

Notes from TOAD HALL

Issue #4 - 2005
the Holiday Issue



Offhanded Joy

DEDICATED:

To my friends who helped the homeless of Louisiana.

To those whose ate mangoes on a beach in Hawaii while their water pipes burst and leaked through the ceilings and walls of their house in Minnesota.

To all my friends sorting through ex-loves, current loves, illnesses, and the postcards of their dead mothers:

I dedicate this Holiday Issue of *Notes From Toad Hall*.

One reason God made children is because they're gifted at making offhanded joy in the midst of some pretty intense circumstances. Jeremy Huggins reports on his blog (<http://junk-mail.chattablogs.com/>) that "A few days ago, a two-year-old girl vomited all over the table where I was sitting. She looked down at the vomit, looked up at me, laughed, and said, 'Jeremy, I frowned up.'" Jeremy is not a father. Which, strangely, increases the joy of this, don't you think?

Although I can't trump a child in giving such spontaneous joy, I can give you a few miscellaneous items that might make you look up from the table long enough to smile a minute or two.

AN ETHNIC JOKE

My Aunt Beatty Frolander, who herself was as Swedish as a meatball, fondly called my mother a "Dumb Svede," even though Mom is not a blonde, and even though last fall she shot a buck from her bathroom window. This doesn't mean as her daughter I'm as smart or as good a shot, but it does make me Scandinavian which means I get to tell my people's jokes.



Mom with Buck. Hunters, plz note white pants & earrings.

At Farmer's Market, Denis and I overheard a grizzled Norwegian tell this to a circle of old guys who slapped their thighs in appreciation:

Sven, Ole, and his wife, Lena, were ice fishing on a little lake in Minnesota. After they fished awhile, Ole asks Lena if she'll walk across the lake over there to Johnson's bait shop and buy him some beef jerky. She says, "Ya, I s'pose I will. Do you have any money?" Ole says, "No but you can just put it on my account there,

then." They watched her walk about half a mile across the ice, and Sven finally says, "Ole, how come you didn't give her some cash, I know you got some there in your pocket? And Ole replied, "I didn't know how thick the ice was."

YOU'LL FEEL BETTER

This time of year we hit the eggnog and the pecan fudge pretty hard, but if you want something good—and aren't on some cruel variation of the Atkin's Diet—something so tasty, so healthy, (especially if you go organic) then make this, or get someone to make it for you. You can eat



Denis Eats Granola

this anytime in moderation. It makes a great gift for someone who has everything. Or nothing. It's from my friend, Mary Jane Clark who'd be glad to share it. Mary

Jane isn't around anymore. She's either resting, all healed from her cancer, or possibly she's eating granola and laughing with her first husband who left her via the windshield of a car one dark night when their children were small. In any case, I know nothing is dark for her now.

We used to eat this together in the morning, watching her cats stalk the butterflies in her garden in the foothills of Colorado's San Juan Mountains. I think if you make this and eat it you'll feel better about most things. You'll definitely be more regular.

Mary Jane's Granola

12 C. regular (thick-cut or long-cooking kind) oatmeal

1 C. of each of the following:

- sesame seeds
- oat bran
- powdered soy milk
- sunflower seeds
- nuts (pecans, cashews, whatever)

2 C. coconut

1 t. salt

2 t. cinnamon (optional)

Mix together in a large bowl.

In a small saucepan heat the following until the sugar is dissolved. Add to oatmeal mixture. Stir until well-coated.

1 T. vanilla

2/3 C. honey

2/3 C. brown sugar

2/3 C. olive oil

2/3 C. water

Place in 9x13 cake pans (makes 4 pans). Bake about 35 minutes at 350° until light brown and crisp, stirring several times. The recipe can easily be reduced. Before packaging in zip-lock bags add raisins, dried cranberries, or chopped dried apricots.

THE IRONY OF GOD

Irony is, as English majors know, "the incongruity between what actually happens and what might be expected to happen, especially when this disparity seems absurd or laughable." I especially enjoy irony in someone else's life, like Jeremy and the vomit. I'm not as keen on personal demonstrations, but irony

happens. This is a story dedicated to the incongruity of God's mercy and who I actually am.

If you make this and eat it, you'll feel better about most things. You'll definitely be more regular.

