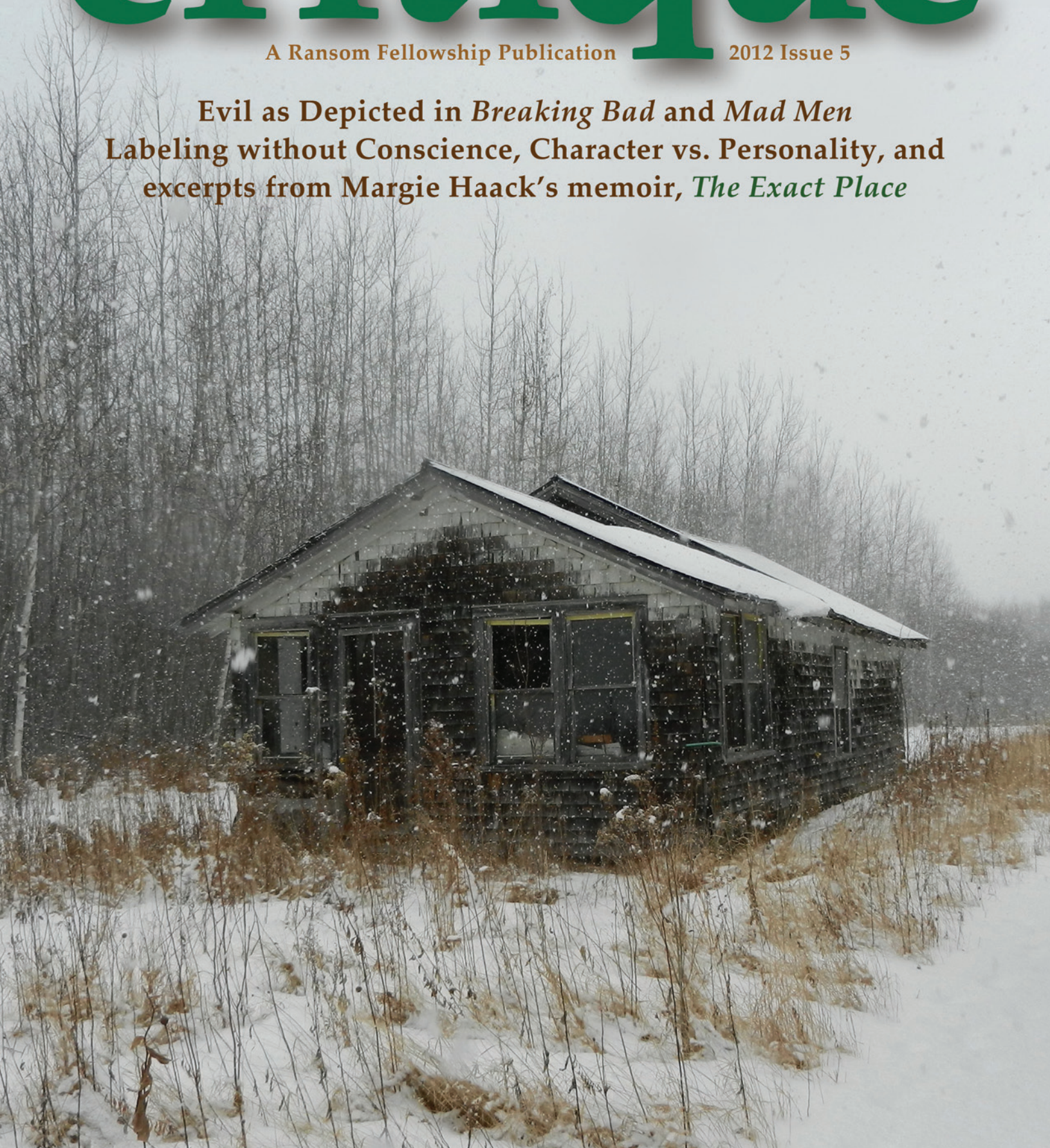


# critique

A Ransom Fellowship Publication 2012 Issue 5

Evil as Depicted in *Breaking Bad* and *Mad Men*  
Labeling without Conscience, Character vs. Personality, and  
excerpts from Margie Haack's memoir, *The Exact Place*



## CRITIQUE



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*Critique* is part of the work of Ransom Fellowship founded by Denis and Margie Haack in 1982. Together, they have created a ministry that includes lecturing, mentoring, writing, teaching, hospitality, feeding, and encouraging those who want to know more about what it means to be a Christian in the everyday life of the twenty-first century.

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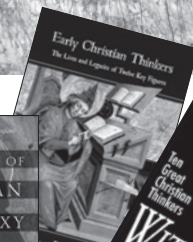
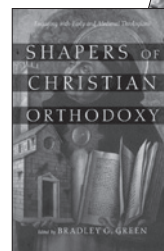
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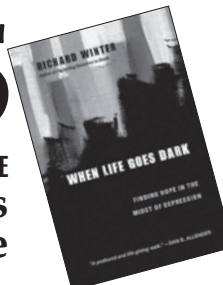
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# On Vision, Hubris, and Faithfulness

by Denis Haack



Over the last few months I've received notice of two different ventures being launched by friends.

News of the first venture arrived via email. A friend I have known for years is beginning a movement to bring the truth of Christianity to the world. He is an indefatigable man, traveling, writing, and speaking with an energy and constancy that is inspiring, intimidating, and wearying. His email told how this vision slowly formed within him, eventually causing him to move from the US to Europe to be better positioned to put it into practice. He is someone in whom a passion for the gospel burns brightly. As I read it was as if I could hear his voice, and saw how this effort fit his personality and gifts, and grew naturally out of his long experience of life and ministry. I think his ideas are interesting and might prove to be helpful to many. If he had only stopped

there, but sadly the email went on and as I read I became increasingly troubled. It is one thing to tell friends about a dream that has captured our heart and that we have come to believe might involve the prompting of God's Spirit. It is good to be committed to a movement that intends to bring the truth of Christianity to the world; it is another to launch a movement with the claim that this particular movement will reach the world as long as enough people get involved. Although my friend's prose was not as crass as this, there was even some math involved: X number of churches times Y number of believers times Z number of years = the world reached.

When does vision cease and hubris begin? The point lies between our pursuit of faithfulness and any assumption of how God might choose to use it. I have no doubt my friend has been gripped by a growing awareness of what he should seek to do as he walks day by day before the face of God. It is his vision, and it is good, and with that, it seems to me, we should be content. The rest is in God's hands, and unless my friend has access to eternal counsels I believe are closed to us mere mortals, it would be wise to be slow to claim we know how things will unfold.

