FALL 2018

FALL LITERARY REVIEW 2018

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The Catholic Imagination of Dean Koontz

THE JESUIT REVIEW OF FAITH AND CULTURE

2018 CPA MAGAZINE OF THE YEAR

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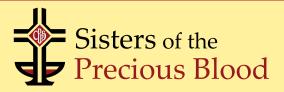


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On Reading Virtuously

"It is not enough to read widely," argues Karen Swallow Prior in *On Reading Well*, her recent book with Brazos Press. "One must read virtuously." I confess that much of my own day-today reading is anything but virtuous, at least in the sense that Swallow Prior means it: reading closely, being faithful to both text and context, interpreting accurately and insightfully, making active choices to sit with a book in defiance of "the disjointed, fragmentary, and addictive nature of the digitized world."

Apologies, then, if you're reading this on your phone. But her point is well taken. We profit from literature most when we shut our senses to the siren songs of so much of contemporary digital culture and focus quite literally on the words before us. Kudos to the author, too, for somehow fooling this unvirtuous reader into reading a book about reading books.

With this Fall Books literary issue, we offer writers and texts that we certainly feel are best read closely and conscientiously. The subject matter is varied, but the virtuous reader might detect affinities among different offerings. Many of America's favorite fiction writers over the last century appear in Joshua Hren's argument for preserving our Catholic traditionsphilosophical, theological, aesthetic-in any attempt to write Catholic fiction. One of those authors appears again in Nick Ripatrazone's reflection on Graham Greene's The Quiet American. And Richard Doerflinger seeks to expand the definition of "Catholic novelist" beyond the canon with his appreciation of the popular writer

Dean Koontz, an American Catholic novelist "hiding in plain sight."

Another recent popularizer of religious themes is the theologian James K. A. Smith, whom **America**'s culture editor, Patrick Gilger, S.J., describes as "becoming something that is both envied and looked at askance within the academy...a popularizer, a public intellectual."

The themes common to many of the writers above are also found in the poetry of T. S. Eliot, whose *Four Quartets* is the subject of Lisa Ampleman's critical reflection. Eliot's legacy is not uncontested among critics and poets, Ampleman notes, but his poems can still be a source of spiritual renewal, as long as one reads with "a clear eye on the background of its poet and a grain of salt." Eliot is joined in this issue by two other poets whose work we are featuring for the first time: Taylor D'Amico with "Echoes" and Sarah Law with "Joan of Arc in Her Prison."

Joan of Arc is not the only saint to appear in these pages. The emeritus editor of **America** Raymond A. Schroth reviews *Elizabeth Ann Seton*, Catherine O'Donnell's biography of the first native-born citizen of the United States to be named a saint.

Some multitext treatments include the review by Jonathan Malesic of two scathing critiques of the contemporary workplace (trigger warning: You might find out your job is pointless), as well as Jordan Denari Duffner's review of two books that can offer nuance and depth to our understanding of Islam. In addition, Kerry Weber, an executive editor of **America**, revisits the creations of one of her own "all-time favorite authors and illustrators of children's books," Tomie dePaola.

In his review of Michel Foucault's fourth volume of The History of Sexuality, called Les Aveux de la Chair (The Confessions of the Flesh), a former America associate editor, José Dueño, S.J., puts his French to use studying a scholar whose influence once spread far and wide in the academy. Eve Tushnet, meanwhile, offers a fascinating appreciation of the famous American crime photographer known as Weegee in her review of Christopher Bonanos's biography Flash, and Kaya Oakes gets a chance to write on her hometown of Oakland in her review of Tommy Orange's debut novel There There.

We also update our readers on our two recent selections for the ever-growing Catholic Book Club: *Jesus of Nazareth*, by Gerhard Lohfink, and *Dagger John*, by John Loughery. We're also well into our online discussion of a new book, Kate Bowler's stirring memoir about her cancer diagnosis and its aftermath, *Everything Happens for a Reason*.

Speaking of book clubs, our Last Word in this issue is, appropriately enough, by Ellen B. Koneck on how joining a book club with friends taught her how to read for fun again.

James T. Keane, senior editor. Twitter: @jamestkeane.

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From 'Jesus of Nazareth' to 'Dagger John'

A little over a year since the creation of our online discussion group, the Catholic Book Club community on Facebook is rapidly approaching 2,000 members. We have found that even in a digital age, a large and vibrant audience still exists for quality print literature and intellectual conversation. We also discovered that our **America** readers are fairly omnivorous in their tastes: Our first two books were a memoir and a novel, and our two most recent selections were an academic text and a biography.

After we read and discussed Kate Hennessy's memoir of her grandmother, Dorothy Day, in *The World Will Be Saved By Beauty* and Alice McDermott's novel *The Ninth Hour*, our selection committee decided to include a theological treatise in our rotation. The Rev. Gerhard Lohfink had garnered such rave reviews for *Jesus of Nazareth: What He Wanted, Who He Was* that it was hard to pass it up. The late Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., a longtime professor of New Testament at Boston College and a renowned expert on Scripture, had given the book a ringing endorsement: "Lohfink's *Jesus of Nazareth* is the best Jesus book I know."

Lohfink set out to discover and explain what was unique about Jesus of Nazareth, incorporating previous scholarship and traditional understandings of Jesus but also striving for a fresh analysis. "He emphasizes that Jesus' life is a historic event," wrote the Catholic Book Club moderator Kevin Spinale, S.J., in an essay in April on the book. "Visible and tangible, as dramatic and concrete as an eclipse. Second, Lohfink argues that Jesus' life and the way he understood himself need to be interpreted through the totality of the canonical Scriptures, particularly the texts of the Old Testament."

Father Spinale also credited Lohfink for not taking the simplistic route of trying to find "the real Jesus" hidden behind later historical accretions. "Neither Jesus' humanity nor Lohfink's human reasoning stems from a corrosive struggle to discover the historical Jesus washed of ecclesial murk," Father Spinale wrote. "Lohfink's Jesus of Nazareth, the man we intend to meet by our modern, critical apparatus, cannot be met but through thoughtful interpretation of the Jesus of the Scriptures revered and interpreted through the experience of Jesus within the Christian community of faith."

Some members admitted in the discussion forum on

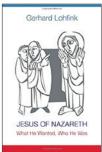
Facebook that Lohfink's theological arguments occasionally went over their heads, but on the whole, readers appreciated his prose. "I doubt this book would encourage faith in non-believers, and it didn't bolster mine or bring me out of complacency," commented one reader, Sara Damewood. "What it did was help me better understand Jesus and the early Christian community."

After we finished with Lohfink, our selection committee felt that perhaps it was time for a biography. John Loughery's *Dagger John: Archbishop John Hughes and the Making of Irish America* had been recently reviewed by the Rev. Anthony Andreassi for **America**. "When a historical figure has a reputation as large as Hughes, it can be hard to separate fact from fiction," Father Andreassi wrote. "However, in this new biography of the most significant U.S. Catholic leader from the mid-19th century, John Loughery not only handles the historical record prudently but also mines the data of the life and times of Hughes with verve and just enough detail to keep the reader moving eagerly forward to the next chapter."

Indeed, Loughery's account of the legendary archbishop of New York did keep readers engaged, in part because many of the political and social issues of Hughes' day are paralleled by our own controversies today. For example, among Hughes' most notable causes was the defense of immigrants against bigotry, discrimination and even violence, particularly the Irish immigrants pouring into the city at the middle of the 19th century (as Loughery notes, Hughes was not quite so enlightened when it came to other minorities). And of course, Hughes was as much a politician as a priest, and an intellectual brawler who loved a good public debate. "Hughes was such a political fellow that it is hard to read the book with anything less than political sensitivities," wrote reader David W. Madsen.

"John Hughes fought all his life," Father Spinale wrote in his interpretive essay on Loughery's biography. "Beyond pugnacious, he was truculent. John Loughery's portrait of John Hughes is fascinating because of his depictions of the ferocity of Hughes and the wildness of New York from the 1840s through the 1860s."

An added bonus of our selection of *Dagger John* was that the author agreed to answer readers' questions about the book and his writing process. "I am interested in religious history but am also very interested in social and polit-







ical history, especially of the nineteenth century," Loughery commented when asked why he had chosen to write about Hughes. "And Hughes was the man for that. Had he not become a priest, he would have become a Whig congressman and worked in Congress with his beloved Henry Clay."

In recent weeks the Catholic Book Club has begun to discuss our fifth selection: Kate Bowler's unique and moving memoir, *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved*. A professor at Duke Divinity School and an expert on "prosperity gospel" teachings, Bowler discovered in 2015 that she had Stage 4 colon cancer—and had to face the question: What does it mean to die young in a society that insists everything happens for a reason?

Publishers Weekly called Bowler's memoir a "poignant look at the unpredictable promises of faith," and commented that "Bowler's lovely prose and sharp wit capture her struggle to find continued joy after her diagnosis."

So: a memoir, a novel, an academic work, a biography and now, again, a memoir. To offer the broadest possible range of quality books with spiritual and intellectual heft, we would like to keep this sort of rotation going. Do you have suggestions for what we might choose next? 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/americacbc.

James T. Keane, senior editor. Twitter: @jamestkeane.

Joan of Arc in Her Prison

By Sarah Law

Thérèse of Lisieux once played the part of Joan of Arc in a "pious recreation" she wrote for her Carmelite community.

It's spring, 1895. Thérèse in the role of Joan, is chained

to the sacristy courtyard's high brick wall. There is no sky.

She is dressed for the part– full gown marked with fleurs-

de-lis; her long hair flows —though not in fact her own—

her wrists are shackled, her head's in her hand.

Thérèse-as-Joan imprisoned, awaiting her final trial,

her costume flammable, her heart even more so;

every prayer is so much straw strewn on the hardened earth.

The camera's grace holds her to this icon of her mission

(the story-arc she'll follow to the end, the act of love she's written);

sunlight gleams on the water jar and the brief lines by her side.

Sarah Law lives in London and is a tutor for the Open University and elsewhere. Her latest poetry collection, Ink's Wish, was released in 2014; and a chapbook, My Converted Father, appeared in July 2018.

James K. A. Smith's Theological Journey

By Patrick Gilger

The taut line stretching away from the glass doors of the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Museum in Grand Rapids, Mich., had an air of solemnity about it on a gray August morning earlier this year. The voices of those awaiting entrance were a notch quieter than normal: the excitement of a theater before the lights are dimmed; the volume of a church before the opening song. Many wore their Sunday best.

Two Vietnamese women in slim silk dresses stood next to one another midway down the line. Just in front of them stood a West African girl in a vibrant pink hijab who chatted animatedly with her father and an older white woman sporting a bob haircut and sensible shoes. Farther back in the line stood an Iraqi man in an immaculately pressed beige suit, his wife and three children nearby. They were among the 200 people waiting in line to process, one by one, into the building to begin the ceremony that would make them citizens, full members of these United States of America. Two-thirds of the way down the line, with his wife Deanna, their daughter and a few friends, stood James K. A. Smith.

Smith is a small man with an athletic build. His thinning hair is cropped close on the sides. He has a broad, warm smile and wears a long goatee of the kind seen on indie-rock bassists or youth pastors. For the morning's naturalization ceremony he was wearing a fitted, blue striped T-shirt and pink sneakers with orange stripes ("I didn't have any red, white and blue shoes," he said with a grin). His normally bright eyes were still sleepy.

Smith, 48 and the father of four grown children, is a professor of philosophy at nearby Calvin College. He is the author of dozens of articles and more than a few theory-laden books dealing with political theology and phenomenology. But it is a rarer talent, the capacity to make clear to many the importance of ideas usually reserved for the few, that is causing his star to rise. Most noteworthy is a concept he has coined himself and developed in a trilogy of books: cultural liturgies. The phrase gives name to an idea: that what we do teaches us how to love. It is meant to help us see how repetitive practices—like shopping or binge-watching or decorating our Christmas trees—point our hearts in a particular direction and by doing so tell us who we are and where we belong.

Like all those with whom he processed into the Ford Museum, Smith was there to swear an oath, to "renounce and abjure all allegiance...to any foreign prince" and declare "true faith and allegiance" to the Constitution and laws of the United States. He was there to participate in one of our country's most powerful cultural liturgies, one that transforms foreigners into Americans.

This would have come as something of a shock to his vounger self. Smith was born a Canadian, in the small town of Embro between three great lakes: east of Lake Huron, north of Lake Erie, west of Lake Ontario. During Operation Desert Storm, and under the influence of the famous theologian Stanley Hauerwas of Duke University, his repugnance to the Pax Americana ran high. The whole thing "just looked like creeping American imperialism," he had told me the day before. "Alternative communities-the politics of Jesus-that sounded exactly like what I wanted to sign up for."In the years since, Smith has spent much of his energy thinking about alternative communities and the politics of Jesus-about what role Christians should play in the American political project. Dissatisfied with both the Christian right's efforts to retake the political center through alliance with the Republican Party and with the Christian left's efforts to baptize the secular status quo, he argues that safe passage between that Scylla and Charybdis needs to be charted not just for individuals but for the church. It is this navigational chart that the concept of cultural liturgies is meant to help us plot. If we are honest, Smith argues, when we look at our lives, we will see two things: first, that all of us are already involved in liturgies that are shaping our hearts, and second, that we might not like what these liturgies are doing to us.

For Smith, as for Hauerwas or John Milbank, responding to this crisis of formation has led to a surprising conclusion, especially for a Protestant: that we need to re-emphasize the liturgical practices that make the church the church. If the church is going to have any chance to influence what we love, he argues, it has to construct "counter-liturgies" capable of reforming and reorienting hearts that have been taught to love riches or honors or anything else—even the nation—above the triune God.

In the auditorium of the Ford Museum, songs were sung: the national anthem, "God Bless America." The country's colors were marched in and out in reverent silence by a girl scout in her green sash. The Hon. John T. Gregg presided in his black robes. The Oath of Allegiance was administered. And through some performative magic, this group of individuals—who moments before had little in common—became part of a people.

It was a moving liturgy. But recognizing how the collective practices we engage in—from our addiction to our iPhones to the adrenaline drip of the 24-hour news cycle are liturgical, how they slide under our thick rational skins and teach us how to desire, is James Smith's specialty. If there is someone who ought to be inoculated to the power of the liturgies of the state, it is he.

As we walked out of the auditorium into the hallway where the new citizens were registering to vote, he turned to me. "That was more moving than I expected it to be," he said. Then he smiled a bit wryly. "Or I should say: I was more moved by it than I wanted to be."

To be honest, I replied, so was I.

Conversion of Heart and Mind

Jamie Smith knows the day he became a Christian. It was Sept. 10, 1988, the day after his 18th birthday. He was alone, kneeling at his bedside. There he prayed a classic evangelical sinner's prayer, the kind that begs for forgiveness and asks that Christ be the center of one's life. After the prayer, "I had an overwhelming sense of Jesus kneeling beside me," Smith told me, "one of the few really tangible mystical experiences I've ever had."

This is not an easy story for a professor of philosophy to tell in our secular age. Because stories about Jesus run counter to another story that enlightened modernity tells about itself. It's an "I once was lost, but now I'm found" story, but in modernity's telling the old song's roles are flipped. Now the story goes: Once upon a time we were lost in the naïveté of religious belief—we believed that spirits moved the winds that formed the hurricane, that a moral mistake brought on bronchitis. Now, thank Reason, we know the truths of science, have seen the electric light and left myths behind in the medieval dark.

