

Letters from The House Between

Formerly *Notes from Toad Hall*

Issue 4 **Winter** 2016



Dear Friends,

From the moment it was hauled through the front door, I hated that pine-green naugahyde couch. It stank like cat pee and the surface stuck to your bare skin. But it *was* something to sit on, and it *was* a free hand-me-down that came during our magical, poverty-stricken third year of marriage. By year sixteen we'd owned and offed many free used couches. They weren't to my taste, but still we were thankful for remodeling projects that made our friends' possessions obsolete, like the perfectly useable harvest-gold refrigerator from friends who upgraded to the fashionable black-appliance era. But the first couch we ever owned that I totally loved was a surprise gift.

The moment I spied it at a neighbor's garage sale I wanted it. From my front porch I could see their driveway lined with tables of clothing, sports equipment, old dishes and an assortment of book cases and wooden chairs that smelled of must. I walked down with the dog – he was a handy excuse to meander past anything of interest. There, among worn linens and old picture frames, was the antique couch I dreamed of owning. It was a camel-back sofa upholstered in rose-y brocade with ornate wood carvings along the back that met in the middle of the hump in a delicate rosette. Graceful Queen-Anne legs supported upholstered arms that rolled comfortably over the side. Exactly what I wanted back in the day of wine-colored carpets and country-blue wallpaper. I peeked at the price. One hundred dollars was more than I could afford. Every day of the sale I walked past to see if the couch was still there and whether the price had been lowered. I'm no bargainer but I screwed up courage to ask if they would take fifty dollars. The owner looked as if I had insulted his mother. "NO! This belonged to our grandmother. It's a gen-u-ine antique." I sighed and walked home determined to put it out of my mind.

The last evening of the sale coincided with our small group Bible study. Later as we prayed togeth-

er I confessed I had a problem with covetousness. I admitted how much I wanted that couch, but was determined to be content with what we had. When the study was over, as usual, I disappeared into the kitchen to prepare our treat which was more complex than my normal throw brownies on a plate. It was homemade gingerbread cake with lemon curd and whipped cream. As I refilled the coffee pot and prepared dessert, several others joined, intending to keep me in the kitchen a little longer.

Meanwhile, noise and laughter from the living room rose to a peak and suddenly hushed signaling the kind of quiet that warns mothers the kids are up to shenanigans again.

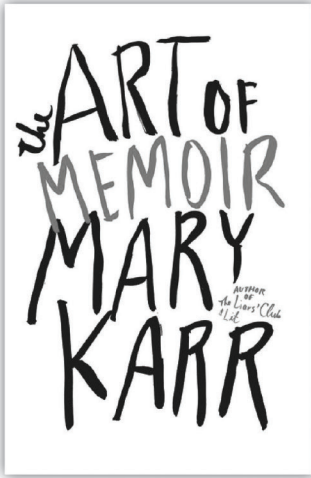
Finally we carried in the cake and then I understood what the commotion was about. After I left for the kitchen there had been a whispered conference. Everyone threw cash down and four of the men ran down to the sale, paid for the couch, hauled it back, horsed it through the front door and were now lounging on it. "It's yours," they said with big grins.



Over the years it got reupholstered when I left country décor behind and it adorned our living room until the day a dear friend weighing something over 300 pounds stopped by, lowered his weary body onto the cushions and I heard a crrraackkk. I hid my dismay and after he left I turned it over. Sure enough there was a fresh break along the back frame. It bravely hung together for many more years until one day I woke up and said, I'm done with antiques and purchased our first couch ever – a leather sofa on sale at HOM. But even the new leather smell and bouncy cushions couldn't diminish the sweet memory of that "antique" gift and the generosity of friends.

Every Christmas we celebrate by giving and receiving gifts. A smarter, better writer could seamlessly lead you to Jesus who is, of course, the greatest gift we've ever known. Through him a lot of grace has been horsed in through our doors, surprising us with what we could never afford. I remember the awe of that spontaneous gift when friends threw down the cash for something I couldn't have and didn't deserve. But I can imagine Jesus sitting on that couch, and over my objections inviting me to shut up and sit down. Or as my husband would say, just say thank you. And so we do. Glory to God forever and ever.

