

Critique

Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

In This Issue

04 Desire, for blessing or for curse

Our deepest desires shape our lives and character. Denis Haack reviews *Brokeback Mountain* and *Closer*, films that invite us to reflect on the nature of desire.

06 Honest questions, honest answers

Steven Garber reviews *A Dark Oval Stone*, Marsena Konkle's debut novel—a beautiful story which tells the truth about the human condition.

08 To be, or not to be, shocked

If Christians are shocked by things that appear on the news, can they claim they really believe what the Bible says about fallenness? An exercise in discernment.

10 Hospitality in a storm

Stephen Baldwin reflects on an apostle's food preparation on a sinking ship, and shows how simple hospitality is a grace. (Menu, recipes, and wine suggestions included.)

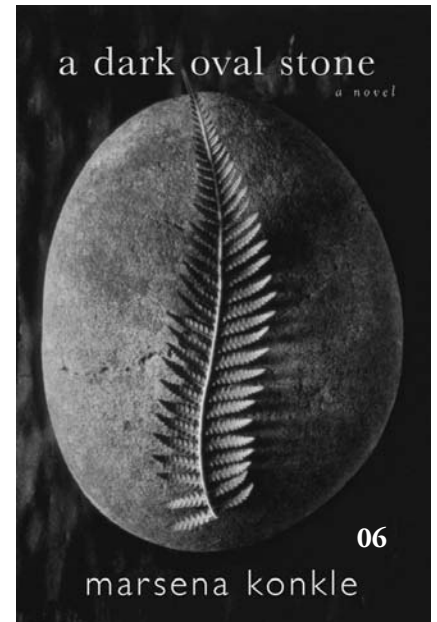
14 Moving forward, returning to roots

Denis Haack reviews folk albums *We Shall Overcome* (Bruce Springsteen), *Cold as the Clay* (Greg Graffin), *Four Thieves Gone* (The Avett Brothers), *Hello Love* (The Be Good Tanyas), and *Firecracker* (The Wailin' Jennys).

02 Editor's Note

03 Dialogue

13 Out of Their Minds



Editor

Denis Haack

Layout

Paper & Graphics

Contributing Editors

Jennifer Disney, Steven Garber,
R. Greg Grooms, Donald Guthrie,
John Mason Hodges, Preston
Jones, Marsena Konkle, David
John Seel, Jr., Travis Scott,
Andrew H. Trotter, Jr.

Board of Directors

Steven Garber

Director

*The Washington Institute
for Faith, Vocation & Culture
Washington, DC*

Donald Guthrie

Vice President for

*Academics at Covenant
Theological Seminary*

Denis and Margie Haack
co-founders of Ransom Fellowship

Rev. Ed Hague

*Pastor of Adult Discipleship
Wildwood Presbyterian Church*

Bonnie Liefer

Vice President

*for Marketing & Communications,
Coalition for Christian Outreach*

Henry Tazelaar MD

*Professor of Pathology,
Mayo Clinic College of Medicine*

Submissions

Critique considers unsolicited
manuscripts only for poetry.
submissions@ransomfellowship.org
or mail with SASE to:

Ransom Fellowship

1150 West Center Street
Rochester, MN 55902

Correspondence

All other correspondence
and changes of address:

Critique

1150 West Center Street
Rochester, MN 55902
info@ransomfellowship.org

Copyright © 2006 by
Ransom Fellowship

<http://www.ransomfellowship.org>

Editor's Note

Yearning for home



Over the past few years I've been particularly tuned to the sense of yearning expressed in so much popular music. A cry of the heart that is beyond words yet captured in lyrics, a yearning that

a chasm in the soul be somehow filled. A desire for a love that does not fail, for a friend who will remain, for a father who will not abandon, for an ark on the edge of the abyss. A longing for something we know we've lost yet never had.

The sense of yearning echoes in Martha Wainwright's cover of "Whither Must I Wander." The simple arrangement, with harp and piano accompanying Wainwright's clear, sensitive vocals wrings poignancy from Robert Louis Stevenson's words.

*Home no more home to me,
whither must I wander?
Hunger my driver, I go where I must.
Cold blows the winter wind over hill
and heather:
Thick drives the rain and my roof is
in the dust...
Fair shine the day on the house with
the open door;
Birds come and cry there and twitter
in the chimney—
But I go forever and come again no
more.*

On one level, of course, it is a common story, of leaving a childhood home for life on our own. Listen more closely, though, and there is a cosmic lostness, a yearning for a home that will be the final place of safety, of

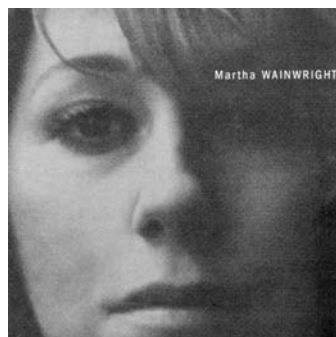
acceptance, where we can rest and where all our wandering leads.

Unlike Martha Wainwright, Margie and I can not make music that resonates in the hidden corners of the heart. We hear her yearning, though, and share it, hoping for a home that someday will satisfy, world without end. And we recognize the power of her music, how it awakens desire for something that reaches to the heart of what it means to be human. Though we can not share in the making of music, we can awaken the same yearning in people in another way.

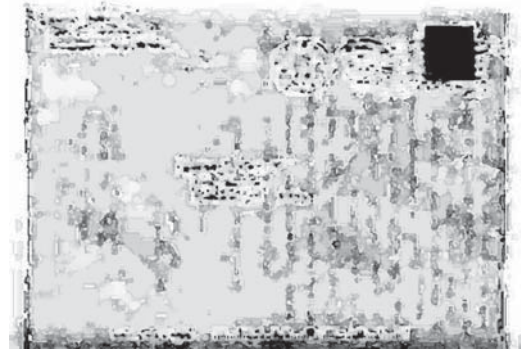
I hesitate to name that other way because it's easy to be dismissive of it, but I'll take the risk. Our way is hospitality: opening our home so that people feel safe, able to rest and talk and share a meal which is served in a setting of simple creativity and authenticity. If our guests do not believe in a life to come, we want their visit to our home make them wish they did.

Do you hear the yearning? Listen again: it rises like an ache from a lost world. And in the words of Jesus cried from the cross, when he embraced our lostness so fully he could walk with us through ours to the home of a Father who madly rushes out to welcome us in, not just to his house, but into his very family, forever. ■

~Denis Haack



Dialogue



Re: Leisure

Send e-mail to:

letters@ransomfellowship.org

You are invited to take part in *Critique's* Dialogue. Address all correspondence to:

Ransom Fellowship
1150 West Center Street
Rochester, MN 55902

or e-mail:
letters@ransomfellowship.org

Unfortunately, we are unable to respond personally to all correspondence received, but each one is greatly appreciated. We reserve the right to edit letters for length.

