

Critique

Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

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Editor's Note



Just how well have we done?

In the September 4, 2000 issue of *Christianity Today*, Michael Maudlin reviews the fourth novel in the Harry Potter series by J. K. Rowling. "We may disagree on details," Maudlin writes about the controversy sur-

rounding the books, "but we share the same concern in taking seriously our charge to raise morally and religiously informed children. Overall I think the Christian community can feel proud of how it has mobilized itself regarding Harry."

In this issue of *Critique* I write a rather lengthy reflection on the Harry Potter novels, and as you will note in my article, I am not so sure we have all that much to be proud of. I point this out not because I want to debate Maudlin—his review is worth reading. And he is surely correct in his insistence that the Harry Potter controversy isn't simply an argument about a series of books. The controversy reveals deep-seated assumptions and beliefs about our understanding of culture, and thus is a good opportunity to reexamine those assumptions and beliefs in light of Scripture. The extent to which this is occurring within the Christian community is something to give thanks for, even if the discussion is difficult and emotionally-charged.

We need to think long and hard about our view of culture, and about what Christian faithfulness looks like in our religiously pluralistic, post-Christian world. I hope each of *Critique's* readers will consider seriously how they can promote this reexamination within their corner of the Christian community. What is at stake here is not merely our response to a series of children's books—though that is significant enough. What is at stake is what the world sees in terms of our

witness of Christ. And as he warned us, the world makes conclusions about him according to what they see in us.

Potter's gospel allegory

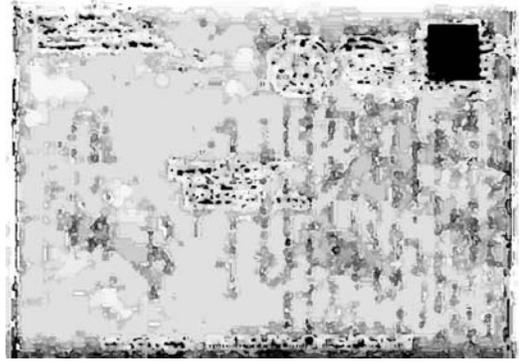
James Jordan, of Biblical Horizons Ministries, has an interesting insight into the ending of the second of Rowling's novels, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*:

"Christians thinking about the Harry Potter books should take note of the explicit Gospel allegory that ends the second volume. A Son, obeying his spiritual Father, and thinking of him all the while, gives his life to kill a Serpent with a Sword to protect a Woman (possibly his future Bride), and then is brought to life again by Water from a Phoenix (a bird representing resurrection). Harry Potter is no more a pure 'Christ-figure' than is Gene Wolfe's Patera Silk, in his marvelous Long Sun books; but like Wolfe's character, Potter is a 'Christian-figure,' and thus is called to be one who saves others by giving his life for them. What this indicates one way or another about author Rowling's personal commitments I do not know, but it certainly does not indicate any hostility to the true faith."

And for what it's worth

The photo is not my idea. Just so you know... ■
~Denis D. Haack

Dialogue



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

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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.

Alaska is an unusual place, ideologically. It is definitely to the right of the political spectrum, especially in its Christian community, but I often feel a bit out of place here. When I receive *Critique* and *Notes*, two things happen. First I realize that there are other Christians who approach issues with a willingness to question presuppositions and concede there may be validity to another point of view. Second, the publications are read by many of my friends and more than once have enlightened an issue which we have discussed and I disagreed with the majority. The series of articles a year or so ago on eschatology is a classic example. One day in care group, I mentioned that the view of the "end times" that the majority of our church members hold was a minority opinion amongst Christians and furthermore appeared to be a bit modern in its ascendance. (I had just read George Marsden's, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*.) When I began to talk a bit about redemptive theology, it helped that most of my friends had just recently read the series in *Critique*. It lent credence to the belief that one can be evangelical and disagree with "core" doctrine.

Anyway, I just wanted to thank you for the blessing Ransom has been to me. As a doctor who would rather be a history professor, it has stimulated me to explore the interaction between our God, our humanity, and our culture. It has raised issues that I can discuss with my colleagues at work and it has opened doors for discussion with my friends at church. I thank you.

Keith Winkle
Anchorage, AK

In response to your recent article in *The Discerning Life*, I see Dr. Laura as no adversary of evangelicals. She is a practicing Jew and has a right to espouse Old Testament Law and Commandments. We should pray that her teaching goes out to a wide audience and is very clearly spoken. Then the Law will be able to fulfill its purpose; that is, to be a "tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith." (Galatians 3:24) Our society is flailing in a quagmire of postmodern moral confusion. Following God's Law is a great help to bring order out of the chaos of a life built on relativistic truth. But soon following the Law becomes a burden only Christ's righteousness can bear. Christians should not quibble with those pulling in the same direction. Jesus didn't. He said in Mark 9:39, "Whoever is not against us if for us."

Cynthia Waltho
Spam Lake, MN

Should We Pray or Protest?

An issue in need of discernment.

The fact that we live in a religiously pluralistic culture means we can expect to be exposed to beliefs, values, and practices that are contrary to our Christian faith. This might arise in a conversation over lunch at work, in a lecture at a university, in a film, or during any number of other instances when we naturally rub shoulders with non-Christians. In most of these instances, however, our exposure is somewhat at arm's length. It involves a theme in a movie, or a comment by a colleague—which might become a topic for conversation, but the thing with which we disagree remains out there, at a distance. We may be uncom-

fortable by the belief, the value, or the practice that we've been exposed to, but it remains in the realm of ideas, and so our discomfort is minimal.

Our discomfort can increase dramatically, however, when the distance decreases and we find ourselves actually drawn into the religious practice in some way. And, truth be told, living in a religiously pluralistic culture means that we should expect this to happen at least occasionally. That being the case, discerning Christians might want to reflect on how to best respond to such situations. One way to prepare ourselves is to discuss the following case study of a Christian

who found himself unexpectedly drawn into the practice of Eastern meditation during a professional seminar.

