

Critique

Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

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Editor's Note



Special Olympics

We think of the wrong race," Mary Jane Grooms recently commented. She and her husband, Greg were with us for a Toad Hall Sabbatical and the Scriptures in which the walk of faith is likened

to a race had come up in our conversation. Scriptures like Hebrews 12:1, where we are told to "run with endurance the race that is set before us," or 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 where the apostle includes not just running but boxing as a metaphor for Christian faithfulness.

These texts usually bring to mind the Olympic Games, which is not inappropriate since such games were well known in the first century. More specifically, the Isthmian Games were hosted by the city of Corinth itself, which built stadiums for just that purpose. The winners of the various events were crowned with pine wreaths and held in great honor across the Empire.

"When we think of running the race of faith," Mary Jane said, "we think of ourselves as Olympic athletes." You know the type: Self-disciplined, single-minded athletes with buff, toned bodies who year after year set records and are featured in full-page pictures in glossy magazines accompanying articles which detail our numerous accomplishments. Of course, being Christians we look humble as well as pleased in such pictures, so the myriad youth who paste them to their bedroom walls have good role models to follow.

It's a satisfying fantasy, but one that is, Mary Jane insists, completely wrong. "We're in a race, all right," she said, "but it's more like the Special Olympics." We flail our way down the course, weaving and plodding down our lane, easily dis-

tracted. It's not always very pretty, nor does it set many records, and the paparazzi don't follow us around. "It's a grace," she said, "that we make it to the finish line at all."

I think Mary Jane is correct. Paul was probably writing with the Isthmian Games in mind when he encouraged the Corinthian Christians to run to win the prize, and there is much to be learned from that rich metaphor. Athletes need to be self-disciplined, and the same holds true for Christians who strive to be faithful in a fallen world. Interpreting what Paul wrote in this light is valid. When we apply the text to ourselves, however, we might want to keep the Special Olympics in mind.

It's easy to lose sight of how broken the world is, and how fallen we are. Compared to most of the world and most of history, our lives are amazingly comfortable. That is a grace, no mistake about that, but it can also be a trap. We are easily lured into believing that comfort (not a cross) is what we are called to, and that our success is due to our efforts (rather than to grace).

As the years go by I am invited to address an ever widening array of topics, but the more I study and learn the more impressed I am how little I actually know. And when I look back with honesty on my life I now see that even some of my best efforts contained far more brokenness than I ever allowed myself to imagine.

So, let's "run with endurance the race that is set before us," but as we do, let's keep in mind that it is a grace—a great grace—that we ever make it to the finish line at all. ■

—Denis Haack

Dialogue



re: Appreciating thinking outside the box

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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.

For the past few years my parents have enjoyed and benefitted from your ministry, particularly through *Critique* and *Notes from Toad Hall*. I've attended a few Rochester L'Abri conferences and learned much from your seminars. One in particular that I remember explored the music of Loreena McKennitt—she is now one of my favorite artists. Since graduating from college I have moved out on my own and find that I really miss reading *Critique* on a regular basis. Your ministry is unique and much needed. I look forward to again developing discernment on a regular basis, and to hearing how better to pray for you.

God bless you in your work,

Lindsay Cameron
Wheaton, IL

I received my copy of *Critique* and *Notes from Toad Hall* this week and just devoured them. Your ministry has been a great blessing to me; both publications are wonderful. I've been working my way through your movie list and have found much to challenge me in seeking to understand our broken culture. Margie, you mentioned *Wit* in *Notes*. I *had* to buy that one and it has been used for several movie nights in my home. My problem with all the information contained is that I have a real weakness for books and its so hard for me not to purchase everything you recommend even when financial sensibilities crowd in.

Soli Deo Gloria,

Pat Walton
Oklahoma City, OK

No publication is more eagerly anticipated or more carefully read in our house than *Critique*. You have helped us toward a more thoughtful examination of issues in our lives—keep challenging us to think and live Christianly. Thank you.

Steve and Glory Griffin
Watkinsville, GA

Thank you so much for this ministry—*Critique* and *Notes from Toad Hall* both force me to think outside of the typical “Christian box.” The need for this really struck home recently when my husband related a discussion at his job between a Christian employee and a non-Christian employee. They were debating the issue of same-sex marriage being legalized. The high school senior refused to accept the Bible as a moral basis for an argument against such marriage because “it’s just another book.” Wow, and this is a kid who grew up in the Bible belt. It’s really making me think about how my husband and I can guide our ten year old son in the years to come. He will need a lot of discernment to be able to share his faith in a way that will have relevance and meaning to the people he will encounter, especially in college. What you are doing is very important. Thank you again for the impact you have had on our lives.

Sanda Stowe
Watkinsville, GA

Advice to young adults

Once each year it becomes customary to give advice. Not that we limit ourselves to that modest schedule, of course, but at least in America, graduation from high school is one of those times when it is deemed appropriate to give advice without waiting to be asked for it. Graduation ceremony speeches are usually full of advice, and the cards left at open houses for graduates often contain some gem—as well as the much more eagerly anticipated gift of money.

In the May 2005 issue of *Real Simple*, readers were invited to answer the question, “What’s your best advice to a new high school graduate?” The answers varied from the idealistic to the practical:

“Expect to succeed. Expect to win. Expect to work for it.”
“You’re never too young to start saving for your future. Thanks to the amazing power of compound interest, the younger you are when you begin to save, the richer you’re likely to be later on.”

“Find something you love to do, and do it well. If you really love what you do every day, it never seems like work.”