This is the story to which we have grown accustomed. But it is not the story Smith told me as we sat at a table in a coffee shop not far from his house the day before he became an American citizen. In his story, reason and religion are not adversaries but companions. "When I became a

My work has always reflected questions that come from something other than puzzles the academy has given me.

Christian," he said, "it was an intellectual light. It tripped this hunger to learn that I didn't know I had."

At first he fed this intellectual hunger by studying what was closest at hand: the Bible. He studied it weekly for more than a year with a member of his future wife's family. They were "very, very conservative evangelicals from the Plymouth Brethren," a low-church, Pentecostal brand of Christianity. But they not only taught him, Smith says, they "enfolded me into a community of care that felt like home."

"Like any young, earnest evangelical convert, I thought I was called to the ministry. So I went to Bible college to prepare for that," he told me. In his case, this meant the Brethren-affiliated Emmaus Bible College in Dubuque, Iowa. And although he went to prepare to be a pastor, it was at Emmaus that he began to fall in love with philosophy.

Emmaus College consists of one large building. In its basement is the library. This is where, for the entirety of his freshman year, Smith spent his free time. "I was alone that year," he said, "and all the journals were down in this dark dungeon in the basement. So, I would just hide out in the library at night and gobble up anything I could." Of the texts he consumed, the one that had the greatest impact was the inaugural issue of the journal Faith and Philosophy (whose editorial board Smith would join in 2006). The lead article in that first issue was written by the famous analytic philosopher and longtime Calvin College professor Alvin Plantinga. It is entitled "Advice to Christian Philosophers."

In that essay, Plantinga makes a simple, quite radical, argument: Christian philosophers ought not be bound by the perspectives of the secular academy but instead should be guided by their own worldview. "The Christian has his own questions to answer, and his own projects," Plantinga wrote, and "these projects may not mesh with those of the skeptical or unbelieving philosopher." Christian philosophers would be better philosophers, in other words, if they were more integrally Christian.

But Plantinga did not intend for Christian philosophers to "retreat into their own isolated enclave[s]." Instead, they should think about problems of general concern, about how the mind works, or how we know what we know, from the bedrock of a Christian standpoint rather than from any supposedly neutral place.

Over the years Plantinga's essay has served as a mission statement for many young Christian philosophers, and for Smith, reading it at night in a dim basement library in a small town in eastern Iowa, it was like flipping on a light switch. "I realized that maybe my calling wasn't pastoral," he told me. "Maybe it was more academic."

Restless Scholar

For Smith, this academic calling has meant stepping into the heat of contemporary debates not just within the academy but in the wider public realm as well. And while there have been some missteps—his Twitter presence has been a bit caustic at times—this kind of variety plays to talents both natural and cultivated. This is, in part, because Smith is something of an occasional thinker, getting captured by a new idea and following it until his itch is satisfied. "I have a certain intellectual A.D.D.," he laughed, "I keep changing the conversations that I'm in."

He has written, for example, a lengthy introduction to the Radical Orthodoxy movement that shows its resonances with his own Dutch Reformed tradition. Another of his books, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?*, attempts to bring postmodern luminaries like Derrida, Lyotard and Foucault to church. And his forthcoming *On the Road With Augustine* is a "travelogue of the heart," in which Smith shows how Augustine's own restlessness might still resonate with spiritual seekers some 16 centuries later.

Smith admits that this intellectual restlessness worries him at times. But it also means, he told me, that "my work has always reflected questions that come from something other than puzzles the academy has given me." His first book, for example, entitled *The Fall of Interpretation*, tackles a deeply philosophical question: Is it a problem that everything we read, even the Bible, must be interpreted? His answer is no. He tries to show that interpretation is not a curse caused by the fall of human beings from grace but instead a gift of creation. And while he engages here with philosophical giants like the German phenomenologist Martin Heidegger, he is equally focused on a problem closer to home: fundamentalist religious traditions for whom all interpretation is suspect.

"I wrote the book," Smith explained to me, out of the "painful experience of getting kicked out of the Plymouth Brethren that I was converted into, [a tradition that] did not have room for a range of ways of understanding the Christian faith." (He still remembers a letter from one of his Emmaus professors calling him "a student of Judas Iscariot.") Similarly, the idea for his second book, *Speech and Theology*, "came to me in a worship service at a Pentecostal church."

But these kinds of Christian interventions in the academy are only one prong of the approach laid out by Plantinga. The other involves thinking not for the ivory tower but for the church. And for Smith this meant becoming something that is both envied and looked at askance within the academy. It meant becoming a popularizer, a public intellectual.

Still, it is "something that fits him well," said Mark Mulder, chair of the sociology department at Calvin College and a close friend of Smith. "Jamie's always thinking, always making connections. When he's going to a film, it's billable time." But he's also someone who is "not afraid to ask a question that reveals his ignorance," said Mulder. "He's curious, and he has a humility about that curiosity that I think is very attractive."

Matt Walhout, a longtime professor of physics at Calvin College, told me that Smith made an intentional choice to find a new audience for himself, to write specifically for the church. "Professional academics are all writing for one another," Walhout remembered Smith telling him. "Somebody's got to write for the church." For Smith, though, writing for the church has ended up looking less like defending dogmas than paying attention to how God was already at work in the world, particularly in the lives of his children or his students.

In 2011 Smith decided his senior undergraduate seminar would read only one book: Charles Taylor's 900-page opus *A Secular Age*. It was an audacious choice, but one that paid off. "To my students' astonishment (and mine), as they made their way through the book, lights went on for them," Smith later wrote. "It's like he's reading our mail," he recalled one student telling him.

Seeing how Taylor's thought gave both the doubters and the believers in his classroom a navigational chart for understanding their own experiences helped Smith to realize how important *A Secular Age* might be—and not just for those who had four months to wade through it. So Smith decided to write what has become his most popular book to date. *How (Not) to Be Secular*, subtitled "Reading Charles Taylor," is a 150-page jaunt through Taylor's massive tome.

In our conversation, Smith remarked that he admires Taylor because he "thinks for the world. To me," he said, "if there's a philosophical chapel, he gets the first stained glass window." And Smith has previously noted of his time with Taylor that what is most striking about him "is that hope is his dominant posture." It is a posture that Smith hopes is coming to dominate his own life as well.

Hope in an Age of Fractured Order

That argument over how—or whether—hope is woven into the counter-liturgies of the church lies at the heart of Smith's most public controversy: his break with "the Benedict option" and with the progenitor of the idea, Rod Dreher.

Dreher, a longtime blogger for The American Conservative, has been piecing together the strategy of the Benedict option for years. The Benedict option advocates withdrawal from the culture wars that the Christian right has been waging for decades in order to focus on building communities in which, as Dreher puts it, "Christians can be formed in the orthodox faith." As he envisions it, these are communities that erect a high boundary between the church and the world—one that can give Christian communities space to be themselves.

The resonance with Smith's concept of cultural liturgies is not illusory. Both call for greater awareness of how power structures like the state and the market shape our desires without our knowledge. And both look to ancient models of what it means to be a person or a community in order to push back against those power structures. For some time these overlapping aims led them to think together about how the church could respond to such problems. They were, as Dreher has written, friends.

But that friendship met an abrupt end in March of last year, when Smith published a short review in The Washington Post of three books on what he termed "the new alarmism"—one of which was Dreher's *The Benedict Option.* "These books are intended for choirs," Smith wrote, "they are written to confirm biases, not change minds." To this critique of the "bitterness and resentment" he saw animating these books, Smith added a more serious theological concern: that this alarmism amounted to a refusal of hope. "What sticks with you when you walk away from these books," Smith concluded, "is [their] bunker mentality."

Dreher's response was not long in coming. Later that same day he published a voluminous reply expressing his anger at Smith's evaluation, particularly in light of what he said were two years of private correspondence from Smith praising the Benedict option. In the end, he attributed Smith's criticisms to the fact that Dreher had decided not to distribute the book with Smith's own publisher. "Smith's nasty attack," Dreher concluded, "makes me wonder if he's trying to put some public distance between himself and us."

Indeed he was, as Smith would clarify just a week later in a more lengthy review. There Smith argued that the church's tactics in our time should be drawn less from St. Benedict than from St. Augustine. And Augustine, Smith wrote, held that the church ought not to withdraw from the world but stay "in the mix of things, among those in error." This call to fidelity in the midst of a sinful world certainly includes a Benedict option-style emphasis on liturgical practices, but for Smith this is done with a different style or tone, one that attracts outsiders rather than rallying insiders. As Smith wrote, it means a church that does not withdraw but leans "out boldly and hopefully into the world for the sake of our neighbours."

When Smith speaks of his conflict with Dreher, he chooses his words carefully. "I'm sure you can see all kinds of overlap between us," he said, "as do I. If I reacted strongly to *The Benedict Option* it's because I felt like there was so much at risk about that shared project being wholly identified with a reactionary posture.... I just think it's so crucial to not jeopardize the opportunity of seeing something attractive that draws people. I might be overreacting," he told me, "but I don't want that to be the obstacle to somebody hearing the Gospel of grace. That's what I'm worried about."

Smith's worry comes from two core convictions: one about where the church's mission begins, and another about whether grace is active outside the walls of the church. The first problem with Dreher's proposal is that it starts from an analysis of the decline of culture—from the problems going on outside the church—rather than "being catalyzed internally by the logic of mission." If the church begins by looking at what is wrong elsewhere rather than to what it is called to be itself, Smith thinks, it has started off on the wrong foot. But secondly, this does not mean that everything is all right. Smith's effort to show how the cultural liturgies of the state or the market (de-)form our desires runs too deep for such pollyannaish affirmations. Instead, the church must look for the cracks in the secular worldview. And doing this requires both trust and hope, trust that grace is common to all persons, and hope that "the Spirit is operative in spaces and places and institutions outside the church."

Like Dreher and other theorists of the end of our liberal order, Smith thinks these cracks are already showing. "People are exhausted," he told me. "I already see manifestations and artifacts of people saying, 'This isn't working." But rather than cause for alarm, Smith sees opportunity in such exhaustion. What worries him is that this opportunity will be lost, that every expression of Christian formation will be, as his review said, "confused with Dreher's unique brand of resentment."

It is true that Smith has not always been so open to seeing grace in the world. This is the same man who once wrote that "what appear to be instances of mercy or compassion or justice outside the body of Christ are merely semblances of virtue." It is understandable that Dreher feels that something has changed. It has.

"What I started to realize," Smith explained to me, "was that these alternative communities start to look increasingly like enclaves for people who have the privilege and luxury of being able [to withdraw]. And the people who get left behind are, it turns out, black and brown." For Smith, being responsible for the world ends up looking less like withdrawal or revolution and more like the plodding work of reforming institutions—even, with its flags and pledges and parades, the institution of the state.

"Institutions are still some of the best ways we care for the vulnerable. Government is a creational good. I do think you need an account of how [government] is disordered," he said, "but I've realized that it would be a failure to love my neighbor to not remain invested in the state, even if that looks like prophetically challenging where it's going. In the Trump era, this is particularly hard."

"I don't know how to say it," he finally sighed. "Anger is not quite the word, but Dreher's position, it's just...not attractive. It's a saber-rattling, a whipping-up of a crew that already agrees with you. And I just felt like there was a lot at risk—because he's going overboard, and because he's being so widely listened to," he said. "Does that sound too strong?"

"In the meantime, I think friendship is going to do a lot

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People are not going to be argued into the kingdom of God.

of work," he told me after a moment, "I think that practices of friendship are my kind of Benedict option."

Families and Friends

There are dozens of practical reasons why Smith and his wife decided to subject themselves to a liturgy of the state on a gray morning this past August: because they plan to stay at Calvin College, because their children are at home in Grand Rapids, because it will simplify their complicated travel schedules. But there is a story that lets these practical reasons make sense, that supports them and gives them shape. For Smith, this is a story of roots, of having them ripped out and—slowly, painfully—learning to regrow them.

That story goes like this: Smith comes from a fractured family. He has been estranged from his father since he was 13 and has not seen him in 26 years. His mother displays his books on a mantel at her house, but has not read them. And still, for the past 28 years, he has been married to Deanna, whom he has known since they were in the fifth grade. He is much of who he is because of her, because her family became his—until that family also fractured. They had their first child when they were 22 and slowly learned how to love something else more than oneself. But building the community that is a family does not always come naturally; it has to be learned, practiced until it seeps into us.

This is especially true for those who come from broken homes. As his friend and colleague Matt Walhout told me, "Jamie doesn't exactly have a lot of long-standing models within his family for what healthy communication looks like. He and Deanna had to figure that out." And figuring that out meant expanding their nuclear family to include what was missing; in particular: parents. Of these they have, over the years, adopted a handful.

"What God has given us in the church," Smith said to me, "has been replacement parents. Everywhere we've lived we've had folks who are there for us. It saved our lives."

It was one of the first of these replacement parents, a woman named Karen, who years ago began to help Smith see how deeply he had been hurt by his own father. She "was one of the first people to confront me," Smith related to me. "For some reason, I remember this phrase: 'a petrified heart'.... I have been hurt so profoundly by a father who left that I had created this stone case to protect myself. But then I couldn't breathe, and I couldn't relate. If I remember my own journey to emotional wellness, Karen was a big part of it."

And so was Deanna. Learning to be a father himself has meant "me apprenticing myself to Deanna," he said; "she's so emotionally healthy that she kind of primes me." Which makes all the more sense if Smith's academic work is correct. Because then, as his cultural liturgies trilogy argues, we would be aware that our thoughts are conditioned by our loves. And that those who rule our hearts—our children, our partners, our Gods—shape our thoughts.

"Look, people are not going to be argued into the kingdom of God," Smith said. "The irony is that I'm a philosopher who thinks that you woo people and move them more with literature than syllogisms." With literature, that is, and with institutions—especially institutions like the quaint, white-shingled, slightly run-down Sherman Street Church that he and Deanna attend on Sunday mornings.

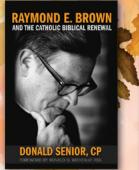
Smith and I had walked through it the day before he became an American citizen. The nave is made of dark wood, and the pews form a half circle around the ambo where the sermons are delivered. The light that falls through the high windows is stained blue. It is an uncomplicated space, a surprising one from which to undertake the audacious task of shaping hearts fit for the kingdom. Smith seemed at home there.

It is not the kind of place stories are written about. It's just a place where friends meet, where worship happens. "It's just this ho-hum place," Smith said, "where we're all learning how messy and hard it is to just be a community and then to be a community for a community."

"Do we have what it takes to pull off the most beautiful thing that will win over the culture?" he wondered aloud. He paused a moment before answering. "The short answer is no," he finally said, "but can God in his grace use our efforts? Absolutely. Without question. We have a role to play."

Patrick Gilger, S.J., is pursuing a doctorate in sociology at the New School for Social Research in New York. He is **America**'s contributing editor for culture.

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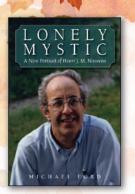
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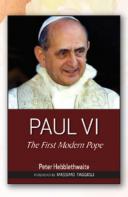
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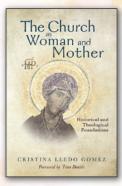
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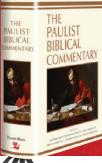
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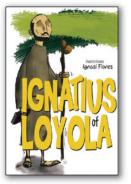


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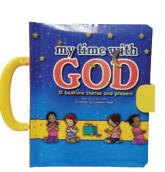
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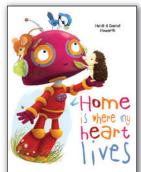
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THE LITERATURE YOU SAVE MAY BEYOUROWN

Can today's Catholic writing build on its rich heritage?

