

critique

A RANSOM FELLOWSHIP PUBLICATION 2009 ISSUE FOUR

A Wedding Homily

What Makes You Afraid?

No Place At Home

Apatow & Aristotle on Friendship

Not Your Average Comic Books



What Makes You Afraid?

What do you fear? Hardly a week goes by without some report identifying some threat in the food supply. Experts say that terrorist sleeper cells wait quietly, blending into the background until some nefarious command sets a deadly plan into action. Physicians are certain that given global travel, the question of a deadly worldwide epidemic is not whether, but when. The 2008-2009 financial crisis wiped out a third of my (already insufficient) retirement account. Airport security removes all liquids from carry-on luggage that are in more than 3 oz containers. Except for bottles marked "saline solution," which can be carried in 12 oz containers, though the liquid itself can be anything because it's never checked. One journalist, to prove that airport security would fail to catch any but the most stupid terrorist carried two 12 oz bottles labeled "saline solution." When asked by the TSA agent why he was carrying two, he replied, "Two eyes." They let him through.

Still, these are not the things that I fear. More than anything I fear that my family will be fragmented with unresolved tensions, many due to my foolishness or wickedness as a parent. I fear growing old, becoming a burden so that my final years are a return to infancy. I fear loving the biblical Story so much, in all the ways it satisfies my yearning for meaning and truth and beauty, that I fail to simply love God. I fear the myriad regrets from my past will strangle my ability to fully know and demonstrate grace. I fear my introversion will keep me from deepening relationships I hold dear. I fear these things happening and being aware of it too late to make any difference.

Does everyone harbor secret fears, or am I alone? If someone says they have none, am I being cynical if I don't believe them?

I find that reason does little to dislodge fear. Unhurried conversations, meals in safe places, trusted fellow pilgrims, the quiet beauty of art, metaphor, and story--these are stronger cures. In those precious moments, I am at home in the deeper reality J. R. R. Tolkien evokes so brilliantly in poetry.

*All that is gold does not glitter,
Not all those who wander are lost;
The old that is strong does not wither,
Deep roots are not reached by the frost.
From the ashes a fire shall be woken,
A light from the shadows shall spring;
Renewed shall be blade that was broken,
The crownless again shall be king.*

SOURCE

"The Things He Carried: the idiocy of airline security" by Jeffrey Goldberg in *The Atlantic* (November 2008) p. 100-104. [I highly recommend reading this. - Denis]

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Denis Haack responds:

To the editor:

I found your "Understanding Scripture Correctly (II)" article [*Critique* #2-2009] to be really clear and helpful! Thanks.

Ron Hjertstedt
St Paul, MN

Ron:

Thanks for writing such an encouraging sentence. May your reading and study of Scripture be infused with holy spirited grace.

To the editor:

I was reading "Moments of Perfection... Almost" in the current issue of *Critique* [#2-2009] on a quiet Sunday afternoon. A comfortable breeze was entering the room through the open windows and bringing with it a variety of natural sounds and smells, which my cats seemed to be enjoying as much as I was. It was one of those moments so well described in your editors note. All too soon the peacefulness of the afternoon was broken by the sound of the neighbor's lawn mower. As they say: "All good things must come to an end." To this statement I would add: "...for now."

Robert Tencate
Boise, ID

Robert:

Exactly. Signs of hope, not of arrival.

Cliff Jumping the Waterfall

by Erin Magee

To fight the instinct of self preservation,
brace my foot on the rock edge,
 and leap
 over
the solitary limb protruding
from under the ledge.

To fall
 suspended
 joyful
 kicking little
bicycles of glee
the drop stealing breath and the sound
of the scream.

To live by faith.
Daring to trust the dark depths
 of our Beloved
to protect us
 from striking our foot
against the rock
 bottom
of it all.

Originally from Cincinnati, Ohio, Erin Magee delights in a nomadic life and currently dwells in Seoul, South Korea. To nurture her agrarian-tinged roots in a city of concrete, Erin grows mint and lavender in her apartment window.

Canning Tomatoes

by Erin Magee

Many hands make light work, the hum
of the fan cools the sticky kitchen
pulling cool river breezes in off the Ohio.

My grandmother drops red glory
of August tomatoes into the boiling
water, waiting until their skins split, rending

shiny peels, revealing faintly veined flesh
and a peppering of bright yellow seeds.
Ladled out, the skin slides off to birth

a tomato in the nude, steaming
 and slippery
and about to be quartered and canned,
as my hand and nails are about to be stained

in little red crescents, and soon my knuckles
will ache from holding the paring knife. My
mother measures teaspoons of salt into the
jars, her hands

flying from jar mouth to jar mouth, dashing
little white crystals to cleanse and preserve
as I slide the red mess through cupped hands.

Light work, to the tune of the summer's
deep-earthed deliverance, and graced
with the breezes and a glass of cold water.

Waterfall and Tomato Canning Images
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Poems for My Son Jacob Henry Melleby

by Derek Melleby

In honor of his first birthday,
November 12, 2008

I.
Jacob was a deceiver
Not an achiever
And yet God chose him.
This, it seems to me,
Is why I can believe
In a God who chooses.

II.
There is something
About knowing you are nothing
That makes you something.

III.
God continually uses
The ones the world abuses
To show it can be done.
And undone.

IV.
Everyday your namesake wondered,
"Am I a fraud?" Of course, he was,
And that's what makes the Story true,
For me and for you.

Derek Melleby is the Director of the College Transition Initiative for the Center for Parent/Youth Understanding through a partnership with the Coalition for Christian Outreach. He is the coauthor of *The Outrageous Idea of Academic Faithfulness* (Brazos Press) and lives in Mount Joy, PA with his wife Heidi and son Jacob. Learn more about his work at www.cpyu.org.