The second venture arrived via a package in the U.S. mail, a book manuscript written by a friend. He sent it asking me to read it and consider submitting an endorsement. The book, a thoroughly winsome work of pastoral theology, *Sensing Jesus*, is written for anyone actively involved in Christian ministry. The author Zack Eswine, a friend I greatly admire, writes with rare authenticity as he deconstructs erroneous notions of ministry to replace

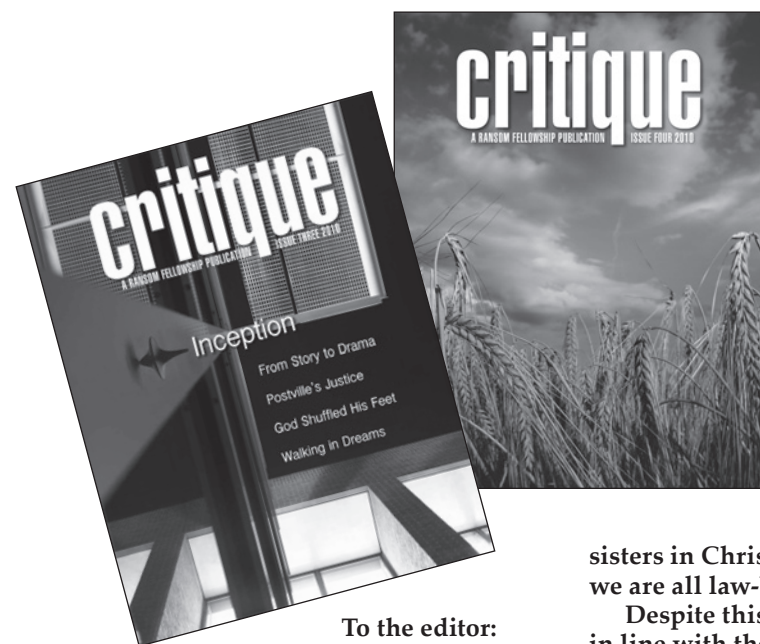
them, through a careful exposition of Scripture, with a robustly biblical one. As I read it was like hearing his voice, as I read I kept thinking, yes, Zack, this seems to me to fit your calling and giftedness admirably. "I believe," Zack writes near the beginning, "that Christian life and ministry is an apprenticeship with Jesus toward recovering our humanity and through his Spirit, helping our neighbors do the same." I read that sentence, and then read it again. Yes, I thought—exactly right.

There is a sweet aroma about that sentence. It's the aroma of humility, of speaking the truth in love.

In some respects submitting a manuscript for publication doesn't seem like a humble act. The manuscript's very existence insists you believe you have something to say, and that people should be happy to give good money for the privilege of hearing it. And yet, done as simple faithfulness, we can pursue a vision that is bigger than ourselves without falling into hubris.

We can be faithful in the ordinary, seeking grace and human flourishing, and be content to leave the rest to God. ■

## DIALOGUE: READERS RESPOND



To the editor:  
I write to you because I just finished reading Ruth DeFoster's article on immigration [*Critique* 2010:3 and 2010:4] and it has set me thinking. I have read M. Daniel Carroll R.'s book [*Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, and the Bible*] on immigration and find myself very much in line with the sentiments of his work. Indeed, it is imperative that we view our fellow human beings as made in the image of God; this is seriously lacking in popular evangelical circles where the prevailing sentiment is that undocumented immigrants are criminals and law-breakers who are interested in stealing the jobs of hard-working Americans while driving down the minimum wage. Many are castigated, treated

unfairly by employers and neighbors alike. There needs to be a serious shift in the way that we look at and treat those who are often times our fellow brothers and

sisters in Christ, and to not forget that we are all law-breakers.

Despite this, I am much more in line with the analysis of James Hoffmeier, an Old Testament (OT) and archeological scholar out of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School who is himself an immigrant, hailing from Egypt. In his book *The Immigration Crisis: Immigrants, Aliens, and the Bible*, Hoffmeier takes the reader through the OT, focusing on the Hebrew terms *ger* and *nekhar* and *zar*. The terms mean "alien" and "foreigner" (the last two are synonyms), respectively. Most of the laws in the OT that command care for the orphan and the widow also include a command to care for the *ger*. The issue is that these *ger* were people who had taken up residence in the country and were officially recognized by the nation of Israel, both beholden to its laws and receiving various social benefits, most importantly religious participation. The laws did not concern those who were *zar*, who were likely people who had taken up temporary residence or who maintained a loyalty to a foreign land. Further, Hoffmeier goes on to show how, despite the fact that

there were no nation states as we know them today, there were geographic borders at which kingdoms controlled the number of foreigners allowed to enter the nation, most of whom came for economic needs. An interesting example of this is Jacob and his family during the famine who had to ask permission of Pharaoh to settle in the land of Goshen. They simply could not settle in the land because of the famine; they would have been thrown out. So the laws that Carroll cites in his work don't necessarily apply to undocumented immigrants.

While I think that there needs to be a reassessment of the manner in which we view our neighbors who happen to be here without a visa, I do not think that we should have disregard for the law. The conversation has to be more nuanced than what we make it out to be. It seems as though we either start with Romans 13 and never get to Genesis 1, or it starts with Genesis 1 and never takes seriously Romans 13—which was written to Christians under a hostile Roman empire. We need to treat every human being with respect and dignity and to care for their needs, both physical and spiritual. This means that we need to rework many of the laws and the enforcement of those laws especially when it would separate families. I'm all for amnesty for children who were brought here when they were young and have grown up here in the U.S. But at the same time, we need to encourage our brothers and sisters to follow the laws of the land. Immigration laws as they stand are not perfect and won't be. But I'm not so sure they are unjust either.

Thoughts?

Joseph McDaniels  
St. Louis, MO

Denis Haack responds:

Joseph: I'm glad you have written—this topic remains an important one and we Christians discuss it too seldom, and as you point out, we often discuss it poorly when it comes up. I appreciate the thought and detail you put into your letter.

You are ahead of me, as I have not read Hoffmeier's book, *The Immigration Crisis*, but should. Since I have not read it, I'll not comment farther on the details you mentioned. I would note, however, that Carroll, author of *Christians at the Border*, has written an extensive review of Hoffmeier's book that calls into question the very points you raise. Carroll's review is online ([www.denverseminary.edu/news/the-immigration-crisis-immigrants-aliens-and-the-bible/](http://www.denverseminary.edu/news/the-immigration-crisis-immigrants-aliens-and-the-bible/)) and is worth reading.

It seems to me that, regardless of how we end up understanding and applying the biblical texts, a crucial first step within the church is to provide safe places where this conversation can be held. The liberal and conservative ideologies that hold sway in the public square disagree on almost everything except this, that life must be politicized if progress is to be made in solving the problems facing humankind. Sadly, this mentality has crept into Christian circles, making discussions on topics like this almost impossible. When public policy issues are granted the primacy of creedal beliefs, when the other candidate is imagined as ushering in some sort of apocalypse, when rhetoric remains shrill, uncivil, and hurtful, and when labels are raised designed to end the conversation, the believers involved have been enslaved to a form of cultural idolatry with values antithetical to their professed Christian commitment. I am grateful for the winsome tone of your remarks, and pray

God will help all of us promote safe places for more such conversations to occur.

I agree with you that, "we need to rework many of the laws and the enforcement of those laws especially when it would separate families." For although it's true that, "Immigration laws as they stand are not perfect and won't be," some things seem so wrong—and unjust—with the system in America as it stands now that it seems to me that we as Christians must push for that reworking. Conversations with relatives of mine in law enforcement assure me that both borders see a remarkable flow of criminal transport, including illegal weapons, massive quantities of drugs, and human sex trafficking. The media in my part of the country also report on multi-year investigations involving dozens (in some cases hundreds) of agents that ended with rounding up numerous families of undocumented workers for deportation. People were arrested and simply disappeared into the system, in many cases separating spouses and parents from families. No legal representation was accorded them since this is technically a civil, not a criminal offence. In almost every case the families were law abiding (except for being undocumented), far more pro-family and pro-life than the average American, and deeply religious—yet I noted many

Christians cheering this action. I assume that the actions of these law enforcement personnel reflect the laws on the books, and to the extent this is accurate, something is not right. I would even agree with the proposition that these agents need to be hard at work tracking down and arresting people that should not be in the United States. But I would argue they should be primarily assigned to go after those transporting illegal weapons, drugs, and human sex slaves—not hard working families that came here to better the lives of their children.

