johnson says, laughing. “A lot of places were just my memories as they came to me. Sometimes it would just be pages and pages of dialogue.” Spilling all of it onto the page was an essential step, but she knew she had a lot more work to do. It helped that she emerged from Goddard having met her future husband, who was completing his MFA in poetry when she arrived. He quickly became the “first and best” reader of her work.

In 2002, armed with her MFA, she worked to more consciously craft the memoir. “It required several years,”

she says, “years where I didn’t do a lot of writing. I just kind of stepped back and got perspective.” That perspective involved a lot of editing, to “get down to the essence of what really needs to be there.” Still, she added enough during this period that the manuscript got even longer: around



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nine hundred pages at one point. She became involved with some writing groups in New Hampshire, where she had relocated, and the community they provided was invaluable to the editing process. It wasn’t specific feedback

they helped her with, she explains, so much as “the support that comes from these women who are really dedicated to telling their stories, and crafting those stories well. And the encouragement to be honest in the writing. That was very important to me: not to avoid the important questions and the embarrassing parts, and the things that people normally don’t want to talk about.”

Johnson had always known that her story had the potential to make some readers uncomfortable. “It makes people nervous,” she says. “I present a more three-dimensional image of Mother Teresa than most people are used to.” Aside from the fact that a prominent figure plays such a big part in her story, Johnson shows that even the most devout wrestle with their faith, and that vows of chastity don’t cancel out a person’s sexuality—as we see in the book, it certainly didn’t cancel out her own. She was understandably concerned about finding the right agent and editor to work with as she brought this rare inside view of monastic life to a wide audience.

Unsure about how best to prepare a book proposal, she turned to the guidelines laid out in a basic “how-to” book, using it to map out the format over several months. Her writing group helped her hone the proposal, and in August 2007 Johnson queried several agents. Though she spoke

on the phone to a few who expressed interest, the only one she met in person was Dan Conaway, a former editor who was relatively new to agenting. He’d been recommended to Johnson by her friend Kim Ponders, whose novel *The*

Art of Uncontrolled Flight Conaway had edited when he was at HarperCollins. “I wanted somebody who didn’t just want to sell a book somehow related to Mother Teresa, but somebody who got the story and was enthusiastic about my writing,” Johnson says.

That writing, Conaway says, “just knocked me out. It instantly felt like such an authentic voice. The proposal came in, and immediately there was no question whatsoever that I wanted to represent her and work with this book.” Johnson signed with him soon after their meeting. But while the proposal had certainly gotten his attention, Conaway felt that its boilerplate format didn’t convey the power of Johnson’s story as well as it could. Over the next few months, he helped his new client expand and rework it significantly so that it did a better job of highlighting her writing.

The work paid off. Nine publishing houses vied for the book in a best-bids auction, a milestone for the book’s

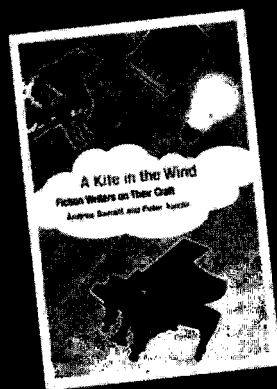
agent as well as its author. “I had never been involved in an auction—as an editor or as an agent—that had that many participants,” Conaway says. As the bids came in over the course of one morning, Conaway kept his client updated on the arrival of each one. The last bid to arrive was from Spiegel & Grau. It came with what Johnson calls a “beautiful, beautiful, beautiful” letter from copublisher Julie Grau, describing why the house loved the book, and explaining that it was exactly the kind of book that they hoped to publish. Grau, who says she was “blown away” by the proposal, had attached a detailed marketing plan. And she really sweetened the deal by offering Johnson a two-book contract. At Spiegel & Grau, “We all marveled at how it spoke to us, no matter our religious background, age, or gender,” Grau explains. “That doesn’t cross your desk every day. Plus, Mary was a rigorous and learned thinker on the most vexing and mysterious and essen-

tial spiritual questions.” For his part, Conaway says he had great confidence in the publishing house’s “track record with taking genuinely literary material into a tough commercial marketplace and succeeding with it.”

Johnson accepted the offer in November 2007, and “then we started editing again,” she says. As her editor, Grau wanted Johnson to trim the manuscript considerably before she read it through. So Johnson combed through her material again and again, making it shorter with every pass. Tightening up the sections and anecdotes that remained, she found the software program Scrivener enormously useful. “It lets you divide things up into different files and folders; you can see them really clearly and move them around,” she says. In helping her organize the many pieces of her big project, the program “saved my sanity at a certain point.” Conaway gave her concrete feedback throughout, offering suggestions about word choice as well as

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occasionally pointing out places where the voice didn't ring true.

When she turned in the finished manuscript to Grau in December 2008, she had slimmed it down significantly. But there were more edits to come. "At one point the manuscript was three hundred pages longer than it is now," Grau remembers. "Mary had twenty years and a lot of weighty matters to grapple with." Aside from all the cutting, the editor also asked her author for the occasional addition, "mostly having to do with her relationship with her family and the view of the secular world from the depths of the order."

Soon after Grau and Johnson agreed that the book was complete and had signed off on it, there turned out to be still more work to do. Gina Centrello, president and publisher of the Random House Publishing Group, and Theresa Zoro, Random House's director of publicity, had both taken a personal interest in the book and felt

strongly that one chapter needed to be shortened further. "They thought the original version was a little bit more than most readers would be interested in, that I wasn't as close to the events as in most of the others," Johnson says. "They wanted me to be back again as close as I could." So Johnson did a last-minute edit—so last minute that she had already finished recording the audiobook and had to go back and rerecord the revised section.

Since signing off on the truly final manuscript in February of this year, buzz has built steadily for the book, which had an announced first printing of fifty thousand copies. *An Unquenchable Thirst* was published in Australia and New Zealand over the summer, and rights have been sold in several other countries. In June *Kirkus* gave the book a starred review. *O, The Oprah Magazine* plans to run an excerpt from the first two chapters in its September issue. Johnson is eager to promote the book, but was "pleased

and relieved" when the writing and editing were complete. "I'd lived as a nun for twenty years, and then I spent ten years writing about having been a nun," she says. "I was ready to not be thinking about nuns anymore."

Today, Johnson is a codirector of the A Room of Her Own Foundation, the organization she founded with Darlene Bassett at a time when she needed the basic space and financial resources to write. The foundation offers support to women writers and artists through generous "gifts of freedom," and organizes popular biennial retreats. It's a fitting role for Johnson, for whom writing has become synonymous with self-determination—and whose postconvent misgivings about women have turned into a passion for helping them tell their stories, the way she herself was finally able to do. As she writes in *An Unquenchable Thirst*, "So much depends on the stories we tell ourselves, and on the questions we ask, or fail to ask." ∞

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