“Spend breakfast talking with friends and have a movie night in, with just you, popcorn, and a blanket. Eat your veggies and your cake. Wear sun screen and glitter. Plan for the future and keep in touch with old friends. Visit your folks and travel to places you’ve never seen. Treat yourself as you would a cherished friend; be good to and honest with yourself. Don’t let your passion for self-discovery end. Let life be the best teacher you’ve ever had.”

“Travel, travel, travel! Quit that job you’ve had through high school and go—at least for the summer. Right out of high school, I went to college, got a job, got married, and had kids, and now

I can’t seem to find the time to take that ‘big trip’... or even the little ones.”

“Though the offers will begin flooding in as soon as you hit college, do not get a credit card. You think you’ll use it only for emergencies, but soon you’ll feel that wanting a pizza at 2 a.m. is an emergency.”

It’s funny how often we know something will be required of us yet how seldom we think about it ahead of time. Giving advice to young adults, when asked or when it is appropriate, is one of those things. On the other hand, hope-

fully all of us have received notes from people that were so creative, so surprising, so intriguing that we copied what they said into our journal or cut it out and pasted it to our bathroom mirror. We took their advice to heart and wanted never to forget it.

Perhaps with a bit of reflection, discerning Christians can come up with some advice that will cause the young adults in our lives to pause, and even consider it. ■

—Denis Haack

Letter to a Young Man

Note: The following letter was written to the son of a friend. It is printed here with the hope that it will be useful to others.

Dear T.

Congratulations on making it your thirteenth birthday. If I remembered what it was like to be thirteen, or if I knew any thirteen-year-olds (besides yourself), then perhaps I could come up with something clever to say to a new young man. But I’m not clever, so all I can offer is the one lecture I would give if I were able to give only one more.

This lecture involves what I call the “regret factor” and its thesis is that lives go better if people live with the intention of minimizing the amount of regret they take with them into the next world.

I don’t understand old people who say that, having surveyed their lives, they have no regrets. I think that people who say this must either have lived an unusually charmed life or they actually haven’t thought much about their lives.

Everyday people make decisions and choices. Most of the times these choices and decisions are not very consequential—do I eat ice cream or do I not? Do I eat a little or a lot? But sometimes we have to make important decisions. For an obese person, or for a person who is tempted to cheat on a Lenten vow, questions like these can be very important.

But some questions—Will I show some gratitude to God for what I have? Should I get married? Should I be educated?—are important for everyone. So (to get back to the point I was making), given all the choices and decisions people are confronted with everyday, it is difficult for me to understand how a person could say that he or she has *no* regrets. To have made the right decision every time—that is the stuff of perfection, which is in short supply among humans.

...Letter cont.

Yet, I think it is possible in most cases, for most people, to get through life without *serious* regret. Perhaps, when I am old and have aching knees, I will regret training for marathons instead of using that time to learn another language. But if that happens, I doubt that it will feel like a *serious* regret.

But suppose instead that, when I arrive at the end of my life, I discover that my daughter doesn't like me because of my own stupidity or blindness. Or suppose I learn that, in the secrecy of her heart, maybe semi-unconsciously, my wife is almost relieved to see me go. Or suppose I realize that I have left behind me former students who, thanks to me, have become cynical and faithless. Certainly I would regret these things very much.

I guess all this must seem obvious. *Of course* husbands and fathers must do right

by their wives and children. *Of course* teachers should not promote intellectual poison, especially under the guise of "challenging students' faith." But look around. Some children do not like their parents. Husbands and wives are estranged from one another. And teachers don't care about students.

What does any of this have to do with a thirteen-year-old? Here's the connection: Getting through life without major regrets requires wisdom and discipline and insight into one's own personality flaws and strengths. It requires thoughtfulness and reflection. Sometimes it requires courage. And these kinds of traits—reflectiveness, discipline and so on—do not come from nowhere. They develop over time.

Obviously, at this point in your life daughters, wives and students are irrelevant. But you have your own choices and decisions: Will I do this homework just well enough or will I do it very well? Will I

waste this next hour or will I do something worthwhile? Will I be the kind of person my teachers know they can trust?

How you answer these kinds of questions—and the many others you face every day—will shape your character, your thought processes, your capacity for self-discipline, and your ability to empathize with others.

I recall that the book of Proverbs is addressed to a young man. I think that must be because older men have a very difficult time changing what they made of themselves when they were young.

How you get along in the world thirty years from now depends a lot on what you do today.

I wish you all the best,
Preston Jones

Preston Jones, a contributing editor to Critique, teaches history at John Brown University.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What advice have you received over the years that was helpful? That may have been sincerely given but was distinctly unhelpful? What distinguished the two?
2. What advice were you given at graduation? By whom? How helpful was it?
3. What advice do you wish you had considered (or been given) when you graduated from high school? Is it the sort of thing you would have seriously considered at the time if it had been given? How might it be expressed creatively?
4. Looking back on your graduation from high school, and what you did following your graduation, what do you most regret? Why? Could your regret become advice worth giving?
5. What obligation do we have as Christians to include some element of "spiritual" advice in these cases? Does it matter if the graduate is a Christian? A non-Christian?
6. What terms/attitudes should we as Christians be careful not to use/exhibit when giving advice to the postmodern generation?

Questions continued on page 6...

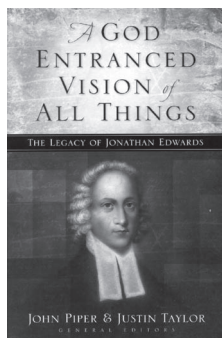
Discerning Life cont.

...QUESTIONS CONT.

