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Amanda MacNaughton

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The Interview that Almost Wasn't, with the Man Who Is No More

“What?!?”

The exclamation burst out of me. I couldn't contain my shock when a customer told me that writer, teacher, and theologian Dr. Marcus Borg had just died.

The customer was buying Borg's book *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary*, so I told her how much I had liked the books of his that I'd read. In return, she told me he had died. I felt shock and genuine sorrow. I explained to her that I knew him personally—not much, but enough.

I first met Borg at a lecture he gave in a Bend church, but only for long enough for him to sign a his book, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, for me. Then a few years ago, Borg and his wife, Marianne, bought a home in Powell Butte, a small community near our Redmond store. We booked him to speak about his novel, *Putting Away Childish Things*. Excited about hosting and speaking with such an internationally renowned author, I pitched an interview with him to Northwest Booklover's then-editor, Jamie Passaro.

Jamie responded that she didn't think NWBL had the readership for an interview with a Christian author. She felt most of NWBL's readers were secular. I accepted her assessment, but I was disappointed. I had many questions for Borg after reading his novel, and had looked forward to having an excuse to talk with him in-depth about it. I also knew what a thinker he was, and thought he'd make a great interview subject.

Jamie's decision wasn't the end of the story. We'd been corresponding via the bookstore email, and Brad, owner of Paulina Springs Books, had seen our exchange. To my surprise, he intervened on my behalf, telling Jamie he suspected that, like the majority of Americans, the majority of NWBL's readers were probably Christian. Even for those who weren't, he argued, Borg's novel had much to offer. He'd read it, and though not a part of any religion, he'd enjoyed it and thought the questions the characters grappled with were ones everyone has to contend with.

Brad's arguments did the trick. Prior to Borg's event, I sat down with

him at The Green Plow coffee shop in Redmond with my old-fashioned tools of pen and paper, which he agreed were perfectly good technology.

I've met all kinds of authors in my work. I've learned that you can never tell from a writer's works what they'll be like in person. Most are amiable and appreciative, but there are also examples like the writer whose book I loved but who then turned out to be somewhat self-focused and demanding, so that I nicknamed him (privately) "Mr. Pompous Author."

Marcus Borg was one of the kindest, most generous authors--in fact, people--I've ever been lucky enough to meet. In addition, this famous writer and scholar was one of the humblest authors I've ever spoken with. He asked me so much about my writing, and had such genuine interest in it, that it took me perhaps half an hour to turn the talk round to his own. This has always stayed in my mind because most people, including myself, are very happy to talk about ourselves and not always so good at listening to others.

Despite Borg's talent for listening rather than speaking, once I got him going, he was pleased to talk about his novel. Our interview was candid and amusing. He used terms like "pissed off" that one might not expect from a Christian theologian in his late 60's, which almost makes me laugh when I re-read it now. He gave me tips about writing my own novel which were very good but which I, of course, haven't followed. I remember telling him the basic framework of the story. Looking back, I wish I'd told him a bit more, including some of the spiritual issues the characters struggle with. But hindsight is always 20-20, and I thought I'd have another chance to talk with him.

Borg seemed young for his age and healthy. Brad and I looked forward to his next novel--there were to be three with the same characters. We had him back for one event after that, for his nonfiction book *Speaking Christian*, and imagined having more events with him in the future.

But that isn't to be. This great mind of our time is no longer with us, and I can only be glad I got to know him in the little way I did. Borg once said he didn't know if there's a heaven or not, though it would be "nice" if there is. I personally believe he's there now, and it makes me smile to imagine him smoking a pipe with Tolkien and C.S. Lewis (both writers he talked about with me) and laughing together about all the things they thought and did when they were here on earth. Then perhaps he gets up

and walks off to a quiet corner to do some writing. After all, a writer is never finished, right?

*As a Christian working among tolerant atheist and agnostic co-workers at Paulina Springs Books in Redmond and Sisters, OR, Amanda MacNaughton is used to thinking differently from her cohorts...but also, as shown in this article, she's sometimes surprised by how much we all have in common.*