

Critique

Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

In This Issue

04 The Common Grace of Joseph Arthur

Jeremy Huggins invites us to listen to the Christ-haunted music of the non-Christian musician/painter Joseph Arthur.

07 3 sentences, 1 chapter, 1 sad conclusion

Steven Garber reviews Tom Wolfe's latest novel, *I am Charlotte Simmons*. In the process he helps us think Christianly about our sadly sexualized society so that we can live more faithfully.

13 Talking about Charlotte

A companion piece to his review of *I am Charlotte Simmons*, Garber interviews two recent college graduates.

02 Editor's Note

03 Dialogue

16 On the Web



Editor

Denis Haack

Layout & Web

John Hake

Contributing Editors

Jennifer Disney, Steven Garber, R. Greg Grooms, Donald Guthrie, John Mason Hodges, Preston Jones, Marsena Konkle, David John Seel, Jr., Travis Scott, Andrew H. Trotter, Jr.

Board of Directors

Steven Garber

Director

*The Washington Institute
for Faith, Vocation & Culture
Washington, DC*

Donald Guthrie

Vice President for

*Academics at Covenant
Theological Seminary*

Denis and Margie Haack
co-founders of Ransom Fellowship

Rev. Ed Hague

*Pastor of Adult Discipleship
Wildwood Presbyterian Church*

Bonnie Liefer

Vice President

*for Marketing & Communications,
Coalition for Christian Outreach*

Henry Tazelaar MD

*Professor of Pathology,
Mayo Clinic College of Medicine*

Submissions

Critique considers unsolicited manuscripts only for poetry. submissions@ransomfellowship.org or mail with SASE to:

Ransom Fellowship

1150 West Center Street
Rochester, MN 55902

Correspondence

All other correspondence and changes of address:

Critique

1150 West Center Street
Rochester, MN 55902

info@ransomfellowship.org

Copyright © 2006 by

Ransom Fellowship

<http://www.ransomfellowship.org>

Editor's Note

A conversation that matters



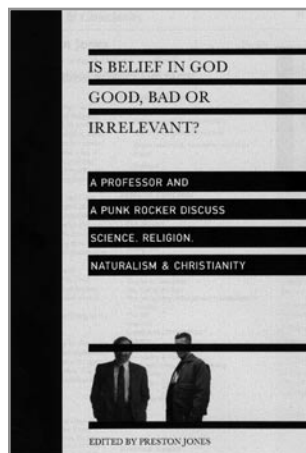
It's a delight to announce that Preston Jones, a Contributing Editor to these pages, is publishing a book which will be of interest to the readers of *Critique*. The book has a rather unwieldy title—*Is Belief in God*

Good, Bad or Irrelevant?—but don't let that discourage you. It's a book that needs to be read by everyone concerned to understand and thoughtfully engage our postmodern world.

In 2003, Dr. Jones, a historian teaching at John Brown University wrote an email to Greg Graffin, the front man, vocalist, songwriter for the punk rock band Bad Religion, who has a Ph.D. in evolutionary biology from Cornell. That began a rather lengthy conversation about the things that matter most. Both are well-read and deeply thoughtful, and each is convinced of the integrity and compelling nature of their world view. They listen to one another, find points of agreement, help each other better understand what each believes and why, and explore the ways their world views and convictions clash in strong disagreement. In the process they touch on a wide variety of topics: theism versus naturalism, free will and determinism, the meaning of mystery, the foundations for morality, significance and ultimate meaning, and Christianity and violence.

One of the things I appreciate about the

book is that Jones and Graffin can disagree so deeply with one another without rancor or hostility. "I want to emphasize," Jones writes in the Introduction, "that this book does not consist of a debate. I know that despite what I say, some readers will still construe it as such. But I never kept score between Greg and myself. I never had an impulse to see who was 'winning,' to see which of us was making better points. Greg didn't either. My hope is that Greg's and my correspondence will encourage people to use the brains God gave them." As you read their conversation you will doubtless think of things you would have said (or said differently) if you had been in on the exchange of emails. One thing is certain:



Christians need to listen carefully to Greg Graffin. He is expressing ideas and values that are widely held, but often misunderstood and unappreciated by Christians. Christians also need to have ears to hear Bad Religion, but that's another topic.

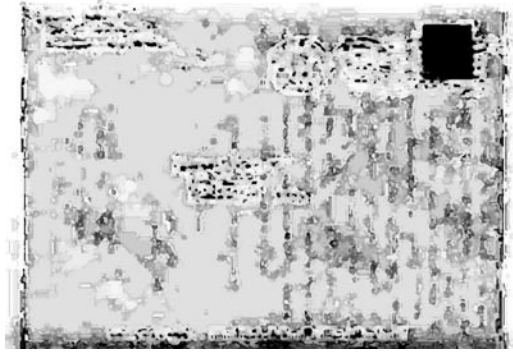
(As an aside, I should note here that the proverbial wisdom of not judging a book by its cover is important in this case. The cover of *Is Belief in God Good, Bad or Irrelevant?* is not merely uninviting but actually unattractive, bright yellow and

black. Sad.)

Jones has included a discussion guide, and sprinkled appropriate quotations in sidebars throughout the text. We'll be running a full review in a later issue of *Critique*, but I wanted to call attention to the book, and to publicly thank Jones and Graffin for letting us listen in on their insightful and lively conversation. ■

~Denis Haack

Dialogue



re: Disagreeing, rest, Phil. 4:8, & meaninglessness

Send e-mail to:

letters@ransomfellowship.org

You are invited to take part in *Critique's* Dialogue. Address all correspondence to:

Ransom Fellowship
1150 West Center Street
Rochester, MN 55902

or e-mail:
letters@ransomfellowship.org

Unfortunately, we are unable to respond personally to all correspondence received, but each one is greatly appreciated. We reserve the right to edit letters for length.

To the Editor:

My husband and I have read borrowed copies of *Critique* and *Notes From Toad Hall* for years and have always been enriched. I am so pleased I finally have gotten my act together enough to get on your mailing list.

As soon as our copy of either publication arrives, we quickly open and begin reading. Very often our Covenant Group Bible Study uses articles for discussion.

One of my old favorites is an article entitled "How to Disagree Agreeably" [http://ransomfellowship.org/D_102.html]; I use it over and over. Another is Margie's article on rest—I was in great need of the solace it brought as I sat with my cup of coffee in a small lounge at the local library.

Thank you so much for your perspective and insights and challenges.