Case study: stress relief workshop

A Christian attorney attends a continuing education seminar. Besides the plenary sessions led by experts in the field, a variety of elective workshops are offered. Our friend looks over the possibilities, and decides the one entitled "Accepting Our Limits: Practical Ideas for Reducing Stress" looks promising. The workshop facilitator is a fellow attorney who though unknown to the Christian, has the reputation of being a strong family woman

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. How is the growing religious pluralism in society obvious to you? In what ways does it impact you?
2. What similar situations have you faced personally—or heard about—in our religiously pluralistic culture? How did you respond to them? Why? How satisfied are you with your response?
3. Since it seems situations like this will likely increase as time goes by, why don't Christians discuss them together ahead of time? Why are such discussions often so emotionally charged? To what extent is agreement about such things a measure of spiritual maturity or biblical fidelity? Why?
4. Discuss the case study. Do you agree with the attorney's response? Why or why not? What texts and principles from Scripture would you point to in order to justify your conclusion?
5. Discuss the reaction of a fellow believer who criticizes the Christian attorney, claiming that silent prayer is not a sufficiently godly response. Since the other participants in the workshop could not distinguish between his prayer and TM, he gave the appearance of evil. He should have refused to participate, just as Daniel's three friends refused to bow before Nebuchadnezzar's gold image (see Daniel 3). Also, since it is unlikely that a Christian would have been allowed to give a gospel solution to stress in such a workshop, he should have protested the introduction of TM into what should have been a religiously neutral workshop. The attorney's choice looks more like cowardice and compromise than it does godly faithfulness. At the very least, he could have quietly excused himself and left. At least then he wouldn't have given the appearance of participating in false worship.
6. If you believe the attorney's response in the workshop to be correct, what response by a Christian could rightly be characterized as cowardice and compromise? Why?
7. To what extent is the attorney's response justified by the conversation he had later with his friends?

Hurrying to Nowhere

Castaway, Crusoe, and Character

and a skilled communicator.

The workshop is divided in half. The first part is a creative exploration of stress in the practice of law. Various causes of stress are identified, and though it is noted that some stress can sharpen one's creativity and efficiency, inappropriate levels of stress can be deadly to not only the practice of law, but to the attorney's health, family, and enjoyment of life.

Then, in the second half of the workshop, the facilitator announces that she would like to introduce them to a simple technique that she has found particularly effective in reducing stress. Used twice a day, for twenty minutes each time, her practice of Transcendental Meditation has not only reduced her levels of stress, but provides two brief periods each day when she escapes from the noise and clutter of modern urban professional life. You do not need to accept the religious ideas behind the meditation, she says, though she finds them both plausible and comforting. In any case, she outlines the main beliefs behind TM, explains how to meditate, and then leads the group in a 20 minute period of meditation.

The Christian spends the twenty minutes in quiet prayer, determining to plan such quiet time into his daily schedule. Later, he talks with several friends who also attended the workshop, beginning the conversation by asking what they thought of the experience.

All of which, of course, raises a number of questions for discerning Christians to reflect on and discuss. ■

-Denis D. Haack

Knowing my interest in the whys and wherefores of learning, a good friend sent me an essay last summer by the agrarian philosopher Wendell Berry. Hearing about Berry for years, but never listening to him, I was impressed with his critical, careful eye in "The Loss of the University." In the months since then I have been reading books of his essays, as well as his novels and poems. Though widely lauded as one of America's most important essayists, he also sees and hears the world around him through the lens of one committed to the gospel of the Kingdom. For example, his *The Timbered Choir* is a collection of twenty years of poems on the theme of Sabbath, a theologically rich exploration of the rhythms of worship and work.

Last week on my way to a conference in Florida, I began reading the essay, "Discipline and Hope." As I flew over the southeastern states, I was taken in one more time with his understanding of human life under the pressure from our media-molded and consumption-crazed culture. Page upon page he sets before us a vision of a deeper, more truthful way of being human, and laments the widespread loss of the very qualities which make it possible to know and love, to be known and to be loved.

Perceptively analyzing the meaning of television in shaping personal and public life, he wrote: "The great sin of the medium is not that it presents fiction as truth, as undoubtedly it sometimes does, but that it cannot help presenting the truth as fiction, and that of the most negligible sort—a way to keep awake until bedtime." This insight

moved toward an examination of our social, political, and economic choices as a culture, and "the expedient doctrine that the end may justify the means." Berry then weighed in with this alternate account of human life: "There is an important sense in which the end is the means." From there he explored the various ways we have distorted the notion of efficiency, "Instead of asking a man what he can do well, it asks him what he can do fast and cheap."

Having read much of Berry over the last months I found myself on familiar ground with his critique; in all that I have read he eventually comes to this criticism. Whether writing of industrialization and our globalizing economy, of raising sheep on the land that his forebears have farmed for four generations, or of the meaning of

sexuality in a consumer culture, he cries out— quite eloquently and thoughtfully— against all that presses in upon us to diminish our humanness, as men and women made in the image of God.

As I turned the pages, paying close attention to his analysis, suddenly these words caught my heart: "It means hurrying to nowhere."

And as I flew, my eyes looking down upon the waterways of South Carolina, I thought of the film *Castaway*. Perennial Oscar contender Tom Hanks plays a FedEx efficiency specialist whose worldwide travels take him from airport to airport, city to city, inspiring employees to meet the demands of

Wendell Berry laments the widespread loss of the qualities which make it possible to know and love, to be known and to be loved.

Reading the World cont.

the clock. The unpardonable? Wherever his expertise takes him, he asks them to remember the company motto: “Let’s not commit the sin of turning our back on Time.” They are words which come back to haunt him.

With the millions who have seen this film since it came out earlier this winter, I was drawn into the drama of his last-minute, late-night flight across the Pacific, and I found my stomach tightening as I began to feel the break-up of the airplane. Its crash into the sea took me along, and I gasped for air with everyone else. Almost always Hanks draws me in; his Jimmy Stewart-like, feet-on-the-ground ordinariness, melding intensity and humor with unusual grace, make him an actor whose characters often tell tales that I understand.

I like movies. And on a certain level, I liked this one too. At the right times I laughed, and cried. But several weeks later my assessment is that it is one of the saddest stories I have seen and heard in a long time. If it is about anything, it is about “hurrying to nowhere,” individually and culturally. Tom Hanks is Everyman at the dawn of the New Millennium, and he is—in the words of one of our best prophets, the novelist Walker Percy—lost in the cosmos.

