

Recommended Books and Films

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Books:

The Greatest Gift, Binka Le Breton (New York: Doubleday, 2007).

Martyr of the Amazon, Roseanne Murphy (New York: Orbis Books, 2007).

Films:

The Children of the Amazon, Denise Zmekhol (ZD films & ITVs, 2008).

They Killed Sister Dorothy, Daniel Junge (Just Media, 2008).

While it is widely known that the Brazilian Amazon is being deforested at an alarming rate and that 20 percent of the forest has already been destroyed, the statistics and satellite images of unrelenting environmental destruction cannot show the scope of devastation of the world's last great forest, nor reveal the depth and breadth of misery for the people of the Amazon—the indigenous people, the migrants from Brazil's Northeast, the river people, the rubber tappers, settlers of all stripes—on a violent, largely lawless frontier, where powerful landowners threaten settlers and government officials alike, as they have for centuries. Landowners with connections in local and state government carry out illegal logging on Indian reserves and extractive reserves; hire gunmen to intimidate settler families and to keep hired workers under slave-labor conditions; and forge deeds, titles, and logging permits so that the cutting and burning of the forests for agribusiness and cattle ranching continues unabated.

Those indigenous leaders, activist priests and nuns, rubber tappers, and community organizers who demand that the law be upheld and that the forests be preserved for the next generations all too often become the victims themselves of an exploitive model of development that ignores the human and environmental consequences of road construction projects, and that does not calculate the cost in human lives and suffering in the formula for profit that rewards the few and exploits the many, while the rest of us watch the greatest forest on Earth go up in smoke.

Lest we forget that the fate of the forests are tied to our own, *Martyr of the Amazon* by Roseanne Murphy and Binka Le Breton's *The Greatest Gift* tell the story of Sister Dorothy Stang, an American Sister of Notre Dame de Namur who was murdered for her work with the poor while trying to protect the forests against illegal logging and burning so that the wealth and beauty of the Amazon might be preserved for future generations. Also alerting us to the perils of uncontrolled deforestation and the consequences for all of Earth's residents, Denise Zmekhol, director and producer of *The Children of the Amazon*, introduces us to the surviving people of the forest and their children, reminding us of the tragic fates suffered by past generations of indigenous people and scores of activists, indigenous leaders, and community organizers like rubber tapper leader Chico Mendes, all killed for trying to protect their forest homes. Daniel Junge's film, *They Killed Sister Dorothy*, focuses on the ongoing struggle to bring to justice the powerful landowners who ordered Stang's murder, among so many others.

Each of these books and films offers a cautionary tale from a unique perspective, warning us of the immediacy of the dangers to the forest and its people, but also pointing to signs of hope for the future through the many extractive forest reserves and sustainable development projects that carry on the work of Chico Mendes, Dorothy Stang, and countless indigenous and community-based activist groups.

In *Martyr of the Amazon*, Roseanne Murphy documents the extraordinary life and work of activist Sister Dorothy Mae Stang, who dedicated her life to migrants and settlers on the Amazon frontier, alerting them to the connection between fundamental human rights and their own struggle to obtain legal title to the lands they worked, while teaching them sustainable farming techniques designed to make profitable the establishment of permanent farm settlements, as opposed to continuous slash-and-burn clearing of forests and abandonment of infertile plots. With boundless energy and determination, Sister Dorothy raised awareness and inspired hope in the landless, giving them the courage to resist the powerful landowners who saw the poor only as a source of cheap and expendable labor. When it became clear that Dorothy would not give in to the will of the rich and powerful and would defend her people (the settlers at PDS [Sustainable Development Project] *Esperança*) to the bitter end, her name appeared on public death lists, since a group of wealthy landowners planned and ordered her murder.

In the state of Pará, a landowner who orders a murder is rarely brought to trial and virtually never convicted, allowing free rein to

the rich and powerful who use violence and intimidation with impunity to consolidate their power, often in collusion with the local police. Landowners felt threatened by Dorothy Stang's mission to educate the poor of their human and legal rights, and for her work with governmental agencies such as INCRA, the national land reform commission responsible for settling migrants on available lands. While Dorothy worked through legal and lawful channels to validate settlers' claims to land, landowners used every illegal means at their disposal to deny settlers access to the lands they worked, and to silence Sister Dorothy.

