A Publishing Friendship: John Berryman and Robert Giroux

The Startling Debut of Raven Leilani

Diary of a Courtesan and Convert

The Political Novels of Curtis Sittenfeld
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Welcome to Fall Books 2020

I spent much of my free time in the month of September preparing to move out of one New York City apartment into another. This inevitably meant getting out the tape measure and becoming more creative about storage options (the average one-bedroom apartment in my neighborhood is less than 500 square feet), but it also became an exercise in purging some prized possessions. Like many of us, I found my greatest enemy to be my closest friend: the books, the endless rows and stacks and unruly piles of books.

Have they been migrating south into my apartment for the winter? Are they breeding? Have they mastered parthenogenesis? Surely I did not buy all of these tomes, and surely I did not bring them all home from the office. But here they all are, and unless I can gin up some courage and ruthlessness, soon some movers will surely be giving me surly side-eye as they hump impossibly heavy boxes up and down the stairs.

This Fall Books literary issue is not helping matters, because right from the get-go I realized it was imperative that I own the two books mentioned in our features: Luster, the dazzling debut novel by Raven Leilani, who is profiled here by a former Joseph A. O’Hare, S.J. fellow, Brandon Sanchez (he calls the novel “as clear as a pane of glass and as elaborate as a stained-glass window”), and John Berryman and Robert Giroux: A Publishing Friendship, by Patrick Samway, S.J., who recounts the fruitful collaboration between the famous poet and his erudite editor. But Berryman was not Giroux’s only noted author: As Samway notes, “Giroux became a com-summate editor with a host of notable writers—including Djuna Barnes, E. M. Forster, William Gaddis, Herman Hesse, R. W. B. Lewis, Walker Percy, Carl Sandburg, William Saroyan, Mary Lee Settle, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Susan Sontag, Derek Walcott, Robert Penn Warren and Eudora Welty, to name but a few—all of whom he granted his full attention.”

The two most recent selections of the Catholic Book Club profiled within have likely long been on many of our shelves: John Kennedy Toole’s comic novel, A Confederacy of Dunces, and John Howard Griffin’s tale of artificially darkening his skin to try to understand what it was like to be a Black man in the American South in the 1950s, Black Like Me. As always, interpretive essays and challenging questions by C.B.C. moderator Kevin Spinale, S.J., helped drive our online discussion of both texts.

Several essays allow us to revisit past literary masters: Robert Rubsam on the literary corpus of Jean Giono, Eve Tushnet on the famous Parisian courtesan (and spiritual writer, of a sort) Liane de Pougy, and Mary Roche on Year of Wonders, a 2002 novel by Geraldine Brooks on a topic now familiar to all of us: a community’s response to a deadly pandemic.

There is much more: Franklin Freeman takes us into the life and fiction of Robert Stone in his review of Child of Light, a biography of Stone by Madison Smartt Bell; and Maureen H. O’Connell reviews Christopher Pramuk’s The Artist Alive: Explorations in Music, Art & Theology, in which Pramuk “translates stories germane to the human experience that illuminate paths to the transcendent when communicated through the arts.” Elizabeth Matthew explores some of the hidden cultural assumptions found in a new novel about Hillary Rodham Clinton (albeit a fictional character, who never marries Bill and runs against him for president), Rodham.

We also have a contribution from Jon Sweeney, who tackles a hefty new tome on Richard Wagner and his massive influence on Western culture by Alex Ross, Wagnerism.

We also have two new poems selected by our poetry editor, Joseph Hoover, S.J.: “In Closing,” by Kevin Pitts, and “Fall Moon,” by Andrew Frisardi.

Finally, our Last Word features Sam Rocha on his “five books of summer.” (They’re not exactly beach reads!)

We hope you enjoy it all. We do these literary issues twice a year, and they always present us with fresh chances to introduce new authors—or revisit old ones.

We have also taken this issue to show our gratitude to our benefactors by mention of their many names in a special insert.

On second thought, I don’t need to get rid of these books in my apartment. Maybe I’ll rent a storage unit.

James T. Keane, senior editor.
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SAM ROCHA
The Catholic intellectual tradition is not a thing of the past
In August of this year, the Catholic Book Club hit a new benchmark for our Facebook discussion group. We now have over 6,000 members. Not bad, considering that three years ago at this time, the group had four members (all editors at America). Combined with the Catholic Book Club newsletter, which reaches almost 12,000 readers every week, we have strong evidence that despite many reports of its demise over the past decade, a culture of book reading continues to flourish.

Of course, let us be honest: Most of us have been more or less trapped in our homes for seven months. Thank God for books.

While we try to rotate among different genres in our four selections for the Catholic Book Club every year (from novels to biographies to memoirs to short story collections to poetry and more), our summer and fall selections for 2020 offered two books about the American South by men named John. How did that happen?

But that is the only thing they had in common. Over the summer we read and discussed John Kennedy Toole’s darkly comic novel about New Orleans, A Confederacy of Dunces, and this fall we are finishing up our discussion of John Howard Griffin’s Black Like Me, a short memoir about his journey through the American South in the 1950s after artificially darkening his skin to appear as a Black man. Both books received critical acclaim upon their initial publication but seem to have lost some of their popularity in recent decades.

Our Catholic Book Club moderator, Kevin Spinale, S.J., wrote several interpretive essays about both books to spur discussion and bring up aspects of each one that might be of interest. While many Catholic Book Club members had read one or both texts in high school or college, Father Spinale was approaching them for the first time, and we benefited mightily from his fresh take and penetrating insights.

A Confederacy of Dunces
Father Spinale noted the dark times swirling around us all during the Covid-19 pandemic, and confessed that “comedy is what I need. But I bet you need some humor right now as well—instead of The Brothers Karamazov, instead of Moby-Dick.” He also promised that “if you stick with it, this novel will make you laugh spontaneously, without any self-regard and without any need of knowing precisely what is beyond the pale at this moment in our cultural history. Everything is beyond the pale in the New Orleans of A Confederacy of Dunces, and that is what makes the book so darn funny.”

Catholic Book Club members tended to agree, though some found the main character of the novel, Ignatius J. Reilly, to be shot through with melancholy beneath the comedy—perhaps an unconscious reflection by Toole himself on the melancholy of his own life. Reilly’s sturdy frame and absurd appearance—including a hunting cap and a bushy mustache—have been memorialized with a statue in New Orleans. “Throughout the novel, he waddles around bursting at the seams in glutonous sloth and saturated with letters,” wrote Father Spinale, “and, by ‘letters’ I mean that he has stored up in himself words and ideas that make him a truly ‘lettered’ person.”

For some readers, Toole’s novel has not aged well. “My chief reaction to the Toole book is shame,” wrote James Speer. “I am ashamed that when the book came out I would undoubtedly have been amused by Toole’s mean parody of gay people and his equally mean parody of African Americans.”

For others, the novel kept its magical quality. “I finished A Confederacy of Dunces this morning. It was a wild read,” commented Mary Ellen Holm. “What an imagination Toole had! The ending made me wonder if he would have written a sequel if he had lived. It also seemed hopeful.”

Black Like Me
While admitting that John Howard Griffin’s memoir made him deeply uncomfortable at times (in part because the notion of appearing in blackface has become unthinkable for most people six decades later), Father Spinale also praised Griffin for his passions. “He possessed some truths about justice, some facts about the furious violence enacted on Blacks in the South, and he was hungry for a fuller truth. His hunger hounded him so much that he was insistent in carrying out this project, even to the point of death,” Father Spinale wrote. “Griffin’s unquestionable sincerity, sensitivity to justice and humility in the face of the truth of the experience of Blacks in the South should be enough for us to hear his story with an open mind and reflect on the profound but partial truths that he discovered in his temporary Blackness.”

Griffin’s book was more than just an account of a personal journey of discovery. At the time of its release, it de-
stroyed for many readers the illusion that the American South offered a “separate but equal” society where Blacks and whites coexisted in harmony. Rather, the world Griffin reported on was one of visceral hatred of African-Americans, especially Black men, and where life was an endless repetition of insults, hassles and public reminders that African-Americans were to consider themselves second class. Many readers commented that they had read the book decades ago and were moved once again by Griffin’s stories of the hatred and misanthropic behavior he encountered on his journey—as well as by his reflections on family and hospitality. “I just finished reading it. Supposedly I read it when I was 12 years old and I never forgot it, but rereading it was like I had never read it before. It was riveting,” wrote Beth Cioffoletti. “Even though ‘progress’ has been made with civil rights, I don’t think that we’ve dealt with the deeper problem of racism, prejudice, white supremacy. Black Like Me seeks to explore this in ways that few books since have.”

As with A Confederacy of Dunces, not all readers found that the book has aged well. “It is likely that the omission of black women from his account was due to his lack of interaction with them, which would have been in keeping with the cultural norms of the time,” wrote Liz Latorre. “However, reading it with 21st-century eyes, the lack of black female perspective and experience is glaringly noticeable.”

In his reflections, Father Spinale noted that Griffin’s Catholicism (he had converted a few years before) permeates the book:

He clearly carries the enthusiasm of his conversion into his writing. Early on in his time in New Orleans, he asks where he might find a Catholic church. He speaks of praying to St. Jude when he is threatened with violence at the hands of a menacing white stalker during his first few days posing as a Black man. He often praised a Catholic openness to desegregation in and around New Orleans, citing his relief that a Catholic bookstore in New Orleans was decent enough to cash his traveler’s checks when no other shop in the city would provide such a service to a Black man.

But Father Spinale follows that up with a troubling question: “Does Griffin go too easy on the Catholic Church? Was the Catholic Church in the South and elsewhere that tolerant and supportive of Black people and the pursuit of civil rights?”

We are now talking about what our next book should be, and we are always interested in suggestions for what to choose. (Don’t recommend your own book.) Are you interested in reading and discussing with us? Join the Catholic Book Club at americamagazine.org/catholic-book-club or on Facebook at facebook.com/groups/americaabc. Happy reading!

James T. Keane, senior editor.
As the future editor of John Berryman’s works, Robert Giroux, right, would remain a loyal friend, never backing away from his commitments to him.
New Beginnings for John Berryman and Robert Giroux

By Patrick Samway

How a lifelong friendship led to literary greatness

During the final days of Herbert Hoover’s Depression-ridden presidency, as millions of Americans were desperately seeking employment of any sort, John Berryman and Robert Giroux, both 18 years old in 1932, enrolled in Columbia College of Columbia University in Manhattan’s Morningside Heights. A few blocks north, Harlem was suffering from a devastating unemployment rate of 50 percent.

In spite of great social and political unrest, not only in New York but throughout the entire country, Columbia found itself protected by the rectilinear boundaries of 114th Street and 120th Street, and Broadway and Morningside Drive. It provided its incoming students a place of quiet refuge and heady elitism, inspired by the presence of such distinguished faculty members as Jacques Barzun, Irwin Edman, Douglas Moore, Lionel Trilling, Mark Van Doren and Raymond Weaver. Among all of them, Van Doren, known as a calm and steady mentor, stayed in touch with these two students more than did any other member of the faculty.

Poetry and the works of Shakespeare, beginning with reading and analyzing Shakespeare’s plays and poetry in Van Doren’s class, as well as editing and publishing essays and poetry in the Columbia Review, brought Berryman and Giroux into close contact. They took every one of Van Doren’s classes, including the American literature course in their junior year and the two-semester course on Shakespeare in the fall of 1935 and the spring of 1936. The class read 37 of the Bard’s plays, studied in chronological order, in addition to the two major narrative poems, the sonnets and “A Lover’s Complaint” and “The Phoenix and the Turtle.” This course aimed to transform the lives of the students and open up to them the comic heights and tragic depths of the human spirit.

The Poet and the Editor

After graduation, Berryman and Giroux remained in contact with one another, as Berryman wrote poetry and pursued a career as an academic while Giroux slowly acquired a reputation as a distinguished editor. Neither one expected the setbacks that eventually changed their lives. In March 1955, for example, Giroux, then editor in chief of Harcourt, Brace & Company, experienced the most trying time of his editorial career, which prompted him to leave that firm to join Farrar, Straus & Cudahy as vice president, where he shortly afterward became editor in chief. Giroux’s departure from Harcourt, Brace & Company caused him great personal and professional trauma, as he
mentions in a letter dated March 27, 1955, to his friend, the historian and novelist Paul Horgan. Because Giroux was Catholic, he was not considered eligible material for the Harcourt, Brace & Company board of directors. “The firm,” he wrote, “was quite content to publish Catholic authors, yes; Catholic money was acceptable, yes, but a Catholic director? No.”

Furthermore, in his three-page letter dated April 2, 1955, to Jessamyn West, another of his authors (known for her collection of stories The Friendly Persuasion), Giroux mentioned that he felt the need to resign because of “bigotry and religious prejudice.” He was shocked at being given 24 hours to leave the premises. When he protested that there were a good many items of unfinished business that required his attention, he was informed that others in the firm would meet and review what needed to be done. In short, as he told me in the spring of 1997, Harcourt, Brace & Company afforded him one hour for 15 years of dedicated service.

Literary Collaborations

In early April, Giroux wrote to his close friend and Columbia classmate Thomas Merton, O.C.S.O., at Gethsemani Abbey, Ky., deeply regretting the misunderstanding that occurred during his last weeks at Harcourt, Brace & Company, which resulted in the final corrections not being made in the first printing of Merton’s No Man Is an Island: “I am grateful to Harcourt, Brace for having released you from their contract,” he mentioned in welcoming Merton to Farrar, Straus & Cudahy.

Giroux’s unexpected, detailed letter to Berryman, written on April 27, 1955, reveals his desire to enlarge his stable of writers:

As you may have heard, I have left Harcourt, Brace after fifteen years to join this firm. I had thought my troubles were over when [Eugene] Reynal [vice-president and director in charge of the trade department] resigned last December, but this was a miscalculation; his leaving only confirmed the ascendency of the textbook people…. In any event, here I am loaded with honors (vice president, member of the board of directors, stockholder) and as excited as Alfred Harcourt and Donald Brace must have been when they left [Henry] Holt in 1919. I’ve known Roger Straus since we were in the Navy together; John Farrar and Sheila Cudahy are old friends.

I want to build up the American list in general (I think our European list has great distinction), and the poetry list in particular. I would like to start with Homage to Mistress Bradstreet. I can now sign contracts myself, and there will be none of the Harcourt, Brace ambivalence—editor proposing and management disposing. May I publish your poem…. We are going to do T. S. Eliot’s new play [“The Elder Statesman’] (he staggered me by cabling “I will come along with you”), and Cal [Robert] Lowell has agreed to publish the prose book he is working on [Life Studies, winner of a National Book Award]…. So come on, and join your friends. Will you wire me collect and tell me we can submit a contract for the Anne Bradstreet; I’ll offer you good terms.

Berryman’s poem is an imaginary monologue by Anne Bradstreet, an important Puritan known for her volume of poetry, The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America (1650), though sometimes the narrator’s voice is heard.