7. How might we creatively and winsomely raise the issue of Christianity in our advice to an unchurched, non-Christian graduate in a way that might intrigue them? To a Christian grad who seems disillusioned by the church? To a Christian grad who knows all the correct answers but has been so sheltered that they really have never had their faith tested in a world of unbelief?
8. What would you consider to be “your best practical advice” for a graduate? Your best advice for the future? Your best advice concerning the walk of faith? Why? What does the rest of your discussion group think of it?
9. What is your impression of Preston Jones’ letter to his young friend?
10. Do you wish someone had talked to you about regret like this when you turned 13? Why or why not? If you were not mature enough to receive it at 13, at what age would you have been ready to listen?
11. How much *serious* regret do you feel? About what? Why is it that we rarely talk about these things openly for the benefit of the next generation? The Scriptures include numerous stories of failure—what might we learn from this about communicating an authentic faith to the next generation?
12. How might the lessons about regret that Jones mentions become an ongoing part of the training Christians include when they mentor young adults (both their own children and those of friends)?

Briefly Noted: The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards

by Denis Haack



In 2003, John Piper hosted a conference on Jonathan Edwards at Bethlehem Baptist in Minneapolis. Now ten papers presented at that conference—covering all aspects of Edwards’ life, thought, and ministry have been published in *A God Entranced Vision of all Things*. Noël Piper, for example, looks at Sarah Edwards, their marriage and home life; J. I. Packer explores how the revival of true religion was intimately related to the glory of God in the thinking and life of the great American preacher and theologian; and Sherard Burns raises the very pertinent question of whether we can trust the theology of a slave owner.

It is easy to forget C. S. Lewis’ wise advice to be careful to include old books that have stood the test of time in our reading. Carefully chosen, they can help anchor our thinking so that we aren’t simply swept along by the latest ideas which happen to be popular. J. I. Packer sees reading dead theologians like Edwards in a similar light. He argues that “evangelicalism is Christianity without additions, subtractions, or dilutions—Christianity, that is, in its purest and most authentic form. And to make the point I picture historic Christianity as a broad river whose main stream flows along a central channel while eddies, stagnant pools, backwaters, and expanses of mud abound along its banks. Then I cite the teaching of such men as Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Owen and Warfield, and Edwards with them, as so many buoys marking out the central channel for all who are concerned to be found in it.”

We recommend *A God Entranced Vision of all Things*. ■

Book recommended: *A God Entranced Vision of All Things: The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards* edited by John Piper and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books; 2004) 256 pp. + appendices + indices.

Why do they despise us?

Making sense of the news

The truth is that Westerners are perceived by non-Westerners as rich, technologically sophisticated, economically and politically dominant, morally contemptible barbarians. That is a hateful combination of feelings and assessments, in the sense that the one who makes them will, as often as not, be filled with hatred for the objects of such contemplation.

Why barbarians? For despising tradition, the ancestors and the dead. For despising religion, or at least for treating it lightly. For the shallowness and triviality of their culture. For their sexual shamelessness. For their loose adherence to family. For their absence of any sense of honor.

That is not to deny that many Western attributes and trappings are found desirable by non-Westerners. But precisely that desirability compounds the problem. The allure of heightened sexuality; or of status clothing, furnishings and possessions; or of personal independence: one would have to be superhuman not to feel the pull of these things or to be tempted by them. That is why many anti-Western movements, notably Islamists, wish to banish the very presence of the Western temptations, to take a separatist line, or at least to limit contacts with Western people and institutions to what can be dictated on their own cultural terms. As one Iranian leader of Ansare Hezbollah put it, 'When you see some people here dressed in American-style clothes, you are seeing the bullets of the West.'

Far more people than just Islamists, however, wish to modernize their countries without at the same time Westernizing them. The extreme difficulty of such an enterprise lies in the fact that the West is the historic source of modernization and its principal present agent. Modernizing without Westernizing is a near impossible task of extrication. The Internet (to take only the most obvious example) knows no boundaries. To accept the technology is to accept the presence of pornography, advertising, commercial values and freedom of speech.

Very many, especially Third World, people have the sensation that everything they hold dear and sacred is being rolled over by an economic and cultural juggernaut that doesn't even know it's doing it... and wouldn't understand why what it's destroying is important or of value. That is why the defenders of traditionalism and advocates of cultural retrenchment in the non-West are perceived by Westerners as 'fanatics,' 'fundamentalists'—the epithets that express a refusal to understand. Why?

Because they fly in the face of what, to Westerners, is 'common sense.'

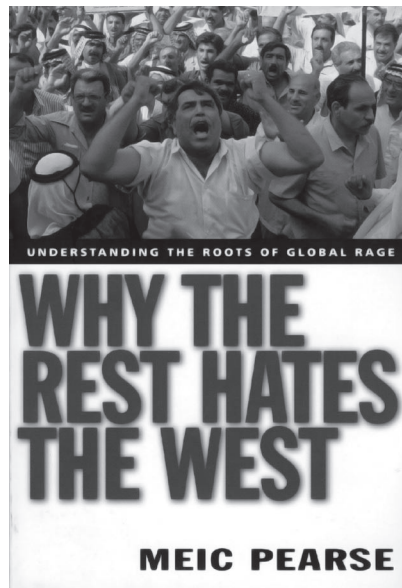
And the worst of it is that Westerners themselves are hardly aware of what they are doing, or of the very existence of the things they are destroying. Many non-Westerners feel that they have some understanding of Western culture; with television and pop music, to say nothing of the high-status artifacts on sale to those who can afford them, it would be strange indeed if they did not. But if the amount of understanding transmitted through those channels is likely to be superficial, the level of understanding in the reverse direction—that is, of others by Westerners themselves—is almost negligible. After almost a decade of coverage of the

Balkan wars on television, most Westerners are still unsure of the identities of the principal protagonists.