Pat and Dennis Carter
Charlotte, NC

To the Editor:

I really appreciated your article titled, "Finding the True, Noble, and Pure in Babylon" (by Denis Haack). [http://ransomfellowship.org/R_Babylon7.html] This is one of the few resources on the internet to grapple with the application and meaning of Philippians 4:8 (particularly as it pertains to culture and the arts).

God bless you,

Ed Vasicek
Highland Park Church
via email

To the Editor:

hello,
i was just at the L'Abri conference this weekend [February 17-18, 2006 in Rochester, MN] where i went to a number of Denis Haack's workshops and talked for quite a while saturday evening with both Denis and Travis Scott about a number of things. i managed to pick up a number of copies of *Critique* in the process and when i opened up my book bag to begin doing homework this afternoon, i ended up pulling out a few issues and reading through them instead. i was particularly struck by Preston Jones' "Meaningless and its Meaning" [*Critique* #9-2005] article, because it is a topic that i've been thinking about a lot over the past few months and actually handed in a paper about it last week monday. i couldn't believe how much of what Preston wrote resonated with my own thoughts and ideas and expanded on them, helping to clarify some things for me. so basically i just wanted to say thank you to Preston, Denis, and Scott for being some of the first adult people not of my age/friend group who seem to understand, support, and clarify a number of the thoughts and ideas i have about God's world.

thanks again for your good work.

Ross Feikema
via email

In the Sun: The Common



A non-Christian musician/artist sings about Jesus

Left to my own devices, as the saying goes, I would be so “unequally yoked” by this point in my life that I’d have forgotten to ask why I was plowing in the first place. That is, I find it easy to fall for non-Christians. Though I wouldn’t put “falling in love” with a non-Christian past myself, perhaps what I do most often is develop crushes on them. I regularly crush non-Christians.

Last year, after half a decade of cancelled concerts and interfering plans, I finally got to see Joseph Arthur perform a concert. Five years I’d waited, five years of nurturing a musician crush. No surprise, then, that my then-girlfriend, who was with me at the show, could detect the twinkle in my eye, the twinkle not-for-her, the twinkle for Joseph. But come on, the man was painting during his concert. Painting! Not just a musician, but an artist, too!

I’ve been listening to Joseph Arthur’s music since 1999, when I first heard his song “In the Sun,” whose refrain and chorus might have come from an early-church creed:

*May God’s love be with you always
 May God’s love be with you.
 Cause if I find, if I find my own way
 How much will I find
 If I find, if I find my own way
 How much will I find you?*

And the resonant lyrics from his song “Tiny Echoes”:

*Sometimes I feel like giving up,
 giving in to the dark
 Sometimes I feel like crying out,
 trying to speak from my heart
 I wish you could hold me here,
 give a reason what it’s for
 I would try to become pure,
 a tiny echo of the Lord.*

*Sometimes I feel like loving you
 is all I have, holding on
 Sometimes I feel like letting go,
 but it’s a gift to be born
 I wish you could hold me here,
 give a reason what it’s for
 I would try to become pure,
 a tiny echo of the Lord.*

Arthur, based on the interviews I’ve read, does not claim to be a Christian, or at least hedges himself outside of orthodoxy; rather, he’s a non-Christian who really likes God, perhaps has a crush on Jesus: Arthur writes songs to and about Jesus, reads about him, tells people about him, asks questions both to and about Jesus. It’s the questions that get to me, the questions—explicit, implied, and rhetorical—that Arthur asks that make me want to sit and have a conversation with him, that give me that “this person understands me” feeling that good art often exudes, that attracts me to both people and Jesus.

I speak facetiously about falling in love with Joseph Arthur, but not about the possibility of falling in love, as a Christian, with a non-Christian. Wade Bradshaw, in his L’Abri lecture “Non-Christians are Nice People, Too,” highlights this reality, pointing out some reasons that Christians often fall for non-



Grace of Joseph Arthur



Christians. All the reasons, ultimately, arrive at the same conclusion, the doctrine of common grace.

By common grace,¹ I understand, basically, that all people, by virtue of having been created in the image of God and living in God's reality, are capable of thinking, behaving, and speaking beautifully, rightly, and truthfully outside of a salvific context. I recently heard a Christian say, in reference to a non-Christian couple, that non-Christian husbands and wives can't *really* love each other. That is not true. While no, non-Christians don't live under the saving love of Jesus Christ crucified, resurrected, and ascended, they do live under the general, or common, love of God for his creatures. We are not, pervasive depravity granted, as bad as we could be, and even to imply that non-Christians aren't capable of speaking or behaving truly is a slap in the face of both non-Christians and their creator. As Calvin writes in his *Institutes* (2.2.15): "If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God. For by holding the gifts of the Spirit in slight esteem, we condemn and reproach the Spirit himself."

Thus, the Christian sees much goodness and value in the life of a non-Christian and falls for her. Thus, I listen to the music of Joseph Arthur, who

I listen to the music of Joseph Arthur, who isn't a Christian, and am provoked to meditate on my relationship with Jesus.

isn't a Christian, and am provoked to meditate on my relationship with Jesus by virtue of the hopes and fears and beliefs Arthur expresses, hopes and fears and beliefs that we share regardless of the different yokes we wear:

*In my heart is a hunger
I will never give away*
[from "Speed of Light"]

*We're made out of blood and rust
Looking for someone to trust without a fight*
[from "Redemption's Son"]

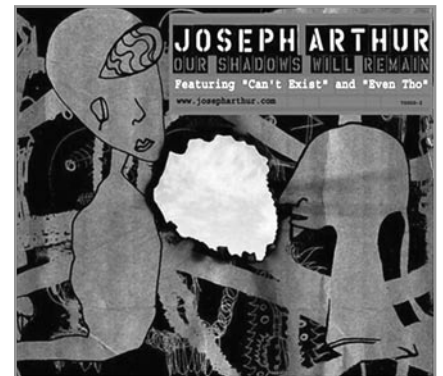
*No one's saying what you need to hear
'You've been loved,
you've been loved,
you've been loved.'*
[from "You've Been Loved"]

The difference between me and Arthur, though we share many of the same questions, is that, for reasons I'll never know, God has answered my most basic questions in the person of Jesus Christ. At some point, the triune God turned my crush on Jesus into a wedding. When Jesus takes you as his bride, he makes a definitive, at-death-we-do-not-part-statement, provides an eschatological resolution. That resolution, however, is not a resting point, no more valid a conclusion than a new bride's saying, "Well, now we're married, and I know you fully." No, there are questions left to ask, answers left to find, a relationship left to nourish and be nourished by lest we emaciate ourselves with self-satisfaction. If we find our own way, Arthur rightly asks, how much will we find? It's a rhetorical question, but it's also a gospel question.