In addition, Giroux looked forward to his collaboration with Roger Straus, who came from a privileged background and could count on family financial resources (his mother was a Guggenheim and his father’s family owned Macy’s department store). Straus said that Giroux’s arrival in 1955 was “the single most important thing to happen to this company,” which would eventually be called Farrar,
Straus & Giroux. Once relocated to his new office, Giroux spent a good deal of time communicating with the 17 authors who went with him to his new firm, including T. S. Eliot, Randall Jarrell, Jack Kerouac, Bernard Malamud, Jean Stafford, Peter Taylor and, eventually, Flannery O’Connor.

When Berryman wrote to Giroux on April 30, he expressed his concern about the fiasco at Harcourt, Brace & Company: “It seems to have been a combination, far from ordinary, of ingratitude and bigotry. They are bound to go straight downhill; which, if you feel vindictive, will be agreeable. It is specially pleasing that Eliot went with you. I really think you ought to be proud about this.” Berryman wanted very much to sign a contract with Farrar, Straus & Cudahy for the Bradstreet poem, but he was not sure how to do this, since he believed that he was under contract to Viking to publish a book on Shakespeare he had contemplated writing.

Berryman felt discouraged that the most important work he had done to date, the aforementioned poem, which had appeared in Partisan Review but not in book form, was both unreviewed and unavailable. “Viking didn’t refuse it,” he added. “They said they wanted to wait & see (two years ago). But I don’t want them to publish it and am not prepared to ask them to. I have no resentment against them anymore, but after what’s passed I just can’t see an amicable relation....”

As a result, Berryman felt no compulsion at that moment to deal with Viking or write the book on Shakespeare because he was uncertain what would become of it. “I can’t get on with anything else with any happiness, because I am not allowed to arrange to publish it. All this is peculiarly exasperating, as owing to my very demanding work here [at the University of Minnesota] this winter, I am finally recovering my energy and peace of mind, from the chaos of the last few years, and am wild to be writing.” He felt the best solution was to repay the $1,000 advance to Viking, but he lacked the financial resources to do so and did not envision having that much money at his disposal for a year, if then.

When Giroux replied on May 2, 1955, he took Berryman’s words as a renewed token of their friendship. Giroux pursued his desire to publish the Bradstreet poem as a book by offering explicit contractual considerations that would clear the way for Berryman to continue writing and having his works published by a longtime friend who was trying very hard to understand his pressures and problems. Berryman needed, above all, the discerning guidance that Giroux was offering:

First of all we will advance you one thousand dollars to obtain the release from your contract. We will advance an additional two hundred and fifty dollars so that there will be some further cash on hand. In return we should like to draw a contract for the Anne Bradstreet poem and the Shakespeare biography.... We would want to put the entire advance on general royalty, that is to say, it would be repaid by earnings from any book under the contract. I cannot recall the royalty rate which Viking offered you, but we will offer no less than they, and more if production estimates allow.

Giroux hoped his proposal would be in general agreeable. If it were, it would seem that the first step would be for Berryman to write Viking for a release. “Is it clear, beyond doubt,” he added, “that they want the $1,000 advance?”

Giroux counseled his friend to have their answer in writing. Once he had Viking’s letter and Berryman’s word to the foregoing agreement, then Giroux would send him a check. Giroux felt that it probably would be best that his name not appear in the negotiations for the time being. “They will doubtless ask who your publisher is to be,” he continued, “and they may also ask to negotiate with that publisher directly; but it is really none of their business and, as far as I am concerned, you do not have to say that another publisher is in the picture.” Giroux was glad that Berryman had recovered his energy and peace of mind. “It’s deplorable that the prohibitive clause in the Viking contract has been such a frustrating matter.”

‘To Rappel Words from Some Inner Abyss’
A re-energized Berryman revved up, ready to pick up his career as a poet, as explained in a letter to his mother dated May 1: “Courage is what writing chiefly takes, when one has not the habit. Just jump in. Draft, without thought of detail or order.... The two great things are to be clear and short; but rhythms matter too, and unexpectedness. You lead the reader briskly in one direction, then you spin him around, or you sing him a lullaby and then hit him on the head.” During these months, Berryman experienced inner peace and consolation, as evidenced in his reply to Giroux of May 5: “I am about evenly astonished and delighted. I can hardly believe it. I feel like a new man.”

Later, in writing hundreds of poems for his two-vol-
ume *The Dream Songs*, Berryman did not hesitate, as he had indicated to his mother, to rappel words from some inner abyss, all the while keenly aware that ordinary speech patterns never reveal the freshness and originality of an intended idea. As mentioned in the introduction to Berryman’s *Henry’s Fate & Other Poems*, the poet and astute critic William Meredith suggests that the poems in *The Dream Songs* give the impression of laughter in the face of humiliation, despair and death—with a dose, one might add, of whimsy and wit that accentuates Berryman’s self-indulgent, allusive, unconventional originality that often creates synergies resulting in polysemantic subjectivity.

Berryman accepted Giroux’s proposal. In a follow-up letter of May 24, he shared with Giroux the letter he had received from a senior editor at Viking, Marshall Best, indicating that Viking would have been pleased to publish Berryman’s books had they arrived on schedule. Because so much time had elapsed since they originally signed the contract, Best was willing to release Berryman from his contractual obligation once the advance had been returned.

Berryman went into high gear now that he understood that Giroux would give him the sure guidance he desperately needed: “So hurrah,” he continued in his letter:

I have got intoxicated with the Shakespeare again, since seeing daylight, and have an entirely new view of it; I plan a much more free operation than I did, a book in fact bearing hardly any relation to those stupid old lectures and that boring piece [“Shakespeare at Thirty”] in the *Hudson [Review]*. I am going to document it to the hilt, at the back, but I mean in the writing, and in the intellectual & emotional design. I think now I am going to spend the whole summer producing an entirely new draft of it. I can do this in about three months I believe.

In his telegram of June 3, Giroux said that he would both repay the Viking advance and draw up a contract for the Bradstreet poem and the book on Shakespeare, which unfortunately was never published.

During those past months, the communication between Giroux and Berryman had been clear, honest and straightforward. As the future editor of Berryman’s works, Giroux would remain a loyal friend, never backing away from his commitments to Berryman; his strength of character helped him to accept Berryman’s overwhelming personal difficulties of severe alcoholism and dependency on a variety of drugs. He encouraged Berryman to write poetry during both good periods and difficult ones—even when Berryman went through prolonged periods of hospitalization, which tended to become more and more frequent, creating for him a disturbing series of mentally uninhabitable spaces.

Giroux paid close attention to the unusually heavy revisions Berryman wanted in the late stages of the editorial process, realizing all the time that he was dealing with an exceptional poet.

Giroux sent Berryman the promised check and, in turn, received a signed contract. He agreed not to say anything publicly about the contract until he had received word concerning Berryman’s release from Viking. He also wanted, in addition to having Ben Shahn do the illustrations, that the notes for the Bradstreet poem be considered as an appendix, since they would make the poem longer and give the type of pedantry critics all too often relish. On July 9, Berryman wrote to his mother that he had just received the canceled contract from Viking and that all the arrangements with Farrar, Straus & Cudahy were complete.

**Notable Writers**

Thus began a publishing friendship that lasted up to the time of Berryman’s suicide on Jan. 7, 1972, when he jumped off the Washington Avenue Bridge in Minneapolis, which connects two parts of the University of Minnesota campus.

Over the ensuing years, Giroux became a consummate editor with a host of notable writers—including Djuna Barnes, E. M. Forster, William Gaddis, Herman Hesse, R. W. B. Lewis, Walker Percy, Carl Sandburg, William Saroyan, Mary Lee Settle, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Susan Sontag, Derek Walcott, Robert Penn Warren and Eudora Welty, to name but a few—to all of whom he granted his full attention. He thought in terms of the formation, rather than the education, of an editor, as exemplified in the editorial careers of Edward Garnett, who launched Joseph Conrad, D. H. Lawrence and John Galsworthy in England, or Maxwell Perkins, who pub-
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lished F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway and Thomas Wolfe at Scribner’s.

Giroux believed editing lines is not necessarily the same as editing a book. “A book is a much more complicated entity, the relation and portions of its parts,” he wrote in his essay “The Education of an Editor,” “and its total impact could escape even a conscientious editor exclusively intent on vetting the book line by line. Perhaps that is why so many books today seem not to have been edited at all…. Editors used to be known by their authors; now some of them are known by their restaurants.”

During the Mass of Christian Burial for John Berryman at Saint Frances Cabrini Church in Minneapolis, with the Rev. Robert Hazel presiding, Giroux delivered a moving eulogy. Although saddened by the loss of such an original poet, the mourners could take comfort in Berryman’s remarkable literary achievements, including 13 books edited and published by Giroux, including Homage to Mistress Bradstreet (1956); 77 Dream Songs (1964), which was awarded a Pulitzer Prize, and His Toy, His Dream, His Rest (1968), which won a National Book Award and a Bollingen Prize for Poetry.

To a great extent, Berryman’s Homage to Mistress Bradstreet relaunched Giroux’s career, and Giroux’s expertise as an editor encouraged Berryman to write and publish as he so devoutly wished. They formed a most impressive publishing friendship.


In Closing

By Kevin Pitts

I told Tinsaye not to clean the juicer yet, she said I was stupid, and I said nothing, and silence is will and quiet wanting.

I told John she was difficult, he fired her, and quiet shuts the door and silence makes room

She came back to tell me Trader Joe’s paid better, that she in high school earned more per quiet hour than me at twenty seven

I was twenty five, I didn’t say anything, but I felt some noise like a window was open, and a car door closed outside.

Kevin Pitts is a writer living in Philadelphia and a student in the Writing Studies M.A. program at Saint Joseph’s University.
AMERICA ON TRIAL — Robert Reilly

The Founding of America is on trial. Critics say it was a poison pill with a time-release formula, and that its principles are responsible for the country's moral disintegration. In this well-researched book, Reilly strives to prove this thesis is false by tracing the lineage of the ideas that made the USA, and its ordered liberty, possible. He argues that the bedrock of America's founding are the beliefs in the Judaic oneness of God; the Greek rational order of the world based upon the Reason behind it; and the Christian arrival of that Reason (Logos) incarnate in Christ.

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James V. Schall, S.J.

An invaluable contribution to the understanding of classical, medieval, and modern political philosophy, while explaining the profound problem with modernity, which Schall shows to be a perversion of Christianity by trying to achieve man’s salvation in this world. It does this by politicizing everything which results in the absolute state. The best defense against this tyranny is “the adequate description of the highest things, of what is beyond politics”. Both reason and revelation are needed for this work, and they are eloquently set forth in this book.

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The startling debut of Raven Leilani

By Brandon Sanchez

By her first year of college, Raven Leilani had decided not to pursue a career in painting. Still, the 30-year-old fiction writer says her freshman year in Italy was one of the most artistically influential of her life. She saw the works of the Florentine masters—da Vinci, Michelangelo—and admired their facility for creating hyper-realistic depictions on the canvas. Lines, angles, close study of human anatomy: The precision was startling and a contrast to the work she typically favored.

As a high school student in a rigorous art program, she had been drawn to Impressionism. “There's something really beautiful to me about the skill it takes to put something on a canvas that is an approximation of a thing, but the viewer still knows what it is,” she tells me. (Leilani has continued to paint in her free time, especially throughout the coronavirus pandemic.)

This tension—between precision and subjectivity, seeing clearly and feeling deeply—marks Leilani’s fiction output. The subject comes up again and again when we speak by phone in the dog days of summer, the morning before Farrar, Straus and Giroux is set to publish her debut novel, Luster. Since its publication on Aug. 4, Luster has become a New York Times best seller.

A little over 200 pages, the novel feels as clear as a pane of glass and as elaborate as a stained-glass window. Luster follows a 23-year-old Black woman, Edie, as she contends with her own artistic coming of age. Edie is a painter in New York City in the 2010s who fumbles her way into a white couple's open marriage in suburban New Jersey. Strapped for cash, she ends up living in Eric and Rebecca's house, alongside their 12-year-old adopted daughter, Akila, who is also Black. What ensues is a series of psychosexual mind games and meditations on art, race, relationships, politics and religion. The novel is dense with social observation and self-analysis. For example: “I believed, like a Catholic or a Tortured Artist, that the merit of a commitment correlates directly to the pain you endure in its pursuit.”

“I started writing a story about a young artist coming up against systemic barriers,” Leilani says, “but also the private barrier: the one that’s just you.”

Born on Aug. 26, 1990, Leilani was raised a Seventh-day Adventist in the Bronx and upstate New York. After leaving her parents’ house, she had a crisis of faith. She is now an atheist.

“Before I left the church was the most pious year I ever had,” she says, “because I was trying so hard. When your primary way of organizing the world—which is God—when the idea of that is gone, you’re rootless. You're searching for the thing that will perhaps take its place. I searched wildly and everywhere for that nourishment, for that rubric to make meaning.”

To fill this God-shaped hole, Leilani turned to literature and the arts. As an undergraduate, she studied English and psychology. She tells me that she would sit in the back of her pre-med classes writing poetry.

For five years after graduating from college, she worked 9-to-5 jobs, including in publishing, as a delivery person and at the Department of Defense in Washington, D.C. (One of my favorite stories by Leilani, “Hard Water,” draws on her time working for the government.) During this period, she started to write seriously.
"I wrote two books," she says. “One that was a naked attempt to cash out. Smut sells, smut is great, it’s fun to write. I tried to write a body-snatching smut, and it just wasn’t good," she laughs. Then she attempted a more serious novel about fandom and music, with which she entered the M.F.A. program at New York University in 2017. Soon she scrapped that book, too, and began to write *Luster*.

At N.Y.U., Leilani’s ear for the music of language—she cites Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” as a major influence and has a tattoo of the Dylan Thomas line “Do not go gentle into that good night” on her wrist—came up against the need for clarity in her writing. She is a slow writer, she says, prone to tinkering with sentences until the rhythm feels just right. As an M.F.A. student, she had a lot of energy but was so concerned with creating something “original” that, in her view, the work she produced felt pretentious. Professors would point to a section of a short story and ask her to explain herself in plain words.

“And I couldn’t,” she says. “So I started writing with the intention of clarity. I wanted to have the beauty, but I also realized I wanted to write a book that people wanted to read.”

Leilani’s appreciation of beauty appears to be born, at least in part, out of her ideas about devotion. She believes that humans are inclined to worship: It is simply how we are built. Just as Leilani searched for something to sustain herself, so does Edie, who is also a former Seventh-day Adventist. More than anything, she desires to be witnessed, known and loved. But this longing can sometimes lend itself to unhealthy attachments. At one point, she realizes, “I have made gods out of feeble men.”

Toward the end of the novel, there is an exquisite sequence that takes place during Comic Con at the Javits Center in Manhattan:

At my height, the holding pen is principally a parade of armpits and old CO2, every mage in sight regretting their cape, the city’s moisture pooling into these few dank square feet, everyone rouged and slathered in unicorn spit.

The chapter is animated by Leilani’s own experience attending the convention. In a recent personal essay for Esquire, she connects Comic Con and fandom to religious devotion. “My primary belief system had collapsed,” she writes in that piece, “but I missed the communion, the part of both religion and fandom that is based not in isolated practice, but in a fervor to share the good news.” In *Luster*, communion is elusive. At times it can seem impossible.