Westerners are so accustomed to this effortless superiority that the real nature of its origins is lost on them. As Samuel Huntington points out, 'The West won the world not by the superiority of its ideas or values or religion... but rather by its superiority in applying organized violence. Westerners often forget this fact; non-Westerners never do.' Indeed, this obliviousness to reality persists, even when considering the present nature of international relationships. What to Westerners appears as 'control of terrorism' or 'maintaining free trade' bears quite a different face from the other side of the prosperity-poverty fence. Actions that, seen from a Western perspective, seem commonsensically altruistic—or at least neutral—appear riddled with double standards: 'Democracy is promoted but not if it brings Islamic fundamentalism to power.' One thinks of Western acquiescence in the aborting

of the Algerian elections and the continuation of the military regime. Furthermore, 'nonproliferation is preached for Iran and Iraq but not for Israel; free trade is the elixir of economic growth but not for agriculture; human rights are an issue with China but not with Saudi Arabia; aggression against oil-owning Kuwaitis is massively repulsed but not against non-oil-owning Bosnians.' ■

~Excerpted, Meic Pearse



Excerpted from: *Why the Rest Hates the West: Understanding the Roots of Global Rage* by Meic Pearse (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2004) pp. 34-36.

The Darkened Room

Redefining Grace



A review of The Woodsman

by Travis Scott

After college I worked for two years to save money for seminary. Due to previous experience I had working with youth in the church I was encouraged to apply to a social agency that ran group homes for adolescents. I had no idea what I was in for.

I submitted an application and was given an interview in a home specializing in the treatment of juvenile sex offenders. I remember driving to the interview intending not to take a position if it were offered. I could not see myself working with that type of kid. During the interview I was asked all the typical questions.

Things were going smoothly until near the end, I was asked, “So, how do you feel about working with sex offenders?”

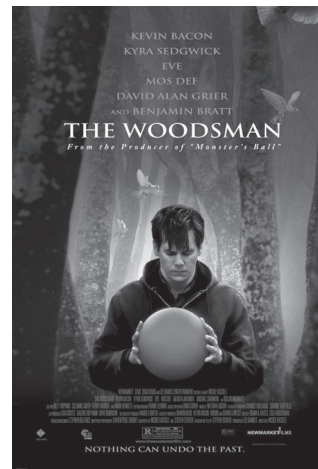
This was my chance to back down. I just needed to explain that I simply wasn’t cut out for such work and then thank them for their time. But I didn’t. Somewhere in

realized in that moment that I had subconsciously been acting as if this home were full of people that were not worth my time, not worth my love. I was making a subtle declaration that they were beyond redemption. I wasn’t really living the theology I said I believed. I don’t remember exactly how I answered the question but it must have been satisfactory because a few days later I was offered the job. Soon I was at work nurturing, serving, and in many ways, giving my life to adolescent sex offenders.

In *The Woodsman* Kevin Bacon plays Walter, a convicted sex offender out on parole after twelve years in prison. Once out he can only find one person who will rent an apartment to him. Unfortunately, the apartment is directly across the street from a grade school. He is trying to make the best of this situation and of this second chance. Walter asks his therapist how long it will take before he is normal.

Walter is tormented by inner demons, has virtually no support from a family that has abandoned him, is haunted by the possibility of his co-workers discovering his dark secret, and is constantly antagonized by a police detective eager to see him back behind bars. The only light in Walter’s life is Vicki. Played by Kyra Sedgwick, Vicki is the one person willing to get close to Walter.

The Woodsman is a difficult film to watch; many people should not see it. Not only does it grapple with a topic that most of society would rather ignore, it does so by telling the story through the eyes of a protagonist who is a predator. The film makes no excuses for child molestation, but nei-



The Woodsman Credits:

Starring:

Kevin Bacon (Walter)
Kyra Sedgwick (Vicki)
Eve (Mary-Kay)
Mos Def (Sgt. Lucas)
David Alan Grier (Bob)
Benjamin Bratt (Carlos)

Director:

Nicole Kassel

Producers:

Kevin Bacon
Damon Dash

Writers:

Steven Fechter (play)
Nicole Kassel (screenplay)

Cinematographer:

Xavier Perez Grobet

Original Music:

Nathan Larson

Runtime: 87 min.

Release: U.S.A. 2004

Rated R for sexuality, disturbing behavior and language.

“So, how do you feel about working with sex offenders?”

the seconds between the question and my answer, I had a moment of clarity. How could I refuse to work with these kids? I

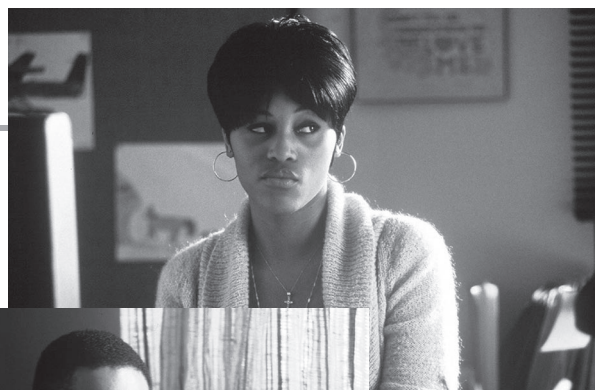
ther does it allow us to make excuses for not seeing Walter as a human being. One feels sorrow for Walter and his brokenness while simultaneously being utterly repulsed by him. This raises a good question for Christians, namely, where do people like Walter fit in the church?

There was a young man in the home where I worked whose family disowned him. During his stay they didn't visit or even call him. Whenever he tried phoning them they either wouldn't answer or made sure the conversation lasted no more than a few minutes. I had several occasions where I needed to speak with the family to discuss the treatment their son was receiving. I discovered they were Christians and the father was a pastor. I

As Christians we claim to believe that Jesus died for the vilest offender. And yet, we manage to withhold grace from those we deem too dangerous to love.

can't imagine the pain this family went through and I don't pretend to be able to put myself in their shoes. Still, the way they treated their son makes me ask whether they truly understood the love of Christ.