To the editor:

I've just received the latest issue of *Critique* [#5-2006, Editor's Note] and as usual I see, to my delight, that you are emphasizing the theme of rest and unhurried time. I have two philosophical tidbits on this subject which I thought you might be interested in.

First, I've been studying Thomas Aquinas on the virtues and the vices this semester, and I was surprised to learn from my professor that the vice of sloth (which is a mortal sin) is not idleness. In the medieval Christian tradition, sloth was taken to be a dullness of spirit which leads to despair. Thomas cites 2 Corinthians 7:20, "The sorrow of the world works death" as a Biblical reference to sloth. The Puritans retained the list of the mortal sins, but redefined them so that sloth came out being something more like idleness. Although the picture is clearly far more complex than this, I wonder if the so-called "Protestant work-ethic" which has shaped our culture and which includes this notion of idleness as evil isn't at least partly responsible for our culture of workaholism. The European countries which seem not to have succumbed to workaholism are the countries where the Reformation did not get a strong foothold, namely, Italy, France, and Spain.

Second, there's a twentieth century Thomist named Josef Pieper who wrote a book called *Leisure as the Basis of Culture* which addresses the same topic from a different perspective. He argues that all of the things that are most distinctive of human existence and culture depend on leisure. Insofar as art, music, literature, theater, cuisine, and philosophy are good things, so is leisure, because we don't get those distinctively human activities in societies in which people subsist on a hand-to-mouth system.

Fiona Grooms
St Louis, MO

Denis Haack responds:

Thank you for engaging what I wrote with such wonderful thoughtfulness.

The shift in the definition of sloth is lamentable. For one thing, defining it as idleness is unnecessary and redundant since the concept of laziness already exists. And more important, the notion of dullness of spirit being deadly is far too vital to lose. If anything, this concept takes on added importance as our world careens from modernity to postmodernity. There is a numbness of soul in so many, a cynicism to any expression of hope, a tendency to see joy as inauthentic, that must surely break the heart of all who have caught even the tiniest glimmer of the grace found in the Christian gospel.

My reading of the Puritans leads me to believe that they rightly celebrated the Reformers' recovery of the biblical notion that all work, no matter how humble, was equally pleasing to God. However the loss had come about, this reformed emphasis both elevated the vast multitudes who toiled unnoticed and unappreciated, and humbled the aristocrats and religious elite who thought too highly of themselves. Work, of course, especially since it so often involves toil in this sad world, was to be balanced by Sabbath, but I don't think a proper balance was achieved. As too often happens in this broken world, the proper celebration of the value of work soon became a measure of faithfulness and significance, and the rat race began.

I have Pieper's book, but have not read it. (Obviously, that needs to change.) His thesis, as you summarize it, is interesting, and parallels an idea we have been trying to be faithful to teach. Namely, that when we rest, we are demonstrating an aspect of God's image that can be demonstrated in no other way. Rest is thus not an abstaining, but a positive expression of our humanity in a deep way, since the God of Genesis is the God who rested.

The Darkened Room

Desire, for blessing

A review of *Brokeback Mountain* and *Closer*



by Denis Haack

*Everybody knows that you love me baby
Everybody knows that you really do
Everybody knows that you've been faithful
ah, give or take a night or two
Everybody knows you've been discreet
but there were so many people
you just had to meet
without your clothes
And everybody knows*

[Leonard Cohen, "Everybody Knows"]

Credits:

Brokeback Mountain

Starring:

Heath Ledger (Ennis Del Mar)
Jake Gyllenhaal (Jack Twist)
Randy Quaid (Joe Aguirre)
Michelle Williams (Alma Del Mar)

Director: Ang Lee

Writers: Annie Proulx (short story)

Larry McMurtry (screenplay)

Original music: Gustavo Santaolalla

Cinematographer: Rodrigo Orieto

Runtime: 134 minutes

Release: USA; 2005

Rated R (for sexuality, nudity,
language, and some violence)

Closer

Starring:

Natalie Portman (Alice)

Jude Law (Dan)

Julia Roberts (Anna)

Clive Owen (Larry)

Director: Mike Nichols

Writer: Patrick Marber (play &
screenplay)

Original music: Steven Patrick
Morrissey

Cinematographer: Stephen Goldblatt

Runtime: 104 minutes

Release: USA; 2004

Rated R (for graphic sexual dia-
logue, nudity/sexuality and lan-
guage)

Desire nourished in a human heart can become ravenous. Some find this too dangerous, and so turn on desire itself. Like the ancient Stoics, they desire to be free from desire. Distracted by busyness and comfortable routine, they are saved from noticing the lack of purpose and the mind-numbing shallowness of their days.

Some take the opposite tack, convinced that desire is its own justification. Passion can not be resisted, and if it can, it should not be. As long as new desires keep arising, they do not need to count the cost of the ruined relationships, deep wounds, and soiled consciences that float in their wake.

Sometimes desire awakens unbidden yet relentless, inviting us to something so delicious we dare not refuse, so we do not. Only later are the consequences considered. And sometimes a desire plagues us by bubbling so continuously it is never satisfied; we determine to resist it, but moments of weakness make us an easy target.

How do we live with integrity in the face of desire? The ancient Hebrew sage

linked the death of desire to death itself (Ecclesiastes 12:5); David's conviction expressed in poetry, was that knowing God was inexplicable unless the delight of the divine shaped our deepest desire (Psalm 37:4). How can we live passionately while restraining our unhealthy desires? Self-help pundits and legalistic preachers insist otherwise, but resolutions and rules are insufficient to check desire, and triumphant testimonies to the contrary fail to prove the case.

Brokeback Mountain and *Closer*, both finely crafted, truthfully told stories, invite us to reflect on the nature of desire. *Brokeback* (2005), based on a short story by Annie Proulx, is directed by Ang Lee who brought to the screen Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1995). Set in 1963, two young men played by Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal take a job herding sheep in a remote spot in the Wyoming mountains. Isolated and desperately lonely, their attraction to one another becomes explosively sexual. Later both marry, but continue their affair until tragedy strikes. *Closer* is an ensemble piece, with a strong cast directed by Mike Nichols, whom I will always respect for (among other films) directing *Wit*. Two couples, played by Natalie Portman, Jude Law, Julia Roberts, and Clive Owens follow their attraction to one another into affairs which wound one another deeply and forever cheapen both their relationships and their souls.

Brokeback Mountain and *Closer* are stories of desire and disappointment, passion and betrayal. *Brokeback* has exquisite

or for curse

mountain scenery, which forms a silent backdrop of beauty in contrast to the painful sorrow suffered by its characters. *Closer* is the deeper story because it is carried by a richly written dialogue in which the four characters probe into their dreams and hearts, and where not just lies and duplicity but the truth is used cynically as a weapon.