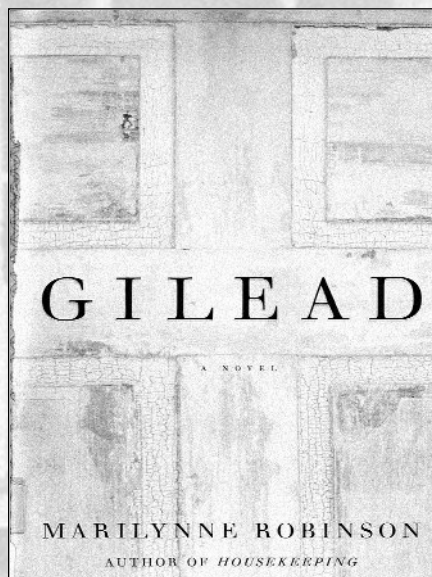
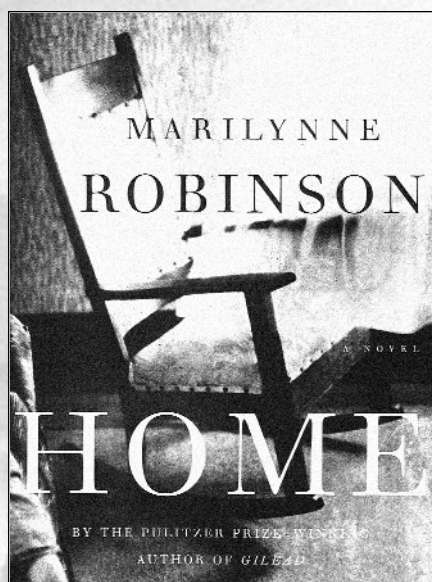
No Place at Home

A Review of *Home* by Marilynne Robinson

I never finished reading Marilynne Robinson's earlier novel, *Gilead* (2006), though I always intended to get back to it sometime. I started it, got distracted before being drawn into the story and set it aside. Now that I've read her latest *Home* (2008), however, I'm not so certain. I'm not certain I could take the wrenching realism of her stories of people that are, to use Walker Percy's memorable phrase, lost in the cosmos.

Robinson is a very good writer, a novelist worth noting whose books are worth savoring for the craftsmanship of her prose. She doesn't just write a good story, but brings us into the ordinary stuff of life so that we feel we've been there, are there. She paints a slice of reality that becomes a metaphor for life, telling of ordinary people trying to find their way through the myriad choices, dreams, and disappointments of ordinary life into a place that is safe, a place of forgiveness, acceptance, and ultimately, glory.

Home is a story that is true, which is why it has such power. Power to let us feel anew the deep, essential yearning we have to know a father's love and acceptance. Power to rock us with the sense of inexpressible loss when that grace is withheld. It's a tragic loss suffered by so many in this sadly broken world, and the pain of that loss echoes on every page of the book. The roots of the problem lie in the past, deep in the hearts and choices of a fragmented family. Jack may have committed the specific sins that now haunt them, but all the Boughton's feel the anguish of paternal disappointment, an unsettled conscience, and the lack of healing.



Excerpt:

When Jack came in, his father was still at the table, brooding over his cold soup. "Don't bother," he said, when Jack offered to help him with his chair. "Glory is here. She will look after me."

When she came back into the kitchen, Jack was standing in the porch. He said, "It's nice out here. Dark."

She went out and stood beside him.

He cleared his throat. "Can I ask you something?"

"Probably."

"It's nothing personal."

"All right."

"Say you do something terrible. And it's done. And you can't change it. Then how do you live the rest of your life? What do you say about it?"

"Do I know what terrible thing we're talking about?"

He nodded. "Yes. You do know. When I was out walking the other day I took a wrong turn and ended up at the cemetery." He said, "I'd forgotten she was there."

"She was part of the family."

He nodded.

"All I can tell you is what Papa would say. He'd say repent, and then--you can put it aside, more or less, and go on. You've probably heard him say that as often as I have."

"More often." Then he said, "Regret doesn't count, I suppose."

"I don't claim to know about these things. It seems to me that regret should count. Whatever that means."

"But if you just found out about it, no matter whether I regretted or repented--what would you think of me?"

"What can I say? You're my brother. If I were someone else, and I knew you and thought you were all right, then that would matter more to me than something that happened so many years ago."

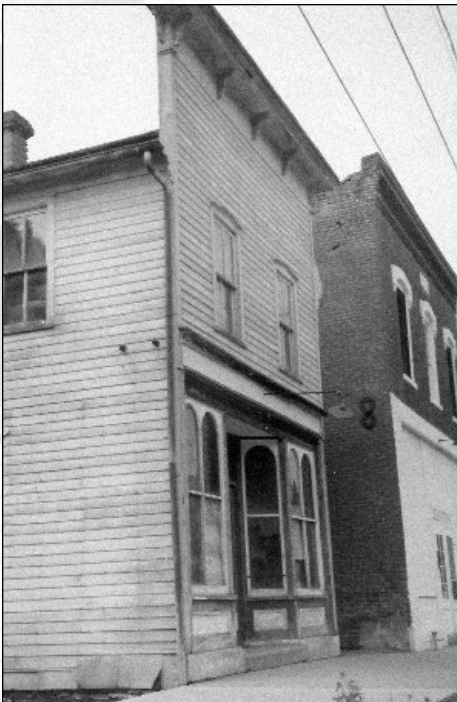
"Even though I had never told you about it. And I should have told you."

"I think so."

He nodded. "You're not being kind."

"I don't really know."

"Well, I might have a chance. Things could work out." He said, "It will be bad at best. A miserable thing to have to hope for. Pain all around. Ah, little sister. It's no wonder I can't sleep."



Home is a creative retelling of Jesus' parable of the prodigal son (you can find Jesus' original version in the New Testament, in Luke 15:11-32). Robinson's retelling, however, turns the parable on its head. In *Home* the father eagerly awaits the wayward son with talk of grace, but forgiveness and acceptance are never fully granted. This is the parable recast in darkness, the demonic version, so to speak, in which the one who is lost is lost even at home. And there is no greater homesickness possible or more horrible than that.

Jesus' parable ends with an extravagant feast, a celebration that what was lost is now found, what had been as dead to the father is alive again and at home. In Robinson's version the ending is a leaving, when what is lost walks away down the street out of sight.

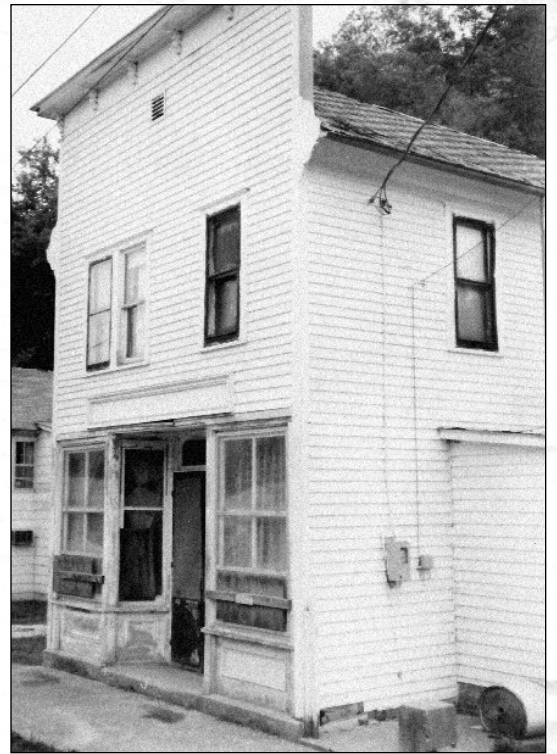
He picked up his suitcase, and then he set it down again and went into the parlor, where his father was sitting in the Morris chair. He stood there, hat in hand. The old man looked at him, stern with the effort of attention, or with wordless anger.