By Joshua Hren

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The last few years have seen a lively debate over whether Catholic literature is dead or alive. In this magazine ("Writers Blocked," 4/28/14), Kaya Oakes observed that "Catholic literary culture today might best be described as a funeral for multiple corpses. This, for living Catholic writers, makes for a rather depressing set of circumstances to enter into."

Perhaps in part as a reaction against these obituaries, some proctors and proponents of the Catholic literary tradition have proclaimed that "beauty will save the world," a sort of clarion call beckoning us away from the culture wars and into the "disinterested" pages of beautiful things. Another strand of contemporary writers has introduced into the conversation the rubrics and aims of identity politics, a recent phenomenon that calls attention to various stigmatized, neglected or victimized demographics. By this they intend to challenge narratives of Catholic literary decline and rewrite the terms of the argument.

I suggest that, provocative as these stances have been, we need to avoid the Romantic reaction of "Beauty Will

Save the World" and the reductive compromise of "Catholic identity politics." There is a less factional, a less fractional—a more Catholic—way.

The Catholic literary tradition has been marked by writers who understood that human nature finds its final cause not in mere beauty, not in mere inclusion, but in salvation. The idiosyncrasies of a given writer and the singularities of his or her times determine the tenor of this implicit or explicit preoccupation. Consider Evelyn Waugh's Brideshead Revisited, which shows us just how difficult it is for grace to hound the decadent, destructive souls of the dying English aristocracy. The task of giving good form and truthful content to grace building upon nature is difficult, too. It is all too easy for such writing to collapse into pious sentimentality and disputatious moralism. But a Catholic literary culture that works in continuity with its rich heritage will give us a contemporary literature that both gazes unflinchingly at the messiness of our present moment and artfully works out its characters' salvation or damnation. In his apocalyptic thriller Father Elijah, Michael O'Brien

effectively enunciates the trials—harrowing and supersubtle—of a soul being sanctified, and Dana Gioia gives shape to a soul's inhabitation of hell-on-earth in his masterfully haunting long poem "The Homecoming."

In his 1926 essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," Langston Hughes deprecates African-American artists who fail to support writers of their race until mainstream or "white" publishers have granted such authors the stamp of "success." Hughes scoffs at an unnamed writer who declares his aim to be "a poet—not a Negro poet," contending that this poet is saying he wishes to be white—that therefore he will not be a poet at all until he can embrace his identity as an African-American.

Bernardo Aparicio García, the founder of the Catholic literary magazine Dappled Things, countenanced the question of whether the Catholic artist's dilemma is similar to that of the African-American artist at a conference at Fordham University in 2017. Aparicio García said:

Many Catholic writers can identify with the poet Hughes talks about, but there's a difference because our universal identity as Catholics is of a different kind than an identity rooted in race, sex, nationality and so on.... While being male or female, French or South African or the like can give a certain accent, as it were, to our experience of being human, being Catholic means having a certain perspective on what being human is all about, regardless of accent.

Aparicio García is arguing that Catholic literature will be more good, more true and more beautiful than alternatives defined by the narrowness of identity politics. This is not to say that Catholic authors ought not to grapple with, say, racial prejudice, in their poetry or prose. J. F. Powers does so masterfully in "The Trouble," in which a priest prays over a dying woman during race riots; in "The Black Madonna," Muriel Spark gives shape to the banal evil of white liberal racism; Glenn Arbery's *Bearings and Distances* draws out deep tensions buried in the "post-racial" moment of President Obama's election; Harlem Renaissance writer Claude McKay climbs the racial mountain in many of his early poems, even as he looks beyond its summit in his "Cycle Manuscript," composed after his conversion.

But the most enduring Catholic writers of the past did

not tear down the constellations by which the Catholic vision sees reality in order to assert their identity as, say, feminist or "poor white" or homosexual. The Catholic writers we remember did not mistake the church for themselves or themselves for the church; they were not so foolish as to think their own personal traits were universal, even if they necessarily passed through the particulars to the communal-and, ultimately, the eternal. Flannery O'Connor was a hillbilly. But she was also a Thomist. Did the priest and poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J., wrestle with homosexual desires? It is fashionable to focus on this question, but a sacramental vision would see that he definitely wrestled with God. Shūsaku Endo's Silence is positively Japanese. But it is absolutely Jesuit, probing the problem of martyrdom with an Ignatian imagination. (I should add that the novel's Japanese authorities are remarkably jesuitical!)

In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," T. S. Eliot notes that when we praise a literary artist, we tend to praise the parts of the work that are most singular, bits that we can isolate out as original. And yet, Eliot cautions, if we shed this prejudice, "we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously."

As writers, Catholics ought not be anxious about their influences. When they forget their traditions, Catholics, like any other creatures, become intoxicated on the fumes of the present moment. If a contemporary Catholic writer has absorbed some of O'Connor's Christ-haunted characters who experience grace violently, this is not necessarily a sign of "unoriginality." To be traditional is, in part, to be unoriginal. Today's Catholic literary artists should familiarize themselves with the notable array of Catholic authors who have preceded them, from frequently cited exemplars like Walker Percy or François Mauriac to authors like Sigrid Undset or John Finlay, who are often left out of the limelight. And let's not forget Dante! All great Catholic literature is a footnote to Dante, and yet to many living Catholic writers who have lost their inheritance, Dante may be the deadest of all.

In *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?* the Catholic philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre argues that a tradition is defined in part by "those internal interpretive debates through which the meaning and rationale of the fundamental agreements came to be expressed." Sometimes,

The most enduring Catholic writers did not tear down the constellations by which the Catholic vision sees reality.

MacIntyre observes, two or more thinkers within the same tradition become external critics of one another. For instance, if, as John Henry Newman contends, literature is largely "a study of human nature," Catholics, like any other writers, can begin to master their subject by becoming astute students of other people and themselves. But, like O'Connor, a writer of Catholic fiction or poetry could also develop her understanding of human nature by mulling over certain sections of the Summa Theologiae, which she "read for about twenty minutes every night" before bed. Seeking a Catholicity of continuity, O'Connor also became cognizant of the very different picture of human nature advanced in The Phenomenon of Man, by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, S.J. Initially contending that "this is a scientific age and Teilhard's direction is to face it toward Christ," she concluded that "if [his books] are good, they are dangerous"; O'Connor, who named Everything That Rises Must Converge after an optimistic passage in Teilhard that contrasts starkly with her dark and tragic story, exemplifies MacIntyre's characterization of tradition as "an argument extended through time," one in which disagreements and agreements are "defined and refined."

A tradition, MacIntyre continues, can also be sharpened when its adherents reckon with forces external to it. In terms of her fiction, O'Connor herself was not influenced exclusively or even mostly by Catholic writers. Though the bourgeois and nihilistic villains of Léon Bloy and Dostoevsky ghost through her stories, she claimed as literary forebears Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James and Franz Kafka. The Catholic writer can and must engage the broad literary culture of her times, learning from the experiments, thematic turns and sheer acumen of, say, Jorge Luis Borges, Ralph Ellison, David Foster Wallace and Lorrie Moore. Still, sincerely Catholic literature will always foster fictions that populate a definitively Catholic cosmos. Consider, for instance, a work like Myles Connolly's *Mr. Blue.* Like F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby,* the novel tackles the tensions between a frenetic capitalist culture and what we might call the Catholic conscience. Nevertheless, Connolly sees salvific possibilities that are lost to Fitzgerald's universe. And O'Connor's characters may have borrowed Kafka's overcoat, but because the Catholic understanding of freedom is distinct from the existentialist one, the overcoat does not always, as it does for Kafka's characters, become a straightjacket.

In *The Theory of the Novel*, the Marxist philosopher György Lukács claims that "the novel is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God." There is a great deal of truth to this, especially if we look at the genre's origins and the flourishing of the novelistic form in the 19th century. But insofar as it is populated with human beings and insofar as human beings are the very image of God, literature is intrinsically theological and, by extension, is undergirded by philosophical premises. As Dana Gioia writes in *The Catholic Writer Today*, while there is no staunchly uniform Catholic worldview...

It is possible to describe some general characteristics that encompass both the faithful and the renegade among the literati. Catholic writers tend to see humanity struggling in a fallen world. They combine a longing for grace and redemption with a deep sense of human imperfection and sin. Evil exists, but the physical world is not evil. Nature is sacramental, shimmering with signs of sacred things. Indeed, all reality is mysteriously charged with the invisible presence of God. Catholics perceive suffering as redemptive, at least when borne in emulation of Christ's passion and death.

We need to add to this descriptive list a concern with conversion in light of the first and last things: Catholic writers tend, even in spite of themselves, to be obsessed with their characters' salvation. This is as true of Dante in his dark woods as it is of Endo and his defecting priests. Insofar as all of the above is true, from this juncture we can see the insufficiency of beauty-in-and-of-itself.

In the first volume of Hans Urs von Balthasar's multivolume *The Glory of the Lord*, the author argues that beauty, unlike the other two transcendentals, is "disinterested." Whereas truth and goodness give rise to innumerable self-interested debates, he claims, beauty is disinterested. In a central passage, he writes:

Our situation today shows that beauty demands for itself at least as much courage and decision as do truth and goodness, and she will not allow herself to be separated and banned from her two sisters without taking them along with herself in an act of mysterious vengeance. We can be sure that whoever sneers at her name, as if she were the ornament of a bourgeois past, whether he admits it or not, can no longer pray and soon will no longer be able to love.

Von Balthasar's argument is partially compelling: Lives, conversations, social orders shaped by truth and goodness but bereft of beauty will end up shrill, falsely pious, unpersuasively moralistic. But beauty will not save the world. Even Dostoevsky, who coined the phrase "beauty will save the world," demonstrates the insufficiency of beauty throughout the novel *The Idiot*. Such an idea is oftentimes a hyperbolic assertion, uttered on behalf of practitioners of beauty, who mistake their good work as the only or primary means of salvation.

Further, as Pope Benedict XVI pointed out in his meeting with artists, "too often...the beauty that is thrust upon us is illusory and deceitful, superficial and blinding, leaving the onlooker dazed." Instead of bringing humanity out of itself, failing to open each person up "to horizons of true freedom as it draws him aloft, it imprisons him within himself and further enslaves him, depriving him of hope and joy." Truly beautiful literature, the kind that is remembered centuries after it is written, is not merely beautiful. It is good, and it is also true.

The "beauties in the eyes of the beholders" of any number of new Catholic writers are always best wrestled out, written and criticized within the broader Catholic literary tradition, just as Catholic life is best lived in communion with the long Catholic tradition of councils and encyclicals, liturgy and "social teachings" that can serve as a corrective to obsessions with originality and identity politics.

When I founded Wiseblood Books in 2013, I did so as an editor who had come across several handfuls of marvelous stories and poems written by Catholic authors who, in part because their works were steeped in Catholicity, were having a hard time of it when they went to pitch their pieces to the New York publishing industry. I situated the press within the Catholic literary tradition by the very name, as Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* signifies a work that embodies a Catholic vision but also strives after literary excellence that can move any reader. I am not dogmatic about her or her work. She was a good but not a great writer. Yet she raised some crucial problems: In literary works written in a world that lives as though God were dead, do we need to shout so that the deaf can hear, draw large and startling figures so that the blind can see? Does not grace feel like violence sometimes, and is not fiction particularly capable of dramatizing the awful conversions that can come of the disruptions that reorient us toward our last end?

Bernardo Aparicio García rounded out his remarks on Catholic literature by saying that when he looks "at the task of Catholic literary journals or presses today, [he] tends to think less in terms of speaking from or about a particular identity but rather from a tradition or worldview and through a multiplicity of identities. This tradition needs to find a way to speak in our time."

There are practical means by which we can scatter literary seeds and help others who are laboring at this particular task:

1. Incorporating Catholic literature—old and new—into high school and college curricula, thereby expanding the canon and teaching students to recognize both the debts and the distinctions of the Catholic literary tradition.

2. Sustaining distinctly Catholic publications and presses through subscriptions, middle-brow book reviews and patronage.

3. Forming book clubs at the parish level and elsewhere. Such clubs regularly form somewhat organically. However, they often take cues on what to read from, say, Oprah, rather than the exhaustive lists of Catholic writers and works compiled by Paul Elie, Dana Gioia and others or the catalogs of presses continuing the tradition.

4. Encouraging bright-eyed undergraduates to pursue work in publishing, thereby situating editors who have "eyes to see" in places where works charged with Catholic vision can reach a broader readership.

Beauty will not save the world, dear reader, but the literature you save may be your own.

Joshua Hren is editor in chief of Wiseblood Books.

OUR MAN IN SAIGON

Graham Greene's 'The Quiet American' is painfully prescient.

By Nick Ripatrazone

Greene wrote that the First Indochina War "will be decided by men who never waded waist-deep in fields of paddy."

"I had to find a religion...to measure my evil against." So goes Graham Greene's oft-quoted explanation for why he became a Catholic. Ever the contrarian, Greene hated being whatever he was labeled as—and rejected the claim of critics that he was concerned with a supernatural evil, saying his novels "are not about Good and Evil but about human beings."

Greene was not a metaphysician. *The Power and the Glory* is pulpy Catholic fare: a priest on the run, in the heat of Mexico, whispering hope into a rural, folk Catholicism. "I don't look for God up there," Greene once said, "He's down around here."

Down here. Embedded. Greene's 1955 novel *The Quiet American* is narrated by Thomas Fowler, a British journalist living in Vietnam. But Fowler hates the word *journalist*: "I preferred the title of reporter. I wrote what I saw. I took no action—even an opinion is a kind of action." Fowler claims to be the only objective voice in a tangled world. There is Alden Pyle, the young American C.I.A. agent who has read books on democracy and hopes to remake the East in an American image. There are the Caodaists—part Catholic, part Buddhist, part regionalists and the French colonizers and then the Communists. By the end of the book, we learn that Pyle's American optimism is his undoing, and yet equally dangerous is Fowler's feigned journalistic distance. Greene suggests that we can never be truly honest. No hands are clean.

At a moment when reporters and the entire culture and action of reporting are being criticized from all sides, *The Quiet American* feels painfully prescient. Early in 1954, Greene lived in Saigon as a correspondent for The New Republic. In his story for the magazine, he wrote that the First Indochina War "will be decided by men who never waded waist-deep in fields of paddy." *The Quiet American*, as novels often do, adds even more complexity to that claim.

Greene's complex novel is a scathing critique of the malleability of truth, the fallibility of perception and American ambition. Although Greene claims in a prefatory note, "this is a story and not a piece of history," he wanted it both ways. We are left with a story about what it means to be engaged—or to do nothing in the face of evil.

It is strange to read Greene's novel in the age of references to the amorphous "media," as if all journalists are part of a cabalistic operation to suppress, or at least bend, truth. This is not to say that journalists are infallible; often the storytelling impulse to give readers a linear, causal narrative means forcing dots to connect. Fowler is correct: "An opinion is a kind of action," and actions have consequences. For example, in May of this year, NBC News reported that the F.B.I. had wiretapped the phone of Michael Cohen, President Donald Trump's former personal lawyer. That was a bombshell claim-implying that the F.B.I. had listened to every conversation. In reality, they had only been monitoring his calls-collecting the metadata of who was calling whom, but not the content of the conversations. The distinction is a big one, and that type of mistake hurts the credibility of other reporters (who are more meticulous).

