

EXCERPT



Rich Mullins *An Arrow Pointing to Heaven*

February 7, 2023 | \$19, 240 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0734-1

Beloved Christian musician Rich Mullins lived his life with abandon for God. An accident cut his life short in 1997, but his songs and ragamuffin spirit continue to teach many. This twenty-fifth anniversary edition of his devotional biography shares reflections from friends and family and an afterword by Rich's brother David Mullins.

Be More Than Just Good, "Be God's"

Rich Mullins stood upon a hill among castle ruins in Ireland. His friend and photographer, Ben Pearson, was standing below. Ben called out, "Lift up your arms," and Rich raised his arms to shoulder level as if making a cross and said, "You mean, like Jesus?" Ben yelled up, "No, lower." Rich dropped his arms a little, and suddenly Ben saw something he did not expect. From a distance Rich looked like an arrow pointing toward the sky. Ben yelled, "You look like an arrow, man. An arrow pointing in the right direction." He snapped the picture. It would be the final picture of the last photo shoot for Rich and Ben.

It was more than a picture. It was the summation of a person's life, a symbol that said more about who he was than mere words can. Rich Mullins was a man who stood among the ruins—the ruins created by his own faults and failings, the ruins that result from the ravages of time. In the midst of the ruins he pointed to heaven, to the God who bundles our brokenness and heals our wounds. He felt the winds of heaven as he stood upon the stuff of earth and pointed, through his words and his music, to something larger than even our dreams. Rich Mullins was an arrow pointing to heaven.

Most people know him through his songs. He wrote and recorded dozens of hit songs in contemporary Christian music. If you meet someone who does not know Rich's name, simply mentioning the song "Awesome God" will usually result in a smile and a response such as, "Oh, I know that song. We sing it in our church." According to his peers in the Christian music industry—Amy Grant, Michael W. Smith, Gary Chapman, Phil Keaggy, and a host of others—Rich's songs are some of the most beautiful and inspiring ever written.

But what most people do not know is the person behind the lyrics and the music. I wish that Rich were here to tell you himself; I wish you had the chance to get to know him, to listen to what he had to say, and to see how he lived. Unfortunately, Rich died in a car accident on September 19, 1997. Unless you were able to spend time with him, draw close enough to understand his thoughts and witness how he expressed them, see how he lived, and listen to what he thought, his life is unknown to you. That is the reason for this book.

How This Book Came to Be

A year after Rich died, many people approached his family and said, "Someone ought to write a book about Rich." After a lot of discussion and debate as to whether or not it would be beneficial, the family agreed that his life merited being written about. In the fall of 1998, Rich's brother, David, asked if I would be interested in working on such a project. I was deeply honored. I was a close friend of Rich's during the final years of his life. We became friends in 1990, and he lived with my wife, Meghan, and me from 1992 to 1995. In 1995 Rich left to live and minister on a Navajo reservation in the Southwest, but in a sense, he never left our home. He returned every few months, leaving his scent of patchouli and a few of his belongings scattered throughout our house.

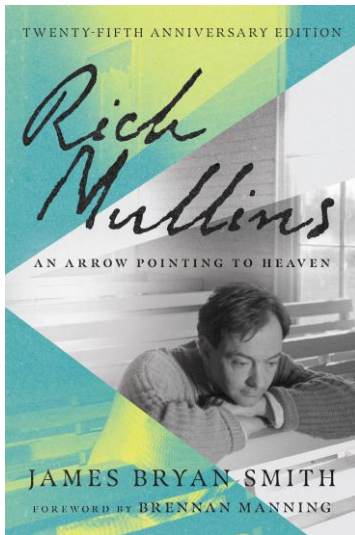


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"James Bryan Smith did with Rich Mullins: An Arrow Pointing to Heaven what Rich did with his life. He was able to tell a story about a man but really tell a story about God."

—David Mullins, speaker, minister, and brother of Rich Mullins

Rich lived with us during what I believe were some of the best times in his life. He had come to Wichita, Kansas, and was attending Friends University, a small, Christian, liberal arts college. Rich was finishing his degree in music education so that he could teach music to children on a Native American reservation. He lived with his writing partner and close friend, David Strasser (better known as Beaker), in a small house in town. I began teaching at Friends the same year Rich enrolled.