Jack shrugged. "I have to go now. I wanted to say goodbye." He went to his father and held out his hand.

The old man drew his hand into his lap and turned away.

As if this is not enough, Robinson weaves in other perennial themes that have long been explored in serious fiction: race, the media, small town ethics and relationships, success and failure, the place of religion. *Home* is a rich work, told in deceptively simply prose but with layers of meaning that invite unhurried reflection. "It is a book unsparing in its acknowledgment of sin and unstinting in its belief in the possibility of grace," critic A. O. Scott said in the *New York Times*. "It is at once hard and forgiving, bitter and joyful, fanatical and serene."

If I seem hesitant in this review to recommend this fine novel, it is not because I doubt its literary quality, power as a story, imaginative grace-full prose, or truthfulness. I doubt none of them. Nor do I doubt the significance of the themes it addresses, of the pain of fatherlessness, the yearning for home, and the need for forgiveness. I doubt none of them, either. My hesitation comes from a very different place. If I hadn't had to read *Home* for Ransom's annual board meeting, I don't think I could have finished it. It was simply too painful, often more painful than I thought I could bear. The reason is simple: the character I most identify with is Jack.





QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

Note: Marilynne Robinson's publisher has a free discussion guide available online (go to www.us.macmillan.com and search for *Home*, click on Reading Group Guide.) Consider the questions listed here as a supplement to that Guide.

1. What was your initial or immediate response to Robinson's novel? Why did you react the way you did?
2. Consider each character in turn: Rev Robert Boughton, Glory, John Ames, Jack, Teddy. As objectively as possible, describe each one, if possible by rereading (aloud) brief sections of the book. What is the significance of each to the story?
3. What is the basic identity of the character(s)? What motivates the character(s)? What do they value most and work hardest to obtain? What kind of action do the characters, particularly the main character, undertake? What tests them in this undertaking? What results from their choices? Do the main characters succeed or fail in their quest? How do you know?
4. With which character do you identify most readily? Why?
5. Stories like *Home*, along with films like *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001), *Lost in Translation* (2003), *Garden State* (2004), and *Look at Me* (2004) suggest that the themes of searching for home and fatherlessness are very relevant themes for our culture. Do you agree? What other stories can you think of that deal with similar issues and questions? Is there a sense of cosmic homesickness expressed in people's lives, fears, and yearnings? How is it expressed?
6. What do you know about the author? Is this of any significance to the fiction you are discussing?
7. Within the world of the story, what assumptions or statements are made about reality, morals, and the meaning of life?
8. Who is telling the story? Whose voice do you hear? Who is the narrator's implied audience or listener? How does the relationship between the narrator and the implied listener help the reader focus on what's important about the character(s)?
9. How does *Home* help you understand yourself, and others, more deeply?
10. In a world in which many are plagued with a sense of cosmic homesickness, what is the Christian response? How might some Christians respond wrongly? How might we bridge from *Home* to a thoughtful, winsome discussion of the biblical gospel?
11. Because the father is a minister, theology is discussed throughout the novel. What place does it have in the story? In the life of this family? How do you respond to these beliefs? Why?
12. If you did not enjoy this work, is there a reason why you should encounter it anyway? Would you recommend this work of fiction to others? Why or why not? How would you describe the work--and your reaction to it--in a way that would make sense to a Christian friend? To a non-Christian friend? Do the two descriptions differ? Why? Should they?

FURTHER READING SUGGESTIONS

The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith by Timothy Keller (New York NY: Dutton; 2008).
The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming by Henri J. M. Nouwen (New York, NY: Doubleday; 1994).

SOURCE

"Return of the Prodigal" by A. O. Scott in the New York Times (September 19, 2008) available online (<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/21/books/review/Scott-t.html?pagewanted=1>)



APATOW & ARISTOTLE ON FRIENDSHIP

A review of *Funny People* by Wesley Hill

I went into the theater expecting to love *Funny People*. I'd been pleasantly surprised by the way Judd Apatow's first film, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, questioned some of our current cultural obsession with sex and stood up for the virtues of premarital abstinence (albeit of a limited sort). I'd found myself laughing and crying at the end of *Knocked Up*, Apatow's sophomore effort, which follows the highs and lows of a young couple who decide to have the baby they accidentally conceived on a night of careless partying. So, when I heard months ago that Judd Apatow would be trying his hand at drama for his third movie, I was primed to like it.

"So, first impressions?" my friend prompted as we left the theater, knowing I was slated to write this review.

"I'm disappointed," I replied. "Not as good as I was hoping."

Since that night, though, I've had a chance to revise my initial take. Frankly, I haven't been able to forget *Funny People*. The characters have stayed with me, endearing themselves. And I've been trying to figure out why...

Starring:

Adam Sandler (George Simmons)
Seth Rogen (Ira Wright)
Leslie Mann (Laura)
Eric Bana (Clarke)
Jonah Hill (Leo Koenig)
Jason Schwartzman (Mark Taylor Jackson)

Writer & Director:

Judd Apatow

Producers:

Judd Apatow, Jack Giarraputo,
Evan Goldberg, Seth Rogen & others

Original Music:

Michael Andrews & Jason Schwartzman

Cinematographer:

Janusz Kaminski

Runtime: 146 min

Release: USA; 2009

MPAA Rating: R

(Language, crude sexual humor and sexuality.)

Judd Apatow has been the helmsman for a fleet of recent "bromantic comedies." Aside from writing and directing *Virgin* and *Knocked Up*, Apatow was the creative trust behind the raunchy male-friendship flicks *Superbad*, *Step Brothers*, and *Pineapple Express* (to name a few). Critics have noted, and sometimes bemoaned, Apatow's virtually exclusive focus on male characters. As Joel Stein put it in *Time* magazine's recent profile of Apatow, "His films are about men growing up and men helping men grow up." Seth Rogen, who plays in almost every Apatow flick, adds of his regular co-stars, "We're all really uncomfortable around girls, for the most part. I imagine that has something to do with it."

A case could be made that *Funny People's* riffs on the friendship theme are more amped than is usual even for an Apatow movie. The story follows a season in the life of George Simmons (Adam Sandler), who got his start in Hollywood as a stand-up and eventually landed the lead roles in several wildly successful comedy flicks. Early on in the film, George is diagnosed with a rare form of leukemia and given a dismal prognosis. As a kind of self-therapy, he bows out of the acting scene for a while and instead takes a few stand-up gigs in an effort to get back to his roots. He stays late at a club one night, after his bit is done, and meets an aspiring young comic, Ira Wright (Seth Rogen). Knowing his time is short and looking for someone to talk to, George awkwardly asks Ira if he'd want to be his personal assistant--you know, someone who can help him write jokes, drive him to his

gigs and George suggests--with surprising, embarrassing vulnerability--sit with him by his bed at night while he tries to fall asleep.