Christmas Gift List 2016

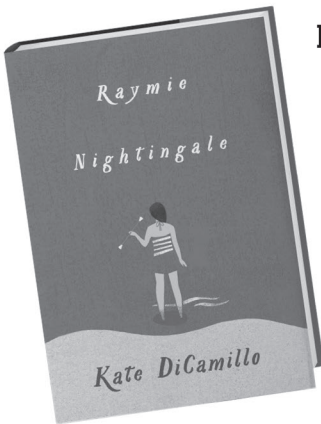


The Art of Memoir by Mary Karr, Harper Collins, 2015. (non-fiction)

Why would I recommend such a book to anyone who is not a writer?

A. Because everyone has a story and should be finding ways to tell it even if it doesn't become a published book.
B. Because this excellent book pulls back the curtain on art-making which translates not only into writing, but into living. More than inspiration, for me, she gives much helpful advice and at least one penetrating question I try

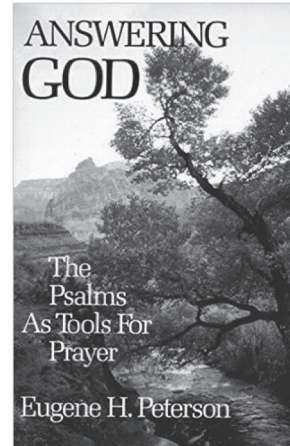
to think of each time I sit down to write: "What would you write if you were not afraid?" One could usefully ask this of most endeavors. What would you do if you were not afraid? Who would you love? Where would you go? What would you pray or say? She writes: "We each nurture a private terror that some core aspect(s) of either ourselves or our story must be hidden or disowned." Karr is a great teacher of writing - for memoir, yes, but for any genre. She models an honesty that leads not just to inner healing, but looks outward for how we may love and forgive others. She is a fierce, insightful and stunning wordsmith. I highly recommend her to both writers and non-writers who are interested in the art of living.



Raymie Nightingale by Kate DiCamillo, Candlewick Press, 2016. (children's fiction)

Kate DiCamillo's books always astonish me. Her latest is no exception. She exemplifies the idea that good children's literature speaks to any age. In this story, three young girls meet one summer and an unlikely friendship ensues that changes their lives. They meet because each one of them, for very different reasons hopes to win the Miss Central

Florida Tire Competition. Raymie is hoping that her fame from winning will bring her father back home - a dentist who has skipped town with his hygienist. DiCamillo is able to write with tenderness about how life is filled with sorrow and challenges and yet the most unexpected people and events can become redemptive to our lives. Friendship and loyalty become a balm that helps heal the wounded hearts of these girls. The power of DiCamillo's stories is that they are rich and true to real life, not just an imagined one. For in our hearts we must admit we, too, harbor deep longings for the kind of friendship love that weathers our quirky defenses and hidden pains. Her ability to write dialogue that ranges from humorous to the profoundly wise is golden. Although these girl protagonists are ten years old, I hope that this book would find its way onto the shelves of those who are much older.



Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer

by Eugene Peterson, Harper Collins, 1989. (Spirituality)

I was mentored, enlivened, and taught more about prayer in this little book than anything I've recently read on the topic. Seriously. It reached down into the seat of

my being and reshaped what I understood about the Psalms and prayer. I have always harbored a secret feeling that one day I would be above the insecurities and troubles of life. He confronts that misunderstanding so soundly I felt joy and hope pour into my heart. "Prayer is the language of the people who are in trouble and know it, and who believe or hope that God can get them out. As prayer is practiced, it moves into other levels and develops other forms, but trouble - being in the wrong, being in danger, realizing that the foes are too many for us to handle - is the basic provocation for prayer. Isaac Bashevis Singer once said, 'I only pray when I am in trouble. But I am in trouble all the time, and so I pray all the time. The recipe for obeying St. Paul's 'Pray without ceasing' is not a strict ascetical regimen but a watchful recognition of the trouble we are in.' That is just a start. A tiny shred of beginning to understand that neither I nor the Psalmists grow above their situations, but we live in our stories and in prayer move again and again from doubting, discouragement even anger to comfort and trust and praise. Although we experience crumbs of it here, only in the next life will we be at home with all praise and all joy all the time.

