

In short

Books in the [November 21, 2001](#) issue

The Gospel According to the Simpsons: The Spiritual Life of the World's Most Animated Family.

By Mark Pinsky. Westminster John Knox, 164 pp., \$12.95 paperback.

The Simpsons and Philosophy: The D'Oh of Homer.

Edited by William Irwin, Mark T. Conard and Aeon J. Skoble. Open Court, 303 pp., \$17.95 paperback.

One of the wittiest and most successful shows on TV has attracted some clever commentators. Mark Pinsky, a religion reporter for a daily newspaper, documents the many religious elements in the show, and also notes that religion and religious adherents are fondly observed as well as relentlessly mocked on *The Simpsons*. Like many fans, he is struck by the way the show, for all its cynicism about mainstream values, often ends up affirming community and family, even a family as wildly dysfunctional as Homer and Marge's. But Carl Matheson, in one of the probing essays collected by philosopher William Irwin and colleagues, thinks the heartwarming aspects of the show merely disguise moral emptiness and a withering "hyper-irony." The comedy is based "less on a shared sense of humanity than on a sense of world-weary cleverer-than-thouness." With its avalanche of one-liners and its knowing stream of allusions to popular culture, the show exists only to advance the cult of one-upmanship--to mock everything and everyone for the sake of the next laugh. All of these writers are right about one thing: the wit and the endurance of *The Simpsons* are worth pondering.

Dialogues with Silence: Prayers and Drawings.

By Thomas Merton. HarperSanFrancisco, 189 pp., \$25.00.

Merton was always beginning his spiritual life anew, never afraid to acknowledge the darkness in which he prayed, always ready for God to rebuild his life. These prayers of intense personal devotion are taken from various books by the Trappist monk. What's new in the book are the presence of Merton's own simple drawings, usually

of faces, which the editors have set on facing pages. They too reflect a devotional life stripped of pretense, open to God's surprises.