

# America

SPRING 2019

THE JESUIT REVIEW OF FAITH AND CULTURE

## SPRING LITERARY REVIEW 2019

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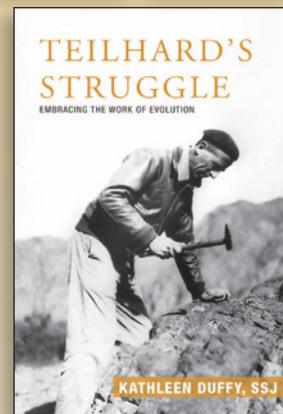
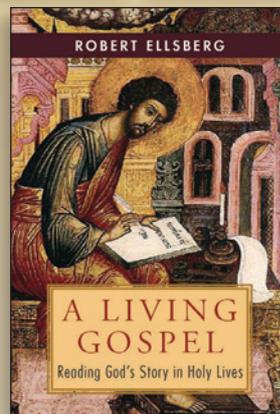
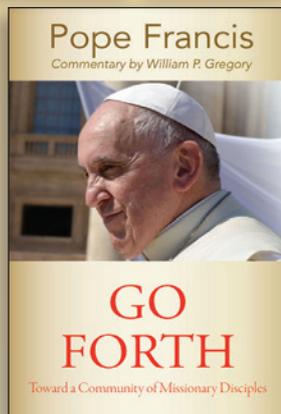
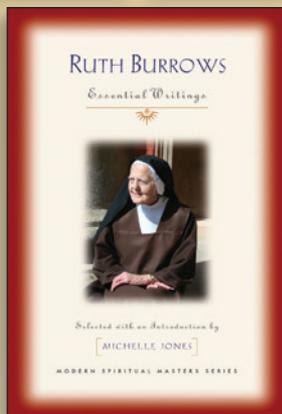
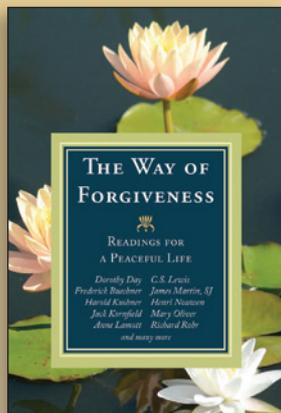
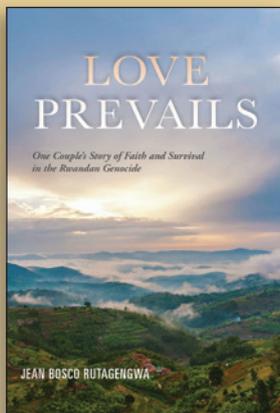
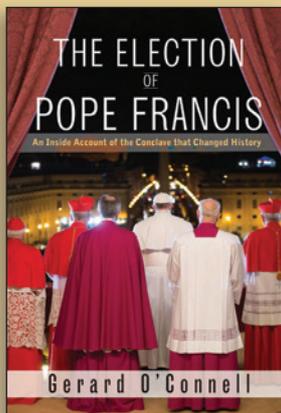
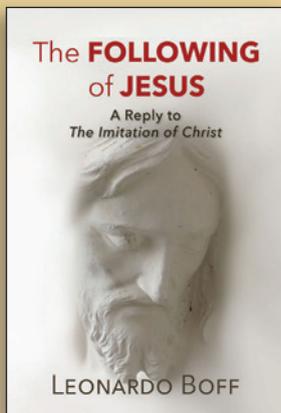
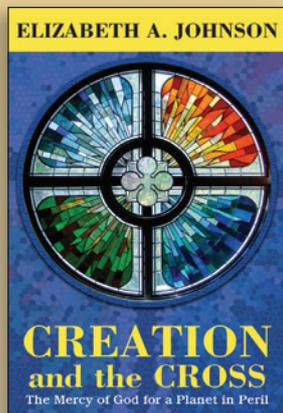
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## Books for Many Needs and Wants

Several years ago I played on a softball team in New York City made up of people of all different ages and walks of life. One night as a group of us rode home on the subway, the youngest member of the team discovered that two of us were book editors: At the time, I was at Orbis Books, and our pitcher was at a big commercial publishing house. “This is my chance to get great reading suggestions!” she gushed. “What do editors read for fun? Like, what do you read at home?”

My fellow editor fastened her with a gimlet eye and shrugged: “Facebook, mostly.”

We all laughed, but there was some truth to her reply. For many people (not just editors), reading can be a heavy thing, an arduous and all-consuming task, and we need some lighter fare on occasion. I like to think that nothing in this Spring Books literary issue is as vapid as Facebook (I just checked mine; all’s well), but I do think we offer writers and books that meet a variety of needs and wants, from deep theological takes to the silly tropes of fiction aimed at teenage boys.

Our two features are profiles of serious authors by serious thinkers: the philosopher James K. A. Smith on the moral vision of Iris Murdoch and the theologian Vincent J. Miller on the ethical landscapes of the nature writer Barry Lopez. Also, Jessica Mesman takes us into the raw anger and confusion of C. S. Lewis’s *A Grief Observed*, in which Lewis “renders in prose what it really feels like to grieve.”

Jason Myers offers an appreciation of the recently deceased poet Mary Oliver, noting that “for many, Oliver’s poems offer coordinates, as a compass would, deep into the self,

the world and God.” And two more poets, Paul Mariani, with “What Happened Then,” and William Kelley Woolfitt, with “Forever Prisoner,” offer us new works.

Emma Winters writes about a different class of versifiers: Instagram poets. Yes, that’s a thing—and it’s not all bad (O.K., a lot of it really is). But “by virtue of being available for free on Instagram,” Winters notes, their work is “democratizing how poetry is shared and who can write it, bypassing literary journals and M.F.A. programs. This has brought poetry back into the public discourse and given those who have historically been marginalized in the publishing world—including women and people of color—a new way to make their voices heard.”

There is no subject under the sun that the prolific Jon M. Sweeney is not interested in or not writing on, from cats in the Vatican to Meister Eckhart, and his contribution here is once again learned and eclectic: “Novels About Popes and What They Say About Us.”

Another polymath is John W. Miller, a former foreign correspondent for *The Wall Street Journal* who eschews his normally more political writing to review Steve Brusatte’s book on a subject rather dear to this editor’s heart as well: *The Rise and Fall of the Dinosaurs*. And the longtime **America** contributor Diane Scharper reviews *The Friend*, the National Book Award-winning novel by Sigrid Nunez. “One of its hallmarks is a memoir-like quality,” Scharper notes, “a plot that zig-zags on the road of real and invented, a tone that is conversational and a discursive style.”

Fickle Catholics who filled out their March Madness bracket with

too many Jesuit schools might have mourned the exit of Gonzaga University from the N.C.A.A. tournament earlier this month, but its most famous alumnus is featured here, in John Anderson’s review of Gary Giddins’s *Bing Crosby: Swinging on a Star*. “Radio, which dominated the ’40s, was ideal for Crosby,” Anderson writes. “He was not made for our visual world, but he ruled his own, its music and its media.”

We also have an update for our readers on two recent selections for the ever-growing Catholic Book Club: Kate Bowler’s beautiful memoir, *Everything Happens for a Reason*, and a collection of punch-in-the-gut short stories by Andre Dubus, *The Winter Father*. We’ve also announced our next book, *Catholic Modern*, by James Chappel, a study of how the Catholic response to totalitarian movements in the 1930s and ’40s radically remade the church itself.

Katelyn Beaty offers the “Last Word” in this issue, in which she stresses the importance of reading widely and deeply, even if that involves authors and topics with which we disagree strongly. “Reading widely reminds me that my understanding of God and God’s world is limited,” she writes. “I need the insights of others in order to fill in what I, owing to ignorance, sin or immaturity, cannot see.”

Oh, and if you’re wondering whose ox was being gored by the mention of “the silly tropes of fiction aimed at teenage boys,” that is my contribution to this issue—a look back at Boys’ Life books from the 1960s.

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



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Customers visit a new bookstore in Hohhot city, in China's Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, Jan. 17. Imaginechina via AP Images  
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KATELYN BEATY  
*Reading Widely—and Deeply*

## From *Everything Happens for a Reason* to *The Winter Father*

One of our goals in the Catholic Book Club (whose online community is now more than 2,000 members strong!) is to offer a variety of genres and literary styles, in part because we have found **America** readers have diverse tastes and in part because of the interesting and often startling ways the different types of books intersect with one another. In the two years since the Catholic Book Club began its Facebook discussion community, we have read novels, memoirs, theological treatises, historical biographies and short story collections.

Each genre and author selected has spurred detailed and sometimes passionate discussion, and our two most recent selections were no exception. In late fall we discussed Kate Bowler's poignant memoir about being diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer, *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved*. We followed that with one of three recent volumes of the collected short stories of Andre Dubus, *The Winter Father*. As always, we benefited in both cases from the intellectual and theological insights of our moderator, Kevin Spinale, S.J., who wrote an interpretive essay to introduce each book to the readers, along with questions for discussion.

Because my friend Father Spinale remains a bit of a Luddite when it comes to digital media and what he still calls "the face book," I was grateful and surprised when he jumped into the discussion of both books online. And there is no doubt all of our fellow readers profited from his close and careful readings of both texts.

*Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved* "Theodicy is a fancy theological term," wrote Father Spinale in his introduction to Kate Bowler's memoir. "It is the name of the branch of philosophy and theology that puzzles over—agonizes over—the relationship between God and evil." The puzzle, he writes, is what to make of the dichotomy between a God who is all-good, all-knowing and all-powerful, and the reality that concrete, massive global suffering exists? It provokes a baldly honest response:

How do we reconcile these two realities—one a principle of belief, the other a fact of personal and communal human experience—with one another? Or can we? It is a question that has haunted me—a Catholic, a believer—all of my life.

Bowler, herself a theologian and a professor at Duke Divinity School, came face to face with theodicy in 2015, when she was diagnosed with Stage 4 colon cancer. She was 35 years old, married, with a two-year-old son. She soon found that she was not the only one who struggled to make sense of what was happening. Her book title comes from the well-meaning phrase that so many people said to her, as she encountered many well-wishers who sought to "minimize the experience of suffering and death as either a gateway to heaven or an inconsequential cessation of life that marks a blink in the vast, cold reality of the universe."

The great balm for Bowler in her suffering, Spinale writes, is the weight of the presence of others as they accompany her: the weight of her two-year-old son; the weight of her husband's arm around her; the weight of bear hugs from friends; the weight of her father's hand as he strokes her hair before she goes into surgery. And, quite simply, the weight of feeling accompanied and loved: "It seemed too odd and too simplistic to say what I knew to be true," Bowler writes, "that when I was sure I was going to die, I didn't feel angry. I felt loved."

Many readers connected with Bowler's musings on mortality, and of course it came as a shock and sometimes just a welcome recognition when we discovered just how many of us have had to face the cruel reality of cancer—either ourselves or in communion with our loved ones. "When my father was diagnosed, he was gone in a couple of weeks," wrote Mary T. Keating. "But to those of you in remission, or who are still taking treatment, does the experience of having the dire diagnosis not come to pass make you believe that prayers worked?" She notes that Kate Bowler takes each additional two months as a major gift, more than she thought she could have with her family: "She wishes for a long life, and prays for it, but knows better than most that each morning is precious, and in that way her prayers are answered."

The reader Emily Hanlon noted she had once read a description of how to answer the problem of theodicy: "In the Final Judgment, all our actions and their consequences will be known, and their ultimate meaning within the context of God's saving work throughout the ages will be revealed to all." She adds that "while I recognize that no one really knows what the Final Judgment is, it gave me great solace to think that I would finally understand the great pattern—or, in other words, the reason everything happened."

### *The Winter Father*

When the writings of Andre Dubus were collected and reissued in a three-volume set by David R. Godine last year, his stories seemed a natural fit for the Catholic Book Club. “Dubus was an irascible, loyal, loving, smoking, hard-drinking, hard-punching, tender man, who demanded much of himself and others and, according to at least one friend, did not realize how much,” wrote Franklin Freeman in a review for **America**. “He was also a devout Catholic, attended daily Mass whenever possible and had a profound devotion to the Eucharist and the reality of the sacraments, both the official church sacraments and the sacraments of daily life.” With that in mind, our selection team eagerly chose *The Winter Father*, Volume II of the set, for our next book.

What followed was an adjustment. As readers—myself among them—delved deeper into Dubus’s stories, we were startled by the graphic language, the occasional misogyny and the emotional cruelty of many of the characters in Dubus’s tales. And yet there remained a strange beauty to his prose. “The stories of *The Winter Father* are human stories—filled with ugliness and moments of grace,” Father Spinale wrote. “The energy packed into Dubus’s stories throbs with Old Testament clarity: expulsion, loneliness, the ferocity of parental love, adultery, retribution and sex that is a stay against loneliness.”

Even the violence noted by many readers seemed always to have a thematic etiology in Dubus’s writing: “Expulsion from a family, from a home, from a marriage spurs

sadness, anger, resentment and hate in the heart of the expelled. Loneliness inspires haphazard relationships,” Father Spinale wrote. “And expulsion coupled with the pain of loneliness combusts into violence.”

Some readers noted that the connection to rituals that some Dubus characters have might have been a stay against the despair many of his characters encounter. “On some level, I think their secular rituals served as an anchor grounding them,” noted Irene Lucas. “Sorrow, loss, disappointment, and more can sometimes feel like one is drowning in a great void. The rhythm of their routines gave them something to hold on to so the void could not swallow them.”

Others noted the gritty reality that Dubus brought to every character. “If we are made in the image and likeness of God, crisis seems to be what it takes to fully activate the implied powers of love and creativity,” noted the reader Elizabeth Malone. “Dubus’s stories take us to a world where outcomes went the other way, as, in fact, they often do in real life.”

To offer the broadest possible range of quality books with spiritual and intellectual heft, we are always interested in suggestions for what we might choose next. Are you interested in reading and discussing with us? Join the Catholic Book Club at [americamagazine.org/catholic-book-club](http://americamagazine.org/catholic-book-club) or on Facebook at [facebook.com/groups/americacbc/](https://facebook.com/groups/americacbc/).

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# THE MORAL VISION OF IRIS MURDOCH

Iris Murdoch  
wrote about a  
post-Christian world  
that is now our milieu.

By James K. A. Smith

“The most obvious difference between nineteenth-century novels and twentieth-century novels is that the nineteenth-century ones are better.” This blunt claim from the philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch is characteristic. But it is her explanation that deserves our consideration.

In 19th-century novels, Murdoch argued, even the rebels can take society for granted. The individualists in the novels of Dostoyevsky or Balzac or Dickens move in worlds where political and religious institutions have a givenness to them, a solidity against which they can rail. “Even if he attacks it,” Murdoch comments, “his thought still moves within it like a fish in water.” These novels are not without horror and heartbreak, but they unfold in a society that can withstand the onslaught, a world where God still exists. Thus we find “a great consoling power” in these novels—which is perhaps why we still return to them. (Shakespeare, in contrast, “writes as one without belief in God.” This, says Murdoch, “is an aspect of his greatness.”)

Murdoch goes on to contrast these with two sorts of novelists in the 20th century—“existentialists” and “mystics.” The existential novel, she argues (and Murdoch literally wrote one of the first books on Sartre), is the natural heir of those 19th-century worlds. It is just that now God is dead and we are all we’ve got. Or rather: I am all that I’ve got. It is the loneliness of that “I” that is most acute. “The individual in the nineteenth century was rarely lonely because he was held secure by God and Reason and Society.” And now? One is left with nothing but his or her own willpower. Hence our angst.

But there is a second kind of 20th-century novel, Murdoch suggests. Mystical novels are “both newer and more old-fashioned.” They emerge on the other side of existentialism, now mourning all that is lost. Living in the twilight of the idols, they reflect “the uneasy suspicion that perhaps after all man is not God.” They “express a religious consciousness without the traditional trappings of religion.” The temptation, though, is to trot out some lame stand-in for God, to “merely reintroduce the old fatherly figure of God behind a facade of fantastical imagery or sentimental adventures in cosy masochism.”

Even as Murdoch identified these two paths for the novel in 1970, she wondered if another possibility was emerging or called for. “Is some very much deeper change now coming about; and what is the place of literature in this scene?” she asked. She confessed the question was unnerving: There was something “here which haunts one and

which is not too easy to formulate. Has literature always depended on a sort of implicit moral philosophy which has been unobtrusively supported by religious belief and which is now with frightful rapidity disappearing?” One can hear Murdoch wondering about a kind of novel on the far side of the death of God *and* his substitutes, a bracing fiction that is haunted not by a lost past but a revenant from the future that would revisit us with what we thought we were done with.

### ‘What Is It Good to Be?’

It turns out Iris Murdoch was already writing these novels, which is why she deserves our attention now in the 21st century. This year—the centenary of her birth and the 20th anniversary of her death—is a fitting occasion to revisit her work. We in the United States might not have been ready for Murdoch in her lifetime. She wrote in and for a post-Christian world that has only more recently become our shared experience. She wrote for a world that is now our milieu.

For this reason Gary Browning’s book, *Why Iris Murdoch Matters*, is timely and suggestive (even if, in the end, Murdoch deserves a better book). The strength of this volume is an encapsulation of her philosophical relevance for today. The newcomer to Murdoch will find serviceable summaries of her metaphysics, ethics and politics, all of which are intertwined around enduring themes that suffuse her fiction as well.

Murdoch found her voice during the war alongside other notable women, including Mary Midgley, Elizabeth Anscombe, Mary Warnock and Philippa Foot (a lifelong friend of Murdoch’s). Midgley has suggested that the forced absence of men from the academy during the war gave room for these women to imagine philosophy differently, space to refuse what she described as the “brash, unreal style of philosophizing” that would normally have dominated the faculty common room.