Washed ashore on an island, he calls out, “HELLO!?!?” again and again. No one is there... more profoundly, no one is home in heaven. Not only is there no foxhole faith, there are no windows to transcendence and truth in this story of a soul set adrift in the universe. And though the waves wash up reminders of the technological society in which he has lived and moved and had his being, he, like most sons of Adam before him, eventually takes these tools and toys and distorts them. Quite crudely, but so sadly,

he chooses a volleyball, “Wilson,” to be his companion and counselor. If we did not cry at this point—perhaps inappropriately, given the dramatic intent of the story yet to be told—we should have. *Castaway*, perhaps, but more truthfully, still at sea with regard to the most crucial questions and concerns in life.

Though I have no idea whether the Oxford philosopher Iris Murdoch ever read Thomas a Kempis, their reflections on the moral life have a surprising resonance. Writing in the 20th-century, she noted, “At crucial moments of choice, most of the business of choosing is already over.” Several centuries earlier he observed, “Circumstances do not make a man frail; rather, they show what he is.” Those readings of the human heart are true, whether they focus on contemporary cinema, the push-and-pull of national politics, or the lives of ordinary people in ordinary places; you and me, your neighbor and mine.

The Tom Hanks character has a character. He is a man full of habits of mind and heart which day-after-day lead him in certain directions, and not in others. When he is pressed to the proverbial wall, at work, at home, at play, he makes characteristic decisions, choices which are his, and him. To an extent which is sobering, even in a fallen world where it is possible to be sinned against—even horribly so—we are our choices. Augustine of Hippo, a keen interpreter of the human heart in his own day, put it this way: “As sure as I lived, I knew that I possessed a will, and that when I willed to do something or willed not to do something, nobody else was making the decision.” As the play-

wright-become-president Vaclav Havel of the Czech Republic reminds us, “The secret of man is the secret of his responsibility.”

The most interesting question to me, pondering the story of *Castaway*, is the question of his response to his circumstances. He is able to respond, be responsible. Being “castaway” has not diminished his humanness. The surf and the sun, the sand and the sky are the constants of the created order in which he is still responsible and accountable for the moral meaning of what he sees and hears.

One cannot think very long about this story, without wondering about Daniel Defoe’s classic; in fact most of the popular press about *Castaway* offers it as “a modern Robinson Crusoe.” Though the broad outlines of the stories are similar in that they tell of a man washed ashore, left alive and alone to forge a life on a tropical island, from that starting point they offer quite contrasting accounts of human life under the sun. If

In Castaway, not only is there no foxhole faith, there are no windows to transcendence and truth in this story of a soul set adrift in the universe.

the one is about a man hurrying to nowhere, a human being lost in the cosmos; the other is about a man whose desire for moral autonomy comes crashing down upon his soul, and who by amazing grace begins to see himself and the world in relation to the Creator of the cosmos.

Defoe’s novel is, in a word, a story of providence. The first chapter tells of Crusoe’s choice to go his own way, shak-

ing his figurative fist at father on earth and God in heaven, embarking upon his great adventure in lawlessness, circa 1600. The years pass, his ships take him to Africa where he is nearly killed, and eventually to South America where he builds a plantation and fortune. On a trading expedition with the fruit of his labor, his ship wrecks, leaving him “castaway.” Still angry at God, he recounts his first moments:

“After I got to shore and escaped drowning, instead of being thankful to God for my deliverance, having first vomited with the great quantity of salt water which was gotten into my stomach, and recovering myself a little, I ran about the shore, wringing my hands and beating my head and face, exclaiming at my misery, and crying out I was undone, undone...”

Days go by, and weeks turn into months, all the while Crusoe is sorting out his soul. Keeping a journal, he writes of the daily duties which occupy him in his new life. The first small opening into his heart comes as he observes thrown-away corn husks amazingly turn into green shoots and then edible barley.

“It is impossible to express the astonishment and confusion of my thoughts on this occasion. I had hitherto acted upon no religious foundation at all; indeed I had very few notions of religion in my head, or had entertained any sense of anything that had befallen me otherwise than as a chance, or, as we lightly say, what pleases God; without so much as inquiring into the ends of Providence in these things, or His order in governing events in the world. But after I saw the barley grow there, in a climate which I know was not proper for corn, and especially that I knew not how it came there, it startled me strangely, and I began to suspect that God had miraculously caused this grain to grow

Robinson Crusoe is about a man whose desire for moral autonomy comes crashing down and who by amazing grace, begins to see himself and the world in relation to the Creator.

without any help of seed sown; and that it was so directed purely for my sustenance on that wild miserable place. This touched my heart a little, and brought tears out of my eyes....”

The pages are literally full of his thoughtful, probing encounter with God. Sin and salvation, the gospel of grace, fears and temptations, learning to love God and the world—it is all there.

In his essay, Berry argues that the arts “refine and enliven perception.” I think he means that they enable us to see more clearly, more truthfully. That is plainly a possibility, and perhaps that is their true purpose. If so, then Robinson Crusoe tells a better tale than “Castaway.” Defoe pulls no punches in his story of the human hunger for autonomy, and of its creational consequences; in God’s world, the world in which we really live, there are consequences for the choices we make—blessings and curses. Crusoe is a son of Adam, full of glory and shame. In his anger, his perseverance, his fear, his introspection, his creativity, from beginning to end we meet a man who is like us, somehow both fully material and fully spiritual, at the very same time. He is someone who runs from God, and who cries out to God. There is nothing cheap here, about faith, hope, or love.

It is only the lesser stories that pull punches, in fact. They are the ones that Walker Percy was thinking of when he wryly observed, “Bad books always lie. They lie most of all about the human condition.” At heart, that is my lament with *Castaway*. It offers a picture of the person which seems far

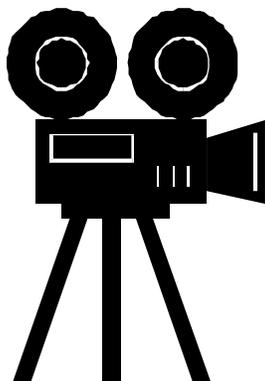
away from the reality of human experience, stretched out as it is from cradle to grave. Pushed to the edge, Crusoe’s pilgrimage rings true in a way that *Castaway*’s shallow secularism simply does not, and cannot.

But I suppose, at the beginning and the end of days, that is where hurrying to nowhere gets you. It is the problem of confusing means and ends. For years I have asked my students, “Do you have a *telos* which can meaningfully orient your *praxis* over the course of the life?” It is a question which grows out of hope, yearning that my students will learn, as Berry reminds us, that “There is an important sense in which the end is the means.” That is not a hard-to-understand truth for folk whose first question of faith asks, “What is man’s chief end?” We are on our way, not to nowhere, but to Someone. ■

~Steven Garber

Dr. Steven Garber is the Scholar-in-Residence for the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, and for many years has served as a member of the faculty of the American Studies Program, an interdisciplinary semester of study on Capitol Hill. The author of The Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together Belief and Behavior During the University Years, he speaks widely on the relation of learning to life. He is married to Meg, and they have five children and six chickens.