In a large room decorated with construction cones, tool belts, and key chains with tiny replicas of hammers and screw drivers as party favors, women sat around tables eating fabulous desserts, and, I supposed, contemplating the metaphor (*Extreme*

Makeovers) surrounding them. Husbands and sons, awkward in the role of waiting tables, threaded between us with carafes of coffee and tea. I nervously waited to be introduced as the main event for a church's gathering of un-churched friends and neighbors. Before I came to speak, Darcy, (not her real name) was on the program to give a kind of summary of what God has done in her life—Christians call it a "testimony." A diminutive, young woman with beautiful eyes, Darcy stood behind the podium, and told us about her fifteen lost years that began with a little bulimia and ended with her as a sixty-eight pound anorexic and abuser of alcohol and prescription drugs. Like addictions will do, they demanded everything from her, not only her body weight, but a few small items like her heart, liver, friends, family, and husband.



Norah Jones

All she had left was this tiny, little shred of life, when her younger brother came to her to tell her he, too, was giving up. He told her, "You have ruined your life. You've ruined ours. When are you ever gonna change?" Assuming she wouldn't, he sat beside her crying for a long time and then left without hope. She'd been confronted many times, but something about her little brother completely broke her heart, and she marks that time as the turning point of her life. That night she threw everything down before God and cried out, "Help me. I need you. I want you."

That was two years ago and the beginning of Christ's remarkable redemption of her life. We sat at the same table together—I met her mother and her grandmother. Her husband was there too; he was out in the hall with their "miracle" baby in his arms—a round-faced, laughing little girl. He paced back and forth outside the auditorium praying for his wife. As Darcy got up, I saw her mom squeeze her hand and say, "You'll do fine." And she did. Darcy cried from the moment she began her talk until she ended with this passage from Jeremiah:

"I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." (Jer. 29: 11)

After this lovely story of amazing grace, it was my turn. It took about one second to realize that the beautiful Norah Jones had just opened for Margie Haack. What I needed to do was praise God, buy the CD, and go home. But I'd driven 250 miles to be there, and they'd also gotten me this nice hotel suite with a nifty bedside radio and an ice maker IN THE ROOM. I knew I had to face these women and begin with a confession. Then they could leave if they wanted since they'd already eaten their dessert and heard

Darcy. Of course, confession is not entirely foreign land for me. It's just that what I must confess is so...well, you would think, for a Christian my age, it would be—avoidable. So as they dabbed their eyes, I plunged ahead.

Last summer in the space of a few weeks, I received more invitations to speak than I had in the previous two years altogether. I was beginning to wonder if God was sending me a message. Like, you're an okay person even if you're a little bit discouraged and haven't cleaned the vegetable drawer in the refrigerator for six months. It's true most of the invitations were not destinations, unless you've heard of Onalaska, WI or Hinckley, MN. I just wasn't up to adding an itinerary to my already anxious, over-wrought life. So I turned them all down except for this one, which I accepted by accident, though God may think otherwise. I was having a weak moment when I listened to the message my friend, Lisa, left on the answering machine about the possibility of speaking at her church. I had just listened to the message when the mail

arrived with one of my favorite clothing catalogs—which I usually throw away. But this time I said to my husband, as I leafed through, "If I find an outfit I like I'll say yes." It'd been three years since I'd actually shopped for anything special. I won't mention which catalog because if I say it was K-Mart you might think I'm cheap and sleazy. But if I say Neiman Marcus, you'll wonder how I could afford *them*, which obviously I can't.

I was stunned to find something I really liked. I even lapsed into Minnesotan, yelling, "Oh, fer cue-it!" Then I laughed, and looking at the ceiling, I announced, "I was only joking." Then I felt so pagan, I only hoped God had a sense of humor. So to be on the safe side, I decided I'd better say yes to this invitation.

The irony deepened when I learned the theme for the evening was going to be "*Extreme Makeover, Inside Edition*." And how we are often tempted and trapped into living as if the only important thing is how we look on the outside. I should have just bailed. But I didn't. Somehow, in my talk I managed to segue into the idea that the central reality of our lives needs to be Jesus and that anything else we place there, even if it's a good thing, will eventually break our hearts. Which lately has been at the core of what I continue to learn about the Christian life.