Much of the film is taken up with the slow, meandering development of George and Ira's relationship. Sparks occasionally fly ("You're my best friend, and I don't even like you," George tells Ira in a huff in one scene), but the real test of friendship comes late in the film, when Ira feels compelled to stop George from having an affair with a married woman. Can he do what needs to be done, what's right, without destroying the camaraderie he shares with George?

Whereas male bonding played a vital, if ancillary role in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* and *Knocked Up*, male friendship is front and center in *Funny People*. And it's just that, it seems to me, that makes Apatow's third film worth thinking about.

Ours is a culture confused about friendship, not least the kind of male friendship on display in *Funny People*. We have trouble imagining close friendships between men that aren't, somehow, sexualized. (Which means, probably, that we've lost any sense of true friendship. "Those who cannot conceive Friendship as a substantive love but only as a disguise or elaboration of Eros betray the fact that they have never had a friend," C. S. Lewis bluntly opined.)

But we also seem to have trouble imagining friendships in which growth in virtue is a primary aim. We're comfortable enough with

casual "hanging out," or even (restrained, oblique) displays of affection. But many of us struggle to choose friends who can, in Aristotle's words, "make us feel ashamed of doing what is really wrong." We have difficulty believing that "we do not merely have the capacity to be friends with beauties and rationalizers, jokers and daredevils, but also with someone who is concerned with what is good and what is true," as Andrew Sullivan colorfully paraphrases Aristotle's insight.

And maybe this is where the real cultural significance of *Funny People* lies.

By portraying a same-sex, non-erotic friendship in which one character is forced to confront another character's lack of virtue, the movie provides an occasion for a conversation about what real friendship might involve. I've thought several times in the days since I saw the movie that *Funny People* could be a

jumping-off point for a wide-ranging discussion of Proverbs 27:6, "Faithful are the wounds of a friend."

There are, admittedly, good reasons for thoughtful viewers to take a pass on seeing *Funny People*. The movie has more crass humor than probably any film I've seen to date. But for those who do choose to watch it, I suspect the payoff won't be nil. Indeed, it may be a far cry from nil. Like me, you may find yourself unable to forget the characters, and the questions their lives raise, for quite some time. And maybe, too, you'll become a better friend in the process.



SOURCES

Joel Stein, "Taking Judd Apatow Seriously" in *Time*, July 31, 2009; C. S. Lewis, as quoted in Alan Jacobs' *The Narnian* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005) p. 88; Aristotle, as quoted in Andrew Sullivan's *Love Undetectable: Notes on Friendship, Sex, and Survival* (New York: Vintage, 1998) pp. 191-192.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. George Simmons is a man who has made a career out of comedy--and now he's dying. What are the effects of this intersection of silliness and seriousness? How well does the movie do at exploring that intersection?
2. Does the movie have any recognizable theology or philosophy of death and dying? How does humor serve to blunt (or sharpen) the dark sense of death hanging over the characters?
3. How well does the film hang together? Critics have noted a clear two-act structure, but do the two acts cohere very well? Why or why not?
4. How would you describe Laura's character? What does she contribute to the story? Is she a fully-formed, three-dimensional character? Why or why not?

A Wedding Homily



A few weeks ago Madison and his fiancé Pamela joined my wife and me for dinner. We loved hearing their story. We loved listening to their dreams, full of smiles--as you would want their life to be. I told Pamela then, with Madison sitting very close beside her, how happy I was for him. That she had been beautiful her whole life, inside and out. That she is the one I hoped he would find. That he did, and that Pamela found him too, must make the angels sing, "Glory, glory, glory!"

Here then, are the words which were spoken at the marriage of Madison and Pamela on August 8, 2009 in Durham, NC:

You have asked me to muse on the meaning of marriage, and so I will. As I told my wife Meg--that I have anything to say is simply because *she* has faithfully loved me. She taught me to love and to be loved. And in her love I delight.

As those who love you, Pam and Madison we gather around you to give witness to your promises of love to each other. We take our place in the generations of your families who have over the years and centuries made their own commitments to marriage, commitments that of course have made this day possible. There is a company in heaven and on earth who stand with you, who stand behind you, who long with you and for you, as you promise to love until death do you part. I hope that you feel the grace of that as you stand here now.

When Madison and I began to become friends several years ago, I was his professor. I loved him for his eagerness to understand. Week after week he took the ideas of class seriously, he took the reading seriously; even

with his wonderfully easy and honest laughter, he wanted to learn all that he could learn. Over time he began to seek more conversation, and on many occasions we met for breakfast. Intellectually alive, passionate about ideas and words, he is also a young man who knows who he is and where is from, and in that he glories.

The rootedness of Madison's life in a people and a place is one of the best gifts he has been given. When we lose those relationships we lose something crucial in our humanity. As I have come to know him he has caused me think of another whose life I have come to know and love. Like Madison this man also loves ideas and words, even as he loves his family and community. A keen observer of life, he is a storyteller and a farmer, a poet and a social critic--his name is Wendell Berry.

In one of his novels, *The Memory of Old Jack*, Berry tells another tale of what he calls the "Port William Membership", the community over time which has lived and moved and had its being in the little town of Port William along the banks of the Kentucky River. These are people whose lives and histories have intersected with each other over generations. They do in truth belong to each other, whether they want to or not, whether they know it or not. In his own allusive and poetic account of the moral meaning of community, they are a membership, deeply and truly. They are a people whose lives cannot be made sense of apart from each other.

Old Jack's story is one of Berry's best. Beginning with his very first years of life, we are given windows into the years of his whole life--from his boyhood until the day he dies. If the first chapter tells of Jack watching

his older brothers ride off to a war from which they would not return, another chapter tells of his love for the girl who would become his wife. The sentences and paragraphs create a tapestry of incredible beauty, as Berry captures the wonder and hope and longing and happiness of young love, of a young man and a young woman slowly deciding for each other, slowly choosing to love this one and this one alone. On a different day it would be worthy of our time to stop and read aloud. Hear these few words:

And now five or six rows in front of him, Jack sees a head he doesn't recognize--as beautiful a head, surely, as he will ever see--the hair heavy and rich, the color of honey and butter, but worn with a simplicity, a lack of ostentation, that moves him strangely. There is something about that head that is both opulent and innocent. For a moment, though he does not move, he strains toward her, looking at her as though to memorize every tiny detail of the look of her; it is a memory that will stay with him, clear as his eye was then, for sixty-three years. And then he settles back into himself. Well!