Stuck in Traffic



A review of Traffic

by Drew Trotter, Jr.

Film Credits

Starring:

Michael Douglas
Robert Wakefield
Don Cheadle
Montel Gordon
Benicio Del Toro
Javier Rodriguez
Luis Guzmán
Ray Castro
Dennis Quaid
Arnie Metzger
Catherine Zeta-Jones
Helena Ayala
Steven Bauer
Carlos Ayala
Jacob Vargas
Manolo Sanchez

Screenwriter:

Stephen Gaghan

Producers:

Laura Bickford
Marshall Herskovitz
Cameron Jones
and others

Original music:

Cliff Martinez

Cinematography:

Steven Soderbergh

Costumes:

Louise Frogley

147 minutes

Rated R for pervasive drug content, strong language, violence and some sexuality.

Rewarded with four Oscars, *Traffic* may be one of the best-remembered films from the last year of the last century. Directed by Academy Award winner Steven Soderbergh, the movie interweaves three stories to display the complex and terrifying efficiency of the drug trade in America. As the drugs, in this case heroin, move from producer through distributor to user, they provide a constant stream of death and destruction for Americans and their culture. If the statistic that is used in the film is even close to accurate—that 25% of American teenagers use drugs other than alcohol—then we face a monstrous problem in this country. Seeing *Traffic* is a must, if you care about that problem...or that country.

Traffic does not presume to judge the attempts at solving the drug problem in America, nor does it offer any fool-proof solutions to that problem. In a chilling scene midway through the film, Robert Wakefield, a judge from Ohio who has just been appointed the new drug czar, flies to Mexico to examine the U.S. drug enforcement agencies' efforts first-hand. While they are enroute back to Washington, Wakefield, played by Michael Douglas, conducts a brain-storming session, asking his staff for "new ideas, fresh approaches." The absolute, stone silence and the frustrated, blank stares of everyone on the plane speak for the film's rigorous insistence that there is no solution coming from the enforcement side of the government's involvement.

What of the legislative side? A classic,

Washington cocktail party scene, including real Senators from both sides of the fence to emphasize the point (Barbara Boxer of California and Orrin Hatch of Utah have cameos), puts forth as many views as there are in the country about what needs to be done. One law-maker advocates stricter penalties for distributors, another wants more education of school children, another greater international cooperation, another legalization. Wakefield wanders from conversation to conversation in a daze, sarcastically remarking to his wife and daughter when he gets back home that Washington is full of bureaucrats who have no idea how to solve the problem.

Much has been made of the movie's semi-documentary style, and it is effective in undergirding the idea that, while the story is fictional, the movie nevertheless gives a punishingly true picture of the drug trade in America. The scenes in the countryside of Mexico, centering around a seedy drug compound, are yellowed out and often shot at 18 frames-per-second speed (rather than the normal 24) in order to reinforce the antiquated equipment and methods of the police in Mexico, as well as the primeval barbarism of the torturers, be they soldiers or drug-producers (or both!). Soderbergh does a remarkable job of orchestrating the portrayals of the separate elements of the business in such a way that the audience keeps the three stories distinct, while regularly acknowledging that they are intimately connected. Often we see devices like a tracking shot of a car containing a character from the "user story" passing along the



street, when the camera suddenly stops and zooms slowly in on a character from the “distributor story” sitting at an outdoor restaurant.

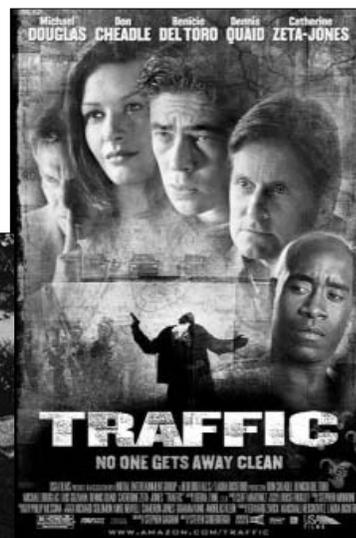
Weaving the tales back and forth,

Soderbergh (and his similarly Oscar-awarded editor, Stephen Mirrione, and screenwriter, Stephen Gaghan) depicts almost everyone in the movie both sympathetically and realistically. This has a disturbing effect on the viewer because

it more than ever forces us to realize how “normal” people who are involved with drugs might appear. In one scene, beautiful and very pregnant Catherine Zeta-Jones delivers lemonade; in the next she is screaming into a cell phone for her hit man to shoot a witness in the head. In a brilliant, horrifyingly real portrayal, ingenue Erika Christensen sits around in one scene talking with her friends about parents and relationships like any other sixteen year-old prep school girl; soon, she becomes the

If the statistic that is used in the film is

even close to accurate—that 25% of American teen-agers use drugs other than alcohol—then we face a monstrous problem in this country. Seeing Traffic is a must, if you care about this problem...or our country.



strung-out love-slave to a drug-dealer, unable to move from her dilapidated hotel room.

Traffic has few flaws. Some will fault the Zeta-Jones character for changing so quickly from an innocent, southern California, socialite with two small children to a ruthless killer, but, sadly, I bought the character completely. If your life is built on money and social status, what might you not do to preserve it, especially when you find out that the man you love is a drug dealer? Christians will be struck with the depressing lack of hope at

the end of the film, but one can hardly blame a realistic, secular portrayal of this problem for being depressing, especially if it seeks to be fair to the subject matter. The Drug Enforcement Agency, for instance, is shown as full of self-sacrificial public servants, but their goodness only functions as a stimulus to the audience’s frustration with the immensity of the problem. If good people are going to keep dying, and the problem is only going to get worse, what’s the point?