As you so correctly note, Carroll's reminder in *Christians at the Border* that undocumented workers are people made in the image of God must never be forgotten. May this be embraced and lived out by God's people. ■

# Evil as Depicted in *Breaking Bad*

by Jake Meador

In one of the most stunning scenes in AMC's *Breaking Bad* protagonist Walter White explains to his wife why he isn't in over his head as a manufacturer of methamphetamine, working in the hardened, dangerous world of the Mexican cartels and drug trade.

*Who are you talking to right now? Who is it you think you see? Do you know how much I make a year? I mean, even if I told you, you wouldn't believe it. Do you know what would happen if I suddenly decided to stop going in to work? A business big enough that it could be listed on the NASDAQ goes belly up. It disappears. It ceases to exist without me. No, you clearly don't know who you're talking to. So let me clue you in. I am not in danger, Skyler. I am the danger. A guy opens his door and gets shot and you think that of me? No. I am the one who knocks.*

It's a positively chilling scene that provides all the proof needed for Bryan Cranston's Emmy credentials. And it's a scene that shows what makes *Breaking Bad* more than just a phenomenal TV show, but a TV show that deserves a wider viewing amongst discerning Christians.

Stories are formative, that's where we have to begin. A good story doesn't just—or even primarily—entertain or enlighten. It shapes us. I was a different person after reading Hugo's *Les Misérables* than I was before. The same goes for Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and

Rowling's *Harry Potter* books. This is a point Jamie Smith makes very well in his *Desiring the Kingdom*. Human beings aren't primarily thinkers or even believers, but desirers and story is one of the chief players in shaping our desires. This insight also provoked C. S. Lewis to write *The Abolition of Man* in which he discussed the need for "men with chests," which was his shorthand for human beings with the intellectual ability and personal maturity to balance the rationality of the head and the visceral appetites of the stomach.

So in deciding to take in a story—be it a TV show, a movie, or a book—one of the first questions Christians ought to ask is not necessarily whether the movie has profanities in it or if it has lots of violence. Those are worthwhile questions, but not first questions. One of the biggest question to ask is in what ways will this story, based on whatever I know about it, shape my heart? Obviously there are other questions. One of special importance for readers of *Critique* is what this story tells us about the storyteller as well as the people hearing the story. Consequently, many of us choose to see a movie like *Pulp Fiction*, even though it lacks the sort of redemptive themes present in the Christian story. It's a worthwhile movie to see in order to be conversant with our neighbors. (Plus one can't deny the pleasure to be gained from watching a master like director Quentin Tarantino at work.)

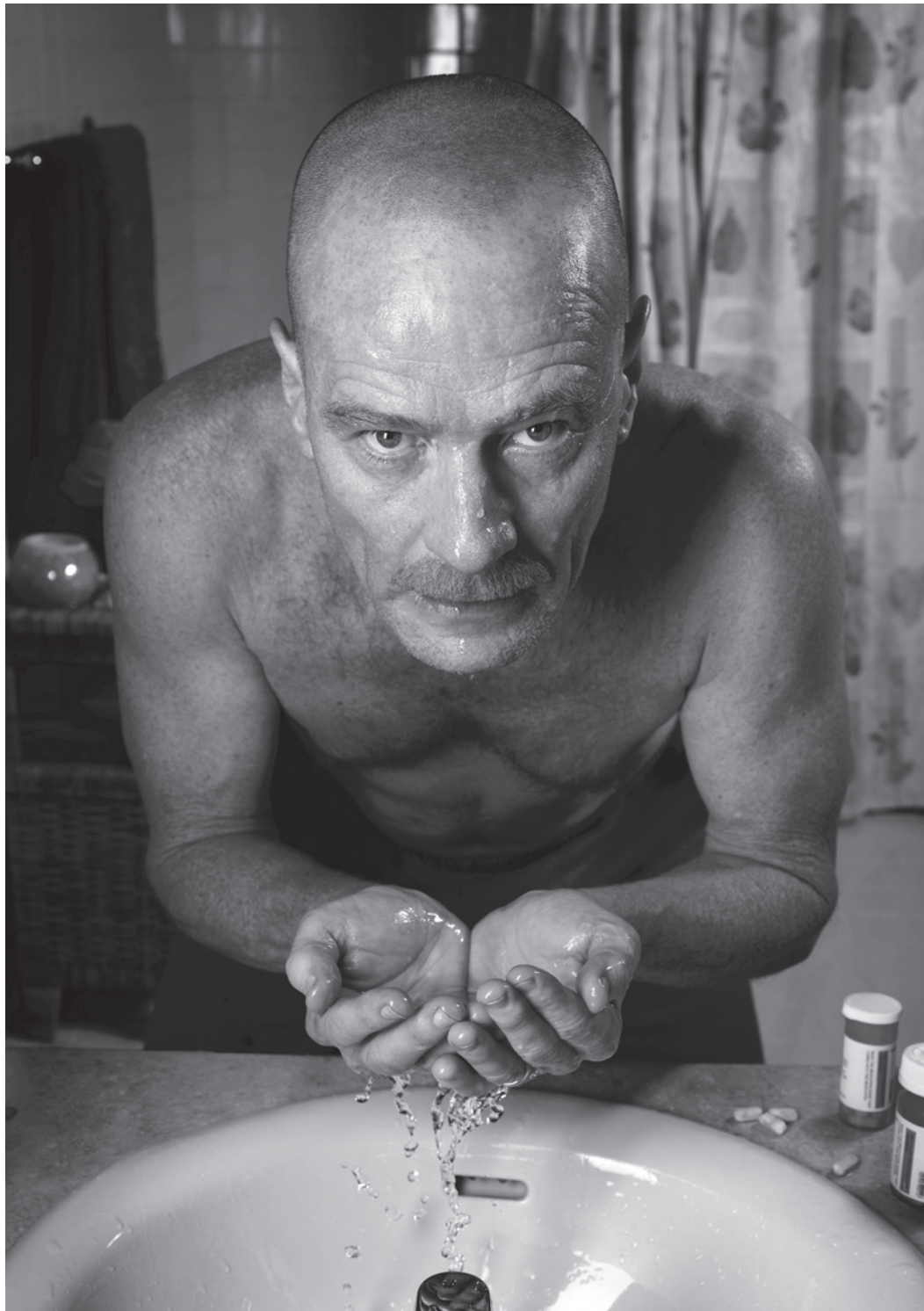
Many of us will also choose to watch a show like *Mad Men*, AMC's other runaway hit, for similar reasons. The costumes and scenery of the show are stunning, the writing is top-notch and there's a great deal to learn about our

# d and *Mad Men*

culture and ourselves from spending an hour with Don Draper and company. *Mad Men* can be a ton of fun. But many of us will choose not to watch *Mad Men* (or *Pulp Fiction*) for reasons a friend of mine summed up well when he said *Mad Men* was too decadent. The prophets warn us against those who confuse good for evil and it's hard to deny that *Mad Men* protagonist Don Draper does exactly that. Draper is neglectful of his family, almost pathologically selfish, and a sometimes-boorish alcoholic. And yet almost every man who has watched the show admits to feeling some distant (or not-so-distant) desire to be Don Draper: The suave, in-control salesman with an impeccable sense of style. The show's sheen—the glitzy settings and clothes, the impeccable writing, the bigness of the characters—can make being good seem so utterly boring and blasé. Indulging every desire, meanwhile, becomes the gateway to freedom.

