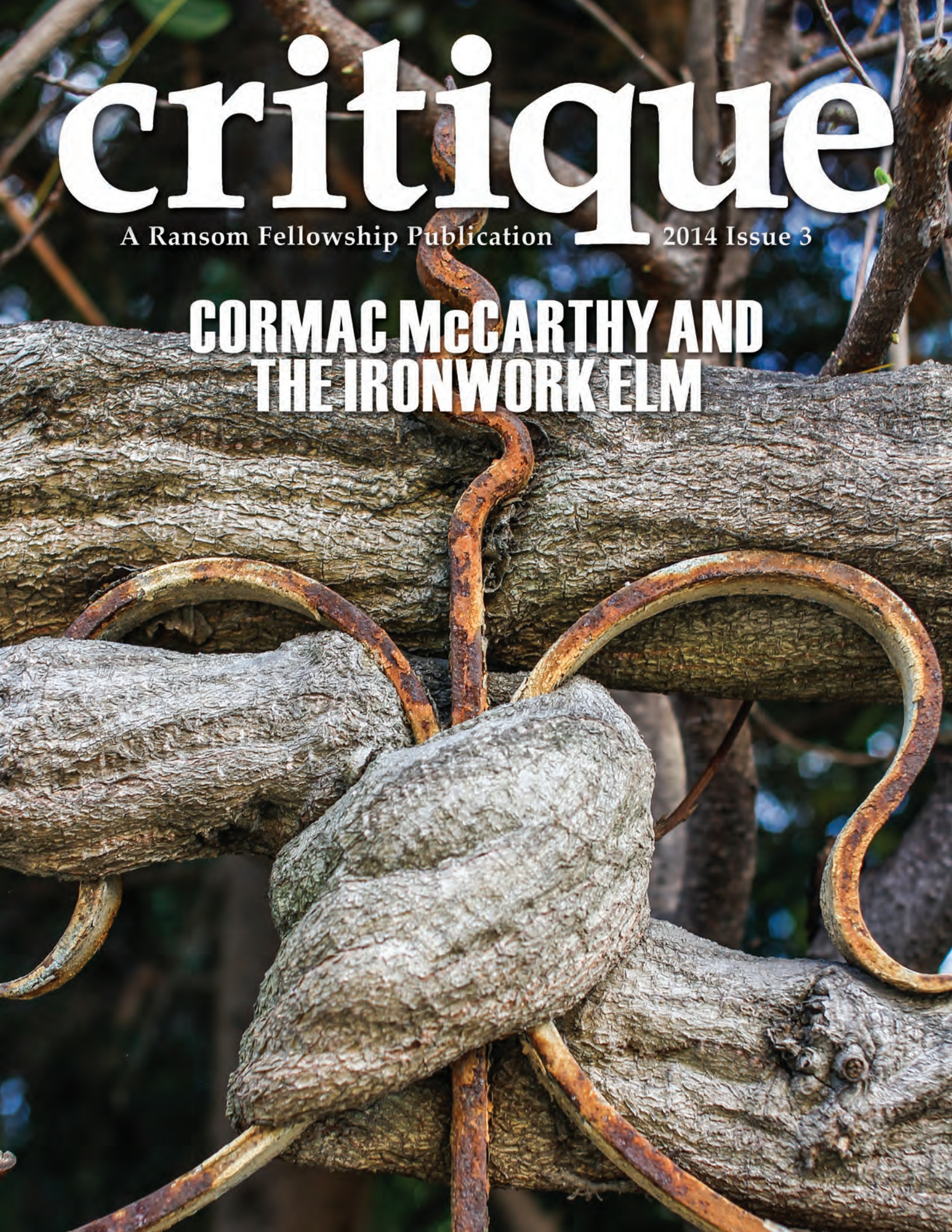
critique

A Ransom Fellowship Publication 2014 Issue 3



CORMAC McCARTHY AND THE IRONWORK ELM

CRITIQUE

EDITOR
Denis Haack

ART DIRECTOR
Karen Coulter Perkins

CONTACT *CRITIQUE:*
www.RansomFellowship.org
15245 132nd Court, Savage, MN 55378
info@ransomfellowship.org

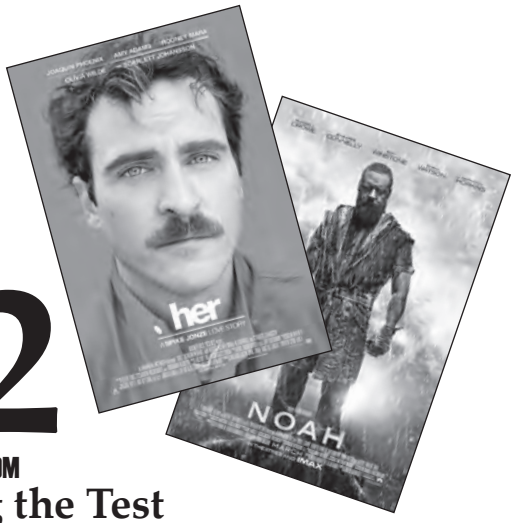
ABOUT *CRITIQUE:* *Critique* is part of the work of Ransom Fellowship founded by Denis and Margie Haack in 1982. Together, they have created a ministry that includes lecturing, mentoring, writing, teaching, hospitality, feeding, and encouraging those who want to know more about what it means to be a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

Except where noted, all articles are by Denis Haack.

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

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

2014:3 CONTENTS



Creation Turned Bad

Bill Gates recently included a fascinating graphic on his blog to highlight the deadliness of mosquito borne illnesses, a problem the Gates Foundation is working to alleviate. The graphic was simple but arresting, listing a series of creatures and the number of human deaths that could be attributed to them annually.

- Shark: 10
- Wolf: 10
- Lion: 100
- Elephant: 100
- Hippopotamus: 500
- Crocodile: 1,000
- Tapeworm: 2,000
- Ascaris roundworm: 2,500
- Freshwater snail (schistosomiasis): 10,000
- Assassin bug (Chagas disease): 10,000
- Tsetse fly (sleeping sickness): 10,000
- Dog (rabies): 25,000
- Snake: 50,000
- Human: 475,000
- Mosquito: 725,000

Those numbers are sobering, and I'm glad Bill and Melinda Gates are working to combat the problem. When I visited Ghana several years ago, my hosts pointed out a huge building under construction at the University in Accra. Funded by the Gates Foundation, it was to be a center for mosquito and malaria reseach.

As a Christian I believe several things about the nature of things. I believe that the brokenness of the world, introduced when our human parents decided they could be autonomous from God's word, extends to every aspect of life, so that nothing in creation escapes unscathed. I believe the world was created good, and was corrupted at the Fall. Malaria, illness, and death are not normal but abnormal, not meant to be, and are now working to devastate God's good world. I believe it is part of our calling as creatures made in God's image to lean against the effects of the Fall in our work. And I believe that when his kingdom is consummated, Christ will restore his corrupted creation, not merely halting the spread of brokenness but bringing it to its full glory; and Creation restored and glorified is beyond my ability to imagine.