I don't know, ultimately, how Arthur answers that question himself. I recognize in some of his lyrics my natural tendency to want to provide my own answers:



by
**Jeremy
Huggins**



Tuned In cont.

*Now Jesus he came down here
just to die for all my sins
I need him to come back here
and die for me again
Cause I cannot forgive myself
for what it is I've done*
[from "Invisible Hands"]

I'm reminded of Dick Keyes' lectures on "Jesus the Questioner," in which Keyes says, "We can discredit the gospel and God by asking questions that are based in our self-doubt rather than in his mercy: He says, 'I love you,' and we say 'why,' not to really know, but because we know ourselves, and we want to earn his love." I believe that Arthur sometimes asks questions from this stance, but I know myself well enough to recognize that even as a Christian, I sometimes do, as well. Joseph Arthur, the non-Christian, turns me back toward God in this way, too.

Ultimately, what I like so much about Arthur's music is that he reminds

Arthur's lyrics and beliefs are often convoluted and pluralistic and new-agey, but they're as often compelling and gospel-driven and nourishing.

me of how easily I give away my hunger, and he asks me questions that get me asking questions again. Arthur's lyrics and beliefs are often convoluted and pluralistic and new-agey, but they're as often compelling and gospel-driven and nourishing, most notably in his third album, 2002's *Redemption's Son*, which is a must-have

album for anyone with an appreciation for thoughtful songwriters. And I don't say that just because I have a crush on him. I say that because, if you're at all like me, you need grace as much from your stereo speakers as your theology. By God's common grace, Joseph Arthur provides just that. ■

~Jeremy Huggins

Endnote:

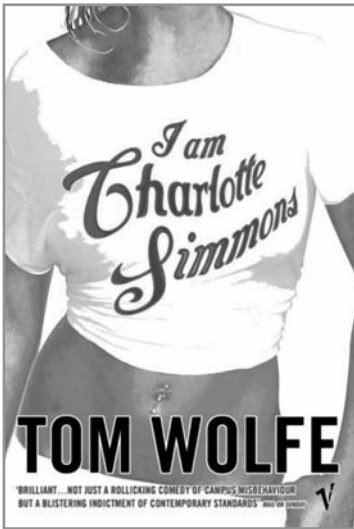
1. For a more rewarding treatment of common grace, and as a starting point, see Theodore A. Turnau III's article "Reflecting Theologically on Popular Culture as Meaningful: The Role of Sin, Grace, and General Revelation," on Ransom's web site [http://www.ransomfellowship.org/Reprint_Turnau.html].

Copyright © 2006 Jeremy Huggins



Jeremy almost passed out a few years ago when, watching the alternate ending to the Franka Potente-graced movie *The Bourne Identity*, Arthur's "In the Sun" provided the soundtrack to the Franka scenery. He thought, perhaps, it was the rapture. Also, he blogs at junkmail.chattablogs.com and hopes that if you are looking to hire someone with an M.Div. and an M.F.A. in Literary Nonfiction, even if it's just to mow your grass, you'll get in touch with him.

I am Charlotte Simmons:



All sad and weary and shallow... for, as Socrates himself put it, 'If a man debauches himself, believing this will bring him happiness, then he errs from ignorance, not knowing what true happiness is.'

'Moral' was the unwelcome word that crashed the party in his central nervous system.

In the morning—she was gone. Jojo loathed himself.

[*I Am Charlotte Simmons*, Tom Wolfe]

Not a week goes by when I am not drawn into commenting on the sexualizing of American culture. Sometimes this happens in a very tender conversation over a cup of tea, listening to the tears of someone's heart as they tell a tale of hope and sorrow, of yearning and grief. Sometimes it is in a much more public place like a classroom where the intimacy is gone, but the issues are just as live and have far-reaching consequence.

If there is any one story that comes up again and again it is Tom Wolfe's *I Am*

Charlotte Simmons, his novel about a young woman who leaves the mountains of North Carolina for the fictional yet very prestigious Dupont University, an amalgam of Duke/Stanford/Harvard.

Who is Tom Wolfe, anyway? And what is it that has made his in-your-face account of the college experience worth the time of those who wade through its 600+ pages?

For more than a generation, Wolfe has been feeling the world around him, putting into words his impressions of what it means to be human as the 20th becomes the 21st century. His essays and novels have chronicled the American experience, perhaps better than anyone else, from *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* to *From Bauhaus to Our House* to *Hooking Up*, from *The Right Stuff* to *Bonfire of the Vanities* to *A Man in Full*. He is a wonderfully gifted reporter; whether he is a great novelist, time will tell.

If we take his decade-by-decade analysis as that of an unusually gifted listener—wondering about what he has seen and heard in light of our own convictions about the way the world is and isn't—these questions stare us in the face:

why *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, now? In what way is it a window into who we are, what we love and how we live, in the first years of the 21st century? There

are three sentences in one chapter that give us help in framing an answer.

Sentence #1

All sad and weary and shallow... for, as Socrates himself put it, 'If a man debauches himself, believing this will bring him happiness, then he errs from ignorance, not knowing what true happiness is.'

Wolfe could have chosen any place,

any person. It is telling that it is a tale set in the university. In the information age we are more sure than ever that acquiring knowledge is the stepping-stone to success, to mastery of this moment when the whole world seems at our finger-tips. Wasn't Bacon's promise that "Knowledge is power"? Profoundly and perversely we have bought into that false hope, and Wolfe, with an ear for the "story," hears what is going on, and reports. The more perceptive call our moment "info-glut." And most of the time, when we stop to think about it at all, we feel that way, *viz.* glutted.

The internet gives us access to everything, all the time. Google this, google that. (I recently "googled" the words, "December" and "despair" and found that 4,700,000 entries came up. One could spend a life on just those two words.) We can click our way into vast libraries without entering the ivy halls; in fact without ever leaving our homes. And yet, with all that is technologically possible, there has never been more competition for getting into "just the right school," from kindergartens to colleges. People embarrass

themselves, stumbling over each other, pushing-and-shoving to get more and more education—with little regard for the warning from one of our wisest novelists, Walker Percy, that

"one can get all A's and still flunk life."