At the beginning of the novel, Edie works as an editorial assistant for the children’s imprint of a publishing house, handling projects about bullied flounders and Labrador retrievers who work as detectives. The book’s momentum comes from Edie’s (in)ability to modulate both external threats and her own suboptimal impulses. In the first half of the novel, she sleeps with multiple people in her office, faces consequences at work and gets evicted from her apartment by her party-girl landlord. There is a tactility to Edie’s misfortune that has stayed with me. Almost halfway through the book, having turned to a gig in food delivery, she encounters the following:

A car speeds through a stop sign and I stop short and spill all the bisque. At this point in my career, I can deliver almost any bad news about soup, but when I get to the entrance, I notice that some of the lobster has gotten into my shoes.

Then the customer approaches. It is her boyfriend Eric’s wife, Rebecca. “For a moment I think maybe I can wring out my socks before she reaches me, but it is too late.” The squishy lobster, those doleful socks. Edie admits to Rebecca that she has nowhere else to go. So together they head to New Jersey, and the unraveling begins. (Leilani tells me she loves books that hinge on a psychological spiral seeded by obsession, which is more or less where *Luster* goes.)

The novelist Kaitlyn Greenidge, writing for the Virginia Quarterly Review, links Edie to the flâneur tradition. But unlike the middle-class, white male flâneur, who can catalog his surroundings as a detached, unobtrusive observer, Edie belongs to a “precarious class.” As observer and observed, she is usually playing defense. Only through
her art—unfinished self-portraits, paintings of household items—can she wrest autonomy from a society that would deny her such a prerequisite for flourishing.

Yet Leilani never set out to create a long-suffering moral paragon. Rebecca may conceive of Edie as a Trusty Black Spirit Guide who can teach Akila about Black womanhood, but Edie is always self-sabotaging and self-destructing (which is to say, she is a human being). Underlining that point, in one scene Edie strolls past a “Diversity Giveaway” in the lobby of the publishing house, a selection of books in which every protagonist is a flat martyr:

I go up to the table and there are a few new ones: a slave narrative about a mixed-race house girl fighting for a piece of her father’s estate; a slave narrative about a runaway’s friendship with the white schoolteacher who selflessly teaches her how to read; a slave narrative about a tragic mulatto who raises the dead with her magic chitlin pies... an “urban” romance where everybody dies by gang violence; and a book about a Cantonese restaurant, which may or may not have been written by a white woman from Utah, whose descriptions of her characters rely primarily on rice-based foods.

Oriented toward sound and reinforced by humor, Leilani’s sentences accelerate and do a loop-de-loop, like the Six Flags coaster Edie and Eric ride on their first date. That or they are clipped and spare, the circumspect syntax of someone who is watched but never seen. (“I try to be scarce,” Edie says when she fears she has overstayed her welcome at Eric and Rebecca’s.)

“You’re privy to her most private, candid thoughts,” Leilani tells me. “But ultimately, she isn’t articulating that all the time to the people who are around her. She can’t. She’s trying to survive, and surviving as a Black woman involves a not insignificant amount of calculation and curation. And I wanted to speak to the absurdity of that.”

In her review of the book for The New York Times, Parul Sehgal wrote that the novel’s figurative language doesn’t always land, that some of the metaphors are too vague, too purple. She cites as an example a passage in which Edie feels guilty for reading someone’s journal in the same way she would feel guilty for overindulging in fettuccini at an Olive Garden. What Sehgal seems to hint at in her critique is the Beat undercurrent that runs through Leilani’s work. When Leilani tells me that Allen Ginsberg was a formative influence on her writing, I nod, because there is a tendency in Luster—thematically and linguistically—to chase moments of rapture at all costs.

“I wanted everything I wrote to have that kind of [Ginsbergian] energy,” Leilani says.

And who wants a literature that shoots for technical mastery at the expense of nutty, sublime ambition? Several months after finishing the novel, I maintain that there is much pleasure to derive from the ornate handiwork. Leilani’s imagination fluctuates and scintillates like a mirror ball. (Early in the book, at a ’70s-themed club night, Edie observes that “the beauty of disco is the too much.”) Most of the time, her language does succeed. Run-on sentences are interspersed with quiet staccato palate cleansers. And as this is a debut, excesses are forgivable.

“There’s a part of art that is failing, and that’s what Impressionism is,” Leilani says. “An artist’s interpretation is what you see on a canvas. You get to see the fingerprints of an artist.” The fingerprints are what I most enjoy about Luster. Even when some of her bits go too far, I am still fascinated by the mind that invented them. Example: the goofy subplot in which Edie interviews for an administrative position with a professional clown who launches into a monologue about “the historic model of the Italian buffoon.”

Ever the Impressionist, Edie wants to leave a trace: to witness and be witnessed, to remember and be remembered. “I wanted to write a young Black woman who is seeking connection and seeking affirmation, like everyone is, of her personhood and her artistry,” Leilani says. “And the weirdness, the jaggedness, of the things we do in service of that.”

Leilani’s Herculean attention to detail—vanilla Juul pods, a nightclub smoke machine producing puffy “orange convex knives,” “Band-Aids and crushed Dixie cups” at a metal concert—is about more than verisimilitude. As Leilani implies at the novel’s end, it is about recording all the world’s beauty and ugliness while one still can. Each clear-eyed observation and lyrical digression is offered up as a salvaged token, evidence that you saw and loved and suffered and felt deeply. To quote Edie: “Proof that I was here.”

Brandon Sanchez is a writer from California and former Joseph A. O’Hare Fellow at America Media. His work has also appeared in The Wall Street Journal.
OF PLAGUES AND POSSIBILITY

By Mary Doyle Roche

In a cruel twist of fate, Geraldine Brooks’s *Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague* had been in my stack of books crying out to be read for months. I had added it to my list of preparations for developing a course on outbreaks, epidemics and ethics. I was not in search of a new case study, but one arrived anyway in spectacular fashion, in the form of Covid-19, and now I am merely on the epidemic bandwagon.

For the first few weeks of the stay-at-home orders, I thought to myself, “Now is not the time for reading about a plague. Bring on the escapist thriller!” Yet I couldn’t bring myself to move it to the bottom of the pile. Finally, I decided that there might be no better time—and I was right. This brilliant first novel by Brooks, who would later win a Pulitzer Prize for *March*, gave my imagination a place to go with the fear and anxiety and allowed me to return, empowered and hopeful, to the world in which one crisis seems to follow on another.

Published in 2002, *Year of Wonders* is set in a 17th-century English plague town. Readers experience the villagers’ grief and perseverance through the eyes of Anna Frith, a young woman whose losses are almost unimaginable but who nevertheless finds strength not only to serve her neighbors, but also to lead a community through a devastating crisis.

There are obvious resonances with our current context of quarantine and social distancing, though Brooks was even more prescient than I had anticipated from the title. The surprise was the way in which the novel also tapped into the feelings of desolation aroused by scandals of authority in the church and by my longing for women’s leadership among the people of God.

The people in the village are unsure about where the plague comes from, how and why it spreads and what they might do to remedy it. Anna, a domestic servant in the local rectory, visits the sick with the local minister’s wife. Equally important, she pays attention, observing patterns...
of illness and keeping track of the remedies that bring some relief. These two women find themselves learning nursing care and midwifery, and they become intrepid researchers.

At the direction of the minister, the town enters a self-imposed quarantine. Finally conceding that “wealth and connection are no shield against Plague,” only the rich, landowning family makes an escape, leaving their estate empty and all who had faithfully served them without food or shelter. Anna remarks, “And so, as generally happens, those who have most give least, and those with less somehow make shift to share.”

As the death toll mounts, even the town church must be abandoned for the sake of social distancing. “Do not despair!” says the minister. “For a church is not a building, merely! We shall still have our church, but we will have it in the midst of God’s own creation. We will meet under the ceiling of Heaven.” The fields become the place of worship, and one of the consequences is that what we might now call denominational differences fall away, or at the very least are relativized in their significance.

Some characters in the novel prey on people’s fear and desperation. Charlatans peddle trinkets and spells to protect against the plague that not only fail in their promise but also add to the pain, suffering and ill health. A price-gouging gravedigger becomes ever more ruthless in his theft. Those who have wealth manipulate the rules in order to take more. Those who were always living in poverty and on the brink of ruin do what they need to do to survive.

Anna must also confront betrayal at nearly every turn. Those who should have cared for her and exercised responsibility for the common good of the town instead choose to be self-serving. Some who see so clearly what the Gospel requires in the care of the sick can, at the same time, find no mercy in their hearts to relieve other forms of anguish and instead heap shame upon those in need of consolation. As is the case in our own time, vigilance with respect to “sexual sins” in the context of gross gender inequality borders on the pathological.

In the midst of all the suffering and grief, the signs of heroic compassion and perseverance, and the depravity too, the villagers confront existential questions about the forces that might lie behind the plague. Twenty-first century Christians also ask whether a virus is a sign from God, and if so, a sign of what? For Anna, the questions are unanswerable:

Why, I wondered, did we, all of us, both the rector in his pulpit and simple Lottie in her croft, seek to put the Plague in unseen hands? Why should this thing be either a test of faith sent by God, or the evil working of the Devil in the world? One of these beliefs we embraced, the other we scorned as superstition. But perhaps each was false, equally. Perhaps the Plague was neither of God nor the Devil, but simply a thing in Nature, as the stone on which we stub a toe.

The current epidemic strains faith to the limit, but it also asks us to shift our gaze away from theodicies that frequently comfort the powerful and toward our moral obligations in this moment, which include supporting the best science we have available to us. Year of Wonders also prompted me to attend to God’s steadfast presence with those who suffer and ask, “How can I bring the Spirit’s breath of life to those struggling for air?”

This novel is indeed a story of wonder in the sense that the triumphs and the tragedies evoke awe. But it is also a story about wondering, about thinking imaginatively about the problem at hand. Like many women whose leadership is called upon in a crisis, Anna is both empowered and empowering. She will not go back to the old way. And neither can we go “back to normal.” The way things were before may not be possible, and not even entirely desirable. Too many inequalities and systemic vulnerabilities have been laid bare. Anna chooses something radically new. That possibility is open to us today as well.

When we gradually emerge from stay-at-home orders and social distancing requirements, this book can speak powerfully to how many of us might feel—eager and exhausted all at once. It calls us to acknowledge the toll that these events have taken and to be gentle with ourselves, our families, neighbors and coworkers:

At day’s end, when I leave the rectory for home, I prefer to walk through the orchard on the hill rather than go by the road and risk meeting people. After all we’ve been through together, it’s just not possible to pass with a polite, “Good night t’ye.” And yet I haven’t the strength for more.

Mary Doyle Roche is an associate professor of religious studies at the College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, Mass.
A Life of Love Affairs That Ended With God

By Eve Tushnet
One of the best spiritual books I have read this year is mostly gossip.

Liane de Pougy was born in 1869 as Anne-Marie Chassaigne in a provincial French town, but she longed early for the high life. She married young (and pregnant) but fled her unhappy marriage, leaving her son Marc with her husband. She changed her name, got a job dancing at the Folies Bergère and quickly became the most famous courtesan of the fin-de-siècle—another Helen, conquering a different Paris.

For Lianon (as she called herself), life was a banquet, and she took seconds of every dish. Men poured jewels in her lap and women threw themselves at her feet—de Pougy's 1901 novel, Idylle Saphique, is a roman à clef about her affair with Natalie Barney, then the empress of lesbian Paris. At last she was swept away from the glittering world in the only manner that could have been more glamorous than her immorality: Prince Georges Ghika of Romania married her, winning the prize so many men had sought and changing her name yet again—to Princess Ghika.

By 1919, when de Pougy started to keep the diaries that became My Blue Notebooks, the height of her fame had passed. De Pougy's diaries are full of drama and scandal, swirling gowns and opium dealers; but another note is creeping in. De Pougy writes with élan about her friends, her lovers and her foes (who are often also friends and lovers). But these anecdotes are punctuated by brief, sincere arias on an unexpected subject: her love of Jesus Christ. Slowly it becomes clear that de Pougy's most intimate relationship was, is and will be with her Lord. In the last decade of her life she became a Dominican tertiary. She was buried, in 1950, in her religious habit.

In her final notebook, de Pougy wrote, “If anyone thinks that [my diaries] ought to be destroyed, I approve. If anyone wants to publish them, make a selection of these memories which crush my repentant heart—if their publication...in all their horror might benefit some straying soul, I approve.” She offers them, she says, “ONLY in the spirit of humiliation.” This is a showy self-abasement—and yet when de Pougy writes it, I believe it, because of the glimpses of her heart the diaries reveal.

For most of the diaries' pages, her most characteristic attitude is insouciance. She is erratic and materialistic—she knows this herself, but that doesn’t stop her from enjoying it. Her complaints are exaggerated to the point of delight: “My ‘Maintenon’ dress exhausted me, I was the slave of that white collar which crushes so easily. Lianon! Organdy’s victim!” Even as faith begins to soak into her life like blood on a ballgown, she doesn’t seem to feel the weight of it. She can do a topless photo shoot in the morning and then pick up her well-worn copy of The Imitation of Christ to read a chapter before bed. In an early entry she regales her diary with the story of the confession she made before her marriage to Ghika: “For Liane de Pougy to make her confession must have been quite awkward, don’t you think? She polished it off like this: ‘Father, except for murder and robbery I’ve done everything.’”

This is a soufflé faith, and there was no chance it would remain aloft forever. De Pougy’s savvy wit—and her awareness of her own dancing intelligence—may have kept her from acknowledging the sins that did not fit her self-image. She cheerfully confesses (and deliciously details) her flightiness, her melodrama, her pleasure in tempting and conquering both men and women, her lax faith, her love of pretty, fancy things. She talks herself out of repentance. After she spends an evening
with two women friends in “delicate, tentative caresses, like inhaling the perfume of a flower,” she writes, “I love my friends. Surely, dear Lord, it can’t be a great sin?” (Two weeks later she records her appreciation for St. Teresa of Ávila’s Meditations on the Father.) Any cruelties she cannot confess charmingly do not get acknowledged. She does not notice that her fights with her friend Max Jacob are colored by her distaste for his Jewishness. That disdain only wears away—if it did wear away, and they didn’t simply get sick of fighting with each other—after a long and painful education in suffering.

As early as 1920, de Pougy writes, with the rapt, suffering piety of the French Catholic revival, “I draw my consoling faith from the vanquishing of my strength.” The beads on Lianon’s rosary are carved with familiar scenes: childhood prayers, a devotion to St. Anne, a lost child. Her son Marc Pourpe died a hero in World War I, and de Pougy mourned him all her life. She watched her friends develop drug habits, watched the world forget her and move on without a thought. Her affair with Barney had a tumultuous aftermath; and although the two women continued to see and care for one another for a long time, they grew further and further apart until at last their relationship suffered a decisive break.

Still, the hardest lessons in her catechism came not from her illicit delights but from her Catholic marriage. Georges Ghika was even more tempestuous than his wife—especially later in life, when his drinking damaged his mental abilities. The most painful blow came when Ghika ran off with a friend of de Pougy (with whom de Pougy herself was enthralled), leaving her alone and devastated.