In *The Quiet American*, Greene's genius lies in making Fowler both a wise observer and an imperfect character. Fowler carries the baggage of an old colonialist. He has paid for the sins of his forefathers with something like cynical exhaustion. His lover, a Vietnamese woman named Phuong, has fallen for Pyle. Fowler's jealousy is teeming. His first-person narration constantly dismisses Pyle as more boy than man. Fowler recalls how they first met, Pyle's "unmistakably young and unused face flung at us like a dart. With his gangly legs and his crew-cut and his wide campus gaze he seemed incapable of harm."

Fowler, tired of it all, hates Pyle's American idealism. Pyle "was determined...to do good, not to any individual person but to a country, a continent, a world." Envy often blurs our ability to perceive, but sometimes it does offer precision. Pyle arrived in Vietnam convinced that "what the East needed was a Third Force."

Fowler knew better. He knew that:

[Pyle] would have to learn for himself the real background that held you as a smell does: the gold of the rice-fields under a flat late sun: the fishers' fragile cranes hovering over the fields like mosquitoes: the cups of tea on an old abbot's platform, with his bed and his commercial characters, his buckets and broken cups and the junk of a lifetime washed up around his chair: the mollusc hats of the girls repairing the road where a mine had burst: the gold and the young green and the bright dresses of the south, and in the north the deep browns and the black clothes and the circle of enemy mountains and the drone of planes.

"Pyle believed in being involved," Fowler writes, and as a reporter, he finds this troubling. Fowler even seems intimidated by Pyle's wide-eyed optimism; "From childhood I had never believed in permanence, and yet I had longed for it."

The Quiet American is a far less sentimental book than the ultimately pious *The Power and the Glory*, and Greene reveals Fowler's hypocrisy. Fowler claims to have Phuong's best interests at heart, but she is treated as an exotic object, a possession that has possessed him. "One always spoke of her...in the third person as though she were not there," Fowler writes. "Sometimes she seemed invisible like peace." That peace is a fiction, and Pyle's Third Force fumbles in its attempt to tip the scales of war.

When we write, when we report, we seek structure. We want to tell stories—that is what they are called in the business—and the best-loved stories are built on character, drama and plot. Fowler is on assignment in Vietnam to write about the war. In one scene, Fowler visits following a Vietminh attack in Phat Diem. A canal is full of overlapped bodies, "one head, seal-grey, and anonymous as a convict with a shaven scalp, stuck up out of the water like a buoy. There was no blood: I suppose it had flowed away a long time ago."

By the end of *The Quiet American*, we learn that Fowler was very involved—with Vietnam and with Phuong's and Pyle's unfortunate end. About Pyle, Fowler says, "I never knew a man who had better motives for all the trouble he caused." A great line; I think Greene delivered one-liners better than Hemingway (both reporters themselves, of course).

Involved or not, Fowler's bias doesn't get in the way of his clarity. When Pyle tries to convince him that the Vietnamese "don't want Communism," Fowler retorts: "They want enough rice. They don't want to be shot at. They want one day to be much the same as another. They don't want our white skins around telling them what they want." Fowler knows his claim that he has no politics is false.

The Quiet American offers the truth that to write is to be political. When we hope to corral the madness of our world into a story, we polish the edges and exaggerate the heartbeats. We make the page a mirror.

Nick Ripatrazone has written for Rolling Stone, The Atlantic, The Paris Review and Esquire. His newest book is Ember Days, a collection of stories.

Exploring Eliot's 'Four Quartets'

A masterwork from a Christian convert

by Lisa Ampleman

I first read T. S. Eliot's poetic sequence *Four Quartets* as an eighth-grade Catholic schoolgirl, in a thin hardbound anthology from our small school library. I usually preferred fiction, but I was floored by lines like these in the final poem: "And the end of all our exploring/ Will be to arrive where we started/ And know the place for the first time."

As a child feeling the pull of approaching adolescence, about to move away from the safety of a neighborhood school to a large high school nearly half an hour away, I was feeling anticipatory nostalgia for the ways that Sacred Heart School had shaped me, and T. S. Eliot helped me process that experience. I didn't "understand" much of the poems, but I responded emotionally to them, which is a good approach to encountering poetry at any age.

I later read the sequence (celebrating its 75th anniversary this year) during both my master's and doctoral exams, and in between I wrote a paper on how "East Coker," the second poem in the sequence, enacts the *via negativa* championed by St. John of the Cross. Each time I read *Four Quartets*, that phrase about exploring struck me like a gong.

As a student, I learned that each of the four poems—"Burnt Norton," "East Coker," "The Dry Salvages" and "Little Gidding"—has five sections that mirror each other. The fourth section of each, for example, is a brief Contemporary poets are divided about T. S. Eliot's legacy

lyric interlude that connects to prayer, Mary or the Trinity. The sequence itself returns repeatedly to the same ideas, for example, these in "Burnt Norton": "Or say that the end precedes the beginning,/ And the end and the beginning were always there/ Before the beginning and after the end./ And all is always now." The poems circle endlessly in and out of philosophies about time and memory, repeating themes and images.

I also learned that Eliot was born in my native St. Louis, with extended family deeply connected to the Unitarian Church and Washington University. I knew that he'd left for Harvard in 1906 and virtually never came back, though he writes about the Mississippi River to open "The Dry Salvages": "I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river/ Is a strong brown god—sullen, untamed and intractable."

Eliot moved even farther away, to England, in 1914, and worked as a bank clerk as he wrote now-famous modernist masterpieces like "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and *The Waste Land*. In 1927, he converted to the Anglican Church, an experience that affected much of his later work, including the long poem "Ash Wednesday" and *Four Quartets*, which he started writing in 1935.

I also saw how divided contemporary poets are about

Eliot's legacy. He has a reputation for being an elitist, including specific allusions and quotes in foreign languages without translation—assuming, perhaps, that the reader has the same breadth of knowledge.

Readers also feel qualms now about Eliot's character. Anthony Julius published *T. S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism, and Literary Form* in 1995, noting anti-Semitic themes in Eliot's early poetry. As he said in 2003, promoting a new edition, "We ought not to seek to outlaw Eliot's poems, but neither can we submit to them. We should not ban them; but we must not abandon ourselves to them." He saw no evidence of such prejudice in any of Eliot's poems after 1922.

Still, it raises a question many readers have these days: If the personality of the writer himself is something I object to, should I enjoy the work? *Four Quartets* sometimes does not help—it employs many abstractions, something teachers of creative writing often discourage. It is dense and allusive and assumes the reader knows exactly what is happening.

But Eliot speaks of the *Four Quartets* as among his highest achievements, and readers interested in spiritual exploration will respond to the poems. For example, the sequence reflects some Hindu concepts and includes a scene from the *Bhagavad Gita* in "The Dry Salvages." As a person of faith, I also respond to those lyrical fourth sections. "East Coker" emphasizes the Eucharist there; "The Dry Salvages" includes a prayer to Mary on behalf of sailors; and "Little Gidding" says, "Love is the unfamiliar Name/ Behind the hands that wove/ The intolerable shirt of flame/ Which human power cannot remove."

Eliot also emphasizes the *via negativa*, or negative way, a spirituality often linked to mystics focused on meditation and "death of the self." Its 16th-century proponent, St. John of the Cross, coined the phrase "dark night of the soul." This theology focuses not on the presence of God but on absence and negation—of our own will in particular. As Eliot says in "East Coker,"

> I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.

Later, he includes a passage that echoes St. John of the Cross's *Ascent of Mount Carmel*:

In order to arrive there, To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not, You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy. In order to arrive at what you do not know You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.

The spiritual seeker in this approach is someone who has felt the presence of God in the past but does not feel it now, who seeks by not seeking, through letting go.

In fact, I know people who have used *Four Quartets* as spiritual reading during Lent, sometimes paired with St. John of the Cross. In my opinion, the best way to approach this sequence is to overcome its referential nature by using aids, to read it in an anthology that includes footnotes or summaries, for example. If you know that the opening of "Burnt Norton" refers to a particular place Eliot visited with Emily Hale, a woman he now regrets not having pursued, the lines about "the door we never opened/ Into the rose-garden" are suddenly clearer.

Reading a poem simply by focusing on an author's biography can be limiting, though. It also helps to look for the patterns Eliot uses, to see the four different seasons at work in each of the poems, the four elements (air, earth, water, fire), and the patterning of those five sections.

Or to listen to the poems. There is an audio recording of Eliot available, as well as readings by Alec Guinness and Jeremy Irons. Hearing a poem out loud helps us appreciate how the sound elements work together and also moves the experience of reading away from the page and into the body.

For those who count themselves spiritual explorers, a dive into the *Four Quartets*, with a clear eye on the background of its poet and a grain of salt, can help us too "to arrive where we started/ And know the place for the first time."

Lisa Ampleman, managing editor of The Cincinnati Review, is the author of a collection of poems, Full Cry, and a chapbook, I've Been Collecting This to Tell You. Her poems and prose have appeared in the journals Poetry, Image and Notre Dame Review.

The Catholic Literary Vision of Dean Koontz

By Richard M. Doerflinger

Religion may appear in contemporary fiction as part of the landscape, a plot device or even a threat, wrote Paul Elie in "Has Fiction Lost Its Faith?" in the New York Times Book Review (12/19/12), but one searches in vain today for a serious writer working, in the words of Flannery O'Connor, to "make belief believable."

Elie's challenge evoked extensive commentary in **America** and elsewhere, much of it lamenting that he is right. Compared to the "golden age," when novelists like O'Connor, Graham Greene, Walker Percy and J. F. Powers received critical and popular acclaim within and beyond the Catholic community, we see a vast wasteland today. In perhaps the most substantive lament, the poet and critic Dana Gioia wrote in First Things in December 2013 that "Catholicism currently enjoys almost no positive presence in the American fine arts—not in literature, music, sculpture or painting." He said there seems to be a tacit agreement on both sides of the divide that "Catholicism and art no longer mix."

In **America**'s issue of Jan. 20, 2014, Angela Alaimo O'Donnell noted exceptions, like Alice McDermott—but her "very Catholic novels" are often set a few generations ago, "when faith was still considered a respectable option," so secular critics can admire her work while dismissing the religious content as historical detail. "Perhaps," wrote O'Donnell, "the successful Catholic writer is the writer who depicts faith by stealth, flying under the radar to avoid detection." Recalling that Catholics had to practice their distinctive faith covertly during the English Reformation and in the early American colonies, she concluded: "Like her comrades of old, the successful Catholic writer has not disappeared—she's just hiding in plain sight."

A Masterpiece of Creation

This brings us to one of the most wildly successful novelists in the world: Dean Koontz. His books have sold over 450 million copies in dozens of languages, and many of his novels have been at the top of the The New York Times best-seller list. They are found in every bookstore, and several have been made into movies (with mixed results, as he is the first to note). This spring, when PBS launched its Great American Read campaign, his 1987 novel *Watchers* was on the campaign's list of "America's 100 most-loved books." Yet he is rarely men-





For decades, a religious vision has suffused Dean Koontz's work, making him the most popular Catholic novelist in the world.

tioned in the recent debate on the decline of Catholic literary culture. One exception is Jon Sweeney, who called him in **America** (7/4/16)"the best-selling writer of fiction in the world today *who happens to be Catholic*" (emphasis added).

Hiding in plain sight, indeed. For decades a religious vision has suffused Koontz's work, making him the most popular explicitly Catholic novelist in the world. But two questions arise: First, is Dean Koontz to be listed among serious novelists at all? Second, what makes him a Catholic novelist?

Some will answer the first question in the negative because they have consigned him to that lucrative but frowned-upon category called "genre fiction." But to exclude such fiction from the purview of Christian literature would lose us the fantasies of J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, the ghost stories of Russell Kirk and the detective novels of P. D. James, Dorothy Sayers and G. K. Chesterton, to name just a few.

In fact, it is hard to pinpoint exactly to what genre Dean Koontz's works belong. Bookstores may carry his works under mystery, suspense, horror, fantasy or science fiction. Because his plots often involve individuals struggling against vast conspiracies, The Newark Star-Ledger has called him a master of the "paranoid thriller." The Richmond Times-Dispatch has said he "almost occupies a genre of his own."

Unlike many novels in these fields, a Koontz novel is *written*. The author has said he may revise each page of a new work 10 or 20 times, and it shows. Even the Washington Post reviewer Patrick Anderson, who thought the premise of his 2015 novel *Ashley Bell* was "hokum," admitted that "Koontz's prose can be exceptionally fine." In many novels he devotes successive chapters to particular characters, writing in the third person but shading his descriptions to reflect that person's attitude toward events—a technique developed by Jane Austen and known to critics as "free indirect discourse." He is gifted at describing natural surroundings to heighten a mood and at creating believable and entertaining characters with a few broad strokes. Here are some samples:

As a brother and sister desperately flee from killers in *The Crooked Staircase* (2018): "They passed near the ruins of the once-great house in which the owners had perished in a fire three years earlier: a rubble of broken masonry and infallen timbers. Two stone fireplaces with chimneys stood largely unscathed, odd-ly threatening in the night, like shrines to a primitive god that had slaughtered his own idolaters."

In From the Corner of His Eye (2000): "Nolly Wulfstan, pri-



vate detective, had the teeth of a god and a face so unfortunate that it argued convincingly against the existence of a benign deity.... With what Nolly must have spent to obtain this smile, some fortunate dentist had kept a mistress in jewelry through her most nubile years."

From the opening pages of *Midnight* (1989), as a 35-year-old widow takes an evening jog in a coastal town in California: "Some nights the fog was too thick and the sky too overcast to permit running on the shore. But now the white foam of the incoming breakers surged out of the black sea in ghostly phosphorescent ranks, and the wide crescent of sand gleamed palely between the lapping tide and the coastal hills, and the mist itself was softly aglow with reflections of the autumn moonlight."

(Koontz being Koontz, it should be noted that after this last idyllic description, the character in question is killed on the shore by werewolves.)

Koontz has been hailed as a writer who keeps people awake at night—because he is compulsively readable and because he scares readers so deeply that they cannot sleep. But even his horror stories do not pile up bodies for cheap thrills alone. Violence takes the lives of precious and unique people. As young Curtis says in *One Door Away From Heaven* (2001): "This is a beautiful world, a masterpiece of creation, but it is also a dangerous place."

If Dean Koontz is a real writer, what makes him a Catholic writer, not just a writer who happens to be Catholic?

A Catholic Worldview

Dana Gioia's essay in First Things suggests that being a Catholic writer does not require a focus on religious or ecclesiastical subjects, or commitment to Catholic doctrines—some of the most celebrated Catholic authors were lapsed Catholics. The writing is Catholic when the treatment of non-ecclesiastical subjects is "permeated with a particular worldview." Catholic writers, Goia argues, "see humanity struggling in a fallen world," combining a longing for grace with a deep sense of imperfection and sin; while evil exists, the physical world is sacramental, charged with the invisible presence of God; suffering is redemptive, especially when it emulates that of Christ; Catholics "take the long view of things," looking back to Christ and forward to eternity; they emphasize community, "extending to a mystical sense of continuity between the living and the dead"; and they see a need for "spiritual self-scrutiny and moral examination of conscience." All these elements are present in Dean Koontz's writing.

