

THE CRESSET

A REVIEW OF LITERATURE, THE ARTS, AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS

LENT 2020



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REVIEWS & COLUMNS

VERSE

A Tale of Two Tables
Susan R. Holman

Greta Gerwig's *Little Women*
Samuel Graber

Grief
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The Fluidity of Stone
and the Ground of Our Being
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Kanye West's *Jesus Is Born*
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Five Challenges from Margaret
Atwood's *The Testaments*
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"Where Do You Get that Living Water?"
Understanding the Risks
to Water Quality
Julie Peller



VALPARAISO
UNIVERSITY

thecresset.org
Vol. 83, No. 3

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On the front cover: Jack Beal (1931-2013). *Still Life with Self-Portrait*, 1974. Oil on canvas, 29 x 28 inches. Sloan Fund Purchase. Brauer Museum of Art, 74.09

Jack Beal was a realist artist whose works were frequently allegorical and complex in allusion. His paintings can be found in museum collections worldwide. The Brauer Museum is fortunate to have in its permanent collection this fine work by the artist.

In this still life painting with reflection that includes a self-portrait, Jack Beal looks on with concentration as he attempts to stabilize with meticulous detail a still life seemingly on the verge of tumbling off the inclined tabletop. One particularly interesting aspect of Beal's art is his ability to combine carefully observed and rendered realism with narrative aspects and intriguing pictorial choices. The still life here remains frozen in time, even though such an arrested state is belied by countless factors that make life unpredictable and unstable from one moment to the next.

On the back cover: Sebastian Voortman. *Body of Water during Golden Hour*, 2016. Original at <https://www.pexels.com/photo/beach-dawn-dusk-ocean-189349/>.



THE CRESSET is published five times during the academic year by the Valparaiso University Press as a forum for informed opinion about literature, the arts, and public affairs. Periodicals postage paid at Valparaiso, Indiana.

Postmaster: Send address changes to *The Cresset*, Valparaiso University, 1320 Chapel Drive South, Valparaiso, IN 46383.

Subscriptions: Regular subscription rates: \$29.95 per year; Student/Senior subscription rates: \$14.95 per year; single copy: \$6.00. International subscriptions, add \$8.00. Subscribe online at www.thecresset.org.

Letters to the Editor: Readers are encouraged to address the Editor at cresset@valpo.edu. Letters to the Editor are subject to editing for brevity.

Submissions: Refer to our online submissions management system at thecresset.submittable.com/submit.

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whatever is **TRUE**

whatever is **NOBLE**

whatever is **RIGHT**

whatever is **PURE**

whatever is **LOVELY**

whatever is **ADMIRABLE**

if anything is excellent or praiseworthy
—think about such things.

Philippians 4:8

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IN LUCE TUA

In Thy Light

This Pandemic Life

HOW QUICKLY LIFE CAN CHANGE! WHEN OUR staff started working on this issue, everything seemed to be business as usual. Within a few weeks, though, the voices talking about coronavirus in the US media intensified from a murmur into a roar. In the past week, the World Health Organization classified coronavirus as a pandemic. The number of confirmed cases in the United States multiplied many times over. Schools and workplaces have closed, grocery stores have been emptied, churches have suspended public worship, and events of all kinds have been postponed or canceled. Valparaiso University is one of hundreds of colleges and universities that have moved in-person classes online.

Life has changed quickly indeed. Daily existence has simultaneously become more boring and more alarming as we adapt to these changes. Although planning for this issue of the *Cresset* commenced long before most of us had uttered the now-familiar words “social distancing” or “self-isolation,” the contributors have given us essays, columns, and poems that seem remarkably relevant to this pandemic life.

First, in the essay “Post-Apocalyptic Hope in *When the English Fall* and *The Road*” (page 24), L. Lamar Nisly reflects on how the actions and outlook of an individual or small group can shape reality, even when reality is at its bleakest. “In helpful ways,” Nisly writes, the two novels “engage similar concerns of what happens when a society’s structures fall apart...how people should approach external threats, and the possibilities for hopeful outcomes.”

Second, Joel Kurz’s essay, “The Fluidity of Stone and the Ground of Our Being: Andy Goldsworthy’s *Walking Wall*” (page 10), considers the recent exhibit of a traditionally constructed stone wall at Kansas City’s Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. As public health professionals and government officials remind us of

how interconnected we are—how much we rely on the vigilance of others for our own well-being—Kurz’s thoughts about the stones Goldsworthy uses seem like an apt metaphor: “Each stone exists in relation to the stones and spaces around it,” he writes. “Only by being joined together with other stones of various sizes and shapes can a cohesive entity emerge.” And, as we anticipate difficult times in the weeks and months to come, Kurz has another important insight: “Sorrow is inescapable, so what happens around it matters.”

Finally, Susan R. Holman’s essay, “A Tale of Two Tables” (page 4), explores the connections between religion, food, and the healing arts. Midway through the essay, she writes about what she needs to do to receive communion: “I must move my body, physically coordinating it with others in the communion line. This reminds me of my connections—and obligations—to others in consequence of this eucharistic community. I must attentively watch clerical hands to get the elements into my mouth and not on the floor. This reminds me that I must be open to my own needs, to others’ willingness to interact with me, and that I have choice and agency.” And finally, she writes, in taking communion she is reminded that “My life indeed depends on Jesus’s willingness to be torn apart, as it were, for my sake.”

Holman’s essay is a bittersweet read in this extraordinary time when participation in communion is limited by coronavirus response measures. Pastors and church leaders have been quick to remind the faithful, though, that a lack of physical communion does not inevitably equal a lack of spiritual communion. We might be waylaid by disease, but we remain the body of Christ. This temporary separation from each other is a sacrifice for the good of the community—one that seems somehow appropriate for the season of Lent. We may be alone a lot these days, but we are alone together. 🌿 —HGG

A Tale of Two Tables

Susan R. Holman

I WAS TWENTY YEARS OLD AND HAD JUST returned home to Boston after my first year as a transfer student at Valparaiso University. The move to the Midwest had been tough in many ways, but in my second semester I'd found an exciting new church and, there, welcoming and like-minded new friends. Meanwhile, back at home that year, my parents had moved from the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) church of my childhood to a new LCMS parish some miles away. On one of the first Sundays back home that summer, my parents' new pastor asked to have a few words before the service. He'd been talking with my mother, he said, who told him I was communing in another denomination. "You realize," he said, "this means you cannot eat at the Lord's table in this church." It did not matter that

I'd been spiritually grounded from infancy in the same deep mysteries of incarnational theology that he himself represented. It didn't matter, as I tried to explain despite feeling completely up-ended, that my beliefs on the Eucharist had not changed since I'd memorized Luther's Small Catechism in confirmation. I was out, simply because I had chosen to eat at another (Christian) table. I returned to campus with much to ponder in the fields of my double major: nutrition and psychology. It was something I would continue to ponder over the following several decades of research and writing on hunger, poverty, and illness across early Christian history.

Food, whether it is used in religious ritual, therapeutic dieting, or ordinary breakfast, lunch, and dinner, is supposed to be good for you.



CCO

It is supposed to sustain life, to restore and heal. Even when we misuse it—eat or drink excessively, practice fad diets, suffer eating disorders, or cook and feed others to gain their affirmation and praise—it is still (usually) because we see food as something good, something we want to be happy about, something with the potential to satisfying those deeper physical and spiritual hungers, something to make us better.

Holy eating gets at this connection. Indeed, to eat in any religious ritual setting is, usually, to engage in a tradition that sees food as part of a deliberately healing therapeutic narrative. In Christianity—an incarnational faith that emphasizes God coming literally in a physical body—spiritual health is thus tightly intertwined with a literal affirmation of fleshly stuff that God uses to enter and change our body to the core of our being.

Across cultures, food has long been the number one ingredient in *medicine*. Before our modern focus on molecular and cellular manipulation of chemical elements in laboratory pharmaceuticals, internal medicines were made up (mostly) of herbs, liquids, and edibles. Thus, healing substances mattered in part because of the effect they had directly as they touched our lips, our tongue, our teeth, our taste buds, our body's absorptive capacities, our choices to chew and to swallow. And, if food is meant to be good and to heal, then obviously food can also affect health by its absence. Insufficient or unhealthy eating may result from our lack of choices: when food is withheld, or when it is unavailable because of poverty, living in a "food desert" lacking nearby grocery stores or affordable fruits and vegetables, or if we suffer a health condition such as diabetes or celiac disease, that wreaks havoc on our metabolism. There are many kinds of starvation, malnutrition, and food failures that affect health and illness, whether of the body, the soul and spirit, or in communal relationships. As food and religious history scholar Rachel Brown put it, "Food is essential to identity formation because food has a double function of solidarity and separation" (2015). Both solidarity and separation have their dark sides: those who are not included.

These uses, failures, and abuses matter, and

sometimes even connect, in ordinary medicine, in public health, in household food distribution, and in religious ritual practices. The corporal process of such eating—or being deprived of it—may spiritually inform our mealtime meditation and conscious focus related to health and healing during what we call "taking communion."

To eat in any religious ritual setting is, usually, to engage in a tradition that sees food as part of a deliberately healing therapeutic narrative.

The idea of the Eucharist affecting our physiologic health begins in the New Testament. In 1 Cor. 11:27-30, Paul said that some folk were literally sick or dead because they ate "in an unworthy manner." Across history this idea has shaped church views, policing "open" or "closed" communion regulations, catechetical instruction, and practices such as confession. In the early second century, Ignatius of Antioch, pleading for unity in his *Epistle to the Ephesians* (20), ordered them to "break one loaf, which is the medicine of immortality, and the antidote which wards off death but yields continuous life in union with Jesus Christ" (trans. Richardson, 1996: 93). Gregory of Nyssa made a similar medical analogy in his fourth-century *Catechetical Oration*, based on the nitty-gritty process of how we digest. In Chapter 37, he wrote,

Those who have through treachery received poison neutralize its pernicious effects by another drug, but the antidote, like the deadly drug, must pass within the vital organs of the individual.... What is this? It is nothing else than that Body which was shown to be superior to death and which became the source of our life.... Yet it is not possible for anything to penetrate the body, unless it is mingled with the vital organs by way of food and drink. (trans. Srawley, 1917: 107-8)

In the Eastern Orthodox Divine Liturgy still today, the congregation just prior to the Eucharist prays aloud in unison the words, “May the communion of Thy Holy Mysteries be neither to my judgment, nor to my condemnation, O Lord, but to the healing of soul *and body*” [my emphasis]. Thus, as any properly trained Christian theologian will tell you, the “medicinal” power of such

As any properly trained Christian theologian will tell you, the “medicinal” power of such eating, whether it is spiritual or physical, is due not chiefly to the calories and crumbs or drops of grain, gluten, yeast, alcohol, sugar, and water... rather, the healing effect happens in the truth and presence—though different denominational groups word it in different ways—of Jesus Christ, God in flesh, whose very corporeal body cells lived among us in real time and still today continue to shape the life of our spirits—and bodies, and many of our life choices.

eating, whether it is spiritual or physical, is due not chiefly to the calories and crumbs or drops of grain, gluten, yeast, alcohol, sugar, and water in our mouth, throat, and gut; rather, the healing effect happens in the truth and presence—though different denominational groups word it in different ways—of Jesus Christ, God in flesh, whose very corporeal body cells lived among us in real time and still today continue to shape the life

of our spirits—and bodies, and many of our life choices.

When I take communion these days, it is this masticating, sensory reality that I ponder: how to engage with Jesus. After all, he told his disciples, “do this in remembrance of me,” not “do this as a public statement of your confessional alliance.” While “remembrance” is for many of us far more than a symbol that points to mindfulness, nonetheless any “worthy” eating and drinking surely calls us to think with our heart and focused concentration about what we are doing. Physically I am required—there is no other way—to experience the Lord’s table by permitting—even causing—his bread to be torn into bits by my teeth and digestive enzymes. This reminds me that my life indeed depends on Jesus’s willingness to be torn apart, as it were, for my sake. I must move my body, physically coordinating it with others in the communion line. This reminds me of my connections—and obligations—to others in consequence of this eucharistic community. I must attentively watch clerical hands to get the elements into my mouth and not on the floor. This reminds me that I must be open to my own needs, to others’ willingness to interact with me, and that I have choice and agency. I may even risk sharing communal germs in the air or on the wine-drenched cup (or spoon in the Orthodox tradition), as it passes from one mouth to another, though, happily, scientific research suggests that risks of infection by practicing “common cup” communion are extremely low (Pellerin & Edmond, 2013).

Whether you worship in a community of “closed” or “open” communion, most clergy today will respect your conscience if, for example, you occasionally choose to opt out when both you and they agree that you are otherwise welcome to partake. The difference in closed communion churches is that you are also expected to respect the pastor’s conscience as an over-the-rail pharmacist. A priest or pastor’s ordination vows (or interpretation of them) may obligate him (or, perhaps sometimes, her) to apply limits, even perhaps refuse you, whether they wish to or not. This is true not just within Lutheran groups, of course, but as standard doctrinal practice among Roman Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and (I am told)

even some Baptists and Presbyterians.

Like all meal etiquette, however, the application can get messy. As I learned in the years that followed my unexpected excommunication, the conscience of many clergy in fact allows them to occasionally, economically, “flex” the rules. And at times such flexes seem nothing less than pure and holy comedy.

Several decades after my college experience, I again spent a season of Sundays in that same church when my father, in his final illness, needed me to be his driver. The pastor had changed but the rules had not, as I knew from a phone conversation I’d had with this new pastor several years earlier. The conversation had left me resentful, not of his policy—which I understood—but of his apparent inability or unwillingness to hear me in theological conversation. One Sunday as I sat in a pew in the back, watching this pastor at that distant altar rail, I found myself thinking, “You know, I’m tired of being grumpy about this issue. I’m tired of carrying this chronic resentment.” For my own benefit I said to myself as loud as I dared, “I forgive him!” A few minutes later, when the service ended, I shook the pastor’s hand at the door in this new spirit. And in that moment, this cleric—who knew only that I had by then signed on with the Anglicans and Episcopalians—said, in the most welcoming New England manner, “I hope you know that you can receive communion in this church.”

You could have knocked me over with a church bulletin.

To this day, I do not know whether this extraordinary dispensation was an expedient of his pastoral care for my father’s illness, or if it was a comic miracle, a holy “coincidence” related directly to my act of forgiving him moments earlier. Medicine of immortality indeed.

NOT ALL CLERGY CARE ABOUT CONSCIENCE. For some across Christian history, ironically, “closed” communion was synonymous with a violent force-fed Eucharist. We find references to this practice in a range of sources. Augustine, for instance, defends this practice when it was used in the forced return of the Donatists in early fifth century North Africa following the Council of Carthage in 414. In his

Letter 185 to Count Boniface, Augustine defends the practice on the basis of Luke 14:23, “Compel them to come in,” although more than twenty years earlier, in 392, in his Letter 23 to Maximin, Augustine seemed to be against it, writing, “Let there be no intimidation...” Perhaps the most violent cases of such forced Eucharist are those described in the third part of the *Ecclesiastical History* of John, bishop of Ephesus, under the sixth-century Chalcedonian emperor Justinian. Justinian enforced the “mainline conservative” views of two natures in Christ, a doctrine codified in the council of Chalcedon in 451. John and many other Christians across Egypt and the eastern part of the empire considered this doctrine heretical because, they said, it “divides Christ our God into two natures after the union and teaches a quaternity instead of the Holy Trinity” (trans. Payne Smith, 1860: 7). John and his fellow “miaphysite” or “monophysite” (meaning “one nature”) Christians—energized by and loyal to the teachings of Cyril, bishop of Alexandria—agreed on a human-divine connection in Christ, but insisted that it could only be rightly understood as “one nature.” Because of this serious difference in views on the divine physical body itself, miaphysites refused to commune with Chalcedonians. The problem was that the Chalcedonians were politically dominant (even though Justinian’s wife, the empress Theodora, had during her lifetime balanced her husband’s views by favoring the miaphysites, including John). Forcing this recalcitrant party in his empire to, as Ignatius put it, “break one loaf,” Justinian ordered enforced unity. Church police across the empire turned the screws on miaphysites, seizing property and persecuting clergy who refused to lead the way and willingly partake in Chalcedonian communion. John’s most gruesome story, extant only as included within the ancient *Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahre Chronicle* (known also as the *Chronicle of Zuqnin*), describes how one Chalcedonian bishop, Abraham Bar Kaili, forced such eating on a priest named Cyrus in John’s hometown in eastern Turkey:

[Bar Kaili] had the Eucharist brought and gave orders to hold the priest, to fill a spoon (with the Eucharist) and to put it

in his mouth. (But) as he shut his mouth, they could not insert the spoon into it. Then the bishop gave orders to bring a whip, to stick its handle into (the priest's) mouth and in this way to get the spoon (also) into his mouth. They held his teeth apart (so forcefully) that they were nearly pulled out. With the handle (of the whip) inserted into his mouth he mumbled, not being able to move his tongue nor to speak normally to them. He swore, saying: "By Christ's truth, if you put the Eucharist into my mouth, I will spit it out upon your faces." Thus in bitter wrath and threatening (him) with death they inserted the spoon to one side of the whip and poured the Eucharist into his mouth....

Of all the violence the miaphysites suffered, says John, they considered this forced eucharistic feeding most toxic. In *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, John repeatedly describes the effects of the "enemy's" eucharistic elements on the bodies of his fellow miaphysites as directly contrary to health, indeed, as poison, the torturers "diluting their blasphemies like a drug with honey" (trans. Brooks, 1923: 99). Here, in short, we find a "closed communion" group—the Chalcedonians who believed only their view was true and proper—not saying, "You can't eat with me," but saying, rather, "I am going to make you eat with me, whether you like it or not, because it will be good for you, even if it kills you." These were, we must also keep in mind, two church parties that *did* accept one another's baptisms. As the priest Cyrus insisted, before Bar Kaili's men murdered him, "The Eucharist given by such force is not the Eucharist."