De Pougy begins the process of divorce—a fact reported in The New York Times, a testament to her old notoriety. Then the diary skips two months, and when she picks up her pen again, Ghika is back. De Pougy writes that a woman religious to whom she turned for counsel told her to renounce self, do her duty and take back her husband, but what passed between the couple remains private. (Although she does note that they reunited with pleasure in the bedroom!) De Pougy’s depiction of her husband is not flattering. As his mind deteriorates, he spends days in incoherent, cruel ranting; he makes failed attempts at sex that his wife endures rather than welcomes. She is anguished and prays that God will let her die. And yet she is surprisingly tender. She sees her husband as ill and accepts him as a part of her, and so she cares for him. He depends on her. They manage.

In 1928, in the middle of their suffering, they traveled together in the Alps near Grenoble. Here she received not so much “a twitch upon the thread” of faith as a good hard yank. Stopping on a whim at the Asylum of St. Agnes, a home for children with physical and mental disabilities, de Pougy “left that place shaken to the quick, vanquished by the Mother Superior.” After pouring her heart out to the nun, de Pougy visited many times and devoted herself to raising money for the children’s care. Her own suffering and others’ Christianized her, as fossils may turn to opal.

Light-hearted Lianon still shows her face here and there. One late diary entry is a funny, touching, ambivalent tribute to her old lesbian friends: “We were...voluptuous and cerebral little apostles, rather poetical, full of illusions and dreams.” But in 1940 she writes: “The sinner has disappeared, Liane de Pougy of the forty blue notebooks full of iniquity and scandal, lightness, frivolity, intrigue and lies—Liane de Pougy is no more. ‘My God, my suffering at having offended You is extreme.’”

After that, there are only a handful of entries. Ghika at last becomes gentle: “my friend, my devoted companion, my unhappy child.” She gains a confidant, R. P. Rzewuski, O.P., to whom she entrusted her diaries; he wrote the preface to the 1979 edition. And then she puts down her pen. She signs her last entry “Anne-Marie Ghika...the last of the last.” She would die in 1950, after nine years of no writing.

One of the reasons I believe de Pougy when she says she is not eager for these diaries to become public is that she stopped writing them. She had already written less and less as her life grew harder. The long silences that punctuate her reports should be a structural failure in the diaries’ narrative. It should make readers feel that the point of de Pougy’s life lay in the things she wrote about most fluently, the earlier things: the fun. Instead, the silences seem mysterious and protective, indicating a kind of truth that can only be experienced rather than described.

The diaries represented to their author her life as a sinner; when that life no longer interested her, she had no reason to write. But the diaries also show Lianon the seeker. While you are looking for something, you have to write down all the places where you tried to find it. But once you have found it, you don’t need to keep maintaining the list.

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Curtis Sittenfeld’s novel *Rodham* is based on the life of Hillary Rodham Clinton—except that in Sittenfeld’s reimagining, she remains Hillary Rodham.

Published in May 2020, *Rodham* is based in its early parts on Hillary’s real life: her modest childhood, her spell-binding speech at her Wellesley graduation and her exciting dalliance during law school with a fellow law student and aspiring Southern politician named Bill Clinton. But in Sittenfeld’s retelling, Hillary refuses to marry Bill because of his chronic cheating and goes on to run against him for the presidency. And (spoiler alert) she wins, becoming the first female president of the United States.

*Rodham* is engaging, full of the evocative language and keen wit that power all of Sittenfeld’s novels. And it is creative, rife with the titillation of viewing these most public of public figures in the private lives that Sittenfeld creates for them. But despite all of *Rodham*’s strengths, the book is inseparable from its revealing—and, in my view, depressing—premise: that the imagined Hillary (forever “Rodham”) is a more inspiring and worthwhile protagonist than the real-life Hillary (“Clinton,” going on 45 years, or nearly two thirds of her life).

*Rodham*’s dust jacket asks, “What would have happened if Hillary Rodham never married Bill Clinton?” In truth, of course, the likely answer is: Hillary would have been a very successful lawyer, law school dean or judge, and most of us would never have heard of her. But the fantasy answer that Sittenfeld offers is that without the baggage
of public association with an ostensibly regressive and un-
deniably sleazy Bill Clinton, Hillary Rodham would have
been the president of the United States.

In Rodham, moral clarity eschews complication. Hence, the Hillary of Rodham is boring.

Of course she is, because she has been reduced to the
sum of her most oversimplified virtues and permitted only
the most ubiquitous and tiresome of 21st-century white-la-
dy vices (she doesn’t always check her white privilege). And
the Bill of Rodham is boring, too. Of course he is, because
he has been reduced to the sum of his most oversimplified
vices and permitted only the crudest and most timeless of
ex-boyfriend virtues (he has extraordinary sex appeal).

But for 40 years, the real-life Clintons of U.S. poli-
tics have been anything but boring. That is partly because
both Hillary and Bill are unique, brilliant, flawed people in
ways that are complicated and confounded by the times in
which they have lived. Bill’s sexual misdeeds, for example—
both known and alleged—are unremarkable when judged
against the long sweep of history, in which powerful men
have always used and abused less powerful women with
relative impunity. It is the changing contexts of Hillary’s
and Bill’s lifespan—the entrance of massive numbers of
women into the workforce, the public reckoning over sex-
ual harassment, the “Me Too” movement—which (rightful-
ly!) casts Bill’s sexual conduct in a light that is further from
“boys will be boys” and closer to “this man is probably a
sexual predator.”

It would have been interesting if Sittenfeld had looked
at Hillary and Bill through the complex lens of these chang-
ing times, if she had imagined and embellished a private life
for Hillary to go alongside a Bill that was, as the real Bill
has been, simultaneously riveting and enraging. But to turn
Bill into a simple villain, a bloviating boor who was “never
good enough for [Hillary],” is to undervalue not only Bill’s
intellectual and political merit, but Hillary’s as well.

Sittenfeld has said that people are always asking her
whether she thinks the real-life Hillary has read Rodham.
People seem to think that Hillary would be gratified by the
heroic portrayal she is given in Sittenfeld’s novel. This leads
me to conclude that what always seemed like an unfounded
criticism of Hillary for seeming too robotic and not human
enough as a presidential candidate was even further off
base than I realized. Apparently, she actually wasn’t robot-
ic or inhuman enough for us.

After all, in wondering
whether Hillary has read
and enjoyed Rodham, we
are imagining her not as a
human being, but as a fic-
tional construction who
would somehow appreci-
ate the reduction of her
life to less than the sum
of its parts. We are imag-
ing that she would feel gratified that a sympathetic nov-
elist imagines that she would be a truly great leader. That
is, if she had made different decisions, lived a different life,
made a different person or no one at all, and not had her
daughter or her grandchildren. In short, if she had been a
different person.

We seem not to understand that after we have stripped
Hillary of what we see as her liabilities, there would be no
Hillary left. Human beings are not buffets from which you
can take what is least problematic and most convenient,
leave the rest and find what you took unchanged. We are
more like cakes. You can’t extract the flour or the butter
after the thing is baked and still call it a cake. Therefore, I
am perplexed by the implication that the best we can do is
to imagine that Hillary would have been great—if she were
simpler for us to understand and explain.

It seems that because of our political and cultural po-
larization (and because of the self-selected news and social
media that make this polarization part of almost our every
waking moment), we have created a false and overinflated
understanding of ourselves and of those on “our side” as
purely virtuous. Simultaneously, we have created a false
and overinflated understanding of those on the “other side”
as lacking all virtue.

This insistence on purity makes figures like Hillary and
Bill impossible to classify reasonably. But if we want Hillary
as a pure heroine, we cannot have a human being, full of both
unique virtue and sordid vice, giving the keynote speech at
the Democratic National Convention at which Hillary was
nominated as the first female major party candidate for
president (as Bill did in 2016). Instead, we want Bill recast as
Hillary’s antagonist. Indeed, we need him to be that if we are
going to continue to cheer Hillary on. Because anyone who
is not purely good by our increasingly extreme and religious
understanding of partisan politics must be purely bad.
But reality, like the realistic fiction that Sittenfeld usually produces, is messier than that.

In 2008, Sittenfeld (who has been exploring the human condition in all its confounding complication since 2005’s *Prep*) published *American Wife*, a fictionalized account of Laura Bush’s life. In the novel, George and Laura Bush are dubbed Charlie and Alice Blackwell, and the storyline of their 30-year marriage is embellished and altered in many ways, even as it follows its real-life timeline and has Charlie serve as president of the United States.

Like *Rodham’s* Hillary, *American Wife’s* Alice is mostly virtuous and vanilla. But instead of being unsubtly cast as such opposite an unworthy ex-boyfriend who is ultimately vacuous and villainous, she is paired with a husband who is profoundly imperfect yet ultimately lovable. In *American Wife*, Sittenfeld gives us a conflicted interiority for Alice; she is both highly critical of and unwaveringly loving toward Charlie.

Most of Sittenfeld’s readers probably disagree with George W. Bush politically (and far more fiercely so in 2008 than now, given the ways in which Bush’s popular image has been softened among progressives by time, friendship with the Obamas and the inevitable favorable comparison with Donald J. Trump). And yet Sittenfeld gives us a Charlie Blackwell based on a George W. Bush who is sometimes foolish, yet other times wise; sometimes thoughtless, yet other times insightful; sometimes maddening, yet other times tender.

It was deemed possible, in 2008, to consider Bush a disappointing if well-meaning president and a loving if imperfect man at the same time. After all, for any character to be based on the actual human being that is Laura Bush, rather than on some nonexistent fiction of her, the person with whom Laura spent 30 years would have to be a human being, too.

In 2020, by contrast, our greatest fantasy is to inhabit a world so simple that there is no use for fantasy.

Thus, Sittenfeld was more willing to portray and engage the confounding complexity of George W. Bush in 2008 than she is to do the same for Bill Clinton today. I would wager that this says less about Sittenfeld’s understanding of the Bushes or the Clintons than it does about her keen observation of our cultural context, to which popular fiction ultimately answers. Today we do not want to consider popular figures with the kind of insight and sophistication that Sittenfeld masterfully wielded in her earlier novels. We want to reimagine them as convenient examples of the reductionism and oversimplification that we now insist constitutes reality.

We cannot allow Bill Clinton to be a political genius and also acknowledge that he is an alleged sexual predator, because recognizing that these two things are true at the same time feels unfair. We cannot allow Hillary Clinton to be an extraordinarily competent, accomplished and prepared presidential candidate running against someone who was none of these things and also acknowledge that she ran a poor presidential campaign, because recognizing that these two things are true at the same time feels unfair. We want to live in a fairy tale, in which the good guys are right in every way and the bad guys are wrong in every way, so that we never need to think too hard about anything.

But as every well-adjusted person must learn, human life in this fallen world is not and never will be fair. It is not and never will be a narrowly construed meritocracy. That is why the ability to navigate complexity and resist reductionism is arguably one of the most underappreciated democratic virtues. This is especially true in the realm of art, where politics and pragmatism should always take a backseat to the exploration of and appeal to our humanity.

Of course, both of the real-life Clintons have been around too long and too successfully not to embrace complexity and resist reductionism. Perhaps this is why they are so widely viewed as politically—and now, it seems, even artistically—passé.

Elizabeth Grace Matthew works in online education at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.
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For the writer Jean Giono, the natural world is fully capable of rejecting the humans who live in it.

Jean Giono’s Mirror of the Present

By Robert Rubsam
Jean Giono was born in 1895, the son of a laundress and an artisan cobbler in the southern French town of Manosque. Though his grandfather had once worked with the father of no less a literary figure than Émile Zola, Giono’s was a largely cash-strapped household, and his literary education came from the bargain-priced Garnier Classics editions of Virgil, Homer and Aeschylus, which he would carry with him on walks through the Provençal countryside. As the genesis of Giono’s sensibility, the image is almost too perfect: the earthy fused with the epic, imbuing the peasant landscape with high poetry.

But this is the lesser half of the story. In 1915 Jean Giono was drafted into the French army’s 159th Infantry Regiment and served four years on the Western Front, fighting in the bloodbaths at Kemmel, the Somme and Verdun, from which only 11 members of his company survived. As depicted in his bitter, fragmented 1931 novel, *To The Slaughterhouse*, Giono’s service was defined by repeated and seemingly random violence, a headlong flight from the ravenous jaws of modernity. Late in the novel, his characters come upon the remains of an English battery: “All around were wheels, fragments of tubes, empty cartridge cases, shells like caterpillar cocoons, disemboweled horses with twisted necks, men with their faces in the earth, black faces biting the sky, a leg, flesh in pulp, the brains of a man on the rim of a wheel.” And through it all, he notes, one cannon continues to fire, oblivious to the carnage surrounding it, its operators walking “over the corpse of the officer, crushing his face with their boots in order to pick up the shell.” His only decoration came from the English, for saving a blinded British soldier from the burning hospital where they were both being treated for poison gas.

Retreat From the World

Giono returned to Manosque a dedicated pacifist, declaring the modern world a cruel joke. He married, had two daughters and retook his position at the Manosque branch of the Comptoir National d’Escompte de Paris, a bank where he had first worked before the war. Giono also began to write, first a book of prose poems published by his lifelong friend Lucien Jacques; and then, in 1928, the periodical Commerce published his first novel, *Hill*, where it was discovered by André Gide and republished in 1929 by Éditions Grasset.

The novel is set in the remains of a tiny village, “four houses, orchids flowering up to the eaves,” which lies halfway up the slope of the southern Alpine plateau, in “the wind’s domain.” It is an isolated place, already half-empied by the brutality of its environment and rendered all the more precarious once its well runs dry and a drought spreads across the landscape. This is a place in which much happens without explanation; and its handful of residents, including the superstitious Gondran and the fool Gagou, contemplate every excuse: a black cat, the evil eye, even a curse from the local paralytic, Janet.

In the story’s visceral climax, a torrent of wildfire scourges the countryside, described by Giono as a living organism, a consciousness against which the villagers struggle with all their knowledge of the landscape. By sheer luck they survive, the well begins to bubble, and the perilous existence of the village Bastides Blanches returns to normal. *Hill* is a coiled novel, told in pointed, present-tense prose, and is in many ways the prototypical Giono work. Nature is bountiful but unsparing, and only vaguely understood by the sunburned and unlearned characters who inhabit it. There is a push and pull among animal, vegetable and human life that can achieve a kind of pastoral splendor—as in Giono’s 1930 work *Harvest*—but more often sparks profound fear in observers. Early in *Hill*, Gondran heads out to clear an overgrown orchard. After waking from a nap, he kills a lizard with his spade. Immediately, nature seems to revol: “And there: there it is. The wind comes rushing./ The trees confer in low voices.” “While he digs,” Giono continues, “it occurs to him for the first time that there’s a kind of blood rising inside bark, just like his own blood; that fierce will to live makes the tree branches twist and propel these sprays of grasses into the sky.” Gondran’s thoughts spiral:

So all around him, on this earth, does every action have to lead to suffering?

Is he directly to blame for the suffering of plants and animals?

Can he not even cut down a tree without committing murder?

It’s true, when he cuts down a tree, he does kill. Suddenly and unavoidably, he imagines the earth as a vast body, alive and capable of crushing him as easily as he crushed the lizard. He recalls an earthquake, and as he prefigures the conflagration that will close out the novel, he can no longer bear it:
The idea rises in him like a storm. It wipes out all his reason. It’s overwhelming. It’s hallucinatory.