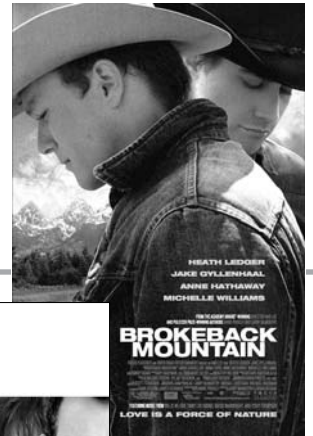
In *Closer* Natalie Portman plays a stripper named Alice, a young American woman who is depicted as less sophisticated, less educated than the other three she meets in London. She falls in love with Dan (Jude Law), but later he has an affair with Anna (Julia Roberts). When Alice confronts him with his betrayal, Dan replies, "I fell in love." Alice's response is stunning, and marked for me one of the crucial moments in the film. "Oh, as if you had no choice?" she asks through her tears. "There's a moment, there's always a moment, 'I can do this, I can give into this, or I can resist it,' and I don't know when your moment was, but I bet you there was one." It is not surprising that it is Alice rather than the other three who would state such a conviction.

As I watched these films my mind kept going to the biblical narratives in which stories of desire play out. Some are sexually charged, stories like David and Bathsheba, Tamar and Amnon, Judah and his

daughter-in-law. Others probe into different desires, a passion for certainty (the calf of gold at Sinai), reputation (Ananias and Sapphira), or power (Absalom, Simon the magician). Ancient stories yet never outdated. They touch on the reality of being created in God's image in a fallen world, and so being confronted by desire, for blessing and for curse.

There are good reasons for choosing not to see *Closer* and *Brokeback Mountain*. It is, however, impossible to imagine becoming truly wise without reflecting deeply on desire. How we live with desire and supremely, what we make the object of our desire will define our character and set the course of our life. ■

~Denis Haack



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Though I have not been able to verify the source, this quote attributed to Joss Whedon, creator of the *Firefly* series, is worth considering: "Passion, it lies in all of us, sleeping, waiting, and though unwanted, unbidden, it will stir, open its jaws and howl. It speaks to us, guides us, passion rules us all, and we obey. What other choice do we have? Passion is the source of our finest moments. The joy of love, the clarity of hatred, and the ecstasy of grief. It hurts sometimes more than we can bear. If we could live without passion maybe we'd know some kind of peace, but we would be hollow. Empty rooms shuttered and dank. Without passion we'd be truly dead." To what extent do you agree? Disagree? Why?
2. Compare and contrast the stories and characters in *Brokeback* and *Closer*. How are the films similar? Different? How does this help us reflect on the nature of desire?
3. In his review of *Closer*, Roger Ebert characterized the film as "about four people who richly deserve one another." Do you agree? Why or why not? In his review of *Brokeback*, Ebert writes the film "is the story of a time and place where two men are forced to deny the only great passion either one will ever feel. Their tragedy is universal." Do you agree? Why or why not?
4. Have you known anyone who appears to exhibit an absence of all desire? Anyone who has deep desires that motivate them to a life of passionate purpose? How would you rate Jesus Christ in terms of desire? What in the text of Scripture leads you to this conclusion?
5. In what ways have you seen desire to be destructive?
6. How do you conceive of desire? Why? What are your deepest desires? How has this nourished good in your life? Where has it become dangerous?

More questions can be found on Ransom's web site.

Honest Questions,

A review of *A Dark Oval Stone* by Marsena Konkle

"Bad books always lie. They lie most of all about the human condition, so that one never recognizes oneself, the deepest part of oneself, in a bad book." Walker Percy's allusive insight into the meaning of literature and life is provocative, anytime and anywhere. But perhaps never more so as in an age like ours so known for its open embrace of pluralization, a time in history when "whatever" is the answer to too many questions.

Percy pushes his point into the world of worldviews that compete for allegiance in our modern-becoming-postmodern culture, audaciously setting forth his conviction that it is only the Jewish and Christian view of human nature and history that is able to produce a "good book," a story that tells the truth of the human condition. As he writes in his essay, "Another Message in the Bottle," "Judeo-Christianity is about pilgrims who have something wrong with them and are embarked on a search to find a way out. This is also what novels are about." And he wonders aloud about the alternatives, pointedly critiquing the possibilities of interesting, compelling stories written out of Buddhist, Hindu, Marxist, behaviorist, and Freudian worldviews.

As I read through Marsena Konkle's *A Dark Oval Stone*, I found myself pondering Percy, page after page. Simply written, it is a beautiful story of ordinary people facing the truth about themselves, situated as they are within the moral order of the world that is really there. Fiction it is, and yet... and yet.

The best stories and the best songs allow us "in," giving us windows into

ourselves, allowing us to see our place in the world more truthfully. What is it about Shakespeare that makes it possible for generations of people, the young and old of amazingly diverse cultures, to hear with the ears of the heart *Romeo and Juliet*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *Hamlet*? We see ourselves in these stories, don't we? Why is it that U2 draws its fans into arenas all over the world, singing along song after song as if the poets from Dublin had imagined the life of Everyman, giving sons of Adam and daughters of Eve the wonderful gift of music that tells about the world "as I know it, as I feel it"?

Konkle has done that for us in her debut novel. From the first pages she tells a tale where we are introduced to an honest marriage, marked by its very own passions and doubts, hopes and griefs, that continues on through the days and months of a year where we come to know her characters—and ourselves—with a truthfulness that is sometimes haunting but always graceful.

Years ago, reading as I was in my dropped-out-of-college years, hitchhiking around the San Francisco Bay Area for a year and across Europe for another, I heard of a place called L'Abri where people could ask honest questions and get honest answers. The possibility drew me in. And now, well, I have lived a good deal of my life, meeting many people, reading many books, seeing many places. That it is possible to ask honest questions and get honest answers still matters immensely to me.

A Dark Oval Stone is a picture of that possibility. It asks no cheap questions, and it offers no cheap answers. The perplexing love of a husband and a



wife, the heartache of disappointment and death, the echoing across time of parental choices affecting children's lives, the complex feelings of rejection and acceptance that are inherent in childlessness and childbirth—all this and more is the world we come to know through Konkle's eyes.

As the weeks of her narrative unfold, she digs deeper and deeper, eventually coming to what is the most difficult task we face in this life: to know and to love at the same time. Can we? Is it ever really possible? Don't we choose otherwise, almost always? There is a "wound to knowledge" in the words of Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and most of us feel that reality in our deepest hearts, and it is painful. To know like that costs us. We find it hard to talk about. Whom will we trust on that level? Almost no one.