Force-fed Eucharist is not limited to such stories from early Christian history. We find the same practice in the persecution against French Huguenots (Protestant converts) in France in the 1680s, when military force to commune the dissidents "scandalized many devout Catholics" (Johnston, 1986: 483). Since the seventeenth century, force feeding has continued to be used in political violence against prisoners that sometimes also includes the forced crossing of religious boundaries: on eighteenth century slave ships

(Jennings, 2010: 179), in force-feeding devout Muslims in Guantanamo which human rights lawyer George Annas calls "more in the realm of war crimes and crimes against humanity than medical treatment" (2017), imprisoned Irish Catholic nationalists in Northern Ireland in the 1970s (Miller, 2016), and educated women imprisoned for their views on women's suffrage at the turn of the twentieth century (Pankhurst, 1913; Williams, 2008). In terms of food's effect on the integrity and health of the self, such stories point to an attempt to impose involuntary reification of the victim's body and world by such eating to erase self-identified meaning and to create an altered cellular digestive identity.

MY PURPOSE IN THIS ESSAY IS NOT TO criticize closed or open communion, nor is it primarily to illustrate exceptions and deviations to these religious norms within the Christian tradition. I understand and I profoundly respect both of these liturgical views when they are practiced—by clergy and laity—in honest economies of conscience. I certainly know first-hand the sorrow that closed communion can cause, whatever its reasons, particularly as it divides not only "closed" from "open" communion church bodies but also divides the many "closed" communion groups whose members will happily talk to one another but who cannot ritually eat together. Both well-meaning clergy and laity face constant challenges in distinguishing theological doctrine from partisan or even ethnic politics.

My point here, rather, is that the religious use of food is—or should be—one of the healing arts. As an art that affirms the value of the body through processes as mundane and messy as saliva and gastric juices, the healing art of holy nutriture invites us to intentionally embrace mindful eating for the good of the spirit and the soul. Food therapy has many meanings, whether in its literal effects on the individual body, communal effects that ingestion has on society and culture, and/or spiritual effects on the interrelationship between body, society, and the divine. Christian history can help us understand context and, studied carefully, may also give us a broader perspective

on modern views and practices. Spirituality is, at core, embodied. Health and healing concern choices not only in your doctor's office, in your head, at the gym, the grocery store, or your bathroom medicine cabinet. They also dwell—no matter where you go to “join the table”—in your worship experience, in community engagement

in church and world, in your teeth, and in your tummy.

Take, and eat. ✚

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The Fluidity of Stone and the Ground of Our Being

Andy Goldsworthy's *Walking Wall*

Joel Kurz

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven...a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together.
Ecclesiastes 3:1,5a

EVER SINCE I DISCOVERED THE WORK OF British artist Andy Goldsworthy, he has been on my dream list of people I'd thrill to meet. I mentioned him briefly in these pages a decade ago ("Living Poetically," Trinity 2010), but I longed to explore more thoroughly his work with elemental nature over time. Imagine my amazement, then, when I heard his voice on the local public radio station one morning last March. He was in Kansas City, working on a major commission at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. "After all of this time thinking about traveling somewhere to hear him," I thought to myself, "and here he is, just an hour up the road!"

The nine months of his stone *Walking Wall* exhibit, from March to December last year, coincided with the toughest year of my life—a time of emotional turmoil, broken bones, surgeries, and ongoing physical therapy. I was also turning fifty, and wondered how I'd gone from a rock-hound kid hunting for geodes to a half-century man, splintered apart on the inside.

In the 2004 documentary film *Rivers and Tides: Working with Time*, Goldsworthy reflects upon the power of water and stone in nature, acknowledging the deep bond between them. He speaks of seeing development in stone as "a way of understanding things in life that cause

upheaval and shock," and a river's "line of unpredictability"—seen when its meandering curves are viewed from above. Toward the end of the film, Goldsworthy talks about a stone's metamorphosis from liquid to solid and observes that setting aside the conception of inherent solidity informs our comprehension of what is here to stay and what isn't.

Goldsworthy undertook his first stone wall, *Give and Take Wall*, in 1988, just a few years after he moved from England to Scotland. He had done some repair work on stone walls as a farmhand during his youth, and he was taken by the sculptural possibilities within that medium. *Give and Take Wall* (1988–1989) arose out of the need to divide land he'd gotten on a long-term lease from the field of which it had previously been a part. The wall he built allowed forest to return to Goldsworthy's side after generations of grazing sheep had prevented it. His second undertaking in the Cumbrian region, *Wall that Went for a Walk* (1990–1991), has itself been disappearing as the trees of the Grizedale Forest have been dislodging the stones winding ribbonlike through their midst.

While that wall has gone largely forgotten, *Storm King Wall* (1997–1998) in New York's Hudson Valley has been the most celebrated, visible, and visited of his endeavors. His first museum commission for a permanent work in the United States, *Storm King Wall* started as a plan to build a 750-foot wall that ended at an oak tree. The wall grew, however, to a length of 2,278 feet as it curved



The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art / Photo by Gabe Hopkins / Art © 2019 Andy Goldsworthy

Andy Goldsworthy, English (born 1956). *Walking Wall* (stage 2), 2019. Site-specific stone wall, dimensions variable. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Purchase: acquired through the generosity of the Hall Family Foundation in honor of Estelle and Morton Sosland, 2019.47.1,2.

through the forestland still bearing remnants of stone walls from agricultural days. The initial idea changed because of Goldsworthy's attentiveness to what was already there. The wall now disappears into a pond, reemerges, and extends to the New York State Thruway.

Goldsworthy's previous walls informed the Kansas City commission, *Walking Wall*, as did these words from Cumbrian poet Norman Nicholson's poem "Wall":

A wall walks slowly,
At each give of the ground,
Each creak of the rock's ribs...
They built a wall slowly,
A day a week;
Built it to stand.
But not stand still.
They built a wall to walk.

Stone laid upon stone, moving and remaining over time, makes a wall. That is what Goldsworthy wanted to explore in an entirely different way, and what coalesced in his new undertaking.

On his first visit to Kansas City, Goldsworthy wasn't sure what he would do on the grounds of Nelson-Atkins. He found guidance, however, in the words of Plotinus inscribed on the museum's stately stone edifice: "Art deals with things forever incapable of definition and that belong to love, beauty, joy, and worship; the shapes, powers, and glory of which are ever building, unbuilding, and rebuilding in each man's soul, and in the soul of the whole world." Goldsworthy studied the environs and sketched ideas, knowing that he couldn't do anything on the "hallowed ground" between Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen's four massive, iconic *Shuttlecocks* (endowed by Estelle and Morton Sosland, the very donors Goldsworthy's work was to honor). When he noticed all of the

existing fieldstone walls in nearby neighborhoods, Goldsworthy said he could “see the hands of the makers” in their work, and he felt the place calling for another.

Those stones in the old walls trace back to the very man whose vision and means made the museum a reality. William Rockhill Nelson (1841–1915), the real estate developer and *Kansas City Star* founder, cleared the land on which his namesake museum now stands in order to build a new housing development, and limestone from that land went into the walls built around those homes. When Goldsworthy considered how to source the nearly 180 tons of stone needed for *Walking Wall*, he remembered traveling through Kansas’s Flint Hills years earlier, while working on a commission in Wichita. He had seen a historical plaque marking an 1867 law that abolished open-range grazing and provided funds for the building and maintenance of boundary walls—almost all made from fieldstone. Traveling back to the Flint Hills, Goldsworthy was able to acquire both weathered and newly quarried stone that complemented the appearance of those in Kansas City.

“A wall is not made of stone alone, but by the builder and his energy,” Goldsworthy asserts, even though he is not the one building his walls. As he recalled in *Rivers and Tides*, when he did some of the early work himself, the “waller” with whom he was working wound up moving his stones for better placement. Goldsworthy now sees his task not as stacking stones but as “finding the line and working the space,” while keeping some distance for viewing and directing the shape it takes. The line of *Walking Wall*, he said, “was made with very little thought but much experience.” One of the builders who has collaborated with Goldsworthy over the years, seventy-two-year-old Gordon Wilton, is considered one of the best in the world at his craft, and *Walking Wall* is his sixtieth wall for Goldsworthy. Wilton was joined by a dozen or so other stonemasons, including his son, on *Walking Wall*. Knowingly, Goldsworthy attests that the work is “not just laying on the stones. It’s the ability to do that all day long, and the rhythm that that labor brings to the piece” (Gardiner).

Wallerers get paid by the yard, so the speed with which they build is important. To reflect this

reality, Goldsworthy “wanted a certain rawness and ruggedness” brought to this work. He told his crew that this work was “all about making a good wall fast,” and that they had to be ready for turns whenever and where ever he said (Frese, 2C). Goldsworthy envisioned a wall that would be “built, unbuilt, and rebuilt,” just as Plotinus wrote. He wanted to attempt a large-scale project that “didn’t forever claim the ground upon which it was built” but apprehended movement and impermanence in a way that expressed how “you only see a small part of a greater thing at any one time” (Frese, 2C).

For that very reason, the installation took shape over nine months—the same span of time from conception to birth. It encompassed all of the seasonal changes that occur in the natural world. Four distinct segments of *Walking Wall* were built and unbuilt, wending their way across the grounds, with the fifth and final segment remaining for the test of time. Goldsworthy said he felt tension when the wall was broken—each time the stones from the beginning of that length were pulled apart and moved to start a new beginning where the wall had previously ended, just as the past always feeds the present into the future.

The wall began last March on five empty acres to the east of the museum. It flowed gracefully between two of those aged, straight stone walls. In May, it moved across Rockhill Road and shut down a section of that four-lane thoroughfare for a couple of weeks—enrapturing some and unsettling others—only to ascend a hill and snake its way around a corner and to the front of the museum’s modern Bloch Building. In July, it continued its journey along the Bloch Building, navigating a narrow confine and stopping on a small green space atop the building. Come September, the wall made its way down the middle of a steep flight of stairs, curved around a corner, and emerged in the vast expanse beside and in front of the historic main building, circling a bed of flowers as it went. When November came, the stones descended a small flight of steps and flowed in a serpentine path up and down a slight hill along the far end of the Bloch Building, only to “pass through” a glass window and end with its short tail protruding onto a hallway. That is where it remains, bring-

ing the outside in and beckoning the viewer to see from different perspectives while guessing at what is hidden from sight.

The illustrator, painter, and early-American historian Eric Sloane wrote about the skill and legacy of dry-stone construction that is Goldsworthy's repeated medium:

Dry-masonry began to disappear when cement entered on the American building scene. Hitherto, a good dry mason could build a permanent foundation wall without any bonding cement at all and could make it so tight and strong that two centuries have left the old foundations unmoved.... It is revealing that the common worker of a few years ago did all his jobs "the hard way" and with an eye toward their lasting qualities, thinking almost less of his own lifetime than that of his successors" (68-69).

That link to times past and yet to come

is embedded in *Walking Wall*, as well as Goldsworthy's others that have preceded it and those still to take shape. Science tells us that stones themselves owe their fracture and dislocation from mountains to fields by means of glacial melt. Ground frost pushes stones to the surface, making them available for practical purposes. James Putnam writes in the introduction to Andy Goldsworthy's *Enclosure* that stacked walls are found "in areas where stone is naturally occurring and plentiful: in Scotland, the upland areas of England and Wales and rural Ireland" especially, and notes that in County Mayo, "there is an entire field system composed of dry-stone walls" dating to 3800 BC (12).

As stones are moved, so are animals and people. Through the British Enclosure Acts of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Parliament forced many people off the "common" pastureland on which they and their ancestors had lived and worked for generations. This was at the behest of wealthy landowners who wanted private



The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art / Photo by Gabe Hopkins / Art © 2019 Andy Goldsworthy

Andy Goldsworthy, English (b. 1956). *Walking Wall* (stage 2), 2019. Site-specific stone wall, dimensions variable. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Purchase: acquired through the generosity of the Hall Family Foundation in honor of Estelle and Morton Sosland, 2019.47.1,2.



The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art / Photo by Dana Anderson / Art © 2019 Andy Goldsworthy

Andy Goldsworthy, English (b. 1956). *Walking Wall (stage 4)*, 2019. Site-specific stone wall, dimensions variable. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Purchase: acquired through the generosity of the Hall Family Foundation in honor of Estelle and Morton Sosland, 2019.47.1,2.

land for large-scale commercial sheep-farming. Because of this massive dislocation, Putnam writes:

Many of the large open spaces had vanished, and miles of dry-stone walls divided off newly delimited land for sheep...with many farm workers migrating from the land to the town and the new industrial centres to seek employment. The plight of the poorest farmers worsened from 1875 with the flood of food from the New World (12).

Very few people had the power or influence to oppose this displacement, but, as Putnam cites, the poet William Wordsworth was able “almost single-handedly” to oppose the enclosure of Grasmere Common and preserve the traditional rights of the people for pasturing their animals there (11).

That social upheaval, tied to the establishment

of new boundaries, was part of what led so many English and Scots-Irish immigrants to America. There, a good number of them cleared land and built those stone walls with which Goldsworthy engages.

Understanding that historical background cannot help but inform the current movement of people from below America’s southern border, which was being established in that same time-frame of expansionism. None of Goldsworthy’s previous walls had found their construction happening amid a heated political climate in which the word *wall* itself was so rhetorically and emotionally charged. Commenting on that dynamic, Goldsworthy said, “What is happening this year with walls in America, is going to be written into that whether I like it or not. This is nothing I’ve ever had to deal with...but it’s put me and the project into a really uncomfortable and amazing space.” What he and his crew were doing had, as he put it, “really little to do with that, and everything to do with that” (Frese, 1C).

While some people perceive walls as fixed barriers and impenetrable dividers, Goldsworthy's walls are entirely different. His walls of stone are not taller than the average person, and they seldom move in straight lines. Like water passing through land or stone, his walls curve and bend in response to place—or, as he explained about the segment of *Walking Wall* that crossed a roof with limited weight-bearing capacity, the wall had to “stretch like a muscle and be shorter, only to be taller elsewhere.” Adaptation and “unruliness” are inherent in his work. All walls are confrontational in some way; *Walking Wall* most certainly was when it blocked Rockhill Road. But Goldsworthy's work is more about connection than division. Employing buckets and wheelbarrows instead of heavy equipment at the worksite, Goldsworthy created an environment that enabled watchers to get close to the work and interact with the wallers.

Perhaps nothing demonstrates connection as clearly and profoundly as the dry-stone method itself. After the ground has been trenched (dug to support the base of the wall), stones are stacked upon each other until they reach the desired height. Putnam writes of the process:

Considerable skill is required in the selection of the correct stone for every position in the wall, as this has an effect on its longevity. Each stone needs to be carefully chosen by shape and weight; it can then, if necessary, be chipped with a small hammer to ensure that as much of its surface as possible has contact with adjacent stones (12).

Each stone exists in relation to the stones and spaces around it. Only by being joined together with other stones of various sizes and shapes can a cohesive entity emerge. The entire wall gains its strength from external weight pushing toward the center. Again, as Putnam explains:

As their sides slope gently inward, and have a slight flexibility, the walls are actually locked more tightly together by any ground movement, rather than being weakened by it. The stonework is

also generally bound with “throughs” or “throughstones” large enough to span the whole thickness of the wall, which are incorporated at appropriate levels in the course of the building. A particular advantage of a correctly built dry-stone wall is that it drains naturally without damage, whereas frozen rain and snow trapped in mortared seams may push joints apart (12).

Knowing what makes for the wall's strength helps when contemplating the portion of St. Peter's First Epistle, where Old Testament images of the Messiah as a “chosen and precious” stone lead to a fuller understanding of what it means to belong to each other through him: “You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ” (2:5). We humans who comprise “the communion of saints” are brought into a new reality of existence through Christ who binds and keeps us together, like one stone upon another, making a spiritual whole. The ground-heaving events we experience can drive us closer, making us stronger as one body rather than causing us to crumble. Maybe that visible manifestation of interdependence in *Walking Wall*—the process of building, unbuilding, rebuilding, and remaining—is what resonated so deeply with me during that time of internal isolation and dislocation.

There was something that rankled me during *Walking Wall*'s installation, though, and that was the lack of interest, appreciation, or understanding from people whom I would have expected to “get it.” How can they look at the gracefully stacked and winding stones and simply shrug them off? Were those people blind to intricacy and beauty? Blind to what's stable in place, time, and season? Or am I just excessively sensitive? I found myself asking all of these questions, but then came to this answer: maybe these differences demonstrate how we are like the stones, all chipped in varying places so that we can converge as a whole.

Stones are scattered around my house. They are on shelves, dressers, and countertops. Each of them carries the memory of a time, a place, or an experience. Together, these rocks constitute, at



The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art / Photo by Joshua Ferdinand / Art © 2019 Andy Goldsworthy

Andy Goldsworthy, English (b. 1956). *Walking Wall* (stage 5), 2019. Site-specific stone wall, dimensions variable. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Purchase: acquired through the generosity of the Hall Family Foundation in honor of Estelle and Morton Sosland, 2019.47.1,2.

least partially, and at least to me, the story of my life. Stone stands as witness of what time holds in place.