Christians must remind themselves that this world is not our home, but it is a place God cares about, and so we must care about it, too. Just because we are not affected by the drug trade does not mean it is not our problem; we have a mandate from the king to bring justice and righteousness into every corner of the world. *Traffic* will help those of us who do not know, and certainly do not want to know experientially, what drugs are all about to gain a perspective on this devastating social disease, and for that we can be thankful. ■

~Drew Trotter

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. In which of the three scenarios—production, distribution, use—could you see yourself, if you had been asked to play a role in this movie? Which character do you see yourself portraying? Why?
2. Reviewers have regularly commented on the “neutrality” of the film; do you agree? Which scenes or lines of dialogue specifically support your opinion?
3. What do you know about drugs, either from personal experience or from solid evidence, that was not accurately portrayed in the movie?
4. What scenes, regardless of the accuracy of their depiction of the drug scene, did not ring true to you? Why—the script, the acting—what made the scene not work?
5. *Traffic* is not a “preachy” film by most evaluations. Should it have been? In other words, following on from your answers to question #2 above, should art be intentionally “didactic” or not? Why?
6. How do you as a Christian see the solution to the “drug problem” in America?

The Scandal of

Most people by now know something of the story behind the Harry Potter novels, but that doesn't make it any less remarkable. It begins in 1990, on a train traveling between London and Manchester, when 24 year old Joanne Kathleen Rowling (rhymes with "bowling") first thought of writing a story about a boy who lives in a magical universe. "Harry Potter strolled into my head fully formed," she remembers. For the next four years Rowling made notes while living in Portugal. While on the plane to Portugal she jotted down the names of the four dorms at Hogwarts School (Gryffindor, Slytherin, Hufflepuff, and Ravenclaw) on an airsick bag. By 1995, now a divorced mother with a daughter living "on the dole" in Scotland, Rowling had completed the first book, but was too poor to make a photocopy, so she retyped the entire manuscript. Most of the book had been written at a table in a café near Rowling's unheated apartment while her baby napped.

As she began seeking a publisher, one literary agent told her that "you won't make any money writing children's books." Then, in 1997, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* was published by Bloomsbury in the U.K., and quickly sold 150,000 copies. (When it was published in the U.S., "Philosopher" was changed to "Sorcerer" in the title—marketers felt Americans wouldn't purchase any book with "Philosopher" on the cover.) Not only have all four of the books (out of a projected series of seven) been bestsellers, they have set publishing records. When the much anticipated fourth volume appeared in July 2000, the



first run printing by Bloomsbury was 1 million copies—a British record. In the U.S., the previous first-run record had been held by John Grisham, at around 2.5 million copies; Scholastic Press printed 3.8 million copies of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. And literary agents notwithstanding, as of March 2000, Rowling's income from the books was estimated by Forbes at \$40 million—and that

Though villains exist, Rowling's world is neither superficial nor sentimental and the consequences of evil are disturbingly horrible.

doesn't count her royalties from the fourth book.

Now a movie is in the works, and the books continue to sell, enjoyed by both children and adults alike. In Great Britain they even published a special edition, minus the children's cover, so adults could read it in public without embarrassment. "In the twenty-some-odd years that I have been pretty closely following trends in American publishing," Wheaton College English professor Alan Jacobs says, "no development in the industry has been nearly so inexplicable to me, nor has any development made me so happy. For I adore the Harry Potter books."

Rowling, like J.R.R. Tolkien, "simply has that mysterious gift," Jacobs says, "so prized among storytellers and lovers of stories but so resistant to critical explanation, of world-making." To read the Harry Potter books is not merely to read an engaging story, it is to be invited into another world, consistent and complete

within itself, yet very different from our own. Rowling exhibits an amazing attention to the little details of Harry's world, usually quaint, often funny, and always interesting, that lend both charm and plausibility to the plot. It is, Jacobs says, a "thoroughly imagined universe."

The Harry Potter novels are well-conceived and smartly-written stories, delightful to read; fantasies set in a moral universe. "The theme running through all seven books," Rowling says, "is the fight between good and evil." Though villains exist, Rowling's world is neither superficial nor sentimental, and the consequences of evil are disturbingly horrible. Choices matter—even little choices. Evil resides in every heart,

and like in our fallen and fragmented world, brokenness, abuse, and death haunt the footsteps of Harry and his friends.

I recently asked my daughter not to read the first four books to my granddaughter. When she is old enough for them, I said, I hoped I could be the one who reads them to her. Needless to say, I can hardly wait.

The Mirror of Erised

In the first novel, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, there is a wonderful episode about a mirror. I would like to use it as both an introduction to the books as well as to the controversy the series has generated in some parts of the Christian community.

Harry is in his first year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and needs to stay at school over the Christmas holiday. He can't go home because he has no family, no home where he is welcome.

Harry Potter

It's true there is the Dursleys, Harry's Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, who had taken him in after his parents had been killed by the evil wizard Lord Voldemort, but they have never cared for or loved him. Selfish and self-centered, the Dursleys dislike Harry passionately, mistreat him cruelly, and live in fear that their respectable friends might discover he is actually related to them. Christmas has always been a lonely time at 4 Privet Drive with the Dursleys, and Harry welcomes the opportunity to remain at school.

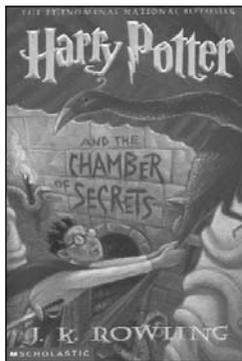
After most of the students have left for home, Harry celebrates Christmas with his best friend, Ron Weasley. Ron has a loving family and lovely home, but his parents have gone to visit his older brother, who is studying dragons in Romania. So Ron and Harry opened their gifts in their dorm room early on Christmas morning. Harry receives a small coin from the Dursleys, which is quite generous since they usually give him nothing. Ron's mom has knitted Harry a warm emerald green sweater and enclosed a box of home-made fudge in the same package. Hagrid, the huge Hogwarts' groundskeeper, gives Harry a hand-carved flute. And inside the final package is a wondrous, silvery gray cloak, which feels to the touch as if water were "woven into the material." Rare and precious, it had been his father's, an enclosed note said. It is an invisibility cloak, just the thing for an eleven year old boy with all sorts of time to explore the huge and ancient castle of Hogwarts over Christmas break.

That night, when Ron has fallen asleep, Harry drapes the invisibility cloak across his shoulders and sets off. In a long corridor on one of the top floors of the castle, Harry finds an open door, and in the room is a mirror. Propped against the wall, it reaches

to the ceiling, has an ornate gold frame, and an inscription carved across the top. He looks into the mirror, and sees himself not in an empty room, but with his parents, whom he has never known for they had been killed when he was still an infant. "The Potters smiled and waved at Harry," the story goes, "and he stared hungrily back at them, his hands pressed flat against the glass as though he was hoping to fall right through it and reach them. He had a powerful kind of ache inside him, half joy, half terrible sadness."