From this first sighting of the woman who would become his beautiful bride, the story goes on, and with delight we listen into the ways of young love, so full of what might be, of what ought to be.

But then I sigh, and if you knew the story as I do, you would sigh too. If the one is a chapter of love gladly found and given, the next is a chapter of love lost. Not a physical death, as sweet Dora to David Copperfield, but a death of hope and dream, a death of the desire to love. What once seemed so full of possibility stumbles into sadness, and the tenderness and yearning of early love becomes hard-hearted indifference. Berry writes,

The illusions and false hopes of their courtship could not survive the intimacy of their marriage, and in the failure of their courtship their marriage failed.

A sober note, isn't it, on a day of glory like this one? And yet, I do want us to hear these words, as we also ponder the words of promised love that you, Madison and Pamela, offer to each other. Marriage does not take place in abstraction; rather it is only understood as we live into its meaning, into its reality. Words must become flesh--if we are to understand

them.

Your words today represent the years of your lives, from the little boy prayers of Madison, to Pamela's longest-held hopes that someday she would find a man worthy of her heart. How will you two take into your young love these words of wisdom, hard as they are, from *The Memory of Old Jack*? That it is one thing to be captivated by love, to be enchanted by another; and it is something else altogether to learn to love in such a way

that early love becomes older love, that the love of courtship becomes a long-loved love.

As the resident theologian of Durham, Stanley Hauerwas, once put it, "We do not fall in love and then get married; we get married and then learn what love requires." Everyone who has been married for more than a day knows the truth of those words. We get married and then learn what loves requires.

As I have watched marriages over the years, as I have lived within my marriage over the years, there are two habits of heart that seem to sustain good marriages. They are at the heart of what love requires: *to take*

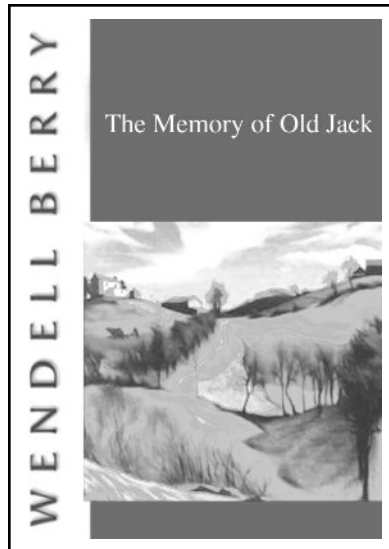
delight in, and *to give grace to*.

Delight and *grace*--hear them again. What is it about delight and grace that keeps a marriage alive over time?

If our desire is to see the passion of young love grow into a good marriage, a marriage where both wife and husband are nourished in heart and mind, then it is the decision to day after day after day to delight in the other that will keep love alive.

There is a sense, Madison and Pamela, and as your family and friends we would not have it be other, that it is easy for you to do that today. It will be easy to do that tomorrow, and for a week of tomorrows. But to keep deciding to delight in each other--this one, and this one alone, has my heart--that is a work of love that is yet before you. And yet the health and happiness of your marriage absolutely depends upon your willingness to choose and to choose again to delight in each other.

In a thousand ways, tenderly and affectionately offered as you alone will know, you will be sustained over the years of your life together by delighting in each other. Madison, Pamela will need that from you--tonight, yes, but even more so the nights of your life



over the course of your life. She will need to hear that and see that and feel that as you wake in the morning, as you enter into the thousands of midday conversations that will be yours, as you watch her become the mother of your children, as you watch her grow into the grandmother of your grandchildren, day upon day she will need to know that she is the delight of your eyes.

But twined together with delight, is grace. If your honeymoon is indeed that, a glory worth remembering all the days of your life, there will come a day when all is not glory, when in fact grace alone will keep your love alive. Pamela, Madison will need that from you perhaps more than any other gift you will give. Like every son of Adam before him, he is a clay-footed man, and he will say and do things that will disappoint and hurt you; he will fall short of the glory of God, and of your hopes for a husband--and because he will, he will need your grace, he will need you to give grace one more time. Marriages that are kept alive over the years, where both husbands and wives find honest happiness together, are absolutely dependent upon the giving of grace. The world is just too broken, we are just too fallen, for it to be any other way. As these days of young love grow into time-tested love, Madison will need to know that as you come to know him more completely, that you love him more completely. In most of life, when we know, we choose not to love; how can we, after all? Now we know!? And now that we know, how can we possibly love? We promise ourselves that we will not be fooled again. We protect ourselves from being hurt again, because sometimes it hurts, very terribly, to know another, to trust ourselves to another.

Dear ones, it is easier to love the idea of love than it is to love. Love means taking into our hearts real people, wounded and wounding as they are. The longer I live the more sure I am that to know and to love together, to know and then to choose to love, is the most difficult choice we make as human beings; nothing requires more of us--and it requires a great grace.

As I read Berry, reflecting on his gifts to all of us, it is his understanding of the covenantal character of life that most intrigues me. With unusual insight he knows

that we are bound up with each other, that we are dependent upon each other, that we need each other; that there is a mutuality at the heart of human life, and that it is in our responsibility to and for each other that we are most fully human. This is what covenant means, always and everywhere.

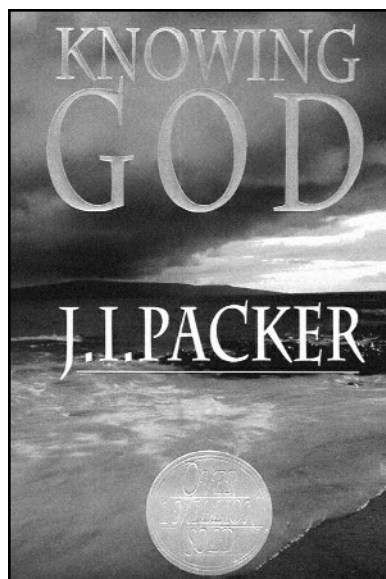
From the beginning of time, at the covenant of creation on through to the covenant with Noah and Abraham and Moses and David, and finally to the covenant made flesh in Jesus--the word made flesh--to be in covenant always means to be in relationships marked by delight and grace. Yes, by amazing grace, the God of heaven and earth delights in us. As Deuteronomy teaches, it was not because the people of Israel were stronger or smarter or bigger than the other peoples of the earth; it was simply because God chose to love them. God chose to delight in them, God chose to give grace to them, year after year, generation upon generation.

As J. I. Packer says so well in his classic, *Knowing God*, it is not so much that we know God that matters, but that he knows us; in fact that he knew the worst about us when he chose to love us, and that no discovery now can disillusion him about us in the way that we are so often disillusioned about ourselves. That is the gospel, that is good news--and that is the heart and soul of the covenant God makes with us.