As Christians we claim to believe that Jesus died for the vilest offender. We make pleas for everyone to come to Christ. And yet, we somehow manage to withhold grace from those we deem to be unworthy or too dangerous to love. Are we willing to listen to Paul's instruction not to regard anyone from a worldly point of view? Are we able to love the unlovable? Do we really believe in grace?



Even after Vicki discovers the truth of Walter's past she chooses to not walk away. When he asks her why, she tells him, "I see something in

Maybe the first discussion that must take place is why their sin scares and disgusts us so much more than our own.

you, something good. You don't see it yet, but I do." Vicki's love and acceptance enables Walter to view himself as more than a sex offender.

My two years at the group home redefined grace for me. Up until then the grace I believed in was truncated and anemic, unable

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What were your initial reactions to Walter? How did he make you feel? Did this change at all throughout the film? If so, how and why?
2. With what characters did you identify? Why? Did you identify with Walter at all? Were you meant to?
3. What are your thoughts on the fact that the only person in Walter's family who will visit him is his brother-in-law? Do you sympathize with his family? Why?
4. What did you feel when the police detective continues to antagonize Walter?
5. What were your thoughts and feelings on the depictions of Walter's internal struggle throughout the film? Did it seem real to you or did you feel like you were being manipulated into feeling sorry for Walter?
6. If Christians believe that Jesus can make someone into a new creation, how should they view and treat a person who has committed a sexual offense? Does it matter if this person is a Christian or not? Why or why not?

Questions continued on page 10...

Darkened Room cont.

to love past the harsh ways the fall plays out in the lives of those around us. I was the Pharisee thanking God that I wasn't the Tax Collector. The grace I believed in was not a reflection of what the Bible describes as God's grace. As Christians we are called to forsake self-designed and self-serving grace. We are called to be conduits of God's grace.

I am not suggesting that we become reckless or naive. Nor am I suggesting a simplistic, one-size-fits-all approach. There is much discussion to be had over how to love our neighbor when that neighbor happens to be a sex offender. However, maybe the first discussion that must take place is why their sin scares and disgusts us so much more than our own. ■

~Travis Scott

Travis lives in St Louis with his wife, Brooke. He will be finishing Covenant Seminary next year, and has no idea what happens then.



...QUESTIONS CONT.

7. How might our treatment of someone influence that person's behavior and lifestyle?
8. Does your church do a good job of ministering the love of Christ to extremely broken people—including sex offenders? Do you?
9. What were your thoughts and feelings on the fight that takes place in the street towards the end of the film? On the way the film ended? Did you feel the story was resolved?
10. What are your thoughts and feelings regarding the choice of "His Eye Is On the Sparrow" as the song which played over the closing credits? Why do you think this song was chosen?
11. In what ways were the techniques of film-making (casting, direction, lighting, script, music, sets, action, cinematography, editing, etc.) used to get the film's message(s) across, or to make the message plausible or compelling? In what ways were they ineffective or misused?
12. How should those who are called to lay down their lives react to the presence of potentially dangerous people living in their neighborhoods?

Reading Saul & Genesis

Self-deception and grace

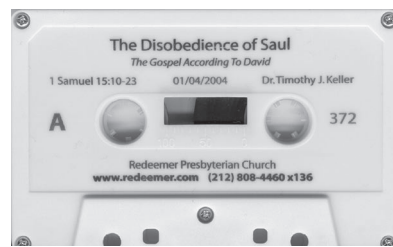
S“The human heart has an unlimited capacity to hide the truth from itself,” Timothy Keller says, “if it is too painful—to justify things that are evil because we refuse to look at it.” He said that as part of a sermon, “The Disobedience of Saul,” which he preached on 1 Samuel 15:10-23 in a series called “The Gospel According to David.” We recommend it for several reasons.

First, Keller is wonderfully gifted at communicating the Scriptures in a way that makes the truth accessible, even to unchurched listeners, without ever dumbing it down. As our culture has become increasingly post-Christian, few evangelicals have bothered to do the hard work of learning how to speak of their faith in a creative and winsome way that might be understood in our pluralistic world. Keller demonstrates how to do this, and is worth listening to (repeatedly) for this reason alone.

Second, the text Keller preaches from is one which raises all sorts of difficult questions and issues for the postmodern generation.

Keller addresses them directly, thus modeling a thoughtful apologetic that can speak to the hearts, minds, and imaginations of a post-modern generation.

Third, the message is Christ-centered. Much preaching on the Old Testament is moralistic today, using the stories as little more than examples for moral living—the sort of interpretation that is found, for example, in Veggie Tales. This is not, however, how Christ understood the Old Testament. After his resurrection he walked with two disciples to the city of Emmaus. “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets,” Luke records, “he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (24:27). Keller’s treatment of the Old Testament is always centered on Christ, not by appending a “gospel presentation” on the end, but by showing how the text reveals the grace of God fulfilled in Christ.



And finally, the message is practical without descending into some sort of self-help how-to formula for self-improvement. Because Keller’s message is Christ centered, the answer to our problem is always rooted in grace.

Actually, we recommend all Rev Keller’s messages to you (on tape or CD), but this one (#372) in particular. Listen to it, as we do, to be nourished spiritually, and then listen to it a second time, to learn better how to understand the Scriptures and to talk about the truth of God’s word in a way that can be understood by those who do not share our Christian convictions and values. ■

Resource: To order tapes or CDs of Rev Keller’s messages, download a catalog, or subscribe, visit Redeemer Presbyterian online (www.redeemer.com).