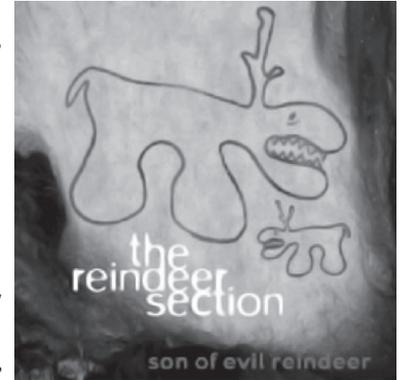
Wherever Denis or I speak, we're kindly invited to put out free samples of Ransom's publications and a sign-up sheet for our mailing list, which I did. At the end of the evening most of my samples were left and only two people signed up for our mailing list. By human measures this event was not a high point for our ministry. But you never know for certain what God can do with the material he has to work with.

One thing, I'm still here, alive, and not so ashamed that I can't lift my head and appreciate the irony of my existence—which isn't divine oversight—it's strictly a matter of God's loving mercy and grace.

Irony is the incongruity between what actually happens and what might be expected to happen, especially when this disparity seems absurd.

LIP-SYNC THIS

The next day on the drive home I listened to music—to one song in particular, not from a Christian group as far as I know. Often, unaware, unbeknownst to the composer, a song becomes a hymn for those who recognize God in places where we least expect him. I sang heartily along with them to “You Are My Joy.” (From Reindeer Section’s CD *Son of Evil Reindeer*. I wish you’d listen to a sample on iTunes or Amazon.) The words are mostly a repetition of the title which normally makes me think the songwriter was either in a trance or accidentally pressed the “repeat” button too many times. But it works here, and I love this song. I thought of my desire to make Jesus central to all my reality and that if he were with me, I’d dedicate the song to him. Because after all I’ve eaten and drunk in this life, he is still the best thing, my joy. Then, I thought, that if (if!) he really were with me, he might sing it to *me*. This notion of us being his joy is from Hebrews 12 which tells us he endured the cross “and the shame” for the “joy set before him.” What he did not have before the cross—was us. So I continued to lip-sync, “You are my joy, you are my joy, you are my joe-oh-oh-wee” on both our behalf’s. ☺



Ransom Notes

SOME OF WHAT’S COMING UP:

January 9-13. Covenant Seminary, St. Louis. Denis teaches a J-Term course: “Film and Theology.”

January 20-22. Ransom Fellowship Annual Board Meeting, Rochester, MN. Ransom’s Board of Directors will meet in our home.

February 3-5. Carmel, Indiana Christ Community Church. Denis will give a seminar “Relating to Christ and Culture” at the Men’s conference for Ohio Valley Presbytery. (info@cccarmel.com)

February 17-19. L’Abri Conference, Rochester, MN. “Living in a Brave New World.” Denis will be giving a plenary session and workshops. I will be giving two workshops. Email Rochester@labri.org for more information.

March 10-12. Providence Presbyterian Church, Concord, NC. Denis will do a Conference “Faithful Living in a Changing Culture.” For more information contact Pastor Steve Baldwin (704.788.8899) or log on to www.ppcnet.net.

PRAYING WITH US.

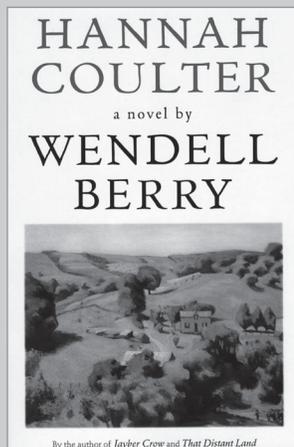
Wade Bradshaw, a worker in the English branch of L’Abri, writes in *by demonstration: God* about L’Abri’s abiding practice of prayer and trust that God will provide both the right people and the right support at the right time. They believe that when God ceases to provide financially, L’Abri will need to sell its properties and close its doors, since only the Church endures forever. “We also continue to pray for God’s guidance,” Bradshaw writes, “for the Holy Spirit truly to be with us in our decisions. All of our teaching insists (because that is what the Bible tells us) that the Creator is still active and involved in the world and its history. And because we know this we must move on from this to prayer. He is not

a do-nothing-god, a god that remains a concept from which we take only intellectual comfort.” This expresses Ransom’s belief as well.