Charlotte takes her place at this table as a first-generation college student, very bright and very innocent. But she is sure that she knows who she is... I am Charlotte Simmons! Against all comers, people and ideas, she is sure that she will remember to remember what matters most, *viz.* the true happiness which Socrates points to.

It is that dynamic in the movement from

For more than a generation, Wolfe has been putting into words his impressions of what it means to be human as the 20th becomes the 21st century.

3 Sentences, 1 Chapter,

adolescence to adulthood that Wolfe explores in his account of her freshman year. From the moment she steps out of the family pickup truck in Dupont's parking lot and sees

To put it harshly: before she is done with being a freshman, being a freshman will be done with her.

the BMWs and Escalades opening their doors to her fellow first-years, she knows that the university is a very different place than she has ever known. That moment becomes a metaphor for her experience throughout the year, *viz.* the world she has known, the person she has known herself to be, will be pushed to the nth degree before she finishes in May. Or to put it harshly: before she is done with being a freshman, being a freshman will be done with her.

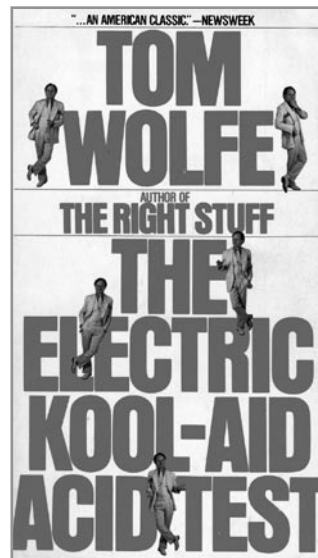
Sentence #2

'Moral' was the unwelcome word that crashed the party in his central nervous system.

Nowhere is this more painfully seen than in the sexualizing of her experience as a student, which is the second reason for this particular story. Wolfe unashamedly peers into the sex-saddened society which meets each one of us as we walk through the grocery line week after week. Five Secrets for !!!! You Won't Be Happy Unless You Try!!!! In the early years of this new millennia, sex sells everything. From cars to clothes, from toothpaste to travel, if it's not sexy, it's not!

The book is not for the faint-of-heart. There is a level of explicit sexual crudeness which is painful to a spiritually sensitive person. But there are many who have read it; after all, it is Tom Wolfe's latest! And there are many who do need to know something of what really goes on in the modern university, as burdensome

as that knowledge might be. How hard it is for any of us to be reallyreallyreally in the world—and yet not of it! How to be holy as the Lord our God is holy, and yet wholly engaged in our time with our neighbors! Opening the ears and eyes of our hearts to the world can wound us, especially if we know that there is a responsibility for knowledge.



Charlotte enters into three communities at Dupont, and Wolfe severely limits her experience to just those three. Through her eyes we learn the ways and means of the jock culture, the fraternity/sorority houses, and the "militant mutants," i.e. the newspaper staff. That is a weakness in his imagination, and in the story. They

How hard it is for any of us to be reallyreallyreally in the world—and yet not of it!

are representative, but I found myself longing for her to meet someone of true and honest faith, to be invited into a real conversation about the meaning of life and love by a friend from IVCF, the Coalition for Christian Outreach, or Reformed University Fellowship—someone somewhere who would love her for the sake of Jesus and the kingdom.

But she meets no one like that, ever. She does meet Jojo, a basketball player who in his senior year has never been asked to be serious about anything other than hoops. His courses are ones designed for jocks, his apartment is outfitted for its most important business, *viz.* video games, and his study habits are nil. Why study, after all? If the university provides a nerd to make sure that papers are in and on time, why would you ever need to study? Jojo knows he is a stud. Everyone knows Jojo is a stud.

Charlotte complicates his life, because he has never met anyone who honestly pays attention in class. And the only reason he meets her is that he mistakenly signs up for a class that actually invites him to think, one that is outside of the regular "course of studies" for athletes.

And he has never met a girl who wasn't smitten by his aura, the fame of being Jojo, basketball star at Dupont. Charlotte seems from another planet. In a culture of whatever, she knows who she is and why she is there... after all, I am Charlotte Simmons.

There is more to the story, of course. But let's return to the beginning, "the three sentences, one chapter—and one sad conclusion." Jojo is with the team on a road-trip. His teammates have gone out on the town, but he decides to disci-

I Sad Conclusion

pline himself and work on a paper. Everyone is surprised, even he is surprised. But he stays put, and reads Socrates, “*If a man debauches himself...*”

Knock, knock, knock. Before the night is completely gone, a beautiful babe shows up at his door, and with a certain perverse innocence, says to Jojo, “Can I come in?” He wants to know how she knew he was there. “Your teammates told me.... They said you’ve been studying very hard and feeling lonesome, and you needed a break... and here I am.”

Yes, there she was. She came in, and came onto Jojo in a way that was very hard to refuse... and *crashed the party in his central nervous system.*

Sentence #3

And Jojo? *Jojo loathed himself.*

That right in the middle of Wolfe’s difficult-to-read account of life in the university, coarse and crude as it is, he situates his story in a moral universe, is

That right in the middle of Wolfe’s difficult-to-read account of life in the university, coarse and crude as it is, he situates his story in a moral universe, is amazing.

amazing. For it is not only Jojo who loathes himself, but sorrowfully, Charlotte does too—for choices she makes during the year.

That thread of reflection and remorse—I will not call it repentance—is strong enough that the reviews in prominent national papers like the *NY Times* and the *Washington Post* were dismissive. While on the one hand they could not ignore a new Wolfe novel, they wondered—the disdain dripping from their proverbial pens—which cabbage leaf he crawled out from under. Sooo out-of-date! What is the problem, Tom Wolfe, with an 18-year old girl being a good person, a good student, and good in bed? What world do you live in, anyway, Tom Wolfe?

To some extent, with common grace insights, he lives in the world that is really there, the one in which we live and move and have our being. It is the one that Romans 1 affirms, the one whose contours are so plainly revealed that sons of Adam and daughters of Eve are without excuse when they deny its reality and truth. But people do repress and suppress what they know in the deepest places of their hearts, and choose to worship what has been created rather than the Creator himself. In every century and in every culture human beings and human history suffer when that choice is made. We live a little lower than the angels, even lower than the way humans are to live. And the consequences ripple across time, affecting persons and politics.