Put another way: A show like *Mad Men* isn't guaranteed to do harm to your heart and mind, but it does have a way of making sin appear attractive and redemption unreachable. It's a deeply seductive tale with an ability to subconsciously transform the viewer in unhealthy ways. Simply put, it probably fails the portraying evil as good test. That's not a definitive argument against watching *Mad Men*, but it is an argument for watching it with a great deal of thought and intentionality.

And that brings us back to *Breaking Bad*. On the surface, *Breaking Bad* looks very like its fellow AMC hit *Mad Men*. Both are shot beautifully, both feature excellent acting, a bleak storyline and



a certain tendency toward the seedier aspects of life. But as Chuck Klosterman wrote for *Grantland* last year, “*Breaking Bad* is not a situation in which the characters’ morality is static or contradictory or colored by the time frame; instead, it suggests that morality is continually a personal choice.... The central question on *Breaking Bad* is this: What makes a man ‘bad’ — his actions, his motives, or his conscious decision to be a bad person?”

When the series begins, the show’s protagonist, Walter White, is a middle-aged high-school chemistry teacher enduring a job he doesn’t especially like because it’s the best way he can provide for the family he loves so much. In the pilot, he discovers that he has stage III lung cancer and, desperate to provide for his family, decides to start manufacturing methamphetamine to create a nest egg. Initially, his goal is to make about \$750,000; enough to cover the mortgage, college for both his kids and to cover any other major expenses that might arise over the next 20 years.

But as the series moves forward, Walt develops a taste for the danger of the drug trade. More importantly, the pride that had always been suppressed under a thin veneer of suburban respectability bubbles to the surface and over four seasons perverts him into a, forgive the cliché, cold-blooded killer who looks very like the men he most feared in season one. Quoting Klosterman, “[Walt’s change is] a product of his own consciousness. He changed himself. At some point, he decided to become bad, and that’s what matters.”

After I finished the second season of *Breaking Bad*, I revisited C.S. Lewis’ masterful chapter in *Mere Christianity* titled “The Great Sin.” It’s Lewis’ exploration of pride and if seeing Walter White’s downfall doesn’t provoke in you a deep fear of pride, nothing will.

The drama of the show comes from watching Walter’s transformation from a frustrated middle-class American male to the drug kingpin he becomes only a year later (in the show’s chronology). But unlike so many other shows, movies and novels with morally ambiguous heroes—think Llewelyn Moss in *No Country for Old Men*, the aforementioned Don Draper, Christopher Nolan’s Batman, or Kevin Spacey’s Lester Burnham in *American Beauty*—*Breaking Bad* is much more willing to show its protagonist in a stark and uncompromising light. Draper’s foibles and failings are dismissed as a product of

the 1960s, Moss is a basically good family man just trying to protect his family, Burnham, meanwhile, is simply reacting against the tedium of life in cubicle land, circa 1999.

What’s fascinating with *Breaking Bad* is that creator Vince Gilligan could use similar devices to explain away Walt’s behavior. He’s a family man doing whatever he can to provide for his wife and kids just like Moss; he’s a talented man who feels trapped and confined by a lifeless, tedious work environment and a staid, predictable suburban life, just like Burnham. He could even be seen as a product of post-recession economic fears, a product of his time just like Draper. All the factors that make us cautiously sympathetic to those characters are in play on one level or another with White. In fact, Skyler makes precisely that point just before Walt’s speech: He’s a good person who’s just in over his head.

But Gilligan eschews them all. What we’re left with is a grizzly, disturbing picture of human evil when all the pretense and justifications are stripped away. Walt’s “I am the one who knocks” speech is legendary, but not because it makes us more sympathetic to him. It’s not Lester smashing the plate against the wall or Llewelyn telling Chigurh he’ll be after him—scenes showing a character’s descent, but doing so in a sympathetic light. Rather, it’s the cue to us—and Walt’s wife—that we’re dealing with a radically new person. He’s no longer the frustrated, somewhat bumbling and basically good genius of season one. He’s changed and we’re encouraged to look at him the way Diane Keaton looks at Al Pacino at the end of *The Godfather*: “What’s happened to you?” It’s a mixture of horror, deep regret, and a pinch of revulsion.

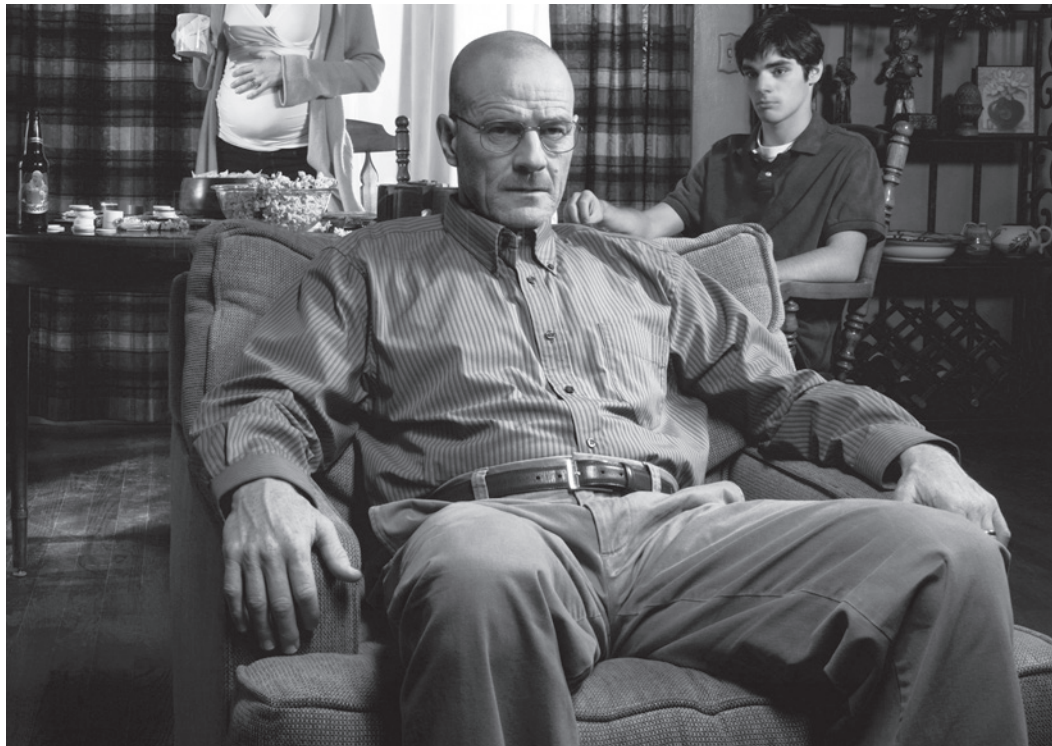
In other words, we're encouraged to think of an evil character as an evil character. Walt will always have some level of empathy because we remember who he was and why he got into the drug trade in the first place. He'll never be a true villain. But he is a thoroughly deconstructed anti-hero, an anti-hero whose failings are viewed as real failings and not as a variation of heroism. *Breaking Bad* may be grittier than *Mad Men* and it may favor a much saltier kind of language, but on this basic level the show is much closer to the Christian story than the moral quagmire of ambiguity that characterizes every character in *Mad Men*. ■

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# The Exact Place

book excerpts by Margie Haack

## THE YELLOW LADY SLIPPER

Lake Agassiz was an ancient glacial lake of the Pleistocene which covered much of present day northern Minnesota, northeastern North Dakota, and southern Manitoba. In Lake of the Woods County it receded leaving a pristine lake and two million acres of wilderness, swamps, marshes and peat-bog between the U.S. and Canada. To some, the land might look uniform—a cold cauldron of mud and water delivering up seasonal batches of mosquitoes. Geologists help us define the differences for the undiscerning eye. A swamp is lowland flooded seasonally and dominated by trees. A marsh is wetland composed more of grasses. And a bog supports a peculiar environment of sphagnum moss, heath, and slowly decaying plant matter called peat, all of which essentially float on water.