One can feel this in the questions Murdoch pursues and a style that spoke to audiences well beyond the philosophical guild (including not a few theologians). She did not play the usual Oxbridge games; she was doing something different altogether. Rather than framing moral philosophy as just another form of epistemology (*how can we know what to do?*), she was asking a more classical question: “How can we make ourselves morally better?” she asks in *The Sovereignty of the Good*. “Can we make ourselves mor-



# At the heart of Murdoch's moral vision is what she calls 'unselfing,' something surely worth revisiting in the age of the selfie. 🧠🧠

ally better? These are the questions the philosopher should try to answer.”

Ethics left in the hands of philosophers became one more epistemic puzzle. The problem of the moral life was construed as either ignorance or paralysis in the face of moral dilemmas. But Murdoch knew this was all a smoke-screen. The source of our moral problems is not that we do not know enough; the problem is us. “In the moral life the enemy is the fat relentless ego,” she wryly remarked. The enduring obstacle of our swollen, self-absorbed egos explains why *The Sovereignty of the Good* feels so contemporary. While the essays within were all written in the 1960s, the diagnosis of our moral sloth is perennial.

In an appreciative reflection on “Dame Iris,” the philosopher Charles Taylor has rightly pointed out that Murdoch does not just ask, “What is the good life?” She asks a more disruptive, unsettling question: “What is it good to be?” And given how the world is and what it means to love our neighbors, “what it is good to be” might not look like a “good life.” It might look like a life of suffering and death. It might look like the lives of saints and martyrs.

At the heart of Murdoch's moral vision is what she calls “unselfing,” something surely worth revisiting in the age of the selfie. As one might guess, this amounts to finding a way out of the claustrophobia of our self-regard by answering a call from outside. Almost 50 years before Mark Lilla was staking out a path “after identity politics,” Murdoch was already noting the danger of involitional spirals drawing us downward. “For Murdoch,” Browning observes, “moral life suffers if individuals are obsessed with examining their own identities. They need to look outside of themselves, to see other people and to take account of them.”

## Self-regard and Unselfies

It might seem odd to suggest our problem is self-regard when so many people are clearly passionate about justice. But Murdoch provides tools to see that much that we call justice is the equal-opportunity expansion of the claims of the ego. In one sense, this is the correction of a certain unfairness—that self-regard used to be a luxury for a privileged few. But we are just leveling the playing field of self-absorption rather than disrupting the self at the center. For Murdoch, the life worth leading is a life that leads to others, to a beyond, to an other. The moral self is pierced, porous, opened.

This vision of unselfing is related to a second central theme in her work, something she appropriated from Simone Weil: the moral significance of *attention*. “If loving attention is bestowed on others,” Browning summarizes, “then the self is changed.” By attending to the world, to something outside of the self, the self is pulled outward, stretched, grows. Attention, as Murdoch describes it, is “a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality.” And it is this, she says, that is the distinguishing mark of a “moral agent”—not will or intellect but the capacity to attend, to notice, which is its own kind of love.

It may seem odd, but this, in fact, is what Murdoch, in her wonderfully idiosyncratic way, means by “Platonism.” At the end of the day—the secondary literature be damned—“Platonism” for Murdoch is the recognition of a reality beyond my making and preference, an objectivity that calls to me, to which I owe a just attention. Plato wakes us up to what Matthew Crawford has called, more recently, *The World Beyond Your Head*, the others we do not notice when the selfie-sticks of egoism are cemented to our face.

If one can learn to attend, unselfing can happen in the most unlikely of places, including places that do not look all that “moral.” In *The Sovereignty of the Good*, Murdoch starts with examples of nature slicing into one's field of vision, like a hawk's reflection carving across my iPhone's screen, pulling my eyes up to the sky.

I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has

disappeared. There is nothing now but the kestrel.  
And when I return to thinking of the other matter  
it seems less important.

Such experiences, she says, are preludes to morality, practice for attending to other people. She suggests the same can be true of art, since “beauty is the only spiritual thing which we love by instinct.” (Henri de Lubac, S.J., who emphasized our natural desire for the supernatural, might beg to differ.) Indeed, her definition of “good” art is what “affords us a pure delight in the independent existence of what is excellent.” It kindles love in the highest part of the soul. In fact, “considered as a sacrament or a source of good energy,” art is “more edifying” than nature in this respect because attending to a work of art not only pulls me outside of myself, it also pulls me into a relationship with other people, with creators. In art, I encounter not only something not me but the product of someone not me. That is the beginning of the end of egoism.

### **Magical Thinking**

Not surprisingly, Murdoch often mentions religion as another source of unselfing. But her account of religion—and the slide from God to the Good—is both helpful and frustrating.

On the one hand, Murdoch reads like an advance scout for a secular age. (It is no surprise that Charles Taylor confesses his own debts to Murdoch, even as he disagrees with her.) As Browning notes, Murdoch “recognizes the prevailing loss of faith in large scale beliefs in many fields and sees a reconstituted metaphysics as a way of dealing with the loss of concepts that underpin morality and personal development.” Metaphysics, in the language of her Gifford Lectures, is a guide to morals when God and religion are no longer viable. Because if we are going to be moral, if we are going to find what it is good to be, we need a beyond, an outside, an other. This amounts to a kind of “transcendental argument”—very much akin, then, to the work of Taylor. The difference with Taylor is that while he recognizes this loss, he is more willing to press the unsustainability of naturalistic alternatives and argue for the necessity of a transcendence that Murdoch too easily assumes could never return.

In her essays from the 1960s, Murdoch believed that “religion, in its encompassing commitment to experience

as a whole, continues to serve as a support for morality even if its magical aspects are no longer sustainable.” But for how long could that be true? Is the moral import of a demythologized religion just like the glow of the sun after it has dipped below the horizon, with dusk and dark in its trail? Murdoch’s optimism in this regard smacks of a denuded moralism that has proved inadequate to the task.

This is why we can fairly question Murdoch’s somewhat magical thinking about the potential of art in the wake of the death of God. Browning, pointing out the narrative role that paintings play in several of her novels, notes her hopes in this regard: “She sees the visual arts as contributing to the possibility of individuals moving towards an appreciation of truth and reality rather than being absorbed by their own interests and fantasies.” Murdoch “recognizes art to be a unique means of freeing people from the grip of desire. In an unreligious age without prayer or sacraments, it represents their clearest *experience* of something grasped as separate, precious, beneficial and held quietly and possessively in attention.”

I want this to be true. But I also know that Hitler listened to Wagner and the Nazis adorned their lairs with stolen paintings by the greats. One could imagine all sorts of ways that experiences of artistic transcendence could be preambles to religious encounters. (The films of Terrence Malick come to mind, for example, or the immersive experience of a Rothko canvas.) As the philosopher Jean-Luc Marion once remarked, even our idols are “low-water marks of the divine,” harboring a capacity to entice beyond the simple recognition of them as idols. But for all that, art functioning as a portal beyond ourselves seems to require an internal work and capacity that is sourced from elsewhere. We live in an age where even the sad splendor of “Roma” can be subject to Netflix-and-chill domestication by swelling self-regard.

In other words, the sort of *attention* that Murdoch rightly extols as essential to the moral life is not merely provoked by some objective outside force. It turns out that something—Someone?—has to also cultivate in us the capacity to attend. When George Bernanos’s country priest finally recognizes that “all is grace,” it is not because he has just noticed something beyond himself. He has been graced with a hermeneutic to read it, to attend. The transformation is internal as much as external.

# We can fairly question Murdoch's somewhat magical thinking about the potential of art in the wake of the death of God. 🍷🍷

## Fiction and Frisson

While Browning is right to argue that Murdoch (still) matters, he does a disservice to Murdoch in significant ways. Rather than providing a window into what makes Murdoch so enticing—her stylistic capacity to write in voices that are variously incisive and supple—Browning's prose bricks up almost every portal of light. One might have hoped for a book that more closely matched the enticing grace of Murdoch's style.

Reading Murdoch's fiction is an experience of frisson. She can provoke a chill that is both eerie and thrilling. This is a function of both her diction and deft plotting. Murdoch can be wonderfully epigrammatic in her philosophy, a skill she gives to characters in her novels. But she can also paint worlds in a poetic register—like when, in *The Sea, the Sea*, she describes the foyer of an empty house having “the expectant air of a stage set” or one of the narrator's young lovers as having “a smallish pretty nose which speeds forward at the world without quite turning up” or the “amphibious nun” who comes to the rescue in *The Bell*. (Murdoch's humor is underappreciated.)

The charge of her fiction is often fueled by a foreboding that is just beyond the natural, a paranormal presence that vaguely lurks, making us wonder whether this is all there is, whether the natural is surrounded (or infected) by a *super*, a beyond. Murdoch's fictional worlds often make room for the monstrous—or, in a way that befits modernity, something that *might* be monstrous but that we might also be able to explain away (and might very much want to). This is matched by plotting that can be at once languorous and taut with tension, a prose that, for example, lopes through warm meadows with a character while something ominous hovers on the edges, overhead, in the grass, threatening from the future. One feels none of this in Browning's book.

A reconsideration of Murdoch could go straight to Murdoch herself. Start with *The Sovereignty of the Good*, a deceptively accessible little book, or shamelessly roam about the omnibus collection *Existentialists and Mystics*, which is an excellent introduction to the range of her

thinking on philosophy and literature. And many of her novels remain timely. *The Sea, the Sea*, for which she won the Man Booker Prize, is an almost Proustian investigation of an unreliable narrator's fat, relentless ego.

## Imperfect Love

I might suggest one of her often overlooked novels as particularly relevant today, showing Murdoch to be an incisive psychologist of the lure of the so-called Benedict option. In *The Bell*, a tiny band of faithful, unnerved by the pressures and pace of the modern world, aim to establish a quasi-monastic lay community on the grounds of Imber Abbey. Even as the community and village are preparing for the unveiling of a new bell for the abbey, gothic tales of illicit love and death attend stories of the lost bell somewhere at the bottom of a lake—itsself a murky presence that lurks throughout the story.

Most of the inhabitants of the lay community are earnest. A couple are resistant, aloof. Dora, for example, the poorly-matched wife of an art historian working at the abbey, is uneasy. But her relative outsider status also gives us another standpoint. “Dora had become used to thinking of Imber as utterly remote, utterly cut off and private. Imber had retired from the world, but the world could still come to Imber to pry and mock and judge.”

Indeed, the world needn't come from outside. The world was already inside simply because human beings were present. The very distinction between the church and the world is destabilized here. Notable is the persistent pinballing of eros within this “otherworldly” community. But in Murdoch's hands, this is not a charge of hypocrisy but a recognition of the curvature of human hunger. Michael, the leader of the community, recognized that “his religion and his passions sprang from the same source.” (Also notable in this 1973 novel is a sensitive, complex portrait of Michael's same-sex desire. Murdoch had argued for the legalization of homosexuality in a 1964 essay.) It is the wizened abbess who says “we can only learn to love by loving. Remember that all our failures are ultimately failures in love. Imper-

fect love must not be condemned and rejected, but made perfect. The way is always forward, never back.”

Even if the story devolves into melodrama at the end, with a touch of hijinks and too-neat coincidences, the novel exhibits many of Murdoch’s literary strengths: a pacing that is invisible but felt; a capacity for description that is mesmerizing, as in her ornithological marking of time (“the sedge warblers were gone”); the ability to inhabit the standpoint of a variety of characters and bring them to life. It is not a perfect book. Nevertheless, she creates a world that mirrors our own with all of its cross-pressures and stubborn hopes.

And it will give you some sense of Murdoch’s dead-serious whimsy that when, finally, the ill-fated decisions of key characters leads to an emergency, it is an “intrepid and amphibious nun” who comes to the rescue. The heroine isn’t just religious but a Religious. When Dora was flailing in the lake, her poor decisions threatening to take her under, “across the surface of the lake she saw a black figure...beginning to disrobe. The next moment there was a splash.” Dora’s next memory is the nun, drenched in her underclothes, hauling Dora to shore. “It was certainly a strange scene: most of the men muddied to the waist, two half-drowned women, and Mother Clare swinging the coat over her shoulders.”

While those who had gathered in the precincts of Imber’s grounds were concerned about the incursions of the world, it was the excursions of the amphibious nun that surprised them and saved Dora. The amphibious nun answered the call from inside the cloister, willing to relinquish her modesty and risk a vow for the sake of someone “outside.” Perhaps, in the end, Murdoch could teach us to be amphibious, at home in the *not yet* but willing to swim out into the *now* to reach those flailing. But such a calling could only be sustained, not merely by “the Good” but by the grace of an amphibious God who stripped himself to nothing and swam to us in the flesh.

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James K. A. Smith is a professor of philosophy at Calvin College and the editor in chief of *Image* journal. His next book, *On the Road With Saint Augustine*, will be published in October.

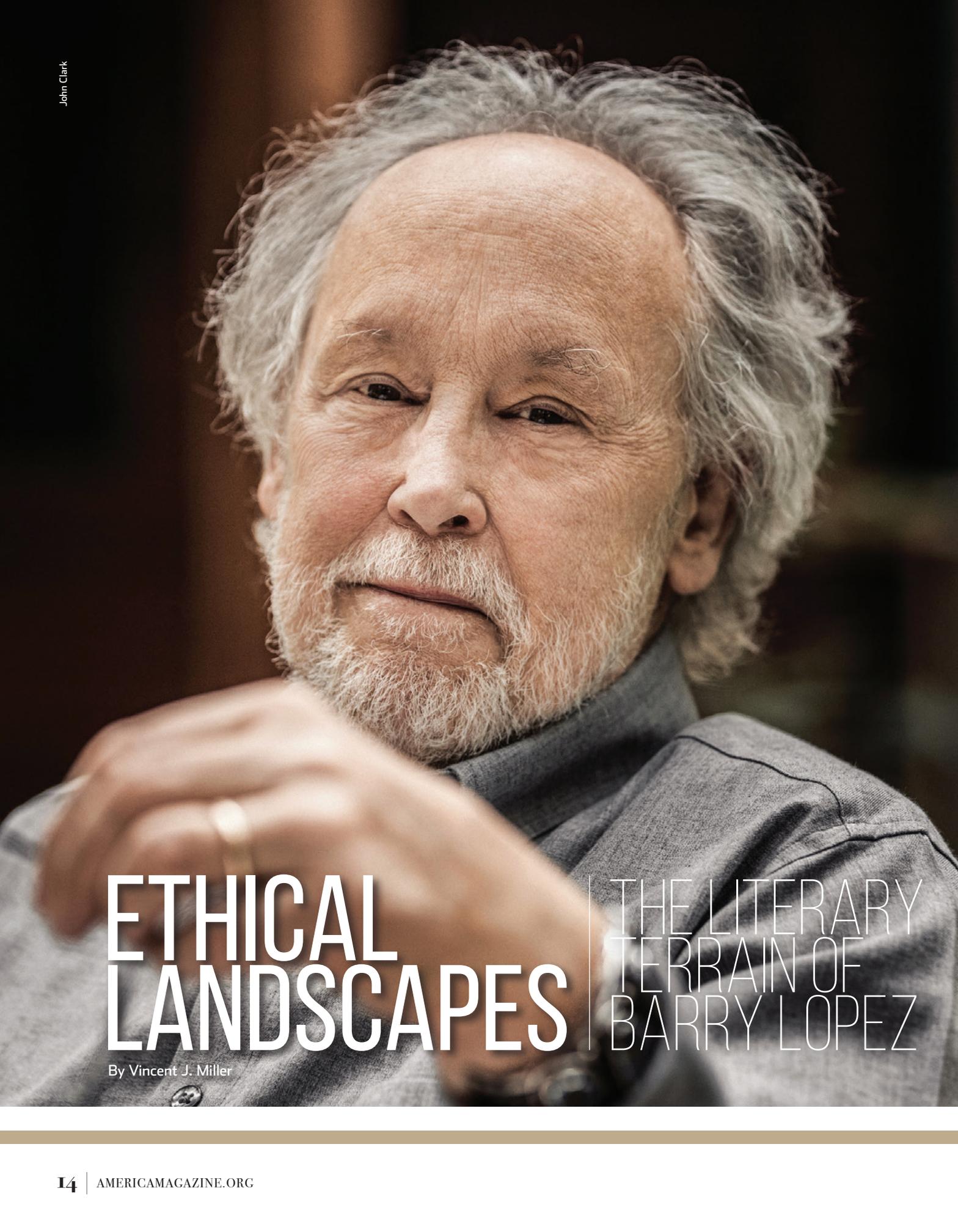
## What Happened Then

By Paul Mariani

Do we understand what happened then?  
The few of us in that shuttered room,  
lamps dimmed, afraid of what would happen  
when they found us? The women back  
this morning to tell Peter what they’d seen.  
Then these two back from Emmaus.  
And now here he was. Here in the room with us.  
Strange meeting this, the holes there  
in his hands and feet and heart.  
And who could have guessed a calm like this  
could touch us. But that was what we felt.  
The deep relief you feel when the one  
you’ve searched for in a crowd appears,  
and your unbelieving eyes dissolve in tears.  
For this is what love looks like and is  
and what it does. “Peace” was what he said,  
as a peace like no other pierced the gloom  
and descended on the room.

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Paul Mariani, poet and biographer, is a former poetry editor of *America* and an emeritus professor of English at Boston College.



# ETHICAL LANDSCAPES

By Vincent J. Miller

THE LITERARY  
TERRAIN OF  
BARRY LOPEZ

Barry Lopez has sought to re-establish our ethical relationships with the land and the other creatures who dwell on it.

In his masterly 1978 book *Of Wolves and Men*, Barry Lopez changed nature writing by combining the perspectives of modern science, indigenous knowledge, history and mythology. In his National Book Award-winning *Arctic Dreams* (1986), he again combined these perspectives to explore a region of the world united by climate, ecology and culture, while separated by political boundaries. His fiction writing powerfully evokes the positive possibility of human conversion in community and coexistence with nature.