Wolfe sees something of this, even

through a glass darkly. He is an intellectually serious person who has something to say in his stories. Walker Percy described his own writing as a diagnostician, the novelist as physician. With self-consciousness, Wolfe takes up that calling too. I read *I Am Charlotte Simmons* as a narrative exposition of his two essays, “Hooking Up” and “Sorry, But Your Soul Just Died,” both now available in the collection, *Hooking Up*. For several years I have assigned them in courses I have taught, as I think that they are about as close as we get to a finger-on-the-pulse of contemporary culture, *viz.* where we are right now.

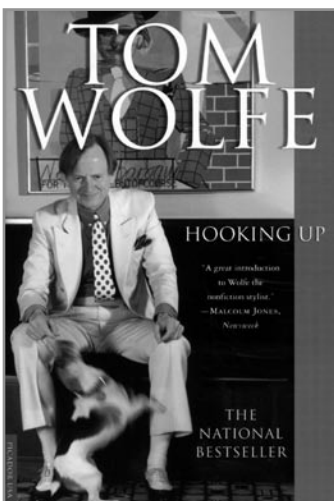
The first is a look at the “hooking up” phenomenon, the term-of-choice to describe varieties of sexual intimacy: from the fellatio in the hallways and stairwells of wealthy suburban junior high schools all the way through to serial, almost anonymous “sex in the city” for adults of all sizes and shapes. As he puts it at one point: “in the era of hooking up, ‘first

base’ meant deep kissing, groping, and fondling; ‘second base’ meant oral sex, ‘third base’ meant going all the way; and ‘home plate’ meant learning each other’s names.”

Assigning this in many different venues has persuaded me that twenty-somethings see Wolfe as describing their experi-

ence—whether they are in the most closeted of Christian ghettos or in the most out-of-the-closet secular settings. As one thoughtful young student at a Christian college put it to me, comparing Cornelius Plantinga’s wonderfully insightful *Engaging God’s World* with Wolfe’s *Hooking Up*, “Plantinga tells the story of the world of the classroom; Wolfe tells the story of the world we live in when we leave class.” I thought that was unfair to Plantinga, as his book is a richer, truer account of life

Twenty-somethings see Wolfe as describing their experience—whether they are in the most closeted of Christian ghettos or in the most out-of-the-closet secular settings.



Reading the World cont.

under the sun than most I know, but the comment was honestly offered.

Before he is done, Wolfe offers an almost-Schaefferian apologetic, pushing the deconstructionist worldview that stands behind the “hooking up” world to the logic of its presuppositions. If there are no certainties about anything, if everything in life and the world has been “constructed” and is therefore to be “deconstructed,” then why not see our deepest longings for intimacy, to know and be known, to love and be loved, as mere “hooking up”? He writes,

Oddly, when deconstructionists require appendectomies or bypass surgery or even a root canal job, they never deconstructed medical or dental ‘truth,’ but went along with whatever their board-certified, profit-oriented surgeons proclaimed as the last word.

You say that you believe there are no “truths,” only perspectives and voices? Well, why not take that commitment with you to your doctor’s office and the operating room? to the way you relate to medicine? Are there truths and certainties in that realm, but not where you teach? Are these ideas you argue for, but don’t really live? Schaeffer would have been honored.

The second essay is an analysis of E. O. Wilson’s *Consilience*, a book by the noted Harvard biologist-philosopher which argues that, in the end, we are sophisticated machines. We are our DNA, nothing more, nothing less. Wilson is brilliant, a gifted scholar with a passion to explore the world and to understand it. An image-bearer of God he sees something of the truth of our existence, and does so with Harvard-

class sophistication.

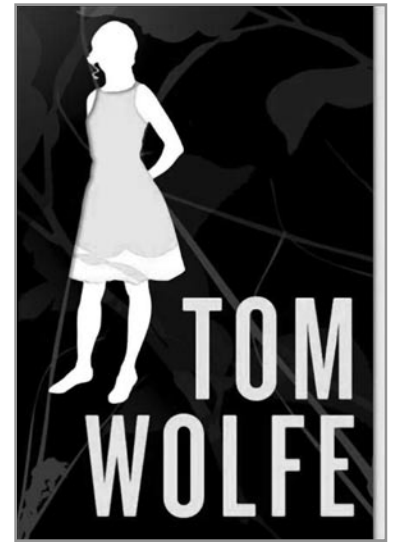
We are from the dust, and to the dust we shall return. We live in our bodies. Much of what we know of life is our material existence. And not a day passes when new discoveries of the mystery of DNA fail to bring forth awe from those with eyes to see. In my own state of Virginia two men were released today from decades of imprisonment because DNA testing proved beyond a doubt that they were falsely accused. We are our DNA, yes—but we are also much more.

Vaclav Havel, the playwright-prisoner-politician, reflecting on the victim status and identity of the Czech people after decades of totalitarianism from the Nazis and the Soviets, wrote “The secret of man is the secret of his responsibility.” At the very core of our humanity is our ability to respond, our responsibility. Havel saw that as long as his people saw themselves as victims, they had no future. They were politically paralyzed, unable to act, unable to imagine a way forward, unable to organize for a more truthful and just society.

Havel argues that if we lose God in the modern world then we lose access, philosophically and politically, to four weighty words: meaning and purpose, accountability and responsibility. With uncanny insight he sees where the line-in-the-sand is for everyone everywhere.

As gifted artists with social and political concerns, Wolfe and Havel are “feeling” the contemporary worldview, and know that it has consequences; in different ways they both understand that ideas have legs. Wolfe takes his critique of Wilson back into the 19th-century, and listens to Nietzsche comment on the world that came into being, bringing forth his

“The secret of man is the secret of his responsibility.”



announcement of the death of God, but also his insistence that his fellow atheists be honest and stop using the words “moral” and “meaning.” Nietzsche saw the price tag for a world without God, even as he welcomed it.

Wolfe’s argument is longer and more complex, but after walking through the growth in a DNA-shaped view of the world with very materialist assumptions at its heart, he observes “The conclusion people out beyond the laboratory walls are drawing is: The fix is in! We’re all hardwired! That, and: Don’t blame me! I’m wired wrong!”

Reminiscent of Steve Turner’s brilliant poem, “Creed,” Wolfe situates his analysis in tension with the parameters of the worldview formed and framed by the secular trinity of Marxfreudanddarwin. Rightly seeing them as the intellectual fathers of the modern world whose thinking has affected generations, Wolfe says,

Meanwhile, the notion of the self—a self who exercises self-discipline, postpones gratification, curbs the

sexual appetite, stops short of aggression and criminal behavior—a self who can become more intelligent and lift itself to the very peaks of life by its own bootstraps through study, practice, perseverance, and refusal to give up in the face of great odds—this old-fashioned notion of success through enterprise and true grit is already slipping away, slipping away... slipping away...