Harry has stumbled across the Mirror of Erised in which a person sees the very deepest yearnings of their heart. The next night Harry returns again to the mirror, but this time he is not alone, for old Albus Dumbledore, headmaster of Hogwarts is there waiting for him.

"Now," asked Dumbledore, 'can you think what the



Laughter and wit are evidences of grace in a world where abuse and death are all too prevalent.

Mirror of Erised shows us all?

"Harry shook his head.

"Let me explain," Dumbledore said, "The happiest man on earth would be able to use the Mirror of Erised like a normal mirror, that is, he would look into it and see himself exactly as he is. Does that help?"

"Harry thought. Then he said slowly, 'It shows us what we want...whatever we want...'

"Yes & no," said Dumbledore quietly. 'It shows us nothing more or less than the deepest, most desperate desire of our hearts. You, who have never known your family, see them

standing around you...However, this mirror will give us neither knowledge or truth. Men have wasted away before it, entranced by what they have seen, or been driven mad, not knowing if what it shows is real or even possible. The Mirror will be moved to a new home tomorrow, Harry, and I ask you not to go looking for it again. If you ever do run across it, you will now be prepared. It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live, remember that. Now, why don't you put that admirable cloak back on and get off to bed?'

"Sir—Professor Dumbledore? Can I ask something?'

"Obviously, you've just done so,' Dumbledore smiled. 'You may ask me one more thing, however.'

"What do you see when you look in the mirror?'

"I? I see myself holding a pair of thick, woolen socks.'

"Harry stared.

"One can never have enough socks,' said Dumbledore. 'Another Christmas has come and gone and I didn't get a single pair. People will insist on giving me books.'"

The Mirror of Erised?

I want to use the story of the Mirror of Erised as a place to begin thinking about these children's books that have quite literally taken the world by storm. Though only one brief episode in an ongoing series of novels, it is representative of the books in almost every way that matters.

It is written with a wry and warm sense of humor. J. K. Rowling has a wonderful ability to capture the humor of children. Sometimes, as in this episode, she evokes a gentle smile, and sometimes she spins tales that make children laugh out loud. And not just children—I found all four books a great deal of fun. Rowling uses humor effectively, not just to draw us into the story, but she uses it redemptively as well. Laughter and wit

Paper and Canvas cont.

are evidences of grace in a world where abuse and death are all too prevalent.

The story of the Mirror of Erised, though utterly fantastic, is also utterly believable. The mark of good fiction is not whether it is realistic (in the narrow sense of the term), but whether it is plausible. The Harry Potter books sweep us into a world which does not exist, except in the imagination, but it is a world which is imaginatively real. It seems right, somehow, that an invisibility cloak would feel different from ordinary cloth, as if it were a cross between fabric and some mysterious liquid. Harry's exploration of the castle, using the cloak, is just what most eleven year old boys would do in his situation. And who wouldn't want to discover the Mirror of Erised and have a chance to look into it?

The magic and witchcraft which are part of Harry Potter's world are not the stuff of the occult, but of fantasy. In Rowling's books we read of riding on broomsticks, invisibility cloaks, owls that deliver mail, spells to turn beetles into buttons, and mirrors in which you can see your heart's desire. Each year Harry and his fellow students must purchase their textbooks at a bookstore named Flourish and Blotts. For the class Care of Magical Creatures, the required text was *The Monster Book of Monsters* which had to be kept in a cage. The books snapped aggressively at anything that dared to come close, and even tore one another to shreds if given the chance. The manager said he had already been bitten five times that morning. "I'm never stocking them again, never!" he exclaimed. "It's been bedlam! I thought we'd seen the worst when we bought two

hundred copies of the *Invisible Book of Invisibility*—cost a fortune, and we never found them."

It's true that Voldemort uses magic for evil in the books, and spells are cast which end in death and destruction, but this too is fantasy, not the occult. It is wrong to confuse it with the world view of neopaganism, as anyone who has both read the books and taken neopagans seriously will understand. The books "don't have anything to do with Wicca," Patricia Allgeier, a witch from Springfield, MO, is quoted as saying in an *Associated Press* report. "It's this generation's version of The Wizard of Oz." They do "not portray my religious beliefs," Chad Anciault of the Witches' League for Public Awareness says, "it is difficult for the religion to be taken seriously when books like this portray it as magic."

Some of this confusion comes from a failure to understand the nature of literature and the relationship between imagination



J.K. Rowling has been deeply hurt by the attack of Christians against her.

and reality. Well-crafted fantasy does not seduce us from reality, but helps us to see reality more clearly. *The Lord of the Rings* does not make me believe in dwarves (though I believe in them as I read), but it makes me believe in the reality of a cosmic spiritual battle, and how our pilgrimage is, in fact an adventure, if we have eyes to see it. One Christian critic has said that though "Tolkien's great character Gandalf is a powerful leader called a wizard... witchcraft plays no part

in the saga." They need to read the story again. The lightning that flashed from Gandalf's staff was not powered by EverReady.

Even the Mirror of Erised has drawn a reaction from Christian critics. In its cover story on the books, for example, *World* magazine calls attention to the episode, acknowledging that Dumbledore's advice to Harry is "wise counsel," paralleling the teaching of Scripture. Still, they include a warning. "Eris was the Greek goddess," the authors note, "of discord and strife." But since it is the Mirror of Erised, not the Mirror of Eris, what does Eris have to do with it? If it is the Mirror of Eris, why is there no "discord and strife" in the episode? And since the Mirror reveals the deepest desire of one's heart, is not a more plausible explanation of the name simply that "Erised" is "Desire," spelled backwards?

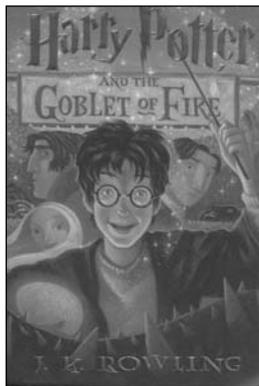
Another criticism that has been raised is that Harry's attitude towards the Dursleys is problematic. He doesn't like them, doesn't want to be with them, and

tries to escape from their home whenever possible. How can he be a hero if such rebelliousness is an essential part of his character? No

doubt Harry's relationship with the Dursleys is a painful one, and their systematic abuse of him is painful to read. Rowling's world is not a simplistic one, where good and evil resides in carefully delineated groups, and where all the good guys wear white hats.