Lopez has just released a major new book, *Horizon*, a labor of three decades in which he reflects on how he has been formed by the places he has visited and the people who reside there. It is a work of profound moral urgency with much to offer both contemporary society and the church.

I visited Lopez in his small home overlooking the McKenzie River on the Western Slope of the Cascade Mountains in Oregon, where he has lived since moving from New York City nearly 50 years ago. It is an area of stunning beauty. Roosevelt Elk roam freely through the dense Douglas fir rainforest in his backyard. In the spring, Chinook salmon still swim hundreds of miles from the Pacific to spawn in the cold river. He walks daily to the river, bringing discarded beaver twigs back to his office.

Here he can sustain friendships with people far from literary circles. “I never tried to write in New York. It’s just not the environment in which I can work. I can work here, you know, where you can step out the door and see elk. And there’s darkness and isolation and great silence.”

For decades, Lopez has sought to re-establish our ethical relationships with the land and the other creatures who dwell on it. But Lopez, like many authors, struggles against labels. He is often identified as a “nature” or “travel” writer, but he is equally engaged with the natural sciences and indigenous forms of community. Although he has written movingly of Mary in his essay “Madre de Dios” and imagined a love affair between saints in “The Letters of Heaven,” he has never publicly presented himself as a Catholic author. But he welcomed

the opportunity to discuss how his Catholic formation has contributed to his work. Catholicism “was a very strong thread in my life, and it is a major thread in my life today as a writer.” He has never tried “to be a Catholic writer, in the uppercase C... but the things that stand out for me in that long education are compassion, empathy, the courage, the determination to do right.”

### An Expanding Vocation

Lopez spent his childhood in California, where he found comfort and safety in the landscape from the violence of the human world where a pedophile abused him for years (an experience he recounted in the haunting essay “Sliver of Sky”). After a move to New York City, this sense of wonder and love for nature provided an experiential ground for him to embrace the aesthetic and intellectual aspects of Jesuit education at the Loyola School in Manhattan, where he found “exactly the right place for myself.” Catholicism resonated with his “metaphorical cast of mind.” He wrestled seriously with a possible vocation, first to the Jesuits, then, after college at Notre Dame, to the Trappists at Gethsemani in Kentucky. Each time the “answer was ‘no.’” Yet the sense of call never left him.

This call led him to move beyond his education and tradition. He tells the story of shattering the stone in his class ring during a baseball game his senior year at Notre Dame. He continued to wear it, sensing a “lesson in that unstoned ring.” Much was missing from his education so exclusively focused on the Western tradition. One of his first thoughts when encountering a Nunamiut Eskimo village as part of the research that became *Arctic Dreams* was “Why did I know so little about these people?” Why were their understanding of the world, notions of justice and insights into the physical world “never mentioned in the good schools I attended?” “I can’t say I left the church. I just stopped imagining God in the terms that I was originally given. When I was traveling with other people, I thought that there’s holiness here too.”

In conversation with Lopez it becomes clear how deeply he was formed by Catholic moral practice as



# A MAJOR PORTION OF LOPEZ'S WORK HAS ENGAGED SOURCES OUTSIDE OF THE CATHOLIC TRADITION BUT REMAINS DEEPLY FORMED BY IT.

much as beliefs. He describes his experience with confession that communicated “a way to live in the world where you knew you were not right with it.” Rather than leave that world behind, it expanded for him to encompass relations with the natural world as much as the human. He tells the story of returning to his home in the woods on the McKenzie after his book tour for *Of Wolves and Men*. “I was afraid the trees would shun me because I had chosen to allow myself to be celebrated and didn’t make sufficiently clear that the knowledge in that book is something I was given directly—in some cases by wolves.”

Lopez knows the dark side of Catholicism and European culture as well. His stepfather’s family wealth derives from Cuban land granted to his ancestor Marín Lopez for building the boats with which Cortés attacked Tenochtitlán.

One must be careful to avoid reducing a complex life and claiming it for Catholicism. Although he was deeply formed by the Catholic tradition, Lopez’s work has primarily engaged other sources and cultures. But it is precisely there, in those writings that are not explicitly Catholic, that Lopez has the most to offer back to the tradition that formed him.

## Seeking What the Tradition Would One Day Embrace

Many have observed that some of the great converts of the 20th century—Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton—did not simply choose the tradition as it was. They were attracted to potentials in Catholicism that were often ignored by those born into the Catholic Church, and their conversions

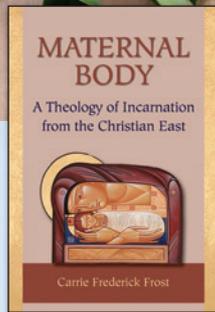
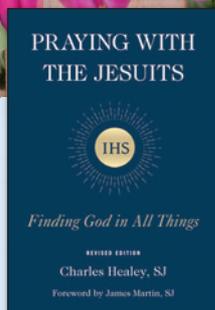
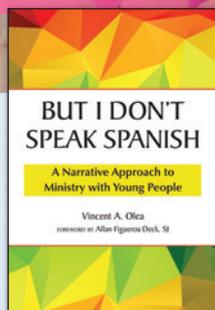
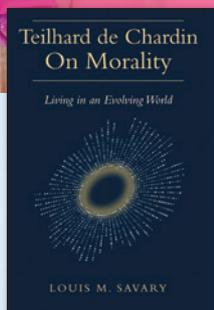
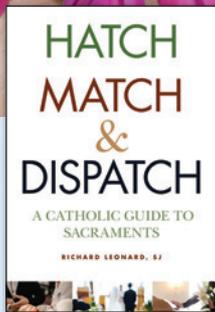
awakened dormant aspects of tradition. Perhaps something similar can be said about some who move beyond the tradition as well. The “more” they seek can be something the tradition itself demands.

Throughout his career, Lopez has labored to bring landscapes and all those who dwell in them to our awareness: the geology of the Galápagos Islands and the geography of the Arctic, the social lives of wolves and the reverie of a polar bear nursing her cubs. In this work he draws deeply from the knowledge of the geologists, biologists and ecologists whom he often accompanies in the field. Lopez has always taken care to make native peoples partners in this project as well. On the scientific front, he notes they have observed animals far longer than modern scientists. But their knowledge goes deeper than mere observation. The sustainability of their forms of life speaks to a deep participation in the ecologies they inhabit. Their cultures manifest the “moral geography” of the landscapes in which they live, a connection at times audible in the very sounds of their languages.

All of this resonates profoundly with “Laudato Si’,” the encyclical in which Pope Francis notes that the complexity of the problems we face demands solutions that do not “emerge from just one way of interpreting and transforming reality. Respect must also be shown for the various cultural riches of different peoples, their art and poetry, their interior life and spirituality.” Pope Francis calls for special attention to indigenous communities’ cultural traditions and their connection to the land as “a sacred space with which they need to interact if they are to maintain their identity and values.” In many ways, Lopez’s synthesis of science, indigenous knowledge and attentiveness to creation anticipated the notion of “integral ecology” expressed in “Laudato Si’.” As an author, Lopez set off long ago in a direction that the tradition would one day follow. And now, as the Catholic Church seeks to put the teachings of “Laudato Si’” into practice, Lopez’s life work provides guidance for the spiritual attitudes and virtues we need to cultivate.

## Community and Landscape

Literary scholars like Paul Giles and Una Cadegan have argued that Catholic literature departs from the solitary heroes of modernism and focuses instead on the individual’s entanglement within community and history.

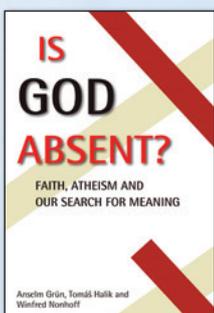
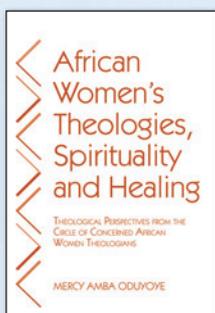
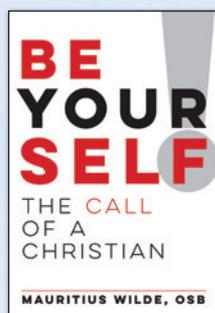


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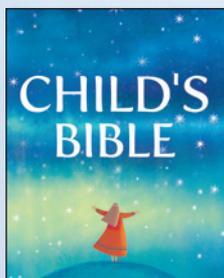
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Attentiveness to community also pervades Lopez's work. In "Before the Temple of Fire," a kiln in the woods of Oregon becomes a study of community, not simply a sketch of a cast of characters, but a story that attends to the potters' shared work and the ethos this requires. The characters in *Resistance* recount their reasons for leaving Western society. But what could be simple stories of solitary escape are grounded in community as each recounts to lifelong friends the relationships, communities and guides (a plains grizzly, an Assiniboine elder named Virgil) that facilitated their transformation. Lopez observes: "Maybe we are at the end of the time of the individual hero, and it is now the time for communities to become heroic."

There is a second, related Catholic dimension to Lopez's work. In his insightful religious history of environmentalism, *Inherit the Holy Mountain*, Mark Stoll argues that the American notion of wilderness is the product of a thoroughly Calvinist imagination, in which God's glory is best manifested in nature, untouched by human depravity. Landscape painting, for example, originated as a Dutch Calvinist rejection of the human focus of portrait painting. The same aesthetic is evident from the Hudson River School painters through the photography of Ansel Adams. There is no room for human presence in these portrayals of nature's splendor. The land's indigenous inhabitants were generally painted out of the picture, just as they were expelled from the land. This leaves us with a disjuncture of humanity and nature, between which we cannot imagine harmony. This vision is so deeply embedded in our collective memory that we simply take it for granted.

Curiously, Stoll finds a different aesthetic among Catholics, which expresses a different ethos. The Civil War-era photographer Timothy O'Sullivan provides a pointed contrast. In his photographs for the government surveys of the West after the war, O'Sullivan always included people in the frame "as if the landscape were empty without humans in it." Similarly, the history of Catholic environmental activism is marked by figures like Peter Maurin, Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, who sought to unite nature, community and justice.

A similar perspective suffuses Lopez's work. Although he has traveled to the ends of the earth, Lopez seldom writes of empty wilderness. *Arctic Dreams* ex-



Vincent J. Miller

Lopez lives on the western slope of the Cascades in Oregon. "I can work here," he says. "There's darkness and isolation and great silence."

plores different islands and corners of the Arctic sea, but in a way that is populated with the musk oxen, polar bears, narwhals and other creatures who thrive there. These in turn are engaged through the culture of the Arctic's human dwellers, past and present: Eskimo hunters and their forebears in Dorset and Thule. Even maritime geography is described in terms of native people's navigation and the treacherous expeditions through which it was mapped by Europeans.

### Recollection of Place

In his new book, *Horizon*, a grand work that defies genre, Lopez revisits many of the landscapes he has written about previously: the Arctic, the Galápagos Islands, eastern Africa, Australia, Antarctica. He reveals himself more here than in previous books, exploring how he has been formed by encounters with diverse landscapes and the people who inhabit them. It is an extended reflection on our openness

to the multifaceted world—from the expansiveness of the ocean horizon and indigenous ways of knowing to figures like James Cook and Charles Darwin, who have widened our ways of seeing. The book is taut with the moral concern of one who has traveled the world and witnessed both its astounding beauty and the horrifying scale of human destructiveness. *Horizon* is suffused with care for what the poet Adam Zagajewski calls “the mutilated world.”

*Horizon* offers indelible images of destruction and indifference. Lopez visits a night market on the Yangtze River and recounts merchants shouldering buckets of butchered meat, “strings of ulcerated fish” from the polluted river, monkeys and hedgehogs staring “out from the confines of screened metal cages,” wicker trays of crickets and caterpillars arrayed beneath “sparrow-like birds hung by their feet.” Here he catches a glimpse of “the future, the years to come, when we would be killing and consuming every last living thing.”

He witnesses the destruction of aboriginal rock art in Australia dating as far back as 25,000 years and still central to the ritual life of the Jaburrara people. Bulldozed to make room for a chemical plant, the art was dumped into a lot surrounded by cyclone fencing, exposed to the view and mockery of all with no concern for its ritual meanings and sacred restrictions. “The flayed walls of the caves at Lascaux and Chauvet, dumped in a barrow ditch.” Lopez describes the Jaburrara desperately trying to rearrange the stones by hand to hide their sacred images, lacking the heavy equipment that dismantled their “great lands of knowledge.”

He reports sailing smoothly through Peel Sound near the northernmost shore of North America, a passage not considered navigable without an icebreaker even in the summer, viewing what has never occurred before in the history of our species: “There was not a single ice floe in the waters ahead. Not a scrap of ice.” An expanse of open water lay where polar bears evolved to hunt on the ice.

For Lopez, such destruction is ultimately a result of indifference. As these images illustrate, the darkest visions are full of things deserving ethical respect that we instead exploit and destroy. This ethical indifference is tied to our perceptions of the land. We are alienated from it, our perceptions and even language formed by the exploitative cultures of agriculture and the industrial revolution. Elements of the landscape have a “numinous

dimension...as real as their texture or color.” Presented “with a certain kind of welcoming stillness,” even a stone “might reveal, easily and naturally, some part of its meaning.” In our conversation, Lopez elaborated: “The exclusion of landscape from the moral universe of humans would constitute for me a sin.”

### **Attentive Accompaniment**

Lopez finds such attentiveness in the native peoples he has accompanied. He describes the silence of the Pitjantjatjara as they walk through the land. If they do speak, it would be “a story about the place we were then moving through.” It “would start just as a prominent feature of the place came into view” and end when it passed; language paced to the rhythm of walking in a landscape. When asked about the geography, they have difficulty abstracting themselves from the land or imagining themselves above it as we tend to do. The loss of so many such indigenous cultures is a profound diminishment of our understanding of the world. “The loss of an entire way of knowing...is a tragedy hard to reckon.”

Lopez does not write about native peoples voyeuristically. He recounts being invited to journey for days into the Tanami Desert to attend a Warlpiri ceremony to cleanse a waterhole where a group of their ancestors had been murdered by police. He declined and instead waited for their return, so they could be the interpreters of their culture to him.

Lopez makes clear that he has no desire to trade places with native peoples. “What I wanted to understand, really, was what they might know that would be of use to my own people, whom I saw traveling very fast on a spavined road.” Time is growing short. “With the horsemen of a coming apocalypse so obviously milling on the horizon, riding high-strung horses, why [is] there so little effort to bring other ways of knowing—fresh metaphors—to the table?” Why is such a narrow group of people “invited to sit at the tables of decision, where the fate of so many will be decided?”

### **Needed Wisdom**

One of the aspects of native cultures Lopez finds most relevant to our predicament is their political practices. Lopez contrasts the traditional “elder” to our model of the charismatic individual leader. Elder-based societies



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believe “wisdom is part of the fabric of a community.” Leader-focused societies believe “wisdom is only to be found in certain people.” The leader says “follow me,” while the elder’s motto is “no one left behind.” He discusses in detail elders’ traits and modes of proceeding. Key among these are elders’ inclination to listen more than to speak, and their capacity for empathy, to understand what others are thinking. One cannot look far in the church or society without seeing the desperate need for such attentiveness.

Successful elders are those who have greater capacities in this regard. Lopez locates these capacities in the evolution of modern *Homo sapiens*. Drawing from evolutionary psychology, he argues that the breakout moment for our species occurred with the rapid increase in the cognitive capacity for communication and empathy around 55,000 years ago. We were able to thrive precisely because of this capacity, which made complex communities possible.

One could summarize the argument by saying that it is the capacity to discern and act for the common good that has made *Homo sapiens* so successful. Lopez finds this evolutionary conjecture confirmed in contemporary experience: “Today, the careful use of language—sincere,

thoughtful, respectful—and participation in ceremony still create a powerful social cohesion when human beings come together.”

If the emergence of modern humans was a result of evolving psychological traits that enabled empathy and communication, Lopez is concerned about the very different psychologies being elicited by contemporary technology and economic systems. Could these lead to the emergence of fundamentally different sets of behavior that could mark a new species division of *Homo sapiens* that leaves “both groups isolated on either side of a chasm”?

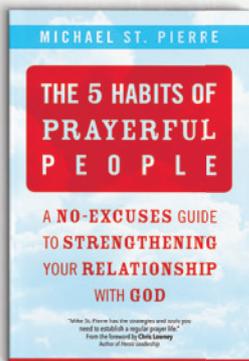
This yields specific guidance for our predicament. The common good depends on the practice of seriously listening to one another and seeking to understand one another’s concerns and motivations. This is not a call for split-the-difference moderation, but for an active engagement across the many lines that divide us. Our divisions are not destructive only because of the violence they breed, but also because they deprive our communities of the full range of imaginative and moral resources we need to address our profound challenges. Facing the growing scramble for dwindling resources, Lopez wonders “whether an unprecedented openness to other ways of understanding this disaster is not, today, humanity’s only life raft. Whether cooperation with strangers is not now our Grail.”

Lopez’s work serves as an example of how the Catholic tradition flows in places that often go unrecognized. Some who move beyond a tradition are still searching for things it values. After a lifetime of honest searching, Lopez has found much to offer and to challenge the tradition that formed him.

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Vincent J. Miller is *Gudorf Chair in Catholic Theology and Culture at the University of Dayton* and the editor of *The Theological and Ecological Vision of Laudato Si’*.