So we pray. Denis and I desire to be more faithful in prayer. And we ask that you pray with us—that we might practice faith in the strength and wisdom God gives—in all we do. This is not so easy, as we pray in full view of the world and its overwhelming need. As our present financial resources dwindle and our expenses rise, it is more important than ever to discern what God would have us do. We wait and pray expectantly knowing God is at work and we are the beneficiaries of his great grace. ☺

Christmas 2005 Gift Suggestions from Toad Hall

Hannah Coulter by Wendell Berry (fiction).



By the author of *Jayber Crow* and *That Distant Land*

Berry's gift in writing is the powerful sense of land and geography and the simplicity and strength of the people who farm it. Berry has written many stories about the people of a small river community in Kentucky, and the reshaping of their lives through the inevitable "progress" of history that changes landscapes and families forever. Hannah Coulter is the single voice heard through the book. She is in her 70's, twice-widowed, and sorting through memories of childhood, of young love and loss, raising children, and

changing seasons. Hannah offers her gratitude for her whole life, a part of the great continuum of love and memory, grief and strength.

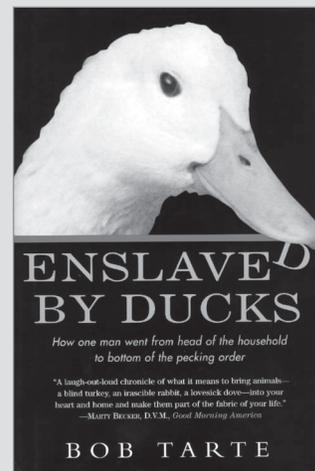
She says: "What is the thread that holds it all together? Grief, I thought for a while. And grief is there sure enough, just about all the way through. From the time I was a girl I have never been far from it. But grief is not a force and has no power to hold. You only bear it. Love is what carries you, for it is always there, even in the dark, or most in the dark, but shining out at times like gold stitches in a piece of embroidery." So drawn in are we, as readers, we just know that Hannah is a part of our own history, she's our own ancestral grandmother, and we hear her voice talking with us about ourselves. [Shoemaker & Hoard, 2004]

Enslaved by Ducks: How one man went from head of the household to bottom of the pecking order by Bob Tarte (memoir).

I recommend this book for the simple joy of being entertained by a man whose life was hijacked by animals—most of them ducks. Beginning with a belligerent rabbit who gnaws his way through electric cords, carpet, and walls, leading to a menagerie of unwanted ducks, a blind turkey, and the dove that fell in love with their parrot, Bob's life was rearranged to accommodate the ever-expanding number of fowl that needed homes. From the *Introduction*: "This morning Linda's large African grey parrot, Dusty, blocked my path to the bathroom by squaring

off on the linoleum and threatening to chomp my toes. Other times, aiming for a coffee refill, I've been forced to stay out of the kitchen rather than suffer the consequences of a starling drilling his beak into my scalp. At least our ducks and geese live in backyard pens, though trudging outside to fill their plastic swimming pools involves a trip through the basement, where two convalescing turkeys yip pathetically if I don't coo and hand-feed them grain." It's impossible not to fall just a little bit in love with Bob, the reluctant pet owner, and Linda, his heroic, generous wife.

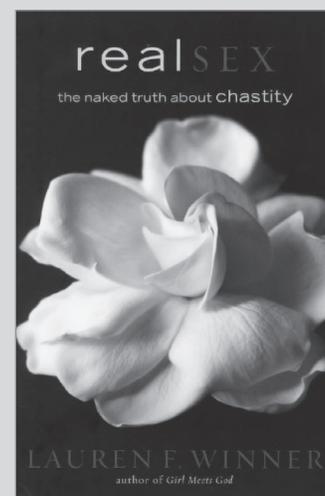
[Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2003]



Real Sex: The naked truth about chastity by Lauren F. Winner (non-fiction).