[...] Earth breathes haltingly.

And, taking up his spade, Gondran flees back to the Bastides, “not even daring to whistle for his dog.”

**Interwar Novelist**

Over the next decade, Giono wrote a series of similarly pastoral novels, short stories, plays and hybrid works like *The Serpent of Stars*, many of which were very successful—including their film adaptations by Marcel Pagnol—allowing him to dedicate all his time to writing. Several of them were translated into English, gaining Giono a reputation as one of France’s leading interwar novelists.

This is perhaps appropriate, as many of Giono’s greatest influences came from English, and particularly from the United States. Traces of Walt Whitman’s vast, sensual nature can be found in Giono’s writings all throughout this period, as can Herman Melville’s mythical mysticism. In fact, he and Lucien Jacques collaborated on the first French translation of *Moby-Dick*, a work Giono first came to love in English. He shares a sense of scale with Melville, equally attentive to animal movement and fine shifts of light as he is to the vast sweep of the seasons or of the decades. His narrators are often grounded in a kind of eternal present, where the coach will always run and a certain tree will always stand, moving us by degrees into the uneasy past of narrative.

*A King Alone*, published in 1947, begins with Frédéric, “who owns the sawmill on the road to Avers,” the same owned “by all the Frédéric’s” from his great-grandfather on down. One might almost expect to find yet another Frédéric sawing and planing in Provence today. “There’s a beech tree there,” he promises, before dropping us into the 19th century.

In so doing, Giono gives his fictional Provençal countryside a sense of heightened reality, as full of life as William Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County and just as fictional. The problems of the past and present intermingle, as do the movements of the seasons with the lives of his characters. This fluid relationship—between the natural and the human—could be considered the crux of Giono’s uniquely pastoral environmentalism. His characters never exist apart from nature, and the environment is never indifferent to their actions, resulting in a give-and-take that can be rejuvenating but also reactive, even violent.

*Harvest* centers around the character of Panturle, “a huge man” who is “like a piece of wood walking along.” Panturle’s life in a denuded village is transformed by his taking of a wife, as well as his choice to replant the dried-out fields with good Provençal wheat. By the end, life has begun to return to the “small wasps’ nest” of Aubignan, but in measure. Nature is not rejected but accommodated.

**Strikingly Antimodern**

This interaction goes both ways. Nature has a way of striking back. The wildfire that closes out *Hill*, or the perverse bacchanal of “Prelude to Pan,” in which a community’s harvest festival, and its attendant pride and waste, are deformed by a man whose connection to nature has rendered him almost animalistic.

Giono’s environmental outlook could be described as strikingly antimodern. He highly values shepherds and farmers, and scorns officials and representatives of the state. His vision of modernity is clear in his writing about World War I, which he depicts as deeply deranged, a chaos that upends and destroys everything on the front as well as back at home. He rejects all political associations and programs, as if the solutions can grow from the land itself. His faith rests with individuals, often heroic in their lonely pursuit.

Writing in his diary in 1943, Giono remarks on a friend’s daughter who studies pottery with a group of artisans: “She lives a magnificent life, making her passion her occupation, tracking down the artisans’ secrets, the mystery of the glaze, the good—or bad—fortunes of the kiln.... This is exactly the opposite of Industry and the Commune. It belongs to Art and to Individuality.”

In 1939 Giono was imprisoned by the Vichy government for his pacifism—“defeatism,” in their terminology—and again in 1945 for collaboration, though on what grounds was never entirely clear. Giono maintained his strongly antipolitical stance during the war, and his return-to-nature vision certainly found its counterpart in Vichy’s own agricultural ideals; but throughout the occupation, Giono maintained a kind of quiet resistance, advocating on behalf of persecuted left-wing intellectuals. In October 1943, he traveled to the concentration camp at Méès to free a Protestant prisoner by the name of Meyerowitz, who had
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converted from Judaism, whom he sheltered at his farm in Forcalquier. This has not prevented scholars like Richard J. Golsan from declaring him “ideologically complicit” with the regime, and perhaps they are right.

Giono was profoundly dispirited by the failure of his return-to-nature movement, not to mention the continent’s descent into what he viewed as yet another “religious war.” His views remained stubbornly antipolitical, as if he could refuse to engage with the conflict. “In our modern mechanical world,” he wrote in his *Occupation Journal* (published earlier this year by Archipelago Books), “it’s clearly very tempting to embrace the cause of religious war. It must give one the impression, despite everything, that he is a thinking being.”

After his release from prison, Giono was prevented from publishing until 1947. His first postwar novel, *A King Alone*, was written between Sept. 1 and Oct. 10, 1946, and tells a deliberately fractured story of a serial killer and the gendarme who comes first to stop him, and then to do great damage to the valley, and finally to himself. It is pessimistic in a way that sharply diverges from Giono’s works of the 1930s, giving voice to a kind of communal despair at the beginning of the Cold War. Man destroys first the community, then the world, and then, finally, himself.

**A Mirror of the Present**

All of which makes Giono’s interwar writings feel like a striking mirror of the present, when continents burn and storms grow stronger and the warming of the earth produces “a new kind of cascading violence, waterfalls and avalanches of devastation,” as the journalist David Wallace-Wells put it in his recent book *The Uninhabitable Earth*. In contrast to writers like Cormac McCarthy, whom Charles Taylor calls “anti-humanists,” Giono finds not indifference but a kind of reaction from the natural world, which is fully capable of rejecting the humans who live in it. Though frequently beautiful, his Provence is a denuded landscape, full of ghost villages and failed settlements, scarred by human hands but frequently without humans to fill it. Take care of the world, he warns, or it might no longer want to take care of you.

Giono belongs to that generation of artists whose experience in World War I led them to re-evaluate the worth of human civilization. But unlike Louis-Ferdinand Céline and Robert Graves, who retreated into reactionary ideology and remote geography, respectively, Giono was not in search of escape and remained deeply committed for all of his life. Constancy is Giono’s currency, reflected as much in his daily life—as in his 35-year affair with the married Blanche Meyer—as in his fiction.

Though his novels frequently star peasants, their wisest characters are invariably shepherds, whose deep familiarity with animal and plant life rarely translates into domination. Their love of the high mountain landscape is not one of possession, but mutual understanding. It is a shepherd whose blessing of a newborn child signals a return from the slaughterhouse of World War I, and their creation play sets the narrator of Giono’s *The Serpent of Stars* back on his way.

And it is Elzéard Bouffier, the herding protagonist of *The Man Who Planted Trees*—arguably Giono’s most famous work—whose slow, steady, intimate labor, those many decades “imperturbably continuing to plant” tree after tree, transforms the “unparalleled devastation” of the Provençal Alps into a green and inviting place, capable of sustaining not only plant and animal life but human life too, villages and fields and families drawn by this one shepherd’s invisible work.

Bouffier defies the drift of nature, the vagaries of politics and the devastation of two world wars and emerges an unassuming hero. When considering this kind of work, Giono writes, “I am convinced that in spite of everything, humanity is admirable.” If we come to know the world, to take care of it on its terms, then it will know and take care of us.

Robert Rubsam is a writer and critic whose work has been published in the *New York Times Magazine*, *The Baffler* and *Commonweal*. He is currently an M.F.A. student at Columbia University.
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Christopher Pramuk’s stated objective in *The Artist Alive* is to explore the significant questions of life in the creative musings and self-expression of a variety of artists in order to offer “tools for critical and contemplative appreciation.” Of course, this is not necessarily new, especially not to him. Given how I reveled in his 2013 book, *Hope Sings So Beautiful: Graced Encounters Across the Color Line*, I anticipated a deliberate and even prayerful approach to the subject at hand. He brings to this monograph that inviting disposition as well as several new strategies of exploration which lend an air of discovery to the subject matter.

Right away, Pramuk identifies himself as a translator. Using familiar methods of interpretation—whether David Tracy’s “classic” or Abraham Heschel’s notion of wonder or Charles Taylor’s notion of the social imaginary—he translates stories germane to the human experience that illuminate paths to the transcendent when communicated through the arts. He features the lives of artists (the world behind the text) as well as their creative self-expression (the world within the text) in order to summon the reader to consider musical, visual and literary muses for their own journeys of self-discovery and self-expression (the world in front of the text). He translates the biographies of Pink Floyd, Joni Mitchell and Bruce Springsteen in the haunting intonations of their arrangements, songs and voices; or the historical context of apartheid South Africa or pre-civil rights America; or post-9/11 America into the anthems of Peter Gabriel’s “Biko” or Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit.” To that end, he succeeds in making the book something that stirs the heart and piques the intellect.

Pramuk is also effective as a translator when he weaves autobiographical details about his own encounters with the works he studies into his reverence for them, all of which have affected his own wrestling with ques-
tions about being human. He tells us about different points in his life journey when the arts provided critical moments of consciousness-raising, whether as an adolescent or a father of adolescents, as a disciple of Jesus or one who teaches about him, as an adoring consumer of the arts or a reverent participant in the responses they evoke. This imbues the book with the intimacy of spiritual memoir. This was particularly evident in my favorite chapter, on Stevie Wonder’s “Songs in the Key of Life.”

In his translations of several songs from that album in the key of his own life, Pramuk opened up much-needed space for my own self-critical wonder about the dynamics of racism in my own story. In fact, Pramuk nudged me toward the album with his disquieting observation that “one cannot listen to Stevie Wonder or Kanye West records in the suburbs, pray for peace ‘down there’ in the city, and consider oneself sanctified.” So I wrote this review with Stevie Wonder playing in the background.

Initially, songs like “Village Ghetto Land” revealed to Pramuk a world “largely hidden” from the “suburban, middle-class, white America” of his youth. He returns to them as an adult for Wonder’s implicit critique of “the racially unconscious white listener embedded in his music” in order to see more clearly how perception can limit our capacity for love. Pramuk amplifies this conundrum with anecdotes from Wonder’s own coming to terms with his role in naming and condemning racism and with the limits of human love, even while insisting it was the path to a different way of being human together. And Pramuk shares his encounters with the world to which Wonder summons his listeners. “I’ve often wondered,” Pramuk says, “how strange, sad, and beautiful, that Stevie Wonder, a blind mind, would be teaching me how to see.”

Last, and perhaps as a reflection of his pedagogical expertise, Pramuk structures the book around what I like to call the “spoonful of sugar” approach to theological reflection. He arranges the chapters thematically, with the artistic piece—its story and the story of its creator, both told from a variety of perspectives—at the center. I found myself lured into familiar and often dense theological concepts in a wide range of theological genres: aesthetics, liturgy, political theology, ethics. He pairs artists, musicians, poets and filmmakers with theologians: the musician Bruce Cockburn with Walter Burghardt, S.J.; the novelist Jean Giono with Pope Francis; the iconographer William Hart McNichols with Henri Nouwen; the singer Bono with Walter Benjamin.

He also looks beyond the Christian tradition—to Jewish mysticism and the-beginner’s mind of Buddhism—to help deepen encounters with this creativity. He implicitly defends this method with frequent references to theological insights his students have shared, often directly quoting them. He models for educators how to invite and then reverence the process of consciousness-raising and purposefulness that the arts can evoke and how to make space for it in our lives or in those of others.

For example, in his engagement with the Indigo Girls and the biblical Song of Songs in Chapter 7, he demonstrates the ways in which the arts are essential for liberating biblical interpretation for people who too often are wounded by narrow interpretations of the same. As an educator who often struggles to find Catholic resources that unequivocally affirm the lived experiences of L.G.B.T. students and consider both their suffering and visions of the “kin-dom” of God through the lens of justice, I found this chapter particularly helpful for doing what Pramuk prescribes at its end. “Perhaps the time has come for straight people of faith like myself to sit humbly and quietly before LGBTQ persons and ask them to share with us, face to face, stories from their own ‘book of experience.’”

At times, there were just too many theological luminaries (and not enough women among them). But when I found myself awash in the insight and intonations, I just surrendered to that sensation, because Pramuk is indeed a trustworthy curator and guide. Whole paragraphs read like meditations. And while his selections
also reflect his generational self-understanding. He unapologetically acknowledges as much. I did wonder if the book might resonate a bit less with readers who are older or younger. But Pramuk’s appendices give readers, especially those who are educators, the confidence to invite and guide students through critical reflection on artistic expression that speaks to them, if not to us.

In short, Pramuk achieves the goals he sets out for himself in this book. The very act of reading it increased my capability to “linger long and lovingly with the real,” his articulation of spirituality. Given the overwhelming uncertainties these days that make figuring out the real—much less lingering with it lovingly—so difficult, this book is right on time.

Maureen H. O’Connell is an associate professor at La Salle University and a board member of Cranaleith Spiritual Center, both in Philadelphia, Pa.

Larger Than Life

“This is a book about a musician’s influence on non-musicians,” Alex Ross says. That’s good, because I am a non-musician.

Ross is the premier music critic in the United States, and Wagnerism often includes detailed descriptions of compositions and performances. About “Das Rheingold,” the opening prelude to the “Ring” cycle, he writes: “Only after 136 bars—four to five minutes in performance—does the harmony change, tilting toward A-flat.” I have heard listeners to “Das Rheingold” say the sound is what God was hearing before the Creation. Others, more accurately to Wagner’s intentions, say they hear evolutionary forces at work. “It is an emanation of primordial nature, the hum of the cosmos at rest,” explains Ross.

Can we comprehend today how a composer’s music might fuel anarchy? It did. One of the many illustrations in Wagnerism shows the Dresden uprising of 1849 with the famous soprano, Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient, a “Ring” performer, exhorting the crowd from a window above the street. Wagner personally fueled revolution, as well. Ross writes: “In a fiery speech...he demanded the obliteration of the aristocracy, the imposition of universal suffrage, the elimination of usury, an enlightened German colonization of the world and, somehow, the self-reform of the king of Saxony.” He was arrested in the Dresden uprising and narrowly escaped prison by decamping to Zurich.

Wagner’s focus on usury, opposition to capitalism, declarations of evil in the world and his extolling of the virtue of art were done in ways that appealed to many Christians, targeted many Jews and led almost inevitably to fascism. He was also afraid of modernity: urbanization, multiculturalism, the media. When Nazism arose four decades after his death, Wagner’s sense of “holy German art” came frighteningly into view. The passion of complex music that had long brought Germans to tears became the soundtrack for violence and barbarity.

Ross shows the effect that philosophers like Schiller, Hegel and Schopenhauer had on Wagner, and then the influence that Wagner had upon Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche served as propagandist for Wagner’s ideas in his early published work. He also helped to raise funds to build Bayreuth, a theater-festival venue meant to incorporate the religious ritual of Oberammergau’s famous Passion Play and the performances of gods in the ancient Athenian Great Dionysia.

In France, Wagner shed his light upon Charles Baudelaire and the Symbolists, and Paris itself, in the 1860s. Napoleon III commanded a performance of the mythic opera “Tannhäuser,” a work that Baudelaire praised using traditional religious language. Other Parisian enthusiasts included Paul Verlaine, Émile Zola and the painter Paul Cézanne. They were all interested in the ritualistic, post-Christian implications of Wagner’s work.