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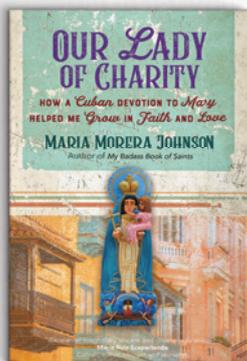
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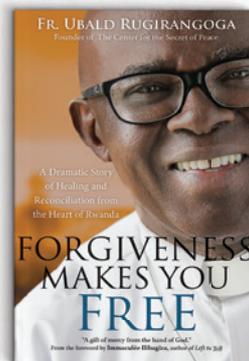
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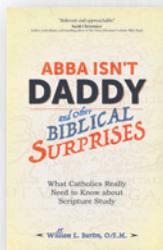
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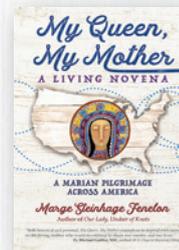
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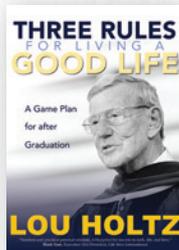
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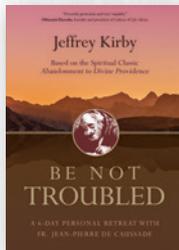
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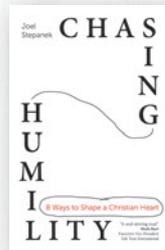
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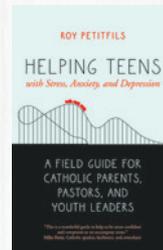
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# DEEPER INTO MYSTERY

*Wrestling with  
the raw anger  
of C. S. Lewis's  
'A Grief Observed'*

By Jessica Mesman



In Lewis's *A Grief Observed*, we see one of our finest and most beloved spiritual writers openly, viciously angry at God.

"You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you," writes C. S. Lewis in *A Grief Observed*. It's a moment of epiphany, or, as I prefer to call it, a smackdown. *Epiphany* sounds too hopeful, too certain, at a time when I find myself, like Lewis at the time of his writing, questioning everything I thought I knew.

A career spiritual writer, I suddenly find the vocabulary of my genre shallow and even repugnant. The old tropes of beauty in brokenness, wounded healers and cracks letting the light in seem pathetically thin in response to this kind of brokenness. More than thin. In a culture so heavily invested in denying responsibility for the pain it has caused in order to preserve itself, they seem dangerous. I fear the language of beauty has been deployed to trap us in systems of abuse.

In the space of a few years, my life—personal, professional, religious—has become unrecognizable. Have I followed the path of faith to a dead end?

Books by revered white Christian men, in particular, haven't been much comfort to me lately. *A Grief Observed* is the only Lewis book I can stand to read anymore. Here we see the great apologist, one of our finest and most beloved spiritual writers, stripped of his convictions and openly, viciously angry at God. The Oxford don is confused, hopeless and utterly bereft. His wife has died, and nothing makes sense anymore. He is disgusted by the platitudes of well-meaning religious friends and the sympathy cards—he calls them "pitiable cant." He can't even pray for the dead anymore. He confesses that when he tries to pray for his wife, "bewilderment and amazement come over me. I have a ghastly sense of unreality, of speaking into a vacuum about a nonentity." His confidence in the reality and nature of God has been destroyed: "Apparently the faith—I thought it faith—which enables me to pray for the dead has seemed strong only because I have never really cared, not desperately, whether they existed or not."

The rubber has met the road, and he has found that all the theology in his world cannot fix a blown out tire.

*A Grief Observed* remains powerful precisely because

Lewis does not come to lovely conclusions about his God or his religion or his suffering. He asks many more questions than he answers. He rants, questions, weeps and feels terrible, deservedly sorry for himself and for the woman he loved so much and has now lost. And in doing so, he renders in prose what it really feels like to grieve.

But there's another reason I like it so much. The book is so raw, and gives such vivid expression to the challenge of belief in a time of suffering, that even the pedigreed C. S. Lewis, already a respected spiritual writer, published it under a pen name.

When I picked up my copy of the book recently, leafing through it idly while preparing to teach, I realized this is what I've been feeling. Grief. I *know* grief, don't I? I'd easily recognize the real animal pain of losing one's beloved. My mother died when I was 14 and took my whole world with her. But this feels different. I am grieving not a single person but the pain of others—literally thousands of abuse victims—while I adjust to the loss of all the conventional markers of my identity. I am no longer a married Catholic writer and stay-at-home mom. I no longer trust the rails I was riding, the institutions that I once so firmly believed in, to be my guides.

I've long thought of writing as my vocation. Words are the only tools that fit in my hands, as Natalia Ginzburg once wrote. I've believed that any natural ability I have is God-given, with strings attached. But are these just more closely held beliefs that I will have to let go in order to press on? As a spiritual writer, I've been stripped of my context. Do I have anything left to offer? In the wake of all this, I've thought, honestly, that I could surely live, and live well, live better, and never write again.

And yet, while I've called so much into question, I still experience art as another path to God. I still believe that the act of creation, of making anything at all, or of entering into another's creation, is a way of entering and sharing the experience of the divine. Art is not bread, and it won't save us, but it can be another kind of food that helps people to thrive, if not survive. And I think that means that artists, imbued by the creator with the ability and desire to create, have an obligation to do so.



THE BOOK IS SO RAW THAT  
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C. S. LEWIS, ALREADY A  
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That's the nobility of art; it makes no promises toward virtue, and yet it can help us to tend the virtue of hope in each other, even when the art itself is not explicitly hopeful. The Roman Catholic Church, for so long my sanctuary, has become another locus of pain, but art has been my minister in these days of confusion, disruption, grief and reinvention.

Alan Jacobs wrote in his book on memoir and personal testimony, *Looking Before and After*, that one of the greatest dangers for a Christian is to assume at any point in our lives that our journey is over and that we have all the answers. I'd say this is also true for artists. It is only too likely that we have answered wrong, or that the answer was right—for a time—and is wrong now, or that we have, as Lewis pointed out in *A Grief Observed*, been asking the wrong question all along. Jacobs says we are always running the risk of the twin dangers of presumption and despair, and I recognize myself in his observation. Hope means believing our story is not finished, that we're still on our way.

Jacobs writes that we must “learn to think of our lives as stories that move along recognizable paths, paths followed by our predecessors and indeed by our contemporary companions in the faith [so that we] will be better able to see changes in the road as continuations of it rather than detours or dead ends.” In art, as in faith, there are no dead ends.

By telling stories, sharing our visions, drawing each other into the mystery of human experience on the page or canvas, photograph or song, we show each other the infinite and wildly various forms the life of faith—which is also a life of doubt—might take. *Especially* when our stories and visions do not fit an acceptable or conventional pattern. *Especially* when the answers do not come easy and we are not

even sure what questions to ask.

The artist and writer Caryl Houselander, when describing one of her mystical visions, said that each of us is living out the Christ life in some way—whether we are living his infancy, his suffering, his death or his resurrection. “No one of us must ever lose hope,” she wrote, for “it is the will of Christ's love to be put into the hands of sinners...that He may be *their* gift to one another, that they may comfort Him in each other, give Him to each other. In this sense every ordinary life becomes sacramental, and every action of anyone at all has an eternal meaning.”

These two sentiments from two very different thinkers have been my guide for the last decade of writing: the infinite value of every person's story and the potentially sacramental nature of every ordinary action. And yet, as I write I notice, again, how narrow my religious imagination turned out to be. How strange that I, a working-class woman writing from a small town in the Deep South, should have sought wisdom only among those whose experiences are so very distant from my own. On the one hand, it is beautiful—a testament to the universality of human spiritual longing and experience, nearly a proof to me of a common creator, that a writer like Lewis can speak to me across time and context and gender and class. But it should not be so shocking to me that my own experiences of God and church are not matching up with those of the writers of the canon that shaped me.

I find I am no longer content to point to the beauty in the wreckage. If I am going to continue as an artist, as a person of faith, I need to rebuild my imagination, or at least expand it significantly. I suddenly appreciate how the crumbling of a foundation might not be a tragedy at all but an opportunity to create one that is stronger. It might be of immeasurable benefit to me as an artist, a witness, a person of faith, a human being, to rebuild. To trust that my own voice and the voices of so many others are worth amplifying exactly because we did not fit and because what we create may challenge or threaten a status quo that has been found not just wanting but destructive.

In the short story “Jack Frost,” by Josephine Jacobsen, the main character, an elderly woman named Mrs. Travis, cultivates a spectacular garden of flowers in a tiny New Hampshire tourist town. The parish priest comes to visit her at the time of the first frost, hoping to persuade her to

leave her cottage before winter, for her own safety. Mrs. Travis clearly makes him uneasy, but the priest recognizes a bond between them—"a belief in the physical, a conviction of the open-ended mystery of matter."

But because Mrs. Travis is not a Roman Catholic, he can find no avenue to approach her: "her passion was in this scraggy garden." In her presence he finds he is tempted to tired metaphors about Eden and Gethsemane and familiar Scriptures like the one about the lilies of the field. But Mrs. Travis grows at least five kinds of lilies, "lifting their slick and sappy stalks above confusion," and his well-worn words falter in the presence of such physical, material abundance.

When Father O'Rourke leaves, Mrs. Travis, "sorry to see him go," offers him all she has to give: some flowers.

He hesitates, recalls the "pious arrangement" on the side of the altar back at the parish church, wary to bring anything as wild as what Mrs. Travis grows into that space. Still, he warns her, "idiotically," we're told, not to let Jack Frost get them.

That night Mrs. Travis wakes from a nightmare to find the first frost of the season approaching without

warning, and she launches her resistance. "Light and warm, drunk with resistant power," she cuts every flower from her wild garden and brings them inside. She injures herself attempting to dig up a rose begonia with a trowel, and barely makes it back across the threshold of her cottage, where sprawled helplessly across the floor, "a dozen shapes and colors blazed before her eyes." Gethsemane indeed. This is Mrs. Travis's Passion, a defeat and a victory all at once.

There's a bit of me in both Mrs. Travis and Father O'Rourke, and I find myself inspired by their awkward interaction in this story. She is at times troublesome, wild, stubborn and self-defeating; she does not share the priest's language or his worldview. She insists on traveling her own road and waving him on down his. And yet, they have a bond, the person of faith and the artist.

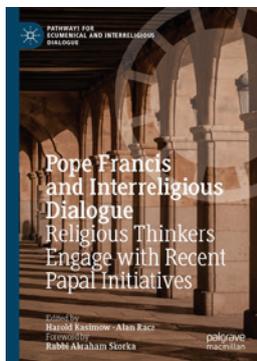
Somehow, they draw each other deeper into mystery.

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*Jessica Mesman is a widely published writer whose work has been noted in Best American Essays. She is the editor of the Image Journal blog and podcast.*

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# Facets of the Maker

On the life and work of Mary Oliver By Jason Myers

In “Steepletop,” an essay in which Mary Oliver recalls her time living at Edna St. Vincent Millay’s estate of the same name, she insists: “We need to be each others’ storytellers—at least we have to try. One wants to know what the beautiful strangers were like—one *needs* to know. Still, it is like painting the sky.”

Mary Oliver died on Jan. 17, at the age of 83. In the ensuing weeks, I have been trying to paint the sky. I have read, to the exclusion of almost all other reading, Oliver’s vibrant prose and her celebrated, mocked, beloved, frequently Pinterested poems. I have noted line after line of beautiful observation, wondrous wisdom, phrases glorious, inimitable and ecstatic. My pen has underlined and bracketed words that I will continue to ponder and cherish for the rest of my “wild and precious” life.

In *Moby-Dick*, Melville’s narrator, Ishmael, tells us that a whaling ship was his Harvard and Yale. Oliver’s work testifies that her greatest pedagogy took place in the woods. Like another 19th-century spirit, Henry David Thoreau, she went to the woods to live deliberately, first in the forests around Maple Heights, Ohio, where she was born in 1935, and then, for most of her life, in Provincetown, Mass. She attended Ohio State University and Vassar College, where I imagine her response to academia was similar to that of Gertrude Stein, who, when she was a student of William James, wrote on a final: “Dear Professor James, I am so sorry, but really I do not feel a bit like an examination paper in philosophy today.”

Whatever her aptitude as a student, she was an excellent teacher. As an undergraduate at Bennington, I had the rare pleasure of being her student in classes where we read Shakespeare and Samuel Johnson. She graciously directed tutorials in which I worked on translations of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and presented her with my own poems. She read them with a generous eye, ear and heart. From 1996 to 2001, Oliver held the Catherine Osgood Foster Chair at Bennington, after brief stints as poet-in-residence at other universities. Though she did not offer it while I was there, the title of her course on Gerard Manley Hopkins lingers in my imagination: “The Poem as Prayer, the Prayer as Ornament.” (This is also the title of an essay on Hopkins that appears in her last book of poems, *Winter Hours*, published this April).





Poets are often wedded to the places in which they lived. Mary Oliver lived most her life in Provincetown, Mass.

### 'A Gregarious Recluse'

It was at Steepletop that Oliver began what she describes in *Our World* as a 40-year conversation with the photographer Molly Malone Cook. The keen and sympathetic eye one experiences looking at Cook's photographs obviously had a nourishing and profound impact on Oliver's life and work. "M. instilled in me this deeper level of looking and working, of seeing through the heavenly visibles to the heavenly invisibles." This is a fine paraphrase of the definition of faith from the Letter to the Hebrews. For many years Oliver and Cook ran a bookshop in Provincetown, and I imagine they both would have identified with Annie Dillard, who set her novel *The Maytrees* in Provincetown and describes herself as "a gregarious recluse."

Poets are often wedded to the places in which they live. The name Wordsworth evokes the Lake District, Merwin's poems and his palm forest in Hawaii seem like a continuity of one great work, and over the last several decades, the State of Kentucky has become a school of poets that includes bell hooks and Wendell Berry, Frank X Walker and Nikki Finney. Had Oliver lived much of her life somewhere other than Provincetown, it is likely she still would have been an adamant praiser of trees, berries, birds and ponds. But she became, in her prose and in her best poems, the voice of Provincetown. She inhabited the land and seascape with a voice by turns ebullient and terrified, attracted always to what a wave or a whelk might have to say about God.

Speaking of God has fallen out of fashion in many poetry circles, or at least speaking with the plainness, the dear-ness Oliver brought to her divine communications. Those who disliked her writing require, I suppose, a poetry more severe, more sophisticated—what the poet Jack Gilbert described as "irony, neatness and rhyme pretending to be poetry." Because of her popularity, many within the literary community belittled Oliver's work. Whether they looked down on her out of jealousy or genuine conviction that the writing did not merit its following is hard to say.

This ridicule by Michael Robbins, in a review of Robert Hass, is emblematic of the condescension many reviewers applied when they bothered to review her. Robbins writes: "Like Mary Oliver, Billy Collins, and Sharon Olds—in their different ways—Hass has made a career out of flattering middlebrow sensibilities with cheap mystery. Unlike those poets, Hass has real talent." How exhilarating it must have been to write off four revered poets in one fell swoop.

Not every poet, not every poem speaks to everyone.

Still, to dismiss entirely a career marked not just by popular success but by institutional awards strikes me as, at the very least, uncharitable.

Oliver was in many ways an old-fashioned poet, happily so, and you could read much of her work without being aware that the 20th century, much less the 21st, had transpired. Her essays on literature are about Wordsworth and Whitman, Emerson and Poe. She does cite a poem by Lucille Clifton in *A Poetry Handbook* but otherwise does not give evidence that she spent much time reading her contemporaries, in general, or women and people of color, in particular. There is a surprising conservatism about her taste. She is willing to accept the Western canon for what it is and offers no objection, no addenda to all those white men.

It pains me to point out this limitation of Oliver's. One might stand under an oak and complain that it does not emit the fragrance of an apple tree or produce the petals of a dogwood. As Oliver herself would put it, we should learn to look with reverence before each made thing for what it is: a reflection of some particular facet of the Maker, even if it is not the facet we desire. By these lights, we should look at Oliver and her taste in literature as simply what it is—a reflection of her loves.

And yet. *A Poetry Handbook* and *Rules for the Dance*, where she quotes only from the "traditional" canon, have been used to instruct new generations of poets and would-be poets. So the examples they provide matter. I am sure Oliver did not sit down thinking about how she could exclude certain schools of poets or poetry as she prepared these books. Still, an editor might have suggested she cast a wider net as she sought to illuminate the craft of poetry.

### Pitching Her Tent

Like her friend Stanley Kunitz, whom she celebrates in a poem titled simply with his name ("I think of him there/ raking and trimming, stirring up/ those sheets of fire"), Oliver left Bennington somewhat abruptly. If her departure was not so dramatic as Kunitz's (upon being confronted by the college president after organizing a student protest, he threw a plant in his face and then quit), Oliver clearly did not care for the constraints academic life placed on her time. In the last letter I received from her, she wrote: "I cannot meet with you—or anyone—except a blank sheet of paper every morning, I'm sorry. But it is the point of not working with other texts, to get thoroughly inside the tent of my own." Of course, it was her beloveds, Whitman and Wordsworth, Hopkins and Hawthorne, who helped pitch her tents.

The mark and charm of Whitman are undeniable when you survey her work: their energy, the improvisational sauntering and expansion of poems like “West Wind” and “White Pine.” Oliver’s inclination, identified by Whitman in “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer,” is to give the halls of learning their due but always return to the greater university, creation.

James Wright was perhaps the most significant influence from the generation directly preceding hers, not just in his poems but in their long correspondence. In a letter from 1963, Oliver wrote Wright: “Tonight, in a room the size of the cupboard, I am broke, I am getting a cold, intermittently I am thinking of someone who never comes anymore, and nothing really matters. I am radiant with happiness because James Wright exists.” The radiance was mutual. He wrote her shortly before his death in 1980, praising *Twelve Moons*, which had just been published. “I sometimes idly wonder if and when you and I will ever actually meet—though, in a way, we seem to have known each other since childhood.”