Lauren Winner, author of *Girl Meets God*, takes on thorny topics of sexuality, topics often addressed by Christians with churchy platitudes. As one immersed in the second wave of feminism, Winner had to rebuild a healthy view of sexuality as a Christian single and now a newly married woman. She is articulate, thoughtful, and discerning. Pastor Steve Baldwin writes, "she deals astutely with both the lies the culture tells us and the lies that the church has told us. She illustrates the predicament of so many of us with the story of learning to play the cello with a wrong bow hand position. She used that position for years, and then with a change of teachers learned that it was wrong. Even so, after more years of using the correct technique the old habits often asserted themselves. Winner applies this to the way we ingrain ourselves, the way we create a template, which we bring to our practice of sexuality, and into marriage, and how those habits militate against chastity in singleness and fidelity in marriage. Her book gives me hope for continuing to cultivate a healthy, passionate, celebrative, and chaste understanding of sexuality." I commend this to every Christian regardless of age or stage of life.

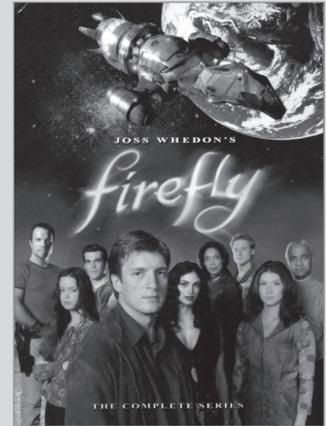
[Brazos Press, 2005]



Christmas 2005 Gift Suggestions from Toad Hall

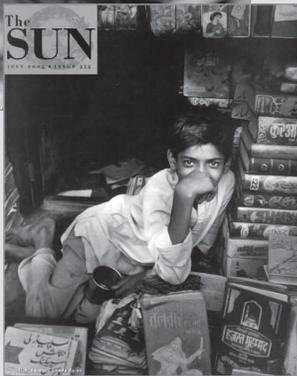
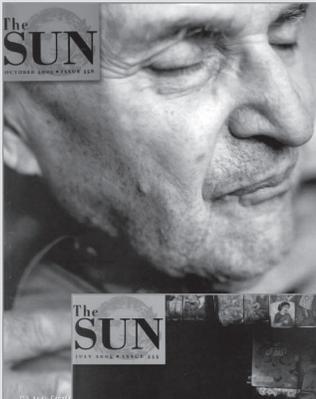
Firefly, The Complete Series (DVD).

Three years ago Fox iced the best series TV has seen in years. Should that baffle us? Anyway, now you can buy it on Amazon—then see the movie, *Serenity*, a sequel made with the original actors. It's a very funny, very cool, very smart, sort of a western set in space. They even ride horse-back sometimes. Dripping with authenticity, *Serenity* is the signature starship of the Firefly-class merchant ships, salvaged, and captained by Malcolm Reynolds, an ex-soldier from a galactic civil war. Everything about it looks used, and yet the community that exists on board appeals to our desire for home and family wherever we are. The characters of the crew and passengers are deeply developed as they struggle to survive on the fringes of colonized space. They face constant threats from scamming underworld bosses, bounty hunters, the bestial Reavers—"If they catch us they'll board us, rape us to death, eat our flesh, and sew our skins into clothing. If we're very lucky it will be in that order." (The Captain's character alone would be a lively discussion of what makes a good leader.) Plots are creative and twisted just slightly past my ability to predict. I am simultaneously amused, terrified, and charmed about five or six times each episode. It's exhausting. Give these to someone who's intelligent, enjoys humor, irony, and doesn't mind people who swear in a tribal language. Check first if it's for a twenty-something. Most of them know and love this series already. [Available on Amazon, Best Buy Stores, etc.]



The Sun (literary magazine).

A monthly magazine out of Chapel Hill, NC that's been around a few years, but no one ever mentioned it to me. I'd like to know why, for it makes me resentful. I've been receiving *The Sun* for six months and it's the only thing I read cover to cover



every issue. (I'm not this devoted to the cartoons in *The New Yorker*.) Each issue contains essays, memoirs, fiction, poetry, photography, and an interview

with someone interesting. The editor is unafraid to include authors with obvious religious beliefs—East and West. Some writers I recognize, many I don't. There is a "Reader's Section" of