Our farm had fields cleared of timber and brush, pastures with groves of poplar and birch, and a few acres of swamp filled with a dense undergrowth of willow, hazel, and bracken. One spring as I splashed through the brush looking for cowslips, I happened upon one of North America's rare orchids: the delicate Yellow Lady Slipper, who is fond of keeping her feet wet. This delicate, slipper-shaped blossom is surrounded by variegated burgundy petals and thrives in a hostile environment. She resists most attempts to be tamed, so is rarely seen. When found, she causes you to stare: such an elegant beauty in such an unexpected place.



## COME HOME

As my mother did housework she often sang hymns, her quiet soprano fading in and out as she moved through the three rooms of our house. There was one song I hated: "Softly and Tenderly." Maybe hate is not quite right. Maybe it's more accurate to say it gave me an anxious ache, like when your favorite dog is going to die and not even a veterinarian can save it.

*See on the portals he's waiting and watching. Come home, come ho-o-ome. Ye who are weary, come home. Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling, calling, O sinner, come home.* It works well in three-part harmony, and the "ho-o-ome" part can be bent and slid around until it, too, comes on home. I recently heard it sung in what was, to me, a strange modern context — the wedding ceremony. It was nicely done as a duet accompanied by guitar and cello — not your normal

sentimental *There-Is-Love* wedding fare. Although I rather liked it, it still had the power to make me sad. I think this young couple was trying to say that as much as they desire to come home to one another and to their children, if they ever have them, the chances of making Perfect-Home-That-Never-Fails are pretty slim, and yet, lingering beneath protective layers of jaded culture and cynicism, we can't shed scraps of longing for a place where we could lie down naked, unashamed, safe, and loved. They meant, I think, to acknowledge Jesus, who promised that one day those deep longings will be granted in a way you hardly dared dream possible — that He really is the Father, the Home-keeper, who invites you in to stay with a warmth as strong as the scent of your mother's cinnamon rolls fresh from the oven.

However, back then, when Mom sang this haunting song as she kneaded bread dough, it made me think she was going to answer Jesus at any minute, and when she mused about having it sung at her funeral it confirmed my alarm. There had already been one parent's funeral and I hoped never to hear of another. She and I, and my little brother, Randy, and step-father lived in a shotgun house in northern Minnesota with more babies on the way. I didn't know what Jesus was talking about.

Mom inadvertently fed my fears one day when I was seven years old. It was noon and she was making hot dogs for lunch, and had sent me on an errand to the old granary where we kept our freezer. While I was gone she dropped a glass jar full of ketchup. It shattered and spread in a bright puddle across the floor. Looking at the red mess, she suddenly thought, "I can't let this go to waste!" and she lay face down beside it. When I returned all I saw was my mother dead from a head injury.

She sat up faster than I could stop screaming, instantly realizing how reckless her thought had been. Her apology and consolations were also instant, though it took me awhile to get over the terror. I have no reason to condemn her for this, or think I would have been wiser at her age because I played some pretty questionable jokes on my kids, too—like releasing a garter snake under the bathroom door when my son was inside. Bad, I know. After something like that, you inevitably feel things you can't understand or voice as a child. I felt them—shame for being vulnerable to a trick and anger because I fell so hard for it. Beneath it was the unbearable thought of losing her, and the apparent tenuous nature of life around me.

Mom had married again when I was 18 months old, and soon after, my first brother, Randy, was born. Wally Block, her husband, had worked in the gold mines of Lead, South Dakota, for two years, saving for a down-payment on the 160 acres of land where we now lived. It was close to where he grew up, and included a barn that could keep

eight dairy cows, an old granary, a tiny milk-house built over the well, a single-seat outhouse, and a three-room house. This was where our family grew from four to eight in less than six years. It was where Mom reconsidered her childhood decision to "have a lot of fun" before she took a serious look at the Christian faith. The years of her late teens and twenties weren't full of the amusement and pleasure she'd dreamed of; rather, they had become a crucible of suffering. Desiring forgiveness for her mistakes real or imagined, in need of comfort, and utterly spent in body and heart, she answered Jesus' call to the weary. The melody and words of "Softly and Tenderly" captured a reality she knew well, and she came home to Jesus, who understands how you can be so tired from your life you can't imagine taking another step, and can't think how to rectify things gone wrong. She found a deeper reason for hope, but that didn't mean she was taking off for the next life quite yet, but at the time I wasn't so sure.

My spiritual journey in the direction of home was not like my mother's. Hers was a sudden turning and more about being extruded into belief by her circumstances. Mine began when I was four years old—the age I first remember becoming aware of God. I loved him even then, and my answering has been a long walk in his direction, unfolding gradually through the years. That journey took me through a paradox that clung to my childhood home. How could it have held such happiness and yet filled me with dis-ease? How could I be both proud of it and ashamed? I couldn't wait to grow up and leave

# Softly and tenderly...

— but when I left, I missed something so desperately, I often went back looking for it. When I visited my family as an adult during college and the early years of marriage, Mom was overjoyed to see me, but Dad met me with familiar cold stares and snide comments.

Things can get twisted in your head—all the stuff children are hard-wired to want in a father: strength, love, acceptance, protection. It's confusing when they're absent, like maybe you misread the cues or maybe they're there but you, you wretch, simply didn't deserve them and got passed over. There's no doubt Wally was a big, strong man who genuinely loved his wife and other children, which made it more confusing. I couldn't believe I was left out of the circle. I wanted to believe he was a gruff, tough farmer, yes, but, also someone who deep-down loved me, and later, my husband and three children. It had to be my mistake, my misperception if he seemed cruel. The truth was that the ground shifted when I was near him and I became unsure of myself, tightening up, feeling little surges of adrenaline asking, do you need to be running or fighting here? I couldn't have sorted this out alone, and I have others to thank for chipping away my pretense: my mother, my husband, and even my eight year old daughter, who once delivered such an insightful observation about how Dad treated us, it first made me angry, and then I cried. We were in the car on the eight-hour drive back to our home when she leaned over the back seat and asked, "How come Grandpa doesn't like us?" My immediate response was to defend him, "Oh, he does. It's just his way with kids. You know he's kind of crotchety." Everyone was silent. Then Denis said, gently, "No. He pushes our kids away, and they stand aside as he pulls the

other grandchildren onto his lap to hold and kiss them while our kids stand nearby watching."

Now, years later, I see more clearly how — the farm, the geography, my family, neighbors, even my step-father — gave both gifts and wounds. They led me to a richer, stronger love for all of life and to the confidence that I am cherished by a God Who is, of all things, a faithful and loving Father to His children.