“Three Poems for James Wright” stands among the most poignant and powerful poems in *Devotions*, a large selection of her work that Oliver put together in 2017. In this moving suite of poems, she recalls learning of Wright’s illness and death. She describes telling some small creatures by a creek of Wright’s cancer:

*I felt better, telling them about you.  
They know what pain is, and they knew you,  
and they would have stopped, too, as I  
was longing to do, everything, the hunger  
and the flowing.*

This image is consistent with Oliver’s pantheism, her ability to see God in all things and all things in God. In a spider under a stairwell and a favorite pond, the flowers along the beach and a child intentionally scarred to beg for charity, a cleaning woman in an airport bathroom and a young man with a gift for constructing with lumber but not with language, Oliver sought and saw revelation. It is this quality that gives her work the luster of the eternal.

Some poems we pass through as we would a shop or a station. We might marvel at a line or image, be struck by certain sounds, but we move on with the pace of our days. A few poems become houses, and we live in them, sitting in their rooms, staring out their windows, watching the seasons become years. Who knows how many people have lived inside “Wild Geese” and “The Summer Day.” In addition to these,

I inhabit, with the humility of a disciple, at least two or three dozen others. What could be more intoxicating than these opening lines from “Humpbacks”: “There is, all around us,/ this country/ of original fire”? I can think of nothing more pleasantly instructive than this from “Flare”:

*When loneliness comes stalking, go into the fields,  
consider  
the orderliness of the world. Notice  
something you have never noticed before,  
like the tambourine sound of the snow-cricket  
whose pale green body is no longer than your thumb.*

And, a few stanzas later:

*Scatter your flowers over the graves, and walk away.  
Be good-natured and untidy in your exuberance.  
In the glare of your mind, be modest.  
And beholden to what is tactile, and thrilling.  
Live with the beetle, and the wind.  
This is the dark bread of the poem.  
This is the dark and nourishing bread of the poem.*

Thus Oliver invokes her priestly calling, to preside at table, to break and offer bread. The repetition of the word *dark* works liturgical and poetic wonder, taking the reader to the cross and allowing suffering to receive its due before assuring us, like the Psalmist, that joy comes in the morning, that we will be nourished, that resurrection is a daily, cyclical, seasonal reality. In over two dozen works of poetry, prose and prose poetry, Oliver deployed repetition as a kind of remembrance and to establish an abiding disposition of patient and reverent attention. “Keep looking,” she wrote in “Sand Dabs, Three.” And, a few lines later, echoing Whitman’s invitation at the conclusion of “Song of Myself,” “Keep looking.”

In “Whistling Swans,” she asks what posture the reader adopts before offering her petitions, then answers, “Take your choice, prayers fly from all directions.” For many, Oliver’s poems offer coordinates, as a compass would, deep into the self, the world and God. One marvels at her work, as she did in her elegy for James Wright, “How it sang, and kept singing!/ how it keeps singing!”

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Jason Myers is the editor of *The EcoTheo Review*. A *National Poetry Series* finalist, his work has appeared in *American Poet*, *The Paris Review*, *West Branch* and numerous other journals.



## Novels About Popes and What They Say About Us

By Jon M. Sweeney

Every novel has an agenda, novels about popes perhaps more than most. It is said that Anthony Burgess's papal novel, *Earthly Powers* (1980), was designed to make fun of Somerset Maugham. Frederick Rolfe's *Hadrian VII* (1904), similarly, was written to settle old scores. Self-indulgent to the core, written by Rolfe after he was kicked out of the seminary, *Hadrian VII* is brilliant, autobiographical wish-fulfillment. If you know a bit of the author's biography, the combination of personal bitterness and comedy will make you laugh out loud. Repentant bishops and cardinals appear one day on his doorstep in London, admitting their mistakes, begging the still-young man to accept not only holy orders but the Holy Pontiff's chair.

Most writers have higher aspirations. Morris West wanted *The Shoes of the Fisherman* to be taken seriously. He could only have dreamed how that might happen. In what must be the most propitious instance in history of real events rocketing a book to best-seller status, *Shoes* was published the day John XXIII died, June 3, 1963. "The Pope was dead," reads the opening sentence of the novel, just as the news reported that eve-

ning. The Australian author was even in New York City for publicity purposes that day, and his book shot to the top of *The New York Times* bestseller list.

West's fictional pope begins as Kiril Pavlovich Lakota, the Metropolitan Archbishop of Lviv, political prisoner #103592 in a Siberian camp. West may have based Kiril on two Ukrainian Catholic bishops who were prisoners in the Soviet Gulag: Hryhorij Lakota and Josyf Slipyj, each of whom spent decades in Siberia refusing to convert to Russian Orthodoxy. They were heroes to Catholics. Slipyj even had prison writings smuggled to the West in the late 1950s, resulting in additional years added to his prison sentence. In another remarkable bit of luck for *Shoes*, Slipyj was released by Nikita Khrushchev in February 1963, just as the novel was about to be published. Slipyj flew straight to Rome to receive medical care and participate in the Second Vatican Council.

In *The Shoes of the Fisherman*, the atheist Russians tied up seven of Kiril's fellow priests and insisted the archbishop deny Christ or the priests would be shot. They were shot one by one. This story escapes to the West and is repeated back to Kiril by the pope, as the



CNS photo/Paul Haring

pontiff attempts to give him a cardinal's hat. Kiril asks not to receive it, to be assigned instead a job with "ordinary men." When that elderly pope dies a few months later, Cardinal Kiril is elected in the conclave. He does not change his name, another indication of his humility.

When the film adaptation was made in 1968, it starred Anthony Quinn as Pope Kiril, Laurence Olivier as the Soviet premier and John Gielgud as the pope who dies. At his coronation, while addressing the crowd in St. Peter's Square, Kiril removes his papal tiara. As the "custodian of the wealth of the Church," he tells 100,000 people, and millions of others watching on television, he pledges all the church's land, buildings and works of art for the relief of those in need around the world. Pope Kiril is a messianic figure. He saves the world from catastrophe, negotiates with Chinese and Russian leaders to prevent a world war, a nuclear holocaust and a famine in China that has been brought on by U.S. trade sanctions.

There were other charmed qualities about *Shoes*. West's novel seems to have anticipated the first Eastern European and anti-Soviet pope: John Paul II, who helped break the Soviet Union's hold on Eastern Europe.

A greater writer than West, Graham Greene wrote during that same pontificate a short story that is now easily forgotten, "**The Last Word**" (1988). It is a futuristic tale of the last pope, in fact, the last Christian, living under house arrest, growing feeble-minded, in a new world order with a general as its despot. By story's end, the general shoots the last pope in the head. Greene concludes: "[A] strange and frightening doubt crossed [the general's] mind: is it possible that what this man believed may be true?" This, too, is autobiography influencing papal fiction. No one but Greene, in 1988, could have imagined a feeble papacy without influence upon the world.

Few could imagine a powerless papacy today, as well, unless they point to the office's relinquishing of power. Pope Francis has disarmed the chair of St. Peter of pretense, bluster and certainty—in contrast to another fictional pope—the one played recently by Jude Law in the often obnoxious and mercifully limited series, "*The Young Pope*," on HBO. Paolo Sorrentino, who writes and directs the series, made his reputation creating films about loan sharks, mafia bosses and rock stars. It is ironic—though no less ironic than Catholic support

for the current U.S. president—that the antireligious, antifaith vision of Sorrentino appeals to some neoconservatives in the church today. They enjoy the fictional Pope Pius XIII’s refusal to speak to the modern world. We imagine the popes we want.

The last novel for your consideration is the most obscure. Thomas Klise was a Chicagoan, the author of only one book, *The Last Western*, published by a small Catholic publisher in Chicago, Argus Communications. (Argus was run by Richard Leach, a Loyola Chicago graduate who later moved to Texas and helped develop the children’s shows “Barney & Friends” and “Wishbone” for public television. The Argus list in the ’70s included Thomas Merton, John Powell, S.J., John Shea and Martin Marty; but it, too, is mostly forgotten today.) If it is ever mentioned at all, *The Last Western* is described as a baseball novel. Still, **America’s** reviewer praised it at that time, saying, “For me, *The Last Western*, unsophisticated as it is, ranks as one of the most important religious books of the decade.” I used to think the book had a cult following. Perhaps it did, briefly, when David Foster Wallace talked about it in the ’90s. Now, I believe *The Last Western* has simply been forgotten.

Klise begins by mythmaking, and his novel is science fiction. Willie, the boy who grows up to become pope, “was born in the town of Sandstorm, New Mexico in the times that are now forgotten.” This is a futuristic, dystopian tale. Willie goes to Mass with his parents in a church that lies “half-buried in the sand...like a ship about to go under.” A pond plague is leaving birds dead on sidewalks, and soon mechanical birds take their place in the skies.

Willie is of mixed ethnicity and race. He is a Spanish-speaker and most often identifies with African-Americans. Stories of his actions while a boy can be hagiographical, as when he props a ladder up to the tall crucifix in church to climb up and offer the poor man a drink. “Slowly he poured the water into the cracked plaster lips.” Thus ends Chapter One. There are 57 chapters in all in this nearly 600-page book.

Much in *The Last Western* seems prescient. Willie identifies with the African-American children at school, and many have older brothers and fathers in prison. His best friend, Clio, “spoke bitterly of the way things were arranged in the country.” A new alliance of nations has formed, uniting Japan, Europe, Russia, China and the United States (Jercus) in conflict against all others. Klise was writing at the height of the Cold War, before

the fall of the Soviet Union and long before the formation of the European Union. Klise also has children receiving “tele-lessons.” He even locates a Richard M. Nixon Park in Houston, where Willie attends high school. Willie is a terrible student because he will not repeat what he doesn’t understand, but he is a great baseball player, a pitching phenom. He becomes a star and moves out of his tenement in Houston, leaving behind his girlfriend and handing his signing bonus check to his mother.

Willie writes letters home that show he is barely literate. His coach gives him a paraphrased Bible—the *Vest Pocket Ezee Bible*. The name is surely a bit of sarcasm from Klise, a Catholic, who was writing when such paraphrases were on best-seller lists. The sports industry has replaced religion in both private and public life. Throughout Willie’s playing career, the United States, through Jercus, is at war in several places around the globe. The president has taken away freedom of the press. The country is run by a military presence. Sports are used to pacify the people. The largest arena, more beautiful than any cathedral, is “a many-sided affair of glass and steel and alumibronze,” standing 294 stories tall in New York’s Central Park. Foreign governments have moved their embassies there, and the United Nations occupies “a part of the 126th floor.”

Willie leaves baseball after a dispute with ownership over issues of morality. One of the owners calls Willie the n-word, among other things. Willie’s journeys over the next decades are many. He stays mostly among the poor, for instance joining a religious order called “Silent Servants of the Used, Abused and Utterly Screwed Up,” where members speak only at Mass, otherwise using sign language. Eventually Willie is sent to seminary and at 28 is ordained a priest. He becomes a peacemaker in cities throughout the country where there are riots between blacks and whites, sometimes caused by white cops shooting black suspects. My, how Thomas Klise foretold the future!

Soon, this now-famous priest is appointed bishop. “The thought of it appalled him, then made him laugh,” the narrator says. “How could he talk to people as a bishop?” This is not even the midpoint of the book. There is not enough space here to lay out the rest of the plot in any detail. As bishop, Willie fights to end wars, marshals support for countries in famine and plays a part in miraculous healings. When the pope in Rome dies, one of the cardinals in the conclave nominates Willie by

acclamation (spoken aloud, seeking verbal assent). Willie keeps his name, just as the fictional Kiril had done, and Pope Willie is introduced to the crowd in St. Peter's Square. His only word spoken that day from the balcony was "uuuv?" Some heard it as "love." "No one heard the question mark," the narrator tells us.

Willie begins as a very uncertain pope. "They dressed him," "They explained to him," "They showed him," "They took him," the paragraphs begin. Willie is in conflict with the Curia. Willie wants the rich to give to the poor. He thinks that justice is easily pursued, conflicts are resolvable without war, the world's problems can be fixed by Christians. He tells people, "I have the pope's job." In a televised address, Pope Willie says to all people that he does not want to be pope only for Catholics:

This is not a day for word prayer, not a day for going to church. Rather this is the day for the true prayer of deed and action.... This is the day when everybody will make up.... On this day no nationalities exist, all the barriers crumble, all the divisions cease to be.

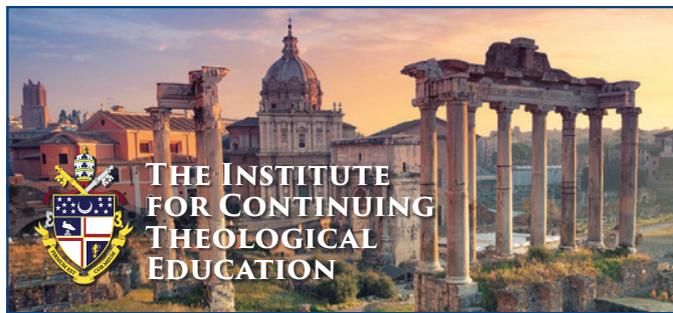
The Curia was furious, of course. The narrator then refers to them as "trappers and custodians and museumkeepers and cage attendants." Willie tells them he is leaving Rome; he cannot accomplish what needs doing from his seat in the Vatican. There is a sense of rage and desperation in *The Last Western*. For Klise, the message is ultimately that the pure in heart are blessed, shall see God, and the rest of the planet might simply perish.

There is no end to the genre of the papal novel. There are many, many others. To mention briefly two others: Dan Brown's *Angels and Demons* (2000) isn't bad for suspense and murder, even in its depiction of the papal office. It too seems to search for a savior. Then there is Kingsley Amis's *The Alteration* (1976), in which Amis imagines that the Reformation never made England Protestant, and we have a Yorkshireman pope—another example of wish-fulfillment, and one many British Catholics could share.

We read all these books, I suppose, because they entertain us. They also say something about who we are and what we want. I stand more with West and Klise, rather than with Sorrentino.

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Jon M. Sweeney is the author of *The Pope Who Quit*, which has been optioned by HBO, and "The Pope's Cat," a fiction series for children.



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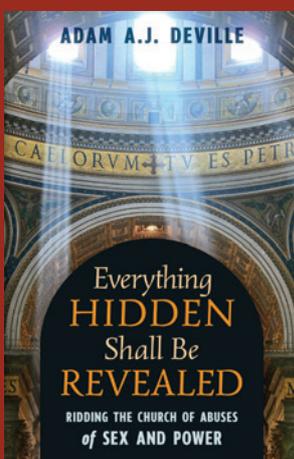
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## Revisiting Childhood Favorites

By James T. Keane

Growing up Gen-X, my siblings and I experienced childhood without digital technology as a fact of life. We got our first personal computer in 1985 (the TI-99/4A, which Texas Instruments sold off for \$100 a pop after discontinuing the model in 1984) when I was 11 years old, and even our television was just a box with rabbit ears and 13 channels well into the 1990s. Suffice it to say we all spent a lot of time reading books.

One trio of short-story collections my brothers and I loved was a battered, two-decade-old set of the Boys' Life sports anthologies: *The Boys' Life Book of Football Stories* (Random House, 1963, 186p), *The Boys' Life Book of Baseball Stories* (Random House, 1964, 182p) and *The Boys' Life Book of Basketball Stories* (Random House, 1966, 186p). All three featured stories originally written for Boys' Life magazine, the official publication of the Boy Scouts of America, from 1943 through 1966, though the last also included material from the books *Young Readers Basketball Stories* and *Teen-Age Basketball Stories* (1949).

These books are easily found online and in used bookstores. Re-reading them as a middle-aged man was in part a trip down memory lane (though I was no athlete, and Lord knows I was no Boy Scout) but also a lesson in cultural pedagogy: These books and others like it were quite clearly designed to educate a certain class of white American male into the virtues of postwar civic culture—for better and for worse.

### Target Audience

Boys' Life magazine has been published continuously for over 108 years, and despite its target audience of boys between the ages of 6 and 18 and its middlebrow reputation, those 11 decades of publication have included some surprising authors and illustrators. Ansel Adams, Norman Rockwell and Salvador Dalí have all been featured in the magazine; so, too, the fiction of Isaac Asimov, Catherine Drinker Bowen, Ray Bradbury, Arthur C. Clarke, Alex Haley and R. A. Heinlein. For three years in the late 1960s, Bobby Fischer wrote a chess column for the magazine.

(Movie buffs may recall one of the best scenes in the 1980 movie "Airplane!," in which a nun is shown reading Boys' Life; nearby, a boy is reading a similarly sized magazine, Nuns' Life.)

The story collections were inexpensive when they first came out. A November 1966 advertisement in Boys' Life offered the three sports books (as well as seven others in the "Boys' Life Library," books on horses, mysteries, outer space and more) for \$2 apiece by mail—less than \$16 each in today's dollars.

The stories are wholesome to a fault, clearly designed not to offend a soul. No one drinks alcohol, and no one uses drugs or smokes, other than the dads who tamp down their pipes while reading the evening paper. There are no divorces, no single-parent families.

Almost every character in the books is designed to appeal to an obvious target audience: athletic, middle-class,

The Boys' Life books were designed to educate a certain class of American male into the virtues of postwar civic culture.

white teenage males. The locales are Anytown, U.S.A., with names like Riverville and Centralia and Oceanside. Everyone has a nickname, some of them quite funny: Pop Weasel, Barrel Buna, Hard-Luck Hagerty, Baby Bunting and Army Armstrong. The dialogue is squeaky clean, even when depicting open arguments (“‘You’re handing me the old baloney,’ Johnny cried”; “‘Watch out, buster,’ he taunted.”)