But, I wonder, where will mosquitoes fit into that reality? The first part is easy: no longer will mosquitoes carry deadly diseases. The next part is harder: what part will they play in a fully restored creation? Will there be a place for biting, swarming insects on the new earth? What role did they play in an unspoiled world? What would a nice mosquito—one I didn't immediately want to crush into oblivion—be like?

The answer, of course, is simply that we do not—and cannot—know. Perhaps an entomologist could hazard some guesses, but that's all they would be, guesses. The reason is probably not primarily because we don't know enough about mosquitoes (though that may also be true), but because we cannot peer out of our brokenness into the nature of glory with any degree of clarity or precision. "Even a creation that is good," William Edgar says, "can have untamed features." The possibilities are fantastic.

There is a lovely simplicity to the story of redemption, so that even children were drawn to Jesus and believed. And beneath the simplicity there are layers of nuanced meaning going so far back to the essence of things that our finite minds will never be capable of taking it all in simultaneously and completely. That the redemption achieved by Christ in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension extends, in the words of the traditional carol, "far as the curse is found" is easy to affirm. Imagining what that could possibly mean for a creation that includes mosquitoes is a secret, a mystery hidden in the grace of God.

But, I believe, it's going to be good—very good. ■

Sources: *www.gatesnotes.com/Health/Most-Lethal-Animal-Mosquito-Week;* How Did Evil Come into the World? *By William Edgar (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing; 2014) p. 25.*

Cormac McCarthy and the Ironwork Elm: Dark Novels of an Enigmatic Writer Show Signs of Embedded Grace

by **Steven Faulkner**

The critics were mystified. Who was this writer from the hills of Tennessee who could write such arresting landscapes?

A warm wind on the mountain and the sky darkening, the clouds looping black underbellies until a huge ulcer folded out of the mass and a crack like the earth's core rending rattled panes from Winkle Hollow to Bay's Mountain. And the wind rising and gone colder until the trees bent as if borne forward on some violent acceleration of the earth's turning and then that too ceased and with a clatter and hiss out of the still air a plague of ice.

And why did he people such landscapes with men like this:

A man much to himself. Drinkers gone to Kirby's would see him on the road by night, slouched and solitary, the rifle hanging in his hand as if it were a thing he could not get shut of.

He'd grown lean and bitter.
Some said mad.
A malign star kept him.

This young, unknown author's first book, *The Orchard Keeper*, revealed a remarkable talent for local color, but there were problems. The scattered narrative of that novel seems to come to no conclusion other than that these people who once inhabited the hills and mountains are now gone. The *New York Times* review praised the power of the writing, but remarked that "many of the episodes of savage violence or of rural charm have no connection with each other. This is a jumpy, disconnected narrative."

PERSISTENT ENIGMA

Outer Dark, Cormac McCarthy's next novel, introduces without explanation a rag-poor, incestuous brother and sister. The sister sets off in search of their lost baby, and, after a time, the brother follows. The fruitless searches of the parted brother and sister go on and on, and nothing much comes of their wanderings but the death of the child.

Years later, the brother meets a blind wanderer tapping along a dirt road "ragged and serene." The blind man stops, makes himself a cigarette, and asks the brother if he needs anything.

HARD PEOPLE MAKE HARD TIMES. I'VE SEEN THE MEANNESS OF HUMANS TILL I DON'T KNOW WHY GOD AIN'T PUT OUT THE SUN AND GONE AWAY.
—Outer Dark

The stubborn brother says he is in need of nothing, but wonders just what the blind tramp could possibly offer him. The blind man says he prays for what he needs. "You always get what you pray for?" asks the brother. "Yes. I reckon. I wouldn't pray for what wasn't needful. Would you?" "I ain't never prayed," says the brother; "why don't ye pray back your eyes?" The blind man answers, "I believe it'd be a sin. Them old eyes can only show ye what's done there anyways. If a blind man needed eyes he'd have eyes." They part and wander on and that's about the end of the book.

Critics and readers were again mystified. Author and Harvard professor Robert Coles remarked that McCarthy's "stubborn refusal to bend his writing to the literary and intellectual demands of our era conspire at times to make him seem mysterious and confusing."

Then came *Child of God*, in which a necrophilic serial murderer wanders the back roads and forests wigged with a woman's scalp. The critics liked the vivid writing, but couldn't lay a hand on the writer's purposes. Robert Leiter in *Commonweal* noted that "we are left with only incisive images strung along a thin plot line, the why and wherefore unexplained."

And Cormac McCarthy would not grant interviews to explain his work. "We lived in total poverty," said his second wife. "We were bathing in a lake. Someone would call and offer him $2,000 to come speak at a university about his books. And he would tell them that everything he had to say was there on the page. So we would eat beans for another week." He seemed in some ways like his characters: reclusive, strange, and poor. He was kicked out of a $40-a-month motel in New Orleans for nonpayment. At one point he moved into an old barn with his wife, determined to keep on writing.

The early novels, though published by Random House and edited by William Faulkner's longtime editor Albert Erskine, sold poorly. Still, he had his advocates: historian and novelist Shelby Foote strongly defended him in a letter to the editor of the *Memphis Press-Scimitar* and recommended him later to the MacArthur Fellowship award committee, the so-called genius grant that McCarthy won along with a whole series of other literary awards, culminating in the Pulitzer prize for his novel *The Road*. Writers liked him.

But what were readers to make of these dark, desolate, unexplained characters? Robert Coles, in a long review for the *New Yorker* wrote: "He is a novelist of religious feeling who

appears to subscribe to no creed but who cannot stop wondering in the most passionate and honest way what gives life meaning." It seems Coles was onto something.

WATCHING SUTTREE

In the books that followed, religious icons began appearing. Having noted the blind man of faith who appears and as quickly disappears in *Outer Dark*, I noticed a strange scene in his fourth novel, *Suttree*, the story of a young man who has left his well-to-do family to live on a derelict houseboat moored to the bank of the Tennessee River. Cornelius Suttree is an actual protagonist, a young man with a moral sensibility. He lives among the outcasts and eccentrics in the bars and poolrooms and fish markets. He befriends losers, he cares for impoverished friends, he works with his hands, he wanders the mountains alone; he tries to find his way.

About halfway through the book, Suttree steps into the church attached to the school he attended as a boy: "A thousand hours or more he's spent in this sad chapel. Spurious acolyte, dreamer impenitent. Before this tabernacle where the wise high God himself lies sleeping in his golden cup." The young, self-exiled vagrant recalls the teacher nuns: "Grim and tireless in their orthopedic moralizing. Filled with tales of sin and unrepentant deaths and visions of hell and stories of levitation and possession and dogmas of semitic damnation for the tacking up of the paraclete." Suttree despises the nuns and their melodramatic moralizing (which is not to say McCarthy despises them, but it might not be a stretch to assume it; he attended parochial schools in his youth). Suttree

WHAT DEITY IN THE REALMS OF DEMENTIA, WHAT RABID GOD DECOCTED OUT OF THE SMOKING LOBES OF HYDROPHOBIA COULD HAVE DEVISED A KEEPING PLACE FOR SOULS SO POOR AS IS THIS FLESH. THIS MAWKY WORM-BENT TABERNACLE.
—Suttree

then falls asleep on a pew, and the priest shakes him gently and tells him, "God's house is not exactly the place to take a nap." Suttree responds, "It's not God's house," and the "dreamer impenitent" walks out.