This may smell of rank cheese to those of us who have been wounded by life. I get it, because I was obviously tricked even by my own perceptions. Cynicism protects a person, keeps them insulated from desires that can't be fulfilled anyway. But here's another paradox I've accepted: although I'm suspicious of the happy ending, I'm also secretly very attracted to it. I want Spider Man to rescue the girl on the train to hell, I want Harry Potter to marry Hermione, and I want Gandalf to rise from the flaming pit, gorgeously alive again. I actually believe that in a most resplendent and cosmic sense there is a story about real life that is true, that Jesus is at the vortex and that one day, as St. Julian of Norwich, the twelfth-century mystic, puts it: "all things will be well, and all manner of things will be well."

At the same time, I'd be a liar if I pretended the way home was either quick or easy.

It was a shotgun house. I heard Mom and my step-dad call it that when they described it to friends. When I asked



come ho-o-ome.



what that meant, Wally said, “you call it a shotgun house because you can stand at the back door with a rifle and shoot straight south and out the front door without hitting a thing inside. Get it? The rooms are all in a row.” I never understood. Had someone done this? Had someone needed to fire a gun through our house?

The house was old. Between the faded cedar shingles on the outside and the wallboard on the inside were hand-hewn virgin, tamarack logs. If our old log house had been the site of a pioneer gun battle, I reasoned, there might be guns hidden in the walls. Or buried in the cellar. Or quite possibly, the attic, I told my brother as we lay on the living room floor staring up at the square door-hole in the ceiling.

The three rooms of the house were all the same size. The back door opened into the kitchen, directly from the outside. No entry hall. No mudroom. In the corner by the door our boots, hats, and mittens were mounded into a cardboard box. Hooks on the wall held our coats. The east wall of the kitchen had a counter with open shelves above

and below. Mom made curtains to hang in front of them; I remember the cotton fabric with dancing fruit and vegetables: long bananas and fat tomatoes with smiling faces and twiggy legs spun across the colorful fabric. These were post-WWII years when food was more abundant than it had been during the Great Depression and designers reminded consumers of this with dancing food on everything from cookie jars to dresses. Against the opposite wall, our bright yellow, Formica and chrome table was folded into a small rectangle. For every meal it was pushed to the middle of the room and opened up so we could squeeze the matching chairs around it. This was the only hint that we lived in the 1950s; the rest of the kitchen offered no evidence of modernity. The five-gallon Red Wing crock of drinking water on the counter with its tin dipper hanging on the lip, the enormous wood cookstove with upper warming ovens, and the slop bucket for kitchen scraps and bathroom emergencies made you think of a much earlier time. Or of poverty, which it was, in our case.

If you walked seven normal steps straight from the back door and through the kitchen you arrived at the doorway to the living room. The wood stove that heated the house dominated that room from where it sat along the inside wall. A few pieces of worn furniture crowded the remaining walls. Conversation with company was not possible here. If you sat on the couch, you couldn’t see the person sitting in the rocking chair opposite unless you leaned to one side or the other to look around the stove — which was why Mom invited most visitors to sit at the kitchen table where she could serve coffee and offer them whatever confection she pulled out of the oven that day. She baked cakes, pies, sweet

rolls, and cookies as easily as one could lay down money at a bakery. At the kitchen table, everyone could look at one another without neck strain, and Dad could keep an eye on the yard to make sure we kids weren’t breaking hay bales in the stack, draining the gas out of the tractor, or strolling about the pasture in a new pair of slippers, which is maybe why I only ever had that one pair.

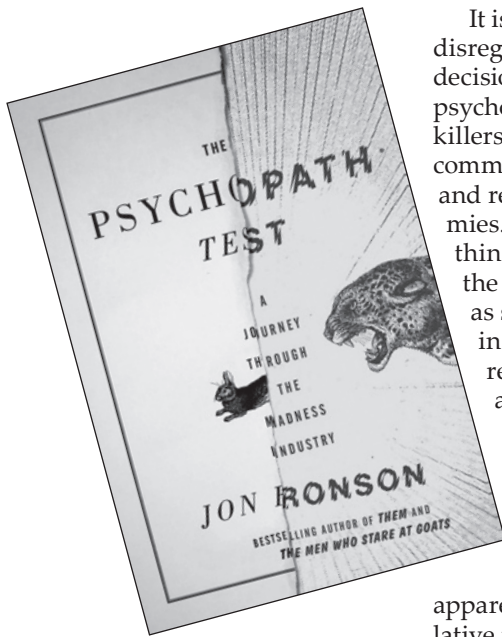
The living room also had the only closet in the house, added by Uncle Peter, who was a carpenter, because Mom was desperate for storage. It jutted into the room, taking up more precious space, but it hid hanging clothes and Sunday shoes for eight people. The closet was a place I knew well since cleaning it was my chore from about as far back as I could remember. In Mom’s ongoing battle against chaos and dirt, every Saturday I was assigned to scramble in under the clothing to re-hang anything that had fallen, pick up dirty clothes, sweep out the floor with a whisk broom, and rearrange the shoes. I hated the job, but once in a while it yielded an unexpected advantage. There were few hiding places in our house, but here behind the curtained doorway, in the dark, I sometimes found things hidden or forgotten: a roll of unexploded pistol caps for Randy’s gun, a Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer coloring book, a tiny plastic purse with pennies inside. Once I reached behind Dad’s Wellingtons and found a dead bat. ■

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*An excerpt from The Exact Place by Margie L. Haack (Kalos Press; 2012)*

# Labeling without Conscience

by Denis Haack



On May 27, 2011 I happened to catch an episode (# 436) of *This American Life* on National Public Radio called “The Psychopath Test.” Act two, entitled “King of the Forest,” was fascinating, a little troubling, and very funny. Author and journalist Jon Ronson read an excerpt from his book, *The Psychopath Test: A Journey Through the Madness Industry* in which he visits and interviews Al Dunlap, the former CEO of Sunbeam Corporation. Dunlap gained a reputation in the corporate world as an executive for whom the bottom line was the only thing that mattered. Struggling companies hired him as top executive when difficult choices were necessary, and Dunlap was happy to oblige. Some felt he was far too happy about it—Dunlap didn’t just mind firing people and closing plants, he enjoyed firing people and closing plants.

It is Dunlap’s open and callous disregard for the consequences of his decisions that introduces the topic of psychopathy into the discussion. “Serial killers ruin families,” one researcher commented. “Corporate and political and religious psychopaths ruin economies. They ruin societies.” We usually think of psychopaths (or sociopaths—the terms are used interchangeably) as serial killers or rapists involved in brutally violent crime sprees but researchers in the field of psychopathy define things with greater subtlety. Certainly psychopaths are found in prison, they say, but they are also found in the worlds of politics, business, religion, and finance—wherever brutally decisive, risk-taking, powerful, apparently conscienceless, and manipulative people flourish.

At the most common level, psychopaths are defined as people who are essentially without conscience. They have trouble connecting consequences to actions, and sense no empathy for another person’s fear or pain. One researcher showed photos to a convicted serial killer that depicted faces contorted by strong emotion, asking him to name the emotion the person was feeling. When she showed several depicting intense fear he responded calmly that he didn’t know the name of the emotion but that the women he tortured to death had that expression just before he killed them.