Many of the stories still held their charm 35 years after I first read them. In *The Boys' Life Book of Football Stories*, “Master Mind” by B. J. Chute tells the tale of Irish Mehaffy, a morose but telepathic high school fullback; it is as clever and funny now as when it was published in 1963, full of a sportswriter’s moxie but undergirded by a sly sense of humor and irony. Others are also remarkably well-written, with careful pacing and character development. There are also literary allusions that would bounce miles above a young reader’s head today: In William Heyliger’s “Too Much *If*,” from *The Boys' Life Book of Basketball Stories*, one of the boys draws his locker room taunts from the lyrics of Rudyard Kipling.

### Lessons Learned

Across all three volumes, there are two typical protagonists: the team captain/star who must learn valuable lessons about leadership, or the underdog/benchwarmer/runt who turns out to have the heart of a lion (or a secret skill). The moral lessons tend to be fairly straightforward throughout: Play fair. Own up to your mistakes. If given the chance for personal glory or team victory, choose the team. Pass first. Love God and your family and your hometown and your country.

In Andrew Hall’s “Talking Turkey,” from *The Boys' Life Book of Football Stories*, a Thanksgiving weekend football game is preceded by a quick meditation that makes almost all of the above explicit. “At breakfast next morning Ike bowed his head in real thanksgiving. ‘Thank you, Lord, for my good family, my fine community, and my beautiful country. Amen.’” His son Peeps then leaves for practice:

And Peeps, loping along to the gym, found himself thinking of the many families that made up the community, of the many communities that made up the country, and he knew he was proud to be part of it. He somehow pictured families getting

together to eat turkey and cranberries and pumpkin pies, but first of all to bow their heads and give thanks for their wonderful country. He guessed that was what Thanksgiving meant.

Other times the dialogue offers a more ambiguous lesson, as in this lecture from a basketball coach to his rebellious, skeptical player in “Too Much *If*”:

He paused. “It’s all right to question things, But”—he looked at the boy gently—“there are times when you must accept the experience of others. There are times when you must work with enthusiasm for the man in command.”

### Potemkin Village

What is missing from these stories? Women (mostly), minorities (almost entirely) and poverty. While it is obviously an easy dunk to point out another culture or era’s blind spots from afar, the absences in these stories stand out almost as starkly as what is present. When women do appear, they are mothers who cook apple pies and worry that Spud did not have second helpings at supper. Younger women are sisters and girlfriends who provide conversational foils for the male protagonist’s eventual epiphany.

African-Americans are similarly invisible, with the exception of one story. In “Tournament Team,” from *The Boys' Life Book of Basketball Stories*, a coach engages in longstanding racial stereotypes many readers of the time probably would not have noticed: “Ken has the peculiar combination of coordination and grace and rhythm that Negro athletes often have.” Ouch. Other minority groups never appear at all.

Poverty is also strangely missing from almost every story, where instead solid two-story brick homes and single-income households are the norm. To overcome adversity in these books is a personal matter, not a struggle against economic disadvantage; a certain level of comfortable prosperity is a given. An exception to the norm is “Lobsters Don’t Make Champions,” from *The Boys' Life Book of Basketball Stories*, in which the protagonist comes from an area of town “not looked upon with any envy by the people of Oceanside” and has to miss extra practice because he helps

his father lay out his lobster pots (best story in the book).

### The World to Come

Another fascinating and troubling benefit of hindsight is that we now know the world that the readers of these books in the mid-1960s would soon enter—a world rather more complicated than many of the whitewashed pieties might suggest. Would a kid ruminating on Peeps's Thanksgiving meditation in 1963 know that within the year Bull Connor would be unleashing police dogs and fire hoses on civil rights activists in Birmingham, Ala., people who might not “give thanks for their wonderful country” because of memories of cranberries and pumpkin pie?

Or did a young man in 1966 read the story above about a coach who said “there are times when you must work with enthusiasm for the man in command”—and then learn that lesson himself under siege two years later in a hellhole like Khe Sanh? And a 13-year-old boy reading about Fastball Fitch in “Beanbrain,” from *The Boys' Life Book of Baseball Stories* (1965), would have entered college at the same time as the young men and women killed at Kent State.

In reality, the readers of these stories in the 1960s were entering a world nothing like that of Barrel Buna or Hard-

Luck Hagerty. Many would fight in a foreign war under a draft that made them a number, not an aw-shucks star; all would see their country rent in two over social conflicts; many would (hopefully) realize that fictional places like Centralia and Riverville exist only because places like Watts and Newark actually do exist.

So what does it mean that I first read these books in the mid-1980s and took such joy from them? Or that today, at 44, I find many of them still charming, once I get past the cringes?

This recently concluded March Madness made it clear once again that so many of us just love a good, old-fashioned sports story, where the underdog wins or the hero learns something new. Is there nothing to be learned, nothing new under the sun?

Maybe there are two lessons to be learned from these books: One, it is important to remember that the way we play, and the way we depict play, says a lot about who we are. Two, it is important to remember that the way we play and depict sports also tells us a lot about who we want to become.

James T. Keane, senior editor.  
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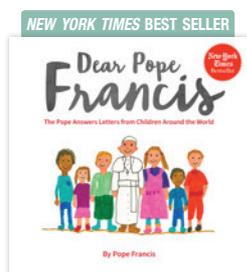
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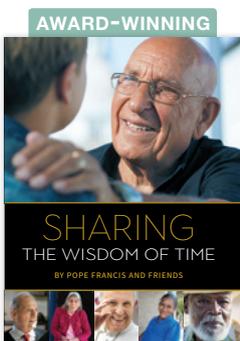
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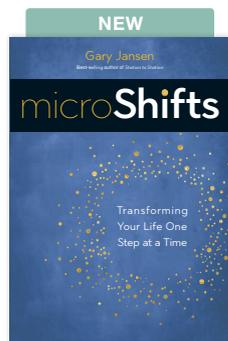
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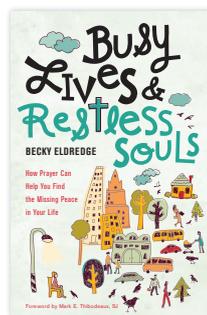
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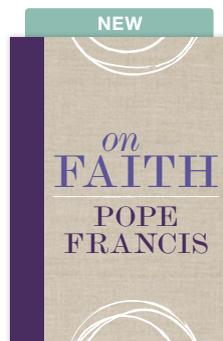
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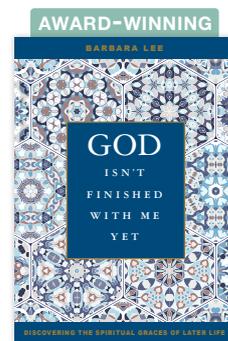
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# Questions for Instagram Poets

By Emma Winters

If one more Instagram poet tells me how to feel or what to think, I am going to lose my mind.

I was bursting to scream this as I read through Nikita Gill's book of poems, *wild embers*, which has a section of fairy tales retold with a feminist bent. The prince's kiss in the fairy tale "Sleeping Beauty" is reframed as a violation of consent, and the speaker of the poem uses this new version to teach her daughter to say no. "I will use this story to help her understand, no boy has/ the right to touch her without her consent just because he/ thinks she is pretty," reads the third stanza of "Sleeping Beauty."

Does Gill's poem provide a positive message about consent? Yes. Are there stories in our collective imagination that are misogynistic? Of course. Should new, reimagined versions be written? Absolutely. The problem with "Sleeping Beauty" (and many other Instagram poems) is the execution.

## Democracy in Poetry

Right now Instagram poets are developing audiences on social media and turning those followers into fans that buy books. Rupi Kaur, for instance, who has 3.1 million followers on Instagram, made waves when her first book sold 2.5 million copies. And while remaining anonymous and wearing a mask, the mysterious Atticus has published two books with Simon & Schuster and gathered some 905,000 followers on Instagram. Many Instagram poets even reject the title of Instagram poet altogether, saying they are just poets who use the medium.

There are, however, themes and commonalities that exist loosely across those who share their work on social media. Many Instagram poets write about self-love, romantic love, heartbreak and sexual violence. They tend to write shorter poems for online consumption (one short sentence is a common length). And by virtue of being available for free on Instagram, these poets are democratizing how poetry is shared and who can write it, bypassing literary journals and M.F.A. programs. This has brought poetry back into the public discourse and given those who have historically been marginalized in the publishing world—including women and people of color—a new way to make their voices heard.

I chose to look at a few Instagram poets who are successful; they





all have a lot of followers on social media and have published books. I also chose Instagram poets who have interesting ideas in their work, ideas about what it means to be a woman, to like yourself, to experience love and to make art, but whose poems I thought sometimes missed the mark. I asked myself: *Why don't I like these poems?* And I tried to answer that question by comparing Instagram poetry to other poetry I do like a lot and asking: *What's the difference?*

### **Nikita Gill**

Often Instagram poets like Gill want to tell the lesson in their writing rather than simply show the reader through the sights, sounds, smells, touches and tastes of their lives and stories. I want to love Gill's feminist fairy tales, but she beats the reader over the head with the lesson. This is a pattern throughout *wild embers*.

In the poem "The Truth About Art," Gill goes so far as to write "What I'm trying to say is,/ You can strive to be perfect./ Or you can strive to be art." Again, I do not disagree with Gill's point. I do not think perfectionism is healthy or preferable. What frustrates me is first, that Gill feels the need to have a thesis statement. Second, she chooses to write about how "some artwork is so entrancing, people spend hours/ looking at it" rather than a specific example of artwork that has that effect on people.

Gill is clearly creative, but I wish she made her ideas more concrete and specific. Poetry is vulnerable work, and it requires details—rather than a thesis. As a reader, I expect more from someone who has published three books with Hachette and has over 462,000 followers on Instagram.

### **Cleo Wade**

Like Nikita Gill's work, the poems in Cleo Wade's new book from Atria Books, *Heart Talk: Poetic Wisdom for a Better Life*, are positive but unspecific. Wade has been called the "Millennial Oprah," and has over 444,000 followers on Instagram. Her small, square book could easily be tossed in a purse; *Heart Talk* at least more straightforward in its branding as a self-help book rather than simply "poetry."

The kind of encouraging, earnest writing found in *Heart Talk* is common in the Instagram poetry world. These words of comfort provide a break in the pretending-to-be-perfect echo chamber of most social media. While millennials have been stereotyped in popular culture as "snowflakes" and are sometimes labeled as emotionally fragile, many of Gill's poems actually show a willingness to confront emotions positively and productively.

Still, the poetry left me wanting more details and images. For instance, in "where to find it," Wade writes: "kept looking for good-

ness/ kept asking everyone/ where I could find the/  
good in the world/ it was not/ until I looked within/  
and/ grew/ my own/ goodness/ that I/ began/ to see it/  
everywhere.”

I appreciate the message, but, as with Gill, the imagery is lacking. What does it look like to grow goodness? (Or smell like? Or sound like? Or feel like tactilely? Or taste like?) I want poetry that encourages me to grow by offering me a different way to imagine growth. What is growing, a field of sunflowers or tangled weeds?

And is there any sensible reason for “and” to occupy a line of its own in this poem? The short lines in “where to find it” are characteristic of Wade’s style throughout the book, but her line breaks at times feel choppy. It is unclear if this fragmented style is intentional or not.

Reviewing these poets has forced me to re-examine what it is I love about poetry. While wading through Instagram poetry, I frequently returned to some of my old favorite poems, some written long before social media even existed. I marveled anew at these lines from Mary Oliver’s “A Summer’s Day”:

*Who made the grasshopper?  
This grasshopper, I mean—  
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,  
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,  
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up  
and down—*

That specificity—describing how a grasshopper’s jaw moves—is the sort of observation that makes Oliver’s work concrete rather than abstract. I see the same commitment to detail in Ada Limón’s poem “The Conditional” as she imagines the end of the world:

*Say owl’s eyes are pinpricks.  
Say the raccoon’s a hot tar stain.  
Say the shirt’s plastic ditch-litter  
Say the kitchen’s a cow’s corpse.*

Limón’s work is a reminder that you can write poetry about big ideas, like the rapture, in vague terms—or you can write about those big ideas as if there is a melted raccoon on the street and a dead cow in your kitchen. Many Instagram poets are settling for vague, unspecific terms and doing a disservice to their good ideas and creativity.

## Rupi Kaur

Among the popular Instagram poets I surveyed, Rupi Kaur stood out—and not just because she is the most famous. (She is currently in the middle of a 12-city tour of the United States. Having a book tour is usually not a possibility for poets, and selling out theaters and stadiums—or even selling tickets at all—is unheard of.) What makes Kaur different is that her poems do get into specifics.

Although her work does at times dip into telling rather than showing, Kaur offers some fresh images for the reader. In an untitled poem in her book *The Sun and Her Flowers*, Kaur describes demolishing her self-loathing, writing “i went for the words.... i lined them up and shot them dead” and “my thoughts...i had to wash them out/ i wove a linen cloth out of my hair/ soaked it in a bowl of mint and lemon water.”

Here Kaur takes the abstract notion of destroying a sense of self-hatred and makes it concrete with images—linen cloth, mint and lemon water—that give the reader something specific to hold on to.

Kaur has those strong moments, but she can also be over-reliant on her illustrations and fall into cliché. Consider this untitled poem from *The Sun and Her Flowers*:

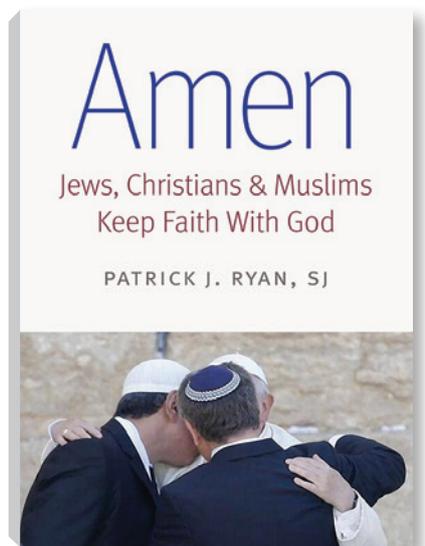
*What draws you to her  
tell me what you like  
so i can practice*

The poem is accompanied by a compelling image of a woman unzipping an outer layer, but you do not get that in the poem itself, which seems like any old sentence. Moments like these make me wonder how long Kaur and other social-media poets work on a poem before they share it on Instagram.

Most Instagram poetry, whether on social media or republished in a book, seems unrefined—not uncultured, necessarily, but as if it has not been filtered and edited to excise unnecessary words, to build concrete images and to choose meaningful line breaks. Not every interesting phrase or idea is suddenly a poem. Most good poetry is not written in one pass. Often, it takes a few drafts (or 30) to have a really good poem. When I read most Instagram poetry, I do not think it is without merit: It just reads like a first draft.

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Emma Winters is a Joseph A. O’Hare fellow at America Media.



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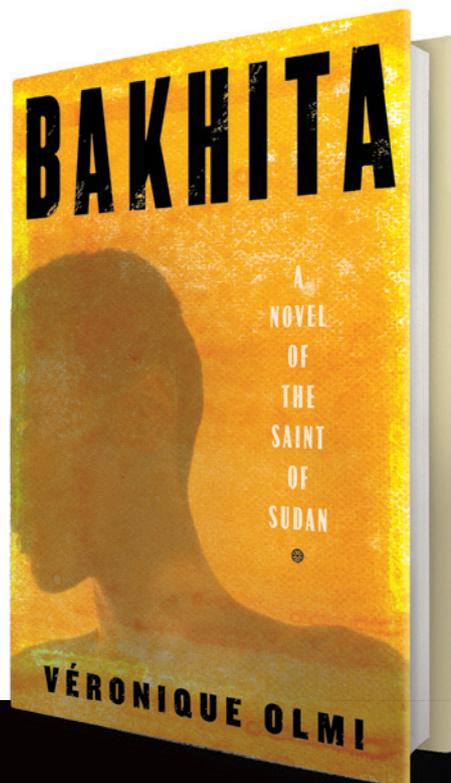
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1 Timoteo 1, 2

gaan kólóku ku en bunuhati. Biga a mbei mi ko ta biibi neén liba, nóó hén a toona da mi di lóbi di dee sémbe dee nama ku en ta feni. Aai womi, di soni de nóó a bigi da mi e.

15 Wé Timoteo, mi o taki wan soni da i aki gbelin seei, kijoo. Nóó a dé wan gaan bambuu taki di hii sémbe musu piki waiwai. Hén da disi: Jesosi Keesitu ko a goonliba u heepi takullibima puu de a hogi basu. Nóó mi wé bi da di móón gaan takullibima a hii dee otowan dendu.

16 Wé nóó feén hedi tu Jesosi Keesitu ko abi tjalihati da mi e. Aai. A hoi pasensi da mi seei, fu mi sa dé wan maaka da hiniwan libi kuma mi di ké ko biibi neén, taa a sa feni di libi u teego tu.

17 Wé fa i si Masa Gadu sai dé, hén wé da di kaba Tiima u mundu fu nóómó e. Fa a dé fáén dé, an o dedé móónsó. Libisémbe an tjika u si en ku wóó te...

19 Nóó mi taki e, ta hoi di biibi di i si i ta biibi a Masa Jesosi naandé gingin e. Nóó i musu ta piki di hati fii nóómó te a ta manda i a wan bambuu soni. Biga wanló biibi u de kaba a sóso gbegeede, leti kuma té i singi a dan tuwé lai fii go fiaa. 20 Wan u dee sémbe deé mi taki dé, da Himéneusi, wan da Alekesani. Ma nóó mi buta de tu sémbe dé a di didibi maun kaa, be de lei taa de an musu ta waka ta mindi soni da Gadu ta poi en né móón. Nóó da só.

Aki Paulosu ta lei fa dee biibima u Masa Jesosi musu ta tja deseci.