I can honestly say that having Rich Mullins in my religion classes was very intimidating. It was a little like having Einstein in your physics class. Most of the time I wanted to hand him the chalk and sit down and listen. Occasionally I did.

When Beaker got married, Rich needed a place to stay, and he asked if he could live in our attic apartment. We agreed, and soon he became a part of our family. During the two and a half years he was with us, Rich and I spent nearly every night (much to my wife's chagrin) sitting up and talking about God, life's meaning, the church, our favorite authors, and passages of the Bible we were laboring to understand. We would sometimes talk well into the night. I feel privileged to have been able to engage in these deep discussions.

What This Book Is Not, and What It Is

After visiting with Rich's family, I realized that any book written about Rich should not be a hagiography (an attempt to turn him into a saint) because Rich would be the first to say, "I am not perfect. Don't put me on a pedestal. I am just a ragamuffin. Look to God, not me." Nor should it be a biography (a chronological account of his life) because that, too, would focus more on Rich and less on what was important to him. And what was important to Rich—the most important thing in his life—was urging people to draw near to God.

When he gave people his autograph, he always wrote, "Be God's." That was his signature statement. Many of us want to be "good," and Rich believed that being good was a noble pursuit. But the highest pursuit was not to be good, but to be God's. The best thing any of us can be is fully devoted to the God who loves us with a passionate, reckless, furious love. I began to see that the kind of book that would most honor Rich, and most help readers, would be the kind of book that pointed beyond the man himself.

This book attempts to look more at the wisdom than at the facts of a life. While it contains many stories about Rich's life, it contains more of Rich Mullins's own words, which are provocative and profound. What he had to say, combined with how he lived his life, is what is most challenging. My hope is that by letting his insights come forth, you will find yourself reflecting on your own life.

This book is best described as a devotional biography. It gives the reader an insight into Rich's life (the things he did, the places he went, the things he loved), but more importantly, it allows the reader a chance to learn what he thought. Also included are quotes from authors and saints who shaped Rich's life and faith along with insights and stories from interviews I conducted with his family and friends. Unless they are footnoted, all of the quotes came from those interviews.



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James Bryan Smith is the author of *The Good and Beautiful Series*. He is a theology professor at Friends University in Wichita, Kansas, where he also directs the Apprentice Institute for Christian Spiritual Formation. Smith is a founding member of *Renovaré* and an ordained United Methodist Church minister.

In preparing to write this book, I was pleased to discover a wealth of Rich's words recorded in articles and interviews. After studying this material I began to notice ten themes that Rich spoke a great deal about: the importance of our families, the role of the church, the love of God, the person of Jesus, the beauty of creation, the struggle and pain we experience in life, the joy of living simply, the struggle with sin and temptation, the call to love one another, and the reality of death and bliss of eternal life. Each chapter centers on one of these themes.

No, It Is Changing Me

No one I have ever met has challenged me to "Be God's" like Rich Mullins. I will never lose the pictures I have of him in my mind. I am a better person for having known him. After I began writing this book, I felt a sudden fear. I was afraid of only one thing—that I would be changed. My fear was well founded. I took a year out of my life to live, eat, breathe, and think about almost nothing but Rich Mullins, and in doing so I have been deeply moved.

I have been changed. I now look at my own family heritage with more awe and appreciation. My love for the church, even in its weaknesses, is deeper. I live more freely and joyfully in the "furious love of God," as Brennan Manning calls it. I cannot look at a tree or a star or a flower without praising God. I look at my own troubles, and the troubles of those around me, with a deeper appreciation because I know they are opportunities for growth. I have less interest in the things of this world. I am learning to look to Jesus and my friends for support when I feel the pull of sin. I view others with less judgment and more compassion. I am not as afraid of death, and I long for heaven more than I ever have. I would like to think that I am a little more of God's for having worked on this book.