Before my last year of college, my father abruptly resigned from the ministry after thirty years. He and my mother, along with my grandmother, moved from Texas to Missouri to be near me. Among the things they brought from Texas was my rock collection, which took up a couple of large boxes. After my parents bought a house—the first they’d ever owned—Dad wanted to improve the front retaining wall by mortaring stone over bleak-looking concrete blocks. There in the Ozarks, where people say all you can grow are tomatoes and rocks, an elderly neighbor gathered stones and gave them to my father for his wall. I gave him my collection, too, and told him to use them, even though he tried to convince me otherwise. Working on that wall was his way of holding himself together as he faced the great unknown, broken and burned-out at fifty-five. He’s been

gone now for twelve years already, and after living in that house for twenty-seven years, my mom finally sold it. In front of that house in which my father lived his final years and died, the stones in that wall remain. Even though my parents are no longer in the house, the stones remain.

In the biblical narrative, stone is there as the pillow-become-pillar commemorating Jacob’s dream of the ladder joining heaven and earth (Gen. 28:10-22). Stone is there as a standing witness to the covenant of peace between Jacob and his contentious father-in-law, Laban (31:36-50); there as Jacob set up another pillar to mark the place where the Lord appeared to him and changed his name to Israel (35:9-15); there as the descendants of Israel crossed over the Jordan River and set up twelve stones of remembrance after forty years in the wilderness (Joshua 4:1-10); there when the Lord renewed his covenant with his wayward people, as Joshua set up a large stone as a witness to those words under a terebinth tree

(24:19-28); and there as Samuel set up the “stone of help”—*Ebenezer*, literally—in remembrance of the Lord’s deliverance of the people from the hands of their enemy (1 Samuel 7:5-14). That brief accounting of the ancient witness of stone in the Hebrew Scriptures imbues a depth of significance.

Those histories come together, with others, in the passages Peter cites about Christ the cornerstone and the living stones built up as a spiritual house in him. When St. Francis of Assisi found the crucifix within the ruined walls of San Damiano, he heard the Savior tell him to rebuild his church. So he went through the town and begged stones of people in order to make it happen. The rebuilding of those walls reached far beyond that place and brought a renewed reality of the Church as human beings made a new spiritual whole in Christ.

My long-held desire to hear Goldsworthy speak became a reality on Ascension Day last year. As the Church remembered Christ being lifted into the heavens forty days after his resurrection, I was thinking of stone and ground, permanence and change. The second stage of *Walking Wall* had just been completed. Prior to the talk on that splendid May night, I walked along the new line of the wall. I studied its dialogue with trees and the diversity of people who also walked its winding way. I beheld a beautiful community of stones and place and people. I wanted to touch the stones as I saw others doing, but I couldn’t bring myself to do so for some reason. I was still carrying the weight of my sorrows, and in that moment I realized that I needed to look at individual stones rather than experience them as a whole. As I studied the large top-stones, I saw a half-circle of darkness that made my eyes well with tears. Many of Goldsworthy’s circular-shaped works have a black hole at the center, which he traces back to the day after his sister-in-law died, when he went to work at a tree with a hole in it. As he explained in *Rivers and Tides*, it was as if he was standing at the edge of a cliff, but seeing more than just impending doom. There is a dark side to land and stone and life. Sorrow is inescapable, so what happens around it matters. As I stared into that dark semicircle, I realized I’d already been emerging from the black hole. I saw emptiness, but I was also able to see how I had grown over the preceding months, and

how I had the strength for whatever was yet to be.

Goldsworthy’s talk that night did not disappoint. I sat eight rows back, listening to him speak about his work and life and the project underway. His words expressed humility, humor, and humanity alongside deep love for this world and echoed something he said in *Rivers and Tides* about needing the earth and being amazed simply to be alive.

The following September, I attended a screening of *Leaning into the Wind*, a 2017 film on Goldsworthy’s work, at the museum. Goldsworthy spoke for a few minutes before the film began. He talked about his love of making things, then went outside to work a bit more before dark.

I managed to see every stage of *Walking Wall*. I thrilled to see Goldsworthy and his crew unbuilding and rebuilding it on several occasions, and enjoyed the opportunity to chat with them a bit. But more, I will continue to visit the wall that remains through upcoming changes of life and time, remembering what has been while reflecting on what still is “in each man’s soul, and in the soul of the whole world.” 🌿

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Five Challenges from Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*

Christine Hedlin

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO SAY A BOOK IS challenging? When I say this to students in my literature courses, I usually mean the book's language is unfamiliar; its form, experimental; its plots, complicated; and its conflicts, ambiguously or entirely unresolved.

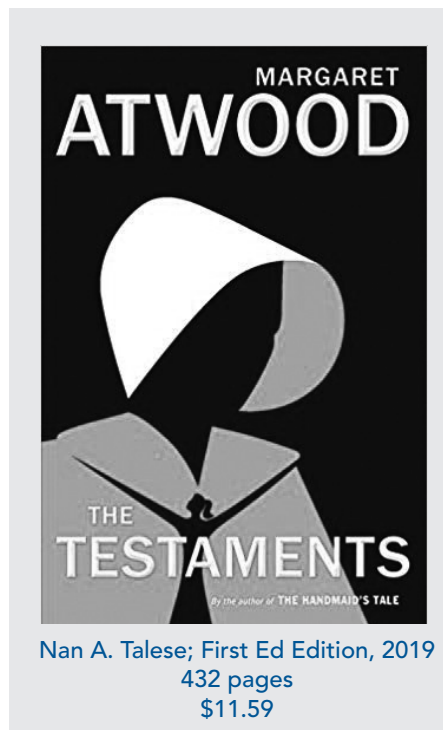
None of these is true, I'd argue, of Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* (2019). Co-winner of this year's Booker Prize and the sequel to Atwood's best-selling novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *The Testaments* feels—as some of the novel's important reviewers have noted—almost simple. We follow three narrators, each offering a first-person, past-tense account of her experiences in Gilead, a near-future dystopian society set within what was once the United States. Gilead is governed by a theocratic, patriarchal, white nationalist regime. Its leaders use the Christian Bible to reinforce women's inferiority to men and establish their purpose as essentially child-bearing vessels. The oppressive order is upheld through a combination of violence and extreme censorship: most women are not allowed to read, for example. Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of Gilead's social order is the role of the female handmaids, who serve as sexual

partners and surrogates for infertile couples in the top echelon of society.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), we're following one such handmaid. What defines her narrative most is its limitations: her story is one of closed doors, closed eyes, and closed options.

In *The Testaments*, we get a more expansive view of Gilead: from the top, the outside, and in hindsight. The first narrator, Aunt Lydia, is a top-ranking leader in Gilead who recognizes the regime is in decline. The second, Agnes, is an aunt-in-training, raised in Gilead as the privileged daughter of a Commander and now uncovering dark secrets about her family's past. The third, Nicole or Jade or Daisy (she goes by several names), believes she is a native Canadian but learns she was actually smuggled out of Gilead as a baby. Through these women's testimonies, we witness a vexed flow of people and information between Gilead and the outside world.

The effect is that Gilead feels smaller than in *The Handmaid's Tale* and also less shrouded in mystery. As the narrators uncover truths about themselves and the regime, they end up resolving many of the unknowns that gave *The Handmaid's Tale* its signature, haunting quality.



Yet, for all that—the familiar language, the conventional form, the straightforward plot—I do think *The Testaments* is a challenging book. Its ideas are challenging: they push us to confront realities we might rather ignore. I'd like to spotlight five ideas I think *The Testaments* is challenging us to consider right now. I draw out these threads to honor what I see as the urgency of the novel's message—to suggest why this book matters in the present age.

1. *The Testaments* is about our history.

Despite being set in the future, this novel is fundamentally about our past. Atwood has famously said in interviews that no event in *The Handmaid's Tale* or *The Testaments* is original; everything has already happened somewhere. Probably my favorite single line in *The Testaments* is Lydia's reflection at one point: "How tedious is tyranny in the throes of enactment. It's always the same plot" (143). I think about the shock with which readers in the 1980s responded to *The Handmaid's Tale*, and I picture Lydia raising an eyebrow. The plot Lydia is living—the plot Atwood is writing—should be familiar to us. It's as if Atwood is saying, through Lydia, "Shock, really? Have you no sense of history?"

We might name countless ways that Gilead's and the United States' histories elide. I'll offer just one example. When Gilead is being established, Lydia strategically pushes for women to have a separate "women's sphere," governed solely by women and in charge of overseeing all so-called womanly duties. She knows this sphere is still ultimately under men's authority. But, she reasons, at least it carves out a little space for her to exercise some autonomy. Lydia's efforts to maximize her political power by claiming dominion over a separate "women's sphere" harken back to a nineteenth-century strategy. Largely barred from participating in the public sphere, some nineteenth-century women opted to lean into their authority over all matters domestic, including religion, the household, the family, and their children's education. Lydia repurposes that social dynamic to navigate the gender limitations before her.

2. *The Testaments* is about the present.

This is a story about the past, but it is also a story about us—the twenty-first-century United States. Atwood has referred to her novels as examples of "witness literature": the kind of literature you write when you are being a keen observer of the world around you. In a review of another author's novel, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2008), Atwood argues, "This is a brilliantly executed book by a master craftsman who has chosen a difficult subject: ourselves, seen through a glass, darkly" (173). I think we can say the same thing of *The Testaments*. If we feel uncomfortable with the sexual abuse, the violence, the corruption that the novel portrays, it may well be because, like a tinted glass, this text reflects back a dark vision of our own world.

I think about the shock with which readers in the 1980s responded to *The Handmaid's Tale*, and I picture Lydia raising an eyebrow. The plot Lydia is living—the plot Atwood is writing—should be familiar to us. It's as if Atwood is saying, through Lydia, "Shock, really? Have you no sense of history?"

The second of *The Testaments*'s three epigraphs speaks to exactly this point. Taken from Russian author Vasily Grossman's novel *Life and Fate* (1960), it reads, "When we look at one another in the face, we're neither of us just looking at a face we hate—no we're gazing into a mirror...Do you really not recognize yourselves in us?" In Grossman's novel, this question is posed from a senior leader in the German Nazi party to a Jew in a concentration camp. The implications of his words are disturbing. "Don't you recognize yourself in me?" the member of the SS asks the prisoner. "Don't you think that you would do the same thing?" It is at once a dangerous justification

of the Nazi leader's actions and a terrifying proposition about human nature, about how quickly we just might choose to be the oppressor to avoid being the oppressed.

In *The Testaments*, the question, "Do you really not recognize yourselves in us?" ultimately extends from characters to readers. Lydia poses almost the same question to us at the end of her narrative: "How can I have behaved so badly, so cruelly, so stupidly? you will ask. You yourself would never have done such things! But you yourself will never have had to" (403). I find Lydia's narrative intriguing here for a couple reasons. First, she uses the second person address to make "us" part of her fictional world; we become the "you" she imagines as she writes. The narrative also, in this moment,

Lydia recalls experiencing floods, fires, hurricanes, climbing unemployment rates, falling birth rates, and decaying infrastructure. But Gilead's rise out of those conditions also depended upon individuals, like Lydia, who chose to silence, to threaten, to kill in order to preserve their own lives.

takes on "our" imagined voice. To say, "We would never have done such things!"—that sounds like "us" defending us, a technique known as free indirect discourse. The text anticipates our quickness to distance ourselves from the violence Lydia has enacted and challenges us to resist that name-clearing impulse. Yes, the social and environmental conditions that gave rise to Gilead should sound familiar. Lydia recalls experiencing floods, fires, hurricanes, climbing unemployment rates, falling birth rates, and decaying infrastructure (66). But Gilead's rise out of those conditions also depended upon individuals, like Lydia, who chose to silence, to threaten, to kill in order to preserve their own lives. One of the novel's great, chilling questions is:

Who becomes an oppressor in oppressive regimes? What are their motives? We are to recognize Gilead's conditions of possibility not just within our society but within our psychology.

3. *The Testaments* challenges us to allow women's motives to be complex.

One of the novel's other epigraphs—this one from George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876)—speaks aptly to this point. The epigraph reads, "Every woman is supposed to have the same set of motives, or else to be a monster."

In taking up this concern about women's motives, I see Atwood responding to a way some readers of *The Handmaid's Tale* have interpreted its female protagonist, Offred. Especially in recent years, Offred has become something of a feminist icon. You can see people dressed in her likeness at women's marches and rallies for Planned Parenthood, for example. Such visual statements have political potential. The thing is, when it comes to Offred in particular, *The Handmaid's Tale* actually offers very little evidence of her stance on women's rights. She is a victim of oppression, yes, and a survivor of it. But is she moved by emancipatory values? We don't actually know—and we explain away a perplexing ambiguity in the novel if we assume her politics by default. Turns out, women—even oppressed refugee women—are capable of a whole range of character traits between hero and villain.

Lydia in *The Testaments* makes that point abundantly clear. I am captivated by the difficulty of this character. Lydia is a victim of Gilead's violence. She recalls the horrors she witnessed as the Republic of Gilead was being established, and her realization that she had a choice: to be among those shooting or those shot. She also recalls committing, in that moment, to avenge the choice she felt forced to make—to work her way to the top of Gilead's hierarchy and use her insider's knowledge to help take Gilead down.

And yet. To maintain that high rank, she also participates in the oppression she condemns. Lydia lies. She threatens. She kills. She blackmails her associates into doing her dirty work and has them take the blame. She supports the practice of a public ceremony in which a mob of handmaids

rips a man accused of rape limb from limb as a form of emotional release. These actions appear only euphemistically at the edges of Lydia's narrative, which she records secretly inside a copy of Cardinal Newman's *A Defense of One's Life* (1864). The title of Newman's tract reminds us that Lydia's narrative, too, is a "defense of her life," one she explicitly sets down for post-Gileadian readers who she suspects already know and judge her for what she has done.

Yet the results aren't a sob story, as we might expect. To the contrary, we see in Lydia's narrative all the ways she has steeled herself against confronting the ethics of her actions. Listen to this line: "I've become swollen with power, true, but also nebulous with it—formless, shape-shifting. I am everywhere and nowhere: even in the minds of the Commanders I cast an unsettling shadow" (32). Lydia is self-aware and even-tempered to the point that her narrative feels unnatural. "I've become swollen with power, true, but also nebulous with it"—who says that about themselves? But it strikes me Lydia's narrative feels unnatural because Lydia speaks about herself almost as if in the third-person, as if she's evaluating herself from the outside. I'm convinced, by the narrative voice, that the steps she's taking within the regime *do* feel inevitable to her at this point—like she is no longer even the one taking them. Other than the "perhaps" in "perhaps it is too late," there are notably no qualifiers in Lydia's reflection here. No "I wonder if" or "I think that," as usually denotes interiority. We don't see Lydia caught up in usual human moral deliberations or uncertainties.

As readers, then, we must ask ourselves: Do Lydia's motives justify her actions? Can we even be sure, based on her narrative, what her motives are? She is at once victim and villain, oppressor and oppressed. Surely, she is more active in the resistance than Offred. Yet we can hardly call Lydia a hero; it's hard to picture readers adopting her as a feminist symbol. *The Testaments* pushes us to resist easy "good guy, bad guy" (or "good woman, bad woman") binaries.

4. *The Testaments* challenges us to listen to women's stories of abuse and assault.

This is explicitly a book of women's testimo-

nies in the era of #MeToo. It has something to say to us about how we, as a culture, respond to women's firsthand accounts of their experiences of sexual assault and abuse. That challenge is not a call to #BelieveAllWomen. As Atwood expressed in an interview with *People* magazine, "Believe all women? I don't think you should believe all of anything." Atwood's point should not be confused with skepticism. Rather, she sees that to "believe all women" on principle is a convenient way out of actually listening to individual women in practice. Scrutiny—genuine scrutiny, not tied to skepticism *a priori*—is a generosity we extend to those who entrust us with their stories. It is a sign of our serious attention.

In *The Testaments*, women's stories of sexual assault do not receive serious scrutiny. Here in Gilead, Lydia explains, "four female witnesses are the equivalent of one male" (252). Young women learn that code early. As Agnes relates, "The Aunts at school taught us that you should tell someone in authority...if any man touched you inappropriately, but we knew not to be so dumb as to make a

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her as a feminist symbol. *The
Testaments* pushes us to resist easy
"good guy, bad guy" (or "good
woman, bad woman") binaries.

fuss, especially if it was a well-respected man" (97). What Agnes articulates, with childlike directness, is that she has learned one lesson from her leaders' words and another from their actions. She lays bare the contradictions in her culture's discourses on assault. The satire here, the commentary on our own culture, could easily feel heavy-handed. Yet, expressed as the partially-comprehending observations of a child, it just feels honest. We ben-

efit from the same childlike perspective as Agnes describes learning about women's "nature." "We were snares and enticements despite ourselves," she recalls the aunts teaching. "We were innocent and blameless causes" (10). In the explanation, we hear Agnes repeating back logic that, as a child, she had internalized. Its blatant contradictions—that women could cause something beyond their control, that they could have no agency except over the violences they suffered—were beyond her capacity, at that age, to question. Victim-blaming is indeed a conspicuous part of Gilead's culture, as when, in one of the most disturbing scenes of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the handmaids are made to practice chanting, "Her fault, her fault," upon hearing of a woman's abuse.

This is Atwood's social commentary at its most incisive, and some reviewers have found the lack of subtlety off-putting. As for me, I'm here for it. It reminds me of an anti-smoking campaign I remember from my childhood. The series of ads featured animals with cigarettes in their mouths with the tagline "It looks just as stupid when you do it." I like to think something of the same logic applies here. If we read and think, "Oh, please! That logic is absurd," yes—and do we really not recognize ourselves?

5. *The Testaments* challenges us to resist systems of oppression.