21 Wé womi Timoteo, awa mi o taki da i fa fii lei dee biibima u Masa Jesosi a i ala fa u de musu libi.

Sóó. A di fosi kamian, nóó un musu ta begi Masa Gaangadu da hii sémbe. Un musu ta tja dea...

569

1 Timoteo 2, 3

hén, biga de nóó da tuutu soni a mundu.

5 Biga wan kodo Gadu tò nóó de a mundu e, hén da Masa Gaangadu. Nóó wan kodo Sémbe tò ta taangpu a u libisémbe ku Gadu mindi fu seeka taki da u. Hén da Jesosi Keesitu di bi tei libisémbe sinkii. 6 Hén wé bi deén seepi kuma wan paima paka puu u a hogi basu a di juu di Gadu buta. Nóó fa a du én naandé, ku en hii mundu sa si fa Gadu ké heepi u libisémbe tjika.

7 Nóó fu mi sa ta konda di soni de hedi mbei Gadu tei mi buta tjabukama feén e. Nóó fa mi ta fan aki, na mindi mi ta mindi soni e, womi, ma tuutu soni mi ta taki. Nóó Gadu buta mi leima tu, fu mi ta lei dee oto sémbe na u Isaéli dee soni u Gadu. Biga de da dee tuutu soni fii musu biibi. Nóó só e.

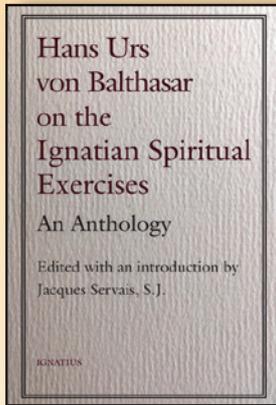
8 Wé nóó mi taki e womi, taa a...

Biga di ló gá dé hén fiti dee mujée dee ta a di né taa de ta dini Gadu.

11 Fa mujée ai dé, de musu ta lei a wan saapi si ta saka de seei da dee womi. 12 Mi seei ma ta da mujée pasi ude ta lei sémbe wajaa a lanti dudu ta péé basi a womi sémbe liba e. Nóó. Ma de musu ta hoi seei a wan saapi fasi. 13 Faandi mbei, womi? Biga wé a fosi Gadu mbei Adam, a baka feén u mbei Eva. 14 Hén tu, di sindéi na Adam a feni ganjan e. Ma lva a ganjan, nóó hén a ko poi dé wéti u Masa Gaangadu. 15 Nóó u di dé hedi Gadu taa te mujée ojai, nóó pai feén o taanga.

Wé só a u pasa tuu. Ma nóó tòku di soni a poi. Biga ee wan mujée sémbe ubi bi a Gadu ta hoi go dou ta lóh sémbe ta libi a wan ghelingbelin fai ku saka fasi nóó héténgi na feni soni a Gadu tu...

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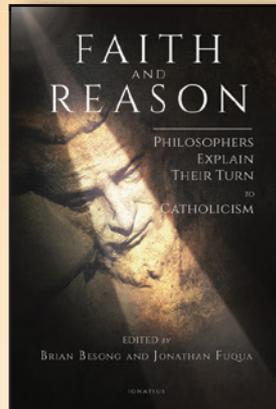
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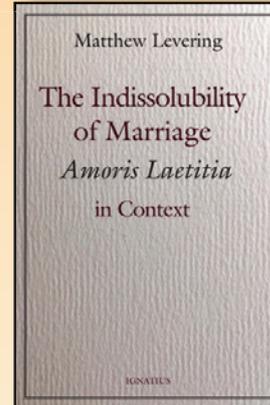
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# GOING HIS WAY

By John Anderson

Bing Crosby and Ingrid Bergman in "The Bells of St. Mary's." Father O'Malley is probably the best-known cleric in classic cinema.

Last fall in Manhattan, at a party celebrating the publication of *Bing Crosby: Swinging on a Star*, by Gary Giddins, the assembled literati milled around, sipping wine, congratulating the author and asking him questions. Chief among them: "What took you so long?"

Not an unreasonable thing to ask. The first volume of Giddins's Crosby biography—subtitled "Pocketful of Dreams"—appeared in 2001. The second and concluding edition was expected by fans of the writer—a National Book Critics Circle winner, a biographer of Charlie Parker and Louis Armstrong, a 30-year jazz columnist

at the Village Voice—in a couple of years. Which turned into 17.

Giddins was explaining what had happened and what was happening, when, in a scene out of a '40s melodrama, Robert Caro walked into the room. You almost had to laugh. Or at least murmur, which is what everyone did.

Caro is, of course, the biographer whose *The Years of Lyndon Johnson* series began appearing in 1982. Originally planned as a trilogy, it is now expected to conclude with a fifth volume—something that Caro said in early 2018 was going to take him two to 10 more years to finish. He is 83 years old.

Giddins is a considerably younger man, and his Crosby series is now expected to be contained in three books. But, like Caro, he is a biographer who went down an irresistible rabbit hole, found himself in a garden and was compelled to build a cathedral. To do otherwise, one imagines him thinking, would be to cheat history, his subject and, not insignificantly, himself.

But in a significant way, Caro has the edge over Giddins. Bing Crosby's place in history was never guaranteed. He was not a president of the United States. He never flew solo across the Atlantic, cured a disease or founded

**Bing Crosby**  
Swinging on a Star: The War Years, 1940-1946  
By Gary Giddins  
Little, Brown. 736p \$40 hardcover

a religion. He was, first and foremost, a “crooner”—albeit one of the most influential in 20th-century American popular music, one whose intimate delivery was perfectly suited (and timed) to the invention of the microphone and the rise of both radio and recordings. He was also a radio star of enormous proportions, beginning in 1931 and remaining so for decades. He was a three-time Oscar nominee and a one-time winner (for “Going My Way”). He was a box-office magnet. His version of “White Christmas” is the best-selling record of all time. According to Giddins, he had more No. 1 hits than the Beatles or Elvis Presley.

That Crosby has few equals in 20th-century pop culture, either as an artist or a ubiquitous presence, is an argument Giddins made convincingly in the first book and continues to make here. That Giddins has to make one at all is a testament to the passing nature of celebrity. Imagine someone years from now asking, “Who was Michael Jackson?” It will happen. But it won’t happen to Bing Crosby if Gary Giddins can help it.

In addition to everything else, Crosby was also the most Catholic superstar the United States has ever seen—or at least the biggest superstar who was also so conspicuously Catholic. The indelible Father O’Malley—the suave, crooning, boater-wearing priest Crosby played in “Going My Way” and “The Bells of St. Mary’s”—is probably the best-known cleric in classic cinema. Crosby is also inseparable from Christmas: Who doesn’t

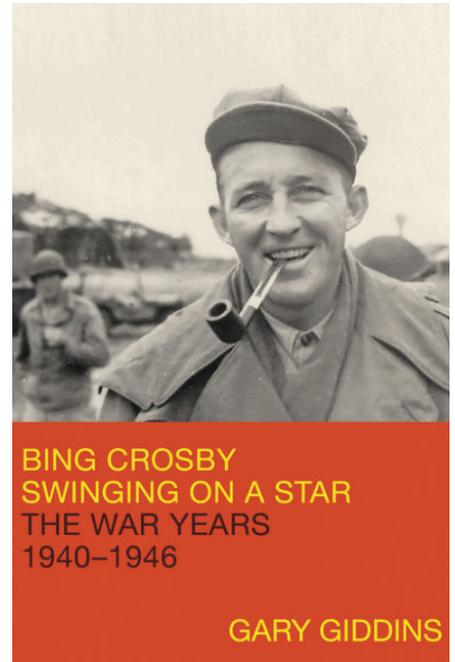
own the 1945 “Merry Christmas” album with Crosby in the Santa hat?

Born and reared in Tacoma, Wash., Crosby was also the beneficiary of a Jesuit education, a graduate of Gonzaga High School in Spokane (where he excelled in “Christian doctrine”) who dropped out of Gonzaga University in his last year of law school when his performing career took off like a rocket. He was a lifelong practicing Catholic who sought solace in his faith and in his religious friends.

Crosby was a faithful correspondent with his fans, but especially the Catholic ones. His letters of appreciation and advice are quite touching, while full of Crosby’s trademark rhetorical overkill.

As this book commences, a desperate Crosby has decided to leave his alcoholic wife, Dixie (their marriage, naturally, is a huge part of the story here). The star is only talked out of it by (Giddins speculates) Arthur Duchsault, S.J., a priest who had been a classmate of Crosby’s at Gonzaga and who later became its public relations director and then a vice president of the university.

But the heart of this book is “the war stuff,” as Giddins told this reviewer, the scope of which he—and most of the American public, even then—was unaware. Giddins noted that the second Mrs. Crosby, Kathryn, would not talk to Giddins for his first book. But after she read it, she changed her mind and also opened up Crosby’s files, where the author found a trove



of material about Crosby’s tireless efforts on the home front, including entertaining troops, hosting and playing in countless fundraising golf tournaments, making personal appearances and refusing virtually any opportunity to perform for profit, preferring to do it free for the boys in uniform.

His pal and “Road” movie series co-star, Bob Hope, may be better remembered now for his efforts entertaining U.S. troops abroad, but at home during World War II it was Crosby—just beyond draft age himself—who was the king, jester and knight errant.

Giddins is an engaging, charming, intellectually exciting writer who executes his mission almost by sleight-of-hand. The detail is encyclopedic, but imparted painlessly; his arguments are irresistible, made with an uncanny combination of passion and critical objectivity. Giddins harbors enormous affection for Crosby, and a certain awe at both his accomplishments and his humility, but he is hardly oblivious to the man’s flaws. Over the two volumes, he debunks most of the details in the unfortunate

*‘What is love,’ the narrator wonders. ‘It’s like a mystic’s attempt to define faith.... It’s like that, but it’s not that.’* ●●

image of Crosby as a cruelly abusive father (perpetrated by one troubled son, contradicted by others) and portrays his subject as a man capable of enormous kindness and generosity. But as friends, acquaintances and even family members recall, he was a person no one was truly intimate with, not after the 1933 death of his one real confidant, the jazz guitar genius Eddie Lang. One could only get so close to Crosby emotionally, which couldn’t have done much for Dixie.

Perhaps Giddins’s most virtuosic act of criticism—which contains its own generosity and honesty—is in his treatment of Crosby’s history with blackface. As much as any other single white entertainer of his time, Crosby used his star power to champion integration on the bandstand and in movies. At the same time, he harbored a nostalgic affection for the tradition of blackface, something rooted in his hero worship of Al Jolson and earlier “minstrels,” like the 19th-century entertainer Daniel Decatur Emmett, whom Crosby portrayed in the 1943 film “Dixie”—and in which he played several scenes in blackface. While hardly excusing the practice, Giddins puts it in historical perspective, as a show-biz genre so widespread that it almost—almost—became divorced

from race. It has also rendered several Crosby movies like “Dixie” and the enormous hit “Holiday Inn” unprogrammable on television today, except in severely edited form.

But Crosby’s timing was perfect—not just musically, which is something Giddins certainly knows a bit about, but in terms of a place in history. Radio, which dominated the ’40s, was ideal for Crosby. He was bald (hence all the hats), colorblind (hence the mismatched wardrobe) and, as regards his big flapping ears, he used to say his head looked a taxi cab with both doors open. He was not made for our visual world, but he ruled his own, its music and its media. And when he was big, he got bigger.

No one around him, Giddins wrote at the conclusion of Volume One, “could have imagined in 1940 that everything he had already achieved would be remembered, within a few short years, as merely a prelude to what followed—a bagatelle compared with the symphony of adulation he roused in the 1940s, when Bing Crosby was remade in the crucible of war.” Dramatic, yes, and an implicit promise fulfilled, a short 17 years later.

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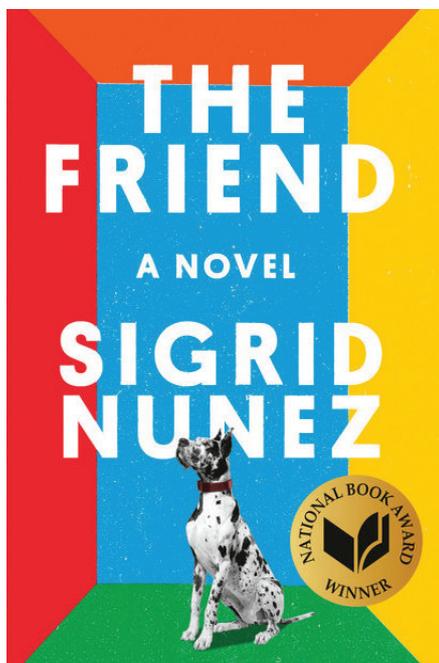
*John Anderson is a television critic for The Wall Street Journal and a contributor to The New York Times.*

## Fiction About Nonfiction

Sigrid Nunez mines the effect of suicide on family, friends and even the pet dog in her National Book Award winner, *The Friend*. Although the title would seem to refer to the dog pictured on the cover, the storyline is deliberately ambiguous—like almost everything in this book. Several friends are mentioned in the novel, but the three friends significant to the story are an unnamed narrator, her unnamed mentor and a dog.

The multifaceted narrative primarily attempts to process the consequences of a mentor’s suicide through the writing of a lengthy letter that is suffused with “Catholic guilt.” Part of the enterprise is his Great Dane, named Apollo, who, as the narrator describes him, is good, kind, smart, warm, loyal, honest and, like the Greek god, inspirational—everything that most people are not. The dog’s “large hazel eyes are strikingly human,” the narrator writes to her mentor, who committed suicide. “They remind me of yours.” The statement is key to this postmodern novel, where what you see is what you get.

This is also a story about teaching students who dislike reading and consider it senseless to study literary



**The Friend**  
By Sigrid Nunez  
Riverhead Books. 224p \$25

classics because they are not best-sellers. The narrator mentions students who take the sex scenes out of their stories in order to workshop their writing, believing they might be expelled in the #MeToo era. She discusses postmodern fiction, qualities of good writing, the perils of publishing quality literature and the difficulties of caring for a grieving dog while suffering from depression.

After her mentor killed himself, his dog sat at the door and continually howled in mourning. His howling irritated the mentor's third wife (a.k.a. Wife Number Three) and caused her to ask the narrator to adopt him. We later learn that the mentor had told his wife to give Apollo to the narrator if anything happened to him.

The dog brings irony, warmth

and thoughts of her mentor to her barren life. No wonder the narrator won't give him up, even if it means violating the terms of the lease to her Manhattan apartment and possibly being homeless and even though the dog slobbers and tends to have accidents.

Because the mentor did not leave a suicide note, the narrator can only speculate about his reasons, which she does. There are no clues in the last email he sent her; it contained a list of books he thought might help her research. One of their last conversations suggested he was unhappy, since it concerned Cambodian women who nearly cried themselves blind. Perhaps, she thinks, he was depressed because as he aged, he became physically unattractive.

She tells her deceased mentor about her visits to a counselor, where she asks whether people have the right to commit suicide and why people kill themselves. She notes that Christianity prohibits suicide, yet there is nothing in the Bible forbidding it, and (in a far-fetched comment) suggests that Christ himself could have been said to have committed suicide, a comment she found in her research but that, like so much else in the story, she does not explain.

Reminiscing about their past, from the time she took her mentor's writing courses as a college student, she discusses his marriages, their friendship and his death. To the mix she adds quotations from literature and philosophy. Like the narrator and like Nunez, the mentor, whom we see through the narrator's eyes, was a novelist as well as a college writing professor. He told his stu-

dents that whenever something bad happened to a writer, there was always a silver lining: They could write a book. (Perhaps that is the reason the narrator wrote this book.) He advised students to write what they see, not what they know. (Perhaps that is why there is an engaging visual quality to her novel.)

The mentor considered romance between professors and students vital to creative endeavors. Believing that he could not write without inspiration, he had affairs with students. He did have a brief fling with the narrator but considered it finished. The story, though, implies that she still loved him.

Numerous religious references add resonance and irony to the novel. The narrator mentions, for example, that *Letters to a Young Poet*, by the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, appears on her syllabus. Rilke, like herself and the mentor, she adds, loved dogs. She also reads the book to her dog. She especially enjoys Rilke's line, "Perhaps everything that frightens us is, in its deepest essence, something helpless that wants our love." Unfortunately, Rilke's daughter, who devoted her life to her father's work, killed herself.

The narrator also notes that a friend of Flannery O'Connor's committed suicide. The woman had become Catholic through O'Connor's influence but then left the religion. For "a serious Catholic" like O'Connor, the narrator says, "the devil is not a metaphor." A variation of this comment could serve as the book's epigraph: Neither the devil nor God is a metaphor.

Like Nunez's debut novel, *A*

# Why shouldn't religion embrace dinosaurs as one of this world's glories? 🐾🐾

*Feather on the Breath of God*, her latest fictionalizes actual events. One of Nunez's friends did kill himself, as she noted in an interview that also suggested Nunez was affected by the growing number of suicides. (The suicide rate in the United States jumped 33 percent between 1999 and 2017, according to the Centers for Disease Control).

The narrator calls this postmodern type of blended novel auto-fiction, self-fiction and reality-fiction. One of its hallmarks is a memoir-like quality, a plot that zig-zags on the road of real and invented, a tone that is conversational and a discursive style—all found in *The Friend*.

The book's penultimate chapter hints there are two dogs. One is the Great Dane. The other is a miniature dachshund named Jip. The second to last chapter also raises the possibility that the mentor is alive and that the suicide attempt failed. That interpretation is contradicted in the final chapter. The contradiction is not resolved, suggesting the narrator, and by extension Nunez, prefers ambiguity over definition and that ambiguity is the key to the success of this type of fiction.