Today is a day of covenant-making, this day of marriage, of promises made and of love declared. And we are your people, Madison and Pamela, the ones who have come together because

of great love for you, and we are the ones who will stand with you, not only today, but for your life. More than any others on the face of the earth, we will hope for you, we will long with you as you find your way into the delights and graces of marriage.

But as we do that, we also say to you that we want you to know that the words you give to each other today will be morally meaningful, if they lead you into proximate happiness together. Proximate--not perfect? Yes, proximate, not perfect. Proximate means close, sometimes very close--but not quite. It is real, so real that it can be touched, but it is not complete, not perfect. At your very best you will disappoint each other; at your very best you will find that you cannot be all that the other requires. There will be needs



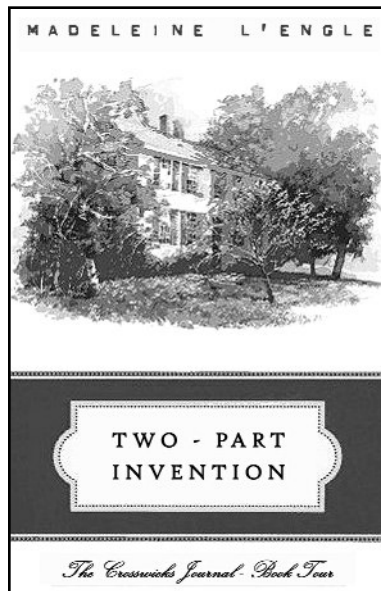
unmet, hopes unsatisfied. And then what will you do? Will you be able to find honest and true happiness together, proximate happiness together, and be glad for that? Or do you require of yourselves, and this almost perfect day, a perfect marriage as the only possible future, the only future that you will accept?

Madeleine L'Engle has written about this as well as anyone that I know. In her collection of poems, *The Weather of the Heart*, she begins with seven poems that she calls, "To A Long-Loved Love." For those who know her life and work, these are best read in relationship to her book, *The Two-Part Invention*, which is the story of her forty-year marriage, tenderly, poignantly told from the perspective of the last year of her marriage as her husband was dying of cancer. But these poems have been a gift to Meg and me, many times over many years, giving words that we did not have on our own as we have stumbled along in our longing to love and to be loved.

The final poem is worthy of our hearing together:

Because you're not what I would have you be
I blind myself to who, in truth, you are.
Seeking mirage where desert blooms, I mar
Your you. Aaah. I would like to see
Past all delusion to reality.
Then would I see God's image in your face,
His hand in yours, and in your eyes his grace.
Because I'm not what I would have me be,
I idolize Two who are not in any place,
Not you, not me, and so we never touch.
Reality would burn. I do not like it much.
And yet in you, in me, I find a trace
Of love which struggles to break through
The hidden lovely truth of me, of you.

There are no perfect marriages because there is no perfect love because there are no perfect people. We are clay-footed, one and all. And you, as beautiful and gifted as you are, Madison and Pamela, are clay-footed too. By the tender mercy of God, a proximate happiness is there for you to find together. Be glad in it, be grateful for it.



Because of my work I am often in conversation with people from other parts of the world. Over the years I have heard this observation from people who know the U.S. well, from Asians, Africans, Arabs. They put it like this: "In your culture you marry the women that you love; in our culture we love the women that we marry." Like all broad-brushstroke interpretations of life, it is mostly true--and yet of course there are exceptions. It is important to note that the difference in cultures, in the way that love and marriage are understood within cultures, carries no moral weight, necessarily. And there is of course infidelity on both sides, in the majority world and in our world. What I do find worth pondering is this: our ways of coming into marriage are a minority opinion, in history and in the world all over the world. Most people do not see it

as we do, in the individualism and autonomy of the West; ours is truly a minority opinion. As much as it feels very normal and natural to us--"Of course we will marry the women, and the men, that we love!"--our ways seem strange to the watching world. That ought to be instructive to us, and humbling to us as we muse over the meaning of marriage.

So, dear ones that you are, on this most wonderful of wedding days, our strong hope is that you, Madison and Pamela, will do both, that you are in truth marrying the one that you love, and that you will love the one that you marry. May it be so.

And may God bless you and keep you and may his face shine upon you, on this day of promises made, and all of the days of your life together, bringing those promises into being. May the words of this day become flesh between you.

A member of Ransom's Board of Directors, Steven Garber is Director of The Washington Institute for Faith, Vocation & Culture, an educational center committed to "connecting conversations with consequences, learning with life, Washington with the world." The author of *The Fabric of Faithfulness* and contributor to *Get Up Off Your Knees: Preaching the U2 Catalogue*, he writes and speaks widely on the relation of popular culture to political culture, of the moral imagination to cultural responsibility. He lives in Virginia with his wife Meg, where they are glad members of The Falls Church, an almost 300-year old Anglican congregation, where for many years he has taught a class, Visions of Christian Spirituality.



Listening to Critics: When Musicians Raise Questions About Faith (I)

Music not only nurtures our souls it speaks to the deepest issues of life. "I have my own particular sorrows, loves, delights; and you have yours," H. A. Overstreet wrote. "But sorrow, gladness, yearning, hope, love, belong to all of us, in all times and in all places. Music is the only means whereby we feel these emotions in their universality." When I share someone's music I not only hear some of what they are thinking, but gain at least a little sense, a brief glimpse of its significance to the deepest corners of their heart. And that level of communication is a precious gift.

So, it is not surprising that in music we hear, among a host of other things, echoes of faith, doubt, questions, challenges, disillusionment, discovery, healing, hurt--all the myriad components of a spiritual pilgrimage.

With this piece I am beginning an occasional series in which we will pay special attention to musical critics of Christian faith. We will listen to their music not to criticize them or their ideas but to learn and to engage, winsomely and thoughtfully. To appreciate their creativity, and to honestly hear what they have to say about why the faith I accept as true and satisfying seems to them to be implausible, or questionable, or untrue, or whatever. As we go, I'll also mention why this exercise is important for people of faith to engage in regularly.

I plan to reflect on songs such as "The God that Failed" (Metallica), "God's Love" & "Live Again (The Fall of Man)" (Bad Religion), "Teen for God" (Dar Williams), "God" (Tori Amos), and "God Shuffled His Feet" (Crash

Test Dummies). And since I am only one listener, I invite you, my readers to participate in this series (see the box at the end for details).

For the first song, though, let's go back a bit in time, all the way to the 1930's.

Critic song #1: "It Ain't Necessarily So"

This song was penned by George and Ira Gershwin for their classic American opera *Porgy & Bess* (1935).

The recording I am referencing is of Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong from their album *Porgy & Bess* (Verve, 1957); the selected track also appears on the compilation "Red Hot and Gershwin" (1998).

