

# Book Review

## The Seeker Academy

L.D. Gussin. 2007. Housatonic, MA: 4361 Press

Reviewed by **Jonathan Reams**

### Introduction

L.D. Gussin's novel *The Seeker Academy* is a perceptive examination of today's New Age truth seeking movement. Gussin describes a complex and interwoven set of threads that enables his novel to do justice to the realities of such truth-seeking. The main character, Grace Hudson, takes up the journey of finding deeper meaning in life and her experience opens a window into this world. Gussin's other characters represent core types found in the New Age movement and elsewhere, and many will recognize them from their own experience. His writing style enables a movement through perspectives in a way that reveals to the reader some of his judgments while leaving space to ponder their own view of such matters.

From this brief introduction to the novel, I want to back up a step and provide some insight into why I chose to review it. Gussin asked me last winter if *Integral Review* would be interested in doing a review of his book. I did some background research, and found that he had thus far approached over 60 editors of publications in the field of progressive, spiritual or integral thought, leaders of retreat centers (places much like *The Seeker Academy* portrays) and workshop leaders of such retreat centers as well as various scholars in the field. Only one had chosen to review his book. This piqued my curiosity. Was the book so bad that people simply didn't respond? Were they simply too busy, already overloaded with long lists of books to review? Or did it touch a nerve in them that led to a tuning out of the book's message and marginalizing it through neglect?

I saw that Gussin took aim at many kinds of practices, beliefs and ideologies that I have encountered on my journey. Having formed my own views on such things, (and often finding myself in the minority), I was interested enough to say yes to doing this review. While "integral" thinking can be applied to any topic or field of inquiry, I believe that, at its best, it is able to live up to a promise to "integrate" the spiritual into our everyday experience of life rather than treat it as some kind of appendage. I hoped to see some of these insights in Gussin's novel.

### The Story

The plot line is simple enough. Grace Hudson is a former actress (not profoundly successful), turned school teacher/wife/mother with, at the start of the novel, a 12 year old niece in treatment for leukemia. Through her caring support of her niece, Grace comes into direct contact with existential aspects of life. These lead her to take a summer workshop on "Embracing Sadness" at the Seeker Academy as a way of dealing with this upwelling of deeper feelings. Once there, she



realized that the workshop had not answered the call she felt, and chose to stay on as staff for another three weeks.

At first, Grace finds it a strange world of people and ideas, and while making a few friends among an eclectic and diverse group of fellow staff members and workshop participants, she really is looking in from the outside. As she unwinds from the intensity of her experience with her niece and settles in to the place, she gradually becomes more interested in both the lives of those she has encountered and the ideas that form the background to their seeking. She encounters yoga, meditation, body work, past life regression and a host of other practices and beliefs. She also encounters narcissism, spiritual elitism and emotional dysfunction in the people she takes an interest in. Gussin's careful narration allows the reader to see this even when Grace may not name it as such.

The mesh of these threads is brought out in the novel through a car crash involving some of her companions. The aftermath helps bring these elements into focus and propels Grace to get at the deeper meanings behind all the action at the Seeker Academy. She weaves her way between cynicism and insight, leading her to leave the Seeker Academy with a healthy dose of distaste for some of the pretenses that are seen to dominate the presenters and their offerings. At the same time, Grace is profoundly affected by her time there.

## The Review

The sparse plot line I have provided above describes the outward framework of the story, which Gussin conveys in wonderful style. There is realism to the writing, grounded in both the action of the characters and Grace's reflections on and perceptions of them. The writing uses specific events and concrete descriptive language to engage the reader with the unfolding view that gradually emerges. This style also enables Gussin to avoid awkwardly slipping in long winded philosophical discourses surrounded by some sparse action. The sections of philosophical discourse are surprisingly few and emerge naturally as support for the movement of Grace and other characters.

While Gussin does not fall prey to long philosophical meanderings, he does manage to say a lot about the wide range of ideas present in the novel. He says just enough about them, woven into the context of the characters presenting the ideas and juxtaposed with Grace's perspective to create a space where a complex, nuanced and integrated view offers itself to the reader. There are no simplistic condemnations of practices or beliefs, nor hollow praise for others.

Grace's narrative is the central thread of the book, presented in a way that enables an outside perspective on everything encountered at the Seeker Academy. Gussin uses it to reveal a complex and nuanced view of what appears to be intended as a representative segment of the New Age movement. While Grace is new to much of the content she encounters at the Seeker Academy, she is perceptive and notices that most of what goes on there enacts the same kinds of dynamics as the rest of the world, simply dressed up in new clothes. Gussin is able to show very clearly how the psychological functioning of people, some healthy and some not so healthy, gets mixed with their ideologies, beliefs and how they put those into practice. The rich characterizations Gussin portrays illuminate how much of what New Age spirituality has to offer

can be and often is distorted by personal needs and agendas. At the same time he also shows that despite these and other shortcomings, this seeking can be of value, that there is truth to be found.