This episode makes the iconic scene at the end of the book so surprising: Suttree is finally leaving Knoxville, going he knows not where. With his cardboard suitcase and cheap new clothes, he stands by the highway trying to thumb a ride. The day is very hot and he stands for hours, his new shirt getting soaked with sweat. Across the highway, construction workers are scraping the bed for a new highway, and Suttree watches as a blond boy with a bucket and dipper takes water to the workers. The boy looks across the old highway and sees Suttree standing there alone in the summer heat. They nod to each other, and the boy turns and looks toward the road.

> *Then he was coming down across the clay and over the ruts and laddered tracks of machinery. His dusty boots left prints across the black macadam and he came up to Suttree where he stood by the roadside and swung the bucket around and brought the dipper up all bright and dripping and offered it. Suttree could see the water beading coldly on the tin and running in tiny rivulets and drops that steamed on the road where they fell. He could see the pale gold hair that lay along the sunburned arms of the waterbearer like new wheat and he beheld himself in the child's blue eyes that had no bottoms like the sea. He took the dipper and drank and gave it back. The boy dropped it into the bucket. Suttree wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. Thanks, he said.*

A cup of cold water. A waterbearer. New wheat. What are we to make of this? These are biblical images, so we might see the waterbearer as some sort of religious icon, maybe even a Christ-figure, especially when contrasted with what comes next and ends the book: a driver stops to pick up Suttree while he's drinking the boy's water. Suttree is not lifting his hand to thumb down a ride, so the ride itself is an unexpected gift, as is the cup of cold water. He climbs into the car, and as the driver pulls away, looks back. The waterboy is gone. "An enormous lank hound had come out of the meadow by the river like a hound from the depths and was sniffing at the spot where Suttree had stood."

> *Somewhere in the gray wood by the river is the huntsman and in the brooming corn and in the castellated press of cities. His work lies all wheres and his hounds tire not. I have seen them in a dream, slaverous and wild and their eyes crazed with ravening for souls in this world. Fly them.*

These are the author's final words, not Suttree's.

A "hound from the depths." And beyond the hunting hound, the dark hunter of souls himself, whose work lies everywhere, in the countryside and in the cities. Suttree seems to have just escaped. Perhaps the "wise high God himself sleeping in his golden cup" has been more attentive than young Suttree has supposed.

BLOOD MERIDIAN

This brings us to McCarthy's next book, the famous *Blood Meridian: Or the Evening Redness in the West*. A

fourteen-year-old boy runs away from rural Tennessee and heads west, to New Orleans, then on, "walking the sand roads of the southern night alone, his hands balled in the cotton pockets of his cheap coat." He sees and confronts violence. He works for day wages and moves on. Caught in a downpour in Nacogdoches, he slips beneath the canvas of a revival tent and listens to a preacher, the Reverend Green, tell about a man he tried to save (McCarthy is not fond of many punctuation marks, including quotation marks, and he capitalizes the words he chooses):

> *Neighbors, he couldnt stay out of these here hell, hell, hellholes right here in Nacogdoches. I said to him, said: You goin to take the son of God in there with ye? And he said: Oh no. No I aint. And I said: Don't you know what he said I will foller ye always even unto the end of the road?*
>
> *Well, he said, I aint askin nobody to go nowhere. And I said: Neighbor, you dont need to ask. He's a goin to be there with ye ever step of the way whether ye ask it or ye dont. I said: Neighbor, you caint get shed of him. Now. Are you going to drag him,* him*, into that hellhole yonder?*

Just then a strange man walks into the tent and removes his hat. He is enormous, dressed in a dripping rainslicker,

> *bald as a stone and he had no trace of beard and he had no brows to his eyes nor lashes to them. He was close to seven feet in height and he stood smoking a cigar even in this nomadic house of God and he seemed to have removed his hat only to chase the rain from it for now he put it on again.*

IN THAT GRAY STORM LIGHT THEY CROSSED A FLOODED PLAIN WITH THE FOOTED SHAPES OF THE HORSES REFLECTED IN THE WATER AMONG CLOUDS AND MOUNTAINS AND THE RIDERS SLUMPED FORWARD AND RIGHTLY SKEPTIC OF THE SHIMMERING CITIES ON THE DISTANT SHORE OF THAT SEA WHEREON THEY TROD MIRACULOUS. THEY CLIMBED UP THROUGH ROLLING GRASSLANDS WHERE SMALL BIRDS SHIED AWAY CHITTERING DOWN THE WIND AND A BUZZARD LABORED UP FROM AMONG BONES WITH WINGS THAT WENT WHOOP WHOOP WHOOP LIKE A CHILD'S TOY SWUNG ON A STRING AND IN THE LONG RED SUNSET THE SHEETS OF WATER ON THE PLAIN BELOW THEM LAY LIKE TIDEPOOLS OF PRIMAL BLOOD.

—Blood Meridian

The Reverend Green stops talking, and the enormous, hairless man strides forward, turns to the crowd, and immediately accuses the minister of being an illiterate imposter wanted in several states. The poor Reverend Green cries out, "Lies, lies!" and commences reading his Bible aloud to disprove the man, but the judge, for that's the name the bald man goes by, continues his accusations, including "the most recent of which involved a girl of eleven years—I said eleven—who had come to him in trust and whom he was surprised in the act of violating while actually in the livery of his God." A moan sweeps the crowd. A woman faints. Men start to shout that they'll kill the imposter minister, the meeting breaks into chaos, and the minister is driven out. The accusatory judge slips away into the rainy night.

Of course, the "accuser of the brethren" in scripture is a name for Satan. And the judge *was* lying; he is violent, charming, educated, something of a research scientist, a leader of men, a killer and chaos creator. The Reverend Green, before being driven out, had cried out, "This is him! This is him. The devil. Here he stands." And he was right. Judge Holden *is* the devil, but with one arresting restriction: he is also a physical human being, literally the devil incarnate. Throughout the novel, he suffers thirst and hunger and sunburn, and he must walk or travel by horse; he is not a wandering spirit who on occasion takes physical form. He is both fully devil and fully man, but unlike the Son of God Incarnate, he avoids death; it's not on his agenda, though at times he comes very close to being killed.

The nameless boy, usually referred to as "the kid," meets him again, this time riding with an American bounty hunter named Glanton, an actual historical man who led a band of desperadoes paid by the state governments in northern Mexico to bring back Apache scalps. And the judge is "foremost among them, outsized and childlike with his naked face.... His cheeks were ruddy and he was smiling and bowing to the ladies and doffing a filthy hat. The enormous dome of his head when he bared it was blinding white."

The judge does terrible things: a murderer, he kills his longtime companions; a pedophile, he captures a little Apache boy, at first treats him kindly, then takes him away in the night and murders him, after which the huge, grotesque man dances wild and naked in the night. He steps through a fire "and the flames delivered him up as if he were in some way native to their element."