Rowling has created a moral universe, one in which Dumbledore's gentle warning about the Mirror makes sense. Truth is taught here, truth that is worth some reflection and discussion, and

though it is taught in an imaginary world, it applies to reality as well. The truth taught in Rowling's fiction not only appeals to the mind but also to the heart. As in all good fiction, it is comprehended by both intellect and imagination. The world in which Harry Potter lives is a world of moral order, where ideas and choices have consequences, where good and evil are clearly distinguished, where evil is both dehumanizing and destructive, and where death is distressingly real.



And they need to see their elders acting righteously, not scandalously.

Please pray for Jerram Barrs' letter to J. K. Rowling. Please learn about neopaganism. And please read and enjoy the first four volumes of the Harry Potter novels. We recommend them to you highly. ■

~Denis D. Haack

and *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2000) 734 pp., all by J. K. Rowling and published by Scholastic Press (New York, NY).

The true scandal of Harry Potter

Jerram Barrs reports that J. K. Rowling has been deeply hurt by the attack of Christians against her. They have attributed to her beliefs she does not hold, and have slandered her in print and in email. They have exhibited a defensiveness and fearfulness that is unbecoming in those who profess to believe in a Lord who has risen victorious over death and the devil. They have used technology to distribute warnings about the books which are poorly researched at best, and often false. Professor Barrs plans to write to Rowling, to apologize for the shameful way she has been treated. And he asks us all to pray that, out of the thousands of letters addressed to her each day, his will somehow get into her hands.

Even if all the critics say was true, the defensiveness of their recommendations is frankly embarrassing. If the Harry Potter novels were introductions to the occult, the church should welcome the opportunity to read and discuss them. Neopaganism is a growing reality in our post-Christian world, and our children need to be able to meet its challenge with a quiet confidence in the gospel. They need to know the difference between fantasy literature and the occult.

Sources:

Information about J. K. Rowling and publishing from "The Return of Harry Potter!" in *Newsweek* (July 10, 2000) pp. 57-60; "Wild About Harry Potter" in *Time* (September 20, 1999) pp. 67-72; "An Interview with J. K. Rowling" on www.scholastic.com/harrypotter/; "There's Something About Harry Potter" in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* (June 27, 2000) pp. 1A,3A. Alan Jacobs from "Harry Potter's Magic" by Alan Jacobs in *First Things* (January 2000) pp. 35-38. The Mirror of Erised from *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (pp. 194-214). "More Clay than Potter" by Anne McCain and Susan Olasky in *World* (October 30, 1999) pp. 16-18. Allgeier and Ancil from "Potter Charms Modern-Day Witches" by Deepti Hajela (Associated Press, May 30, 2000) on www.cesnur.org.

For further study and reflection:

"The World of Harry Potter and Evangelical Muggles," a lecture by Jerram Barrs given at the February 2001 Rochester, MN L'Abri Conference and available on audio tape. Order tape #6525 from Sound Word Associates, P. O. Box 2036, Chesterton, IN 36404. Cost is \$5.00/tape + \$2.00 shipping and handling. Or contact them by phone (219.548.0933), fax (219.548.0931), email (tapes@soundword.com), or visit them on the web (www.soundword.com).

Books recommended:

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone (1997) 309 pp;
Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets (1998) 341 pp;
Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban (1999) 435 pp;

Order From:



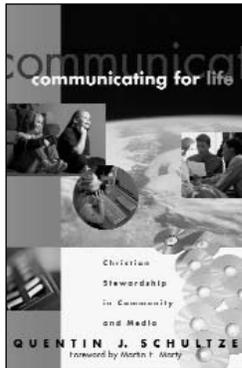
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Called to Communicate



One of the riches of Christian community is being able to learn from sisters and brothers who have very different callings from our own. I'm not just referring to networking here, nor to the fact that in an age of information so many resources are available in the marketplace. Both are good gifts, but more than that should be found in the church, because our learning from one another is in the context of covenant community.

Rather than merely tapping into a network, we are members of the same family. A family in which every calling is significant, and every member is needed. And because our faith gives us a common perspective under Christ's Lordship, we can learn from one another not across world views, but under the authority God's word. As we each seek to think and live Christianly within the sphere of our particular calling and vocation, we can share the fruit of our pilgrimage with our fellow believers. The community will sharpen our discernment with their questions, and they can profit from what we've learned and tried, and in how we have succeeded by God's grace, and failed.

Sadly, such learning from one another occurs all too infrequently. Relatively few believers have done the hard work of developing a Kingdom vision for their calling and life, and relatively few opportunities exist to share in that process together in the average church.

In *Communicating for Life*, Quentin Schultze demonstrates what such faithfulness looks like. Dr. Schultze is professor of communication at Calvin College, and though few of us may be called to the field of communications, all of us are called to be faithful communicators. "We are inherently, incessantly communicators of whatever is in our hearts," Schultze points out. "It is a sobering fact that virtually everything we do can communicate something to someone else." In all that we do and say—and in all that we do not do and do not say—we are either promoting shalom or brokenness, for nothing in our lives is neutral and outside the sphere of Christ's Lordship.

Dr. Schultze does several things admirably in *Communicating for Life*. He shares with us what he has learned in his calling as a professional communicator so we can reflect on how to communicate more faithfully. Schultze also allows us insight into his vocation, so we can see something of what it means to work within that sphere of life. He outlines the main theories of

communication prevalent in his field, so we can understand something of their strengths and weaknesses from a Christian perspective. Written without technical jargon and in a way that makes the ideas and theories accessible to lay communicators, his example encourages us all to be discerning in our own calling and work. And most helpful of all, he sets his entire discussion clearly in the context of the Christian world view, allowing the biblical story of Creation, Fall, and Redemption to shape his approach. *Communicating for Life* not only allows us to learn to be more faithful in our own communication, it is a model for thinking Christianly about one's calling and vocation.