But it is this very dynamic that is the thread that makes its way through Konkle's novel. We come into the bedroom of a young marriage, and are

Honest Answers

asked to ponder the strange admixture of loneliness and longing that is present in their bed. What does it mean to love another person as I love myself? Can it ever be? And probing even more deeply, can I be loved, really, by another? What if this person were to know me as I know myself? To know me as the awful, selfish, wounded, broken person that I am? And then sometimes, right in the middle of asking hard-to-answer questions, we find ourselves no longer able to ask any questions—because the only one who could answer has died. There is nothing cheap here, because these are the stories of human life under the sun, of people who live in our houses, on our streets, in our neighborhoods.

She captures this poignantly, drawing upon years of relationship between two of the main characters, a brother and a sister, allowing us to understand their complex histories, the whys and wherefores of their joys and their sadness. Profoundly, feeling feelings that every one of us feels, “She wanted to cry, thinking now that he had seen her with such clarity and loved her still.” Everyone longs to be known like that.

The story is set within a Catholic piety, and Miriam Kovatch, the central character, lives and moves and has her being as the adult daughter of parents who sought to make sense of their own sorrows inside the contours of that tradition. It is not easy, just as it is not easy to do so within Protestantism and Orthodoxy. The brokenness of the world runs up and down the central hallway of mere Christianity, entering into each room and wrecking its own brand of havoc. Not surprisingly, Miriam was wounded by their wounds.

The faith of her family bears down upon her, more than offers any immediate saving grace. She struggles to face the most horrible of human circumstances, viz. the shocking death of her much-too-young hus-

band. Wanting what she grew up believing to be true in the face of her unbearable pain, she ponders one more time her parents’ faith and life, who in their own way had suffered grievously.

Looking back upon her childhood, Miriam remembers, “Even at that age, she understood grief to be the defining quality of both her parents’ lives, a sadness for which she would never be able to atone.” “Catholic guilt” requires that, perhaps, but there are variations on that theme across the traditions, as the complexity of relationships between parents and children is mysterious in its rippling realities.

But saving grace Miriam does find. Not cheap grace for a cheap story, not for a moment. But Konkle weaves faith and hope and love through the seasons of a year in the life of Miriam, from the despair of death to the joy of birth. Along the way we feel the ache in Miriam’s heart, wanting happiness for her even as we understand her resistance to simply “moving on” from her sorrow.

What the author does so skillfully is allow us to see the pilgrimage of Miriam from the inside. Remembering Percy’s analysis of a good story,

she faces a dilemma that seems insurmountable—and keeps on keeping on. Not without tears, not without temptations otherwise, but she does decide to keep getting up in the morning. Her dear friend Esther, who has her own sorrows, offers this wisdom: “But wherever you go, you’ll be taking yourself with you.” “Life will still be life.” Words from the moral philosopher Iris Murdoch jumped off the page as I read that counsel, “At critical moments of choice, most of the business of choosing is already over.” Pushed and shoved, Miriam was Miriam.

The brokenness of the world runs up and down the central hallway of mere Christianity, entering into each room and wrecking its own brand of havoc.

In Konkle’s literary universe, there is silliness, laughter, and gladness—even as there are sentences like this: “She cried from deep within her body....” Who has not cried like that? I know those tears. In true stories there is always both joy and sorrow. Stories that are less-than-true miss at that very point, offering a lopsided view of what it means to be human. Are there hours of one, and not the other? Sometimes. Are there days and lives of only joy or only sorrow? Never ever.

A final word is required though. Reading *A Dark Oval Stone* made me think of my years of knowing its author. Of meeting her as a young girl in Albuquerque, of spending days in her home in Rochester, watching her grow from a playful but always thoughtful girl into a gifted and always thoughtful woman. So it is its own grace that I am able to reflect upon her work here on the pages of *Critique*. Well done, Marsena Haack Konkle, well done. Your own pilgrimage is a gift to each one of us who opens the

windows you have imagined in this story that penetrates into the places where the bone and marrow of our hearts meet.

A good book? Yes, deeply so—because it tells the truth of the human condition, opening windows into the wider world even as it opens windows into our deepest selves. ■

Copyright © 2006 Steven Gilchrist Garber.

Steven Garber is the director of The Washington Institute for Faith, Vocation, and Culture, and serves on the Board of Ransom Fellowship. His book *The Fabric of Faithfulness* is now out in an expanded edition.

The Discerning Life

To be, or not

Perhaps this is simply a function of who I hang out with, but it seems a good many people are shocked by things they encounter. They aren't all shocked by the same things, which some of them find rather shocking in itself.

For many the list involves things they see on the evening news, the horrific pictures of disease, slaughter, death, and suffering that are beamed into our living rooms from locations in Africa we can't locate on a map. Or it includes wardrobe malfunctions in half-time shows, the f-word in movies, and people who don't get too upset by either assault on manners in the media. Some would include the saccharine sayings that well-meaning friends trot out when a friend is in pain, or sermons that speak to questions that aren't being asked in our

postmodern world, and the Christians that seem perfectly content with both. Or the downfall of leaders caught in a web of deceit, lies, secret addictions and embarrassing sins.

On the other hand, we might find ourselves rather numb to it all. This also seems pretty common. We're inundated with so much exposure to so much horror that eventually we've seen it all and seen so much that it no longer has the power to move us. Images of gaunt, fly-covered faces of malnourished

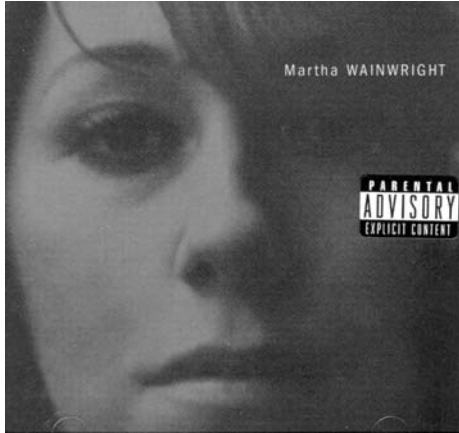


infants in squalid, wind-lashed refugee camps flicker on the screen, but it isn't really new even if it is news. Up next is a funny commercial and then the weather

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. On a continuum ranging from "easily shocked" to "badly numbed," where would you place yourself? How did you arrive there? Where would you like to be? Why?
2. What sort of things tend to shock you? Are you shocked by the same things that shock your parents (or older children)? Why? What sort of things do you tend to be numb to? Are you numb to the same things as your parents (or older children)? Why?
3. Do you agree that Christian faithfulness should include neither being shocked nor becoming numb? Why or why not? What are the dangers in each?
4. How has, and to what extent has various forms of media shaped the way you see and think about things? How comfortable are you with this? How intentional are you about your immersion in media?
5. In saying what he did, Schaeffer was not suggesting we acquiesce in being numb, but rather that we believe the biblical view of life and reality deeply enough to see reality as it truly is. That if we truly believe what the Bible teaches about sin, we will realize we live in a world that is so fallen from grace, so sinful and broken that wickedness perverts every part of life and selfishness distorts every person, including ourselves. That only God's grace prevents the whole sorry mess from spiraling down into hell. What texts of Scripture speak to this? To what extent do you truly believe the biblical teaching? Do any of the texts seem a little extreme?

to be, shocked



report, which is what we turned the evening news on for in the first place.