On this recording Ella's voice is flawlessly charged with expression, Satchmo's trumpet as clear and bright as his voice is gravelly. Listening to them always makes me smile--their infectious love of life and beauty, merged with mischievous artistry to distill joy from a broken world:

*It ain't necessarily so
The t'ings dat yo' li'ble
To read in de Bible,
It ain't necessarily so.*

*Li'l David was small, but oh my!
He fought Big Goliath
Who lay down an' dieth!
Li'l David was small, but oh my!*

Wadoo, zim bam boddle-oo,
Hoodle ah da wa da,
Scatty wah! / Oh yeah!...

Oh Jonah, he lived in de whale,
Fo' he made his home in
Dat fish's abdomen.
Oh Jonah, he lived in de whale.

Li'l Moses was found in a stream.
He floated on water
Till Ol' Pharaoh's daughter,
She fished him, she said, from dat stream.

Well, it ain't necessarily so
Dey tells all you chillun
De debble's a villun,
But it ain't necessarily so!

To get into Hebben
Don' snap for a sebben!
Live clean!
Don' have no fault!
Oh, I takes dat gospel
Whenever it's pos'ble,
But wid a grain of salt.

Methus'lah lived
Nine hundred years,
But who calls dat livin'
When no gal will give in
To no man what's
Nine hundred years?

I'm preachin' dis sermon
To show, it ain't nece...
Ain't nece...
Ain't necessarily...so!



The song also raises questions about the central message of Christian faith, the gospel: to get into heaven, Sportin' Life says, he's been told to be moral, be faultless, don't gamble. It's advice that Sportin' Life accepts "whenever it's pos'ble, but wid a grain of salt." I agree: this bit of moralism may capture a bit of wisdom about life, but it doesn't come close to capturing the message of the Christian gospel. The gospel of Jesus is the opposite of this, a story of grace for all those (like me) who may want to live clean but find that they simply can't and don't.

I hear questions here, not rebellion. Honesty not anger. An asking not shouting. A wariness about Christians who make believing the Bible seem effortless, simple, obvious, as if every text and story were equally plausible. Thoughtful questions about some biblical stories that seem impossible to believe. And a disbelief in a so-called gospel that points to righteous living but remains hopelessly out of reach for all of us who know we fall short. And all accomplished with fine creativity and wit.

Music, like all good art, is communication. This song begins a conversation worth having.

In *Porgy & Bess* "It Ain't Necessarily So" was sung by a drug dealer named Sportin' Life. The Gershwin's Jewish heritage brought familiarity with the Old Testament. The song was written as the Depression was ending and Germany's power was rising in Europe, a time of great uncertainty when the old sureties seemed far less certain than they had a decade earlier.

The song raises questions about some of the stories found in the Bible: Jonah swallowed by a fish, Methuselah living 969 years. They are good questions, too because the stories seem highly implausible to any thoughtful reader in the modern West. Christians shouldn't find such questions offensive but be willing to think such objections through carefully. Honest questions deserve honest answers. After all, if such stories are passed off in the Bible as factual but can't be trusted to be true or historical, why believe the rest of what Scripture says?

AN INVITATION TO CRITIQUE READERS

We will happily include material from you in future articles in this series.

Send by email: info@ransomfellowship.org -- the name of the song, the artist(s), album title, the full lyrics, and a brief reflection (max 500 words) on what you hear.

Are questions being raised, or a challenge issued, or disillusionment explored, or an alternative belief proposed, or anger expressed?

What should Christians hear in, appreciate, learn and take from the song?

Write so that both Christians and non-Christians can enter the conversation comfortably.

Though you will retain the copyright, submitting grants us the right to edit, publish, and post your submission on Ransom's web site.

A ONE-WAY TRIP

"Space, the final frontier. These are the voyages of the starship Enterprise. Its 5-year mission: to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no man has gone before."

One reason *Star Trek* became so popular is that it allowed us all to imagine what it would be like to be an explorer. There were lots of other reasons, too of course: good writing, plots that dealt with the big issues of life, fascinating characters we cared about, innovative devices we all wished we could have. Still, the notion of exploration ran like a thread through the entire series. No one knew what they would discover next or what danger would threaten their mission or their lives.

Exploration has always involved risk. "Men wanted for hazardous journey," Ernest Shackleton wrote, advertising for 26 men to join him in crossing Antarctica. "Constant danger. Safe return doubtful." 5,000 applied, hungry for adventure, willing to take the risk.

Throughout history courageous men and women have eagerly set off to explore with no guarantee that they would return home safely afterwards. In 1447 the Portuguese explorer Nuño Tristão discovered the Gambia River in West Africa. He died on the first day of his return voyage as a result of being hit by poisoned arrows. Apparently the Gambians they encountered were uninterested in being explored. Another Portuguese explorer, Gaspar Corte-Real set out for North America in 1501 and simply disappeared. The next year his brother, Miguel, set out on the same adventure, and he too, was never seen again. Sir Hugh Willoughby sailed from his native England in 1554 to explore the Arctic. A Russian fishing vessel happened upon his ship the next year, drifting, the entire crew

frozen to death. But we don't have to go that far back in time for examples. Remember how we watched on January 28, 1986 when 73 seconds into its mission the Challenger disintegrated in a massive explosion, tragically killing all aboard.

The point is simple: exploration always involves risk, but still explorers are willing to set off on their adventures. Good planning helps, but cannot guarantee a safe return. All explorers know they may not make it back home.

Since that is the situation with exploration, and since part of what makes a trip to Mars so prohibitive is the cost of the return trip, Lawrence M. Krauss of Arizona State University asks why the U.S. should not send astronauts into space on a one-way ticket. The reason the cost is so large is that a trip to Mars requires shielding the astronauts from deadly radiation, increasing the weight of the spacecraft. Even our best efforts would only be partial, however, so returning to die on earth rather than remaining to do more experiments on Mars seems unwise.

And it could all be accomplished with volunteers, Dr Krause says.

If it sounds unrealistic to suggest that astronauts would be willing to leave home never to return alive, then consider the results of several informal surveys I and several colleagues have conducted recently. One of my peers in Arizona recently accompanied a group of scientists and engineers from the Jet Propulsion Laboratory on a geological field trip. During the day, he asked how many would be willing to go on a one-way mission into space. Every member of the group raised his hand. The lure of space travel remains intoxicating for a

INTO SPACE

generation brought up on Star Trek and Star Wars.

Staffing the mission to Mars with volunteers is only one safeguard we could institute to ensure that no one is coerced into going, or that anyone's rights are violated.

The largest stumbling block to a consideration of one-way missions is probably political. NASA and Congress are unlikely to do something that could be perceived as signing the death warrants of astronauts.