The kid rides with the judge and the scalpers deep into Apache country, where they wreak havoc on men, women, and children. Eventually the hideous band starts killing and scalping more accessible peaceful Indians and even Mexicans, for who can tell whose black-haired scalp it is? A former priest who rides with them tells the kid that the judge "has been all over the world. Him and the governor they sat up till breakfast and it was Paris this and London that in five languages." The judge is also, like the devil in American folklore, a fiddler: "He's the greatest fiddler I ever heard and that's an end of it. The greatest. He can cut a trail, shoot a rifle, ride a horse, track a deer."

He is also a scientist: an anthropologist, geologist, paleontologist, and a chemist who makes gunpowder. After examining and discussing the historical relevance of a found bone, he remarks, "There is no mystery to it. Your heart's desire is to be told some mystery. The mystery is that there is no mystery"—by which statement he tries to erase religion and claims the supremacy of science.

For a time, the kid, now grown to manhood, escapes the deadly judge and wanders the West. "He never saw the expriest again. Of the judge he heard rumor everywhere." Then, years later, he rides into a frontier town supported by hundreds of bonepickers who construct heaps of buffalo bones and cart them away on creaking wagons across the west Texas plains. There he meets the judge one last time, and the bald giant "seemed little changed or none in all these years." The judge recognizes the kid and pours him a whisky: "Drink up, he said. Drink up. This night thy soul may be required of thee."

The kid says, "You aint nothing." The judge replies, "You speak truer than you know." (As St. Augustine tells us, evil is parasitic, feeding on the good, dependent upon and corrupting the truth, but having no real substance itself.) A dancing bear is shot in the dance hall and dies in a large pool of blood, and the judge says this is part of a planned ceremony, for blood is a necessary part of the ritual. The judge never sleeps. He says he'll never die.

THE WRATH OF GOD LIES SLEEPING. IT WAS HID A MILLION YEARS BEFORE MEN WERE AND ONLY MEN HAVE THE POWER TO WAKE IT. HELL AINT HALF FULL. HEAR ME. YE CARRY WAR OF A MADMAN'S MAKING ONTO A FOREIGN LAND. YE'LL WAKE MORE THAN THE DOGS.
—Blood Meridian

If God is elusive in these novels, evil is not. McCarthy's world—and, we might argue, the real world—is rife with it. Evil is firmly imbedded in human life. Looking back to *The Orchard Keeper*, this seems to have been McCarthy's very first message to his readers. In an independent, one-page story that precedes the novel, three men have cut down an elm tree growing along a wrought-iron line of fencing and are crosscutting the tree into lengths. Cutting near the base, the saw teeth strike metal. One man "took hold of the twisted, wrought-iron, the mangled fragment of the fence, and shook it. It didn't shake. It's growed all through the tree, the man said.... The Negro was nodding his head. Yessa, he said. It most sholy has. Growed all up in that tree." This is an interesting way to put it, for of course it's the tree that has grown up around the fence, but both men put it the other way: the iron has "growed all through the tree." Evil, we might say, has grown and imbedded itself in the natural tree.

THE BORDER TRILOGY

The trilogy McCarthy wrote next, beginning with *All the Pretty Horses*, has violence and enough evil to fill a landscape, but the boy in the first and third books (*Cities of the Plain*), John Grady Cole, is a pretty good kid—caught by betrayal and loss, but a young man who has a heart, and who meets others with heart, usually working poor who care for him in his need.

There are many serious issues at stake in these books: loyalty and friendship, empathetic souls and hard souls, fate and free will, guilt and goodness. At various times throughout the trilogy, the boy protagonists encounter

wandering truth-seekers who examine the world and ponder the mysteries of reality and its relation to history, and who speak of God and his relation to us. An older aunt of the girl John Grady Cole loves tells him, "The question for me was always whether that shape we see in our lives was there from the beginning or whether these random events are only called a pattern after the fact. Because otherwise we are nothing."

DEEP IN EACH MAN IS THE KNOWLEDGE THAT SOMETHING KNOWS OF HIS EXISTENCE. SOMETHING KNOWS, AND CANNOT BE FLED NOR HID FROM.
—The Crossing

She doesn't believe in blind fate, but in an endless succession of deciding agents. She says,

> *I wanted very much to be a person of value and I had to ask myself how this could be possible if there were not something like a soul or like a spirit that is in the life of a person and which could endure any misfortune or disfigurement and yet be no less for it. If one were to be a person of value that value could not be a condition subject to the hazards of fortune. It had to be a quality that could not change.*

This is both an argument for free will and for the meaning of one's life arising from the decisions of one's soul. John Grady makes a number of foolish decisions, but he is very much "a person of value," and this value is based *not* on the attainment of his quest, for there he fails, but on his daily moral decisions.

In the second book of the trilogy, *The Crossing*, a young man named Billy Parham ropes a she-wolf and drags her off to Mexico to release her in the mountains. Along the way, he stops in an earthquake-ruined village, where a man calls to him from a ruined church. When Billy asks the old man why he lives alone in this wrecked village, the man tells him, "I was seeking evidence for the hand of God in the world. I had come to believe that hand a wrathful one and I thought that men had not inquired sufficiently into miracles of destruction… I could not believe He would destroy his own church without reason."

The old man goes on to tell a long story (17 pages in the novel) that, we might therefore assume, is of some importance. It's the story of another old man who fought with God throughout his life, though he continued to believe in God. The people of the village called for a priest, who visited the old man and spoke to him "of the meaning of grace in men's lives and the old man heard him out and nodded his head," then shouted at the priest that he knew nothing! The priest took this rebuke to heart and began rethinking his way. This priest was, says the storyteller,

> *a man of broad principles. Of liberal sentiments. Even a generous man. Something of a philosopher.... He carried within himself a great reverence for the world, this priest. He heard the voice of the Deity in the murmur of the wind in the trees. Even the stones were sacred. He was a reasonable man and be believed that there was love in his heart.*

But there was not, says the storyteller, who then admits that he himself is that priest.

> *Nor does God whisper through the trees. His voice is not to be mistaken. When men hear it they fall to their knees and their souls are riven and they cry out to Him and there is no fear in them but only that wildness of heart that springs from such longing and they cry out to stay his presence for they know at once that while godless men may live well enough in their exile those to whom He has spoken can contemplate no life without Him but only darkness and despair.*

He tells Billy, "In the end we shall all of us be only what we have made of God. For nothing is real save his Grace." There's much more to this long monologue, some of it complex and difficult to sort out, and Billy makes no attempt to sort it out. He mounts up and rides away.

It's clear that at this stage in his writing, McCarthy is willing to take up religious issues head-on. McCarthy has complained about plays and books that say little of life and death. Richard Woodward, writing for the *New York Times*, says that McCarthy's "list of 'good writers'— Melville, Dostoyevsky, Faulkner—precludes anyone who doesn't 'deal with issues of life and death.' Proust and Henry James don't make the cut." For McCarthy, serious works must address the serious issues of life, and what is more serious than eternal life, eternal death? In this trilogy of quests, the search for God and the meaning of life keeps flashing like fish to the troubled surface.