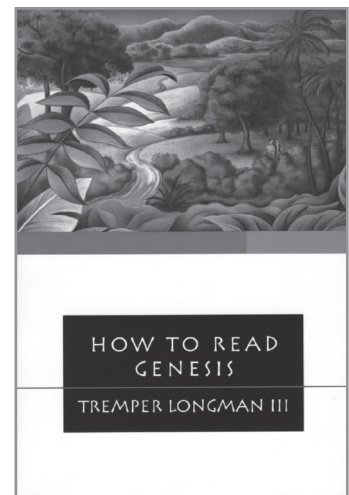
Understanding the beginning

UEven a cursory reading of Genesis reveals how crucial this book is to the story which unfolds in Scripture. The opening chapters tell us about Creation and Fall, and the promise of a coming Redeemer given by God sets the stage for all that follows. Crucial though it might be, however, the book of Genesis is also the source of controversy. Did Moses actually write it? Are the “days” spoken of in the first chapter 24-hour periods or longer periods of time? How extensive was the flood in Noah’s day? The list could go on.

Both the importance of Genesis and the controversy it raises means we would be wise to reflect thoughtfully on how to read and understand it. Tremper Longman, professor

of biblical studies at Westmont College, helps us do precisely that in *How to Read Genesis*. “The purpose of *How to Read Genesis*,” Dr Longman writes, “is to explore the interpretation of the book of Genesis. In the process I will present an overarching understanding of the book itself, but in addition, I want to reflect on the principles of interpretation that are most important to arriving at a proper understanding of the book.” Written with careful scholarship yet accessible to ordinary Christians, *How to Read Genesis* will sharpen your Bible study skills even as it explores the great truths revealed in Genesis.

We recommend *How to Read Genesis* to you. ■

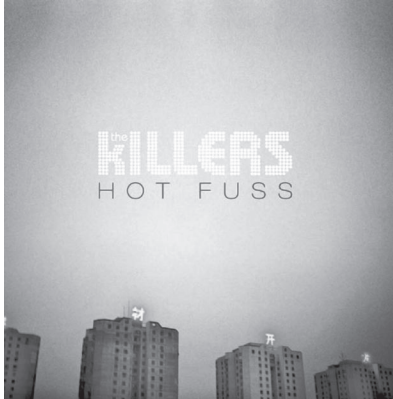


Book reviewed: *How to Read Genesis* by Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2005) 175 pp. + notes + appendix + indices.

~Denis Haack

Critique #5 - 2005

Art and Artifice



The Popularity of Posers and The Killers' *Hot Fuss*

Popular music consists of a world of competing values. On one hand pop music reviewers, with their storehouse of knowledge about rock'n'roll history and musical genres, are ever on the search for genuine originality—the next new thing. Creativity and authenticity reign as values of high importance. These reviewers represent musical purists.

On the other hand, popular music consumers want music that somehow connects with their lives, makes few demands, and, in keeping with the dominance of neo-romantic sentiments, produces feelings they feel—whether anger, despair, or euphoria. Record companies that sign and promote new artists have no commitment to musical or cultural values—for them it's all about what sells plus nothing. Consequently, pop music tends toward the most common and primal desires in search for the largest market share. It tends toward the antinomian, transgressive, and nihilistic. While there are rock'n'roll musicians whose talent is undeniable and message powerful, it is also true that much that hits the airwaves on rock music stations is less than character or culture building.

And yet there is among almost all rock music aficionados a highly refined authenticity meter. Posers are considered losers, because there is a widespread feeling among young adults that commercial success requires critical compromise. In time the successful will sell out, if they didn't already on their way to the top. The premise behind these judgments is that one can tell what is real and what is fake. But under the conditions of postmodernity, it's no longer as easy to make this distinction, and perhaps in the end, one shouldn't really care. Architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable has suggested that Americans prefer

a good fake to a bad real, a slick lip-synch to strained vocals. Illusion and reality are losing their distinctiveness. Nowhere is this blurring more pronounced or accepted than Las Vegas—the epicenter of this cultural phenomena (Disney's Orlando runs a close second). Here as Baudrillard notes, "Illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible." What happens in Las Vegas stays in Las Vegas, because what happens is not really real.

So one takes note when *Rolling Stone* asks, "What does it mean that one of the early 21st century's best British bands is actually from Las Vegas?" The band that they were referring to is the enormously popular band, The Killers and their initial album, *Hot Fuss* (2004). The album has sold 2

million copies reaching the top 30 albums on Billboard. Besides extensive radio airplay for their two singles, "Somebody Told Me" and "Mr. Brightman," they were offered the headline

slot at England's prestigious Glastonbury Festival in June, asked to play for this summer's Live8 concert in Hyde Park on July 4, and will open later this summer for U2 in Amsterdam. They are a group on everyone's radar. A true phenom.

Apart from their commercial success, one cannot help noting the consistent beating that they have taken in the rock press. Wildly popular, they have been widely panned—as retro-posers—



and now, we'd need to add, wealthy retro-posers.

It's true that their roots are Las Vegas where they had their beginnings working on the strip as a bellhop (songwriter and vocalist, Brandon Flowers) and wedding chapel photographer (drummer, Ronnie Vannucci). Their website proudly embraces their "Sin City" roots: "The unique habitat in which our subjects developed, their native characteristics shaped by external factors would go towards creating a band so clearly the product of their environment and yet so perfectly adapted to becoming a truly dominant species in the world of pop."