Toward the end of his life Rich said, "I think we cry at funerals—even at funerals of people we don't like—because we realize what a miracle a life is. You realize, 'This will never happen again.' There will never be this exact combination of genes, there will never again be the things that have created this person to be what he is. God has spoken uniquely here, and it's gone. It's over. And I think there's some regret, because we all realize, boy, we didn't pay enough attention."¹

This book is my attempt to help us pay attention to the uniqueness of Rich Mullins's life. God has spoken uniquely through his life and his words. Though Rich's life on earth has ended, his eternal life has just begun. As Dr. Steven Hooks said at Rich's memorial service, "There is a ragamuffin loose in heaven, and he is walking barefoot on the streets of gold." Until we reach the other side of the veil, we have his words and his music to help us on our own journey. It is my prayer that as you read this book you will come to know more about this man whose life, insights, and music were so powerful. But more than that, I hope you are somehow able to draw near to the God who made him who he was.

—Taken from the introduction

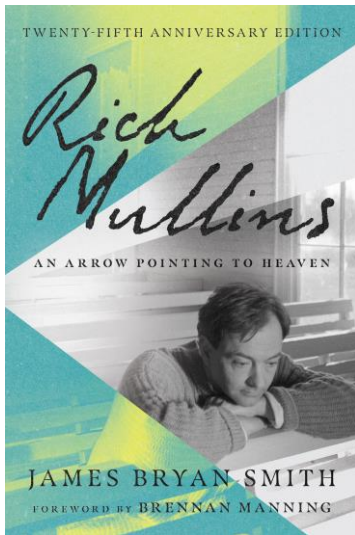


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ENDORSEMENTS



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“*Rich Mullins: An Arrow Pointing to Heaven* is the most powerful book I have read in the last five years. . . It is the purest echo of the gospel I have read in a long, long time.”

—**Brennan Manning**, author of *The Ragamuffin Gospel*

A Legacy Pointing People to God and His Goodness

“I don’t know many people who have died and left so many people saying, ‘I need what Rich Mullins’s life brought to the table, and I don’t know where else to find it except in looking at his life and listening to what he had to say.’”

—**Amy Grant**, Christian musician and author of *Mosaic*

“Writing a book about someone who meant so much to so many is a daunting task but one that James Bryan Smith has accomplished with a great deal of passion and wisdom. This book is a gift to all of us who miss having Rich in this world, and it will be a treasure to those who are just discovering who he was.”

—**Andrew Peterson**, recording artist and author of *The God of the Garden*

“*Rich Mullins: An Arrow Pointing to Heaven* gives us an intimate and honest picture of Rich, but even more importantly, the book gives us a passionate, powerful picture of the God Rich loved. Read with caution: This is a dangerously challenging work about a life lived in pursuit of God’s own heart. You will not make it to the final chapter unchanged.”

—**Carolyn Arends**, recording artist and director of education for Renovaré

“In *Rich Mullins: An Arrow Pointing to Heaven*, James Bryan Smith writes fondly of his friend Richard Mullins. Even more, he shares the spirit of devotion that characterized Rich’s life. Even more still, he points us to that great reservoir of devotion that has sustained followers of Jesus Christ throughout the centuries.”

—**Richard J. Foster**, founder of Renovaré and author of *Learning Humility*

“There are few examples and guides in walking this way of Jesus who have expanded my imagination and hunger for God as Rich Mullins has. His life, ministry, and writing have profoundly shaped me and generations of Christians. This book, written by a trusted friend of Rich, is a beautiful and insightful glimpse into the life of this wise, complicated, struggling, and brilliant ordinary saint. I found *Rich Mullins: An Arrow Pointing to Heaven* decades ago, and it has indeed helped point me toward God’s redemption and goodness.”

—**Tish Harrison Warren**, Anglican priest and author of *Liturgy of the Ordinary* and *Prayer in the Night*

“Rich Mullins was a pilgrim. . . . His irreverent spirituality touched many, confused some, and gave hope to many more. In this book one can reach into the inside of this man. . . . Rich did not rise to meet God; God came and got him—and much too soon for the rest of us. Thanks to Jim Smith for helping us be guided by Rich’s sensitivities between these pages.”

—**John Fischer**, pioneer of Jesus music and author of *Fearless Faith*



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