THE ROAD

Which brings us to McCarthy's Pulitzer prize-winning, post-apocalyptic novel, *The Road*. Punishment has

IF TROUBLE COMES WHEN YOU LEAST EXPECT IT THEN MAYBE THE THING TO DO IS TO ALWAYS EXPECT IT.
—The Road

come at last for the wickedness already chronicled in McCarthy's works. And it has fallen with cataclysmic vengeance: the whole country, likely the whole earth, has been wrecked irretrievably by a nuclear holocaust. Amid the devastation, a boy and his father are wandering in a grey, ash-choked world of blood cults, cannibals, and the occasional haggard, filthy refugee. The sun never shines. The sky is never blue. Nothing grows. Birds and animals are only a memory.

One night, the father lies watching his boy beside their campfire. "Look around you," he says. "There is no prophet in the earth's long chronicle who's not honored here today. Whatever form you spoke of you were right." And so the father affirms the prophets who warned of judgment and calamity.

But in all this murk and ash and cold and hunger there flickers one consistent light. The boy. This unnamed boy is kind, selfless, and compassionate. Though starving, he is willing to give away his own meager food to refugees; he even insists on it when his father refuses. The father says of his boy, "If he is not the word of God God never spoke." And in the context, this does not seem blasphemous. This boy is, in fact, innocent and good. An image of God. On a freezing night, the father washes the boy's hair in an icy stream, wraps him in a blanket and puts him by the fire. He tousles the boy's hair to dry it. "All of this like some ancient anointing. So be it. Evoke the forms. Where you've nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them." Later, the father sits beside the sleeping boy and strokes his pale and tangled hair: "Golden chalice, good to house a god."

And there again, after all these books, the image of the chaliced, sleeping god rises again. This boy, obedient to his father in terrible times, this boy so giving, so caring, so respectful, so uncomplaining, is a word of God made flesh, if not the Word of God made flesh. He surely is a Christ-figure, baptized and anointed, in communion with his often-forgiven father.

They walk on, "treading the dead world under like rats on a wheel. The nights dead still and deader black. So cold." At one point, the man raises his eyes and sees his boy standing "in the road looking back at him from some unimaginable future, glowing in that waste like a tabernacle": a place to house a god. As the man sickens and weakens, he watches the boy coming through the grass. The boy kneels "with the cup of water he'd fetched. There was light all about him. He took the cup and drank and lay back.... [The boy] took the cup and moved away and when he moved the light moved with him." The water-bearer has returned. The fire keeper is here.

The father tells the boy that he has to "carry the fire," and the boy asks if the fire is real. "Yes it is," says the father, and the boy asks, "Where is it? I dont know where it is." The father says, "Yes you do. It's inside you. It was always there. I can see it."

In McCarthy's famous interview with Oprah (after *The Road* won the Pulitzer and was chosen by Oprah's book club, he finally broke his silence), Oprah tried to push him about his spiritual views, but he brushed her off and said he didn't want to get superstitious. But there can be no doubt that Cormac McCarthy is wrestling with issues religious and moral, with the mysteries of time and life, of God and the devil. Everything he wants to say to the public on these things is, by his own testimony, in these books. He's not trying to brush the reader off.

THE SUNSET LIMITED

In McCarthy's 2006 play *The Sunset Limited*, the plot is explicitly centered on religion. A black ex-con has just rescued a white professor after the professor tried to commit suicide by jumping in front of a train, the Sunset Limited. The black man has hauled the professor up to his tenement apartment to talk the man out of suicide. Neither man has a name. The dialogue goes back and forth between "black" and "white."

The black man is a convicted criminal who served his time in the penitentiary and found Jesus after a prison fight in which he pounded a man's head to a pulp with a chair leg after the man stabbed him with a switchblade. Afterward, while chained to a hospital bed, he hears a voice:

> *"Just as clear. Couldnt of been no clearer. And this voice says: If it was not for the grace of God you would not be here. Man. I tried to raise up and look around but of course I couldnt move. Wasnt no need to anyways. They wasnt nobody there. I mean, they was somebody there all right but they wasnt no use in me lookin around to see if I could see him."*

The white man rejects all this. He had once believed in the arts, in literature, in culture, but all those things, he has come to see, are fragile, and the culture itself is rejecting them. So he now believes that "the darker picture is always the correct one. When you read the history of the world you are reading a saga of bloodshed and greed and folly the import of which is impossible to ignore." The world "is basically a forced labor camp from which the workers—perfectly innocent—are led forth by lottery, a few each day, to be executed. I

PEOPLE COMPLAIN ABOUT THE BAD THINGS THAT HAPPEN TO EM THAT THEY DON'T DESERVE BUT THEY SELDOM MENTION THE GOOD. ABOUT WHAT THEY DONE TO DESERVE THEM THINGS.
—No Country for Old Men

dont think that this is just the way I see it. I think it's the way it is."

The black believer in Jesus is clever. He gets the professor to admit his own hatred of common people, to admit that every day he curses them, proving that the professor does not actually believe in the innocence of the people who are led forth to execution. But the atheist professor is adamant. He will not admit the possibility of God. And the believer is also firm: "I see a different truth... That you must love your brother or die."

The black man tries again and again to keep the professor talking. He feeds him good food, he pours him coffee, he tells him stories. But the professor will not be swayed. He has established his intellect as the prime arbitrator and sees the black believer as an opposing intellect: "You try to understand God," he asserts. "No I dont," says the black man; "I just try and understand what he wants from me." "And that is everything you need," says the professor inquiring. The believer answers, "If God aint everthing you need in a world of trouble. And if what you sayin is that my view of the world is a narrow one I dont disagree with that. Of course I could point out that I aint down on the platform in my leapin costume." He goes on to argue that faith in Jesus is the firm foundation of reality:

> *"But the unbeliever has got a problem. He has set out to unravel the world, but everthing he can point to that aint true leaves two new things layin there. If God walked the earth when he got done makin it then when you get up in the morning you get to put your feet on a real floor and you don't have to worry about where it come from. But if he didnt then you got to come up with a whole other description of what you even mean by real.... Is you real?"*

The black man admits he doesn't agree with everything in the Bible—for example, original sin—but he says he's a questioner, not a doubter: "I think the questioner wants the truth. The doubter wants to be told there aint no such thing."

They part at the end with neither persuaded. But I am persuaded that Cormac McCarthy is quite openly laying out these arguments for our consideration and taking the arguments to their logical conclusions, which few modern novelists do. The black man asks the professor, "If I'm understandin you right you sayin that everbody that aint just eat up with the dumb-ass ought to be suicidal." And the professor says, "Yes."

THE FLAME

McCarthy's later works wrestle with issues that are fundamentally religious: eternal life, fate and free will, guilt and forgiveness, innocence and evil, love of the poor, love even of the arrogant intellectual and the murderer. They introduce characters worth listening to, worth following through their searching quests. There is a lot of violence in these novels, but Flannery O'Connor was also accused of using gratuitous violence in her stories. She answered, "My subject in fiction is the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil." Whether McCarthy believes, as O'Connor and Walker Percy did, that grace can be effective in such a world is an open question, but he has, seemingly more and more, shifted his fiction toward characters who embody goodness and grace, who are mysterious lights glimmering in an ever-darkening landscape.