The in-depth portrait painted by Murphy is one of an unusually strong and determined woman whose religious vocation, personal integrity, unrelenting drive, and commitment to the poor directed her work with migrant workers in Arizona in the 1950s, and would next lead her to spend forty years of her life defending the rights of migrants in the forests of Brazil. Teaching the farm worker children at Most Holy Trinity School in Phoenix during the day, Sister Dorothy spent the evenings with the families in the migrant labor camps, distributing food and clothes and encouraging families to let their children attend school rather than have them work in the fields. Murphy cites one of Dorothy's students who remembers Dorothy for her work in helping migrant workers to understand their rights and to fight for those rights: "Sister talked about the power of the workers, and about how standing together for what you believe in and deserve is a very powerful weapon. She explained how racism and capitalism were connected and how unions could impact change" (23). Dorothy Stang did not accept the ways of the world as a given, but rather took up the challenge to fight for a more equitable order and to stand up for the disenfranchised and invisible people in forgotten corners of the world.

Journalist Binka Le Breton also tells how Dorothy Stang's profound faith and adventurous nature led her to become a missionary in Coroatá, Maranhão, where she and her fellow sisters immediately threw off traditional nun attire and shocked the townspeople by driving a car, breaking all the local rules about what women did and did not do. The town was surprised by the sisters' insistence that the Church is a community of people rethinking their social condition in the light of the Gospel. When the sisters built schools in rural communities, they angered landowners whose power depended in large part on the people remaining ignorant and malleable, and alarmed the police always on the alert for communists and subversives. These outspoken nuns teaching about land reform, community, and human rights would not go unnoticed.

In the spirit of the Second Vatican Council's appeal for people of God to bring Gospel values to the struggle for social justice throughout the world, Dorothy Stang was anxious to answer Pope John XXIII's 1963 call for the North American religious to serve underrepresented communities in Latin America. She was delighted to be assigned to work in Brazil, where she immediately embraced her first lessons in liberation theology from Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez and Fr. Jon Sobrino, two of the instructors in the orientation program where she first came to understand the roots of poverty in Brazil. Sister Dorothy brought a wide range of community organizing skills and practical knowledge to her work with migrants. She led literacy training for community members to become teachers in their community, trained community leaders to lead Bible study groups, and encouraged others to become agricultural technicians who then came back to put sustainable farming methods into practice, all while helping the poor to question the social structures that perpetuate poverty.

From her first years in Brazil, Dorothy Stang faced the ire and suspicion of landowners, as she worked to set up base communities and schools in areas devoid of fundamental services for the flood of newcomers. Her arrival in Brazil coincided both with the early years of military dictatorship in Brazil, and with a period of changing roles on the part of religious communities who increasingly took up the challenge to make the Church an agent of social change in opposition to the violent and repressive role played by the military governments and elites in several Latin American countries. Whereas the Church had been seen traditionally as an ally of the elite, following the 1968 bishops' conference in Medellín, Colombia, and in response to the spread of liberation theology throughout South America, clergy reached out increasingly to the poor. Priests and nuns in Brazil organizing and assisting communities were considered subversive and became targets themselves when they used the Bible as a tool of resistance, mobilizing migrants and settlers to work together, particularly in the Amazon where waves of peasants from Brazil's drought-stricken Northeast flocked to the frontier in response to the government's promises of "land in the Amazon for the landless from the Northeast."

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank funding to build roads, and to "develop" the Amazon, fueled wide-scale deforestation as the forest was cut open by the construction of major roads, inviting a flood of newcomers into a vast wilderness devoid of an infrastructure necessary to a lawful society. Indeed, this model of development called for parceling out of

the land in small pieces to the migrants and in vast tracks to the wealthy, often from southern Brazil, with no consideration for the environmental and human impact. The peasants were the pioneers who would clear the forests for small farms, moving deeper into the forest when the thin, exposed soil was depleted, or selling out to speculators or big landowners for whom they would then become a cheap source of labor. Cleared and burned land was sown with grass seed for cattle-raising or sold to speculators, who then sold out to agribusiness or multinational companies when the price was right.