One risk of dystopian novels like *The Handmaid's Tale* is that they may, instead of inspiring action, lead to hopelessness or despair. Readers might think, "What's the point? There's nothing I can do." We cannot know whether Atwood thought about that risk as she was writing *The Testaments*. We can, though, choose to read *The Testaments* is something other than a dystopian novel—as I would indeed advocate that we do.

Anytime we categorize something as a particular genre, we are choosing to draw certain traits of that text to the foreground. Genres help set our *expectations* as readers, even as they are also always fluid and overlapping. With that in mind, I'd advocate for reading *The Testaments* as a work of speculative fiction. Works of speculative fiction take our existing reality and ask "What

if?" What if potatoes were the only available food? What if a theocratic regime seized control of the US government in a coup? The general conventions of reality stay the same; we're just playing with a couple of key variables within that reality. In *The Testaments*, like in *The Handmaid's Tale*, we're speculating a particular configuration of an oppressive regime. But—and this is different than in *The Handmaid's Tale*—here we're also speculating a hopeful response to it. What if, amidst oppression and against all odds, people unified? What if they imagined their reality differently? I would argue this is ultimately the challenge the novel presents to us. *Can we be creative enough to imagine the social order differently?* When I reflect upon the purpose of the humanities or of reading fiction in particular, I often think about the urgency of this question. Fiction gives us a means of imagining alternative realities—the first step, arguably, toward enacting them.

We can see characters modeling that imaginative work within Atwood's novel itself. Part of how the regime maintains its power is by actively preventing its citizens from encountering other worldviews or experiences of reality. It controls the media, so they never see messages from the outside. It controls the church, teaching people that the status quo is God's plan and that to question the regime's decisions is to sin against the divine order. Most importantly, it outlaws reading for all women and lower-class people. This choice to forbid *all* reading, as opposed to just censoring some offensive-seeming material, suggests the powers-at-be recognize *the act of reading itself* as a threat to their authority. I'm reminded here of arguments that authority figures in the eighteenth-century United States made against the novel, when it first rose to popularity. Religious and government leaders warned that novel reading would corrupt people's moral compass and lead to the disintegration of a cohesive society. They saw the novel as a challenge to their centralized intellectual authority; they didn't want people encountering new ideas and forming interpretations on their own.

In *The Testaments*, we witness Agnes and a fellow aunt-in-training, Becka, experience the worldview-expanding effects of reading. In several instances, the characters read the Bible, and

realize, as Becka puts it plainly, “It doesn’t say what they say it says” (302). We might expect reading the Bible to challenge the characters’ perspectives, given they live in a theocratic regime. What I find perhaps more striking, then, is how Agnes’s worldview expands upon first learning to read from the classic “Dick and Jane” primers. Agnes shares:

The most astonishing thing about these books was that Dick and Jane and Baby Sally lived in a house with nothing around it but a white wooden fence, so flimsy and low that anyone at all could climb over it.... Baby Sally could have been abducted by terrorists at any moment and smuggled to Canada.... Jane’s bare knees could have aroused evil urges in any man passing by. (292)

What we get to witness here is how reading introduces Agnes to a different possible experience of the world—and in the process, turns her questioning gaze back on what she takes to be “normal.” That move—to turn our questioning gaze back on what we take to be normal—is the same one for which I think Atwood has won the Booker Prize this year. The Testaments is to us what “Dick and Jane” is to Agnes: it challenges us to see what could be different. 🌿

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Bass, Dorothy, ed. *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997.

Wright, Basil. “Filming in Ceylon.” *Cinema Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (1943): 231–32.

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Post-Apocalyptic Hope in *When the English Fall* and *The Road*

L. Lamar Nisly

OUR CULTURE'S CURRENT FASCINATION with post-apocalyptic novels and movies has been well documented, so perhaps it was only a matter of time until an Amish post-apocalyptic novel joined that pantheon. What may be more surprising are the significant connections between David Williams's *When the English Fall* and the popular and critically acclaimed *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy. Certainly the two novels have substantial differences. *The Road's* profound and provocative prose provides hints of God and raises powerful questions about how to survive and at what price. *When the English Fall* offers a quieter voice, partly because the story spans the apocalyptic event so that society is still more intact, but also because it focuses on a community grounded in faith. Yet in helpful ways, the texts engage similar concerns of what happens when a society's structures fall apart as the novels explore their child characters' seemingly innate connection to the divine, how people should approach external threats, and the possibilities for hopeful outcomes.

To be clear, the similarities between the two novels should not be overstated, beginning with the differences between the two authors. McCarthy, who won a Pulitzer for *The Road*, was raised Roman Catholic but has expressed his uncertainties about belief. In an interview, Oprah Winfrey says to McCarthy, "You haven't worked out the God thing yet." McCarthy responds, "It depends on what day you ask me. Sometimes it's good to pray.... I don't think you have to have a

clear idea of who or what God is in order to pray. You can even be quite doubtful about the whole business." *When the English Fall* is Williams's first novel. He is pastor in the Presbyterian Church (USA) and writes regularly about matters of faith communities, particularly the importance of "human-scaled communities. You cannot be effectively Christian if you don't do intimacy well" (interview with Palmer, 28). In addition, the novels themselves have significant differences. *The Road's* prose is searing and spare, almost poetic in its elevated resonance, with the main characters identified only as an unnamed man and his son. Written as the journal of Jacob, an Amish man, *When the English Fall* is simple and staid, a direct telling that at times opens into more flowing reflections. Similarly, the feel of the two novels differ, with the intensity and ever-present potential for violence in *The Road* at times bursting into full bloom, as in the horrific basement scene where humans are imprisoned as a cannibal gang harvests their limbs. While violence is shown at times in *When the English Fall*—such as the shooting that averts the massacre of Jacob's family—more commonly the violence happens offstage. The presence of a close-knit community provides a hint of security even in an increasingly chaotic world.

Although these differences should not be dismissed, a more significant focus for the two novels, I believe, is their shared exploration of what happens when society falls apart. As Jen Hinst-White writes in reference to *When the English Fall*,

these novels ask “what kind of people [do] we become, or continue to be[?]” (116). When societal structures crumble, how do we survive? What is revealed about us and those around us when our culture’s restraints are stripped away? In both novels, an important element is the small primary family unit. The boy and man are alone in *The Road*, since the mother had earlier committed suicide rather than face the constant danger from the roving cannibalistic gangs. Set years after the apocalyptic event, the novel presents everyone the two encounter as likely threats to their existence. In *When the English Fall*, Jacob and his wife, Hannah, lament that they have only been able to have two children. Yet even if their immediate family is smaller than they would wish, they are part of a supportive, intertwined Amish community, and even their English neighbors think well of and look out for members of that Amish community.

Within these contexts, both novels focus on a child who seems to have an innate connection with the divine, a linkage that provides a focus and sense of possibility in a fraying world. The son in *The Road*, who seems about eight or ten years old, is shown through his father’s eyes as having a numinous quality, even as the novel raises significant questions about God’s role in the world. Near the beginning of the novel, in a characteristically enigmatic comment, the man says of his son, “If he is not the word of God God never spoke” (5). Though the statement is tentative with its double negation, this early remark points to the son’s outsized role in the novel. Various other images throughout the novel underline the son’s special status. The boy is a “Golden chalice, good to house a god” (75), “glowing in that waste like a tabernacle” (273), so “when he moved the light moved with him” (277). These images, imbued with religious significance, point the reader toward seeing the boy as connected with the divine. Given this context, the boy’s statement to his father that “I am the one” (259) takes on Messianic overtones, even though the son is not explicitly laying claim to that tradition.

Sadie, the fourteen-year-old daughter in *When the English Fall*, seems at first to be uttering nonsense as she has seizures. The family is gravely

concerned about her apparent medical condition. Yet her father, Jacob, acknowledges that there have been past moments when it seemed as though she predicted events before they happened. This possible spiritual dimension serves as a backdrop to the present of the novel, when Sadie keeps reiterating that angels are coming soon and insisting, “They fall” (4). The novel’s apocalyptic event turns out not actually to be angels falling but rather a spectacular solar storm that knocks out almost all electrical circuits, causing planes to crash from the sky and cities to go dark. As the family observes the bright dancing lights in the sky and the planes

When societal structures crumble,
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restraints are stripped away?

crashing to earth, Sadie says with tears in her eyes, “The English fall” (52). After this event, Sadie’s health seems much better until suddenly, as the family is eating dinner one evening, she has a seizure. Afterward, she tries to explain, “I felt suddenly frightened and ashamed, like my heart was breaking. Like I’d done something horrible. I hadn’t. It wasn’t me, Dadi. It was someone else” (179). Though at the time this explanation makes no sense, the next morning the family learns that a neighboring Amish family had been shot by looters at just the time of Sadie’s seizure. This timing combined with her explanation suggests that Sadie is in tune with a spiritual dimension. Through these various incidents, members of the community come to recognize that Sadie is a prophet figure, so that while she had earlier been regarded with suspicion, toward the end of the novel she is consulted for advice. When her father asks if she “knows things,” Sadie sighs and says, “sometimes my soul is all lit up, like lightning on a summer night, in a cloud without rain” (212–13).

A particularly significant connecting point between the boy in *The Road* and Sadie in *When the English Fall* is the Christ-like way in which

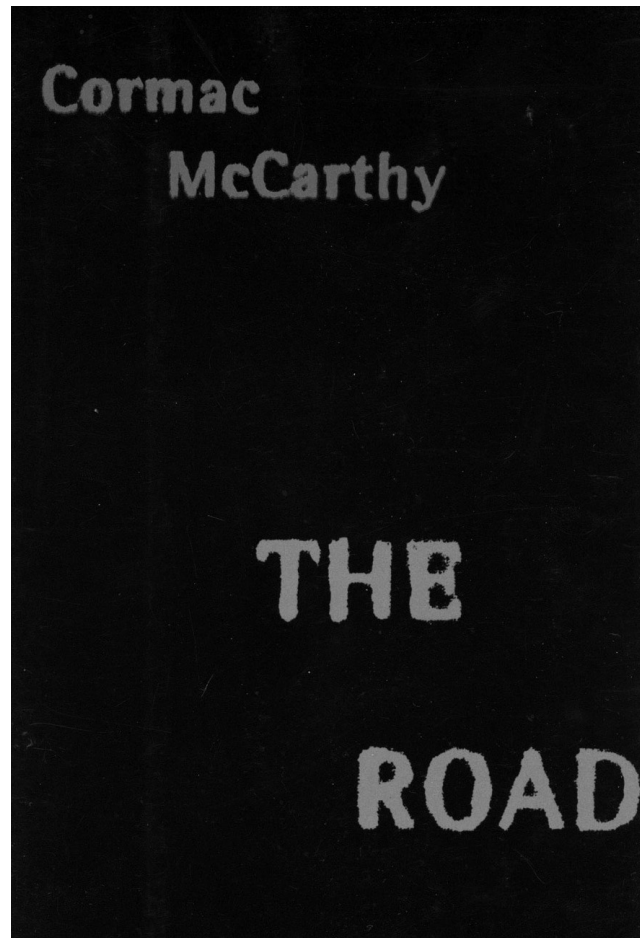
each is concerned about other people, even unlikable or dangerous characters. Yet while this linkage is noteworthy, each novel's context for this attitude shows the very different approaches apparent in the texts. In *The Road*, the father's overriding goal is to protect his son from the ever-present danger of the marauding bands of cannibals and to find enough food as they journey south. While the boy is terrified and hungry, his differing priorities become clear time and again as they encounter others, leading to ongoing conflicts with

his father. For instance, when they come across a man burned by lightning, the boy requests, "Can't we help him Papa?" (50). The father insists that

[The man's] intention to protect his son at any cost likely resonates with parents the world over.

And yet it is the boy who models Jesus's surprising and disturbing commands to love our enemies, feed them, and turn the other cheek.

there is nothing they can do. Similarly, when they see another boy, the son insists they should help him, saying, "We should get him and take him with us.... And I'd give that little boy half my



food" (86). The father makes the rational case that their supplies are too limited to support anyone else, but the son pushes for a selfless response that embraces what is right even if it puts their survival at risk. The boy's stance becomes most clear after a thief has taken their supplies. When the father tracks him down, he threatens the thief with his gun and forces him to give back everything, taking even his clothes. The boy cannot stop crying about this outcome, so that finally the father goes back to the spot where the man had been and leaves the clothes.

He tries to placate his son by saying that he was not going to kill the thief. Much later, the boy responds, "But we did kill him" (260). Given the intense danger and their precarious situation, the father's actions and attitude seem entirely justified. His intention to protect his son at any cost likely resonates with parents the world over. And yet it is the boy who models Jesus's surprising and disturbing commands to love our enemies, feed them, and turn the other cheek. The ongoing conflict between the boy and his father reflects a basic difference between world views: whether one should seek survival at any cost or if caring for others is the higher calling.

In *When the English Fall*, by contrast, Sadie and her community share a common outlook in their view of others. Perhaps Sadie's most striking encounter takes place when two thieves are threatening her family. Just as the thieves are about to kill them, a visitor shoots the thieves instead. Though the older one dies instantly, the teenager lingers,

and Sadie cradles his head on her lap. She speaks to him “about the trees and the stars and the sky. About forgiveness” (208). Sadie sets out her basic connection with this sinner, saying, “He and me, Dadi” (208). Yet this attitude is in tune with her family, for they try to make the thief comfortable and pray for him. Indeed, the community as a whole seeks to help those in need. They willingly offer food from their stores for the army to take to hungry people in the city. Jacob and his family, with the bishop’s blessing, welcome in a family to live with them. The Amish community mourns deeply when a neighboring family is killed, but they also lament and bury a thief who had been killed and left hanging by the road as a warning. In his journal, Jacob links the hanged thief with Christ on the cross. In this context, Sadie’s connection with those who would do her family harm is in tune with her larger community’s ethos.

So, as portrayed by these novels, whom do we become when the restraining structures of society crumble? How much hope emerges in these texts? Both novels show at best a tenuous sense of possibility, yet each suggests that some hope is still present. In *The Road*, the father and son have reached the coast, though the father has continued to become sicker. While they had hoped for a more hospitable climate as they journeyed south, the bleakness of the area seems much the same as before. When the father dies, the boy’s chances of survival seem dim indeed. Yet in a hopeful turn, the boy is welcomed into a new family, some of the “good guys” (282) who have two children and “didn’t eat them” (284).

A safe future is far from assured. As Steven Frye writes of the novel, “Violence is a reality endemic to the world’s existence; depravity and avarice are central to human nature; and meaning, purpose, and value, if they are to be found, must be sought in darkness” (8). Yet hope for a society that is governed by more than the most violent impulses of humans does exist, as this new family selflessly takes in the boy and offers him shelter. The mother of this family talks to the boy about God, and

he tried to talk to God but the best thing was to talk to his father....The woman said that was all right. She said that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time. (286)

In the midst of caring relationships, of people carrying out Christ’s love for the least of these, the boy continues his innate connection to the divine.

The Amish community in *When the English*

Fall explicitly wrestles with how to respond to the growing violence around them while remaining true to their basic beliefs. At the funeral sermon for the murdered Amish family, the minister exhorts the community “about not letting fear take us and change us, turning us away from the simple path of grace” (190). When the locals decide to take protection into their own hands, forming an armed militia, Jacob muses, “More armed men, even friends, could not be a good thing” (192). A bit later, the bishop articulates a similar view, saying, “Is that



what we are meant to be, Jacob? Safe? Safe behind the guns of our neighbors?...[The sword] cuts us, even if it is not our hand that wields it” (218). In this context, Sadie returns to her prophetic role, telling her father, “I think we have to go.” When he asks where, she responds, “To where it isn’t safe” (213). This response seems enigmatic at best, given the increasing danger within their current setting. Yet the members of the community become ever more certain of “the even greater peril—to our souls—if we stayed” (228). A bit sheepishly, Jacob turns to his daughter for advice on whether they should stay or leave. If they stay, Sadie says, more blood would be shed to protect them.

And if we go? Then the story of our journey will be told and remembered. Of our setting aside what we have, and not resting in the shadow of the sword. It will be harder. Some of us will not live. More, I think. But it would let us live our plain way, and be a witness.... God’s will is too big for me to see. It hurts to see even part of it. Like a fire. But I think it will be better if we go, and face the harder journey. More like him. (232)

For this novel, the paramount concern is living the right way, following the call of faithfulness. Surviving in this context means more than physical survival. Living out Christ’s call to love is what must endure.

THOUGH THE CONTEXTS ARE QUITE DIFFERENT, these two post-apocalyptic novels invite us to wrestle with questions of survival and hope. *The Road*’s very bleak world nevertheless provides a suggestion that living amidst this violence can include selfless love for the other. In a different register, rather than being merely a backdrop for standard post-apocalyptic tropes, Williams’ portrayal of an Amish community similarly provides a thoughtful and engaging exploration of the disruption and soul-searching

that emerge when the larger society around the separatist group collapses. The future in each of these novels is far from certain. And yet, perhaps against all odds, signs of hope emerge. When the Amish members take food to a collection site staffed by the National Guard, Jacob notices an armored personnel carrier, “with many wheels and a large and wicked gun mounted in a turret on the top...it seemed strange to see it here, looking so fierce and terrible. And there we were, filling it up with jam and green beans and canned corn” (79). This lovely picture, with its surprising and beautiful juxtapositions, serves perhaps as an appropriate image for these novels, as against all odds they offer hints of hope for humanity amidst a ruined society. 🌿

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RELEARNING TO PRAY

*We do not turn to prayers, they stalk us,
speechless with longing
so that it is almost a betrayal to speak them?*

In the dead hours
when we wake, terrified
of oblivion, its endless black sky
without stars, something
like a twisted metal angel opens its
mute throat
and silence emerges, combing
its invisible hair.