One constant theme is the beauty and complexity of creation, as well as many people's preference for a flatter and less demanding worldview. In *Saint Odd*, the last of eight novels depicting the adventures of Odd Thomas, the hero is awed by "the mysterious nature of the world, its deeply layered and profound strangeness." In *One Door Away From Heaven*, young Leilani Klonk has learned to fear her stepfather, an atheist "mercy killer" reminiscent of Jack Kevorkian—and she reflects that he lives "under the same vault of stars that were, to her, filled with wonder and mystery, but that were, to him, nothing more than distant balls of fire and cataclysm." Another character, Curtis, recognizes for the first time a divine presence that is "resonant in all things" and feels "the exquisite *rightness* of creation," along with "an awareness of being loved."

Lest anyone think that in Dean Koontz's world such epiphanies are commonplace, the situation is more than unusual. "Curtis" is a young alien from another planet, fleeing those who have killed his mother, and has taken the form of a human boy as a disguise. He can bond mentally with other creatures over time and is accompanied in his escape by the real Curtis's dog. It is on entering the sleeping dog's dream that he becomes fully aware of God's presence in creation and "the piercing joy that comes with the awareness of that holy, playful Presence."

Koontz's love of dogs, especially golden retrievers, is more widely known than his theological explanation for that feeling. Curtis realizes that the dog was born in "a state of grace" and is comfortable with her instinctive awareness of God "because her innocence leaves her unfettered by self-consciousness." Such creatures are intelligent but not of the highest intelligence, so are innocent enough "to serve as a bridge between what is transient and what is eternal." And Curtis can share his gift of mental bonding with others, helping to save humanity from itself. Among other things, he can show Leilani that "although her mother never loved her, there is One who always has."

Our path as human beings is not that of animals, as we have free will, "our greatest gift, the thing that makes life

worth living, in spite of all the anguish it brings," says Odd Thomas's friend Edie Fischer. Noah Farrell reflects in *One Door Away From Heaven:* "We bring beauty with us into this world, as we bring innocence, and the ugliness that we take with us when we leave is what we've made of ourselves instead of what we should have made."

Facing Truth

In this drama of sin and redemption, characters use their free will in radically different ways. Koontz's villains generally share certain characteristics. Their self-centeredness and drive for power over others is both a psychopathology and the fruit of nihilistic and reductionist ideas that have acquired new visibility in recent decades.

In From the Corner of His Eye, Junior Cain's philosophy is "self-realization through self-esteem," learned from the self-help books of the fictional writer Caesar Zedd, whose approach may remind the reader of Scientology. For Cain, belief in an afterlife is ignorant superstition, and morality is "a primitive concept, useful in earlier stages of social evolution" but now obsolete. He is "a hollow man" who realizes he is missing something important in life but can't figure out what it is. Preston Maddoc, the Kevorkian-like villain in One Door Away From Heaven, has embraced the vision of Peter Singer and other utilitarian bioethicists, described by another character as "a brave new world of greater happiness through useful killing." In Breathless, the killer Henry Rouvroy admires Freud, Marx, Nietzsche, Singer, Foucault and others, and thinks that "only two roles existed for any human being: prey or predator. Rule or be ruled. Act or be acted upon." The same will to power, exalting oneself by controlling others in a world with no inherent meaning, animates the conspirators in Koontz's recent "Jane Hawk" novels.

Koontz's protagonists are more varied. Some begin as people of faith. Others are initially lost, wounded and unsure of their direction. Some, like Cammy in *Breathless* and Micky in *One Door Away From Heaven*, were abused as children—possibly reflecting the author's childhood in a dysfunctional family dominated by an erratic and alcoholic father. Some suffer from devastating tragedies like the murder of loved ones. By facing great adversity they come to a fuller sense of purpose for their lives and the world. In contrast with the self-absorbed villains, they yearn for love and community—including an assurance that their lost

Koontz keeps people awake at night because he is compulsively readable and because he scares readers so deeply that they cannot sleep.

loved ones are not lost forever, that there is a bond surpassing death.

In perhaps the first novel in which Dean Koontz went public with his beliefs, *The Bad Place* (1990), the private detectives Robert and Julie Dakota are tracking a serial killer with astonishing powers. Julie's beloved brother Thomas, who has Down syndrome but also some telepathic ability, senses the approach of the killer, whom he has dubbed The Bad Thing—but his mental outreach has alerted the killer to Thomas's location and sealed his fate. Aware that he is going to his death, which he calls The Bad Place, he sends a final telepathic warning to the Dakotas that "the Bad Thing's coming, look out"—but as he dies, he suddenly adds that "there's a light that loves you...." The intimation that what lies beyond death is not such a "bad place" gives the Dakotas hope, sustaining them in a fight against seemingly impossible odds.

His novels are battles between good and evil, but Koontz believes, with Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, that "the line separating good and evil passes...right through every human heart." His villains retain shreds of conscience that bedevil them, with distressing digestive symptoms in Junior's case and obsessive hand-washing and memory lapses in Henry's. The protagonists Odd Thomas and Jane Hawk, the heroes of entire series, agonize that they have crossed a moral line in their own use of violence and are becoming like their enemies. Bibi Blair in *Ashley Bell* and Ryan Perry in *Your Heart Belongs to Me* find that through self-deception and a failure to face the truth about themselves, they have literally become their own worst enemies.

This need to face the truth about oneself and the world is another constant theme in Koontz's work. Perry is told by a bodyguard he has hired that "the taproot of violence" is "the hatred of truth." Koontz expands on this theme in his foreword to a nonfiction critique of the "animal rights" movement, Wesley Smith's *A Rat Is a Pig Is a Dog Is a Boy* (2010). "This is a world of infinite layers and of insoluble enigmas," he writes, but "we lie to ourselves about the nature of the world" to keep it simple and subject to our control. "We are afraid of meaning except as we craft it to suit ourselves." The result is "a simple and intellectually hollow materialism that reduces nature to a machine lacking in mystery," denying both "the sacredness of all creation" and humankind's exceptional role in that creation.

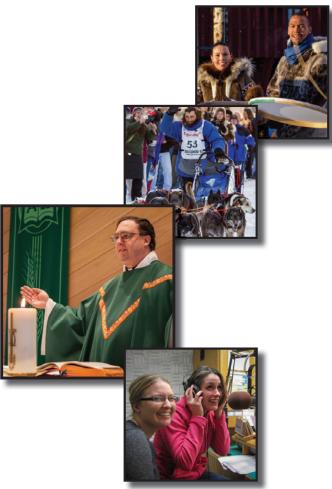
Koontz believes one answer to such reductionism is to show the beauty and complexity of life through works of the imagination. Some of his characters are creative artists who seek to present the beauty of the world—not a simple or sentimental beauty, but life with its light and darkness, as the painter Celestina says in *From the Corner* of His Eye. In What the Night Knows (2010), the successful painter Nicolette feels "the need to serve Truth even more than art." And their works, like Koontz's, are dismissed by self-styled intellectuals who think art should denigrate and deny timeless truths. (Koontz got some literary revenge in *Relentless*, where a powerful literary critic committed to nihilism turns out to be a murderer.)

A Theological Bent

But why promote the truth about the world through tales of horror and violence? One clue lies in Koontz's love for the work of Flannery O'Connor, who sought to "make belief believable" in an increasingly secular world by placing characters in situations that disrupt their lives (and shock the reader) to the core. "To the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures," she once wrote. In a world grown even more secular, if not openly hostile to faith, Dean Koontz has taken up this task. And horror and ghost stories are fertile fields because they already ask the reader to suspend disbelief in a supernatural realm. As John Calvino says in *What the Night Knows*: "I've seen the demonic. If it's real, so is its opposite."

Some of Koontz's recent work shouts more loudly, as it is more openly theological and apocalyptic. In *The Taking* (2004), what is thought to be an alien invasion turns out to be an angelic intervention to end the world as we know it. Addison in *Innocence* (2013) must prowl his city by night, as he is so hideous that the sight of him fills people with





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Koontz does not dismiss social action, but he distrusts grand utopian projects that claim to elevate humanity while forgetting individual people.

murderous rage—except that it turns out he is not hideous at all. He is one of a small number of people, appearing shortly before a devastating plague will be unleashed on the world, who were born without original sin to begin humanity anew—and the innocence in his face indicts most other people of their guilty consciences, driving them to erase him from their sight. Addison can also see demons and angels hovering about the city as it approaches cataclysm, and the angels appear wearing surgical scrubs (talk about the church as field hospital!). And *Breathless* (2010) invokes "intelligent design" and chaos theory to suggest that when humanity risks destroying itself, the Creator might bypass the slow process of evolution and suddenly produce a new intelligent species to offer us a different path.

These frankly religious works have surely cost Koontz secular readers, some of whom have sent him hate mail after discovering that their favorite writer of supernatural fiction really believes in, well, the supernatural. Unfortunately, his boldness does not seem to have won him comparably greater attention from Catholic reviewers. In the current Jane Hawk series, about a rogue F.B.I. agent struggling against a massive conspiracy, he returns to less overtly religious subject matter—but even Jane knows she is fighting for a civilization "built on love" and against "a loveless realm in which soon everyone would live as a stranger in a strange land."

A Unique Character

If one can accept the idea that tales of horror and violence may allow an author to introduce the concepts of faith and redemption in our increasingly tone-deaf culture, a final feature of Dean Koontz's worldview may prove a barrier for some readers: He is a self-described "conservative Catholic." In *Recovering Faith* (2011), edited by Lorene Hanley Duquin, he relates how he stopped attending Mass after the Second Vatican Council because he felt the church was selling out its traditions to a "utopian impulse" of social action. He was drawn back by the church's intellectual heritage, his correspondence with some priests and bishops and a relationship with the Norbertine fathers at a local abbey.

Thus, when John Calvino seeks help from his pastor in combating a demonic spirit terrorizing his family, he is told that "in an age of nuclear weapons, we don't need Hell and demons" but rather "the courage to express our faith in social action." (To be fair, when John seeks out the more traditionalist former diocesan exorcist, he finds a disgraced ex-priest who cannot come to his house because he would be sexually attracted to John's adolescent children.) At the climax of his battle with the demon, John feels what is needed is "some really antisocial action or else what was once called a miracle." He gets the miracle, once he resolves to sacrifice himself for his family.

Koontz does not dismiss social action, but he distrusts grand utopian projects that claim to elevate humanity while forgetting individual people. His novels feature many sympathetic characters who are brought low by poverty, persons with mental or physical disabilities and children. His least favorite people are members of affluent elites, politicians or not, who feel they are above the common run of humanity and have a right to control the destiny of others.

Like O'Connor and other writers who have taken risks to invite the reader to an existential decision, Dean Koontz will not please everyone. But in a culture addicted to horror stories, action movies and superheroes, he has used the raw material at his disposal to propose that the greatest horror is to ignore how beautiful and mysterious are the works of God. He presents one fascinating way to use the power of imagination to evangelize.

Richard M. Doerflinger is a public policy fellow at the University of Notre Dame's Center for Ethics and Culture and former associate director of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities, where he worked for 36 years.



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Echoes

By Taylor D'Amico

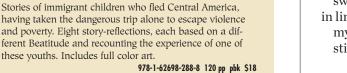
For Cricket, July 1996-February 2017

"And all their echoes mourn." *–"Lycidas,"* by John Milton

I woke with Lycidas on my tongue, and I should have known. My prayers for my ailing cat and empty womb had become twined together, his dark fur falling to shadow as the months passed.

- In my dream, I had stuttered the name, given it to my newborn, its body
- turning to vapor as I stirred. The weekend we read Milton, that elegy was waiting for me, my cat tottering as he moved toward his bowl
- and then, his aching stillness, his labored breaths in my arms. I swaddled him
- in linen when he passed, held him to my chest, and went out into the still morning.

Taylor D'Amico is assistant poetry editor for the journal Five Points and worked as production editor for the Facebook journal Muse/A.





During a papal press conference in 2014, Pope Francis called on Muslims to condemn acts of terrorism committed by their co-religionists. "There needs to be international condemnation from Muslims across the world. It must be said, 'No, this is not what the Quran is about!""

American political commentators and other Christian leaders voice this sentiment, too. In 2015, Cardinal Timothy Dolan, the archbishop of New York, wrote in the New York Post, "We encourage the majority of Islam to speak up and condemn these attacks...and say, 'This is not Islam.'"

This persistent refrain asking Muslims to condemn terrorism is almost always well intentioned; many of those voicing it have actively sought to combat untrue and unfair perceptions of Muslims. But as Todd Green, a religious studies professor at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, writes in his new book, **Presumed Guilty: Why We Shouldn't Ask Muslims to Condemn Terrorism** (Fortress Press. 250p \$16.99), it is a question we must let go of.

Muslims, Green notes, are already condemning such violence, and they often invoke the Islamic tradition to demonstrate why these acts are wrong. Evidence of these condemnations is just a Google search away; search for "Muslim condemnations of terrorism" and you will find countless entries, including statements signed by Muslim religious leaders of various denominations, news reports of massive demonstrations and social media campaigns launched by ordinary believers in the name of peace. When Christian leaders and other prominent voices call on Muslims to condemn terrorism and fail to highlight these myriad existing statements, it gives the false impression that Muslims are not already speaking out. This, in turn, reaffirms the common misconception that Islam promotes violence.

But the idea that Islam promotes violence ignores the complex causes of violence, and it misunderstands the role of religion in people's lives. Green, who formerly advised the State Department on Islamophobia, walks readers through much of the scholarship on terrorists' motivations, which demonstrates that social and political factors explain more than religious convictions do. The vast majority of the 1.7 billion Muslims around the world live out their Islamic faith in ordinary acts of charity and self-sacrifice.

Like Christians, Muslims have diverse ways of approaching their religious tradition and interpreting their texts. Just as we do not give Christianity's worst adherents the right to define the religion, Green writes, we should not allow Muslims who commit acts of violence to speak for Islam. Green's final thesis is that when people in the West call on Muslims to condemn terrorism, they are often, perhaps unconsciously, deflecting attention away from their failures. It sets up an us-versus-them scenario, in which we see them only as the source of the world's violence and terrorism, rather than examining the complex set of factors—including our own histories of violence—that play a role. This

lets us maintain the best vision of ourselves and compare it to the worst version of the "other."

Green describes plenty of oft-forgotten, unsavory episodes from Christianity's past to drive home this point. Readers will find more examples in Rita George-Tvrtkovic's book, **Christians, Muslims, and Mary: A History** (Paulist Press. 272p \$27.95), which traces how Mary has figured in Muslim-Christian relations. George-Tvrtkovic, a Catholic historical theologian at Benedictine University in Lisle, Ill., chronicles the ways that Mary has been used as both "bridge" and "barrier" between Christians and Muslims. Mary has brought both communities together, and she has been used to drive them apart—sometimes literally. For example, an image of Mary was sometimes emblazoned on Christian military banners in battles against Muslim armies.

Though most Catholics today think of Mary as nothing other than the benevolent and loving mother of God, she has been invoked throughout history as a warrior against perceived enemies of the church, including Muslims. The most striking example of this in George-Tvrtkovic's book is a 17th-century depiction of Mary and the infant Jesus standing on top of the corpse of a defeated Turk. Mary has a sword and rosary in hand, and Jesus holds the Turk's head, which his mother has severed.