Ronson’s appearance on *This American Life* was funny, even though psychopathy is hardly a topic naturally given to humor. His book, *The Psychopath Test*, is funny too—a few times I chuckled out loud as I read. His humor comes from his delightful self-effacing style of journalism, and having

a knack for juxtaposing facts and stories in ways that allow the absurdity of life to be revealed without descending into cynicism or losing sympathy for the people and events he is investigating.

Still, Ronson is investigating an important and disturbing slice of reality, and one that is worth some careful thought. Although psychiatrists do not include an entry for psychopathy in their professional diagnostic list of mental illness, the *DSM-IV (Diagnostic & Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th edition)* the diagnosis is used in the criminal justice system, usually based on a 20-point checklist developed by a psychologist named Bob Hare, and can result in incarcerating individuals deemed dangerous for unlimited periods.

*The Psychopath Test: A Journey Through the Madness Industry* is one of those remarkable finds, a book on an important topic that is also a delight to read. And the questions it raises for Christians are varied and probing. Does our view of the fall include such deep brokenness that some people might actually be born without a conscience? Would this possibility call into question our conviction that human beings bear God’s image? How does the gospel of grace come to a psychopath? Does the use of the Hare PCL-R Checklist in criminal proceedings sometimes unjustly incarcerate people? I am not suggesting we all need to become activists on the issue, but *The Psychopath Test* will help us understand the deeper meaning of news stories that would be otherwise largely ignored. ■

**Book recommended:** *The Psychopath Test: A Journey Through the Madness Industry* by Jon Ronson (New York, NY: Riverhead Books; 2011) 272 pages.

# Some Who Came Before

by Denis Haack



We are part of an unfolding story, and no amount of wishing otherwise will change that reality. Those who came before helped shape us, a legacy that when embraced can become a source of insight into the present and a source of wisdom for the future. Nowhere is this more important than for us who name Christ as Lord. Our faith is part of a tapestry of belief and practice that stretches back into history, and whether we know and honor them or not, there is a long line of believers that go back from us all the way to the cross and empty tomb. Someday I hope we get to meet each one in that line, to thank them and hear their stories.

As Christian believers we are indebted to teachers, thinkers, apologists,

saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ" (Ephesians 4:12-13). That being the case, it can be helpful to be acquainted with some of these faithful forebears, to learn something of their lives, their work, their legacies, and their mistakes. Here are three books that can help.

## ***A Cloud of Witnesses: Ten Great Christian Thinkers***

By evangelical author and theologian Alister McGrath (Oxford University and Regent College), this short book provides a very short, and therefore necessarily incomplete introduction to ten people, some of whom some evangelical readers might find surprising: Athanasius, Augustine of Hippo, Anselm of Canterbury, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, Huldrych Zwingli, John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, Karl Barth and C. S. Lewis. (by Alister E. McGrath, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock; 1990, 2005; 137 pages)

theologians, and philosophers that over the centuries studied the Scriptures, answered critics, and unpacked the meaning of historic orthodox belief. St Paul states that this is a gift from God to the church "to equip the

## ***Shapers of Christian Orthodoxy: Engaging with Early and Medieval Theologians***

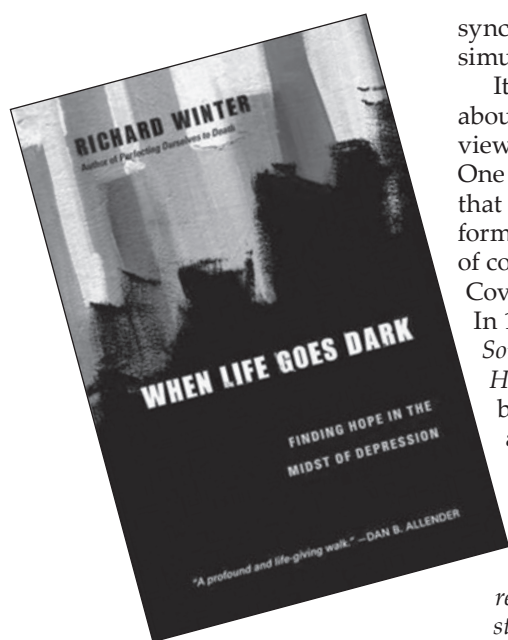
Eight evangelical scholars were asked to provide, in the editor's words, "(1) an insightful theological analysis and commentary on each theologian; and (2) a critical assessment of each theologian that asks how evangelicals should view and appropriate (or not) the insights of the theologian." Chapters are on Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, Athanasius, The Three Cappadocians (Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus), Augustine, Anselm and Thomas Aquinas. (edited by Bradley G. Green, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2010; 388 pages + index)

## ***Early Christian Thinkers: The Lives and Legacies of Twelve Key Figures***

Each chapter in this book was previously published in the *Expository Times*, intended to be a brief scholarly introduction to each historical figure. Chapters cover: Justin Martyr, Tatian, Irenaeus, Theophilus of Antioch, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Perpetua, Origen, Cyprian of Carthage, Hippolytus of Rome, Gregory Thaumaturgus, and Eusebius of Caesarea. I found this volume helpful for a modern reading of ancient thinkers, but found the prose dry and the author's assumptions of "multiple early Christianities" unconvincing. (edited by Paul Foster, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2010; 193 pages + indices.) ■

# Meeting the Blues with Grace

by Denis Haack



Some Christians believe that all forms of mental illness or emotional distress are really spiritual problems in disguise. It's a Gnostic notion if you think about it, the not so subtle dismissal of anything that is physical or material. It's an easy notion to dress up with Bible proof texts and spiritual language, but it does a lot of damage. Not every problem can be reduced to secret sins, or a failure to pray regularly. God also created us with bodies, that he called good, and these too have been vandalized in the Fall. We are unitary persons, made in God's image, body and soul, broken and needing redemption. It's true that I might feel down because my devotional life is so out of whack that I've lost the sweet center to my existence. It might be equally true that I feel down because my brain chemistry is out of

synch. Who knows—both might be true simultaneously.

It's important that those we listen to about such topics be clear in their worldview about what it means to be human. One such voice I commend to you is that of Richard Winter, a psychiatrist, former L'Abri Worker and now professor of counseling and practical theology at Covenant Seminary (St. Louis, MO).

In 1985 he published *The Roots of Sorrow: Reflections on Depression and Hope*. It was a sensitively written, biblically wise, medically informed, and thoughtful study. Now he has revised and expanded that study in *When Life Goes Dark: Finding Hope in the Midst of Depression*.

*Over the last forty years of my career, I have counseled many people whose struggle is somewhere on the spectrum between discouragement and severe depression. A large part of my calling as a psychiatrist and psychotherapist is to listen to people's stories. Almost every day I hear new stories from my students or clients of their struggles to deal with the pain of life. In each of their stories there is woven a unique tapestry of beauty and brokenness, of dignity and depravity, and many of these threads lead to an endpoint of deep emotional distress and depression. Each person's story is different but simultaneously absorbing, fascinating, disturbing and heart wrenching. There is no neat formula for recovery from depression, so I cannot prescribe some ready-made package of things to think and do or pills to take. Often, it takes many weeks of talking for some of the factors that have played into a person's depression to come out into the open—so hidden are they underneath layers of shame and fear. It then takes more time to understand the relative contribution of*

*personality, attachment issues, early-life events, trauma, current stresses, genes and biology so that the client and I can work together toward turning a seeming 'breakdown' into a 'breakthrough' of new ways to see, believe and be. This is the privilege and wonder of counseling and psychotherapy, being able to walk alongside someone for a while and see God's gentle but persistent work of transforming and healing.*

Even if you are not troubled by depression, you would do well to read *When Life Goes Dark*. It will make you more aware of life, more responsive to the silent creeping shadows that afflict so many, and more understanding of how hope—real, substantial, plausible hope—is not merely a nicety but a necessity.