A sign, perhaps,
that surely the ultimate erasure, which we
have earned, is upon us? Was it
supposed to end
like this?
No, we say, clearly it is written, all
things shall end
in a garden of singing light, not this
night after night waking, adrift
like nothing
lost in a white cup.

But at last, out of reason and luck,
one way or another a prayer
finds us
and calls forth its voice.
Be *with* me, it says. Just that,
the words flying out alone into
an enormous room
made entirely of listening
and the sun rising over the hills.

Christopher Howell

Reading Augustine's *Confessions* During Lent

Sam Ochstein

THE FIRST TIME I READ AUGUSTINE'S *Confessions* was in seminary. It was a required text for a church history class. Even though I'd already earned two degrees in theology and had been pastoring for several years, I suddenly felt very adult in my faith. To read something so classic, so ancient, so weighty seemed significant. *This is what mature Christians do*, I thought.

I enjoyed and was challenged by *Confessions* so much I told myself that I'd read it every year during Lent. It would be like a spiritual discipline; something you do because it's good for you and helps shape you into the kind of person you want to become. The very title of the work seemed appropriate for the season of penance, prayer and self-reflection. And what could be more inspiring and formative for my own spiritual journey than reading and reflecting on Augustine's account of his circuitous and blundering pilgrimage to Christ?

There was much I resonated with, especially Augustine's struggles with sin, doubt, and intellectual wrangling. My own life was fraught with these things. I thought reading *Confessions* during Lent could be an annual re-anchoring and re-centering for my soul, a reminder that I wasn't alone in my struggles. And more, *Confessions* would remind me of God's grace and healing. I needed to hear the truth that God is "very powerful in shaping what is misshapen in us" and that he "frees us from the chains we've made for ourselves."

Further, God's providence and sovereignty permeate almost every page of *Confessions*. How comforting to hear that God was at work guiding

me, even when I knew nothing of it and failed to discern his still small voice through the cacophony of competing voices and commitments of my life. Perhaps I could find comfort and contentment, even a sense of peace, in the midst of my wanderings and wonderings.

That was in the fall of 2015. Since then I've succeeded spectacularly in *not* reading *Confessions* every year during Lent. Not entirely anyway. It hasn't been for lack of planning or attempting with good intentions. I've started and stopped multiple times, typically not getting much past the halfway point and not even reaching the climactic scene of Augustine's conversion in Book 8.

I've even purchased different English translations in anticipation of practicing my Lenten discipline over the years. *Confessions* isn't what I'd call an easy read. It's a dense work. I thought having a more readable translation would aid my comprehension of Augustine's ruminations and perseverance to finish the book.

I currently have three different versions of Augustine's *Confessions*, not counting the one included in my thirty-eight-volume Early Church Fathers collection. I used to have a fourth translation—the Barnes & Noble Classics edition. I got rid of it for reasons I can't recall. But I suspect it had something to do with the realization that one doesn't need four or five different English translations of *Confessions*. Especially if you're not reading them regularly.

The deeper truth—the truer truth—is that I wanted to be the kind of person that read *Confessions* during Lent and had multiple editions

of it prominently displayed on the shelves of my library. I wanted to be the kind of person that others saw reading *Confessions* during Lent and were impressed by my deep spirituality. I wanted to be the kind of person that perhaps one day wrote articles about reading *Confessions* during Lent.

Like the younger Augustine, I longed “to be fashionable and sophisticated.” Rather than hungering and thirsting after righteousness, I craved knowledge for the sake of knowledge and yearned for recognition. Chasing “the inanity of public acclaim” is how Augustine describes himself and his intellectual friends during the formative years of their liberal arts education. He had much to teach me.

THE THING ABOUT READING *CONFESSIONS*, at least for me, is that it confronts me with myself. It shatters my pious pretensions and the image I work hard to maintain that basically I’m okay and have everything together, spiritually and otherwise.

I’ve been in church most of my life and was an ordained minister and lead pastor for ten years. One thing I’ve learned is that we Christians are often masters at impression management. I know I am, anyway. But reading *Confessions* peels back the masks I wear, revealing the ugly and dark places in my heart I’d rather pretend don’t exist.

“You again confronted me with myself and forced me to look, so that I would find my sin and hate it,” Augustine prays. “I knew it, but I tried to pretend I didn’t; I tried to squelch any awareness of it, and to forget.”

I do that. I like to forget my sins, pretend they don’t exist, or squelch any awareness of them. Most frequently, I imagine that they’re not as bad as they are. I tend to be optimistic about the human condition and self-deceived about our ability—*my ability*—to choose the good.

Yes, I sinned, I might say, but we all sin. We’re all messed up and trying to muddle our way through. Besides, God is loving, merciful, and gracious. He knows that we’re dust.

Somehow I convince myself that this gets me off the hook. I’m just a wayward pilgrim on the journey. But at least I’m on the journey. A sinner saved by grace.

True enough, of course. But God does call us to genuinely change. Repentance, after all, comes from the Greek *metanoia*, meaning not merely a change of mind, but to actually turn around and go in a different direction. If we haven’t, by God’s grace, changed, can we truly say we’ve repented?

The thing about reading *Confessions*, at least for me, is that it confronts me with myself. It shatters my pious pretensions and the image I work hard to maintain that basically I’m okay and have everything together.

Augustine’s severity in recounting his sins always initially strikes me as off-putting. For example, can he really be so distressed with his fifteen-year-old self and his hooligan friends that shook down some pears from a neighbor’s tree, ate some of them, and chucked the rest at pigs? Not the best thing in the world, of course. But not the worst either. Boys will be boys, right?

Yet Augustine perceives something more sinister. The pear tree incident is a paradigmatic example of our disordered and inordinate desires. For Augustine, the petty crime revealed something fundamental about himself and the human condition. He and his friends stole those pears merely for the sake of doing it and the illicit thrill they got from getting away with it. How often do I do the same?

I’M PRETTY SURE AUGUSTINE HAD A SEX addiction. In Book 8 he confesses the infamous prayer of his younger years: “Give me chastity and self restraint, but don’t do it just yet.” He continues, explaining the rationale for the prayer, “I was afraid that you’d hear my prayer quickly and quickly cure me of the disease of lust, which I preferred to have satisfied rather than nullified.”

The first time I read this I laughed. We all have

our pasts. Some of our pasts are more sordid than others. And who doesn't like sex?

But this was deadly serious for Augustine and the cause of significant pain in his life. He writes of being overwhelmed by “a lunatic lust” and “an insatiable lasciviousness”—a way of being in the world that “held [him] violently captive and tortured [him].” Augustine confesses that he suffered from “the deadly sweet disease of carnality” and that his “yearning for sex” was like a chain that held him tautly. He put off his conversion for many years in part because he liked sex too much to remain chaste.

Addicts are notorious liars and self-deceivers. We create narratives to convince others and ourselves that things really aren't that bad, that we're in control, that we can stop any time. But, of course, they are, we're not, and we can't.

This is the most prominent example of inordinate and disordered desires that Augustine wrestles with throughout *Confessions*. Sex was his vice. Even after his conversion and commitment to celibacy, memories of his sexual exploits and images of indecent acts popped into his mind, sometimes haunting his dreams. This tortured him and he prayed, “Isn't your hand, all powerful God, powerful enough to heal all the diseases of my soul, and through your grace as it flows more plentifully, can't your hand even quell the lewd movements of my sleep?”

Perhaps only a recovering sex addict can identify with Augustine's “lunatic lust” and appreciate the depths of despair he felt during weak moments, the battle of wills between the lust of the flesh and the Spirit, and unsolicited memories polluting his mind. It resonates with me and I've discovered a kindred spirit in Augustine. Because I'm a recovering sex addict.

I was in the throes of decade-long battle with sex addiction all the times I read *Confessions* from 2015 to 2018, but I hadn't yet faced my addiction. So although I saw a struggle with which I related, I somehow had the ability to remove myself from the reality of my situation. *That's not me*, I told myself, even while knowing deep down it was.

Addicts are notorious liars and self-deceivers. We create narratives to convince others and ourselves that things really aren't that bad, that we're in control, that we can stop any time. But, of course, they are, we're not, and we can't.

“Inordinate desire,” writes Augustine, “arises from a twisting of the will; and in the course of slavery to this desire, habit forms; and through lack of resistance to this desire, a certain inevitability emerges. With these links, as it were, interconnected (and that's why I've called this a chain), a harsh slavery held me tightly in check.”

That's perhaps one of the truest things I've read that describes my experience with sex addiction. And it's only by God's grace, with an assist from Augustine, that I have nearly a year of sobriety in recovery as of this writing.

READ *CONFESSIONS* THIS YEAR DURING Epiphany. The entire thing. Yes, it was partly because I was preparing to write this piece. It was also partly because I'd still like to fulfill my annual Lenten discipline of reading *Confessions*. I just did it a bit earlier this year.

But I believe there's a deeper truth to the timing. “It happened,” as Augustine says of an incident in his life, “because, I'm convinced, you [God] arranged for it through your mysterious means.” Perhaps for the first time I was ready to not merely read *Confessions* but, more importantly, receive what God had for me through reading and reflecting on it. This time it truly was a spiritual discipline.

In Book 10 Augustine asks in prayer what business he has in sharing his story. “Human kind is quite inquisitive about someone else's life, but quite lazy about correcting their own. Why do they ask to hear from me about who I am, when they don't want to hear from you about who they are?”

What I've discovered is that I hear from God about myself through the testimony of Augustine.

I like to think of myself as someone with high emotional intelligence, someone that's very self-aware. But the truth is, I often hide myself from myself. Publicly and privately, I accentuate the good while minimizing or flat out conveniently overlooking and ignoring the bad. And like Adam and Eve crouching behind the trees and undergrowth in the Garden, I often hide myself from God.

Yet Augustine teaches me this is purely self-deception. "What would be hidden in me, even if I didn't wish to confess it to you? I could hide you away from myself, but not myself from you," he prays.

Reading *Confessions*, I'm invited to consider how my attitude and actions, even my inclinations and the secret yearnings of my heart, are either aligned or, more often, misaligned with the way of Jesus.

Augustine's prayer in the opening of Book 9 is especially poignant for me:

But who am *I*, and what sort of person? What evil has been absent from the things I've done? And if not from the things I've done, then from the things I've said? And if not from the things I've said, then from my inclinations?

Yet you, God, are good and compassionate. With your right hand, you explored the depths of my death, and from the floor of my heart you drained out the sea of rot. But the whole of what brought this about was that I stopped wanting what *I* had been wanting, and instead wanted what *you* wanted."

When it comes right down to it, I think Psalm 27:4 captures the truest and deepest longing of my heart: "One thing I asked of the LORD, / that will I seek after: / to live in the house of the LORD / all the days of my life, / to behold the beauty of the LORD, / and to inquire in his temple."

But like Augustine, my misdirected, disordered, and inordinate desires keep getting in the

way. Impure and distorted thoughts, a harsh word here, an inconsiderate act or lack of kindness there. Even on my best days I'm a mishmash of mixed motivations and desires.

The beauty of the Gospel is that God refuses to give up on me, and he is actively at work reshaping

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what's misshapen in me. The incarnation teaches us that God enters into the mess of our lives and the world. And also this: Though the darkness is often pervasive and overwhelming, the darkness did not and cannot overcome it. Not even darkness of our own making.

Reading Augustine's *Confessions* during Lent, or any other time, reminds me of all this and more. It confronts me with myself. It redirects me towards God. And it moves me to prayer and praise for the loving kindness and grace of Christ. ✚

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GOLGOTHA

for Karl Umlauf

The frame defines the anthology of skulls
examined from above as if through
the open hatch of a cellar come to by chance.

We kneel, lean over, and look in,
all of our lives to lose or gain.
Chiaroscurist of the afterworld,

the place of skulls is limitless.
But we see only what you've
brought to light, made plain,

and signed in the bottom left-hand corner
with prescience—the hoard of death's-heads
streaked ocher and rust

unearthed from a common grave.
Below or above isn't the issue.
The depths overhead yield equally.

Take a boy in a park on a spring day
watching his kite's skeletal cross
travel the blue sky. He lets the kite climb,

the string connecting him to it
unwinding off the humming spool
into the long sag, excavating light.

Todd Copeland

Oceans Underneath

The Natural Grace of Greta Gerwig's *Little Women*

Samuel Graber

GRETA GERWIG'S *LITTLE WOMEN* IS A great film that richly deserved its Academy Award nominations for Best Picture and Adapted Screenplay. Gerwig's chances to be nominated for the Best Director Oscar, however, were swamped by a host of males directing largely male-driven movies about maleness. In its eagerness to celebrate men telling the stories of soldiers, mobsters, stuntmen, and psychos, the Academy missed an opportunity to acknowledge the talented woman responsible for a terrific film centered on women. Far more importantly, however, Academy voters overlooked a powerful example of deeply humane cinematic storytelling. For although *Little Women* is about women, it is finally a story for all of us.

If that claim carries more weight coming from a male fan of the film, so much the better. In making it I don't mean to cast myself as some sufficiently woke champion of an up-and-coming female director; Gerwig certainly doesn't need that kind of help. I actually want to point out that paying too much attention to gender, even in a film that challenges American society's historical disempowerment of women, could cause us to undervalue a cinematic story that is finally about people—or to put it more grandly, about the human condition.

Of course gender matters. In mid-nineteenth-century America, women like Louisa May Alcott

and the fictional characters in her story constituted an oppressed class, beholden to their fathers and husbands within a pervasive fog of shared assumptions about their limited individual capacities and social value. To grow up as one of the little women meant grasping at wisps of freedom within a stifling patriarchal miasma that rarely lifted and never dissipated. Too much of that cloud remains with us today, but it fell heavier on women of those times and it hovers around the edges of nearly every scene in the film.

Yet Gerwig's movie succeeds most powerfully in those moments where the fog is pierced, not by speeches about the economics of love and marriage or women's work, but by a sudden revelation of common humanity. These are the moments that reveal the lie of all the calloused justifications of a diseased and misogynist culture, and they make the fundamental injustice motivating the film's speeches

excruciatingly clear in ways that the speeches themselves do not.

In some quarters, appeals to a region of human experience beyond culture, whether made by a film or a film critic, may sound naive and off key. Everything, after all, is shaped by culture. What we call the world is a learned experience. Even the soul is scripted, however it may be defined. All this is true, even obvious. But it is also BS, a bluff easily called by a child witnessing a corpse, or the lover's overheard heartbeat in the night.



2019
Little Women
INC

Or, to borrow a visual motif from Gerwig's film, the image of natural grace and wonderful history revealed in a person's hands.

Jo March's hands are often ink stained in Gerwig's imagining, and she is always shaking the cramps out of them. She is a writer, you see, like the author and filmmaker behind her, building cultures with her pen and being marked herself as a text of her times. But cramps are cramps, and it is in remembering the bodies behind the text that an audience can recognize these women writers as representatives of all of us, human beings beyond their social context because they can never escape

If we assume that this film is really about the strange truth of childhood—irreducible in its essence, growing in ultimate significance even as it shrinks in the temporal distance—then Gerwig's formal choice proves not only justifiable but also perfectly apt.

the temporal necessities that are the raw materials of all human histories, all cultures. One such moment comes during Mrs. March's close observation of a farmer's hands in a charity line. In her encounter with the father of four sons lost to war—two of them forever—his shaking hands yield a recognition of what lies under the ink, even under the scars left by culture and history, by work and war, class and gender. A hand beyond history finally amounts to a vaporous platonic myth, but there also can be no real history without the hands that write it together. Look closely behind the text and there they are, the hands that mirror one's own, the hands to hold "whoever you are," as Alcott's contemporary Walt Whitman liked to say. So Mrs. March becomes Marmee, played with the warm but understated grace that has become Laura Dern's trademark, as she hands the grieving

farmer her own scarf, surreptitiously removing it and passing it along to the much larger man, who somehow needs this article of women's clothing more than she does. He is on the way to a war hospital to tend to a sick son; it will be years before Marmee loses her daughter to a disease caught while caring for a sick infant. This is not merely Christian charity. Rather it is the premise behind it, the claim of our common humanity on all of us.

Children, the novitiate of our various cultures, are also the walking symbols of that deeper shared reality. They are missing from the scene, but the children grown and partially grown are held in their parents' minds: the sons gone to war, the daughters on their way to the predicaments of adulthood. That space of holding also forms the core of the film, the ordinary truth that childhood impresses on us even as we learn to let it go, piece by inexorable piece. We feel that impression forever as something lost, in ourselves and then in our children, something our hands failed to clench tightly enough. We feel it in this film whenever Jo senses her siblings starting to depart for adulthood and hear her make Pan's argument to the Wendys who share her attic dramas: don't leave; just stay. As she puts it in one of the narrative's great lines, spoken to her older sister Meg upon her betrothal to a Latin tutor: "You will be bored of him in two years and we will be interesting forever." That's not quite true, of course. Though Meg's tutor is quite dull, he has a hand to hold. And as Meg promises Jo, he will help her build a family of her own, children to make the case anew, to show again that there are ways to see through the clouds of our cultures. Children and the memory of childhood can do that for all of us. Artist's imaginations can do it, too, if their art can give the vision a solid form, a new thing to see.