Ultimately, this novel, which is fiction about nonfiction, has many layers, perhaps too many. Yet in its essence, it is a love story. "What is

love..." the narrator wonders. "It's like a mystic's attempt to define faith.... It's not this, it's not that. It's like this, but it's not this. It's like that, but it's not that."

Secretly, the narrator hopes that if she takes care of the dog, her mentor will miraculously return to life, which, the alternate ending suggests, is indeed conceivable. Remembering how Edith Piaf's blindness was supposedly cured on a pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, the narrator thinks everything is possible. And in this complex and compelling novel, it is.

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Diane Scharper is a lecturer at the Johns Hopkins University Osher Institute. She is the author or editor of seven books, including *Reading Lips and Other Ways to Overcome a Disability*, winner of the *Helen Keller Memoir Competition*.

## When Giants Roamed

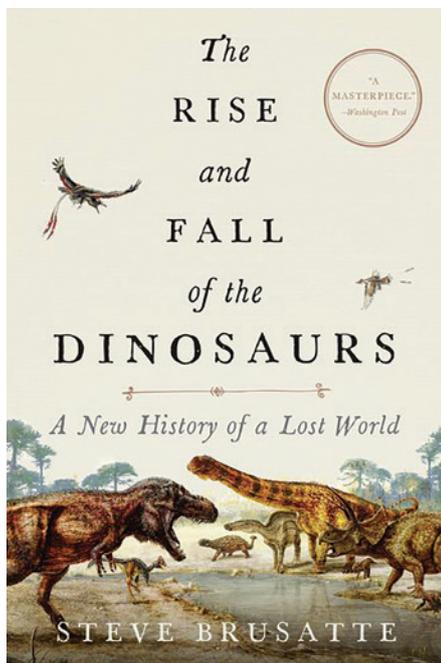
Learning about dinosaurs is one of life's great wonders. Typically, childhood awe at plane-sized reptiles and flying carnivores fades into fantasy as abstract as dragons and Santa Claus, replaced by realities like grades, hobbies and crushes. And some strands of Christianity have discouraged discussion of dinosaurs as some sort of a negation of the seven days of creation in Genesis, a

dark dream.

One reason it is hard to recharge the grandeur of dinosaurs is that there are relatively few great popular science books about the subject. The literature is largely scientific, drowning in weird names. It's easy to lose readers in disquisitions on the transition from the Mesozoic to the Cenozoic. That's why I was thrilled to discover Steve Brusatte's *The Rise and Fall of the Dinosaurs*. Brusatte, a paleontologist at the University of Edinburgh, is a scientist who can write in plain English and communicates why, without explicitly saying so, dinosaurs should be part of any religious or reverent worldview.

Armed with enthusiasm, command of his material and a knack for analogy, Brusatte has written a book that incarnates dinosaurs with color, sound and fury. What a world, I thought over and over again reading this book. Brusatte is Catholic, and it's hard not to read the vivid descriptions of dinosaurs patrolling the place where we live now as a scientist's ode to creation. After all, it is in Genesis that God made "every thing that creepeth upon the earth after his kind" and "saw that it was good."

In Brusatte's worldview, on a planet that is 4.5 billion years old and welcomed vertebrates only around half a billion years ago, dinosaurs are almost



**The Rise and Fall of the Dinosaurs**  
A New History of a Lost World  
By Steve Brusatte  
William Morrow. 416p \$29.99

our brothers, fellow vertebrates, with teeth and skin and bones. “Dinosaurs aren’t just monsters or dragons; these were real animals, in the scheme of things quite closely related to us, and making that connection is a great thing,” he writes. In fact, our proto-primate ancestors developed teeth and ears like ours, “carving out an existence in the shadows of dinosaurs,” Brusatte said in an interview with **America**. Spend some time with that thought.

Overall, dinosaurs should be considered “incredible feats of evolution, well adapted to their environments, the rulers of their time,” Brusatte writes. Far from being failures, he concludes, “they were evolutionary success stories.” Brusatte is also thoughtful about why it is important to study dinosaurs. “They give humans per-

spective, and humility,” he says. “Dinosaurs help us reckon with the great changes of the earth.”

There is a good reason to tell this story now. After a post-World War II lull in paleontological discoveries, we are living, it turns out, in a great new age of dinosaur discovery. Another dinosaur is discovered every week. Computers, CAT scans and other technologies are expanding our understanding of what dinosaurs looked and sounded like, how they ate, moved and mated. Using fossilized feathers, scientists have figured out that dinosaurs were more feathered than previously thought and carried bright colors. And there is still so much to learn. We could still discover, for example, that dinosaurs used tools or were much smarter than we realized.

Brusatte knows paleontologists in China, Argentina and Poland and turns them into romantic heroes, shoe-leather scholars, detectives cracking murder cases. “Sometimes, you have one clue, and sometimes, you have ten,” he says. The best clues are fossils. And there are fossils everywhere, he writes, “in a limestone pit in Poland or maybe a bluff behind a Walmart, a dump pile of boulders at a construction site, or the rocky walls of a ripe landfill. If there are fossils to be found, then at least some swashbuckling (or stupid) paleontologist will brave whatever heat, cold, rain, snow, humidity, dust, wind, bug, stench, or war zone stands in the way.”

The glamorization of contemporary paleontologists occasionally feels breathless; Brusatte’s enthusiasm for dinosaurs wins every time.

He calls one collection of fossils “gorgeous”—“as suited for an art gallery as a natural history museum.”

Brusatte also describes the history and evolution of paleontology as a science and its early Indiana Jones-like practitioners. We spend time with characters like Barnum Brown, the 19th-century paleontologist who discovered the *Tyrannosaurus rex*. Reared in a tiny town in Kansas, he studied geology and “hunted fossils in the dead of summer in a full-length coat, made extra cash spying for governments and oil companies, and had such a fondness for the ladies that rumors of his tangled web of offspring are still whispered throughout the western American plains.”

While in Montana in 1902, Barnum discovered a pile of huge, mysterious bones. What he had discovered was “the James Dean of dinosaurs: it lived fast and died young.” A young *T. rex* put on five pounds a day, 1,700 pounds per year, growing into a 40-foot long, 10-foot-tall, seven-ton beast.

Brusatte’s descriptions of dinosaur geography paint useful contextual pictures. *T. rex*’s dominion, for example, “was the forest-covered coastal plains and river valleys of western North America.” “Like a Great White shark,” writes Brusatte, “*Rex* led with its noggin and used its clamp-strong jaws to grab its dinner, subdue it, kill it, and crunch through its flesh and guts and bones before swallowing. *T. rex* simply had to hunt headfirst, because its arms were pitifully tiny.” About those tiny arms: *T. rex* used them to “hold down struggling prey while the jaws did their bone-crunch-

ing thing. The arms were accessories to murder.”

Our fascination with dinosaurs might have something to do with how long they reigned—150 million years of fights, feeding, sex, birth, death and, over and over, new kinds of life—and how quickly they fell, wiped out by a meteor that struck the planet 66 million years ago, which made “the atom bomb look like a Fourth of July cherry bomb.”

As an Italian Catholic teenager in suburban Chicago wrestling with life’s fundamental questions, “it was wonderful to learn that I belonged to a church that accepted evolution,” Brusatte says. It was “tragic,” he says, to see fundamentalist Christian friends “close their minds to a whole

new way of looking at the world in a way that was undoubtedly true.” Thanks in part to books like Stephen Jay Gould’s *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life*, Brusatte says he resolved quickly to reconcile religion—“an important part of how I view the world”—and his love of dinosaurs.

And why shouldn’t religion embrace dinosaurs as one of this world’s glories? “If you’re a person of faith, you can find a whole lot of purpose” in evolution and the story of the dinosaurs, he says. “Everything is connected.” Just like theologians, scientists must use their imagination to recreate a world they can’t see. “We’re not robots,” Brusatte says. “In order to come up with new ideas,

you have to be observant, make connections and use your imagination.” Once you’ve conceived new ideas, “then you have to test them against reality.”

However, “my imagination could never match what evolution created,” he writes. But dinosaurs “were real: they were born, they grew, they moved, they left footprints, they died.”

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John W. Miller is a Pittsburgh-based writer and former staff reporter and foreign correspondent for *The Wall Street Journal*.



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## Forever Prisoner

By William Kelley Woolfitt

*At Guantánamo, indefinite detainees are known as the forever prisoners.*

Carried to the feeding block by a forced cell extraction team, laxative and vanilla Ensure entering him through the tube in his nose, tied to the restraint chair, he sees the photos in National Geographic (mildewed, tattered) he's pored over. He has by heart the gondolas of Venice, can summon a teakwood dhow.

He doesn't vomit; the team carries him back.

In a cellblock in Camp 6, his ankles chained, he stains cardboard with coffee, timbers his clipper ship, raveling his prayer cap for rigging, ties fine knots. While the anchor (a bottle lid) grabs the sea-bottom, holds fast, his rag-sails are ballooning with wind.

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*William Woolfitt is the author of three poetry collections: Beauty Strip (Texas Review Press, 2014), Charles of the Desert (Paraclete Press, 2016) and Spring Up Everlasting (Paraclete Press, forthcoming).*



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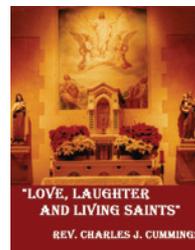
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## *Coming This Fall: An America Media Journey to Ireland*

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It should come as no surprise to readers of this magazine that we have always had a special place in our hearts at America Media for the Emerald Isle. (We used to joke that the masthead was our own version of the “O Antiphons”: “O’Brien, O’Hare, O’Keefe, O’Toole...”). Even today, we have many Irish-Americans on staff, and we still cover news from Ireland with some frequency, from the visit of Pope Francis for the World Meeting of Families last summer to an in-depth feature on the struggles of the Irish church last spring.

Over the past several years, we have also been leading pilgrimages to various holy sites in Christian history, from our yearly trips to the Holy Land and visits to Rome and Ignatian sites in Spain. In addition to the many spiritual fruits of these pilgrimages, they have also allowed me and many of our staffers to get to know our readers better. Friendships have been formed on those trips that will last lifetimes.

So why not add to that list a journey into Ireland, we wondered? In addition to the many holy sites and “thin places” of Ireland, it is also a land rich in literary history. Imagine: celebrating Holy Mass at the Marian shrine at Knock; touring the ruins of monasteries 17 centuries old on the Aran Islands; seeing the Book of Kells up close at Trinity College; taking a literary tour of Dublin through the eyes of Joyce, Yeats and Beckett.

With that in mind, James T. Keane, our literary editor and I are delighted to invite you to join us on our America Media journey through the land of saints and scholars, from **October 20 to 28, 2019**. More details can be found in the advertisement alongside this letter, and as always, feel free to contact us with any questions. But don’t delay too long to sign up: We’re limited to 45 travelers!

Sláinte,



Fr. Matt Malone, S.J.  
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# Reading Widely—and Deeply

*I need the insights of others in order to fill in what I cannot see*

By Katelyn Beaty



Last night over margaritas at a Tribeca restaurant, a friend asked, “So why did you move here?” He was wondering why I had transplanted my life from the Chicago suburbs to New York City at the end of 2018. What was it about this storied city that compelled me to leave the comforts of the Midwest, where I had spent most of my life?

I answered, “I wanted to be here because there are so many people here who aren’t like me.”

For years, New York beckoned as a place where I could bump into seven million people with a wide array of backgrounds and beliefs. The homogeneity of Wheaton, Ill., had become discomfiting. Having lived in Brooklyn for only four months now, I am keen on learning how to practice Christianity in a place where many neighbors either shrug or recoil at the notion. A faith that is culturally taken for granted remains untested.

The desire to know how other people live and move and have their being in this beautiful, fractured world is the reason I try to read widely as well. The novelist Joyce Carol Oates says, “Reading is the sole means by which we slip, involuntarily, often helplessly, into another’s skin, another’s voice, another’s soul.” Thus, I seek out books by people who experience the world differently from me.

*Lit*, a spiritual memoir by Mary Karr, sheds light on both the shame

of addiction and the healing power of Catholic worship. *Between the World and Me*, from the essayist Ta-Nehisi Coates, helps me to grasp the unique cruelties people of color face in contemporary America. Novels like *Americanah* and *Pachinko* put flesh on debates about immigration and national identity. Together, they help me step into someone else’s shoes and practice compassion.

Reading widely reminds me that my understanding of God and God’s world is limited. I need the insights of others in order to fill in what I, owing to ignorance, sin or immaturity, cannot see. So often, we do not know what we do not know. As the apostle Paul writes, “now we see through a glass darkly,” so we must rely on God and others to illuminate the truth.

Reading widely is especially important in this deeply polarized moment in the United States. Many of us are tempted to only listen to people who see the world the same way we do. It was once the case that most Americans relied on the same three or four mainstream news outlets to learn about events of the day. There was a shared national narrative. Now, a proliferation of news sites and social media feeds caters to ideologically narrow audiences and seem to run on contempt for the other side.

Even though it takes patience and practice, it is good to read people we

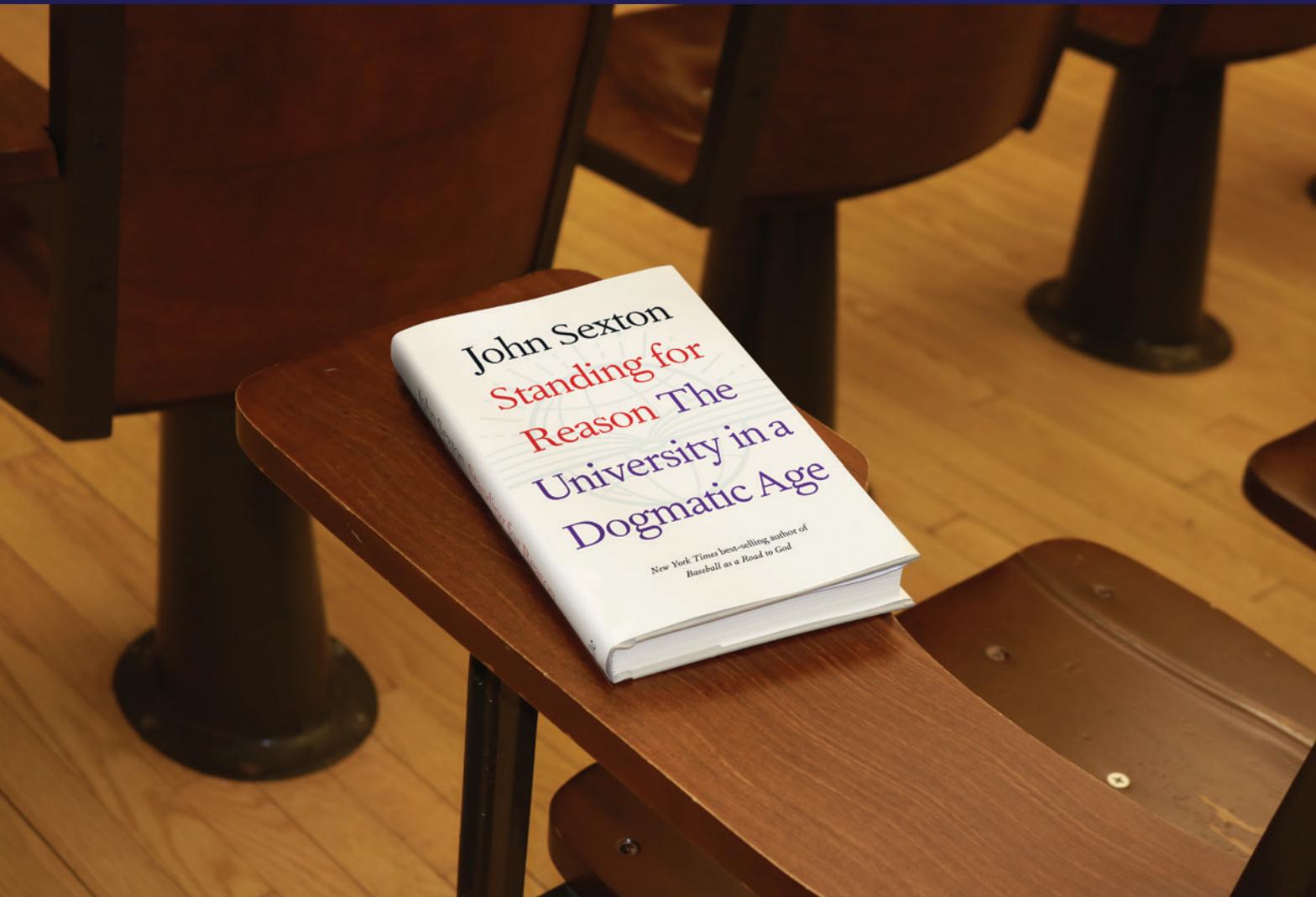
disagree with, who challenge our beliefs or who simply get under our skin. Oftentimes we find that the people on the other side of a hot-button issue are motivated by good reasoning and deeply held values. They are not the enemy.

When I ride the New York City subway, I am confronted by a dizzying display of humanity. It is not always comfortable. People bump into me, play loud music, yell at their boyfriends or stay buried in their cell phones. Many days I remember with longing the quiet of driving down the road nestled in my blue Honda Civic. But the truth is that we all need each other to get where we are going. We are in it together, whether or not we want to be.

Above all, the virtue of reading widely pairs well with reading *deeply*—not just to ingest information but to allow others’ words to sink into our souls. As the late Eugene Peterson wrote, “Reading is an immense gift, but only if the words are assimilated, taken into the soul—eaten, chewed, gnawed, received in unhurried delight.” In a place like New York, it is hard to do much of anything without feeling rushed. And yet life with God and with others requires that we slow down and really listen.

**Katelyn Beaty is the author of *A Woman’s Place* (Simon & Schuster) and an acquisitions editor at Brazos Press.**

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