And so it was that when the band was formed in 2002 that they took their cue from a New Order video about a mythic perfect band with great songs, youth, and glamorous looks, named, you guess it, "The Killers." New Order, for those not familiar with the band, was one of the most influential and mysterious British post-punk bands of the 80s. The real Killers (Brandon Flowers, David Keuning, Mark Stoermer, and Ronnie Vannucci) set out to fulfill New Order's video prophecy. "It gave me the ambition that our actual band should be as perfect as their fictional band," says Flowers.

Named for a fictional band from a video of a now defunct 80s group, The Killers used their undeniable talent to package a starkly Anglophile sound and look. They would be more British than the British. They took the Isle by storm doing their first gigs outside of Vegas in the UK. (Some of the band members had never been issued passports before this trip.) BBC's Chris Long writes, "It was inevitable, given the number of 80s revivalists currently packing venues up and down the country, that one band would finally mix every single artist from that decade into one sound." Johnny Loftus adds in *Pitchfork Review*, that one is "unable to separate the hype from its unabashedly referential sound." The list of "sounds-like" is long: Simple Minds, U2, The Cure, New Order, Joy Division, Duran Duran, Echo

and The Bunnyman, and The Smiths. Loftus concludes, "It's plain that The Killers have made a record more concerned with artifice than artistry."

Posers are considered losers, because there is a widespread feeling among young adults that commercial success requires critical compromise.

Their website describes their debut album, *Hot Fuss* (2004), as "eleven nuggets of reel-you-in storytelling genius and musical nectar," which, while expected, is over the top. Here is a collection of well produced, hard rocking songs about obsessive love, murder, stalkers, and dashed expectations—pretty common rock fare, if not especially uplifting. Three songs bear closer attention because of their connection to the theme of artifice.

The first is The Killer's first hit single, "Somebody Told Me." It tells the story of a man trying to pick up a woman in a bar ("Breaking my back just to know your name / Seventeen tracks and I've had it with this game"). His expectations are low, but his motivation high—he's on the prowl ("But heaven ain't close in a place like this / Anything goes but don't blink or you might miss"). Then in the midst of this ritualized male seduction, he hears a disturbing rumor about the woman he is currently pursuing ("Never thought I'd let a rumour ruin my moonlight")—she's been dating his former girlfriend.

*Well somebody told me
You had a boyfriend
Who looks like a girlfriend
That I had in February of last year
It's not confidential
I've got potential*

In a world of gender ambiguity—where straight, gay, and bi- mingle indiscriminately at the bar and on the dance floor— appearances are often not what one expects. It's hard to get serious about relationships or reality if appearances are assumed to be artifice. "Illusion is no longer possible, because



**by
Dr.
David
John
Seel,
Jr.**

the real is no longer possible.” Nothing really is as it seems. Does the “real” really matter? Who defends it from the commercial consequences of spin on steroids? Who defends it from the gender bending confusion of modern relationships (the headline reads, “Gay on the Streets, Straight in the Sheets”)? Back to the song—the man at the bar is genuinely confused (“I said maybe baby please / But I just don’t know now”). And so are many contemporary young people, who are negotiating relationships in a world where everything and anything goes and nothing can be taken for granted.

When I went to Barnes & Noble to buy *Hot Fuss*, the CD cashier commented on how much she like The Killers. Not-

We live in a world where we accept artifice, strangers sleep with strangers, where the real doesn't really matter, where intimacy is the name of a perfume, where words and lyrics of songs are said to bear no connection to reality.

ing that I was a “parent-type,” she added, “It’s a clean album. There’s no ‘Parent Advisory’ label.” Feeling really old, I returned to the car with the assumption, “Good, in spite of being an album by a group called The Killers, here’s one for the kiddies.”

So you can imagine my surprise when the opening track on the album, “Jenny Was a Friend of Mine,” described the murder of a girlfriend by an obsessive lover. Now questioned by police the

guilty lover pleads his case.

*She said she loved me, but she had
somewhere to go*

*She couldn't scream while I held
her close*

I swore I'd never let her go

Tell me what you want to know

*Oh come on, oh come on, oh come
on*

*There ain't no motive for this crime
Jenny was a friend of mine*

And this song is a part of a trilogy about rape and murdering young women—

“Jenny Was a Friend of Mine,” “Midnight Show,” and “Leave the Bourbon on the Shelf” (the unreleased conclusion). About the murder trilogy their webpage chirps,

“It’s a deliciously ambitious series that belies the band’s tender years, and they’ve already decided they’ll be calling on our favorite dark lord actor, James Spader, for the video.”

*Oh crashing time can't hide a
guilty girl*

*With jealous hearts that start
with gloss and curls*

*I took my baby's breath beneath
the chandelier*

Of stars in atmosphere

And watched her disappear

Into the midnight show

It would seem at this point that some measure of discernment should kick in.

I’ve been fascinated along with many others about the disappearance of Natalie Holloway in Aruba. I wonder if The Killers’ latest album was played on the night of May 30th at Carlos’ n Charlie’s. We



live in a world where we accept artifice, strangers sleep with strangers, where the real doesn’t really matter, where intimacy is the name of a perfume, where words and lyrics of songs are said to bear no connection to reality. Rape and murder

happen, but they are not entertainment or blithely reduced to dance tunes and guitar

riffs. Ask Natalie’s mom. The real really matters and those young people who are sensitive to artifice in art are to be highly commended.