I want to suggest that faithfulness to Christ and his gospel does not include either option. We should not be shocked by what we encounter in a fallen world, and we dare not be numb in the face of suffering. "Bible believing Christians," Francis Schaeffer always insisted, "should never have the reac-

tion designated by the term 'shocked.'" He means that if we are, we have failed to understand what we claim to believe, namely that we live in a fallen world. Satan's temptation to our first parents was to underestimate the power and nature of evil, and we sons of Adam and daughters of Eve have believed the same lie ever since. Underestimating it, we are shocked when it appears, and by the havoc it wrecks. On the other hand, to feel numb, unmoved in the face of raw evil and unimaginable suffering is a prospect that should frighten us. A danger we must guard against if we are followers of the One who howled aloud in grief and anger at the death of his friend, and who so loved the marginalized and lost that he embraced their death for himself.

It's easy to assert that we can not afford to be either shocked or numbed; it's quite another to sort out what faithfulness looks like in our media-saturated and pain-soaked world. The topic is something discerning

Christians might want to consider together in light of Scripture. ■

~Denis Haack



Photo credits:

Boy in poverty photo Copyright © 2006 Clésio DaGama (<http://www.sxc.hu/photo/79325>)

War scene photo Copyright © 2006 Human Rights Watch.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION CONTINUED

6. If we are to provide safe havens for lost people, we can't afford to be either shocked at or numb to their stories. If we want prodigals to feel welcome in our living rooms, we can't be shocked by where they've been and who they've been hanging out with. If we want doubters to know we walk with them, we can't be numb to the reality of their uncertainty. If those who don't believe in Christianity are to take the gospel seriously, they need to know we understand their unbelief and the reasons that can make belief so hard. If we are shocked by their stories, what will our reaction do to the conversation? If we are numb, what will that reaction do to the conversation? What do you need to pray about in this? What plans should you make?

7. If you are no longer shocked by the same things your friends or family are shocked by, what might be their response to you? How should you answer? If you are a Christian speaking to other Christians, what biblical argument would you put forward?

8. What might you say to numb friends to help them take responsibility for the knowledge they have of our broken world? If you are a Christian speaking to other Christians, what biblical argument would you put forward?

Hospitality

One of the most intriguing and poignant of all New Testament narratives is Paul's sea voyage to Rome. He is a prisoner in chains who will stand trial before Caesar, and he doesn't know the outcome. God has told him that he will arrive in Rome and bear testimony to Jesus in Caesar's court, but after that he could be condemned to die. What is more—and what no one on board the ship could foresee—there would be a terrible storm, an unplanned side-trip far off course, and the ship would be lost.

This is an unlikely story in which to discover a comforting meal. But when we least expect it, a meal becomes a medium of grace, setting the stage for an even larger work of God's grace and mercy.

It's important to get a clear sense of the circumstances. The book of Acts records several voyages made by Paul, so when he began this trip with over 3,000 miles of prior sea travel, he was quite possibly the most experienced passenger on board. The ship departed from Caesarea (below the modern day port of Haifa) in late summer. They changed ships in Myra on the coast of what is now Turkey, and prepared to set out on the second leg of the voyage. Contrary winds slowed them for "many days" and they made slow headway to Crete, finally mooring at Fair Havens. It was now after Yom Kippur in late autumn, the second leg of the voyage had taken considerably longer than it should have, putting them at the end of the window of safety for navigating the Mediterranean. Knowing their danger from his experience at sea, Paul warned the Roman Centurion, the owner, and the ship's captain to stay where they were until winter had passed or face loss of

the ship, lives, and cargo. Against his advice they sailed on.

Almost immediately upon leaving port a typhoon-class storm shoots their ship westward across the open sea like a leaf in a storm

gutter, straight to what turned out to be the island of Malta. All along their path chaos and tumult in the storm ensued, and seasoned sailors began trembling in fear.

The storm that caught them blew continually for fourteen days, during which the sailors were drenched with rain, battered by waves, and tossed by heavy seas. Clinging to rigging and rail for dear life, they could not even steer the ship, much less prepare and eat food. Their fear of shipwreck on the shoals and drowning apparently paralyzed them, for when Paul finally speaks he points out they have not eaten for two weeks.

Paul and his traveling companions, Luke and Aristarchus, are almost certainly the only followers of Jesus among the 276 passengers of various religious (or irreligious) persuasions. Historians believe that most of the fellow passengers were prisoners condemned to die for their crimes in the arena in Rome. If true, it almost appears from Acts that God delights to place Paul into settings where there is a disproportionate ratio of believers and non-believers. Here Paul, a master evangelist, has a captive audience for whom death seems imminent. Even



so, Luke makes no reference to Paul sharing his story, or segueing into the gospel. The man who was never reluctant to speak, who was careful to catch the perfect common grace connection with his hearers, who always spoke the truth boldly, here *does not preach*. He does not say "if you die in the sea tonight, you will all go to hell unless you pray to receive Jesus..."

I find this extraordinary. Instead, Paul does two things: first, in a few words he exhibits faith in the one true God, and then in an uncomplicated gesture he offers them hospitality.

His simple statement exhibits faith: "the God whose I am, and whom I serve sent a messenger to me... we will not die, but the ship will be lost." The fact that he trusts God's word is squarely before them. In a way he even trusts God *for* them since they do not trust him themselves. Then he does another simple thing. Rather than urging them all to continue fasting to persuade God to keep his word, Paul persuades them to eat *because* God keeps his word and because they will need strength to swim ashore to an island. So he lifts up a loaf of bread and gives thanks to God before them as a simple act of worship, and begins to eat with the men.

in a Storm

It's clear that the meal was Paul's idea. His action opened up a small space in the midst of the storm where the travelers could glimpse what it looks like for a man to trust in God. Since we must assume that the storm continued throughout, Paul's act of hospitality must have been arresting, indeed.

So Paul the prisoner became Paul the host, offering hospitality to frightened fellow travelers. The effect was that his actions became a medium that offered grace. I am further intrigued by the notion that this was the action of Paul the mature evangelist. We see great wisdom and restraint in his words—what he did not say set the things he did say in sharp relief. There is no record of a conversion resulting from this simple form of witness. Nevertheless it is appealing to imagine that perhaps more happened than is related in the narrative, perhaps with some who were facing death in the arena.