SO JO WRITES AND GRETA SHOOTS. GERWIG'S boldest narrative technique takes shape through a literal deviation from her source that, in my opinion, presents the most faithful transcription of the novel's oxymoronic title: little women. Her film makes the memory of childhood real by rhythmically alternating cinematic points of view between the nearly mature and decidedly childish women. It's a risk, and not without



The March sisters: Meg (Emma Watson), Amy (Florence Pugh), Jo (Saoirse Ronan) and Beth (Eliza Scanlen).

cost; the repeated skips across the seven-year gap using all the same actors can seem disorienting, hokey, pretentious. But if we assume that this film is really about the strange truth of childhood—irreducible in its essence, growing in ultimate significance even as it shrinks in the temporal distance—then Gerwig’s formal choice proves not only justifiable but also perfectly apt. These are not really flashbacks, for the film never quite endorses the authority of either temporal point of view. Childhood in *Little Women* is more than reminiscence, more than recollection; it becomes the literal and visceral accompaniment to all the revelations of adulthood. From the film’s point of view, childhood is both lost from the start and never transcended. And so we come to see all these little women for what they are from the point of view of eternity, as people made and marred by time, as well as by history and culture.

The value of Gerwig’s cinematic approach to the novel’s narrative manifests fully in death and the urgency of love that surrounds it in Alcott’s novel, and in the movie’s distinctive capacity to grapple with mortality as the maker of memory and its destroyer. For Gerwig’s bold temporal leaps

show us, in a fresh and poignant way, the ultimate loss behind all the lesser departures that mark the lives of the little women and that make their sisterhood so dear. A death cheated in childhood must inevitably return, of course, but it is the filmmaker’s method that forces us to feel it like the drumbeat behind the characters’ collective maturation. The potential loss of the film’s promised future helps us see the nearness of Amy’s brush with death when, having burned Jo’s book and now burdened by her sister’s angry disregard, she makes a childish charge to be included in the triangle with Laurie and plunges below the ice she did not know was dangerous. Stranded too far away to grasp her hand, Amy’s future husband extends a saving branch, even as he is grasped desperately by Jo in turn. The fall, announced by breaking ice overheard from a distance, and the anxious bedside scene that follows, strip all trivialities bare with the suddenness of freezing water on the skin. Jo is left in the dark to huddle with Marmee and wonder why she is so savage, and why she cares so much for her books. The event is ordinary, a domestic scene in the wake of a mere accident of childhood. But there are oceans underneath it.

We see those oceans more directly in a crowning anachronistic sequence, a temporal mashup of beach scenes that creates a climax for the plot's lively jostling of mortality and memory. In the script that its writer made available online, Gerwig signals the time change by stipulating that, in the later scene, "The beach is emptier, darker, colder—the beach of their adulthood,

Jo draws another author's words out of the past to stave off the ultimate finality for her sister...: "We could never have loved the earth so well if we had had no childhood in it, if it were not the earth where the same flowers come up again every spring that we used to gather with our tiny fingers."

without the gloss of memory." Here and now we find Jo reading George Eliot aloud to her dying sister, the words binding together the film's separate chronologies. Jo has used her writing money to bring them back to the beach that the audience has just seen in all its bright remembered cheer, in the hope that it will help Beth get better. Now Jo draws another author's words out of the past to stave off the ultimate finality for her sister, as she has resisted all the incipient surrenders that growing up entails: "We could never have loved the earth so well if we had had no childhood in

it, if it were not the earth where the same flowers come up again every spring that we used to gather with our tiny fingers."

Jo reads and Beth listens on the threshold of death and adulthood, and they talk about stories, as Beth admonishes Jo to write for others, for those who are dying and those who must face death, again and again. "I'm very sick," Beth says, "and you must do what I say....Do what Marmee taught us to do. Do it for someone else." The scene and chronology shift again and we see a series of gifts: Marmee's gift in the charity line; Jo's gift of her hair (her "one beauty," as Amy laments); Beth's charity visit to a poverty-stricken child who will pass along a deadly infection; and Mr. Laurence's gift of a piano to Beth, who reminds him of his lost daughter, as he tells her just before he exclaims that she has caught the baby's fever. Back on the beach with the adult sisters, we hear Jo's gift of a new story take the place of Eliot, along with her promise to stop the death she had previously only postponed in Beth. And then the camera shifts to show the women curled together as we might see them from the edge of the water, while the wind blows the sand on which they sit incessantly out to sea, a world disappearing and being made again. No hourglass can contain it. Yet in words, in pictures, and, as Beth insists, in stories, we make a place for ourselves in a larger history—Gerwig, Eliot, Alcott, and the rest—setting our hands to the task, remembering the truths of childhood as we build new cultures on a windswept world of time. 🌿

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The Distilled Gospel of Kanye West

The Sunday Service Choir's *Jesus Is Born*

Josh Langhoff

MODERN GOSPEL MUSIC IS MANY THINGS, but “austere” isn’t one of them. Especially in the mass choir scene, gospel albums tend to feel overstuffed, soaring from one climax to the next. The singers’ voices toggle between joyful praise and hopeful reassurance like they’re riding some celestial seesaw. Gospel bands tend to have spellbinding rhythm sections, with keyboard players testing how much beauty they can cram into the songs’ chord changes. To name check two 2019 choir releases, Donald Lawrence’s *Goshen* was an elaborate concept album full of spoken interludes and guest singers, while the songs on William McDowell’s live album *The Cry* routinely meandered past seven minutes. Both delivered moments of sheer exhilaration, and both got a little exhausting.

You could say the same about Kanye West’s entire career. Since he became the world’s most acclaimed rapper-producer in 2004, he’s flirted with austerity—his *808s and Heartbreak* was a widely imitated isolation chamber of an album—but his music generally favors wildly disparate instrumental textures, gigantic emotions, and a ton of guest stars. He stuffs his songs with ideas and jokes but little quality control. A typical listener experience is being blown away by the fusillade of drums in 2010’s “All of the Lights,” only to groan at the lame stream-of-consciousness rapping in the song’s first verse. Exhilarating and exhausting, and tipping more toward the latter every year—that’s Kanye.

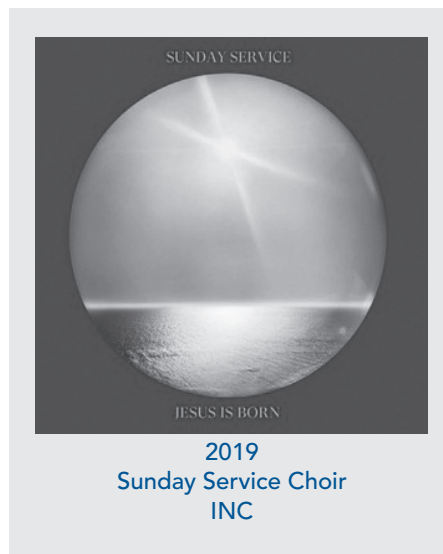
So it’s a surprise to listen to *Jesus Is Born*, the

first gospel album from West’s Sunday Service Choir, and hear how stripped down the music is. Each song gets right to the point, and some you might even call austere. The choir sings two songs a capella, swiping Shirley Caesar’s arrangement of “Satan, We’re Gonna Tear Your Kingdom Down” and covering Richard Smallwood’s standard “Total

Praise.” (Despite its title, the album contains exactly zero songs about Jesus being born; it was apparently named for its Christmas Day release date.) Many of the other songs have only an organ for accompaniment. Some arrangements add brighter tones with horns and busy, trebly drum patterns that recall “All of the Lights,” but the choir remains the music’s singular focal point.

Despite that simplicity and the fact that we never hear the rapper’s voice, *Jesus Is Born* sounds like Kanye

West’s handiwork. In some cases, the affinity is blatant: the choir sings three songs from West’s 2016 album *The Life of Pablo*, changing their sometimes risqué lyrics so as not to offend. But West’s fingerprints are everywhere, even on the songs he didn’t write. Part of this is the repertoire—the choir covers Midwestern gospel songs and 1990s R&B hits. Both styles would have appeared on Chicago radio station WGCI when West was growing up in suburban Oak Lawn, and there’s something quintessentially “Chicago,” and therefore quintessentially “Kanye,” about hearing these repertoires butt heads. Certain musical effects also sound familiar. The choir inserts syn-copated shouts of “Hey!” into A. Jeffrey LaValley’s



standard “Revelation 19:1,” giving it unexpected club energy. When they sing Timothy Wright’s 1983 song “Count Your Blessings,” the choir takes a dramatic ascending vocal line, originally improvised by one of Wright’s choristers, and repeats it several times—physically “looping” the line like West the producer uses vocal samples to create hooks. He may have farmed the musical arrangements out to others, but as producer and visionary, West asserts his authorship by making sure the choir’s every musical choice stays consistent with what we know of his previous work.

He may have farmed the musical arrangements out to others, but as producer and visionary, West asserts his authorship by making sure the choir’s every musical choice stays consistent with what we know of his previous work.

West got the choir together the first week of 2019. Or rather, he delegated the task, recruiting gospel keyboardist Phil Cornish and Jason White, a former megachurch worship leader in Los Angeles, to convene a choir and band. White described his early impressions to *Rolling Stone*:

I’m thinking that we’re gonna do this [for] two or three weeks. First week of January, 2019, Kanye’s gonna do this a week or two, he’ll get sick of it and move on. Week after week, Monday or Tuesday, Ray [Romulus, a producer] would call: “This week we’re gonna sing blah blah blah.” Mr. West would have different directions for us every week. After the fifth week, we’re adding horns, adding drummers, and I’m like, what is this turning into? Then Mrs. [Kim Kardashian] West calls it Sunday Service, and it took on a whole ‘nother spin. What I’m thinking is gonna

be a week or two, now I’ve been in the company of Kanye West for the last ten months. I’ve spent every Sunday riding with him. (Leight 10/31/19)

Besides singing recent gospel standards like “Total Praise,” the choir started giving secular songs new lyrics about Jesus. These Christian parodies, largely written by singer-songwriter Nikki Grier, have repurposed songs as innocuous as Soul II Soul’s 1989 dance hit “Back to Life” or as ribald as Ginuwine’s R&B ode to sex addiction, “So Anxious,” reimagined by Grier with the title “Souls Anchored.” Grier’s new lyrics aren’t brilliant hymnody, but neither are they embarrassing. If you’d never heard Ginuwine’s original, you’d never realize “Souls Anchored” was a parody, and that’s not faint praise. Gospel songs often rely on boilerplate lyrics (“When we think back where we started/ We were brokenhearted”) to showcase their music. “Souls Anchored” delivers its message through the power and clarity of its choral vocals, and through the determined stalking rhythms of the band, themselves adapting an ominous electronic beat by R&B producer Timbaland. The song conveys a slow but steady trudge from despair to hope, anxiety to peace, pulled along by the anchor of Jesus. Its theology is musical. The lyric’s job is to stay out of the theology’s way.

Christian songwriters and dorky Sunday School teachers have been nervously giving secular songs more acceptable lyrics for decades. (No, it’s not how Martin Luther wrote hymns, but that’s a different story.) But many musicians, especially in the R&B world, have shown little anxiety about mixing up sacred and worldly messages. Just look at Kanye West’s entire career. On his first album, *The College Dropout*, he included two outspoken Christian songs, “Never Let Me Down” and the hit “Jesus Walks,” that juxtaposed profanity-laced boasting with inspirational messages. True to form, West acted like this was more provocative than it actually was. “If I talk about God, my record won’t get played,” he rapped—an odd claim for a year when WGCI was playing God-bothering songs like Tye Tribbett’s “No Way,” R. Kelly’s “U Saved Me,” and, eventually, “Jesus Walks” in its regular rotation, right next to J-Kwon’s “Tipsy.”

Such mixed messages have drawn criticism from fellow Christians. When Kirk Franklin, the most visible choir director of the past thirty years, broke through to a general audience with the Christian song “Stomp” in 1997, anxious letters started appearing in *VIBE* magazine. “Kirk needs to stop playing church to the beat of Satan’s drums,” read one, while another claimed, “Mr. Franklin is little more than a pimp, prostituting a new style of gospel music that sounds no different from hip hop or R&B.” Franklin has since become the most prominent face of gospel music, appearing on mainstream radio and award shows without compromising his message. (His 2019 album *Long Live Love* beat *Goshen* for the Best Gospel Album Grammy.) And what is that message? In a nutshell: preach the Gospel to the lost; imitate, as best you can, the holy behavior of Jesus; and use music to express the unimaginably abundant love and grace of God. All those overstuffed gospel albums with their guest stars, keyboard arpeggios, and emotional climaxes convey that God’s love cannot be contained. The same goes for hearing gospel songs next to sex-and-drinking jams on the radio. Separatist impulses exist within the gospel world, but, perhaps because they’re separatist, they’re less often heard. Gospel’s more public factions would integrate with, or, better yet, transform mainstream culture.

That seems to be what West is going for with his Sunday Services, albeit in his typically heedless try-anything manner. The services have grown more elaborate over time. A-list celebrities regularly attend, and West, who’s worked in fashion design, outfits the hundred-member choir in different monochrome get-ups every week. When the choir sang an adaptation of Sia’s “Elastic Heart,” the pop star showed up at service to sing the altered lyrics. In April 2019, the choir brought its show to the annual Coachella festival. Calling these services “worship” raises questions—for one thing, people usually need tickets to attend—but listening to their music can lead to genuine worship, like attending a Passion Conference or hearing a church service on the radio or internet.

The first album to emerge from West’s recommitment to Christ was *Jesus Is King*, an occasionally inventive but lyrically deficient rap

collection released last October. Defending the album, writer Jordan Green compared West to the prodigal son of Luke’s gospel, and his detractors to the parable’s skeptical, self-righteous older brother. Green wrote:

“In the last few months, Kanye appeared alongside Joel Osteen, reached out to Jerry Falwell, Jr., sold expensive sweatpants with a picture of Jesus on the knee, and performed an opera about Mary from a floating barge on the last day of Art Basel while coated entirely in silver paint. Plenty of Christians I know are rolling their eyes. But did you expect Kanye West was going to fold up into a precise theological cube? Since when are the actions of Christians ever easy to predict?”

“Plenty of Christians I know are rolling their eyes. But did you expect Kanye West was going to fold up into a precise theological cube? Since when are the actions of Christians ever easy to predict?”

Christianity’s “older brother syndrome” has a parallel among music fans. In 1974, the Country Music Association voted Olivia Newton-John its Female Vocalist of the Year, leading to protests and the formation of a splinter association. The next year, when Charlie Rich presented CMA’s Entertainer of the Year award, he set fire to the paper bearing John Denver’s name. (Rich later claimed this was a poorly conceived, drunken joke.) Newton-John and Denver polarized the country audience, some of whom considered them carpetbaggers who hadn’t paid their dues. West, whose two *Jesus* albums have topped *Billboard*’s gospel chart for weeks, has drawn similar side-eye. To their credit, though, actual gospel singers like Donald Lawrence have supported him. Lawrence hopes that, in a gospel field increasingly dominated by small groups and soft rock arrangements, West will renew interest in large choirs (Leight 10/25/19).

The relatively demure *Jesus Is Born* could do the trick, if only because it'll make people (well, me) go back and search out its antecedents. Listen to the Sunday Service Choir next to the choirs they cover, and they seem tentative, like they're recording demos. Groups like Timothy Wright's Concert Choir and A. Jeffrey LaValley's New Jerusalem Baptist Church Choir recorded live and loose, but with the Sunday Service Choir, even the whoops and hollers sound rehearsed. Phil Cornish's band arrangements are subtler and less exciting than those of Detroit's beloved Clark Sisters, who drew energy from electronic beats that today situate them clearly in the 1980s. But *Jesus Is Born* has its own virtues. The vocal arrangements, by Chicago preacher's kid-turned-L.A. backup singer Steve Epting, build thrilling climaxes out of crystal-clear counterpoint. With nineteen songs, the album is exhausting but frequently exhilarating, as when a sunny four-on-the-floor house beat shows up on the medley "Follow Me–Faith." In short, it's a Kanye West gospel album: devotional, technically accomplished, and following West's obsessions wherever they lead. 🙏

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Peter Hutchins CCO

Kanye West performing at the Verizon Center in Washington, DC.

The Post-Modern Outsider

John Fry's *With the Dogstar as My Witness*

Joshua Gage

JOHN FRY IS AN AUTHOR WHO INTENTIONALLY delves into realms both awkward and uncomfortable. Approaching his newest collection, *With the Dogstar as My Witness*, readers may be intimidated by both the content and form of the poems. That intimidation is deliberate. Fry wants readers to feel cast out and alienated by his poems, as these are the very subjects and themes he addresses in his work. Using personas of holy figures who were outcasts in some way, Fry creates a discussion about which individuals the modern church or Christian community chooses to exclude.

Fry's major preoccupations in this book are the ways in which people who stand outside religious teachings or are condemned by the church can still find favor with the Christian community or, failing that, with God. Many of these poems allude to feelings of the speaker's alienation as a member of the LGBTQ community, but use biblical outcasts (Mary Magdalene, Judas, Thomas) as personas to explore these conflicts. For example, the poem "credo" contains the lines:

when, doubting, he touched to see
seeking the exact location

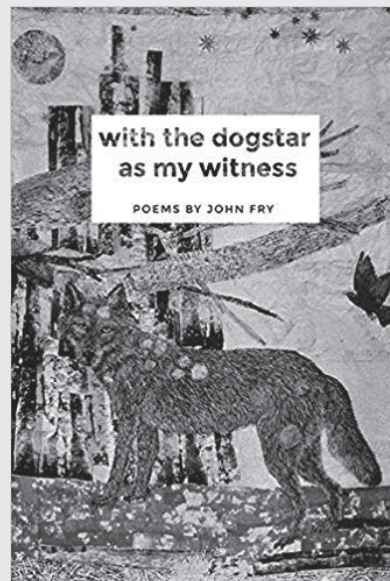
of soul's shining kingdom
of heaven behind spear-split skin

did Thomas find its aleph—

did Mary feel any pain

when crowning she
pushed out godhead

—Judas kissed Jesus
—did Christ kiss him back



Orison Books, 2018
104 pages
\$16.00

In these lines, Fry connects with St. Thomas, doubting Thomas, as well as Mary and Judas. While his speaker venerates these key people in the life of Christ, so too does his speaker identify with their outcast status. There is a tension here, a tension between one of faith and evidence, one of loyalty to one's God and loyalty to one's self. Fry taps into the doubt of these individuals as his speaker wrestles with his own doubts and disillusionments. This speaker wants so badly to be accepted as one of the faithful and yet needs something tangible, some sign

or feeling, to believe that they are accepted. The kiss between Christ and Judas at the end of the poem, a homoerotic interpretation between the ultimate betrayer and God incarnate, solidifies the outsider status and tension-fraught longing within the speaker. This early poem establishes the tension found in the rest of the book. Fry uses very experimental poetics to wrench the language into suffering to explore the isolation and longing for Divine presence felt by his speakers.

