

*Dearest Sister Wendy... A Surprising Story of Faith and Friendship*, Sister Wendy Beckett and Robert Ellsberg (Orbis)

In the 1990s Sister Wendy Beckett, a contemplative nun, became the unlikely presenter of a series of BBC television programmes on the visual arts and author of a number of art books. She was often the subject of – sometimes warm-hearted, sometimes not – parody and ridicule, especially after one particular TV moment which saw her fondling the testicles of a life-size statue of a bull. These parodies and homages included the anarchic Sister Windy Bucket, the cross-dressing Sister Beatrice, and *Postcards from God*, a musical.

Her Sunday School demeanour and somewhat simplistic religious take on art did not endear her to everyone, but in person she was very different. At 1990's *The Journey* art exhibition and conference in Lincoln, she was a charismatic speaker and a sociable and engaged delegate who charmed everyone present. In a couple of brief notes she sent to me soon afterwards, she enthused about everything from the food (which was mediocre at best!) to the other speakers and ensuing talks and discussions, as well as the exhibited work itself.

*The Journey* was organised by artist Garry Fabian Miller, and a couple of years later Stride published *Honesty*, a book of his photographic plant images accompanied by five Sister Wendy texts. The book was launched in a London gallery and Sister Wendy turned out for the event and set to signing limited edition copies. She sat with my mother behind the sales table, joking and chatting with her and our book buyers, whilst consuming a surprising amount of white wine. That was the last time I met her in person, but once again I received a few short letters afterwards, enthusiastic and uplifting, one accompanied by a short pamphlet she had previously written about prayer.

Robert Ellsberg got to know Sister Wendy much later on. They wrote to each other from 2016 until her death in 2018, and *Dearest Sister Wendy...* is a book extracted from a much larger correspondence. Ellsberg does, or did, his best to coax Sister Wendy into an in-depth conversation, opening up himself to her before she takes the bait and enters into true dialogue.

I say true dialogue, but actually much of what both sides write is religious platitudes: breathless thank you for each others' letters, 'being touched' by, 'rejoicing in', supporting each others' sufferings, and the sharing of dreams (always a bad sign in my opinion). There is little depth or actual questioning or debate going on here; Sister Wendy appears almost zen-like in her self-abnegation, and everything that happens is simply God's will and that is pretty much the end of it, her response is not needed. The most interesting part of the book for me is the slow change of Sister Wendy's attitude to the rebellious writer and monk Thomas Merton, whom she initially criticises for not following his monastic order's rules, but gradually warms to, mostly as the result of Ellsberg's gently persuasive arguments and observations.

Maybe it's just me, but Sister Wendy's acceptance and inability to discuss things except in terms of her untroubled Christian belief, makes for alien and uncomfortable reading. I long for some doubt, some questioning, some discussion of art in terms of colour, form, weight,

pattern, creativity, not as an enabler of some simplistic mini-sermon related to a picture's 'content'. Ellsberg is the editor-in-chief of Orbis books, and in some ways this publication feels like an indulgence, a view supported by his constant mentions of books he has published or will be publishing soon, and the autobiographical stories he weaves in to his published letters. I prefer to remember Sister Wendy's crooked smile, wine glass in hand, as she chatted amiably to the people around her in Lincoln and London; Ellsberg's depiction of a saintly, retiring and somewhat pious and dull correspondent does her a disservice.

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