In England, Wagner was at the heart of the revival of all things Arthurian. The sword in the stone is one of the motifs in the “Ring.” Also, his impact on novelist George Eliot as well
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—Paul Mariani, professor, poet, and literary biographer

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as upon the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood is traced by Ross. Wagner later influenced T. S. Eliot’s The Waste Land, Virginia Woolf’s The Waves and the work of the Inklings C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien.

Meanwhile, that first Bayreuth Festival, championed by Nietzsche before he rejected the master, was a financial failure, so Wagner contemplated a flight to the New World. What would have happened to his “holy German longings” of rebirth had Wagner landed in New York Harbor? “The image of Wagner in America...might make for a lively historical novel” someday, Ross muses provocatively.

Anyone interested in the Victorian era, the collapse of bourgeois Europe in the early 20th century, the Russian Revolution, World War I, the rise of Nazism and every notion of culture during that time will find much to ponder here. From the chapters on the United States, I found the discussion of Hollywood figures Alfred Hitchcock and Charlie Chaplin fascinating, and on Francis Ford Coppola’s “Apocalypse Now,” “captur[ing] an empire in its decadence,” an enduring Wagnerian theme, utterly convincing. “There is no path into the twentieth century—for good or evil—that bypasses Wagner,” Ross quotes another historian saying.

In the 21st century, Wagnerism lives on in what the author calls “fantasy culture: the increasingly vast body of novels, stories, comic books, films, television series and video games presenting alternative worlds of mythological or legendary character.” Think of the “Game of Thrones” books and television series, and the ongoing “Star Wars,” DC Comics and Marvel Comics franchises. In them all there is a power of place, mythical force, unsuspecting novices, questions of lineage and gnostic ways of knowledge that can be traced back to Wagner’s epics. Nietzsche declared: “Wagner sums up modernity. It can’t be helped, one must first become a Wagnerian.” May we survive it. The choice of “Shadow” in Ross’s subtitle was right on, for the effects of Wagnerism can be dark, mysterious and ominous.

Ross does not shy away from the legacy of racism and anti-Semitism long connected to Wagner and his devotees. There are hundreds of references, some running for many pages, of Wagnerian anti-Semites and racists. But Ross does not grapple enough with why many Jewish thinkers and artists have appreciated Wagner’s art despite the hatred toward them in it. Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern political Zionism, for instance, found inspiration in Wagner. Great musicians in Israel such as Zubin Mehta and Daniel Barenboim have fought passionately against public opinion for the right to perform Wagner in concert. Ross is himself Jewish, and says he was in college when he too fell in love with Wagner.

This is an interesting time for this book to appear. “Cancel culture” now has a name. I may even be one of its defenders, in that we’re at a point when I believe certain issues no longer deserve debate. Shall we deny basic rights to L.G.B.T.Q. people? There are not two sides to this. Are Jews and Blacks less than human, and should they be excluded from society? This is not an “issue” to be discussed. We can pull that statue down. So how could W. E. B. Du Bois, the great Black writer, say of Wagner’s musical dramas that “no human being, white or black, can afford not to know them, if he would know life”?

Ross’s final chapter, “The Wound,” includes this statement: “In the minds of many, Wagner still poses a palpable threat. Could the composer somehow stoke new horrors or rouse some future Hitler? In an age when classical music has a marginal role in mainstream culture, the possibility seems remote.” He probably wrote that a year or more ago, I wonder if he would rebuff the suggestion so easily today.

Finally, it is astonishing to read the accounts of the first audiences of “Tannhäuser” or “The Valkyrie” (part two of the four-part cycle, “The Ring”) weeping with joy or crying aloud in outrage. “Rapture” was also a common descriptor of what those who were there experienced. What an artist would give today to have an audience care so deeply for what they have created! I suspect it is unlikely to happen in our lifetime, but I also suspect the very possibility is what continues to fascinate many about Wagner’s life and work.

Jon M. Sweeney is a frequent contributor to America and the author of many books.

Prophetic Writings

“Nothing is free” was Robert Stone’s motto in life and work, according to Madison Smartt Bell in Child of Light, his new biography of one of America’s best but perhaps least-known writers. Stone’s motto reflects his and his characters’ personal experience of alcoholism and drug addiction. Having read all of Stone’s books to prepare for this review, I have to admit that I sometimes had the feeling one gets reading Hemingway’s Across the River and Into the Trees, when you lose count of how many bottles of wine the
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Amos C. Homer Stone, whom Bell calls “a cipher.” His mother told him conflicting stories about his father, but she took care of her son well enough and sent him to a Catholic school in Queens, N.Y., run by the Marists. Stone’s memories of St. Ann’s, which later became Archbishop Molloy High School, are riven by terror, with an undercurrent of strained gratitude.

The terror was for the beatings he received—including razor strop lashes across the palms. Later he would say in an interview: “The Marists were savage, but in those days I don’t know where they stood in terms of savagery—you were always hearing about some order of Irish troglodytes down the road who were actually permitted to use flails.” The gratitude was for their teaching him, to a certain extent, how to write, and for giving him a “realistic” view of the world. In his contribution to a collection of essays titled Once a Catholic, he wrote: “It’s very hard to escape that take on the world. And when you come right down to it, the world is like that, after all.” Not exactly a stellar recommendation for Catholicism, but Stone’s view of the world was pretty grim. His St. Ann’s days are portrayed vividly in his story “Absence of Mercy.”

Stone, a top student in spite of his rebelliousness—he stopped going to Mass during adolescence—never finished high school. He joined the Navy, earned his G.E.D., and was able to attend New York University, where he studied under the legendary writer-teacher M. L. “Mack” Rosenthal and met his soon-to-be-wife, Janice. Rosenthal recommended that Stone apply for the Stegner Fellowship at Stanford.

At Stanford, Stone became part of a social group that included Ken Kesey, of One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest and “The Merry Pranksters” fame, and he experimented with LSD. He and Janice were very good friends with Kesey and his wife, Faye; and the couples continued to see one another until Kesey’s death. But Stone, even at the height of his involvement, was still something of an outsider. Applying W. B. Yeats’s dictum that “the intellect of man is forced to choose perfection of the life, or of the work,” I think Kesey chose life and Stone chose art.

Janice, who was described by a friend as “the patron saint of writers’ wives,” shopped a portion of Stone’s first novel, A Hall of Mirrors (1966), to Candida Donadio, who liked what she saw, and Stone’s literary career was launched. He and Janice had two children, Deirdre and Ian, and lived in London for four years, from which Stone flew to Vietnam for two months. The experience would help him finish his second novel, Dog Soldiers (1974), which co-won the National Book Award in 1975. Stone took a long time to write his novels, usually five to seven years, because, he said, he was a “slothful perfectionist.” He was always working, but it was hard for him to commit to a long-term project. And he was always teaching and traveling (he was a very restless man) and churning out journalistic pieces and the occasional short story, one of which, “Bear and His Daughter,” Ann Beattie considers a classic.

But it was in his novels that he wrote best. A Hall of Mirrors is set in New Orleans and involves right-wing politics, civil rights and a tragic love story. Dog Soldiers (1974) explores the American experience in Vietnam; A Flag for Sunrise (1981) does the same for Central America and is one of the most harrowing novels I have ever read. Children of Light (1985), a Hollywood novel, in-
Fall Moon

By Andrew Frisardi

Another winter coming and I’m talking to myself.
I’m setting up my wine and oil on the cellar shelf
In demijohns and jars as relics of my lucky stars.
It’s getting late. The more time flows the icier its scars.
I can’t tell if I pass through seasons or they pass through me.
I’m pulpy as the ripened fruit on my persimmon tree,
Whose leaves have fallen. In the distance, Mount Soratte’s cone
Is floating like an island where the tide of clouds has blown.
A raven grouches past defoliated pylon wire
Across the valley toward the setting sun’s sputtering fire,
Which the moon, a hooded vagabond, wields blood-red on a
sickle:
A reaper not as grim as death, or fate, but just as fickle.

Andrew Frisardi’s poems have appeared lately or are forthcoming
in the Alabama Literary Review, Dappled Things, First Things,
Hudson Review and in a chapbook,
Death of a Dissembler.

As a translator-editor, he has published
Dante: Convivio: A Dual-Language Critical Edition
and Vita Nova.

Franklin Freeman, a frequent contributor
to America, lives in Maine.
Dear Friends and Benefactors,

What an unprecedented year it has been for all of us! When I left to go to the Holy Land with our 100 pilgrims at the end of February, I could have never imagined not returning to our New York City headquarters and in-person meetings with our hardworking staff.

Despite these uncertain times, there have been many graces and successes for which I am very grateful. Above all, your ongoing support, prayers and engagement with our content across all of our platforms give me tremendous hope!

When we closed our offices in March because of the coronavirus, our dedicated staff members reinvented their workspaces at home so they could continue to work even harder than ever to provide the news, analysis and spiritual resources you needed and wanted. You may have heard additional episodes of the podcasts “Inside the Vatican” and “Jesuitical,” while our editors published content to nourish your spiritual needs.

During some of those dark days, my spirits were buoyed by subscribers, listeners and viewers like you, who wrote to tell us that America has been an anchor of stability and consolation in their lives, to let us know that they regularly shared our content on social media and among their communities, subscribed to our newsletters and podcasts and continued to read our flagship magazine faithfully.

I was also humbled by the more than 800 donors from 47 states and 20 countries from around the world who gave more than $120,000 on our anniversary in April to continue to make it possible for us to tell the stories that matter most. We know that our pursuit of the truth is recognized by many, as shown by the 53 Catholic Press Association awards we won in June, which was a record number for us at America.

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Thank you for your generosity and encouragement, and most of all, thank you for believing in our staff this year and always. Your support of our work reaffirms our commitment to you. We could not do this without you. Nor would we choose to.

Be assured of my prayers for you and your loved ones, now and always. May there be brighter days ahead.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Rev. Matthew F. Malone, S.J.
President & Editor in Chief

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Chairperson, Board of Directors
Brooklyn Jesuit Prep’s partnership with America for Giving Tuesday last year was a great success. Many of our respective donors saw our Giving Tuesday partnership as a special day of unity to support two great nonprofits. Most importantly, our respective supporters learned more about another Jesuit work.

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Father Ralph Goman • 2020 ............. Minnesota
Mr. Sebastian Gomes • 2020 ............ New York
This image was one of the promotional elements during our partnered fundraiser - our “Dream Bigger” campaign - with Brooklyn Jesuit Prep on Giving Tuesday last December. The students at BJP are amazing!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Maria Gonzales</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Ontario, Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Lauren Gonzalez</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Connecticut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Geoffrey Goodale</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Michael R. Goonan</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>New York</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Vyvian Gorbea-Oppliger</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Michigan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Nancy Gordon</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>New Jersey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Bob S.orman</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Ohio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael P. Gorman and Anne N. Goorman</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>Maryland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Maryann Gormley-O’Connor</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Pa.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Jim Graf</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Kentucky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Todd A. Graff</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Minnesota</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. and Mrs. Arthur E. Graham</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Kentucky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Carolyn Graham</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>Connecticut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Michael Graaney</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>Oregon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Sarah Granger</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Jo Marie Grasser</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>New Jersey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Sheila Gray</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>New York</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Lynn Graybeal</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Hawaii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. William J. Green</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William H. Green and Amanda C. Green</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Diane D. Greenberg</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>California</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Greene</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Katherine Greene</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. and Mrs. E. James Greiner</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>New York</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Elizabeth Griffith</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Maryland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Thomas Griffith</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Nebraska</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. and Mrs. Mark Grilli</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>New Jersey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Susan G. Grimes</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>New York</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johanna Grimm</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Alzenau, Germany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria Grimminger</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Michigan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Jaqueline Griswold</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>Indiana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. and Mrs. Jon Grout</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Michigan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rev. Wayne Gubbels</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Iowa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. William Guglielmi</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Florida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Mary Ann Guligier</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Joseph Guillinan</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Michigan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy Gulidner</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. and Mrs. Dennis E. Gullo</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Florida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James L. Gunnick and Jean L. Gunnick</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>Tennessee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Mary Gunelson</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Missouri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. and Mrs. Frank A. Gunther Jr.</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Maryland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel Gunther</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>Ohio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Amado Gutierrez</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>New Mexico</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Barbara Gutzler</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>New York</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Haas and Kathleen Haas</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>California</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Howard G. Haas</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Karen M. Habersky</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rev. James A. Hablewitz</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Lauren Hackman-Brooks</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Washington</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. William J. Hahn</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Michigan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe Hall and Cindy Hall</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Nebraska</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Alice Hallinan</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Florida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hallsey and Johnson</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>California</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Anita Hall Anderson</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Melanie J. Halvorson</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Illinois</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. and Mrs. Richard Ham</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>New York</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Thomas Hannan</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>Missouri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Thomas Hanrahan</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>California</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. John Hansen</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Delaware</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victor Harbuckhak Jr.</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Jennifer Hardee</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. and Mrs. Stephen U. Harders</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Maryland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Marilyn Hark</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. and Mrs. William A. Harkins</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>N.J.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Sharon Harrington</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Michigan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. John Harrington</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>New York</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I was inspired to support America’s ministry after making the 2020 pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Under Fr. Malone’s leadership, the pilgrimage was spiritual and intellectual nourishment for my mind, body and soul and one of the most memorable experiences of my life! 💫

Beth Marren

Mr. Joseph S. Harrington • 2019 .......... Illinois
Ms. Brenda Harris • 2018 .................. California
Ms. Bridget Hart • 2020 ...................... N/A
Ms. Kathleen D. Hartley • 2016 ........... California
Mr. and Mrs. Norton Hatlie • 2016 .......... Iowa
Ms. Rita L. Haugh • 2008 ................... Minnesota
Mr. Kevin Howorth • 2018 .................. Ohio
Stephen T. Hayes and Jude D. Hayes • 2020 ....Florida
Ms. Roberta Head • 2019 .................... California
William Healey • 2019 ..................... Massachusetts
Rev. J. Marc L. Hebert • 1988 ............. Massachusetts
Mr. and Mrs. Dan and Hebert • 2020 .... Kansas
Mr. Frank J. Hoffert and Mrs. Geraldine J. Hoffert • 2019 .............. Ohio
Sr. Mary P. Hogan • 2012 .................. New Jersey
Mr. and Mrs. David Hogan • 2014 .......... New York
Mr. Timothy Hogan • 2019 .................. Missouri
Mr. Thomas Christopher Hogan • 2020 .... N/A
Deacon Dennis and Patricia Holley • 2020 .... N/A
Rev. David Holloway • 2013 ................ Missouri
Mr. Ronald Holman • 2017 ................. Massachusetts
Ms. Judy M. Holmes • 2006 ............... Michigan
Mr. Bob Holstein • 2020 ................... Iowa
Jeffrey Holt and Mary S. Holt • 2020 .... New York
Ms. Emilee Hunter-Maguire • 2018 ........ Nebraska
Ms. Meghan Hussey • 2018 ............... District of Columbia
John Huston • 2019 ....................... California
Ms. Christine Hyland • 2019 ................ Virginia
Rev. John M. Hynes • 1995 ............... Delaware
Mr. and Mrs. Anthony J. Iannaccone • 2018 ....... Pa.
Mr. Daniel Illich • 2015 .................... California
Dorothy and Joseph Infosino • 2018 .... New Jersey
Mrs. LouAnne Insprucker • 2017 .......... California
Ms. Donna Ioppolo • 2018 ................. Illinois
Ms. Mary Margaret Bea Isaak • 2018 ........ Minnesota
Dr. and Mrs. Ed Ivancic • 2015 .......... Mississippi