Instead of a more traditional, left-justified, rhythmically driven style of poetry, Fry opts for a post-modern exploration of sound in his poems.

His lines are often scattered across the page, one brief moment or thought leaping to another. Instead of connecting these moments through a standard narrative arc, Fry instead leans heavily on sound to make the connections in his poems for him. For example, the opening lines of “as Judas fleeing from the storm in his marrow”:

in the olive-adorned hour
before I betray you, already consecrated
your breath fills my mouth

as the first word animated
father-fashioned river clay,

when I kissed you, a sun
rose where your logos had been

wine-pressed words (*I am the vine*)
ripening the barren branch I’d become

This sonically lush stanza begins with a mournful assonance that carries the theme of the poem with it. Then Fry introduces the voiced plosives (*before, betray, barren, branch*), but tempers their harshness with softer fricatives (*breath, fills, first, father-fashioned*). Fry clearly understands the phonemic relationship between words and uses this relationship to drive his poems forward instead of a more traditional rhythmic or metrical relationship.

This, of course, makes for some difficult reading. A reader can enjoy these poems, especially if they read them out loud, but will struggle to make sense of them in the moment. These are poems to be read, reread, and pondered. Fry often leaves blanks or gaps in the poems, forcing the reader to help construct the meaning. A series of poems, all titled “debris field,” push this idea to the extreme. The poems mimic their title. The lines are scattered across the page, with large gaps left between each stanza for the reader to fill in their own meaning and find their own connection with the poem. For example:

& was this also given
for you, the loneliness of limestone’s
memory of water

carried always a handful of salt
saved from the city that burned
having already eaten, having already
drunk deep of

unleavened bread
sacramental wine

& also, a needle

These large gaps between stanzas force the reader to create meaning and make their own connections between the ideas and images Fry presents. While Fry’s lines are there to guide the reader, it is up to the reader to find the deeper themes in this chaos. By breaking up the language in this way, Fry demands that his readers find a new way to approach the poems. While this might be rewarding for some readers, too much of this approach ultimately becomes taxing. There are times when his poems get the best of him, and while they are sonically pleasing, it’s difficult for a reader to make sense of them or to find a resonant theme amidst the language. For the most part, however, Fry is able to find a balance, giving readers just enough to participate in the poem without feeling that they are directionless.

Ultimately, the struggles that Fry puts his readers through have a purpose. The majority of the speakers in these poems are outcasts or outsiders, and Fry uses not only language and imagery to convey this struggle, but form as well. In struggling to find meaning in these poems, readers will be able to identify with and participate in the struggle that the speakers face when dealing with the church as well as the Divine. Fry forces readers to experience the outsider position, an uncomfortable effort for many, which is exactly the point. Fry and his speakers face daily situations that make them uncomfortable or alienated, so readers should feel uncomfortable and alienated as they read. This painful, awkward tone forces the reader to feel empathy for the marginalized in society, and that ultimately brings them closer to Christ. 🌿

Joshua Gage is from Cleveland, Ohio. His newest chapbook, *Origami Lilies*, is available from Poet’s Haven Press.

More Seats at the Table

Nicholas Wolterstorff's *Religion in the University*

Aaron Morrison

FOR MUCH OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, many academics accepted that the gradual secularization of higher education would marginalize religious perspectives so much that these perspectives would be limited to the private sphere. While secularization continues to impact colleges and universities in 2020, it has not resulted in the disappearance of religious perspectives from academia—on the contrary, more seats have been added to the table. Whereas only Christian perspectives existed before, now other perspectives from Buddhism and Islam have greater visibility. The debate today is about the nature and extent of the role of religious perspectives in higher education. Nicholas Wolterstorff, professor emeritus of philosophy at Yale University, has brought clarity to this debate with his new book, *Religion in the University*.

This volume introduces Wolterstorff's landmark scholarship and invites readers to explore his work on the philosophy of religion and education more deeply while providing a philosophical foundation from which to grapple with the role of religion in higher education on an increasingly pluralistic horizon.

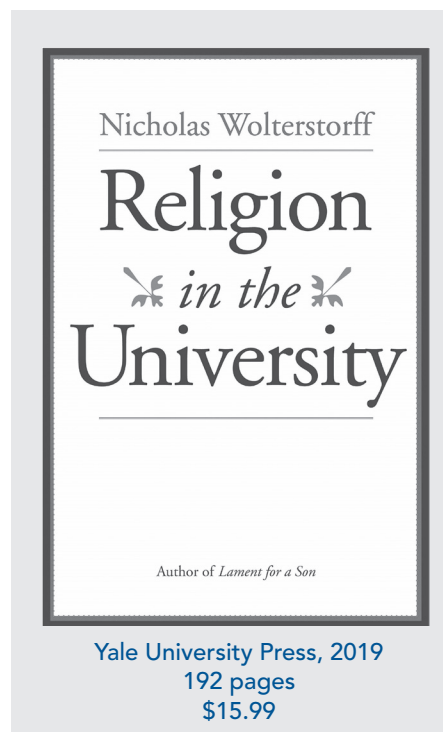
In this book, Wolterstorff intends to “contribute to rethinking ... the traditional understanding of the place of religion in the university” (vii). He narrates how and why the philosophy of religion and academic learning has changed over the past generation, and he recommends ways universities

can welcome these changes. In a sense, this book announces an age that most university faculty and administrators already inhabit, whether they know it or not.

The material in *Religion in the University* originated from the Taylor Lectures, which Wolterstorff first delivered at Yale Divinity School in October 2001 and revised for 2019 in this book. The Taylor Lectures, which were established in 1902 and have been given every other year since then, addresses some theme in theology for a general audience. As such, while his topic might be best appreciated by readers already interested in the role of religion in higher education, this volume is accessible for readers who may be less familiar with this topic.

The role of religion in higher education is an immense subject, one that

Wolterstorff describes as “a near-fathomless ocean” of discourse (11). Instead of addressing the topic in its totality, he sketches out the history, summarizes recent academic developments in the philosophy of religion, and shares his personal stories as a faculty member at Yale. Choosing this particular type of institution—“so-called secular universities within pluralist democratic societies” (6)—is crucial to building his case. He is not addressing places with a strong denominational affiliation or faith tradition (places like Calvin University, for instance, where Wolterstorff studied as an undergraduate student and where he taught



for three decades). In choosing Yale, an influential Ivy League school, Wolterstorff argues for a prominent positive role for religion at all colleges and universities.

Religion in the University is divided into four essays. The first provides a history that Wolterstorff identifies as the dominant traditional understanding of the role of religion within the modern Western

Faculty will hold a wide variety of commitments and values, some religious, some not. Those who engage in these practices “don’t just offer reasons to each other but listen to reasons, listen to them with an open mind.”

university. The second chapter identifies current developments in academic learning that complicate that history. The third chapter summarizes the work Wolterstorff and his contemporaries, especially Alvin Plantinga, undertook on the subject of epistemology of religious belief. In the eponymous fourth chapter, the author proposes the proper role of religion in the contemporary university, cites several examples of how he has experienced religion at Yale.

WOLTERSTORFF’S MAIN INTERLOCUTOR in this book is the great social theorist Max Weber—because, he writes, no one has made the case for what modernity means for religion in higher education “more profoundly—and more poignantly” than Weber did in his 1916 lecture “Science as a Vocation” (7–8) Wolterstorff disagrees with Weber that modernity has fully privatized religion. He responds to Weber in various ways throughout chapters two and three, and suggests that the contemporary rise of “character identities” in the academy has also reasserted the relevance of religious perspectives. The hegemony of white, male perspectives in the

academy during Wolterstorff’s grad school days stifled imaginative discourse on what positive role religion could play in public. However, Wolterstorff writes that as concepts such as feminist epistemology and black sociology have become accepted as ways of knowing over the past forty years, these theories have paved the way for religious ways of knowing to return to scholastic attention (50). Here, he acknowledges a potential worry over objectivity. Wolterstorff qualifies that the scholar “must be *entitled* to those particularist values and beliefs that shape their scholarship” (50). Scholars must be diligent “to read and listen...broadly” to justify their position (50–51). Scholars cannot be wholly objective, Wolterstorff writes, but they can be truthful about their inability to achieve objectivity.

These responses to Weber terminate in the final essay, in which Wolterstorff lays out his design for the proper role of religion in the university. Such institutions embrace academic learning as “norm-laden and purposeful social practices” with three characteristics. First, their faculty aim toward a certain good (for example, justice) with “criteria for competent engagement.” Second, they are open to change across time. Third, they are part of a tradition, meaning these practices are learned by watching “one’s forebears” (124–126). In addition to supporting academic learning as social practice, Wolterstorff argues that universities should champion “dialogic pluralism” as the ethic of its faculty (126). Faculty will hold a wide variety of commitments and values, some religious, some not. Those who engage in these practices “don’t just offer reasons to each other but listen to reasons, listen to them with an open mind” with the aim of agreement (127). If agreement can’t be achieved, Wolterstorff writes, “mutual understanding is of worth” (129). To further illustrate, Wolterstorff describes with admiration how Yale “has a chaplain,” “classes on the relationship between law and the book of Job,” and “an English class on Jewish hermeneutics” (141). Yale is a secular university, but its secularity is pluralist, not neutral. This is what Wolterstorff hopes for all universities—that they water the distinctive flowers of their faculty so that they may bear good fruit.

WOLTERSTORFF'S AUDIENCE WILL appreciate the erudite analysis he offers in *Religion in the University*. He explains the work of significant and complex figures such as Weber, Locke, and Hume in a straightforward manner that's accessible to readers who may be unfamiliar with their arguments. Because he is addressing Weber specifically, Wolterstorff devotes a whole chapter of *Religion in the University* to the charge that prejudice against religion in the academy is due to irrationality. While this may be true in part, Wolterstorff loses an opportunity to examine how prejudice against the injustice of religion also contributes. A litany of scandals and policies that negatively affect the vulnerable in society, such as clergy sex abuse and its subsequent handling, continue to harm the reception of religion in the university. While it remains unclear whether irrationality or injustice has a greater impact on creating prejudice towards religion, Wolterstorff's commentary on justice and academic learning in his earlier work, *Educating for Shalom*, is missed here.

Religion in the University evokes comparison to several other works on the subject. Because *Exiles from Eden* also examines the vocation of the religious scholar in the university, Mark Schwehn represents one such appropriate dialogue partner for Wolterstorff. Whereas Wolterstorff aims for "dialogic pluralism" as the role ethic of professor (126), Schwehn propounds for "spirited inquiry." Wolterstorff emphasizes "the interchange of reasons...to arrive at agreement" (127), while Schwehn accentuates the "exercise of virtues," namely "humility, faith, self-sacrifice, and charity" (Schwehn, 53). Another pertinent comparison is Wolterstorff's own earlier work on Christian higher education in *Education for Shalom*. There, Wolterstorff refers to Abraham Kuyper's account of disagreement in the pursuit of truth due to sin and Christian belief as a gift by the Holy Spirit of "privileged cognitive access" (Shalom, 235). By contrast, Wolterstorff makes no mention of Kuyper in this new book. While this later Wolterstorff would agree on Reformed hegemony at Calvin and democratic pluralism at Yale as distinct differences, he does not make explicit if

these differences change how a Christian scholar would operate.

The future landscape of religion in Western democracies remains pluralistic, and Wolterstorff presents a compelling argument for religion to have a positive and significant role in keeping those political systems oriented toward human

Wolterstorff challenges colleges
and universities to facilitate
dialogue among members of
its community about how they
uniquely envision the good life.

flourishing. Higher education is a testing ground for this schema; Wolterstorff challenges colleges and universities to facilitate dialogue among members of its community about how they uniquely envision the good life. Full objectivity is a false idol, and a university that values the relationship between knowledge and wisdom will steer clear of it. Wolterstorff has provided an effective argument in *Religion in the University* to help ease relations between secularity and religion when tensions between the two worldviews still flare. 🙏

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GRIEF

At the riverbank, beneath the bridge, a child plays in the saltgrass,
sifts his hands through stem, laughing as if chasing

a frog through the brush. You do not want the child to know
you are watching. You do not want the child to see

you longing for his happiness. This visible riverbed,
this bridge built like a tipped wall. What you see is given

to you only as the dawn fog recedes. Along the guardrails
of the bridge, the fog leaves behind its icy encasement.

A bird left by the V's flying south cries in the wind's wake.
The snow will melt and swell the creek until

there will be no riverbed, no place for the child to play,
and no child either—imagined ghost, glimpsed then gone.

Aaron Brown

"Where Do You Get that Living Water?"

Understanding the Risks to Water Quality

Julie Peller

WE HAVE LOTS OF WATER ON THIS planet, but two big problems come with it in the modern era. First, very little of that water is fresh water, so many people struggle with water scarcity. The United Nations estimates that about four billion people—nearly two-thirds of the world's population—experience severe water scarcity at least one month per year. Those of us who live near the Great Lakes typically don't have this problem—after all, the Great Lakes account for 84 percent of North America's surface fresh water, and a significant portion of the global surface fresh water supply. But we do struggle with the second big problem, which is just as concerning as the first. Our problem is how to ensure the quality of our fresh water.

I love the Great Lakes and I'm a chemist, so these two things have led me to study water quality. The water quality in the Great Lakes depends on many factors. Any pollutant in the Great Lakes Watershed (the area that drains into the lakes) can be carried through local creeks, streams, and rivers into one of the lakes. Even pollutants in the air can make their way into the lakes via rain. Protecting water quality is not a simple task.

When we hear about Lake Michigan beaches being closed due to contamination, it is because some entities in some locations—the National Park Service at the Indiana Dunes, for instance—regularly test for bacteria in the lake. Bacteria levels—*E. coli* levels specifically—can rise because of storm drain runoff, sewage overflows, animal waste, or boat discharge. Whatever the case, beachgoers know not to go in the water when they see the red flag posted. It means that *E. coli* levels are high, and swimmers are likely to get sick.

We need to monitor biological contaminants, but we also need to recognize that many other harmful contaminants—chemical contaminants—

endanger our lakes and are not being monitored in a long-term, scientifically rigorous way. With a larger population of people using more materials, many more chemical contaminants enter surface water. Different places generate different chemical pollutants. All are rapidly dispersed and diluted when they enter the large lakes.

Science tells us the current input of pollutants is concerning, and the recent proposed rollbacks for the EPA's Clean Water Act will worsen the situation. Last summer, ArcelorMittal's major spill of ammonia and cyanide into Lake Michigan near the Indiana Dunes killed thousands of fish and exposed beachgoers to toxic chemicals that may have long-term health effects. It's a particularly poignant example of what can happen when we don't carefully safeguard the quality of our water. If we don't have meaningful legal penalties and oversight for those who disregard pollution limits, we endanger the health of our beaches, our water, our wildlife, our families, and ourselves.

But even when we're talking about normal, "acceptable" levels of pollutants in our water, we have serious problems. In northwest Indiana, the chemical pollutants of concern include pesticides and agricultural nutrients, pharmaceuticals, industry-related heavy metals, and plastics. Farmers use pesticides and nutrients, but Americans in general are obsessed with having a green, weed-free lawn. Lots of people use these chemicals to achieve that goal. While it's fine to use them on occasion, people need to recognize that when they are taking every step possible to keep their lawn green, they are polluting the watershed.

Pharmaceuticals are a second category of pollutants. Between 2002 and 2018, pharmaceutical sales in the United States increased from \$195 billion to \$482 billion. Usually only a small percentage of pharmaceuticals is metabolized,

leaving much of the medication we take to pass through our bodies and into our waterways, thus becoming a significant source of pollution.

Toxic metals—lead in particular—are a third concerning pollutant in our waterways, and these metals typically come from industry. Unfortunately, heavy metals tend to stay heavy. They do not change in the way other pollution will, given enough time and space. Airborne particulates from local steel

Have you thought about who monitors your water, or what particular contaminants affect your water?... How often is it tested, and what should it be tested for?

mills and other industrial sites carry metal pollutants and may rain out into the lake.

Plastics are the fourth major pollutant category. It doesn't take long for even a casual observer to see that plastics pollute our waterways. Perhaps you've read about the mountains of plastic that have ended up in the oceans, or you've seen pictures of dying or dead animals that have consumed massive amounts of the stuff. Sadly, even when we're paying attention we only see a small percentage of all the plastic pollution.

I'm currently working with a team of researchers that's studying the presence and effect of synthetic microfibers that come from clothing, blankets, stuffed animals, carpeting, and the like. When we think about plastic we don't usually think about fabric. But polyester, nylon, and fleece are very common and they are plastics. We wear plastic clothes, and they shed tremendously. Laundry wastewater is a significant source of synthetic microfibers, and this type of water contamination should absolutely concern us.