In the new world of neuroscience hailed by Wilson and critiqued by Wolfe, the social conditioning of Marx and Freud seem passé; but the evolution of Darwin's vision seems ever-more important and intriguing. (Think here of the very hard lines being drawn over the intelligent design debate, with the secular elite voices that dominate the universities and the national papers and magazines so celebrative of the Darwinian hypothesis that Everything is a result of time working matter in the framework of chance; any other opinion is unworthy of "public" discussion.)

Hear Wolfe again, imaging a new Nietzsche bringing the news in 2010 or 2030, proclaiming

the greatest event of the new millennium: 'The soul, that last refuge of values, is dead, because educated people no longer believe it exists.' Unless assurances of the Wilsons and the Dennetts and the Dawkinses also start rippling out, the madhouse that will ensue may make the phrase 'the total eclipse of all values' seem tame.



From within his own paradigm, Nietzsche prophesied that a world without God would by the beginning of our century be one marked by "the total eclipse of all values." It is with some irony that it was Nietzsche, after all, who argued for the word "values," understanding that we would need a new word if we no longer had access to "morals" and "meaning." He or she who has ears, let them hear. I think that Schaeffer would be honored here too, as Wolfe is "taking the roof off" of the Wilsonian view of human life—if we are only and evermore DNA.

To say it simply: *I Am Charlotte Simmons* is a story based upon a narrative vision of the worldviews criticized by Wolfe in these two essays. So the novel must be seen as a culturally-serious effort to understand our world. Yes, sometimes to lay it bare. And yes, sometimes to stick it in our collective face. But always to allow us to see and hear what the

modern world feels like, for those who are living in its center.

One good friend, a mother of a first-year student at the University of Virginia, read the book in four days. She devoured it. Accomplished and aware, sophisticated and savvy, she was aghast at some of what she read—and she called her son. His response? "Mom! I've been sexiled four times already, and we're only half way through the year." For the uninitiated, "sexiled" means that one

The novel must be seen as a culturally-serious effort to understand our world.

roommate asks another roommate to leave the room so that a "hookup" can happen. She looked at me, eyes full of wonder and care, and said, "And I know his roommate!"

One sad conclusion

Wolfe does not bring a coherent worldview himself to bear on his subject. From the best I can do with what I have read, and from one conversation with him, the closest he gets to a philosophical root that makes sense of the world is Stoicism. *A Man in Full* is the best literary expression of that. But while there are echoes of reality in that vision, it stops short of the Incarnation and has no eyes to see the meaning of a Trinitarian God who has revealed himself in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. What it does see is the suffering and pain of the world, and that I honor. The Stoics take that seriously; where they miss the mark is seeing that it is possible to step into the messes and hurts and pains and wounds, and to hold onto them in imitation of Christ, for the sake of the kingdom.

I spent most of one day with Wolfe a few years ago, and listened with great interest. Over lunch I told him that I almost always assigned his work in my classes, and that I had given a week of my life to *A Man in Full*, enjoying it all the way to the very... well, not quite.

I didn't really think the conclusion was right for the story he had told, and it disappointed me. He had shown Stoicism to be wanting at the critical point in the story; it was believed, but it could not address the need of the moment. The Schaefferian apologetic one more time—but surprisingly Wolfe was unwilling to bite the bullet in the end, and offered Stoicism as a true answer to our deepest hopes.

There he was across the table, white linen suit and carnation—Tom Wolfe as the man in full—and he looked back at me, finally say-

Reading the World cont.

ing, “I don’t finish my stories very well, do I?” It was an amazing moment. I have not read a Wolfe novel yet where he has, *I Am Charlotte Simmons* being the most recent. His story-telling stumbles, and rather than offering an *Anna Karenina* or a *Kristen Lavransdatter* he offers something that is less-than-satisfying, as his story fails to follow-through the logic of his own insight.

In his great work of cultural apologetics, *Signposts in a Strange Land*, Walker Percy argues that “Bad books always lie. They lie most of all about the human condition.” With uncommon brilliance and bravery in a secularizing, pluralizing world, he goes on to ask, “Have you read any good behaviorist novels lately?” And then right on through James Sire’s “universe next door.” Any good Buddhist novels lately? Any good Marxist novels lately? Any good Freudian novels lately? And with each question he sets forth why that would be hard, given the beliefs about the human condition at the heart of each worldview.

Percy finishes well, setting forth his own conviction that it is the Jewish and Christian view of life, with its understanding of human nature and history, that alone can produce a good novel, and that when novelists tell a good story with no apparent reference to that tradition, they are “living off of the fat,” as he puts it.

With that standard, Wolfe sees clearly, understanding that we live in a moral universe where real right and wrong exist—whether we believe in them or not, whether we want them or not—and that men and women who suppress that reality do so at their peril. “If a man debauches himself, believing this will bring him happiness, then he errs from ignorance, not knowing what true happiness is.”

For months this past year, the *NY Times* on-line had as their most prominent pop-up ad one for the film *Kinsey*. So while reading David Brooks I was always aware of the film too; two different universes, next door to each other, competing in the public square. Does the *NY Times* have a view of the world that it wants the rest of us to buy into? Yes, from beginning to end—and we should not be surprised.

I think that is why the secular, sexualizing world of the early 21st century has been sneeringly dismissive of Wolfe’s story. In the words of Jesus, it “hates the light” of the truth about the human condition that is woven through what is only a common grace account of life. Wolfe is not writing as a Christian, making a Christian argument.

Why on earth would Jojo “loathe himself”? For hooking up with a beautiful woman who comes knocking on his door? Come on. Grow up. We’re sophisticated machines, after all. The old, out-of-date categories of right and wrong no longer apply. “Morals” and “meaning” went out with the Enlightenment. Now we know better.

The first time I really saw that that worldview was more “the emperor has no clothes” than one I should be enamored by was reading another of Steve Turner’s poems some 30 years ago. The artists do “get there” first, and in his little poem, “The Conclusion,” he was in fact “bright as a light, sharp as a razor,” as the book’s cover promised.

*My love, she said
When all’s considered,
We’re only machines.
I chained her*



*To my bedroom wall
For future use.*

And she cried.