The so-called Brazilian Miracle of the 1970s, based on a model of development that depended on an endless supply of land and labor, plus international loans that were at the time the biggest in the world, was born out of ashes of the forests and ended in the abandonment of the landless poor drawn to remote corners of the Amazon Basin. Following the migrants as the frontier pressed farther into the forest, Sister Dorothy saw, from ground zero, the consequences of this kind of predatory development. In a letter to the Sisters of Notre Dame of Namur in Ohio, Sister Dorothy described the intimidation and violence aimed at thousands of farmers trying to eke a living off the land: “The rich, backed by easily acquired funds from international banks and farm projects, use all means to rob the people of their small survival plots, as in a capitalistic system, the poor have no reason to have land since financially it is not viable” (62). While acknowledging the magnitude of the task of getting legal titles to lands and the dangers involved in opposing landowners backed by international and governmental funding, political support, and gangs of hired gunmen, Dorothy never ceased to work with INCRA to establish titles for settlers in compliance with Brazilian law that revoked titles not substantiated by land improvements.

Nonetheless, INCRA could not keep up with the number of cases and claims to be resolved, especially as SUDAM, the agency for the development of the Amazon, funded projects on tracts of land already distributed to settlers by INCRA, setting up conflicts between the large-scale projects and the migrants. The incapacity of the respective agencies to handle the conflicting claims, both legitimate and fraudulent, and the inability of the judicial branch of government in states like Pará to hold landowners accountable, to bring them to trial, and to judge against them in cases involving forgery and falsification of titles, led to a state of perpetual conflicts over land ownership and general impunity on the part of the few who controlled the land, leaving settlers and activists like Dorothy Stang as walking targets in the war over land.

Like Chico Mendes in Acre, who formed the National Council for Rubber Tappers in 1985, and, as we see in archival footage in *The Children of the Amazon*, traveled to Washington to convince the InterAmerican Bank to suspend loans to Brazil for road construction, and proposed the establishment of extractive reserves that would both preserve the remaining forests and protect the forest for the indigenous people, rubber tappers, and other extractivists, Sister Dorothy saw the forest as a place for people to live and work. It was a place to be protected for future generations, and Sister Dorothy hoped that the PDS *Esperança* would be the first of many INCRA-sponsored PDS projects in which settlers would leave 80 percent of their tract as standing forest and would devote only 20 percent to farming. Like Chico Mendes and other activists, she was murdered for defending the rights of the many over the demands of a few powerful landowners with guns and political influence, as the film, *They Killed Sister Dorothy*, clearly shows, picking up where Murphy's book leaves off, with the trial of the suspects involved in her murder—a trial charged with drama, suspense, and tension.

Surprisingly candid close-ups of the defense lawyers planning their courtroom strategy, coupled with taut footage of the trial itself, place the film audience squarely in the position of the jury, whose duty it is to assess the credibility of the accused and their lawyers, intent on hanging the guilt on the two hired gunmen and the middleman, while exonerating those landowners who ordered the murder. Refraining from commentary on the demeanor of the defense team, the film lets the accused and their lawyers speak openly for themselves, allowing us viewers to be the judge as the defendants reverse their testimony from one hearing to the next, the lawyers for the defense build their case on the argument that it is the murder victim, not the accused, who is guilty, a witness is beaten and threatened so that he will not testify, and unknown quantities of money change hands between certain important players who will never be identified. The film's pre-trial and trial scenes lead us through an intricate labyrinth of lies and half-truths, outlining a pattern of threats and violence on an individual level, and pointing to grave institutional failures on a societal level, making patent the hidden forces that lead to the killing of activists and community leaders.