**Book recommended:** *When Life Goes Dark: Finding Hope in the Midst of Depression* by Richard Winter (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2012) 253 pages + notes + indices ■

## RESOURCE

Hearts and Minds bookstore is a well-stocked haven for serious, reflective readers. When ordering resources, mention Ransom Fellowship and they will contribute 10 per cent of the total back to us. ■

**Resource:** Hearts and Minds bookstore, [www.heartsandmindsbooks.com](http://www.heartsandmindsbooks.com)



# Character vs. Personality

by Denis Haack

As Susan Cain points out in her fascinating book, *Quiet*, American society went through an important cultural shift in the opening years of the 20th century. It was one of those shifts that effected every person, even those who were unaware it had occurred or who took pride in being aloof from such things. Historian Warren Susman referred to it as a shift from a Culture of Character to a Culture of Personality.

"In the Culture of Character," Cain notes, "the ideal self was serious, disciplined, and honorable. What counted was not so much the impression one made in public as how one behaved in private... But when they embraced the Culture of Personality, Americans started to focus on how others perceived them. They became captivated by people who were bold and entertaining."

There are a number of reasons why this shift occurred. Changing demographics meant more people lived in cities surrounded by strangers. Gone was the day when people grew up around neighbors who were acquainted with one another for a lifetime. People competed for jobs in a mobile world and now how you came across in an interview was as important as your experience, skills, and education. Now to make friends or land a job the first impression you made became more strategic than virtues you had quietly nurtured over decades. In the fast paced world of modernity one had only seconds to stand out from the crowd, and what others thought of you in that instant could open and close opportunities.

The world of advertising followed the shift. A 1922 ad for Woodbury's soap warned, "All around you people are

judging you silently," and the Williams Shaving Cream Company claimed, "Critical eyes are sizing you up right now." Using their products, it was claimed, would add to a person's appeal at a time when instant impressions counted far more than it ever had before the explosive impact of the industrial revolution.

Americans have always loved self-help books and the popular manuals selling at the time tracked the shift that was taking place. *Character: The Grandest Thing in the World* by Orison Swett Marden was published in 1899; in 1921 the same author produced *Masterful Personality*. It was not simply a change in vocabulary, as if personality was another word for character. "Susman counted the words that appeared most frequently," Cain says, "in the personality-driven advice manuals of the early twentieth century and compared them to the character guides of the nineteenth century." The two lists are instructive and revealing.

The most frequently used words in the self-help manuals from the 19th century Culture of Character:

*Citizenship*  
*Duty*  
*Work*  
*Golden deeds*  
*Honor*  
*Reputation*  
*Morals*  
*Manners*  
*Integrity*

And here are the most frequently appearing words in the self-help manuals of the early 20th century Culture of Personality:

*Magnetic*  
*Fascinating*  
*Stunning*  
*Attractive*  
*Glowing*  
*Dominant*  
*Forceful*  
*Energetic*

It is hardly a coincidence, Cain notes, that the burgeoning Culture of Personality spawned an obsession with movie stars.

It is true that what I have related here is a story from the past. A full century has passed since this cultural shift overtook beliefs and values that Americans had tended to assume were essential to human relationships, personhood, and community. Yet, if anything the Culture of Personality is not only with us still, technology and the new social networking tools of the internet have provided us with novel opportunities to further shape the way we present ourselves to others.

All of which suggests a number of questions that discerning Christians will want to reflect on and discuss thoughtfully. ■

**Source:** *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking* by Susan Cain (New York, NY: Crown Publishers; 2012) pp. 21-24

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## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. To what extent do you believe we are still in a Culture of Personality? Why?
2. Some in the church might argue that unlike the rest of the world, true Christians care more for character than for personality. Do you agree? Why or why not? They might argue, further, that the proof of this is found in the wholesome character displayed by home-schooled or Christian-schooled children in contrast to the young people being produced by the public schools. How would you respond to this idea?
3. In his epistle to the Christians living in Galatia, St Paul composed a list that has become famous even outside church circles that he identifies as the fruit of God's Holy Spirit in the believer's life (5:22-23): *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*. Eugene Peterson, in his paraphrase of Scripture, *The Message*, translates the apostle's list this way: "He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely." Compare and contrast this biblical list with the two lists in this article culled from the self-help books of the Culture of Character and the Culture of Personality.
4. Some Christians would point to two texts of Scripture to prove that Christians must simply reject the Culture of Personality in favor of a Culture of Character. The first is from the Old Testament where the prophet Samuel is sent by God to anoint the next king of Israel. "The Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart'" (1 Samuel 16:7-8). The second text is written by St Paul in a passage where he defends his authority as an apostle since opponents have argued that he is not worthy of such deference: "We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart" (2 Corinthians 5:12). Both biblical texts, it can be argued, claim a specific preference for the values of the Culture of Character over those of the Culture of Personality. How would you respond?
5. Since we are Christians who value righteousness, virtue, and sterling character who yet live in a world in which first impressions do matter (for jobs, beginning relationships, receiving a hearing, and so much more), is it possible to have sympathy for both Cultures? Is the best response to this cultural dichotomy simply to excel at both? Why or why not? To what extent do you think the three lists are mutually exclusive?
6. What do the priorities and values of a Culture of Personality do to the attractiveness of the Christian gospel? What incorrect strategies might believers use to overcome this barrier? Why are they incorrect? What correct strategies would be wise to consider?
7. Review the biblical texts that describe the attributes of church officers, the elders and deacons that are raised up by God to shepherd his people (Titus 1:5-9; 1 Timothy 3:1-13). How might living in a Culture of Personality bring subtle changes to how these qualifications are understood and identified?
8. The list that identifies the primary traits of the Culture of Personality tends to favor extroverts over introverts. What does this do to extroverts and to introverts? What will be lost in the process—in the culture, in the workplace, and in the church?

# *The Exact Place*

an endorsement

One of the highest compliments you can give an author is to feel a kind of sadness upon reaching the end of their book. If the story has become important to you and its reading a delightful part of your day, sometimes the only remedy is to flip back to the first page and start all over again. This is the way I felt upon coming to the end of Margie Haack's deeply moving, wise, and masterfully told memoir of her childhood, *The Exact Place*. I will read it again. Margie and I have been dear friends for years.

We've written letters, shared meals and overnights, and talked of our lives, families, and work. I already love her. But now I also love the spunky, spirited, full-of-pain and full-of-hope young girl that she was. And I'm a little bit in awe. I have long considered Margie to be one of my favorite writers, devouring her essays and the quarterly *Notes from Toad Hall*. But after reading *The Exact Place*, she has moved onto my list of most beloved authors. There are sentences in this book so wonderfully crafted, breathtaking, and insightful that I had to read them over again and again to let the words soak into my soul. Margie is a storyteller of the highest order. You will see, feel, and think, laugh out loud and want to cry, sometimes all on the same page. When a book of such excellence is birthed into the world, it is cause for much rejoicing. In honor of *The Exact Place* and its release, I'm raising a glass, dancing under the disco ball, and rushing to order multiple copies for the fortunate people in my life! ■

*[Andi Ashworth, author of Real Love for Real Life: The Art and Work of Caring, co-founder of Art House America]*

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