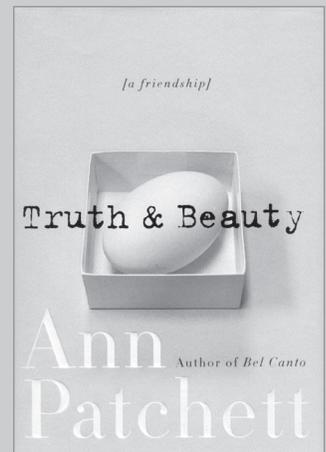
shorts submitted by readers on a designated topic. Recent topics: Playing With Fire, Coffee, Saturday Night, Taking a Stand. These little pieces are amazing, powerful submissions that leave me wanting to join them. No advertising is included, so subscriptions run a little high, but so worth it. \$19.00 for six months. \$36.00 for a year. *The Sun*, Subscription Dept., P.O. Box 469061, Escondido, CA 92046-9061. Tel. (888)732-6736. www.thesunmagazine.org

Truth & Beauty by Ann Patchett (non-fiction).

Ann Patchett, author of *Bel Canto*, met Lucy Grealy in 1981 when they were both students in college. After Lucy's death in 2002, Ann wrote about their 20 year friendship and what it's like, in the end, to love someone you cannot save. *Truth & Beauty* reflects the parts of their lives that were interwoven from young writers at the Iowa Workshop, through the painful surgical wards in Scotland, to book parties in New York. Patchett's writing always shines, but so do their lives. Patchett isn't just a curator of Grealy's life, she almost gives us more insight into who Lucy was than Lucy does in her autobiography. Among the many things that fascinated me about this book were questions about the cost of giving in friendship and where the boundaries exist, if they do.

"That was part of Lucy's genius in having so many friends. We all lost our patience with her, but never at the same time. If one of us was tired, there was always someone else to pick up the lamp and lead her home. It would have been me again, I know that. There was a time, just a moment that night in the Park Avenue Café, I had thought I could let her go. But now I know I was simply not cut out for life without her. I am living that life now and would not choose it. If Lucy couldn't give up heroin, I could not give up Lucy."

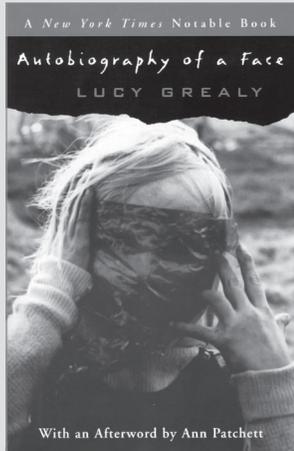
[HarperCollins Publishers, 2004]



Christmas 2005 Gift Suggestions from Toad Hall

Autobiography of a Face by Lucy Grealy (memoir).

At age nine, Lucy Grealy was diagnosed with a cancer that required a third of her face and jaw be surgically removed. In this honest story, Grealy recounts, with wit and remarkable strength, the years of failed reconstructive surgery and her efforts to live with two warring impulses: the desire to be loved for who she was and the secret longing to be physically perfect. Though she became a successful poet and writer, and lived fiercely, her wounds were never healed. Her life-long battle to find real truth and beauty should cause us to examine what it means to be made in the image of God regardless



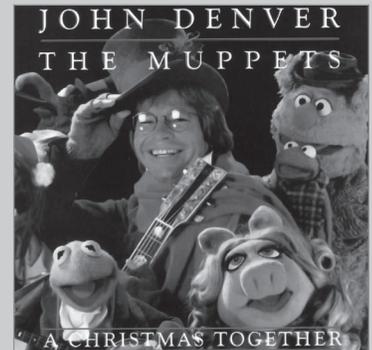
of physical image.

“I had the capacity of imagination to momentarily escape my own pain, and I had the elegance of imagination to teach myself something true regarding the world around me, but I didn’t yet have the clarity of imagination to grant myself the complicated and necessary right to suffer...I thought I simply had to accept the fact that I was ugly, and that to feel despair about it was simply wrong.” —Lucy as a young teenager.

[HarperCollins Publishers, 1994]

John Denver & the Muppets A Christmas Together (CD).