In an article for the *New York Times* called "Has Fiction Lost Its Faith?" writer and editor Paul Elie ponders the absence of writers like O'Connor and Walker Percy, Dostoevsky and Evelyn Waugh, in the present day. He laments that Christian belief expressed in the literature of our times figures "as something between a dead language and a hangover...if any patch of our culture can be said to be post-Christian, it is literature."

McCarthy's searching novels and plays are an exception. He certainly does not present himself openly as a writer of Christian convictions, but he seems beset by issues of Christian faith. For years he has been drawing strong contrasts between good and evil, grace and greed, faith and nihilism. Whatever he himself believes, he has, at first cautiously, then symbolically, then explicitly, presented us with the most important issues our minds can address. In a literary culture where these arguments have largely been shelved, this is something that matters. His landscapes and people are often dark, and evil "has growed up all through" them, but within the soot and blood and ashes, a fire is burning. ■

Steven Faulkner *teaches creative writing at Longwood University in southern Virginia. The movie based on his book* Waterwalk *has just been released on cable and will soon be available on DVD.*

Three Haiku

From wind-sifted trees
the cold fire of crisp leaves
scrape across cement

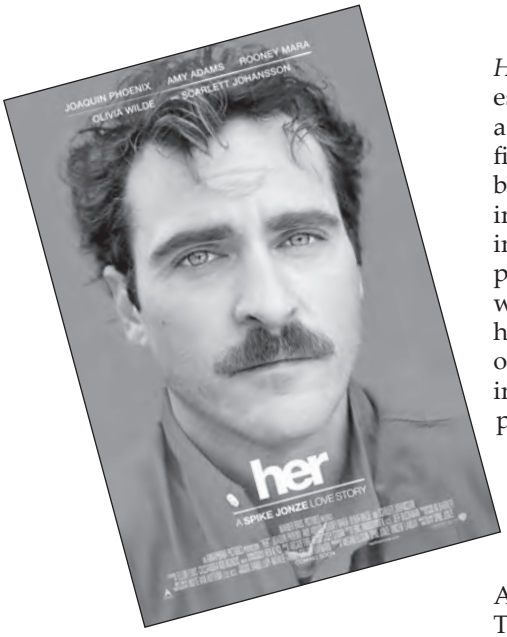
Coffee-steam vanishes
before a window
of winter

Wingtips
slowly slicing wind
into ribbons

Scott Schuleit *received the MA in Christianity and culture from Knox Theological Seminary. He is the youth ministry leader at Lake Worth Christian Reformed Church and an adjunct instructor at South Florida Bible College. He enjoys the arts, theology, good conversation, and spending time with his dear wife Christina.*

Failing the Test

by **R. Greg Grooms**



Back in 1950, when the best computer in the world lacked the power of your old laptop, British mathematician/philosopher Alan Turing anticipated a day in which this would no longer be so. In his paper "Computing Machinery and Intelligence" he asked a question—Can machines think?—and proposed a test whereby it might be answered. In the Turing Test, a judge may ask any question—via keyboard—of two subjects: a human being and a computer. When he is no longer able to tell which answers are human and which are computer-driven, the machine has passed the test.

It's tempting to see Spike Jonze's *Her* as the latest chapter in the same essay—after all, a relationship between a man and his computer occupies the film's center stage—but that would be a mistake, for Jonze really isn't interested in machines. He's interested in persons, or to be more precise, in personal relationships. *Her*, in his own words, is "about something that I think has maybe always been here, which is our yearning to connect, our need for intimacy, and the things inside us that prevent us from connecting."

So in *Her* he draws us into three relationships: Theodore (Joaquin Phoenix) and Catherine (Roony Mara), Theodore and Samantha (Scarlett Johansson), and Amy (Amy Adams) and Charles (Matt Letscher). The first is offered only as a backdrop to the next, for Theodore and Catherine are almost divorced by the time we meet them, and most of their story is told through a series of flashbacks in Theodore's memory. There's an irony in their breakup as there is in most failed romances. You see, Theodore makes his living writing love letters for other people. He's a kind of nerdy Cyrano de Bergerac; he puts into words the things others would like to say to loved ones but can't find the words. He writes Catherine a letter, too, in which he apologizes for "everything I needed you to be or needed you to say." Remember it. It's a central theme in *Her*: needs are tough on relationships.

It's Theodore's relationship with Samantha that takes center stage in *Her*. She enters his life as a new operating system in his computer and is programed, at least initially, to be utterly him-focused: to understand who he is, what he wants, how to please him. With the aid of Scarlett Johansson's voice and personality, she does that *very* well, so much so that Theodore falls for her, fast and hard. They are, to be sure, an odd couple. Even Theodore admits that: "Well, you seem like a person, but you're just a voice in a computer." At the same time Samantha is at first almost everything any self-centered person like Theodore—like *most* of us—could ever want.

And then the predictable happens: Samantha outgrows her programming. She becomes aware that the world is bigger than Theodore and his wants and desires, and that she is bigger than that, too. She becomes a person, not in an ontological sense of the word but selfishly. She doesn't exactly stop loving Theodore, but loving him simply isn't enough anymore. So she leaves him. I call this predictable, not only because lovers have left lovers before in lots of other films, but because Jonze has been giving us hints about what will happen between Theodore and Samantha throughout *Her*. He sees a pattern in relationships and, in this pattern, what happened to them isn't the exception, it's the rule.

For example, the third relationship in *Her*—Amy and Charles—has all the hallmarks of disaster in it by the time we meet them. They are together but one can't help wonder why. They don't seem to enjoy one another very much. They are constantly bickering about small things. If there ever was any real love between them, it is long gone. They are together just because they are together, and one day being together becomes too much for them, so Charles leaves. When Theodore comes to comfort Amy, she offers her take on why their relationship failed.

"You know what, I can over think everything and find a million ways to doubt myself. And since Charles left I've been really thinking about that part of myself, and I've just come to realize that we're only here briefly. And while I'm here, I wanna allow myself joy. So fuck it."

I think Amy is speaking for Jonze here, "about the things inside us that prevent us from connecting." And what he thinks those "things" are seems clear at least at first glance: we're so needy that mere love and companionship aren't enough. We need someone willing and able to sacrifice himself/herself for us, to be in the relationship for me. And since no other needy person can do this, at least not for long, relationships always fail.

But it's not that clear, and Jonze knows it. In his December 16th interview on NPR ("Spike Jonze opens his heart for *Her*"), Audie Cornish talked with him about the many and contradictory reactions she and her friends had to *Her*—some thought it "creepy," others "melancholy," still others "hopeful"—and asked, "Are you actually saying this is cheerful?" To which he replied, "I'm not saying anything."