The Underdogs: Children, Dogs, and the Power of Unconditional Love

By Melissa Fay Greene, Harper Collins, 2016 (nonfiction)

If you love dogs, then you will love this book about service dogs who have brought joy and hope to the lives of families with children suffering from disabilities that brought stress and in some cases so much uncontrollable chaos that parents were never free to let down.

The dogs that successfully entered such homes brought with them a kind of unconditional love and safety that led to astonishing changes. The stories of many

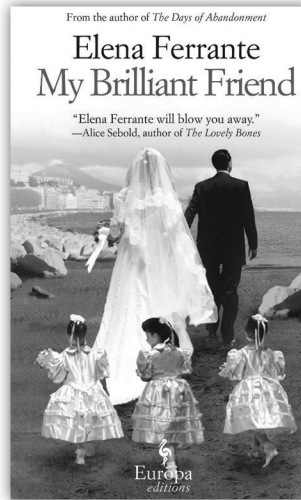
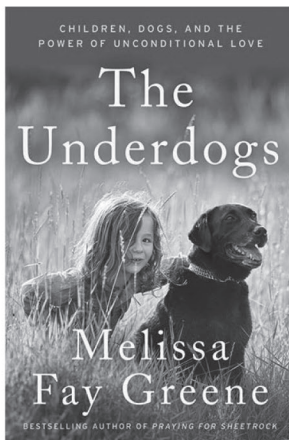
who have been helped are woven throughout the book as Greene explores the history of dogs bonding with humans and some of latest scientific research and

discoveries about what makes dogs tick.

One story she followed is that of Karen Shirk who at the age of 24 was diagnosed with a neuromuscular disease that left her isolated, depressed and dependent on a ventilator. Every service dog agency rejected her because she was “too disabled.” Finally with encouragement

from her nurse she raised her own service dog, a German shepherd who dragged her back into living. From there she began an agency training dogs to help others who had been turned down because they, too, were believed to be beyond help. Her trained dogs have now

bounded into the lives of hundreds of adults and children who before their arrival felt helpless and hopeless. What a gift they have been!



this age of the Big Me and contrary to the belief that money is the bottom line, she refuses to do the slightest thing to market her books. Including no interviews, no lectures, no signings. She believes they must stand on their own and does not care if no one reads them. She writes for herself. Despite this her books are always best sellers in Italy!

My Brilliant Friend by Elena Ferrante
2012 Europa Editions. (Fiction)

This is book one of a trilogy. It is the story of a life-long friendship between two women that began in the 1950s when they were children. Elena and Lila grow up in a tough neighborhood in Naples and learn to rely on each other through the years, even though the shelter of that friendship does not keep them from misunderstandings and hardships. It is a fascinating look into the lives and customs of lower class Italians following World War II. Ferrante’s prose does not lose power even though it has been translated from Italian. She is an impressive writer and an unusual one. In



H is for Hawk by Helen Macdonald, 2015, Grove Press. (Memoir)

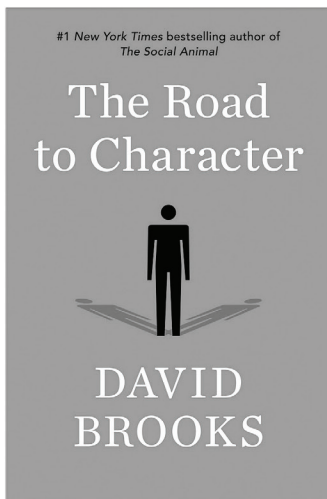
After the death of her father, in an effort to distract herself and heal from grief, Macdonald turned to training predator hawks. She chose the aggressive and difficult goshawk. Goshawks don’t become pets but remain ultimately wild and untamable. Intent on murder and blood, with enormous talons and sharp beaks, they are awesomely equipped to kill small game. She hoped that the challenge of training Mabel would bring her back to normal life, but as the weeks passed she sank further into depression, withdrawing from friends and family, and identifying more and more with her goshawk.