John Denver collaborated with Jim Henson and the entire Muppet Gang to put this record together. It’s a delightful collection of Christmas carols and songs that kids will love. I still laugh when Miss Piggy says in her most affronted voice, “PIGGY PUDDING?” And Kermit, corrects her, “FIG-gy Pudding.” I admit I’m a little sleazy and was seduced by the musical cheese of Gonzo and John Denver singing so sweetly you could cry:



*When the mountain touches the valley,
All the clouds are taught to fly,
So our souls will leave this land most peacefully.
Though our minds are filled with questions,
Our hearts will understand, when the river meets the sea.*

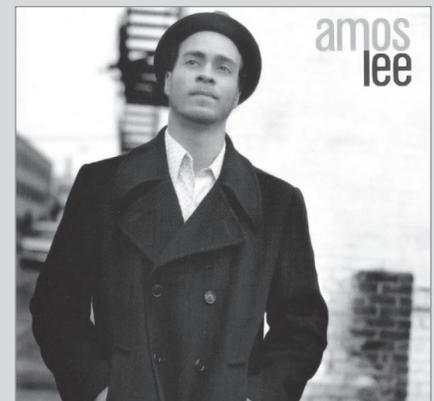
It’s the power of metaphor and the simultaneous feeling of joy and sadness that I like about this song. But I think you’ll like this mostly up-beat CD, too.

[Available on Amazon.]

Amos Lee (CD).

Amos Lee sings, “Nothing is more powerful than beauty in a wicked world”—“Soul Suckers”—and then proceeds to prove it in his debut CD. His music could be described as a fusion of folk and soul, but that fails to reflect his superb artistry that transcends genres. The arrangements are simple, bare-bones, sometimes giving the sound of an age-old spiritual as in “Black River,” or sometimes following Van Morrison into the mystical—“All my friends all live in pain, longing for the warmth of childhood to bring ‘em home again.” The opening of his “Seen It All Before” echoes “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door” by Bob Dylan. If I had a favorite track, it’d be the stunning “Arms of a Woman” which is less about passion than it is about a love that eases us through the dark and points us toward home. This is one of my favorite CDs of the year.

[Available online and in some record stores.]



Final Notes

EMANUEL, GOD WITH US

Science News (Sept. 4, 2005) reports that certain species of bees kill giant invader wasps with body heat that comes within 5° C of cooking themselves in the process. It was originally thought the wasp was stung to death by a ball of bees that surrounded it. But no, in what's called "heat



Bees heat-balling wasp

balling," the bees actually rev up the temperature by fanning their wings until the attacker dies. The wasp dies at 45.7° C while the bees can withstand just a little more before they, too, would expire.

Earlier this year I memorized a passage of Scripture because I love the imagery, the metaphor, not thinking it might be like praying for patience. Or baiting the avian flu by hanging out with sick chickens.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord, your God, ... you are precious and honored in my sight, and ... I love you, I will give men in exchange for you. (Is. 43:2-3.)

Sometimes you don't know if you're the cooker or the one getting cooked. Either way, we live in an age where we have great worries about many things. More fragile and more focused on it than ever, we expire, we leave, we give up easily when faced with difficulties and trials. When I memorized this passage, I wasn't literally thinking of floods or fires, though across the world many have faced just that. Personally, I've seen friends survive long enough to learn new meaning to the name Emanuel, "God with us." When adversity comes I need the strong reminder that God is ever with us, controlling the temp and getting heat-balled along with us. His identification with his people, his being one with us, is part of the mysterious, irresistible attraction of Christ.

That's it from Toad Hall.
Blessings and Noël from
both of us.

Warmly,

Margie

Margie Haack



Denis & Margie

Toad Hall is the name of our home, christened by our children. It is from the book *The Wind in the Willows*, a favorite of ours. In it Mole, a shy yet daring character, and Ratty, who is much nicer and more sensible than his name would imply, have many adventures along the river. One of their friends is Toad of Toad Hall. Toad is something of an aristocrat and lives in a mansion. Otherwise, he has very little to commend him and really doesn't deserve friends since he is a callous liar, lacks common sense and, well, he lives for the pleasure of the moment—which brings him no end of trouble.

When we moved to Minnesota in 1981, our children had rarely seen such tall homes with their imposing three stories. They were used to one-story adobes which rambled along in the hot New Mexico sun. So, to our children, a midwestern Gothic four-square looked amazingly like a mansion. Possibly even as great a house as Toad Hall.

Receive Notes from Toad Hall (quarterly) and Critique (a newsletter written nine times per year by my husband, Denis) by requesting to be added to Ransom's mailing list. Donors to Ransom Fellowship, a 501(c)(3) non-profit, tax-deductible ministry, are added to the mailing list automatically.

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