Yet, *They Killed Sister Dorothy* should be viewed more as a celebration of the life and work of Dorothy Stang than as an indictment of the individuals that planned her murder and threatened her with death for months before the event. Backlit shots of the trees on the contested lot 55, paired with an elegant soundtrack evocative of a forest ringing with bells and chimes, allow us to see the forest as Sister Dorothy saw it, as a sublime cathedral of endless beauty. At the

beginning of the film, we hear Dorothy express her hope that all may share in the magnificence and the beauty of the forest, that its richness not be lost. Rare footage captures Sister Dorothy on the land with her people, conveying her love for them and their love for her, while demonstrating the sense of purpose she was able to bring to people who, like the fifty-five-year-old farmer in the film, never before had had the opportunity to work a plot of their own. Her wish was that the land be shared by those who work it, not monopolized by ranchers, loggers, and multinationals, and that PDS *Esperança* serve as a model of sustainable development for the rest of the Amazon. Sister Dorothy herself served as a model of integrity, devotion, and quiet determination to those who knew her, and now, to those of us who are only now getting to know her through the documentary, *They Killed Sister Dorothy*.

Likewise, journalist Binka Le Breton's *The Greatest Gift* celebrates Dorothy's life and work through the stories and recollections of dozens of Stang's friends in Brazil, lay and religious, who share Sister Dorothy in their memory as a tireless, single-minded, and intrepid champion of social justice, as well as a bit of a free spirit. She was an outspoken advocate for her people, independent and perhaps stubborn to a fault, as Le Breton's revealing interview with Dom Erwin, bishop of the Xingu suggests, but she was determined to make a difference for those poorest of the poor:

She just couldn't accept the way that the poor were living and she did what she could to change things. She'd go to Belém, and if she couldn't get things sorted out there, she'd be in Brasília before you could turn around! There was no holding her. In fact, she got what she wanted, as often as not. With the federal police, for example, and the federal attorney's office. And she started getting recognition (109).

The resolute determination that served Sister Dorothy in her mission to challenge injustice wherever she saw it was the same quality that made her feared and despised by those in the region who had high stakes in the status quo. Yet the settlers who had been dumped by the side of the road on the Transamazônica by the government saw her as their only hope:

Dorothy was a shining light for us. When we arrived on the Transamazônica, it was the end of the world. We were abandoned by the church, by the state, by everyone. And Dorothy was like a light to us. We realized that it was possible after all to live in Amazônia. We started working together. We learned to love the forest. We saw that we women had to take up the challenge, and we founded the Women's Association. The men used to be very

macho, so we started going to meetings and talking about health, politics, education, alternative medicine. ... And we fought for the land, started thinking about farming the land more sustainably. The families kept coming in, and we kept organizing ourselves. Today I can feel her presence among us very strongly. (114–5)

Dorothy's vision remains very much alive on PDS *Esperança*, as both the film and two biographical works clearly illustrate.

Padre Nello, who knew Sister Dorothy from her first years in Coroaá, points out that her murder actually strengthened settlers' resolve to advance her vision of sustainable development. Rather than silence her, "instead it was Dorothy who won. And I don't think she died in vain. There is a new consciousness around here. People are more committed to her project, and I think they are feeling better about it. They knew it wasn't right to keep destroying the forest like that. But they didn't know what to do about it." Sister Dorothy's precious gift to the land and its inhabitants is precisely this new consciousness that the forest belongs to the future and must be cared for with reverence.

The same reverence for the forest and respect for its people shines through in Denise Zmekhol's 2008 film, *The Children of the Amazon*, an exquisite and moving documentary on the fate of two tribes in the western Amazon who have watched their numbers dwindle, their forests burn, and their culture disintegrate as the uncontrolled commercial exploitation of forest resources continues to threaten their survival as a people, all in the space of only forty years since initial contact with government agents. Glowing images of Suruí and Negarotê children in their forest home provide a poignant reminder of how much they and their forest world have changed in the fifteen years between Zmekhol's first visits to the Amazon in 1988–1990, when she originally photographed the children of the forest, and her return trip in 2002, when she finds the Suruí lands almost devoid of trees and the children, now young men and women, facing life in a very different and much less hospitable world. Through historical footage, her own still photographs, and recent filming, Zmekhol traces the infiltration of the western Amazon from Coronel Rondon's 1907–1908 expedition laying telegraph wire, up to the present, documenting the acceleration of destruction in recent years.