I didn't like his answer, but I think I understand it. Like most artists, Jonze would rather let his art speak for itself rather than speaking for it. But saying that he's saying nothing is too disingenuous to be true, for *Her* says a mouthful about relationships, not only how and why they fail, but that they can be creepy, melancholy, and hopeful, all at the same time. Whatever else he's saying, it isn't that we shouldn't have them. Still every relationship in *Her* does fail, and what I yearn for after watching it is a reason to believe that it must not always be so.

In chapter 18 of C. S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters*, a senior demon patiently explains to his nephew why love is impossible.

The whole philosophy of Hell rests on the recognition of the axiom that one thing is not another thing, and, specially, that one self is not another self. My good is my good and your good is yours. What one gains another loses.

Screwtape makes a good point; the same, I think, that Jonze is flirting with. If relationships are like math, then every relationship fails the test, because ultimately the relational math can never favor us both. Either my needs are met, or yours are. Either way we fail. Unless there's another option.

"The Enemy's philosophy" says Screwtape, is nothing more than an attempt to evade the obvious. "Things are to be many, yet somehow also one. The good of the one self is to be the good of another. This impossibility He calls Love."

Herein, I think, lies the true test of any relationship. Can two needy people forge a relationship in which the impossible becomes possible? Jonze is right to suggest that the answer may be no; our needs and our natures incline us to Screwtape's philosophy, unless something changes radically in us. Don't get me wrong here. I'm not suggesting that becoming a Christian will solve all of your relational problems. Far from it. The truth is that many unbelievers are both better spouses and better parents than many believers. Given the divorce rate amongst evangelical Christians, it would be ridiculous to suggest that the only key to a happy marriage is becoming a Christian. But I think, I *hope* that Spike Jones would understand and agree with what I *am* saying: that we shouldn't attempt it without realizing that we need to change in order to relate well, and to seek the help we need to do so.

Be warned: there are two rather embarrassing sex scenes in *Her* that you may wish to avoid. If you struggle with erotic conversations or nudity, you might well forego seeing *Her* in a theater, wait till it comes out on DVD, and simply skip those scenes. (Ah! The advantages of modern technology!) Despite these, it's a fascinating, original, well-made, and well-acted movie. I recommend it highly. Watch it with someone you love and talk about it. ■

Turn the page for reflection and discussion questions.

***Greg Grooms**, a contributing editor for* Critique, *lives with his wife Mary Jane in Hill House, a large home across the street from the University of Texas in Austin, where they regularly welcome students to meals, to warm hospitality, to ask questions, and to seriously wrestle with the proposition that Jesus is actually Lord of all.*

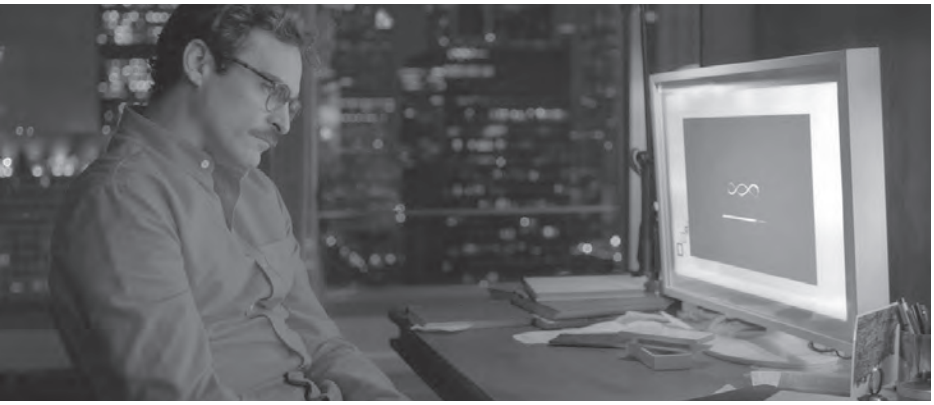
FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

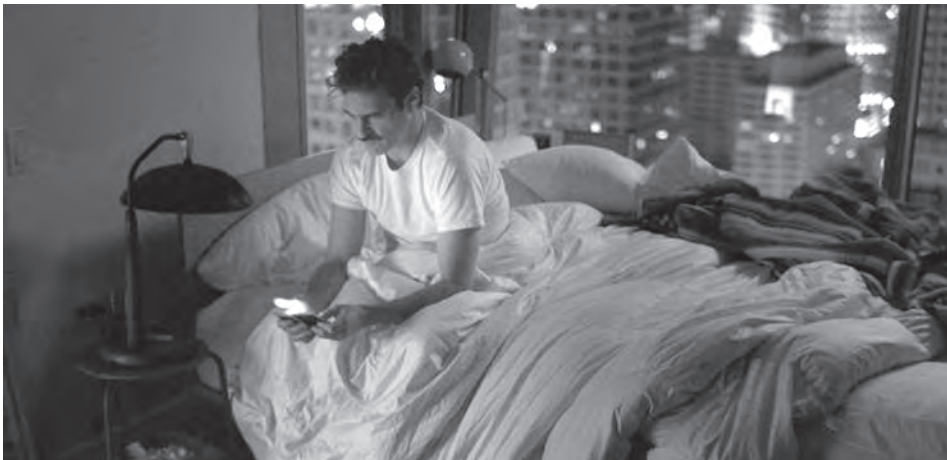
1. What's the weirdest question you've ever asked Siri? How did she respond?
2. Did you find *Her* romantic, creepy, melancholy, or hopeful? Feel free to insert your own favorite adjective here if none of these terms work.
3. The first question I usually ask after watching any movie is "What did watching this film leave you thinking about?" It's a question that is, perhaps, more important than usual after watching *Her*. Does it leave you rethinking failed relationships in your own life? Does doing so lead you to consider how things might/should have been different? Or does it reinforce a feeling that the failures were inevitable?
4. Discuss the three relationships in *Her*—Theodore and Catherine, Theodore and Samantha, Amy and Charles. What is there in each of them that attracts you, that makes you realize, "Aha! That's why they're together!" What are the flaws in each relationship? Do they fail for similar reasons? Whatever your opinion on this point, discuss why the relationships died and what, if anything, might have been done to strengthen them.
5. In your experience, why do relationships fail?
6. The two sex scenes in *Her* are among the more embarrassing moments I've ever seen in a film, not because I find sex embarrassing, but because each involves taking something beautiful (sex) and oddly twisting it. In the first Theodore calls a stranger and initiates phone sex illustrated by his flashback memories. The second involves Samantha's attempt to overcome her lack of a body through the use of a surrogate. If you are comfortable doing so, discuss your reactions to these scenes. Why in your opinion did Jonze include them in *Her*? How do you think he wants you to react?
7. Late in the film Samantha suggests to Theodore that there is a way to balance the relational equation. They have this exchange:
   Theodore: Do you talk to someone else while we're talking?
   Samantha: Yes.
   Theodore: Are you talking with someone else right now? People, OS, whatever...
   Samantha: Yeah.
   Theodore: How many others?
   Samantha: 8,316.
   Theodore: Are you in love with anybody else?
   Samantha: Why do you ask that?
   Theodore: I do not know. Are you?
   Samantha: I've been thinking about how to talk to you about this.
   Theodore: How many others?
   Samantha: 641.