Attending the Seeker Academy represents turning inward and away from everyday life, captured by Grace's exploration of herself beyond being a wife/mother/teacher. This inward turn allows for reflection and the opening up of space for awareness of what has always been present to come into focus. It allows Grace to encounter a full and rich landscape that she finds mirroring the issues of her everyday world at times, or perspectives and experiences she had in the past. The tensions and distortions that arise from many at the Seeker Academy who attempt to treat it as different from the world outside its gates fuel a range of dysfunctional behaviors. Grace's perception that it is in many ways similar to the everyday world reveals Gussin's capacity to hold the richness and complexity of such seeking and the places that foster it. Eventually, this time of inward reflection allows Grace to go back out into her world with a new level of awareness that has a capacity to integrate the spiritual with the mundane.

There is also a gradual unfolding of Grace's awareness and a natural rhythm to this process that Gussin captures extremely well. I have read other novels that try to convey the subtle unfolding of consciousness, and they often feel awkward, forced or artificially contrived. This is not the case here, as Gussin manages to weave into the story the psychological and spiritual awakenings of Grace so deftly that it feels like a natural and obvious response to her inclinations and the situations she finds herself in. Her seeking arises authentically, which highlights a contrast with some of the other characters who appear driven by a range of other motivations. Some of these appear as healthy, some as unhealthy, but all of them come across as real people struggling with the complexity of their lives.

The flow of the novel felt like it rose in tempo towards a climatic realization, a collapsing to a singularity that I felt rushing in. And yet, when the end came, there was a denouement of sorts that managed to symbolize and capture everything and open up into a very real and transformed future that was also open. Grace steps back into the world at large, having found in herself a confidence and awareness that many sought at the Seeker Academy. She finds that this is not something new or strange to her, but that she has simply not focused her attention on it before.

I had a great appreciation for the way Gussin presents people first, and then the ideas as inextricably woven into the fabric of their lives. This gives the book an "integral" grounding. The diversity of the cast of characters shows the diversity of reasons people seek the truth, and the multiple ways they interpret, use and abuse the ideologies they adopt.

One element present in the novel is that Gussin calls for the return of reason to balance the some of the mysticism and more foolish elements of the Seeker Academy and New Age in general. His descriptions of some of these beliefs and practices at the Seeker Academy come across as comical at times, yet from my experience I can recognize that such things are taken very seriously by many. As with any beliefs and practices, there are people who hold those of the New Age in a balanced fashion, and others who take them to extremes and lose perspective. This is often compounded and fueled by the kinds of psychological needs mentioned above. Gussin's call for a measure of reason is fitting in this context, and the long history of tension between reason and mysticism is woven into the story as a backdrop for the seeking going on there.

It becomes clear enough through the novel that Gussin sees many people being taken in by an abandonment of reason through some psychological need aiming to be fulfilled by a belief, practice or guru. As I read through the novel, what I found myself wanting to hear more of was how one could transcend and include reason. The concept of the pre/trans fallacy is relevant here. Briefly, it proposes that what is non-rational can be either pre-rational or can transcend (and include) rationality. The fallacy is that the pre-rational can be mistakenly elevated to a transcendent status. It is common in the world that Gussin aims to describe for people to proclaim the spiritual as transcending reason, (which indeed can be true), yet actually be reverting to a pre-rational stage. To me, making and applying this distinction is a key aspect of the integral project. While I could feel hints of such a view in the novel, I wished for a more clear and explicit expression of this distinction and its implications.

## Why Have Others Been Unwilling to Review It?

In reflecting back on one of the points that motivated me to read and review this novel, I can now see at least one possible reason why others had not taken up the invitation to review it. While I have indicated above a clear admiration for the way in which Gussin manages to capture the depths of real human seeking, I have only briefly mentioned how he subtly reveals his view of the leaders of New Age, spiritual or integral movements.

Gussin places these people in a very human light. The limitations of their work, the mix of personal agendas with an emphasis at times on marginalizing reason to keep critical questioning at bay are there to see. Not flagrantly, but possibly enough to get under the skin of some who might style themselves along the lines of such leaders.

Beyond this possible reason, I can only speculate on why others have not been willing to review the novel. One such speculation is that Gussin portrays many of those in the Seeker Academy as being “had by” their beliefs and ideologies rather than “having” them, and thus unable to sort the feelings arising from these views from their own psychological condition. This leads to the entwinement and enmeshment of psychological dysfunction and resultant coping agendas with a host of New Age themes. This is not very flattering for those who identify with this culture, but it is this complex situation that Gussin portrays so well in *The Seeker Academy*.

So while these reasons may have contributed to the lack of reviews Gussin’s novel has received, they stand out for me as the strengths that make it a compelling piece of literature. The mix of action and reflection narrated through Grace Hudson, the deft touch of lightly interspersed philosophical offerings, the focus on whole human beings and how they have this rich variety of mixed psychologies and beliefs all contribute to making *The Seeker Academy* a compelling and insightful read. L.D. Gussin opens up a window that clearly lets the light in, and allows us to see out onto a spacious vista, replete with helpful markers to inform us on our own journey into this territory.

**Jonathan Reams, Ph.D.**, is Editor-in-Chief of Integral Review and currently an associate professor in the Department of Education at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, where he teaches organizational counseling, coaching and leadership.  
Jonathan@Reams.com