This depiction is illustrative of a broad trend that George-Tvrtkovic describes: Catholics' long-standing association of the rosary with wars against Muslims. During and after the battle of Lepanto against the encroaching Ottoman navy in 1571, the Catholic armies saw Mary as the key to their success, and they continued to invoke her—and the newly popular rosary devotion—against Muslims (and Protestants). The feast of Our Lady of the Rosary—originally Our Lady of Victory—celebrated on Oct. 7, marks the Lepanto battle. As George-Tvrtkovic notes, the event looms large in the minds of a small subset of Catholics today who invoke the blessed mother to justify their hostility toward Muslims.

But the history of Mary in Muslim-Christian relations has bright spots as well. George-Tvrtkovic describes how Christians and Muslims have invoked Mary as a unifying figure, and her persona has drawn both communities together in pilgrimage. From Turkey to Jordan to Pakistan, Christian and Muslim pilgrims visit holy sites dedicated to Mary to remember her and seek her intercession.

The book also offers in-depth discussions of Mary's role in the Islamic tradition. Readers may be surprised to learn,

for example, that the story of the annunciation in Luke's Gospel closely resembles a similar story about Mary in the Quran. This window into the "Islamic Mary"— Maryam in Arabic—will be particularly illuminating for Catholic audiences. According to a survey by the Bridge Initiative (which I helped commission), a vast majority of U.S. Catholics (88 percent) are unaware that Muslims honor Mary as Jesus' virgin mother, despite the fact that Muslims' reverence for her is praised in the "Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions" of the Second Vatican Council.

George-Tvrtkovic writes that Mary can be an example for us. Her qualities, attested to by both traditions and evident in the annunciation story, serve as a model for what a truly dialogical relationship between Christians and Muslims can look like. But George-Tvrtkovic also reminds readers that, like our ancestors, we have agency over our symbols. Ultimately, it is up to us to decide who Mary is—a bridge or a barrier.

As different as these two books are, *Presumed Guilty* and *Christians, Muslims, and Mary* give us a clearer and fairer picture of the oft-demonized Muslim "other," and they call into question the sometimes rose-colored view Christians have of themselves. Green writes that his book should be seen as "an invitation to raise our standards and examine our prejudices." The same could be said of George-Tvrtkovic's.

Many of the crucial, revelatory takeaways from both books come toward the end, only after readers have made their way through extensive details. Readers will profit from a peek at the introductions and conclusions early on. Both Green and George-Tvrtkovic write in a compelling and accessible style, successfully walking readers through subject matter that requires deep nuance. Both books would fit well into high school and undergraduate courses, and journalists and lay readers of diverse backgrounds will benefit much from them.

Both Green and George-Tvrtkovic have written timely texts that help elevate our thinking and improve the ways we relate to our Muslim brothers and sisters. Readers who share these goals will be well served by both books.

Jordan Denari Duffner *is the author of* Finding Jesus Among Muslims: How Loving Islam Makes Me a Better Catholic *and a doctoral student in theology and religious studies at Georgetown University. Twitter:* @jordandenari.



Americans work an awful lot. But what are we doing at the jobs we believe are so important? For some workers, it is obvious. They're collecting your trash. Or they're teaching your kid the Pythagorean theorem. Or drawing a vial of your blood. They're doing stuff that needs to get done.

What about the rest of us? What are the branding consultants doing? Or the accreditors? What about the value-based health care associates and the clearing member representatives—both of which are open positions advertised on LinkedIn as I write this? Do the people who have these jobs even know what they're doing? Would anyone notice if they just stopped doing them?

David Graeber doesn't think so. Graeber, an anthropologist and the author of the rollicking mega-narrative *Debt: The First 5,000 Years,* guesses that about half the jobs in advanced economies are pointless, and the workers know it but feel they need to pretend they're doing something useful. They're doing "bulls**t jobs."

People with useless jobs include flunkies (who make higher-ups feel important), goons (the lawyers and P.R. flacks who battle counterparts at other companies), duct tapers (who fix systemic problems through ad hoc means), box tickers (who signal, often to regulators, that work is being done, even when it's not) and taskmasters (who assign useless work to other people). None of these roles answers a real human need. The work is symbolic and ideological, not useful. Graeber's point, in calling out useless jobs, isn't to put these workers out on the street in the name of corporate efficiency, though. It's to liberate them.

On Graeber's account, the proportion of useless jobs in the economy—and of useless tasks within otherwise productive jobs—has grown in recent decades. Even jobs that unquestionably do something valuable feature useless "box-ticking rituals." As Graeber writes, "one ends up spending so much more time pitching, assessing, monitoring, and arguing about what one does than one spends actually doing it." He has a point. According to one study, physicians spend half their workday doing data entry, and only about a quarter on direct patient care.

How did this happen in the era of the supposedly lean and mean corporation? According to Graeber, we devalued work once we began to believe that capital, not labor, creates all wealth. We've built a system of "managerial feudalism" in which the worker's time belongs to the boss, regardless of whether that time is productive.

Bullshit Jobs: A Theory (Simon & Schuster. 333p \$27) began as—and is haunted by—a viral essay Graeber wrote for Strike! Magazine in 2013. It is reprinted in the book's introduction, and Graeber frequently refers back to its argument and responds to its critics. He quotes a paragraph from it as the epigraph to his final chapter. He also draws the bulk of his ethnographic data—email mes-

sages quoted at length—from people who read the essay and wrote to him with accounts of their own useless jobs. Because of this methodological limitation, the book works best, true to its subtitle, on the level of theory, as a vocabulary for talking about why office workers so often feel like they're wasting their time and talent.

The most obsessive U.S. work culture may be in the technology sector, where every startup promises to remake our world. Tech workers board Wi-Fi-enabled buses in San Francisco and start working immediately as they rumble down the peninsula to Silicon Valley. As the journalist Corey Pein found in reporting for his fun, jaundiced book **Live Work Work Work Die: A Journey Into the Savage Heart of Silicon Valley** (Metropolitan Books. 309p \$28), the loftiness of the techies' rhetoric is a thin mask for the fact that what they're doing is often useless too. That is, when it isn't predatory.

Pein, a frequent contributor to The Baffler, spent months living in dodgy, expensive housing in the Bay Area to understand how Silicon Valley works—and what it's doing to the rest of us. Because none of the young workers Pein meets can afford to buy their own meals or know how to cook, they socialize at catered events at tech companies' offices. At these parties, people ask Pein, "What's your space?" To a normal person, the question would be, "What kind of work do you do?" But these workers don't want to think of themselves as workers.

"They could only face themselves in the mirror," Pein writes, "if their business card proved that they were rock stars or ninjas or something romantic and brave and individualistic—anything but the truth, anything but a drone." The reality of most coding work, however, is that it is drudgery. "The most important computer commands for the ninja to master were Copy and Paste," Pein writes.

A lot of what tech companies do is break up other people's satisfying, decently paid work and offer it to the lowest bidder. Uber allows anyone to be a cabdriver; Spotify lets you be your own D.J. and record-store clerk. With Yelp, you get to be a restaurant critic. The key innovation has to do with labor, not technology. By creating ever more freelancers, these companies do, in a sense, cut out considerable useless work. But at the same time, "Most of the startups pitched as 'Uber for X' boiled down to 'cheaper labor for X," Pein writes.

Pein thinks the whole tech industry is a scam, concentrating wealth in a few hands while destroying value

We devalued work once we began to believe that capital, not labor, creates all wealth.

nationwide. Traditional media is collapsing, for instance, yet online advertisers aren't even getting what they pay for. The eyeballs that view web-based ads might be automated software, or else they're humans working in "click farms" on the other side of the world, earning a penny per click.

Pein compares Silicon Valley today to the California Gold Rush of the 1840s and '50s. In those days, most prospectors went bust. The smart investment was to capitalize on their foolish hopes: "Sell shovels to all the suckers who think they'll get rich digging for gold." Pein sees landlords who operate what amount to Airbnb tenements as shovel merchants. Likewise conferences where developers with half-baked ideas pay to pitch to bored venture capitalists.

If the technology sector is a grift, then it's hardly alone. A decade ago, the "innovations" of subprime lending and collateralized debt obligations ruined our economy. Now the wellness industry hawks charcoal and coffee enemas as cures to made-up afflictions.

The contradiction in the U.S. regarding work is that the same society that believes you need to labor for wages in order to have dignity also believes in getting rich quick. The proliferation of useless jobs may signal that faith in the moral value of work is ebbing away. That's not necessarily a problem. After all, work isn't really what gives human beings dignity. But some people still believe in work, and they're at risk of exploitation by those whose only creed is acquisition. The challenge of social ethics is to elevate the former and rein in the latter. New York City recently passed an ordinance that limits Uber's activity on the streets and mandates a minimum wage for its drivers. It's a start.

Jonathan Malesic is a writer living in Dallas.

Tomie dePaola's Stories of Service and Stillness

By Kerry Weber

We called them the "special books": *Giorgio's Village*, about everyday life in an Italian village, and *The First Christmas*, about, of course, the birth of Christ. Both were intricate pop-up books that I received as a young child. However, due to the delicate nature of their moving paper parts, the books were kept on a high shelf and brought down to be read with some degree of supervision, lest Giorgio or the Christ Child be permanently separated from their scenes. I loved poring over every detail of these books as I absorbed the stories. I longed to stand with Giovani beside the fountain in his town or the Wise Men as they watched the star which grew in size and magnificence as you turned a paper wheel—glowing in the sky over the stable.

There was something soothing about the pictures in these books. They evoked both the comfort of home and the thrill of adventure. And these books were special for reasons beyond their delicacy; they introduced me to the man who would become one of my all-time favorite authors and illustrators of children's books: Tomie dePaola.

DePaola is perhaps best known for his "Strega Nona" series, about an Italian "grandma witch" who helps the neighborhood with headaches and warts and who owns a somewhat infamous pasta pot, which—when used by a bumbling layman—manages to nearly cover the town in spaghetti. But dePaola's illustrated world extends well beyond Italian villages, and at 84 he has now written and/or illustrated more than 250 books. DePaola is a native of Connecticut who studied art at the Pratt Institute in New York and at the California College of the Arts. He returned to New England to teach but eventually began working full-time as an author and illustrator. His distinctive style channels folk art traditions and is filled with blocks of color and clean lines, often evoking stained glass windows that might hang in the sort of church that would make everyone feel welcome.

Raised Catholic, dePaola's work often remains infused with a sense of the spiritual, and he has written several books about the saints, including *Patrick, Patron Saint of Ireland; Mary, the Mother of Jesus*, and *Francis: The Poor Man of Assisi*. He also has illustrated Bible stories, as well as *The Holy Twins*, a children's book about Saints Benedict and Scholastica by the Catholic spirituality writer Kathleen Norris. Other books, like *Let The Whole Earth Sing Praise* and *I Love You Sun, I Love You Moon*, which dePaola illustrated, highlight a love of creation that would make any fan of "Laudato Si" proud.

In addition to his books, dePaola has an actively maintained Facebook page where, until recently, he posted new drawings daily. His "Art Mail," as he calls it, includes images commemorating a significant event for the date or a lighthearted holiday, like National Ice Cream Day. Often included are feast days of Catholic saints. St. Gregory the Great, St. Teresa of Calcutta and the Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of Jesus were recent-





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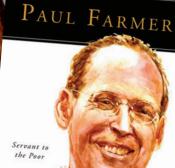


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ly featured, as well as novenas for peace. But dePaola's art is not restricted to the page or screen. DePaola's art also hangs in churches, including a Benedictine abbey in Hingham, Mass., and a church in New London, N.H., where he now resides. And in June 2017, he participated in a live reading of his work alongside Mother Dolores Hart, O.S.B., of the Abbey of Regina Laudis.

DePaola's latest book, published in October, is called **Quiet** (Simon & Schuster. 32p \$17.99) and the text serves as both a meditation and an invitation. In it, a grandfather and his two grandchildren explore the world around them. They notice how the animals behave, how some move fast or slow. They notice how they feel when they are still enough to notice these things at all. *Quiet* never mentions smartphones or YouTube, but it offers a message that serves as an antidote to the distraction of today's technology and the need so many of us feel to be constantly busy or on the move or entertained. It's a lovely book, and indeed its title names a quality present in a number of dePaola's books.

While many books aimed at children can seem frenetic, as if trying to compete with cartoons, dePaola's books always have moved at their own pace, offering lovely lessons or legends that delight with their details. Among the most beautiful and heartbreaking of dePaola's tales is *The Clown of God*. The book is dePaola's retelling of a French legend in which Giovanni, who once was able to use his juggling performances to earn fame and fortune, finds that his gifts have value even for the smallest of audiences. There are few images in children's literature more lovely than dePaola's depiction of a statue of the Christ Child smiling down at Giovanni, now an old man who has given his all in Tomie dePaola's distinctive style channels folk art traditions and is filled with blocks of color and clean lines.

his final performance.

The theme of service to others is prominent in *Pascual and the Kitchen Angels,* a story of a young man who joins a religious order hoping to serve the poor but ends up on kitchen duty cooking for his fellow friars. At a loss in the kitchen, Pascual begins to pray and is assisted by angels who cook such a delicious meal that the friars request that Pascual become the community's permanent chef, thus compounding the problem. Finally, the friars' curiosity about Pascual's methods leads them to peek into the kitchen. The holy scene on display earns Pascual a chance to serve the poor at last, while still keeping the friars fed.

Many of dePaola's most delightful characters are those who persevere in the worthy effort to simply be themselves. In *Oliver Button Is a Sissy*, the titular character is a young boy who prefers art and acting, jump rope games and long walks in the woods, to sports. When he takes up dance, he is teased by the boys and teased even more when he is defended by the girls, until one day he gets a chance to prove his talent to the whole school. His success comes not in competition but in his willingness to pursue what he loves.

Another tale of a creative child is told in *The Art Lesson*, which draws on dePaola's own story. In it a kindergarten boy strives to create unique artwork that expresses his personality rather than the uniformity his teacher expects. It is a book that appreciates the way in which small victories pave the way for big ones and in which rebellion comes in the form of a 64-count box of Crayola crayons.

In *Quiet* there is more sage advice for children. As they walk through nature, the grandfather makes a suggestion to the grandchildren: "Let's not be so busy. Why don't we sit here, you next to me?" The final image is the three figures sitting on a bench, looking in the same direction. The scene serves as a beautiful reminder of what it means to be present to one another, and that often in order to "see the person" in front of us, as Pope Francis has urged, we must start by looking outward together.

Kerry Weber is an executive editor of **America**. Twitter: @Kerry_Weber.



Watch **America**'s video profile of Tomie dePaola at americamag.org/video/tomie.



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In the Best Possible Light

SOLE. MIO

Weegee was one of the godfathers of noir. Pictured: his photograph from Sept. 21, 1939, of a man killed during a street melee on New York's Mulberry Street.

By Eve Tushnet

One of the great aesthetic and moral markers of film noir is its stark, high-contrast lighting. That noir glare makes every face a beacon lost and drifting in a sea of shadows. The white light confronts the human face and makes the darkness all around it even thicker. It's a kind of lighting made for crime, for secrets, for the punishingly bright exposure of what's hidden in darkness; for sudden fear, reversals of fortune, the soul in extremis. And it came, in some small part, from the collision of technology, ethnic anxiety and a hunger for success-from, in other words, Weegee.