Macdonald writes:

...I’d thought that to heal my great hurt, I should flee to the wild. It was what people did. The nature books I’d read told me so. So many of them had been quests inspired by grief or sadness. Some had fixed themselves to the stars of elusive animals Some sought wildness at a distance, others close to home. ‘Nature in her green tranquil woods heals and soothes all afflictions,’ wrote John Muir ‘Earth hath no sorrows that earth cannot heal.’

Now I knew this for what it was: a beguiling but dangerous lie. I was furious with myself and my own unconscious certainty that this was the cure I needed. Hands are for other human hands to hold. They should not be reserved exclusively as perches for hawks. And the wild is not a panacea for the human soul; too much in the air can corrode it to nothing.

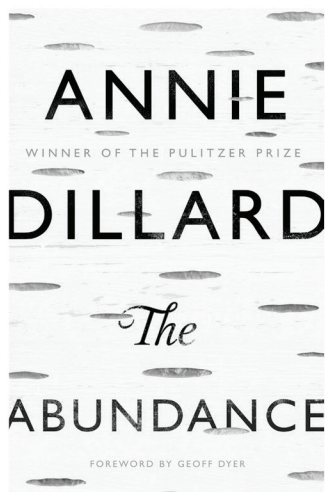
There couldn’t be a better argument for the Christian belief that God made us to live in community and bear one another’s burdens.



The Road to Character by David Brooks, 2015, Random House (non-fiction)

During a year when there was more public vulgarity and viciousness than we'd ever want to see, and during an age when the "Big Me" is what characterized, not just public figures, but often our own social media selves, I grew hungry for wise voices that feed richer and deeper needs in life. Voices that challenge us to become people of virtue and humility. Words that penetrate the heart with an invitation to actually change how we react to the world around us. Brooks questions the culture that teaches us how wonderful we are, and how listening to the inner me will help us become the best we can be. Rather, he proposes

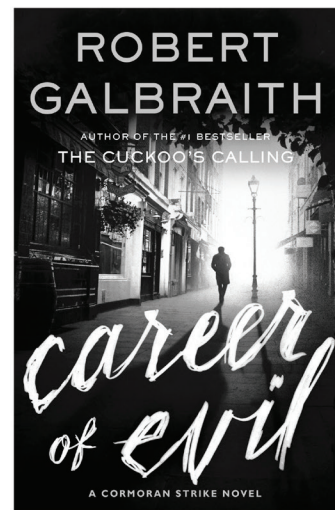
we look at the lives of characters like Dorothy Day, Augustine and George Eliot to see what it cost them to walk a long road toward maturity. It may sound strange to hear that Brooks, the New York Times, columnist has written a #1 NYT bestseller that frequently uses the word *sin*. Amazing, but he does. He insists our natural tendency is to consider ourselves the center of the universe which leads to the disasters of narcissism and self-aggrandizement. He proposes that "Sin and limitation are woven through our lives. We are all stumblers. All of us need an external rescue – redemptive assistance from the outside – and if we can admit our need and surrender ourselves grace flows into our lives. This man may have become our brother in Christ.



The Abundance by Annie Dillard, 2016, Harper Collins. (essay collection)

This collection of essays cries out to us to be observers of creation and life, if not lovers. Dillard explores the mysteries and cruelties of everyday life without ignoring its beauties. She examines the wonder of people who risk their lives while trying to be the first to discover the poles. What does this tell us about man, she wonders? From the eclipse of the sun to the flaming moth caught in the candle she never stops asking. Wherever she looks she finds words to describe life in ways I could NEVER think of. Not just the balmy scent of wild roses hanging over a brook but the bloody nature of

life itself that bites a frog and turns its insides to a soup that is sucked up by a giant water bug. Her writing is never just a simple exploration of the facts, with a vengeance she is trying to suss the meaning of the universe. Her phrases and word choices stun me. I love them. For example: "... I risk the searing, exhausting nightmares that plunder rest and force me facedown all night long in some muddy ditch seething with hatching insects and crustaceans." p. 149. Really? This is so visceral and yet she captures the inexpressible feelings that assault us in nightmares. So why read this book? Because to be whole we need more than gentle stories, pleasant scenes and thrilling novels, we need muscular, creative challenges that push us into places we've never been before.