Ms. Sheila Hegar • 2019 .................... Pennsylvania
Julia Hegge • 2019 ...................... Wisconsin
Ms. Martha M. Heidkamp • 2014 ............. Ohio
Mr. and Mrs. Clovis Heimsath • 2016 ....... Texas
Ms. Margaret P. Heino • 2018 ............ New York
Mr. G. Matthew Hettker • 2020 .............. N/A
Ms. JoAnn Held • 1989 ..................... New Jersey
Robert Hellen • 2019 ....................... Minnesota
Mr. Don D. Hellkamp • 2020 .............. Florida
Ms. Patricia Helsley • 2019 ............... Virginia
Katie Hennessy and Tim Hennessy • 2016 ... Oregon
Ms. Jessica Hensler • 2020 ................... Ohio
Mr. Eugene Herbert • 2020 .................. California
Mr. Thomas Herchline • 2020 ............. Ohio
Mike and Mary Herman • 2019 ............. New York
Ms. Meghan Hermes • 2020 .............. N/A
Ms. Lillian N. Hess • 2015 ................... Arkansas
Mr. and Mrs. James R. Hickey • 2018 ...... Ohio
Mr. and Mrs. Joe Hicks • 2017 .............. Pennsylvania
Mr. and Mrs. James F. Higgins • 1998 .. Pennsylvania
Mr. and Mrs. Kevin Higgins • 2014 .......... Colorado
Mr. and Mrs. William Higgins • 2016 ....... Connecticut
Mr. Jerome Hill • 2019 ..................... New Jersey
Ms. Marilou Hitt • 2019 ..................... Ohio
Mr. and Mrs. Robert Hitter • 2010 .......... Massachusetts
Mr. John G. Hodgson Jr. • 2017 ........ South Carolina
Ms. Janet M. Holzer • 2017 .................. Florida
Kenneth Homan • 2019 ................... Massachusetts
Mr. William J. Hopkins • 2006 ............ Pennsylvania
Sybil Hopkins • 2019 ....................... North Dakota
Rev. William Hoppe • 1993 ................. New York
George M. Horey and Kathleen M. Horey • 2018 ... Va.
Ms. Patricia Horgan • 2019 .................. New York
George L. Horishny and Lorna Lee Horishny • 2020 .... Tennessee
Ms. Lucille M. Hornby • 2019 ............ Massachusetts
Dr. Robert and Karen Hostoffer • 2016 ...... Ohio
Ms. Stephanie Hotard • 2020 ............... N/A
Mr. and Mrs. Thomas J. Houlihan • 2012 .... Pa.
Ms. Anne Marie Housel • 2016 ............. Massachusetts
Deacon Joseph F. Houser • 2012 ............. Pennsylvania
Mr. Ivan J. Houston • 2006 ................. California
Dr. and Mrs. James H. Howard • 2002 ...... Nebraska
Mr. and Mrs. John S. Howell • 2017 ........ California
Mr. George F. Howlett Jr. • 2006 ......... Wisconsin
Ms. Ruth Hronich • 2019 ................. Illinois
Mr. James D. Huber and Mrs. Mary M. Huber • 2014 ...... Michigan
Mr. Scott Huizenga • 2016 .................. Michigan
Samuel and Judith Huil • 2015 ............. Texas
Ms. Kimberly Humphrey • 2020 .......... Massachusetts
Mr. Robert Humphreys • 2019 ............ New York
Ms. Ann D. Hungerman • 2006 ........... Michigan
Ms. Fay B. Jackson • 2018 .................. Texas
Ms. Courtney C. Jackson • 2019 ........... Louisiana
Rev. Joseph A. Jacobi • 1993 ............... Oklahoma
Mr. Robert Jacobs • 2018 .................. Wisconsin
Ms. Mary Jaeger • 2020 ..................... Illinois
Mr. Timothy P. James and Mrs. Maureen E. James • 2018 ....... Maryland
Jan Jans, S.T.D. • 2020 ................... Belgium
Mrs. Patilynn Jansen • 1999 .............. Illinois
Ms. Joan Jarosek • 2015 ..................... Texas
Miss Christine A. Jarvis • 2007 .......... California
Paul F. Jenkins Jr. • 2020 ................. South Carolina
Ms. Joanne Jenovic • 2020 ............... N/A
Mr. Raymond Jereza • 2019 .............. Nevada
Mr. John Jerpe • 2019 ..................... N/A
Hye Jin Moon • 2019 ..................... N/A
Katherine M. Johnson and Joan C. Johnson • 2002 ......... Minnesota
Mr. and Mrs. James T. Johnson • 2008 .... California
Ms. Jennifer Johnson • 2016 .............. Michigan
Mr. Eric Johnson • 2019 .................... Washington
Ms. Anita Vela Johnson • 2020 ............. N/A
Mr. Jeff Johnson • 2020 ................... Florida
Ms. Gabrielle Johnston • 2020 ............. California
Dr. Mary Beth Johnston • 2020 ........... N/A
Mrs. Gerry U. Jones • 1996 ............... Ohio
Mr. Robert Jones • 2015 ................... Arkansas
I rely on *America* for the historical and cultural insights from a faith perspective. The scripture review in *The Word*, variety of timely articles and film and book critiques all demonstrate how Jesuit and lay writers struggle right along with the rest of us to understand, deepen and live our faith. ♦️

Anne Jenkins

Rev. Bernard N. Mohan • 2003 .................. New Jersey
Mr. Nicholas M. Mohr • 1983 .................. Kansas
Mrs. Judith E. Molseed • 2012 .................. Virginia
Mr. Frank Monahan • 2018 .................. Maryland
Mr. Marc Montalbano • 2018 .................. North Carolina
Mr. Joseph A. Monte • 2019 .................. Maryland
Mr. George J. Monteverdi • 2018 .................. California
Ms. Christina Montgomery • 2019 .................. Georgia
Mr. Robert Montoya • 2019 .................. Texas
Ms Sarah Moon • 2017 .................. New York
Ms. Margaret Mooney • 2005 .................. New York
Mr. John J. Moore • 2014 .................. Connecticut
Prof. Sean D. Moore • 2020 .................. N/A
Mr. and Mrs. G. T. Morahan • 2019 .................. Alaska
Patrick T. Moran and Kathryn Moran • 2020 ..................

Mr. and Mrs. Thomas P. Mortell • 2016 .................. Colorado
Mr. Michael Motley • 2019 .................. Ohio
Mr. Robert Motley • 2009 .................. New Jersey
Dr. Patrick Mowery, Ph.D. • 2016 .................. California
Mr. Octavio Muguerra • 2009 .................. Texas
Ms. Marie M. Mulcahy • 2007 .................. New Jersey
Rev. Roger P. Mullaney • 1988 .................. Arizona
Ms. Katherine Mullen • 2018 .................. North Carolina
Mr. Jack Muller • 2019 .................. New York
Joseph and Sharon Mullin • 1999 .................. Massachusetts
Ms. Helena Mullin • 2010 .................. New Mexico
Mr. Michael Mullin • 2020 .................. N/A
Ms. Silvia Munoz • 2019 .................. Florida
Marilyn Muriello • 2020 .................. N/A

Ms. and Mr. Thomas P. Mortell • 2016 .................. Colorado
Mr. Michael Motley • 2019 .................. Ohio
Mr. Robert Motley • 2009 .................. New Jersey
Dr. Patrick Mowery, Ph.D. • 2016 .................. California
Mr. Octavio Muguerra • 2009 .................. Texas
Ms. Marie M. Mulcahy • 2007 .................. New Jersey
Rev. Roger P. Mullaney • 1988 .................. Arizona
Ms. Katherine Mullen • 2018 .................. New York
Mr. Jack Muller • 2019 .................. New York
Joseph and Sharon Mullin • 1999 .................. Massachusetts
Ms. Helena Mullin • 2010 .................. New Mexico
Mr. Michael Mullin • 2020 .................. N/A
Ms. Silvia Munoz • 2019 .................. Florida
Marilyn Muriello • 2020 .................. N/A

Mr. Nicholas J. Nastasi • 1986 .................. Pennsylvania
Mr. Michael J. Naughton • 1989 .................. California
Ms. Virginia Navarro • 2020 .................. N/A
Ms. Mary Naylor • 2016 .................. New Jersey
Mr. and Mrs. Michael and Xiomara Neary • 2020 .................. N/A

Mrs. Margaret Neckles • 2019 .................. New York
Mr. and Mrs. Michael J. Needham • 1993 .................. California
Ms. Patricia A. Needham • 2020 .................. Missouri
Mr. Randall Neff • 2013 .................. Ohio
Mr. John F. Neill • 2016 .................. Maryland
Mr. Sigrid Nelson • 2019 .................. Florida
Mr. Peter Nerone • 2018 .................. Kentucky
Ms. Suzanne Neumann • 2015 .................. Ohio

Patrick T. Moran and Kathryn Moran • 2020 ..................
Mr. and Mrs. Frank and Lois Noonan • 2014 .................. California
Mr. James Noonan • 2019 .................. Ontario, Canada
Mr. and Mrs. Frank and Lois Noonan • 2014 .................. California
Mr. James Noonan • 2019 .................. Ontario, Canada
Ms. Mary Ellen Norpel • 2004 .................. Pennsylvania
Mr. and Mrs. Frank and Lois Noonan • 2014 .................. California
Mr. James Noonan • 2019 .................. Ontario, Canada
Ms. Mary Ellen Norpel • 2004 .................. Pennsylvania
Mr. and Mrs. Frank and Lois Noonan • 2014 .................. California
Mr. James Noonan • 2019 .................. Ontario, Canada
Ms. Mary Ellen Norpel • 2004 .................. Pennsylvania
Mr. and Mrs. Frank and Lois Noonan • 2014 .................. California
Mr. James Noonan • 2019 .................. Ontario, Canada
Ms. Mary Ellen Norpel • 2004 .................. Pennsylvania
Mr. and Mrs. Frank and Lois Noonan • 2014 ...............
I struggle with the politics of many religious people and organizations today, and I seek out media that offers serious political discussion rather than propagandistic sound bites for one “side” or the other. Your group [at America] seems genuine.

