

The Eyes of the Heart, by Frederick Buechner

reviewed by [David M. May](#) in the [March 8, 2000](#) issue

Few people listen to their lives as closely as Frederick Buechner does, and fewer can articulate so well what they hear. This book, Buechner's fourth memoir, resembles his previous autobiographies—*The Sacred Journey* (1982), *Then and Now* (1983) and *Telling Secrets* (1991)—in that it deals with pivotal moments and persons in Buechner's life. It is unique, however, in that he here contemplates them in relationship to death. Now 73, Buechner writes, "I think about dying a lot these days. . . . I think about how much time I've got left. Sometimes they're sad thoughts, but not always. Sometimes the sadness is lost in wondering what will come next. If anything comes."

In these most personal of reflections, Buechner takes the reader on a tour of the place he calls his Magic Kingdom, his library/study. Buechner invites us into the sacred space where his books were conceived and created—a place itself filled with books. (It includes the first collected edition of Ben Johnson works [1692] and all the first editions of L. Frank Baum's Oz series.) The description of the books, pictures, family archives and artifacts on Buechner's walls and shelves centers his storytelling and his reflections. They gather Buechner "to his kinspeople." The writers of the Hebrew scriptures often use this phrase to refer to death. Buechner reverses the image. Someone who has experienced death, his grandmother, Naya, is gathered to him. She becomes his conversation partner and guide as he wrestles with the question Karl Barth asked in *The Doctrine of Creation*: "What we shall then have and be on the far side of our life in time, is what death calls in question. We shall then only have been. What will then become of our being . . . when it is one which has only been?"

As in his previous memoirs, Buechner writes about his mother and father. His father's suicide when Buechner was only ten has had a lingering influence. He confesses that "one way to read my whole life—my religious faith, the books I have written, the friends I have made—is a search for him. Maybe at its heart my fear is that fear of finding him." A particularly insightful reflection on Buechner's relationship to his mother is the written response he sent to her question, "Do you really believe anything happens after you die?"

Not only do Buechner and his guide Naya speak about the death of his parents, but also the more recent deaths of a friend, poet James Merrill, and Buechner's younger brother, Jamie. Merrill died in 1995, and Buechner recalls their friendship—especially the time in 1948 when they together rented a summer beach cottage in which to write. They were just beginning to dip their toes into the literary pool into which they would later splash. Though the two men were quite different—Merrill, "gay, a poet, an intellectual, a citizen of the world," and Buechner, "straight, a minister (of all things), bookish and . . . a citizen of Rupert, Vermont"—they formed a strong friendship, and Buechner mourns Merrill's death.

The chapter about Jamie is perhaps the most insightful, not just for its poignant reflections on the parting of siblings but because it reveals what Buechner partially hopes to accomplish in this memoir. He has spent his life working with words, breathing life into fictional characters like the 100-year-old saint Godric and the preacher Leo Bebb. Similarly, this chapter helps preserve the life of his brother, making him more than a private, dreamlike memory. Words are concrete reminders of a person's life and being. Where there are words, there is life.

In the hands of a less skilled writer, the use of a resurrected conversation partner might seem contrived. Here it successfully combines an intimate conversation with a hint at a revelatory vision. Buechner is neither sentimental nor detached, gloomy nor unduly optimistic. He listens to his fears, anxieties and hopes and

illuminates our own experience of the death of those close to us.

The memoir's hopeful tone is indicated by its title, taken from Ephesians 1:18. Seeing with the eyes of heart is reflected in Naya's comments about Jamie. She says, "Little by little Jamie will find himself, and little by little he will find all of us . . . No one is ever lost. Nothing is lost." Perhaps the most fitting way to summarize this way of seeing is Godric's reflections on his approaching death: ". . . all the death that ever was, set next to life, would scarcely fill a cup."