Career of Evil by Robert Galbraith, aka, J.K. Rowling, 2015, Mulholland Books. (Crime novel)

Cormoran Strike, private investigator is back again in this third book of the series! I couldn't wait for this to come out in paperback so we could afford it. Strike gets embroiled in a search for a frightening psychopath who seems intent on bringing him down and killing his sidekick and assistant Robin. When she receives a package at the office containing the severed leg of a woman, the hunt is on. With three dangerous suspects and little cooperation from the Yard, Strike and Robin are on their own. Meantime, Strike loses all his clients, dumps his lover and ostracizes most of his friends in his effort to find this criminal and bring him to justice. When it becomes clear there is also a serial killer at large who seems connected to the woman's leg, finding the killer becomes even more critical. This is a page-turner. But here's what I like about Galbraith's mysteries: The characters in her books are not one-dimensional, they grow and change. There are believable, satisfying back stories. Her plots are brilliant and the cases are cracked by dogged investigation not by miraculous interventions. The criminals themselves seem designed by someone who knows the real intricacies of evil that harbor in the heart of man. So for a really suspenseful, fun read – this could be a welcome gift for almost anyone.

And Finally...

We are getting a new website! As this issue of *Letters* went to press it wasn't quite ready to launch. As we began digging into files on our old site, we saw an overwhelming number of things that need to be updated or edited. Some files like the "Interviews" I did with Denis and myself have not seen the light of day since I wrote them back in the early 90s. It's like allowing you to use my bathroom and realizing too late, I haven't cleaned it in a year. It's that bad! Our site is huge and I think the word



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is "deep," so we are mopping up like crazy. But this is what you'd expect when no one is specifically paid or assigned to keep cleaning up after you. A major reason we've updated our site is because – yes it's old and clunky – but we also want to continue providing

resources and thoughtful exchange even after we are too old to tie our shoes and our brains can't think of the word meaning "it's time to give the golden handshake" – Retire!

The new one is going to be very cool and much easier to navigate. We want people to come in and feel welcomed. We want to encourage people not to be afraid of our times and culture. We want to remember that the God of the universe is delighted with our being faithful in the small everyday ways of life.

It will be a while before we get everything edited and reformatted, but we'll let you know when it's time to break a bottle of champagne over it and invite you in for a visit.

If you remember us, would you pray as 2016 rounds the corner and we continue with efforts to write? In January, we have our annual board meeting and in February, the L'Abri conference. In March, Denis will be teaching a seminary course in Nashville. I am determined to work on a new manuscript, and otherwise stay out of trouble as we keep up with the myriad details of Ransom's ministry.

As always in this advent season the gift of your prayers and donations continue to comfort and astound us. Thank you. Be cheered in your hearts as we all receive the gift of God's sovereign care through all our days.



Warmly,

Margie Haack

About Letters From the House Between

If you drive through western Kentucky where two great southern rivers – the Cumberland and the Tennessee – come together, you pass over the dams that bind them and a land emerges bordered on all sides by water, simply called The Land Between the Lakes. As we drove, we thought about the changes coming as we aged and needed to move from Toad Hall, our home of thirty-three years. We needed a place where certain features were on the main floor so as body parts fail one doesn't need to climb stairs to reach them. We thought of that place as "The House Between," a place bound on one side by years past where we raised children, continued our ministry and grew older, and on the other side, a place in heaven where God holds a perfect place of restoration yet to come. Our new home is a reminder that this is only a "place between" what is now and what will one day be true Home forever. Thus: The House Between.

Letters from the House Between 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 automatically unless requesting otherwise. Everyone on Ransom's mailing list also receives Critique magazine. To receive them send your mailing address to:

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