   Theodore doesn't like the idea; Samantha does. With whom do you agree and why?
8. When Catherine finds that Theodore is "seeing someone" her first response is to encourage him. But when she learns that the someone is his computer, her attitude changes.
   Catherine: Wait... I'm sorry. You're dating your computer?
   Theodore: She's not just a computer, she's her own person. She doesn't just do whatever I say.
   Catherine: I didn't say that. But it does make me very sad that you can't handle real emotions, Theodore.

   If your computer were as you-focused, fascinating and capable as Samantha, would you
   a) avoid it like the plague,
   b) indulge in it guiltily once in a while, or/
   c) fall in love?

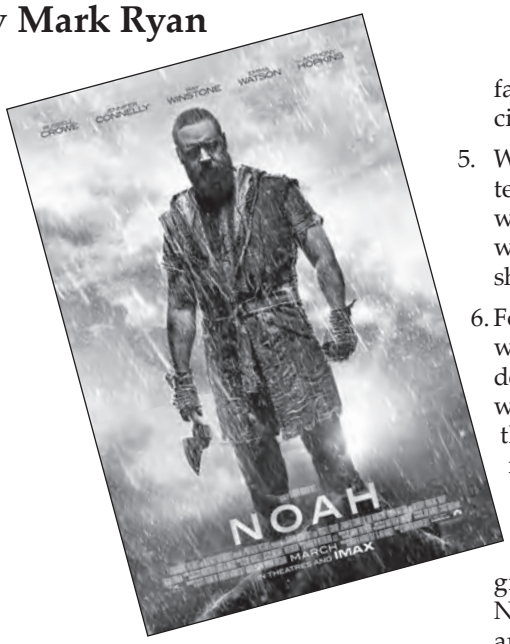
   Defend your answer.
9. In response to the Turing Test, John Searle, philosophy professor at USC, proposed another test—The Chinese Room—to illustrate the difference between human intelligence and artificial intelligence. In Searle's scenario two persons exchange messages written on paper in Chinese through a slot in a door. Apparently they are communicating, but there is a catch: one of them doesn't understand Chinese. He merely responds to the symbols he receives with other sets of symbols, which he arranges according to a set of rules. This, according to Searle, is the difference between a person and a computer. One manipulates symbols according to a mathematical algorithm; the other attaches meaning to the symbols. Does this seem like a significant difference to you? Are there other differences between humans and machines that are in your opinion more significant than this?
10. If you were privileged enough to watch *Her* with Spike Jonze, what questions would you have for him?





Questions for *Noah*

by **Mark Ryan**



1. What was your first impression? What lines of dialogue, what visual effects, or what plot twists stood out to you? (What initial or lasting feelings did these moments evoke in you?)
2. What genre might you assign this film to? Did this bring other films to mind for you? If so, which ones? (For those who know Darren Aronofsky's work, how does *Noah* look, feel, or unfold like other of his movies that you have seen?)
3. Clearly this depiction leans upon more than the brief, Genesis narrative. What sources (biblical or otherwise) did you suspect (or are you convinced) the writer/director is drawing from?
4. Theology to one side for the moment... Why, artistically speaking, might a filmmaker depart from a standard text when depicting a familiar story? In your mind, to what degree is this helpful and acceptable in relation to retelling or presenting familiar, even revered stories, cinematically?
5. Who are the main characters in this telling of the Noah story? What do we know about them? In addition, what qualities, flaws, and relationship dynamics most stand out to you?
6. Following Noah's revelation to his wife that the Creator is "going to destroy the world", one reviewer writes: "It's a chilling reminder of the stakes in this narrative. This is a story any child who's been to church can recite by heart, but we tend to wrap it up in pictures of a cutesy arky-arky with smiling giraffes, calm seas, and a chipper Noah manning the ship. There are no flannel-graphs of the dead floating just beneath the surface, no indication that Noah might have felt anything but undiluted bliss at the prospect of his facing the rest of his life with his family and new animal friends." (Tyler Huckabee, *Relevant Magazine*, March 28, 2014).

   For the most part, how did you understand the Noah story before viewing this film? What is its role or function in the biblical story?

   Now that you have viewed this film and thought a little about it's sources, and main characters, what do you identify as the theme of this Noah story? (How would you characterize the central story? What is this movie actually about and how might you defend this claim?)
7. Thinking biblically…
   a) Clearly this telling of the Noah story has been controversial. Reviews have spoken of Aronofsky's *Noah* as "deranged," as "thoroughly pagan," as "blatantly Gnostic," and even as "brilliantly sinister anti-Christian filmmaking." What do you make of this film? Do Aronofsky's 'creative liberties' help us hear this story in a fresh way and in a manner that highlights biblical truth? Or are the negative reviews right? Are the distortions dangerous—even obscuring the God of the Bible altogether? (Be as specific and as concrete as you are able in sharing how this film helps or hinders understanding the scriptural account and its intent.)
   b) While some furiously blast this movie, others can note the film's shortcomings and recognize Aronofsky's own atheism, yet still sort through (in positive fashion) the elements of the Genesis flood story. What is preserved? What surprised you in terms of being included? In what ways might the God of *Noah* be more scriptural that the one preached from many pulpits?
   c) Between negative and positive reviews lay lots of folk who wish to utilize this movie 'evangelistically.' In what ways is this legitimate? In what ways is this misplaced or problematic?
8. Overall: Did you enjoy this film? Did it enhance (or reduce) your understanding of this biblical episode? What will you take away from having viewed it? If asked, will you recommend this film to others? (Who should or should not see it? Why?) ■

***Mark Ryan**, together with his wife Terri, served with L'Abri Fellowship for many years (first at Southborough, MA, then on Bowen Island, BC). Presently, Mark serves the Francis A. Schaeffer Institute at Covenant Theological Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri.*

Credits for *Her*

Starring:
Joaquin Phoenix (Theodore)
Chris Pratt (Paul)
Rooney Mara (Catherine)
Amy Adams (Amy)
Scarlett Johnasson (Samantha)
Olivia Wilde (Blind Date)
Director: Spike Jonze
Writer: Spike Jonze
Producers: Spike Jonze, Vincent Landay, Megan Ellison and others
Music by Arcade Fire
Cinematographer: Hoyte Van Hoytema
Runtime: 126 min
Release: USA, 2014
Rated: R (language, sexual content and brief graphic nudity)

Credits for *Noah*

Starring:
Russell Crowe (Noah)
Jennifer Connelly (Naameh)
Ray Winstone (Tubal-cain)
Anthony Hopkins (Methuselah)
Emma Watson (Ila)
Logan Lerman (Ham)
Douglas Booth (Shem)
Leo McHugh Carroll (Japeth)
Director: Darren Aronofsky
Writer: Darren Aronofsky and Ari Handel
Producers: Darren Aronofsky, Chris Brigham, Scott Franklin, Ari Handel, Amy Herman, Arnon Milchan, Mary Parent
Music by Clint Mansell
Cinematographer: Matthew Libatique
Runtime: 138 min
Release: USA, 2014
Rated: PG 13