Jojo loathed himself because he acted against the moral universe that is really there, against his humanity as well as against the law of God. A son of Adam would loathe himself. A sophisticated machine would.... well, in the end, I think he would cry—that is, if the author was reflecting the truth of the human condition. Jojo would have to cry, wouldn’t he? We are our DNA, but we are also able to respond, responsible. It is the secret of our humanity, at the very core of who we are as human beings, made in the image of God.

Yes, Jojo loathed himself. God, human nature and history are together on this one. ■

~Steven Garber

Copyright © 2006 Steven Gilchrist Garber

Steven Garber is a member of Ransom’s Board of Directors, a Contributing Editor to *Critique*, and director of The Washington Institute for Faith, Vocation & Culture (www.washingtoninst.org).

Talking about Charlotte

A Conversation About *I am Charlotte Simmons*: Reflections from Two Who Were There

Steve Garber: *Who are you? Why did you read it?*

BC I am a thirty-one year old stay-at-home mom of three kids. My husband and I met at and graduated from the University of California at Davis in the early 90s. I read this book for many reasons. I like to read whatever it is that people are talking about, but also the content of sexual mores at university hit home with me. I was shocked and appalled by the casual sex culture I found in college and after. I wondered if feminists during the sexual revolution wanted what I saw at college: girls competing for boys, sleeping with them, being dumped, and starting over again. Is that power and equality?

KH Well, I'm not sure how much information is pertinent here, but to cover the basics, I am 25 years old, recently married and the graduate of the University of Colorado at Boulder, (less known for its academic prestige than for its rating as the #1 party school in North America). What a proud alumni I am! Prior to my time at Boulder, however, I also attended Vanderbilt University, a school much more akin to the fictional Dupont University Tom Wolfe has created.

I am currently working on Capitol Hill for Senator Rick Santorum in his leadership office. I manage cultural outreach and special projects for the 55 Senate Republican Members who make up the Senate Republican

Conference. I live in northern Virginia with my husband Joel and we attend The Falls Church.

In addition to the rather benign fact that I attended college, there is also the more remarkable fact that I had an eerily similar experience to that of Ms. Simmons

“With the exception of a few plot twists, I could almost imagine Mr. Wolfe followed me around campus for four years and wrote this book simply to mess with my head.”

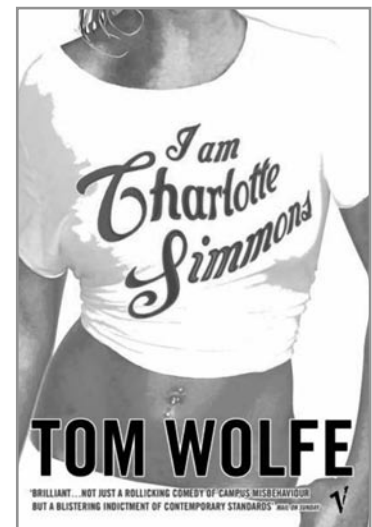
when I went to college. With the exception of a few plot twists, I could almost imagine Mr. Wolfe followed me around campus for four years and wrote this book simply to mess with my head. Not kidding! Let's just say I fought off more than one fit of nausea reading this book. Being a few years outside of college and now having, by God's grace, the ability to look at those years not only through the objective lens of Wolfe's narrative, but through the lens of my faith, it was all I could do to not scream through the pages to Charlotte to stop being such a stupid, stupid girl!!

Steve Garber: *What did you think of his vantage point on the university world at large, and of Charlotte's experience of it?*

BC I felt Wolfe described a very narrow, but significant, segment of the university population. The young people in his book are white, upper class and un-churched. However, you can't go far at the University of California without meeting first and second generation Americans motivated to work hard and make their families proud. Other students are determined to go to

graduate school and will tolerate nothing that distracts them from their goals. Still others become immersed in art, in journalism, in science, in history, and build friendships based on mutual interests. In addition, there are communities of faith whose members consciously reject the amoral choices of their peers.

Nothing could be further from all these experiences than the bed-hopping, hard-drinking perpetual party that Wolfe describes. Wolfe is relentless in his refusal to give Charlotte places of refuge. She meets no one who rises above the seduction culture, only those who participate and those who envy. Charlotte enters college hopelessly innocent. Are people, even rural people, surprised by cell phones any more? She has worked all her life for the approval of adults. She does not own her faith, her knowledge, her goals. She enters university desperate to gain approval from others, all the while repeating her mantra



Conversation cont.

“I am Charlotte Simmons” without wondering what that means. All this works together to make the story compelling, but somewhat flat. Charlotte is more the fly in the spider web than a complex human being making choices.

KH I think this book is frighteningly true of how things are, or at least how I experienced things to be, on college campuses today. While I was reading the book, I read several reviews by columnists and authors who emphasized how exaggerated they found Wolfe’s portrayal to be. The only thing I kept thinking as I read these reviews was that these reviewers must all have been out of college for some time, because they are in dreamland if they think the story Wolfe tells is too outrageous to believe. It’s unbelievable, for sure, but it is also happening just as he tells it.

As I read through this book I can say with confidence that just about every character and every circumstance was someone or something familiar to me. I would say that just about every situation Wolfe described is one I can either recall distinctly from my own experience or know about firsthand from close friends. Overall, I would say he is definitely on the mark, especially as it concerns elite, expensive universities where the “work hard, play hard” ethic is dominant among students and parents who see school as a “ticket punch” on the way up an already well-assured ladder of success, instead of an institution to grow minds and character.

Steve Garber: *Some critics have panned it, arguing that Wolfe is out-of-touch with what is going on in the world, and on campus. Given your experience, what do you think of that criticism?*

BC I would argue that it is the critic, not Wolfe, who is out of touch. In my freshman dorm in 1990, anything went. Having sex and being sexiled was the mild stuff. One woman across the hall moved her boyfriend into her room for six months. Her roommate slept in the top bunk, the girl and her boyfriend slept in the bottom. Another woman moved her boyfriend in from off campus. He wasn’t even paying boarding fees. The only reason I escaped such a fate was that my roommate was Japanese and her cultural heritage kept her from engaging in such behavior, as did my faith.

My husband lived in a suite of four young men. The other three set up a keg in their room and had beer parties every weekend. He would come home and find girls passed out in his bed. We had a unofficial unisex bathroom, with boys in the room while girls showered in a nearby stall. Who protects these girls from peeping toms? None of these things was unusual, or curtailed. I found it shocking and dehumanizing. How did sex get so devalued that it was done with others in the room, like a casual conversation? How did people become so rude that they would impose these things on roommates? I couldn’t believe that these students, whose parents were paying a princely sum for their room and board, didn’t raise a stink and demand their rights as tenants, if not as human beings.