David Delle Monache
Sebastian Gomes, executive editor for audio and video, in the William J. Loschert Studio during a recording of our newest podcast series, “Voting Catholic.”
Ms. Donna Smith • 2017 ........................................North Carolina
Ms. Melinda K. Smith • 2018 ........................................Ohio
Ms. Mary Smith • 2019 ........................................Virginia
Mr. Kevin John Smith • 2019 ........................................Arizona
Barbara Smith • 2020 ........................................Maine
Mr. and Mrs. Chester F. Smolenski • 2019 .................Pa.
Ms. Ethelyn L. Smylie • 2019 .......................................New York
Mrs. Joyce Tianaello Smogodgrass • 2020 ..................N/A
Mrs. Frances and Dennis Solano • 2015 ....................New York
Ms. Betty Song • 2020 ........................................California
Mr. Anthony E. Sorrentino and Mr. John R. Sorrentino 
• 2018 .................................................................New York
Mr. Brian Spadora • 2019 ........................................New Jersey
Rev. Matthew D. Spahr • 2009 ...................................California
Mr. and Mrs. Frederick T. Spahr • 2012 .....................Maryland
Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Spaniol, III • 2015 ......................Virginia
Mr. Joseph K. Speicher • 1989 ....................................Maryland
Ms. Carmel Ann Speriti • 2018 ....................................New York
Mr. John D. Spiegel • 2015 ........................................Iowa
Rev. Joseph C. Spina • 2018 ......................................Florida
Mr. Shawn Spooner • 2018 ......................................Massachusetts
Richard and Joanne Spotswood • 2013 ....................California
Robert and Carol Sprenger • 2018 ................................Ohio
Thomas Spring and Mary O. Spring • 2020 ..................Calif.
Rev. P. D. Staiger • 2018 ..........................................California
Mr. and Mrs. Jon M. Stark • 2014 ................................California
Mr. Michael Starks • 2018 .........................................Indiana
Mr. John Staude • 2020 ...........................................N/A
Ms. Erica Stavola • 2019 ........................................New York
Mrs. Stechschulte • 2010 ........................................Kansas
Mr. David L. Steeno • 2006 .......................................Michigan
Mr. William G. Steflany • 2006 ....................................New Jersey
Ms. Susan Stein • 2016 ............................................Nebraska
Ms. Nansiatta Stein • 2019 ........................................Oregon
Sam Steiner • 2020 ...............................................N/A
Kristi Steinmann • 2018 ..........................................North Dakota
Karen Steinmetz and Gregory J. Steinmetz • 2019 ..........Rhode Island
Ms. Samantha Stephenson • 2020 ..............................N/A
Barbara Z. Stickford and Charles J. Stickford • 2020 .........North Carolina
Mr. Franklin B. Stith • 2020 .......................................Kentucky
Paul R. Stockhausen and Jane L. Stockhausen • 2018 .......Pennsylvania
Mr. Brian D. Stokes • 2017 ........................................Florida
Mr. Neil Story • 2019 ............................................Michigan
Thomas P. Stoy and Brigid M. Fitzgerald • 2018 ..........Pennsylvania
Mr. Harry R. Strack and Mrs. Eleanor F. Strack • 2003 ...Pennsylvania
Dr. and Mrs. John P. Straetmans • 2017 .....................Georgia
Ms. Carole Stuart • 2020 ........................................California
Rev. Msgr. Gregory J. Studerus • 2014 ......................New Jersey
Mr. Leo Stueve • 2005 ..............................................Kansas
Mr. and Mrs. Ralph A. Sturges III • 2015 ....................Conn.
Sandy Sturr • 2020 ................................................Washington
Mr. and Mrs. Jeremiah M. and Carole Sugrue • 2014 ....Michigan
Mr. and Mrs. Edward C. Sullivan • 1995 ....................Maryland
Mr. Roger Sullivan • 2015 ......................................District of Columbia
Ms. Mary Sullivan • 2018 ........................................Colorado
Mrs. Nancy Sullivan • 2020 ......................................N/A
Mr. J. Richard Sullivan • 2020 ....................................Kentucky
Dr. and Mrs. John Kelly Sullivan • 2020 .....................N.J.
Mark and Diane Sundrup • 2016 ................................Ohio
Rev. Eric Sundrup, S.J. • 2018 ...................................Illinois
Mr. Leonard Supp • 2019 ........................................New York
Mr. and Mrs. Terry C. Swagerty • 2001 .....................Oregon
Ms. Catherine Swanstrom • 2020 ..................................N/A
Ms. Margaret Swavelly • 2018 .................................Arizona
Jean H. Sweeny • 2005 ...........................................Florida
John Sweeny • 2019 ................................................New York
Mr. Kevin M. Sweeny • 2009 ...................................Delaware
Ms. Marie Sweeney • 2020 ......................................N/A
Ms. Sharon Swift • 2020 .........................................Washington
Denise S. Szabo and Thomas J. Booth • 2020 ..............N.J.
Mr. Michael Szczepanik • 2020 .................................N/A
Mr. Loretto Szucs • 2018 .........................................Illinois
Eva and J. Scott Talbot • 2018 ..................................Texas
Ms. Colette Tarallo • 2019 .......................................New Jersey
Ms. Mary Jeanne Tash • 2016 .....................................Massachusetts
Ms. Minda Te • 2016 ...........................................Ohio
Mr. and Mrs. Mark Teaford • 2018 .........................Washington
Mary D. Tejeda • 2020 ...........................................Wisconsin
Mr. Emmanuel Tenero • 2017 ....................................Michigan
Fr. James J. Termyrna • 2014 .....................................New Jersey
Ms. Patricia Terranella • 2019 .....................................New Jersey
Ms. Vicky Tett • 2019 ..............................................California
Ms. Megan Thall • 2018 .........................................Illinois
Rev. Frederick Thelen • 2015 ..................................Michigan
Mr. James H. Thessin • 2005 .....................................Virginia
Mr. and Mrs. Christopher Thomas • 2016 ....................Texas
Mr. Samuel Thomas • 2017 ......................................Michigan
Mr. Joseph Thomas • 2019 ......................................Maryland
Ms. Joan Thompson • 2019 .....................................Virginia
Richard and Lois Thorne • 2017 ................................Massachusetts
Ms. Lynn B. Tidwell • 2019 ........................................Connecticut
Ms. Ellen Kelly Tierney • 2001 ...................................Illinois
Mr. Edie Tierney • 2018 ...........................................Pennsylvania
Mr. Brian Tierney • 2018 .........................................Australia
Sean P. Tierney and Robyn M. Tierney • 2020 ..............Ohio
Rev. Francis Tiso • 2019 ...........................................New York
Paul J. Tivnan • 2019 .............................................Missouri
Sylvia Tiwon • 2020 ...............................................N/A
Mr. Daniel Toll • 2019 ...........................................Indiana
Nicolas Tomasoni • 2019 ...........................................Florida
Ms. Maura Tomboh Estevez • 2019 ............................New York
L. Tooill • 2019 ....................................................Florida
Rev. Msgr. Ronald A. Tosti • 2012 ............................Massachusetts
Ms. Maureen Touhey • 2020 ......................................N/A
Ms. Elizabeth Toups • 2016 ......................................Louisiana
Mr. and Mrs. Wilbur Toups • 2020 ..............................La.
Mr. and Mrs. James H. Tourtelotte • 1988 ....................Mass.
James Towell • 2018 ..............................................N/A
Ms. Ali Towle • 2018 .............................................Washington
Mr. Paul Trame • 2020 ..............................................N/A
Mr. George Trejos • 2019 ........................................New York
Rev. Marc Tremblay • 2019 ....................................Massachusetts
Mrs. Heather Trotta • 2017 .......................................New York
Mr. Daniel Troy • 2017 .........................................Illinois
Mr. Richard Troy • 2019 ................................Connecticut
Mr. Julian Trukowski • 2019 ...................................Pennsylvania
Rev. David D. Tscherne • 2018 ................................Ohio
Mr. William J. Tucker Jr. • 1983 ..............................Missouri
Fr. Patrick Tucker • 2018 ......................................Indiana
Mr. Roy Tucker • 2020 ..............................................N/A
Ms. Mary Turnbull • 2018 ......................................Pennsylvania
Mr. and Mrs. John Turner • 2017 .........................Florida
Mr. John Twomey • 2018 ......................................London, England
Rev. Patrick Tyrrell, S.J. • 2013 ...................................Illinois
Ms. Mary Tsyr • 2016 ..............................................Texas
Mr. William Uebelher • 2018 ....................................Colorado
Ms. Marilyn Ulme • 2019 .........................................Michigan
Rev. Patrick Universal • 2020 ....................................N/A
Mr. Michael Uchen • 2019 .......................................Wisconsin
Mr. Grant Ute • 2009 ...........................................California
Ms. Stephanie Valera • 2020 ......................................N/A
Ms. Bette Vallario • 2014 .........................................Florida
Mr. Andy Van Epps • 2020 .....................................Georgia
Robert E. Vanden Bosch and Ann M. Vanden Bosch • 2019 ....Florida
Mr. Andrew Vanover • 2020 .....................................Michigan
Ms. Nora Vasquez • 2014 .......................................New York
Mr. and Mrs. James D. Vaughan Jr. • 1993 ....................Mass.
Ms. Alexander Vaughn • 2018 ................................Texas
Mr. Robert Venable • 2008 .......................................Indiana
Ms. Elizabeth A. Vesely • 2014 ..............................Pennsylvania
Ms. Corazon A. Veza • 2017 .....................................Kentucky
Mr. Marcel Viens • 2008 ......................................California
Mr. Joshua Vincent • 2020 .....................................Maryland
Dr. and Mrs. Thomas T. Vogel, M.D., Ph.D. • 1982 ..........Ohio
Mr. Jim Vogt • 2018 .............................................Kentucky
Rev. Michael S. Vona • 2003 ....................................New Jersey
Van An Vu • 2018 .................................................Australia
Terrance Wadsworth and Maria C. Wadsworth • 2004 .......California
Mr. John Wagener • 2019 ......................................N/A
Rev. Josef A. Wagenhoffer • 2014 ............................New Jersey
Ms. Diane M. Wagner • 2014 ......................................Colorado
Ms. Amanda Waite • 2019 ......................................N/A
Mr. John Walker • 2018 ..........................................Georgia
Ms. Debra Walker • 2018 ........................................Missouri
Ms. Marcie Walker • 2019 ......................................N/A
Ms. Peggy Walker • 2020 ......................................Missouri
Mr. John T. Walsh • 1987 ........................................Massachusetts
Ms. Mary Walsh • 2012 ...........................................New Jersey
Sister Margaret Walsh • 2019 .....................................Ohio
Mr. Dan Walsh • 2020 ........................................... N/A
Elizabeth and Patrick Walsh • 2020 .......................... N/A
Mr. Steven Walter • 2020 ....................................... N/A
Ms. Nancy Walton-House • 2016 ............... Washington
Ms. Caroline Wang • 2019 ............................. Hawaii
Ms. Susanne Washburn • 2003 ....................... Vermont
Deacon and Mrs. Daniel Waters • 2015 ... Ohio
Stu Watson • 2020 ........................................... Oregon
Mr. Thomas E. Wavro and Mrs. Marianne G. Wavro • 2002 ............... Georgia
Ms. Lisa Weber • 2015 ..................................... Washington
Mr. Bruce Weber • 2019 ...................................... Oregon
Philip and Cecilia Weck • 2018 ................ California
Mrs. I. Weeda • 2015 ........................................ Virginia
Ms. Marguerite Weibel • 2018 ....................... Washington
Ms. Ramona Weinberg • 2002 ........................ Texas
Mr. Jared P. Welch • 2018 .................................. Missouri
Ms. Christine Welch • 2020 ............................. Oregon
Mr. Ronald C. Wenzler • 2002 .......................... California
Kathleen Wernette • 2020 ............................. N/A
Mr. William Werwaiss • 2010 ...................... New York
Mr. John E. Wassling • 2004 ........................ Ohio
Mr. Joseph H. Wassling • 2013 ......................... Virginia
Mr. and Mrs. Thomas D. Westerman • 2017 ....... S.C.
Mr. Thomas C. Westropp and Cheryl Ann Reynolds • 2002 .............. Vermont
Mr. Chris Whalen • 2019 .............................. Ontario, Canada
Mr. Tristan Wheeler • 2018 .......................... Tennessee
Marsha Ann Whelan • 2020 ........................... Tennessee
Rev. Robert J. Whelan • 2020 ......................... New York
Ms. Mary White • 2016 ................................. Missouri
Mr. Robert J. White and Mrs. Charlotte White • 2018 ...... Hawaii
Ms. Joan E. White • 2020 ............................. New York
Ms. Gladys Whitehouse • 2018 .................. North Carolina
Ms. Amy Whitletch • 2019 .......................... Ohio
Ms. Mary V. Widhelm • 2019 ..................... New York
Mr. and Mrs. W. Widnall • 2020 .................. Massachusetts
Mr. Thomas J. Wieckowski • 2003 ........ Pennsylvania
Teresa Wier • 2020 ........................................ N/A
Ms. Marianne Wilensky • 2018 .................. New Jersey
Rev. Brian J. Wilk • 2018 ......................... Wisconsin
Ms. Olive E. Wilkins • 2001 ....................... Washington
Ms. Eunice Williams • 2015 .................. Massachusetts
Ms. Mary Alig Williams • 2020 ...................... N/A
Suzanne M. Williams • 2020 ........................ N/A
Mr. Richard Willitts • 2018 ........................ Minnesota
Mr. David C. Wilmot • 2015 ........................... Missouri
Ms. Lisa Wilson • 2018 ................................ N/A
Kevin Winset and Kateri Winsett • 2019 .... Wash.
Mark Winburn • 2019 .......................... North Carolina
Ms. Maureen Windmoeller • 2018 ........ Illinois
Mr. Peter Winfrey • 2020 .......................... Alaska
Mr. Paul Winslow • 2019 ........................... Missouri
Ms. Doris A. Winrode • 2008 ...................... California
Fr. George C. Wolf • 2012 ......................... Nevada
John W. Wolf and Brenda W. Wolf • 2012 ...... Ohio
Ms. Margaret Wollen-Olson • 2013 ............. Mass.
Rev. Robert K. Wong • 2016 ...................... British Columbia
Rev. Walter J. Woods • 1995 .................. California
Ms. Rosie Woods • 2018 ......................... Canada
Mr. and Mrs. Donald and Blanche Woolford • 2012 ...... Pennsylvania
Rev. Msgr. Richard W. Woy • 2004 .............. Maryland
Mr. and Mrs. Don and Celine Wozniak • 2018 .... Ill.
Mr. Lawrence G. Wrenn • 2005 ................. Florida
Deacon and Mrs. John Wright • 2016 .... Michigan
Mr. and Mrs. Dominick and Charlotte Yacono • 2019 ...... Virginia
Mr. Raymond A. Yadron • 2019 .............. Illinois
Ms. Donatta M. Yates • 2016 ........................ Illinois
Michael and Mary Yazzee • 2020 ............ Minnesota
Ms. Kristen Yoo • 2019 ........................... California
Ms. Kate Youte • 2018 .............................. New York
Mr. Paul H. Young • 1977 .......................... New York
Ms. Mary Yuen • 2018 .......................... Hong Kong, China
Msgr. Peter J. Zaccardo • 2018 ........................ New Jersey
Mr. David Zande • 2018 ............................... Michigan
Mr. Mark M. Zangrando • 2020 .................. California
Mr. Michael Zapinski • 2019 ....................... Wisconsin
Mr. and Mrs. Stanley E. Zatkowski • 2006 ...... Mass.
Mr. and Mrs. Charles Zeuch • 2005 ........ Pennsylvania
Ms. Kathleen Zelezensky • 2019 ................ Minnesota
Mr. and Mrs. Rick and Ginny Zeller • 2016 .... Virginia
Ms. Janice Zeller • 2019 ........................... Illinois
Fr. Gary M. Zender • 2011 .......................... Washington
Deda Zile • 2019 ........................................ New York
Mr. William Zink • 2013 ............................... Michigan
Mrs. Colette C. Zito • 1996 ........................ New York
Mr. Frank Zolinski • 2012 ........................... Indiana
Ms. Laura Zurovski • 2018 ........................ Pennsylvania
Ms. Amanda Zygarlicke • 2018 .................. Wisconsin
When it comes to voting, Catholics in the United States are split down the middle. So, what are the deciding issues for Catholics and how will they stack up in the 2020 election? From abortion to immigration to racial justice, we’re exploring the key voting issues through the lives of informed Catholics—individuals who have lived and studied the issues and who bring their faith to the voting booth.
A Living Legacy
The Catholic intellectual tradition is not a thing of the past

By Sam Rocha

It is common to hear rumors that the Catholic academy has gone missing. This is better understood as a generational anthem of nostalgic discontent, projecting willful and often cynical ignorance. This past summer, amid the Covid-19 pandemic, I spent most of my time between two academic book projects for Routledge and Bloomsbury. In August, I read three recent books, published by M.I.T., Oxford and Princeton (all academic presses), during a short vacation.

These five books of my summer, while diverse, are united by a common biographical Catholicism, a trait all but one of the authors carries confessionally. These books are written for general and academic secular audiences and carry the peer-reviewed expertise of various fields of study, above all from philosophy. Nonetheless, each book carries real and even intimate signs of the church alive and at work. Together, they form a resounding counterfactual rebuke of the cottage industry reporting the doom of Catholic academia.

In The Syllabus as Curriculum, my latest book, I note that modern educational theories focus on the subject, the student and teacher, and often miss the object: the fruits of the teacher’s labor. In the syllabus, I claim, we encounter a powerful object that can take on different forms: a pedagogical or pastoral letter, a memorandum, an essay or an outline. One of the outcomes of this claim is a critique of the social sciences that have overrun educational research and a proposal for a revolution of the humanities.

I also edited and translated the forthcoming Paulo Freire: A Biography, Walter Kohan’s philosophical study of Freire, originally published in Portuguese and soon translated into Spanish. Freire was a Brazilian philosopher and theologian with a foundational and lasting influence on traditions like liberation theology. We also find in Freire a deeply Catholic thinker, steeped in Roman Catholic theology and personalism.

Chad Engelland exuberantly proclaims the gospel of a complex intellectual tradition in Phenomenology, which he calls “an investigation into the experience of experience.” Engelland’s accessible introduction to phenomenology includes Catholic sources like Karol Wojtyła’s The Acting Person and Jean-Luc Marion’s The Erotic Phenomenon. Phenomenology, Engelland shows us, seeks a wondrous love that forces us to part from the disenchanted natural attitude without losing the interiority of our own experience and lifeworld.

Jason Blakely’s We Built Reality tells a story hiding in plain sight. This book is about the negative influence of the social sciences, which Blakely carefully contrasts from the natural sciences. Blakely shows how social science has become a common sense that is neither common nor sensible. In his convincing analysis, it is an ideology unchecked by reason, not entirely unlike the worst forms of religious fundamentalism. He ends with a provocative final question: “Where are the new humanists?”

In Lost in Thought, Zena Hitz begins in a testimonial register that seems headed into a personal account of the transformative power of ideas in the life that yearns for something more, something different, something greater. Soon, however, Hitz drops the direct testimonial voice and turns more directly to texts that she reads with an accessible rigor and passion. We witness fresh readings of classics like Aristophanes’s “The Clouds” and Augustine’s Confessions, culminating in a forceful critique of the university that is neither cynical nor romantic and calls for the primacy of the intellectual life over and above the intellectual or academic institution.

The Catholic academy has a present and future, continuous to its rich past. It is especially notable that Catholic academic expression ranges well beyond its rightful place in sacred writings; these books are to be found in the world of secular thought as sacred and secular Catholic letters have always been and always will be.

Sam Rocha is an associate professor in the Department of Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia. His most recent book is The Syllabus as Curriculum: A Reconceptualist Approach.
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