

Review of Richard Evanoff, *One With the Father: A Novel of Mysticism, Heresy, and Rebellion in the Middle Ages* (Wipf & Stock, 2023)

by Joel Graybill

Unravel the intricate tapestry of Richard Evanoff's *One With the Father* (Wipf and Stock, 2023), a captivating journey through medieval Europe! Set against this evocative backdrop, this spiritual bildungsroman invites readers to embark on a quest of self-discovery intertwined with profound philosophical reflections on the nature of god and existence. Evanoff's skillful storytelling guides us through a series of encounters, revealing layers of meaning and insight with every turn of the page. Whether you're drawn to the allure of medieval Europe or seek a thought-provoking exploration of the divine, *One With the Father* promises an enriching journey that will resonate long after the final chapter.

The story revolves around Justin, the son and sole heir of a feudal lord. Raised within the sheltered confines of his lordly father's estate, he remains content in his ignorance of the grief and hardships endured beyond its walls, shielded even from the realities of aging and mortality. However, when rebellion brews among the estate's peasants and threatens the lord's way of life, Justin's sheltered worldview begins to crumble. This pivotal moment of awakening leads him on a quest to discover god, embarking from a point of profound naivete.

Much of the book has a distinctly allegorical aspect that is often hidden by a very direct exploration of serious philosophical and spiritual questions that seem to be focused through a lens of Christianity, as appropriate in the age of the Inquisition, but the line of questioning that Justin explores throughout the story actually goes beyond mere Christian concerns and often even rejects many tenets of faith outright. Justin goes through a series of experiences, meeting a cast of characters that provide him with a spectrum of philosophical and spiritual views ranging from humanism to a strict interpretation of Christian doctrine and everything in-between, including paganism, animism, primitivism and nature mysticism to name a few.

The story provides a sturdy scaffolding for exploring the various conceptions of god, religion and philosophy through the eyes of a young man who was not strictly indoctrinated and therefore has the ability to view all of these concepts with a somewhat fresh perspective. There are numerous despicable characters who use the power of the church and feudal social system to subjugate others to their will. There are those bound beyond logic or understanding to the religion of the day who seem to have every excuse to support discretion, but others with a more nuanced approach to their understanding of the search for god and the part humans play in the world. The book seems not to impose any of the author's views onto the reader but provides a set of circumstances in which the main character is able to use his unbiased judgment to discern whether religion or philosophy is truly serving its purposes or simply being propped up by tradition or weakly scrutinized by apologists.

From a strictly historical perspective there are a few details that seem out of place or do not quite give the sense that the story is taking place in a true historical time period or location. For example, the writing uses certain phrases and idiomatic expressions that seem ill-fitting for the Middle Ages. However, to focus on this or the sometimes forced and contrived interactions between characters would miss the point of the novel, despite the sometimes jarring effects it may have on the reader.

The author employs narrative to engage with ideas that might be more thoroughly explored in a philosophical treatise (and no doubt have been), but they would not be nearly as engaging or accessible as they are in this quick-paced story. Some readers may be left with a feeling the concepts were not addressed fully, but the narrative style allows the characters to wrestle with the questions of god, immortality and our purpose on earth which people may or may not have asked themselves at one point or another in a simple and straightforward way.

The pace of the story is quite fleet and almost never lags or gets bogged down in the philosophical undercurrents. It is both a celebration of the quest people have been on since long before the setting of this story and continuing to the present day, as well as an adventurous coming-of-age story. It might even be said that Justin's state of naive innocence is similar to the state many people find themselves in today. We live in a walled garden where true suffering is most apparent outside, but within our prison sanctuary we are coddled with entertainment and distractions so that we never truly have the nagging curiosity and indignant moral conundrums that sent Justin out of his father's estate.

While departing from Evanoff's usual academic works, this venture into fiction proves to be a thought-provoking exploration of religion and philosophy. Ultimately, *One With the Father* prompts readers to reconsider their own beliefs and perspectives, while forging its own path in the exploration of moral complexity and spiritual discovery.