Members of our team, which includes undergraduate chemistry students, collect samples (about a coffee cup's amount) of laundry wastewater, then filter it and look under a microscope to count the fibers. We have found that the Valparaiso wastewater treatment plant removes about 97

percent of synthetic microfibers from laundry wastewater. That sounds impressive, but that still leaves a lot of synthetic microfibers in treated water. Our team determined that about 4 billion microfibers enter Lake Michigan through Salt Creek daily. Wastewater treatment plants typically ship the sediment they collect to farms to be used as fertilizer. We don't know how many synthetic microfibers make their way into that sediment, nor do we know how these microfibers affect the plants that farmers grow and the food they produce.

Over the span of just a few generations, we've become extremely reliant on plastics. I do a plastic survey with my Intro to Chemistry classes. Until you really stop to look, it's hard to recognize how much plastic we use and encounter every day. There's more of it than ever before, and plastics don't break down—they just compile. I recently took a walk along Lake Michigan, and I came across a dune that had been exposed by the recent high water levels. Tucked far under the surface I found many pieces of plastic—plastic that had probably been there for years, and will remain on earth for much longer.

HAVE YOU THOUGHT ABOUT WHO MONITORS your water, or what particular contaminants affect your water? Say you have a little creek near your home. How often is it tested, and what should it be tested for? If you live near a Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation (a CAFO) or near an industrial park, how does that affect your water? When I am around local streams and ponds, sometimes I can only see a couple inches below the surface. Is this something to worry about? To really know the answers to these questions, we need surface water monitoring.

The Indiana Department of Environmental Management (IDEM) is responsible for watershed monitoring in the state. The department has divided Indiana into nine water management basins and uses a "rotating basin approach" for its water monitoring strategy. That means just one basin is monitored each year over a nine-year period. Is it satisfactory to monitor a particular watershed and its surface water just once every nine years? I've yet to find someone who says, "Yeah, that's great!" Most citizens don't know

about this, and it's something we all need to know. The rotating basin approach is an indicator of how understaffed and underfunded—and perhaps undervalued—this agency is.

IDEM does what it can with limited resources. But both the department and everyday Hoosiers need to think about innovative strategies for water quality monitoring. Partners may be one such strategy, as long as they have the education and training to assist with monitoring in a scientifically rigorous way. The Hoosier Riverwatch organization encourages volunteers to help with simple monitoring tasks, such as measuring pH levels. But as long as communities don't know how their water is monitored, and as long as they don't know individual citizens can come together to do something to help, few people will participate.

A few years ago, some of my colleagues and I decided we should be doing more to help monitor the local water quality. So we secured funding from the Environmental Protection Agency in 2015 and the National Science Foundation in 2017 to partner with some local schools and nonprofits, as well as the US Geological Survey. With the help of some wonderful middle school teachers in the nearby town of Portage, we taught eighth graders how to monitor water quality. They helped us collect samples, do testing back in our labs, and analyze our data. The project helped create community awareness and stewardship. While we would have liked for this to turn into a long-term project, we didn't get the funding to continue past three years. I still keep my eyes open for funding opportunities, but they are few and far between, and it's difficult to build on a project that has ended. The reality is, when the money dries up, you're done. Water quality monitoring has to be long-term to be effective. Otherwise, we can't know whether there has been a substantial shift in water quality over time.

RECENTLY I CAME ACROSS A 2006 REPORT from the United States Geological Survey that said there is a documented inadequacy of current water quality monitoring efforts around the United States. This was from fourteen years ago, and things have not gotten better. What's required for effective, science-based water quality

monitoring? We have to know which specific pollutants we need to monitor and quantify. We have to be strategic about our testing locations and about testing frequency. Once every nine years is probably not sufficient.

Scientists were telling us many years ago that we have to get better at this. Now, with the proposed changes to the Clean Water Act, we have the federal government essentially disregarding science and potentially endangering public health.

We all have pollutants in our bodies now. It's in our water and in our food. We're finding chemical pollutants in all kinds of organisms, especially aquatic ones. We need to consider chemical pollutants, not just biological ones, as a real concern. With the proper resources, we would be able to do all of this. Without the proper resources, this is an impossible job.

A reduction in surface water protections is a move in the wrong direction. If you want your dog to be able to safely drink out of a local creek, if you want your family to be able to safely drink a glass of water from the kitchen tap, then we need to treat water as the precious resource it is. We ignore this issue at our own peril. 🌊

Julie Peller is a professor of chemistry at Valparaiso University. This column was written with Heather Grennan Gary.

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What Would Heidi Do?

JoAnne Lehman

I WAS SEVEN YEARS OLD WHEN I FIRST USED literary allusion in my writing.

I was an early reader, taught at the age of four by my brother John—a precocious six-year-old who also showed me how to tie my shoes. Before that, our parents read aloud to us, and even after we could devour books on our own we still loved listening to them. Usually our mother read to us from the overstuffed, slip-covered chair in the cozy corner by the stairs. Picture books gave way to chapter books, and Mom worked her way through the row of identically bound *Children's Classics* on the top shelf of our living-room bookcase. The John C. Winston Company published that edition of the series in 1924, but my parents must have bought their set in the 1950s—maybe from the same traveling salesman who sold them the multi-volume *World Book Encyclopedia*, which filled the lowest shelves. John favored *Kidnapped* and *Treasure Island*. *Black Beauty* aroused in me that universal young-girl passion for horses, of course. But it was *Heidi* that most captivated me.

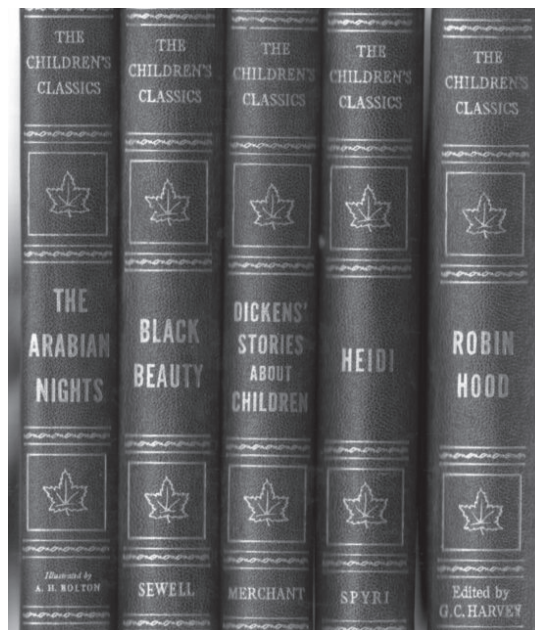
As Heidi, the cheerful nineteenth-century Swiss orphan, frolicked with mountain goats and charmed her gruff old grandfather, I felt in my own body her delight in the clear alpine air, the fresh goat's milk, the rough country bread. When I was seven I would retreat after school to that corner chair to read and reread the story for myself. I would stop, just before Heidi and Peter bit into their lunch up in the mountains, and go to

the kitchen to pour myself a glass of milk and grab some cheese and bread to bring back to the living room. Even if I suspected that homogenized, pasteurized cow's milk, store-bought white bread, and Velveeta slices on a plastic plate were not quite what they were dining on in the mountain meadow, I was *there* with them.

For those who didn't cut their literary teeth

on this classic, here's the gist: An orphaned child is dumped by her aunt at the home of her bitter and lonely—but decent—grandfather, a mountain goat farmer. Heidi loves the adventure of it, from sleeping on a mattress made of hay to helping Peter, a young goatherd, tend flocks in the Alpine meadows. Heidi softens the hearts of not only her grandfather and Peter but also the boy's widowed mother and blind grandmother. Soon, though,

Heidi's aunt retrieves her and takes her to faraway Frankfurt to be the companion of a sick child, Clara. The grandfather becomes bitter again. Heidi is deposited in an enormous home ruled by Miss Rottenmeier, a cruel housekeeper/governess. The widowed homeowner, Clara's father, is usually away. Rottenmeier resents Heidi, but Heidi and Clara get along well. Clara's kind grandmother visits, and teaches Heidi to read and pray. But Heidi is so homesick she becomes ill. The family doctor prescribes her return to the mountains, where all sorts of things are put right: Heidi teaches Peter to read; Grandfather's heart melts again and he rejoins the village community he had previously



shunned; Clara visits Heidi in the mountain paradise and regains her health.

Even as a young child I felt Heidi's terror as she was abruptly bundled off to Frankfurt. I felt her curiosity and fleeting happiness as she bonded with Clara, her gratitude and adoration for Clara's kind grandmother, and her relief when Sebastian, the amused coachman, rescued her from some of her missteps. I understood her inner conflict: of course she became devoted to Clara and loved Clara's grandmother, but who wouldn't yearn to return to their own true home?

And then there was Miss Rottenmeier, who was indeed *rotten*. I shrank in fear as I read Heidi's interactions with her. Heidi's closest scrape with Rottenmeier occurs on her first day at the house. Heidi learns, to her horror, that she cannot see her beloved mountains and sky, even when she runs into the street. So she persuades a street urchin to escort her to the highest place he knows, a church tower, and there, alas, she sees only more of the grey cityscape. But wait—the tower keeper has a cat with a litter of kittens! He gives her two to take home in her pockets and offers to send along the rest. Heidi knows Clara will love the kittens. But by the time Heidi returns to the house, she is late for dinner and assumed to have run away. Sebastian tries to mediate: “Make haste, little miss...They are already at table. Miss Rottenmeier looks like a loaded cannon.”

Things get worse with Rottenmeier's cold reprimand to Heidi, and the meowed response. Rottenmeier is so terrified of the “horrid little things” in Heidi's pockets that her “cannon” does fire. The woman pronounces dire punishments upon Heidi and provokes the poor girl to want to run away for real. But Heidi doesn't get to go home, not yet, and as far as she can tell she will live in this bleak and lonely exile forever.

JOHANNA SPYRI WROTE *HEIDI* IN GERMAN, of course, and although it was first published in 1880, translations, reprints, movies, and spinoffs appeared in subsequent decades. Many of my female peers grew up with this story. Curiously, my family's 1924 Winston edition doesn't list a translator, although it credits the preface writer, a Pennsylvania librarian named

Adeline B. Zachert, who stresses the serious duty of teachers, librarians, and “thoughtful parents”—who “have the responsibility of safeguarding the mental and moral life of children”—to make sure said children are supplied with “the right book at the right time.” Zachert gives *Heidi* “high rank” by that standard.

Sebastian tries to mediate: “Make haste, little miss...They are already at table. Miss Rottenmeier looks like a loaded cannon.”

Heidi was certainly the right book at the right time for me, packed with wholesome material for my mental and moral life. After all, she is truly a good girl, no matter what cruel Rottenmeier thinks (and even she eventually comes around). The story brims with the same values and virtues that were handed down to me in my Swiss Mennonite lineage and conservative Baptist upbringing, and it's about the most wholesome reading my thoughtful parents could have hoped to find for us without resorting to explicitly sectarian literature. We had the sectarian kind too, with its specific guidance on how to become a true Christian and escape the fires of hell. But those stories built around dogma were flat and unmemorable, and my parents, God bless them, recognized literary quality when it came to our bedtime reading.

Some readers find *Heidi* saccharine, at least in hindsight. Writer Nancy McCabe references the story in her literary memoir, *From Little Houses to Little Women*, reflecting that this childhood favorite of hers “sometimes instilled and reinforced in me narrow religious beliefs and traditional ideas of female virtue.” As an adult, she is “surprised to find [it] so didactic”:

The title character is always, to use anachronistic twentieth-century lingo, “witnessing” to others. Suddenly, I understood better a childhood self who memorized Bible verses, earnestly sought to be Christlike, and comforted myself in

my diary by writing about the hellfire that my enemies would someday face. (28)

Like McCabe, I memorized Bible verses, sought to be like Christ, and loved *Heidi*. Like McCabe, I can recognize some of the cloying sweetness when I reread passages of the novel today. But there was something else in that book for me—possibilities more freeing than I could glean from Baptist Sunday School and sermons and altar calls. *Heidi* didn't so much *reflect* my childhood Christian self as *expand* it. What made Heidi so liberating for me was that the moral of the story wasn't pounded home with explicit interpretation, either by the author *or* by my devout parents. When Peter destroyed Clara's wheelchair, Spryi *didn't* write, "And so Peter then realized that, just as he deserved a beating for ruining the wheelchair but Grandmother stepped in to save him, so he deserved to go to hell for being a sinner, but Jesus died on the cross to save his soul."

When some of my friends got distracted from their work as they saw what I was doing, Mrs. Gilson told me to put all of it away and do extra work—the *lower* reading group's work—to fill the time.

Nor did my parents turn that story into anything more than it was—although they could have, and no doubt some parents did. It was a huge—and welcome—distinction for seven-year-old me to experience a piece of literature that illustrated desirable character traits and pointed to divine goodness and intervention, but did not bear down with literalized dogma.

No wonder I wanted to live Heidi's life. Heidi might tell someone to pray and trust God, but that wouldn't be *witnessing* as I understood the concept, meaning knocking on people's doors to tell them God would send them to hell if they didn't have exactly the right beliefs or become correctly, perfectly "born again."

That wasn't all, though. Heidi was good, as I was, but she had courage and boldness that I lacked. She ran out into the city streets, talked to strangers, and came home with kittens! I would not have dared that, no matter how much I missed the mountains and the goats. I was shy and fearful. I did what teachers and other authorities told me to do. I feared "getting in trouble" more than anything. Heidi modeled something different by taking initiative, by speaking up, by sometimes insisting on doing things her way—yet still being good and having the life and the relationships she loved restored to her, and then some.

OF COURSE I COULDN'T ARTICULATE ANY of that at age seven, when I was in Mrs. Gilson's second-grade class. And I wasn't consciously thinking of Heidi on the day I brought to school my little box of screws and springs and keys and marbles that I had found in our attic. After I had finished all the work assigned to the top reading group (early, as always), I proceeded to entertain myself by taking the box out and handling the tiny treasures. When some of my friends got distracted from their work as they saw what I was doing, Mrs. Gilson told me to put all of it away and do extra work—the *lower* reading group's work—to fill the time.

I wasn't thinking of Heidi, but I was bothered. Something about the situation reminded me of a feeling in the story where there was tension, anger, and unjustified blame.

I did the lower reading group's assignment in record time, and my printing on the lined page was neat as ever, my answers correct, my spelling perfect. But at the very bottom of the paper, under the last line, in tiny letters and faint pencil—so faint that maybe she wouldn't even see it?—I wrote a note to my teacher, who now personified the meanest character in my favorite book. "Don't load your cannons, Mrs. Gilson. You're too much for me." I put the paper in the tray on her desk.

She did see it—was I surprised?—and summoned me to her desk for a private chat. I trembled. I looked at the floor. I could barely speak. "Did you write this?" she asked. I could only with effort nod my head half an inch.

“What does it mean?” I managed a shrug. “Are you angry with me?” I couldn’t move. “Is this because I made you do more work?” The tiniest nod again. “Would you rather be lazy?” That wasn’t at all what I meant, but it seemed to be the only choice, so I nodded another half-inch. Mrs. Gilson sighed, sent me back to my seat, and never mentioned it again. How could I tell her I just wanted her approval and her understanding—that I wanted her to prove she was not Miss Rottenmeier?

Mrs. Gilson didn’t yell or send me to the principal’s office—or even, like a cruel governess, threaten to lock me in a dark cellar with rats. I never again disrupted her class with my treasure box, nor did I suffer the humiliation and outrage of being assigned work beneath me. Perhaps she found extra challenges for me that I wouldn’t perceive as punishments. I came to adore her, and she seemed to understand me. She wasn’t Miss Rottenmeier after all.

I wonder if she had any idea where the cannon allusion came from. She might not have, even though she was no doubt familiar with the children’s classic. It was an obscure reference, based on something Sebastian said just once, on

page eighty-nine. “Loaded cannon” was an image that stuck with me, but it might not have with others. I’ve never used it since and I probably never will.

How could I tell her I just wanted her approval and her understanding—that I wanted her to prove she was not Miss Rottenmeier?

Mrs. Gilson never told my parents, or not that I ever knew. But I can imagine her at home that evening, maybe drinking a glass of wine with her husband, showing him the curious note from her shyest, best, most well-behaved student, both of them shaking their heads and chuckling. 🌿

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Look at Your Fish

Main Sanctuary Tower, Brhadīśvara Temple

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God, some mornings
I hope you'll arrive
with your fish & your loaves,

turn my water into
mangosteens, my ideas—
like the widow's emptying oil jars—

into an ever-plenty storehouse.
But when you come here
with your hands empty

& all I see are those
beautiful frightening holes,
no longer red but dried

into smooth quiet shutters,
I am not awed
the way I should be—

for I, being someone
driven only by what
I can & cannot sell say,

that's it? They are long,
terrible holes—streaks
that stretch the distance

between myself & my sin.
The weight of a thousand
anathema years.

(stanza break)

What do I know
about holiness, or what
magnificent gifts

can reside in that space
between carpal & carpal—
Why do you linger here

at the threshold
of this house, persistent
ineffable Body!

I can't escape
your all-consuming
window-wrists—I look

through them & see
no broken bones. In fact,
they reside perfect

in your God-skin, as if
they were built there
on the First Day.

Meg Eden

ON THE POETS

Todd Copeland's poems have appeared in *The Journal*, *High Plains Literary Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *Sewanee Theological Review*, *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, and *Columbia Poetry Review*, among other publications. He won *Descant's* Baskerville Publishers Poetry Award in 2018. He lives in Waco, Texas.

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