Is this courageous hospitality the sort of thing we should cultivate as followers of Jesus? Is it possible to demonstrate our trust in God with courage, but with an economy of words that shows deep reliance upon Christ, not on our own powers of persuasion? The image of relating to others as fellow travelers, in the same boat, is engaging. The unpretentious (but actually daring) act of offering a meal in the thick of chaos can set the stage for the work of the Spirit.

Another storm, another meal

Karen and I received a call near midnight from our friends Michael and Ellen (not their real names). We had become close over a period of months, and we were honored they had opened their lives to us, sharing some of their wounds. They were people with whom we had enjoyed cooking, and had been in each other's homes a number of times. That night they were in the middle of a major fight, and Michael was calling for prayer and advice. He was subdued and distraught, but in the back-

ground I could hear Ellen shouting and swearing. Ellen was in a rage, and Michael was at a loss. Michael and I talked for a while when I asked to speak to Ellen. When she got on the phone she spewed her anger on me, too. With bitter sarcasm, she asked me if

I was going to be a [colorful term] male like

all church leaders, and discipline her. I don't remember what I said but my instinct was to ask her if they would come over for dinner the next night. To my surprise she said they would.

As Karen and I thought about what the evening should look like, we remembered how often we have had major conflicts and how scary that was early in our marriage. We had gone into marriage thinking that being Christians would virtually end all that. We decided it was important to help Ellen and Michael by shooting down those unrealistic expectations, letting them know that heated conflict is not unusual nor does it mean that a marriage is in trouble. The next evening we welcomed them warmly—we didn't withhold affection or subtly withdraw as if we had never been where they were now.

Karen poured wine when they arrived, serving a simple meal of Moussaka to which she added a mixed green salad with vinaigrette dressing, and crusty bread on the side. She poured more Cabernet into our glasses adding warmth to the meal. We moved from the table to our living room sofa, and devoured an apple tart Karen had baked. It capped-off the meal as something that embodied love, having been prepared with care and attention to the components, and was savored as special. There was a fire in the fireplace, so we all sat on the couch together and faced the fire. Karen put a throw across her legs and spread it across Ellen's too. Michael and I were the bookends on the sofa. At this point I became aware that

something sacred and safe was happening between us. I don't remember all that was said, but I know it was much less significant than what was going on between us as we shared a simple and delicious meal, our sofa, our fire-

A meal becomes a medium of grace, setting the stage for an even larger work of God's grace and mercy.

place, and our friendship. Tension and anger had dissipated. As they were leaving at the end of our time, Ellen said with a little smile, "I came expecting that you were going to kick me out of the church." It was a delightful finish to our time.

The meal and the way the conversation flowed as a result was more intuition than strategy. It melted barriers. The outcome would have been entirely different had it been a counseling session in my office. The best way—the ordinary way—for relationships to be built and to be healed is in a context of offering simple hospitality... even when it is in the midst of a relational storm. ■

Stephen Baldwin

Copyright © 2007 Stephen and Karen Baldwin.

Stephen and Karen Baldwin and daughter Rachel are living in Concord, North Carolina where they cook together often and where Stephen is involved in planting a church that aims to encourage and recover artistry of all kinds, including food, as an act of worship. After years as a pastor/church planter's wife, Karen received her culinary training from the Ballymaloe Cookery School in County Cork, Ireland. She currently teaches cooking classes for Williams-Sonoma in Huntersville, NC.

Table Grace cont.

Menu and recipes:

Moussaka (serves 6)

For the Meat & Tomatoes:

- 2 onions, thinly sliced or chopped
- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 1/2 lbs ground lamb
- Salt & pepper
- 2 teaspoons cinnamon
- 5 large tomatoes, peeled & chopped
- 2 teaspoons sugar
- 1/2 teaspoon chili-pepper flakes
- 3 tablespoon chopped flat-leaf parsley

White Sauce Topping

- 4 tablespoons butter
- 4 tablespoons flour
- 2 1/2 cups hot milk
- Salt & pepper
- Pinch of grated nutmeg
- 2 eggs
- 1/2 cup grated cheddar
- 3 eggplants (about 1 1/2 pounds total), not peeled, cut crosswise in 1/2-inch slices
- Olive oil

Preheat the oven to 400° F.

Sauté the onions in the oil in a large skillet or saucepan until golden. Add the ground meat and stir, crushing it with a fork and turning it over, until it changes color. Add salt, pepper, cinnamon, tomatoes, sugar, and chili flakes if you like. Stir well, and cook until the liquid has almost disappeared, then mix in the parsley.

Prepare the white sauce: Melt the butter in a pan. Add the flour and stir over low heat for a few minutes, until well blended. Add the hot milk a little at a time, stirring vigorously each time, until it boils, taking care not to allow lumps to form. Simmer over low heat, stirring

occasionally until the sauce thickens. Add salt and pepper and a pinch of nutmeg. Beat the eggs lightly, beat in a little of the white sauce, then pour back in to the pan, beating vigorously. Do not allow the sauce to boil again. Add the cheese and mix well until melted.

Brush the eggplant slices generously with the oil and broil or grill the slices, turning them over once, until lightly browned. Line the bottom of a large baking dish (about 14 x 10 inches) with half the slices. Spread the meat on the top and cover with the remaining eggplant slices. Pour the white sauce over the top.

Bake uncovered for about 45 minutes, until golden. Serve hot straight from the baking dish with good quality crusty bread and a green salad.

Wine suggestion: With the lamb and that aromatic touch of cinnamon, a lush Cabernet-Merlot blend or a softer Cabernet Sauvignon would be a perfect match for this meal.

Green Salad (serves 4)

A mixture of lettuce of your choice or one of the mixtures available in most good grocery stores in the bin or the vented containers with a lid. Avoid lettuce sold in plastic bags, it is often not fresh and picks up the smell of the plastic.

Vinaigrette

- 2 tablespoons of red wine vinegar
- 1/2 teaspoon honey
- 1/2 teaspoon grainy mustard
- Salt & freshly ground pepper
- 5-6 tablespoons good quality olive oil

Wash and dry the salad leaves. Gently tear the lettuce into bite size pieces. In a salad bowl, mix the vinegar, honey, salt &

pepper together with a whisk. Next, slowly whisk in the olive oil. Taste and correct the seasoning. Place the lettuce gently on top of the dressing and toss just before serving.