The sharp contrast between black and white enhances the whiteness of skin, which is why a man named Arthur Fellig used it when he took his

pony Hypo through the neighborhoods of New York's Lower East Side, letting kids ride Hypo and trying to persuade their struggling parents to shell out for a picture of the kids on the pony. Fellig-as he was still known in the 1910s, though he would soon gain the nickname under which he would become famous-knew that the parents would want their kids to look as WASPy as possible. So he used "the contrastiest paper I could get in order to give the kids nice, white, chalky faces." And those bleachy family-album pictures kept Weegee in baggy suits and cheap cigars until he could break into the news business, where his stark, high-contrast crime photos earned the kind of fame that ruins people. Ah, the sweet smell of success!

Christopher Bonanos's Flash: The Making of Weegee the Famous is a book in love with its subject-convinced of his genius, willing to be charmed by his excesses and forgiving of his lapses. "People who have never heard of Weegee can describe him," Bonanos writes, because he created Hollywood's idea of the newspaper photographer: "the squat guy in a rumpled suit and crumpled fedora, carrying a press camera with a flashgun mounted on its side, a stinky cigar clamped in the corner of his mouth." Bonanos can laugh at Weegee's ego (the guy had a stamp saying CREDIT PHOTO BY WEEGEE THE FAMOUS) but he never forgets the skill, talent and determination behind the persona.

The pony-photos story encapsu-

Flash The Making of Weegee the Famous By Christopher Bonanos Henry Holt & Co. 400p \$32

lates several of the qualities that made Weegee the king of crime photography and one of the godfathers of noir. Weegee knew photographic technology intimately. He could command the camera and push its limits. In the days when each picture required the photographer to load a fresh glass plate into the boxy camera body. Weegee would spend hours practicing his moves until he had the dexterity to shoot faster than his rivals. He knew how to light a shot for emotion as much as-sometimes more than-factual accuracy. And he knew that if you want to make it big, you have to play to your audience. Weegee's news photos and his later art photos have their strange obsessions-sleeping people, mannequins, spectators, all in their own way hauntingly exposed and helpless-but above all, in his early, hungry years, he gave the people what they wanted.

Weegee's great insight was that even in news photography, people want emotion—what Bonanos summarizes as "schmaltz, pathos, violence." They might want irony: firehose blasts turning to steam as they hit the blazing bouillon-cube factory, upon whose brick exterior is a company ad reading SIMPLY ADD BOIL-ING WATER.

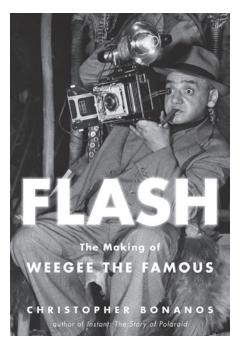
They might want horror: Weegee titled one of his best-known shots "I Cried When I Took This Picture." It shows a woman clutching her mother, who is wearing a shawl, as they stare in open-mouthed anguish at the burning building they've just fled, inside which the other daughter and her child are burning to death.

They might want subtle emotions too complex to name, as in the gorgeous photo of the accused cop- killer Anthony (Mad Dog) Esposito after a roughing-up at police headquarters: The cops face away from the camera and Esposito looks down, his loose, unsteady posture and the white bandage under his eye the sole deviations from the photo's straight vertical lines.

If a car knocks a horse-drawn wagon off a bridge, Weegee explained, "The other photographers will take a picture of the bridge.... What I do is go and see what happened to the poor old horse."

Bonanos details the method: the police radio in Weegee's quintessentially bachelor apartment; the willingness to goose the truth now and then; the emphasis on spectator and aftermath. Weegee wasn't above making some cash by shooting cute pics of puppies in water glasses (who doesn't love a funny pet photo?), but he was known for his corpses. The end of Prohibition was bad for his business too.

The bloodstained photos might be sordid, but Bonanos suggests that Weegee was also a political photographer, a champion of the working class. Weegee's camera could make any working man or woman mythical. A 1940 photo shows a bagel man emerging from the predawn mist with his loops of dough, like a poppyseed prophet come down from the mountain. His Harlem photos are just as raw and human-and just as artistically accomplished-as his pictures of white people, free of any anthropological distance. (Weegee may have shot the most glamorous N.A.A.C.P. photo ever, as a pretty young woman smokes beside a little sign for the civil rights organization.) His photos of men arrested for dressing as women show a



willingness to let them display themselves as they like; similarly, a 1940s photo of "Girls at a Bar," who from their dress are almost certainly lesbians, is casual and neighborly.

But Weegee himself mistrusted "message" art, a mistrust Bonanos oddly attributes "perhaps...to his lack of formal education, perhaps to his streetwise cynicism." Any artist interested in the full range of humanity will depict class struggle and the inner life of despised and oppressed people. (Consider "I Cried When I Took This Picture": The anguished mourners' landlord pleaded guilty to manslaughter for insufficient fireproofing.) But Weegee's police-booking photos of suspects are often frankly exploitative. He had a repertoire of lies and tricks by which he could prevent arrestees from hiding their faces. His camera could capture resignation, defiance or bewilderment on an arrestee's face, but if you consider those websites that collect mug shots cruel, maybe you should be uncomfortable with Weegee's guilty-until-proven-unprofitable work here too.

Fame bought Weegee freedom. He

American Saint By Catherine O'Donnell Cornell University Press. 494p \$36.95

used it to leave crime far behind. Instead, he explored the possibilities of the camera, inventing a score of ways to warp images in his "distortion" photos. These pictures show technical innovation, but artistically they do not rise above the level of the carnival caricaturist. Weegee also loved girlie photos. Some of them he turned into art: the backstage shot of a Los Angeles strip-club dancer, sparkling with gold-glitter body paint, drinking a cup of water with all the poise of a femme fatale leveling a pistol, as a man in the background ducks behind his hat in shame; the self-mocking shot of Bettie Page sassily facing a row of men hidden behind their panting cameras. But Bonanos can't quite hide the way Weegee exemplified not only the crime-photographer image but that other, sadder image of the photographer: the lonely man whose camera expresses the emotion and connection he struggles to share in real life. Bonanos captures the sadness of a man who chased women, literally (his bohemian friend Judith Malina refused to go to his apartment after her first visit turned into what she called "a running-around-the-table situation"), who sometimes seemed to see all women as centerfolds.

Weegee the Famous no longer needed to woo—he was free to dazzle. But like many lonely men, he learned that his obsessions were not widely shared. He was interested in nudism and made a couple of movies about it that met with zero success. His "distortions" didn't do much better. He tried to get back in the crime-photo game in the mid-'60s, but it had passed him by; he couldn't hack the late hours and the constant hustle. Bonanos struggles to prevent readers from concluding that Weegee peaked early and never regained the glory of the murder years, but the photos tell the story. Weegee was best when he was hungry.

Eve Tushnet *is a contributing writer for* **America**.

American Saint

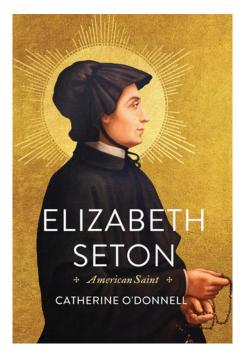
By Raymond A. Schroth

It was March 14, 1805, in New York City. A 31-year-old woman who all her life had discussed religion with educators, spiritual advisers and even her own family is about to proclaim her commitment to the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. Her name is Elizabeth Ann Seton.

Pope Paul VI would canonize Seton 170 years later, on Sept. 14, 1975, making her the first native-born citizen of the United States to be named a saint.

Readers learn early in Catherine O'Donnell's *Elizabeth Seton: American Saint* that Seton's mother was the daughter of an Episcopalian priest, and her father (who later walked out on his wife) was chief health officer of the Port of New York. She herself served those shattered by poverty, side effects of the American Revolution, and felt the pain as both strangers and those she loved were destroyed by yellow fever and tuberculosis.

Elizabeth was intellectual, read devotional literature, kept a diary and wrote letters to all her friends and family spread around the world. On



Jan. 25, 1794, at the age of 19, Elizabeth married William Magee Seton, 25, a wealthy businessman whose career often took him to Europe. William brought his six younger siblings into the family, while Elizabeth quickly gave birth to five children of their own: Anna Maria Seton, who eventually took vows as a member of the Sisters of Charity; William Seton II, a naval officer who with his wife Emily had eight children, one of whom became a monsignor and another a Sister of Mercy; Richard Bayley Seton, a civilian clerk on a naval ship; Catherine Charlton Seton, who entered the Sisters of Mercy; and Rebecca, who died young.

During these years, as the families multiplied, Elizabeth's desire to convert to Catholicism took various forms, especially in her distinction between life and death. She tended to see death more as moving into the presence of God than as a confrontation of one's sins throughout life. Thus, death should not be seen as a moment of judgment about the future agony of someone who might have

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America MEDIA

lived a decent but imperfect life.

The men in Elizabeth's family were at best indifferent toward religion, but Elizabeth read widely. Tempted by depression, to settle her nerves she turned to literary classics, like Voltaire's *Candide*, with its Pangloss playing with the idea of providence. O'Donnell quotes a letter Seton wrote to her father: "I have passed one of the most Elegant Evenings of my life.... Part of my family are asleep and part abroad—I have been reading of the 'High and lofty one who inhabits Eternity.""

In 1799, William's mental and physical health began to suffer. And if William failed to survive, Elizabeth wrote to her friend Rebecca, she and Rebecca might never see one another again, since she would be so shattered by the loss. She added, "I'm pregnant for the fourth time." O'Donnell sees Elizabeth working to "reduce herself to a vessel of God's love. That quest, as ambitious as it was self-denying, underlay her conversion to Catholicism and all that followed."

Meanwhile, it seems that the closer Elizabeth came to declaring herself a Roman Catholic, the more obstacles stood in her way. Her father, Richard Bayley, was "impermeable to evangelization," so she did not even try to discuss her interest in Catholicism. Her husband, who was in many ways the center of her life, showed only a polite interest in evangelization, while also saddled with a plummeting business and his failing body.

O'Donnell sums up the atmosphere of those years:

> Elizabeth Seton's contemplation of death was not unique to her; mortality was the soil

from which theologies and philosophies had always grown, and in the eighteenth century death remained as common as dirt. Women sickened and died in childbirth; men slumped home from work at the docks vellowing with a fatal fever; hearts failed, cancers grew, horses threw their riders and wounds suppurated. The possibility of death lay everywhere, whether one longed for it or feared it, so why not put it to use? Such was already Elizabeth's view when, in the summer after William's bankruptcy, she and her children made their country home at the city's new quarantine station.

One response to the plague that swept New York City was to move for a while to Europe, where some hoped the cleaner atmosphere would allow for better health. So in mid-November the ship Shepherdess pulled into the harbor of Livorno, Italy, carrying William and Elizabeth Seton with their young daughter Anna Maria, who had absorbed her mother's piety with enthusiasm. They were greeted by William's friend and business partner Filippo Filicchi and his wife, Mary. Before they could connect, a voice yelled, "Don't touch!" The rumor had reached Livorno of a new plague of vellow fever in New York.

The Setons, treated like immigrants, were rowed to a *lazaretto* (named for the friend Jesus brought back to life) and held for almost a month. William got worse and coughed up blood. He did not share Elizabeth's impatience with life, but loved art, music and good dinners. Elizabeth spent the nights listening to her husband breathe and kissing his face to see if it was cold. Their daughter slept a few feet away. Anna Maria, 8 years old, felt sick. Elizabeth taught her to see the sickness as a gift from God. In his last days William imagined that he had won a London lottery and was no longer bankrupt. Four days after Christmas, his breathless, dehydrated body failed. At quarter past seven his soul "took its flight."

It would be four months before the Setons could get a ship back to the United States, but with the hospitality of the Filicchis they toured Florence. Elizabeth, guided by Filippo, spent much of her prayer time debating if and when she should embrace Catholicism. Filippo had grand dreams of spreading Catholicism in the United States. He even wrote personally to Bishop John Carroll, suggesting that Providence had sent Elizabeth to Europe so she could re-encounter the divine message, for she was being called to spread the faith.

A year after Elizabeth's formal reception into the church in 1805, she assumed a new persona: that of a religious leader. She was about to move to Canada when she encountered Louis William Valentine Dubourg, a French Sulpician priest who had been president of Georgetown College and St. Mary's Seminary and College in Baltimore. He asked her to run St. Mary's. Maintaining a school demanded fundraising ability, which usually entailed calling on a select number of wealthy families. As O'Donnell notes, the basis of the wealth for those families and the Catholic Church in Maryland was

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slavery. Those who owned slaves to support their church argued they had no choice but to accept slavery in order to do good.

Within a few years, through the combined efforts of John Carroll, the Sulpicians, benefactors, individual priests and religious women, with Mother Elizabeth Seton as both their guide and servant, Emmitsburg became home to a variety of institutions, including St. Joseph's House and St. Mary's Seminary and College.

Eventually tuberculosis took Elizabeth, just as it had her husband. Elizabeth was surrounded by loving friends and family when she died on Jan. 4, 1821. Her sister remembered, "It seemed the Lord was there."

Raymond A. Schroth, S.J., is an emeritus editor of **America**.

A Story of Repression?

By José Dueño, S.J.

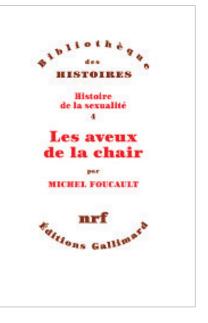
Contrary to the accepted narrative in secular histories, early church fathers did not repress sexuality. Instead, they granted it a central place in their understanding of what it means to know oneself. This is one of the main takeaways from the recent posthumous publication of Michel Foucault's fourth volume of *The History* of *Sexuality*, subtitled *The Confessions* of the Flesh (Histoire de la Sexualité 4: Les aveux de la chair). (The book is available in French but has not yet been published in English.)

Michel Foucault (1926-84) was

a French philosopher who studied the relationship between power and knowledge and the way it has changed throughout time. He paid attention to how practices of exclusion and domination are closely linked to authoritative claims of knowledge. The major foci of his work were the histories of madness, the social sciences, penitentiaries and sexuality.

The History of Sexuality is a project that occupied Foucault at the end of his life. He got to see only the first three volumes published. The first, subtitled The Will to Knowledge, begins by questioning what Foucault calls the "repressive hypothesis." According to this hypothesis, sexuality was for the most part repressed before the various sexual liberations of the 20th century. Foucault does not deny that our present age softened some of the prohibitions of previous eras, but even with this liberation. Foucault remains suspicious of the role that this "repressive hypothesis" plays as a discourse in today's sexual practices.

The person who invokes the repressive hypothesis sees him- or herself as freed from an oppressive past. This is not only a very simplistic vision of history; it also does not encourage much examination of one's actions. Power is not only prohibition; it is also production. Sexual liberation has produced new sexual practices, and it is this productive form of power that the repressive hypothesis leaves unexamined. Even with liberation, sex continues to be a problem. Today's debates about how to interpret all the practices that enter into the "gray zone of consent"



exemplify how sexual practices can be problematic even in a supposedly liberated culture.