The Children of the Amazon introduces us to heroic Chico Mendes, a rubber tapper who united his fellow rubber tappers and native peoples, their former enemies, in a common struggle to preserve the land for all children of the forest. The film follows the rubber tappers, accompanied by crowds of colleagues, friends, and family, into the

forest on Seringal Cachoeira where they employ Chico's nonviolent *empate* technique, successfully blocking the clearing of the trees for ranching, demonstrating the solidarity of the rubber tappers and reflecting the strength of his leadership. Next, we are invited into Chico Mendes' home with his friends and family eating dinner while he serves the beans, his anguish writ large on his face as he awaits his publicly announced murder. We meet his children, first as young children about to lose their father, then as young adults who will embody his dream of education and opportunity for all children of the Amazon as Sandino goes on to attend college and Elenira directs the Chico Mendes Institute in Xapuri. The extractive reserves he imagined are now a reality, preserving vast tracts of forest for the sustainable harvest of rubber, nuts, fruit, and oils.

Evocative percussion and vocals by Badi Assad and Naná Vasconcellos accompany Denise Zmekhol's compelling narration and poetic imagery, taking us back in time and space to the homelands of the Suruí and the Negarotê tribes in the states of Rondônia and Mato Grosso. For the Suruí and the Negarotê, the differences between then and now are striking and many: where there had been endless virgin forest, there are logging roads, sawmills, and shanty towns. Clear streams where children had bathed and played are filled with silt and mud from logging. Great longhouses in a forest clearing are replaced by wooden shacks baking in the sun on a plot of bare red earth. Where once the Suruí had picked fruit and hunted game in the forests, now they are dependent on food and income from the outside. Motira Suruí speaks, with longing and sorrow, of the forest of her childhood when her world was a still beautiful place; forest time is over forever, however, as the land demarcated for the Suruí has all been cleared, and Negarotê and other tribal lands continue to be illegally logged, while their forest way of life vanishes.

Chief Itabira Suruí too reflects on the many changes since initial contact, remembering the time when his people were free of disease and knew how to live in the way of their ancestors, telling as well of the moment when government agents made initial contact, accidentally introducing serious diseases and almost immediately killing five hundred of the seven hundred remaining Suruí, including almost all of the elders. The influx of settlers, missionaries, loggers, miners, and ranchers following the newly constructed BR364 highway encroached on Suruí lands, threatening the Suruí way of life from the ground up. With the forests disappearing and the elders gone, Suruí leaders struggle to find new ways to live in a foreign and often hostile world, while the young people mourn the loss of the trees, the spiritual world

that deserted them as the forests disappeared and the few remaining elders were converted to Christianity. The remaining hope for the Suruí is that education will be the bridge that will prepare the present generation of young people to find their way in a rapidly changing world while preserving what remains of Suruí lands and traditions.

Focusing its lens on the faces, colors, and textures of the last great forest, *The Children of the Amazon* provides a long view of an environment at risk, while alerting us to the immediate dangers threatening forest people. The film traces the connections between the international funding for the building and paving of roads through the forest and the devastation of a fragile ecosystem, and points out the relationship between deforestation in the Amazon and international demand for tropical hardwood, and for beef, between the cutting and burning of forests and rising temperatures worldwide. The film raises many important ethical, political, and environmental questions, but it is also a remarkably beautiful and uplifting film that brings home to all of us exactly what it is that is being lost and must be saved, thus engendering hope and inspiring action rather than complacency, while helping us to see that the Amazon rainforest is much closer than we realized. With humor, respect, and compassion, Denise Zmekhol establishes obvious rapport with the people she films, as we can see by their spontaneity and grace in response. Perhaps most moving is the film's sensitive attention to the faces of the people of the forest, showing the great warmth and humanity of Chico Mendes, the anguish of the mourners at his funeral only weeks later, the shy smiles of the indigenous women, the curiosity and delight of their children, the sense of loss among the Suruí, but also their pride, joy, and laughter. Personalizing what it means for forest people, for their children, and also for the rest of the inhabitants of this earth when rampant devastation of forests is left to run its course, the documentary argues that the future of the forest is our future, as well. And yet, the luminous images of the children of the Amazon speak for themselves.

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