Apple Tart with a Pecan Crumble Topping (serves 6)

- 1 pastry crust, pre-baked

Tart filling

- 1 1/2 lb cooking apples, peeled, cored & chopped
- grated rind and juice of 1 lemon
- 1 cup of sugar
- 2 teaspoons ground cinnamon
- 1/2 stick unsalted butter

Crumble

- 1/3 cup sugar
- 1/3 cup soft brown sugar
- 1/3 cup unbleached flour
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1/2 stick unsalted butter
- 1 cup chopped pecans

Preheat the oven to 375°. Line a 9 -10 inch tart pan with the pastry. Chill for 30 minutes, then bake blind for 20 minutes until golden. Brush the base and sides with beaten egg.

Toss the apples in lemon juice, then sprinkle lemon rind, sugar, and cinnamon over the apples, and mix. Melt the butter in a large pan, add the apples and cook stirring, until apples soften, almost all of the juices have evaporated, so the filling is fairly dry.

Place the crumble ingredients in a bowl and rub together with your fingertips until it is pea-size.

Increase oven to 400°. Spoon filling into pastry base and cover with topping. Bake for about 15 minutes until the topping is cooked. Best served warm.

Hindsight & intelligence

In the fall of 1973, the Syrian Army began to gather a large number of tanks, artillery batteries, and infantry along its border with Israel. Simultaneously, to the south, the Egyptian Army cancelled all leaves, called up thousands of reservists, and launched a massive military exercise, building roads and preparing anti-aircraft and artillery positions along the Suez Canal. On October 4th, an Israeli aerial reconnaissance mission showed that the Egyptians had moved artillery into offensive positions. That evening, AMAN, the Israeli military intelligence agency, learned that portions of the Soviet fleet near Port Said and Alexandria had set sail, and that the Soviet government had begun airlifting the families of Soviet advisers out of Cairo and Damascus. Then, at four o'clock in the morning on October 6th, Israel's director of military intelligence received an urgent telephone call from one of the country's most trusted intelligence sources. Egypt and Syria, the source said, would attack later that day. Top Israeli officials immediately called a meeting. Was war imminent? The head of AMAN, Major General Eli Zeira, looked over the evidence and said he didn't think so. He was wrong. That afternoon, Syria attacked from the east, overwhelming the thin Israeli defenses in the Golan Heights, and Egypt attacked from the south, bombing Israeli positions and sending eight thousand infantry streaming across the Suez. Despite all the warnings of the previous weeks, Israeli officials were caught by surprise. Why couldn't they connect the dots?

If you start on the afternoon of October 6th and work backward, the trail of clues pointing to an attack seems obvious; you'd have to conclude that something

was badly wrong with the Israeli intelligence service. On the other hand, if you start several years before the Yom Kippur War and work forward, re-creating what people in Israeli intelligence knew in the same order that they knew it, a very different picture emerges. In the fall of 1973, Egypt and Syria certainly looked as if they were preparing to go to war. But, in the Middle East of the time, countries always looked as if they were going to war. In the fall of 1971, for instance, both Egypt's President and its minister of war stated publicly that the hour of battle was approaching. The Egyptian Army was mobilized. Tanks and bridging equipment were sent to the canal. Offensive positions were readied. And nothing happened. In December of 1972, the Egyptians mobilized again. The Army furiously built fortifications along the canal. A reliable source told Israeli intelligence that an attack was imminent. Nothing happened. In the spring of 1973, the President of Egypt told *Newsweek* that everything in his country 'is now being mobilized in earnest for the resumption of battle.' Egyptian forces were moved closer to the canal. Extensive fortifications were built along the Suez. Blood donors were rounded up. Civil-defense personnel were mobilized. Blackouts were imposed throughout Egypt. A trusted source told Israeli intelligence that an attack was imminent. It didn't come. Between January and October of 1973, the Egyptian Army mobilized *nineteen times* without going to war. The Israeli government couldn't mobilize its Army every time its neighbors threatened war. Israel is a small country with a citizen Army. Mobilization was disruptive and expensive, and the Israeli government was acutely aware that if its

Army was mobilized and Egypt and Syria weren't serious about war, the very act of mobilization might cause them to become serious about war.

Nor did the other signs seem remarkable. The fact that the Soviet families had been sent home could have signified nothing more than a falling-out between the Arab states and Moscow. Yes, a trusted source called at four in the morning, with definite word of a late afternoon attack, but his last two attack warnings had been wrong. What's more, the source said that the attack would come at sunset, and an attack so late in the day wouldn't leave enough time for opening air strikes. Israeli intelligence didn't see the pattern of Arab intentions, in other words, because, until Egypt and Syria actually attacked, on the afternoon of October 6, 1973, their intentions didn't form a pattern. They formed a Rorschach blot. What is clear in hindsight is rarely clear before the fact. It's an obvious point, but one that nonetheless bears repeating, particularly when we're in the midst of assigning blame for the surprise attack of September 11th. ■

-Malcolm Gladwell

Copyright © 2003 *The New Yorker*.

Excerpted from: "Connecting the Dots: The paradox of intelligence reform" (pp. 83-84) by Malcolm Gladwell in *The New Yorker* (March 10, 2003) pp. 83-88.

Moving forward,

Five recent folk music albums reviewed

Before there was rock there was folk, and it never went away. Good thing, too, for this deeply rooted musical tradition is far too rich to be lost. Traditionally, folk music is acoustic, a heritage of common people, the instruments played and songs sung on front porches or village greens or barns cleaned out for a community dance. In the early 20th century folk became a movement, blending protest, gospel, spirituals, and the traditional songs that had endured over generations. Now in a global world it has expanded further, embracing native music from all corners of the globe.

In the West, folk music can appear simple, blending singable melodies with simple lyrics, but the simplicity is deceptive. Good folk music speaks from the heart, addressing the concerns, fears, dreams and hopes of ordinary people living ordinary lives. One of the great losses of modern life is the gathering of friends and neighbors to sing, accompanying themselves on a variety of instruments. That is rare today, so rare most of us can not imagine it. Perhaps it has always been uncommon, but we can hope that after slow food has taken root, a revival of music-making will follow to accompany those unhurried meals.

Like all music, everyone is not drawn to the same folk musicians or albums. The ones I mention here have been playing in my office, in various ways tugging at my heart.



Four Thieves Gone: The Robbinsville Sessions (The Avett Brothers)

It is difficult to summarize the Avett Brothers' music in a single phrase, for the simple reason is that there is nothing else like it. The

best I can do is that this is folk music, but on steroids—in fact, a rather large dose of strong steroids. They may use traditional instruments and look rather sedate (notice the ties), but this is a group that delights in bending the edges and keeping its fans off balance. The more I listen to them, the more a single impression keeps coming to mind: the Avett Brothers absolutely love making music, and have more fun performing than would seem fair.