Historically, sex has not always been seen as an enigma to be deciphered. The History of Sexuality is an account of the hermeneutic problems that have been ascribed to sexuality throughout the ages. Originally, a draft of Volume IV was to precede Volumes II and III, but very "quickly...Foucault decide[d] to go further back in time to grasp, within Christian history, the point of origin...of the subject's injunction to verbalize a truth-saying of himself." The church fathers developed a number of practices for dealing with sexuality. But before diving into them, Foucault studied the preceding periods to better understand the specific transformations Christianity introduced.

For the fathers, the notion of sexual desire (concupiscence, libido) brought together a network of practices and discourses. "Spiritual combat," "the examination of conscience," virginity (celibacy) and marriage are some of these. For the fathers, sexual desire was a problem in that it escapes our will. Foucault sees in these early Christian writings a series of reflections about what is voluntary and involuntary in relation to sexuality.

In Volume IV's first few paragraphs, Foucault states that the fathers did not really invent any new restrictions in matters of sexuality. They largely inherited the regulations of the Stoics and the ancient Greeks. What interests Foucault throughout the book are the specific transformations carried out by the early Christians in their appropriation of these "pagan" norms.

The book comprises three parts with four appendices. The first part is called "The Formation of a New Experience." This new experience is that of the *flesh* as a source of "knowledge and self-transformation in function of a certain relationship between the cancellation of evil and the manifestation of the truth." In other words, the early church fathers developed a series of techniques, based upon an interrogation of the flesh, in order to discover the truth of oneself and to reject what hinders that. The flesh thus became a place of knowledge.

Most of this first part concerns the ritual of baptism as a rupture within one's life. To remain faithful to this change, one must forever be in a state of self-vigilance. One technique taken from the Stoics is the examination of conscience. In the Stoic "examen," the emphasis was on exterior actions: what was done right or wrong. In its Christian variant, the examen emphasizes the recognition and confession of one's *thoughts*. It seeks to uncover the nature of these thoughts: Where do they come from? What actions do they encourage? Am I being deceived by someone?

This introspection culminates in a confession. In listening, the confessor or spiritual director not only guides the person, but helps her to discover the truth of her thoughts. The Christian examen thus develops a practice of *intimacy*. It inaugurates a turn inward to discover the truth of oneself and then to seek a certain validation in sharing it with someone else.

Much of this introspection and articulation centers on sexual desire. Thus, a form of subjectivity, based on desire, begins to appear in relation to virginity and marriage. In the book's second part, subtitled "Being Virgin," Foucault reiterates his point of departure: Christians did not invent the idea of virginity as a practice. They even borrowed some of the standard "pagan" arguments for celibacy, such as viewing marriage as an obstacle to an independent life. The originality of early Christian writers was to conceive it as a "privileged," or special, form of life.

The fathers understood celibacy as privileged in that it presently enacts what awaits all Christians at the end of time. They saw it inscribed within salvation history. But Foucault points out how this form of life required constant practices of self-vigilance in relation to sexual desire for it to function effectively. Virginity thus represents a particular way of engaging with the problem of sexual desire.

Marriage deals with the same problem differently. In Part III, "Being Married," Foucault does a close reading of certain texts of Augustine concerning marriage. The question for Augustine was how to see marriage as something good while maintaining a belief in a certain level of evil inscribed within sexual desire. Consent is one of the concepts Augustine introduces to try to grapple with this tension. To engage in sexual relations is to consent to that sexual desire which one cannot control. This marks a separation from the "pagan" practices of continence. In these, the accent was on avoiding excesses and achieving self-mastery.

In contrast, Augustine frames the problem around the self's own will. "[N]on-consent does not consist in overcoming desire by casting away from the soul the representation of the desired object, but in not wanting it as concupiscence wants it." The goal becomes to not consent to sexual desire, not so much in order to surmount it but to transform the very way one wills. This theme of consent/ non-consent functions as a pedagogy of the will, in which the objective is to learn to want differently.

One could see this volume as conducting a genealogy of the vocabularies that have framed the conversations about sexuality throughout history, even to this day. Consent is one of these terms. Foucault finishes the book by saying: "[t]he problematization of sexual conducts...becomes the problem of the self/subject." Sexuality becomes linked with discourses and practices of self-exploration. For Foucault, two forms of subjectivity arise from all of this: one based on desire, the other on law. For the subject of desire, "the truth can only be discovered by himself, in the depths of himself." As for the subject of law, his "imputable actions define them-

Continued on Page 50

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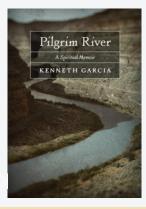


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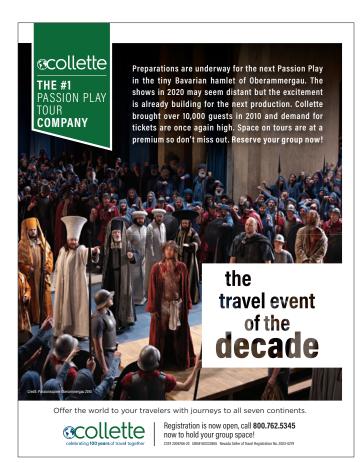
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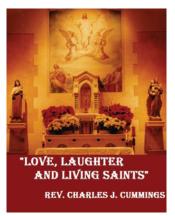
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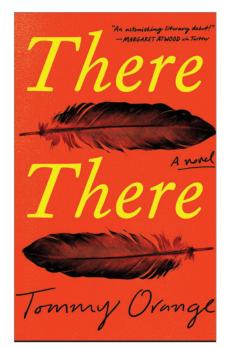
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Continued from Page 47

selves and are classed as good or evil according to the relationships he has with himself."

For better or for worse, it is clear that these two subjectivities have conditioned the rest of the history of Western sexuality. In today's world, sex is for many a source of self-exploration. These two forms of subjectivity are still operant in contemporary conversations about sex where the ambiguities of consent are discussed. In terms of law, it can be seen in attempts at judging another person's sexual behavior. This judgment does not stop at the level of the external actions committed. It seeks to uncover the interiority of the person being judged-i.e., his/ her desires and intentions.

One cannot analyze the case of Louis C. K., for example, without making use of many of the categories that Foucault historically traces back to the church fathers: confession, consent, desire, finding the truth of oneself and more. Though one should not be too quick to look for answers for today's #MeToo movement in *The Confessions of the Flesh*, it nonetheless provides a history of how the vocabularies that shape so much contemporary concerns emerged.



Restless and Adrift in Oakland

By Kaya Oakes

Oakland, Calif., is having a zeitgeist moment. The recent films "Black Panther," "Sorry to Bother You" and "Blindspotting" were all directed by filmmakers from Oakland. The Golden State Warriors continue to rack up championships. The food scene is hyped in the national press.

But scratch the surface and Oakland's trenchant, seemingly unsolvable problems remain. Homeless encampments grow, people of color and the working class are regularly displaced by gentrification, local politicians bicker and do little to change anything, the Warriors and Raiders are both leaving, and crimes like the recent stabbing of a black teenager, Nia Wilson, are repeated with horrifying regularity. Into these colliding visions of Oakland's identity, arguments about whom the city really belongs to and this undulating pattern of creativity **There There** By Tommy Orange Knopf. 304p \$25.95

and violence arrives Tommy Orange's debut novel, *There There*.

Orange, like many characters in his novel, was born and raised in Oakland. He is Native American, a member of the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes. The Native characters in Orange's novel are very much urban, but as the narrator of the prologue says, "an Urban Indian belongs to the city, and cities belong to the earth." Some parts of Oakland's Native population were rooted here before there was an Oakland, and others arrived later, but over time, they became part of the city, and now they "know the downtown Oakland skyline better than any mountain range."

Rather than trying to speak about Oakland's Native community in a single voice, Orange employs a kaleidoscope of Native narrators, including a teen born with fetal alcohol syndrome (which he refers to as "the drome," the way he heard it spoken as a child), half-white characters struggling to understand and balance their dual identities of colonizer and colonized, elders trying to connect with children they abandoned, and young filmmakers, community activists, drug dealers and aspiring writers.

All of these characters eventually end up in the same place in the novel's final pages: at a powwow in Oakland's crumbling Coliseum, where an older character who cleans up the stadium's trash reminds readers of the years when the Raiders and the A's racked up championships. Back then, he says, sports offered the city a different kind of narrative, one where "it was a really good time to be from Oakland, to feel that you were from that thing, that winning." But the last

José Dueño, S.J., is a former associate editor of *America*.

time the A's played in a World Series, in 1989, the Bay Area was cleaved by a huge earthquake that killed dozens and destroyed buildings, bridges and roads, and that tore chunks of Oakland out of the earth for good.

Along the way, Orange explores the question of Native identity through the lens of characters who do not always feel very Native. This unease is layered with unease about the identity of Oakland itself. In one cringe-inducing scene, a young Native artist named Dene Owende, who is vying for a grant, chats with a newly arrived white guy who claims "no one's really from here" when it comes to Oakland, mangling the Gertrude Stein quote about there being no "there there." Dene, who knows Stein was writing about how the Oakland of her childhood had changed beyond recognition, says of the white guy that he "probably used the quote at dinner parties and made other people feel good about taking over neighborhoods they wouldn't have had the guts to drive through ten years ago."

For many of Orange's characters. the question of what it means to be born and raised in Oakland crashes up against the question of what it means to be Native. For Orvil Red Feather. his great-aunt who raises him and his brothers "had been openly against them doing anything Indian." Instead, she treated their Native identity "like drinking or driving or smoking or voting. Indianing." After his great-aunt tells him that "you're Indian because you're Indian because you're Indian," Orvil spends years learning to be Indian from the internet: Googling powwow music and dancing, reading Native publications online. But this does not solve the problem of identity. Orvil puts on a set of powwow regalia he finds in a closet and sees an Indian boy "dressed up like an Indian." He keeps staring, Orange writes, "waiting for something true to appear before him."

Ultimately, the intersections of Orange's Native characters' quest to define their identity and Oakland's struggle to do the same are about redefining the narratives forced onto both. "All these stories that we haven't been telling all this time," he writes, "are just part of what we need to heal." But, he adds, "don't make the mistake of calling us resilient." His Native characters are addicted to many things: alcohol, drugs, the internet, bad relationships. The genocide of Native Americans at the hands of missionaries and colonizers; the subsequent struggle to retain their languages, faiths, arts and culture; and the fracturing of Native families as they were forced off their lands is a narrative of loss, full stop. But, Orange writes, there is some consolation in understanding that doesn't mean their history has been completely erased. "Look no further than your last name," he writes. "Follow it back and you might find your line paved with gold, or beset with traps."

The question of Native identity keeps arising throughout *There There*. Some of Orange's characters don't even know their tribal affiliation; others are professional powwow employees, driving a circuit from gathering to gathering. All are Native, but all ask repeatedly, to themselves and to others, what being Native really means. Dene, working on his storytelling project, interviews Calvin, another Native kid feeling restless and adrift. Dene asks Calvin to talk about being his experiences growing up in the city. "I don't know," Calvin says, mentioning that his Native father was never a part of his life. "I feel bad sometimes even saying I'm Native. Mostly I just feel like I'm from Oakland."

In There There, Oakland becomes a character as much as any of Orange's other individuals: regularly erupting into violence, steadily erasing the history of its impoverished citizens who jump from apartment to apartment, existing in a series of "long, grey streets" that seem to go nowhere when you're a kid on a bike pedaling around. But one thing about being from a place marked over and over again by regular invasions of those who would seek to define it in their own image is that it still belongs to whoever has dug in deeply enough to call it home. Native Americans know this; so do those of us born and raised in Oakland. And in both cases, the chip carried on a shoulder as the city is reinvented by outsiders again and again can become, as Orange writes, "a concrete chip, a slab."

Street artists have become some of the strongest activist voices in Oakland, making a case for graffiti as a testimony against erasure. A few years back, a mural appeared on a side street in West Oakland, a neighborhood where some of Orange's characters live, now being scoured by gentrification. Sprawling across two buildings, it depicts twining, forking, and burrowing lines. In large text across the top, the artist makes the point, which might be Orange's too, and Oakland's: ROOTS RUN DEEP.

Kaya Oakes, a contributing writer for **America**, teaches writing at the University of California, Berkeley, and is the author of The Nones Are Alright.



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Prose for Pleasure Learning to read (for fun) again

By Ellen B. Koneck



My "must-read" list is significantly longer than my "have-read" list. That's normal, I think—and it's a good problem to have. There are centuries of good books to get through, after all.

I was lucky enough to have a liberal arts education that prompted me to read some of the world classics: Aristotle and Augustine, the Bhagavad Gita and the Bible, Shakespeare and Cervantes, all of which (perhaps expectedly) got me hooked on books that stood the test of time.

Not wanting to miss anything, I started the habit of adding an entry to an iPhone note called "books + authors" upon each new recommendation, which derived from all kinds of sources: reading a compelling review, deciding that if Netflix thought it was worth a TV adaptation, it *must* be good, or—my kryptonite—observing it referenced, even in passing, by people I consider wise and insightful.

When I moved out to New York, I got a job at Commonweal magazine and I was in way over my head. Lunchtime conversations with the writers and editors included so much fodder for my humble iPhone list I could barely keep up. I'd leave our staff lunch, go back to my desk and frantically read Wikipedia articles and order books to try to bridge the chasms I suddenly recognized in my education. It was the unmistakable pain of realizing how much I didn't know I didn't know.

As my "books + authors" list grew, I began to refer to it as my "what Ellen must read in order to be a good person and a worthwhile participant in the history and future of human discourse" list. Zero pressure, I know. I was racing through short stories and classic novels just to check them off my list, with no time to digest or sit with the ideas, feelings or characters. I'd unwittingly started to treat reading as more of a duty than a delight.

Graduate school the following year didn't help. I was assigned two or three books' worth of reading each week, and I doubled down on my new habit of consuming information efficiently, rather than enthusiastically. Many tried to convince me it was okay to "skim," but I couldn't bring myself to do it. I had too much pride: If a book was going to be checked off my list, it had to be official. It had to be read in its entirety.

Despite amplifying my unhealthy relationship to books, graduate school the great leveler—also convinced me sufficiently that I just couldn't read everything good there was to read. Once the pendulum starting swinging in this new direction, however, inertia took over. By the time of graduation, my reading pace had slowed to a halt.

It was what I've come to call an *education hangover*. A little too much the night—okay, the years—before, and I couldn't quite stomach using my newly free evenings and weekends to self-assign more books. I needed to detox.

A few months off helped, because soon I missed books: the ideas and the plot twists and the immersive other worlds I could enter. But the blue-lit "must-read" list on my phone continued to torment me. It gave the impression of an assignment fraught with pressures that I didn't want associated with reading—especially if I were to delight in the act again.

My ultimate cure? Book club.

I joined a group of friends a few months after graduation, pleased to find these were the kinds of ladies who took socializing, rosé drinking *and* dissecting plot equally seriously. And because books were chosen democratically, they never came from my highly curated list; we read a book that Oprah recommended, and then a novel that one of the girls got for Christmas and then some New York Times bestseller that was poised for a screenplay. We even—it's hard to admit this—read books that were downright *bad*.

This is not to say my new, more relaxed reading was lacking rigor. Like my experience at the magazine or in grad school, insightful remarks and deft observations were regularly posited by book club members. We renewed our commitment not to judge a book by its cover (even if a favorable judgment); we agreed that a meandering plot is more interesting to live than read about; and perhaps most important, we determined that the act of reading-even reading a genuinely bad book-was worthwhile if it created such occasions for communion with kindred readers.

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