

## The Wisdom of Love in the Song of Songs

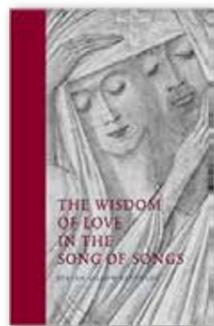
Stefan Reynolds G'98  
Hikari Press 2018

**Q**uestion: what is the Song of Songs? Answer: A third or fourth (?) century BC erotic poem which is also one of the Wisdom Books of the Jewish and Christian Bible. Further question: is it much used in Christian liturgies? Answer: no; it's a bit fruity and anatomical and the People of God, especially the English, tend to clear their throats and gaze at invisible spots on the floor, on the rare occasions it's read in church. Further question: why is an erotic poem part of scripture? Standard answer: it's an allegory of Christ's love for his Church, so it's ok really.

Stefan Reynolds, currently Retreat Director at Mount Melleray Abbey, Co Waterford - invites us to think again and go further and deeper in this his latest book. A central takeaway message is that the allegory-and-symbol approach can subtly lead us into a form of dualism whereby we think of God as 'up there' urging us to be spiritual, while we are 'down here', being human and carnal; spirit is good, matter is bad, therefore a racy poem is only acceptable if we choose to treat it as a virtuous tale in disguise.

By contrast, Stefan strikes a splendid blow for Christianity's central doctrine that the Word became flesh and for our consequent belief in sacred humanity and spirit-filled matter, sex very much included; we don't have to be philologists to spot the connection between 'carnal' and 'incarnation'. We can desecrate our sacred humanity, our behaviour can become subhuman or inhuman this we know - but that does not detract from Christianity's glorious vision of men and women as incarnate spirits, not angels, and of matter as sacred, not profane; after Christ there can be no 'mere' humanity; matter matters more than we could ever have guessed.

What makes sexual human activity, and every other sort of human activity, sacred is the quantity and quality of love that men and women bring to it; the Beatles were right: what we need is love; this is what brings about the transfiguration. The Song of Songs is about a loving relationship expressed sexually - hooray, hurrah! - but there are multiple relationships that are expressed non-



sexually - hooray again! What makes all of them, sexual or not, important is that they connect us creatively with another person or persons and we need that connection; solitary confinement is terrible. Stefan writes, 'the value of the relationship portrayed by the Song is that it can be read at all levels: spiritual-soul friendship, physical-sexual compatibility. Neither need be divorced from the other... if the poem is a spiritual journey experienced through a couple's deepening relationship, then it shows that spirituality is a deepening of *personhood in relationship*. 'The Song', he hopes, 'can inspire people to be whole again'.

Robert Davidson tells the story of a Jewish tailor talking to a Christian friend, 'the real difference between a Jew and a Christian is that we Jews believe in sex'. If true, this is very sad because, as Stefan points out so powerfully, those who take the Incarnation seriously cannot not believe in sex. Big thanks to Stefan for making this point so well, big thanks to him for his labour of love and for his impressive use of scripture, art, literature, Christian spirituality and psychology; biggest thanks for all to him for his choice of topic: Rabbi Akiba wrote that 'the whole world is not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel; for all the Scriptures are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.' Stefan's book will help us to understand this insight and make it our own.

**Dom Stephen Ortiger**

## The Secret Surfer

Iain Gately C'81  
Head of Zeus 2018



Iain Gately has always relished a challenge. As he entered his teens, he ventured 10,000 kms from his home in Hong Kong to board at Worth. As a Sixth Former, with a crop of excellent A-Level grades already under his belt, he tackled A-Level English Literature (a subject that he had never studied before) in three terms, earning the top grade. One term later, having taken the English entrance papers, he secured a place at Cambridge - but opted to study Law, another subject of which he had no previous experience. At Cambridge he represented the University at boxing, a sport in which he had received no coaching in his secondary education. All this is relevant to his latest book, which is founded on the most recent challenge that he set himself: to 'catch a tube' (that is, to surf through the tunnel formed by a breaking wave) before increasing physical difficulties would render that objective impossible.

The title of the book may seem problematical. Perhaps it is a compromise between Joseph Conrad's choice for his 1910 short story, *The Secret Sharer*, and Marvell Comic's name for one of its super-heroes, the Silver Surfer (sharing their scansion and their s-alliteration). As 'surfing' is now more commonly encountered in its metaphorical rather than its literal sense, *The Secret Surfer* might suggest surreptitious nights visiting dubious web-sites on the internet, sooner than exhilarating days riding pounding breakers off public beaches. There seems to be nothing 'secret' about Gately's pursuit per se; rather the impulse that drives him is the 'secret', in that it is deeply personal.

This is not merely a book about surfing; indeed, it is perhaps not even primarily a book about surfing - although there is a surfing-glossary at the back for non-aficionados. It is part travelogue (the West Country, Galicia and the Canary Islands, with references still further afield), part autobiographical narrative, part self-help manual, part spiritual adventure, part anthropological discourse, and part prose-poem delighting in natural description (particularly of the sea and coastal landscapes). If other people do not figure prominently, that is because surfing is a solitary pursuit in which not even individual waves are shared between participants. When others do appear, however, surfers and non-surfers alike are subjected to thoughtful scrutiny, although there may be a tinge of impatient misanthropy when Gately deals with those who do not share his dynamism, passions and ambitions.

Successfully blending such eclectic ingredients offers a further challenge. Gately finds a style well-suited to the task: literate, digressive and vivid, with a rich vein of original, striking imagery. He offers a wealth of references to surfing-authorities, while comfortably assimilating the occasional scholarly quotation or citation from literary figures, philosophers, theologians and even a Mexican revolutionary! His anecdotes are memorable and sometimes unsettling - for example, those concerning John Keats's diet before his death and Thomas Hardy's reaction to seeing a woman hanged. The tone of the book evolves from the lighter and wittier early pages to the rather more sombre and reflective concluding chapters as our writer, who has already suffered one debilitating hip-replacement operation, finds his other hip deteriorating rapidly, a major threat to his aspirations. These latter pages record a determined and victorious struggle against pain and infirmity: as one quest is completed, another presents itself.

The fascination of Gately's account lies in the insights that it offers into his personal psyche: his preoccupations, his motivation and his fears as his body ages and deteriorates. The philosophical and spiritual passages interspersed in the book may even imply that surfing represents the parabola of life: although the relative shallows of infancy and youth lead to the crests of mature achievement, decline inevitably follows, leaving the wave-rider washed up. These are among the 'secrets' that the book gradually reveals.

If you enjoy the kind of humour and arcane knowledge that characterises Bill Bryson's records of his travels around and beyond Britain; if you appreciate sensuous natural description such as that encountered in Robert Macfarlane's observations of mountains, wild places and ancient byways; or if you fear that your life is diminishing and feel the need to 'rage against the dying of the light'; then this could well be the book for you. It might even prove to be to this decade what *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* was to the 1970s. Like a good wave, Iain Gately's book is uplifting and exhilarating, even when the threat of 'wipe-out' is rapidly approaching.

**Paul Miller (English Teacher 1980-2003)**