*I wonder if this blade ran through someone's side
The blood wiped away to hide
How evil your grandfather was 'fore he died
But war can make monsters out of us all
I'm sure I'd become one if I was called
And then it would be my blade
Here at this yardsale*

*The guitar I am holding is way out of tune
The neck it is warped and the saddle is through
I wonder if sweet music ever was played
From the hands of a boy to a girl in the shade
From this rickety ghost of a song
Here at this yardsale*

*A dollar for anything here on this quilt
A price tag for hands from which all things are built*

returning to roots

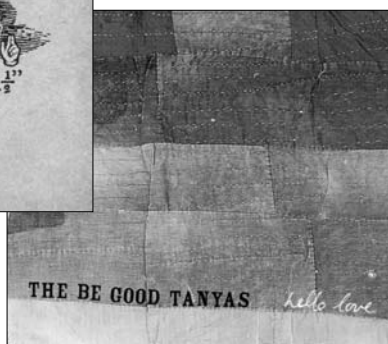
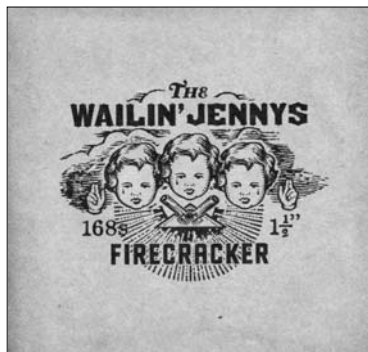
*A blanket of voices speak pleasure in shame
Flowers of plastic and fruit of the same
A basket of nothing at all
Here at this yardsale*

[“Yardsale” on *The Gleam* (2006)]

Hello Love (The Be Good Tanyas) Firecracker (The Wailin’ Jennys)

Both these trios hail from Canada, female vocalists/instrumentalists who are fine musicians as individuals, and extraordinary as bands. Their tight vocal melodies, accomplished performances, and arrangements displaying their skill on a variety of acoustic instruments provides a sound both beautiful and full of yearning. Neither group limits itself to a traditional repertoire, yet consistently write/cover songs that perhaps can best be described as Americana, a

blend of influences which include traditional folk, old-time country, and gospel.



*Well here I am, undone again.
I know I'll see you, I just don't know when.
Little stars, all a 'twinkling,
I wonder where you are, I wonder what you're thinking.
I know I gave my heart a little soon,
I walk for miles underneath the moon,
I sing this sad, lonesome little tune
For you.*

[“A Little Blues” from *Hello Love* (2006)]

*When I'm in my restin' place
I'll look on my mother's face
Never more will I have to know
All the loneliness that plagues me so
Hallelujah, hallelujah*

[“Glory Bound” on *Firecracker* (2006)]

Both The Be Good Tanyas and The Wailin’ Jennys make music that is so hauntingly beautiful it makes my heart ache. That is a grace I cherish.

We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions (Bruce Springsteen)

On this album Springsteen joins an astonishingly accomplished group of folk musicians to play a set of traditional songs, including “My Oklahoma Home,” “Old Dan Tucker,” “John Henry,” and “Jacob’s Ladder.” The songs were recorded in one take, without rehearsal in an old farm house, so as to try to preserve the immediacy of the folk genre.



Some of the strongest songs are spirituals, blending a realistic portrayal of life in a sadly broken world with a certain hope that justice someday would be done.

*Well one of these nights bout 12 o'clock
This old world is gonna rock
Pharaoh's army got drowned
O Mary don't you weep*

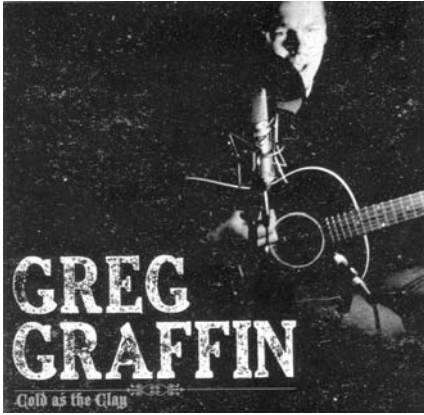
*Well Moses stood on the Red Sea shore
And smote' the water with a two by four
Pharaoh's army got drowned
O Mary don't you weep.*

[“O Mary Don’t You Weep”]

Blending horn, accordion, bass, violin, banjo, guitar, percussion, organ, piano and harmonica, the music is both deeply grounded and wondrously performed. It’s hard to listen without tapping your foot.

**by
Denis
Haack**

Tuned In cont.



***Cold as the Clay* (Greg Graffin)**

Better known as the singer/songwriter of the punk band, Bad Religion, Greg Graffin's earliest musical memory involves singing with his family. Here Graffin joins a group of very talented folk instrumentalists to sing a set of songs, a few traditional, the rest composed

by himself. There is a sharp edge to many of the lyrics, and though hope is expressed, it seems more rooted in progress than in anything beyond the horizons of time and space.

*Whispers of ancients buried by dust
Echoes of ages in canyons of dust
Is heaven so lonely? I'll know soon enough.*

*The tools of the trade lie shopworn and old
The skills of the master done died with his soul
And the worklike routine is so lonely and cold
Lying in wait for better times*
["Cold as the Clay"]

A songwriter's world view is expressed in their music, and I find *Cold as the Clay* an intriguing album on that score. I think Graffin's vision for life is better captured in punk, but reflecting on how he expresses himself in the folk tradition is a fascinating exercise in musical discernment.

Order From:



Distinctive Books and Music

www.heartsandmindsbooks.com
read@heartsandmindsbooks.com

234 East Main Street
Dallastown, PA 17313
(717) 246-3333

All books mentioned in *Critique* may be ordered directly from Hearts and Minds. A portion of the proceeds will be donated to Ransom Fellowship.

Critique Mailing List:

Critique is not available by subscription. Rather, interested readers can request to be added to Ransom's mailing list, which is updated frequently. Donors to Ransom Fellowship, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, tax-deductible ministry, are added to the mailing list automatically unless requesting otherwise. **To receive *Critique***, send your mailing address to:

Ransom Fellowship, 1150 West Center, Rochester, MN, 55902.

Everyone on Ransom's mailing list also receives *Notes from Toad Hall*, a newsletter written by Margie Haack in which she reflects on what it means to be faithful in the ordinary and routine of daily life, and gives news about Ransom's ministry.

Critique is a newsletter (published nine times each year, funds permitting) designed to accomplish, by God's grace, three things:

1. To call attention to resources of interest to thinking Christians.
2. To model Christian discernment.
3. To stimulate believers to think biblically about all of life.

The articles and resources reproduced or recommended in *Critique* do not necessarily reflect the thinking of Ransom Fellowship. The purpose of this newsletter is to encourage thought, not dictate points of view.

Copying policy: Feel free to make up to 50 copies of any article that appears in *Critique* for use with a small group. We only ask that you copy the entire article, note the source, and distribute the copies free of charge.

Now on the web: www.ransomfellowship.org