The Killers have produced their cynical reviews—posers, yes, but oh the beat. Anthony Miccio writes for *Stylus*, “Instead of crying about Jet or The Killers being a bunch of idiot posers, one should celebrate how they represent the increase of danceability and playfulness on sluggish rawk radio. It’s actually more cynical than pining for some messianic figure to smash the system and it let’s you save that precious ulcer-space for something more worthwhile.” This is a more cynical response. “Dance on and to hell with reality.” In fact, reality will have the last dance. ■

~John Seel

John Seel is the headmaster of South Shore Christian Academy. His most recent book is Parenting Without Perfection: Being a Kingdom Influence in a Toxic World (Navpress). He lives with his wife, Kathryn,

Places and Stories

From Ai to Ur

The story of Scripture is set in history, and so geography is a part of the narrative. Thus as we read the Bible we come across numerous place names that are central to the story yet about which we may know little. Now Richard Losch, a retired Episcopal rector, comes to our aid with *The Uttermost Part of the Earth*. It is an unfortunate title, since at first glance it might sound as if it is a book on missions; in Acts 1:8 Jesus told his disciples they would be in witnesses to “the uttermost part of the earth.” On the other hand, that may be a problem only for the few of us who remember how the old King James Version translated the phrase.

The Uttermost Part of the Earth has 76 entries, including for each entry what we are told in Scripture about that place, as well as the latest findings of archeologists and historians. And Losch includes a few surprises, like Sepphoris, a city that is never mentioned in the Scriptures but which was an important cultural center in Galilee in Jesus’ day. Some brief excerpts to whet your appetite:

From *Nineveh*: “Nineveh was located on the east bank of the Tigris River, across from

the site of the modern city on Mosul in Iraq... The name apparently comes from the Assyrian word *nina* or *ninuwa*, and the cuneiform symbol for it consists of a fish in an enclosure. Nina was the river goddess. This is interesting in consideration that Jonah was swallowed by ‘a great fish’ (Jonah 1:17).”

From *Sodom and Gomorrah* (commenting on the story of their destruction by “fire and brimstone”): “The region around the Dead Sea is prone to earthquakes, and beneath the area there are large oil and natural gas deposits. It is perfectly reasonable that an earthquake destroyed the city and ruptured the rock the capped a gas or oil deposit. With the rush of natural gas meeting a spark or cooking fire, the entire city would have been engulfed in a searing holocaust.”

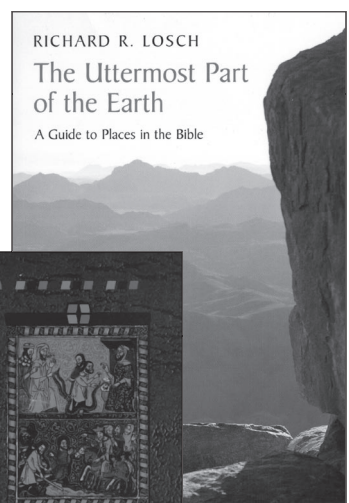
From *Ur of the Chaldeans*: “Today it is generally accepted that the Tell el-Muqayyar in the southern part of Iraq is the biblical Ur. The ruins there date back to 5500 bce, with levels indicating that the city was finally abandoned about 300 bce. One fascinating level is a heavy layer of alluvial silt that many scholars believe was deposited in the Great Flood described in Genesis and the Gil-

gamesh Epic.”

The Uttermost Part of the Earth will be handy to keep nearby as you read and study the Bible. It can also be simply read on its own, since the story of each place is fascinating on its own merits. Losch weaves together ancient traditions, Biblical data, and the discoveries of scholars in a simple, accessible style.

We recommend that you add *The Uttermost Part of the Earth* to your library. ■

Book recommended: *The Uttermost Part of the Earth: A Guide to Places in the Bible* by Richard R. Losch (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; 2005) 245 pp. + maps + pronunciation guide + index.



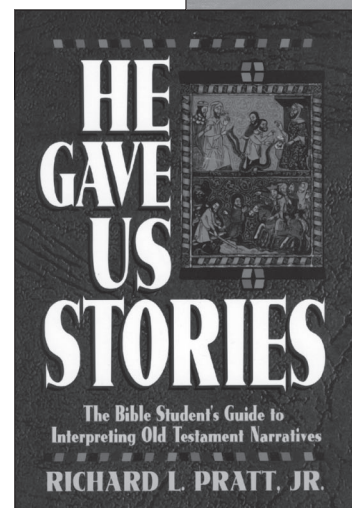
Interpreting stories

Dr. Richard Pratt is a professor and scholar; though *He Gave Us Stories* addresses a very important topic, it needs to be studied rather than read. Case in point: the endnotes run for 70 full pages. “In this book,” Pratt writes, “we are going on a dig into the ancient texts of Old Testament narratives. We will make preparations for our work, investigate the Old Testament in its ancient world, and apply our discoveries to modern life. If we overlook any of these steps, our work with Old Testament narratives will be incomplete.”

As the Bible unfolds the story of Creation, Fall, Redemption and Consummation, it doesn’t only supply propositions about

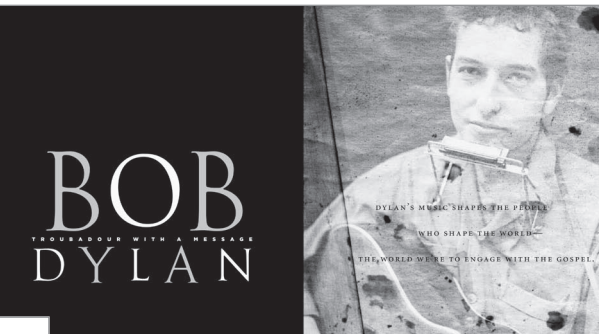
truth, but rather tells stories of real people in real history. In the process God reveals himself to us, we learn how his grace enters our broken world, and we find that if we read with understanding, the biblical story can make sense of the story of our lives. Pratt’s *He Gave Us Stories* can help us in this crucial process of reading, analysis, and discovery. ■

Book recommended: *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student’s Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* by Richard L. Pratt, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed; 1990) 402 pp. + notes + indices.




~Denis Haack

On the Web



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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.

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