



# **Pure Act: The Uncommon Life of Robert Lax (Catholic Practice in North America (FUP))**

*Michael N. McGregor*

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*A companion piece to Thomas Merton's bestselling autobiography The Seven Storey Mountain, Pure Act: The Uncommon Life of Robert Lax tells the story of Merton's best friend and early spiritual inspiration. Written by a close friend of Lax, Pure Act gives an intimate view of a friendship and a life that affected Merton in profound ways. It was Lax, a daringly original poet himself, who encouraged Merton to begin writing poetry and Lax who told him he should desire to be a saint rather than just a Catholic. To the end of Merton's life, Lax was his spiritual touchstone and closest friend.*

Pure Act tells the story of poet Robert Lax, whose quest to live a true life as both **an artist and a spiritual seeker inspired Thomas Merton, Jack Kerouac, William Maxwell and a host of other writers, artists and ordinary people.** Known in the U.S. primarily as Merton's best friend and in Europe as a daringly original avant-garde poet, Lax left behind a promising New York writing career to travel with a circus, live among immigrants in post-war Marseilles and settle on a series of remote Greek islands where he learned and recorded the simple wisdom of the local people. Born a Jew, he became a Catholic and found the authentic community he sought in Greek Orthodox fishermen and sponge divers.

In his early life, as he alternated working at the *New Yorker*, writing screenplays in Hollywood and editing a Paris literary journal with studying philosophy, serving the poor in Harlem and living in a sanctuary high in the French Alps, Lax pursued an approach to life he called *pure act*--a way of living in the moment that was both spontaneous and practiced, God-inspired and self-chosen. **By devoting himself to simplicity, poverty and prayer, he expanded his capacity for peace, joy and love** while producing distinctive poetry of such stark beauty critics called him "one of America's greatest experimental poets" and "one of the new 'saints' of the avant-garde."

Written by a writer who met Lax in Greece when he was a young seeker himself and visited him regularly over fifteen years, *Pure Act* is an intimate look at an extraordinary but little-known life. Much more than just a biography, it's **a tale of adventure, an exploration of friendship, an anthology of wisdom**, and a testament to the liberating power of living an uncommon life.

*"Robert Lax was a poet who devised his own poetic forms, much admired by some readers, unfortunately unknown to most. He was an intellectual and was often called a mystic, but he was neither, just as he was called a hermit but really wasn't. When he was younger, he lived in New York, where he worked for a period at The New Yorker and knew many figures in the arts, from Jack Kerouac, to Ad Reinhardt, E. B. White, William Maxwell . . . the list goes on. Most crucially he was a close friend of Thomas Merton's and was made known, a little, by Merton's autobiography, in which he appears. He also for a time traveled with a circus and wrote a lovely little book about it, The Circus of the Sun"--hard to find, but worth the search. For the larger parts of his life he lived alone, on islands in Greece, and spent much, perhaps most, of his time in solitude and meditation, trying to find some kind of ultimate peace (though he never put it that way). Even then he knew and was admired by many; and many others who'd only heard of him sought him out. He was invariably hospitable and welcoming, his presence gentle, humorous, and utterly patient. In short, there's never been anyone like him, and Pure Act, in its offering of a detailed recounting of his life and an acute*

*presentation and analysis of his too-neglected poetry, gives him to us: the gift of a human being unlike any other."*--C. K. Williams

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