Of course, these liaisons were consensual. However, I think the air of freedom allows predators to take advantage of young women without consequences.

KH Totally disagree, although I also recognize not everyone is necessarily as exposed to these circumstances as I was. Attending a Christian college, for instance, might provide a different experi-

ence, or by attending a small school where people are less anonymous some of the risqué behavior would likely be curbed. Speaking for Vanderbilt and Colorado, however, I have to say Wolfe is painting a pretty clear picture (for a freshman year especially). Particularly as it pertains to sex and drugs.

As one who entered my freshman year with a naivete and ambition comparable to Charlotte, I was shocked to find how corruptible I was living in my co-ed dorm the first month of college. Every close girlfriend I had on my hall (maybe 6 would be considered close friends) were virgins at the start of the school year. Most had some exposure or commitment to church in their family background, which was why sex wasn’t an option in high school.

As for school itself, I would say that it worked kind of like a game. Everyone (except a few REALLY spoiled kids) knew the school piece had to happen to sustain the party life so everyone kind of learned to strike their own balance between partying, hooking up and studying. . . . Charlotte was right to see that while being smart was important, it wasn’t valued nearly as much as being able to be smart and fun at parties and not be a prude. The balance is what created success.

Anyway, I could go on and on to emphasize just how accurate Wolfe is in his assessment, but this is the general picture. I guess a few other related issues that he touched on but didn’t delve into as deeply are the side effects of this rampant sexual license, primarily eating disorders and depression for women. I’ve seen lots and lots of both. Birth control, anti-depressants and study drugs were pretty much taken like vitamins by most girls I lived with during college.

Steve Garber: *Where is the book especially strong? especially weak?*

BC Wolfe did a masterful job creating a downward spiral that led to Charlotte's seduction and the aftermath. From the beginning of the book, there was no doubt that she would fall, and fall hard. He painted the picture well. However, I found the end unsatisfying. It was as if Wolfe waved a wand and suddenly Charlotte and JoJo were self-actualized, mature people. I did not see the transformation. What could have been the most interesting part of the novel, the climb back up, the restoration, was empty. I have to suspect that this is because Wolfe's underlying philosophy, classical stoicism, is unsatisfying. He excels at identifying the gaping wounds in American culture, but he has no band-aid.

KH I think it is especially strong in pinpointing the reality of college life at what are considered to be most large and/or elite universities. He reveals the deep dissonance between what these institutions claim to promote and what in fact they enable by turning a blind eye. It reveals how much money and prestige can foster sexual and academic irresponsibility when students aren't accountable to each other, their parents or the university. The characters, I thought, were real and believable. The scenarios Wolfe constructs align with reality. I also appreciated how Wolfe showed the crude side of these realities, not just the glamorous sides students would like to believe about their world. He showed pain as well as temptation and he effectively revealed the inner conflict and loathing various characters felt when they indulged too much the delusions that all of these decisions and behavior are fulfilling.

“Wolfe did a masterful job creating a downward spiral that led to Charlotte’s seduction and the aftermath.”

The greatest weakness of the book, I thought, was Wolfe's inability to provide a convincing ending. One is led to believe that Charlotte is a fighter, a headstrong, independent woman who I expected to come

through her depression willing to face things as they were and redeem some of her past mistakes, but instead she just seems world-weary and tired as though she doesn't have the energy to be a moral warrior anymore. There is some mutual redemption between her and JoJo, I suppose, but I was sad to not see her emerge as a heroine but rather as a tired victim not willing to fight anymore and somewhat cynical about the world. I closed the book feeling disappointed, when I felt like there was great opportunity for her to reach some significant conclusions about herself from her experience.

Steve Garber: *How close does he come to “the truth of the human condition,” drawing on Walker Percy’s criteria for a good book?*

BC In the end, I find Wolfe an excellent journalist. He researches well, he describes well, he makes you see what he has seen. He keeps his finger on the pulse of American culture and starts conversations we didn't even know were needed. To me, his writing lacks the spark that turns journalism into literature. There is no underlying wisdom that would make me read the book over and over, no insight that expands my understanding of what it means to be human. He spreads out sordid facts on the table and leaves you to clean them up as you will.

“I felt like the book did a good job of debunking the popular deception that sexual promiscuity never hurt anyone.”



KH With the exception of the ending, which I believe failed to come full circle to a point of complete truth about how Charlotte would likely recover or redeem her previous experiences, I felt like the book did a good job of debunking the popular deception that sexual promiscuity never hurt anyone. It shows the emotional and interpersonal angst of sexual relationships that lack any emotional context and it effectively probes deep questions of human dignity, value and purpose. While I wish there were another 100 pages to explore how Charlotte came to live in her new skin, I appreciated the raw honesty of her inner turmoil and angst and that the novel was set in a moral framework that set right against wrong and matched choices with consequences. ■

Copyright © 2006 Steven Gilchrist Garber.



Order From:



Distinctive Books and Music

www.heartsandmindsbooks.com
read@heartsandmindsbooks.com

234 East Main Street
Dallastown, PA 17313
(717) 246-3333

All books mentioned in *Critique* may be ordered directly from Hearts and Minds. A portion of the proceeds will be donated to Ransom Fellowship.

Living a Magnetic Faith in a Post-Christian World—
a reprinted article from *byFaith* magazine by Denis Haack
http://www.ransomfellowship.org/haack_byfaith_MagneticFaith.pdf

Critique Mailing List:

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. **To receive *Critique***, send your mailing address to:

Ransom Fellowship, 1150 West Center, Rochester, MN, 55902.

Everyone on Ransom's mailing list also receives *Notes from Toad Hall*, a newsletter written 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.

Critique is a newsletter (published nine times each year, funds permitting) designed to accomplish, by God's grace, three things:

1. To call attention to resources of interest to thinking Christians.
2. To model Christian discernment.
3. To stimulate believers to think biblically about all of life.

The articles and resources reproduced or recommended in *Critique* do not necessarily reflect the thinking of Ransom Fellowship. The purpose of this newsletter is to encourage thought, not dictate points of view.

Copying policy: Feel free to make up to 50 copies of any article that appears in *Critique* for use with a small group. We only ask that you copy the entire article, note the source, and distribute the copies free of charge.

Now on the web: www.ransomfellowship.org