Nevertheless, human space travel is so expensive and so dangerous that we are going to need novel, even extreme solutions if we really want to expand the range of human civilization beyond our own planet. To boldly go where no one has gone before does not require coming home again.

SOURCE

Dr Krauss' proposal appeared in an op-ed piece, "A One-Way Ticket to Mars" (September 1, 2009) in the *New York Times*, and is worth reading in its entirety. A free copy is available online at: nytimes.com

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What was your initial reaction to Lawrence Krauss' proposal?
2. Exploration today still beckons to adventurous souls. Dark labyrinthine caves, corners of vast tropical forests and deserts, deep oceanic trenches, and space all contain secrets yet undiscovered. Is the risk associated with all such endeavors sufficient reason to discourage young adults from pursuing vocations that embrace them? Why or why not?
3. Is there any reason why an astronaut that happens to be a Christian could not volunteer for a one-way trip to Mars?
4. To what extent is longevity of life a Christian value? What do the Scriptures teach explicitly on the topic? What principles drawn from the Scriptures address it implicitly?
5. Are there dangers for a nation like the U.S. to adopt a "one-way to Mars" position as a matter of public policy? What are they? Could safeguards be put in place to adequately address them?
6. What level of risk is too high for an exploration to be launched? Who should determine that level of risk?
7. What does this whole discussion suggest about our view of death?
8. It is probably safe to say that the majority of medical scientists today hold a naturalistic world and life view. Naturalism, as a philosophy, is essentially life without hope, since it accepts the notion that at death the individual simply ends (in terms of existence). Yet, every world view seeks to produce hope in its adherents. Today that hope has been channeled into the medical push against death and increasing longevity of life. In this light, embracing longevity of life as a value, per se, is merely embracing a myth promulgated by the modern idolatry known as Naturalism. Discuss.
9. In the 19th century when Christian missionaries went to Africa they transported their belongings in coffins, one for each member of the family. This not only symbolized their determination to remain in Africa, it was practical since a large percentage died in the first few years after their arrival. Would such zeal be accepted by American churches today as a legitimate approach to missions? Why or why not? What does it say about the view of death and the longevity of life in the 19th c. Western church compared to today?
10. Would the pro-life movement, to be consistent, need to resist any effort by the federal government to adopt a "one-way ticket to Mars" policy? Why or why not?
11. In a society as diverse and pluralistic as ours, what likelihood is there that Krauss' proposal can be discussed thoughtfully and with civility in the public square. What can Christians do to increase civility on this and other topics?

NOT YOUR AVERAGE COMIC BOOKS

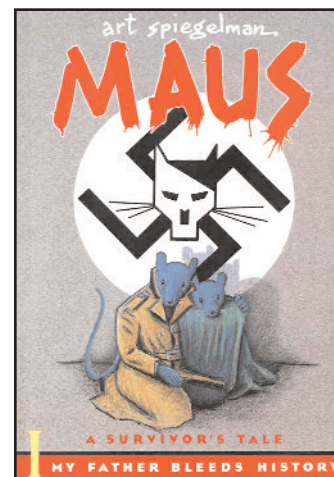
GRAPHIC NOVELS DIVULGE RICH HISTORIES AND ATROCITIES

PENNING A PULITZER WINNER

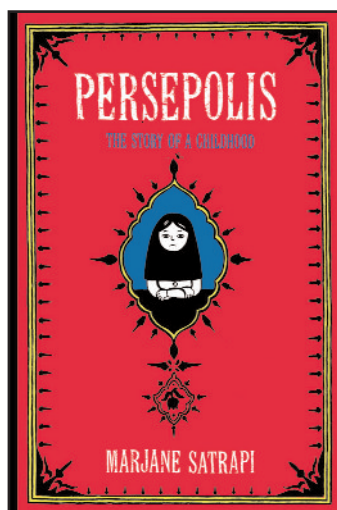
They are usually shelved in the teen section at your local library, or near the comic books at your local book store; but these are not your usual tales of masked crusaders. These are real stories sharing all too real experiences in text and pictures.

As a graphic artist Art Spiegelman turned to the pen to process the stories of his parent's experiences in Nazi concentration camps. The artist uses cats and mice metaphorically to represent Nazi's and Jews respectively. But the furry faces quickly fade as the reader seeks to

relate to the all too human and all too tragic tales that unfold. This tale, which was originally released as a serial in *Raw Magazine*, earned Spiegelman the Special Prize Pulitzer in 1992.



Maus: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History, Art Spiegelman (Pantheon, 1986)



Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood Margane Satrapi (Pantheon, 2004)

CONSTANT REVOLUTION

With *Persepolis*, Marjane Satrapi recounts her life growing up in Iran. Born in 1969, she walks us through major upheavals like the Iranian (a.k.a. Islamic) Revolution, life under the Ayatollah Khomeini, and the impact of religious and political shifts on her family.

Early in life Marjane must discern between what she is taught in



school and the ideologies of her parents (who were against the regime). We see her grow more aware of her political and religious surroundings; along with their effects on her friends, neighbors and family members.

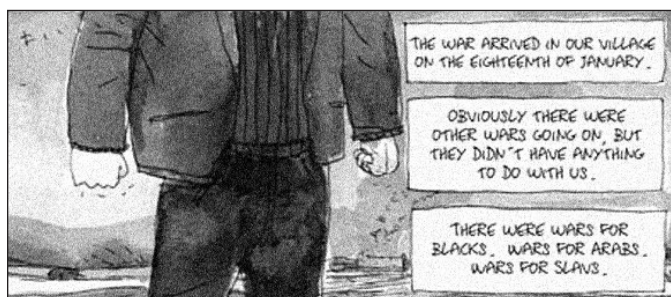
Satrapi has written a companion volume which covers her studies in Vienna and move back to Iran. Both graphic novels are encapsulated in the feature length animated film *Persepolis* (2007).

LIFE IN WARTIME

Notes for a War Story is purposely non-descript in its geography—for this could be any war torn region in the world today. Gipi (Gianni Pacinotti) is quoted as saying, "My intention was to make people think about the possibilities of a war suddenly arriving in their own home." He succeeds.

Through pen and watercolor he weaves a tale of three young men trying to reframe their lives when all that was familiar has been destroyed.

There are a lot of questions: What did this fighting achieve? What do we do now? What is "normal" now that the life we knew prior to war has been exterminated? That is what the young men seek to resolve on this illustrated journey.



Notes for a War Story Gipi (First Second, 2007)

ALSO RECOMMENDED

The Wall: Growing Up Behind The Iron Curtain, Peter Sis, Farrar, Staus & Giroux, 2007.
The Arrival, Shaun Tan Aurthur A. Levine Books, 2007.