

The title “A Longing for Wisdom” pulled this reader in. Scripture from the Twenty-fourth Chapter of the Book of Sirach opens this little book by praising wisdom. To seek wisdom is a prudent move, something that happens as we begin to age and have lived the diverse experiences of our lives. Questioning begins in youth, but black and white answers never arrive. They hang in the air like the questions – seemingly solid – yet maddeningly elusive.

Although the questions in this book deal with the role of women in the Catholic Church, the concerns are universal for women of many faiths. The issues the author deals with are complex: ordination of women; celibacy of priests; pedophilia and its concealment within the priesthood; oppression of women; use of birth control; and finally abortion. While the author presents strong clear arguments for change and reform on some issues, her feelings about others are complicated. Compounding the arguments are the author’s personal and spiritual conflicts.

The book is a lovely little bag of mixed genres: essays, poetry, creative nonfiction, fiction and photography. These are the result of many years of contemplating the issues, filing the writing away unpublished, then finally realizing a theme has emerged. The short pieces make for easy reading, but their brevity belies the strength within the works. The reviewer has favorites; for example, in the early chapter “Madonnas,” a poem “The House of God” ends with these lines:

Mary pushed Him into the carpenter’s hands  
And then, with swollen breasts,  
she suckled God and man with woman’s milk (p 11).

Poetry is not only what the poet intends but what the reader gleans from it as well. “Impure Places” (53) suggests that hidden agendas exist in the most unsuspected of places. Perhaps I’m reading something into it; perhaps not, the reader will have to decide.

The essay in the Chapter “Lamentations” is a sensitive and poignant response to the author’s personal tragedy. She paints a lively picture of her mother as she grapples with the pain of her death. “Vigil for Sister Mary Angelus” chronicles the death of an aunt in her last days, again with sensitivity, but also with a keen sense of realism, practical yet perceptive. The poem is didactic: a lesson in how it is possible to be at the side of a loved one to the end and remain stable oneself.

The best argument in the book is in the essay “Why We Weep: On the Desperate Need for Church Reform.” The theme and argument of the entire book is represented in the following passage found on page 80:

. . . those who want the ordination of women are out of step with Rome. This latter group, especially, must be censored, punished, and even threatened with excommunication. Wouldn’t it make more sense to excommunicate the violent drug lords in Mexico who torture, mutilate, and randomly kill their own citizens?

The essay continues to demonstrate examples of hypocrisy, then abruptly offers compassion. The argument is strong yet lovely in its exhibition of the feminine side. More fine argument presents itself in “The Tragedy of Abortion.” For example, the words we use like pro-choice don’t always say everything; scientific terms “cloak reality” (86). The real issue is that of life versus the taking of life, yet Edmisten argues another term “natural law” needs to be applied more broadly.

Can dream be considered genre? The book includes several good ones. The image of an old gray Catholic church obscured by trees and isolated is incredibly metaphorical.

That the author loves her church is clear. She, like many of us in today's strange world, is torn by the cruelty of circumstances. When we begin to long for wisdom, it presents itself to us in varied and magical ways. Often the book we need to read at that time shows up on our coffee table. I recommend this one.

**Andrea Walker**

#### Readers Write Books

The title of BookWomen subscriber Patricia S. Taylor Edmisten's new book—**A Longing for Wisdom**—could be the title of her life, and the book's subtitle focuses on one chapter of that life: "One Woman's Conscience and Her Church."

What a chapter it is, a mix of lyrical prose set to the rhythm of poetry, memoir and fiction, with a trove of family photographs, spiced with bible verses and quotes from others, and tied together with thoughtful and provocative commentary.

Although Edmisten writes from her Catholic roots and branches, the questions she poses and analyzes are pertinent across the religious spectrum, the highly patriarchal spectrum.

Here's a sampling of the subjects she scrutinizes: the grace with which poor women meet their days, her mother's suicide, the ever-present solace of nature, the promise of young girls, her struggle with the injustices within a Church she loves. She writes from a deeply felt and considered wellspring; her words are not strident but luminous, often earthy, unflinchingly honest.

Born and raised in Milwaukee, Edmisten now divides her home place between Pensacola, Fla., and Montezuma, a mountain community in western North Carolina. The story of her life has many interesting chapters, including:

"Social justice advocate": Edmisten was one of the original Peace Corps volunteers, serving and working in Peru. As an unrepentant social justice advocate, she organized Patriots for Peace, a Pensacola group that peacefully demonstrated against the invasion of Iraq. She has marched to protest the U.S. role in arming and training the Contras to fight in Nicaragua. A writer, of, as she tells it, letters of desperation to the newspaper and various officials, she expresses the often unspoken conscience of the community.

"Teacher": Edmisten's early teaching career was devoted to special-needs children and teaching their teachers. She taught at several universities, and in later years, she combined her concerns with poverty, women's issues, and education as director of International Education and Programs at the University of West Florida at Pensacola. Over the years she has addressed numerous gatherings, on a variety of issues, many of which form the chapters in "A Longing for Wisdom."

"Relationships": Wife, mother, grandmother, friend—these relationships are the bedrock of Edmisten's personality, of her life. From her deep love of family, and the large circle of friends who are sweetly treated as family, springs her conscience, which impels her to random and precise acts of kindness and teaching.

The little children—her grandchildren, the children of the world—are the hope of the world. Their future she fiercely fights to assure.

“Writer”: Always writing, even as she washes dishes, cooks, and does the myriad “quotidian mysteries,” as author Kathleen Norris would say. Edmisten has received the National Peace Corps Writers Award for Poetry. She has been a longtime member of the West Florida Literary Federation and is currently its president. The author of six previous books, she works to find the right voice, to create with words as she creates her life.

As a close friend of Edmisten over the decades, I know her marvelous sense of humor, her many acts of kindness toward friends and strangers, her abiding love of family, her love of her Church in spite of itself—all of which are part of the “her-story” that is the fertile ground of her writing.

Edmisten is also an eclectic reader. She and I constitute a two-woman book club, sending good reads back and forth via mail.

This past year many of our common authors were African. We read Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s **The Thing Around Your Neck** and **Half of a Yellow Sun**, as well as Uwem Akpan’s novel, **Say You’re One Of Them**. J.M. Coetzee’s **Disgrace** was another shared read, along with Jung Chang, **Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China** and Jill Ker Conway’s **The Road From Coorain**.

Anything written by William Dalrymple or Gabriel Garcia Marquez or Julia Alvarez or Wendell Berry is always a choice. Her favorite poet is the earthy Chilean, Pablo Neruda, and she grounds herself in poet Mary Oliver when the world becomes too complex.

Read Edmisten for yourself. Her works are a curl-up-with-a-cup-of-tea type, riveting and can’t-put-down. She’s still a work in progress and the next chapter is likely being written as she lives.

### **Nancy Trowbridge**

Interested readers can order **A Longing for Wisdom** directly from the author: [pedmiste@uwf.edu](mailto:pedmiste@uwf.edu). For more information about her work, visit her website at: [www.patriciaedmistenbooks.com](http://www.patriciaedmistenbooks.com).