I almost didn't read this book, because it is written as a textbook for use in classes on communication in Christian colleges. Over the years, however, I have come to appreciate and learn from Dr. Schultze in the various books he has published, so I read his introduction, and immediately knew *Communicating for Life* was must reading. To listen as a thoughtful fellow believer reflects on his calling in light of the Christian world view, and as he helps us reflect on some of what his calling implies for our own faithfulness is a learning opportunity too good to be missed. In fact, I wish he had written more. More about postmodernism and how the shift in culture affects communication. More about the ethical dilemmas that we all face as we try to communicate in a fallen world. And I wish he had included discussion questions, because *Communicating for Life* shouldn't just be read in college classes, but discussed in Sunday school classes and small groups.

This is a book about listening and identifying with people quite unlike ourselves. About speaking the truth in love, and how that differs from just speaking the truth. About how all our best efforts to communicate are flawed, and about how God still uses us. About how we are called to be co-creators with God, symbolic stewards of his good creation. About telling the truth and about when telling a lie might be the better choice in this sad world. About love and accountability, forgiveness and humility, and about how faithful communication by God's grace is not only a foretaste of heaven, it is also a conduit for shalom in the here and now.

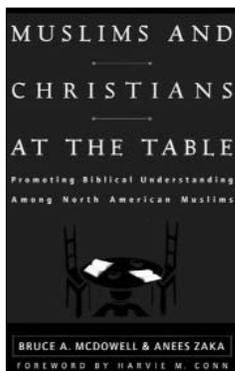
We commend *Communicating for Life* to you. ■

-Denis D. Haack

Book reviewed:

Communicating for Life: Christian Stewardship in Community and Media by Quentin J. Schultze (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books; 2000) 174 pp. + notes + index.

Bible Study with the Qur'an



Picture this. Two friends, one a committed Christian and one a committed Muslim, sitting at a table sharing a meal. Open before them on the table are two books, the Bible and the Qur'an. Both are enjoying the conversation. The Christian is intentionally asking questions and listening with care. The conversation is animated, and ongoing, and has, in fact, been occurring regularly for several months. What we are picturing is an evangelistic Bible study, a holy spirited attempt to share the gospel of Christ with one of the millions of Islamic believers now living in the West.

Muslims and Christians at the Table was written to teach Christians how such evangelism can occur. The authors, Bruce McDowell and Anees Zaka are both qualified to teach us. Both have earned doctorates from Westminster Theological Seminary and have studied Islam over many years. Both have been involved in Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia under the ministry of the late Dr. James Boice. And most important, both not only have a passion for the gospel, but extensive experience leading evangelistic Bible studies with Muslims living in North America. "We came to believe that this book was needed," they write, "after noticing a lack of practical guidance on how to witness to Muslims in the North American context. Most of the available literature discusses the theoretical and theological aspects of witnessing to Muslims, but provides little of the practical how-tos. The purpose of this book is threefold: (1) to set forth the historical, cultural, and theological background of Islam as a foundation for witnessing to Muslims, (2) to encourage witnessing to North American Muslims with the gospel, and (3) to teach how to witness to them more effectively by promoting biblical understanding."

Muslims and Christians at the Table is divided into four parts. First, McDowell and Zaka share their vision for reaching the thousands of Muslims now living in North America. Chicago alone has 50 mosques and nearly half a million Muslims; New York City 700,000. Islam is the fastest growing religion in America (averaging 4% growth annually) with an estimated total of 5 million followers. This means there are more Muslims in America than Episcopalians and Presbyterians combined, and more living in the U.S. than in Libya. In part two of the book McDowell and Zaka provide a historical and cultural overview of Islam. Then, in a much longer section, they deal with the theological issues, such a comparison of the Bible and the Qur'an, the nature of God, and the problem of sin. In the final section they introduce us to a practical way in which Christians can reach Muslims

with the gospel through evangelistic Bible studies in the context of committed and lasting friendships. At the end of each chapter are discussion questions, which makes the book even more helpful both for personal reflection and for use in small groups.

This is a "how-to" book, but in the sense of providing practical training, not in the sense of providing simplified steps of action that are then repeated endlessly. Even if we do not yet have Islamic friends and neighbors—and if they are our neighbors, what reason could we possibly give for not having them as friends?—the approach to evangelism taught in this book is creative and alive. McDowell and Zaka are sensitive to the fact that the gospel is a living message, not a sound bite to be regurgitated on command, that our non-Christian friends are made in the image of God and must be treated as such, and that the evangelistic encounter is not a debate to be won, but a relationship to be nurtured, even at cost.

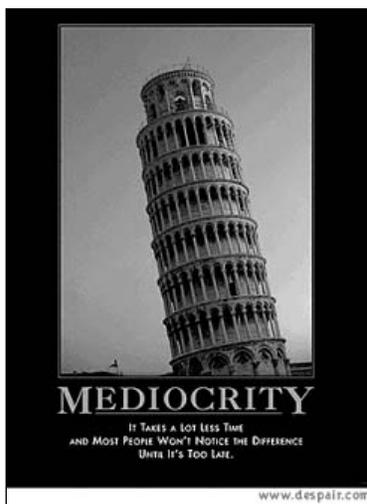
"The amazing growth of Islam in North America during the last few decades has gone largely unnoticed by the evangelical church," McDowell and Zaka say. "Many people still think that missions is only done overseas, and that unreached people do not live here in North America. After all, we have the gospel on radio and television daily, churches are found every few blocks, and Bibles are easily available. However, what is not realized is that those who are outside of the Christian subculture are rarely exposed to the gospel. Those who have come from an Islamic background have never heard the gospel in terms that they can understand. Even native-born Americans who are converting to Islam out of Christian backgrounds have generally not heard the gospel in a culturally relevant way that addresses issues that concern them."

We recommend *Muslims and Christians at the Table* to you. Get a copy and work through it with a small group of Christian friends. Begin praying for your Islamic neighbors by name, that God would bring them to Christ, and that he might use you as part of that process. Put a copy of the book in your church library. And give thanks that God has raised up gifted teachers like Anees Zaka and Bruce McDowell from whom we can learn. ■

—Denis D. Haack

Book reviewed:

Muslims and Christians at the Table: Promoting Biblical Understanding Among North American Muslims by Bruce A. McDowell and Anees Zaka (Phillipsburg, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing; 1999) 261 pp. + 2 appendices ("The Story of a Muslim Immigrant" and "A Bible Study Case Study") + notes + glossary of Islamic terms + resources for further study.



<http://www.despair.com>

Time for a pick-me-up?

Despair, Inc.

If you find the success and motivation posters often hanging in professional offices and employee lunch rooms a little sappy, then Despair, Inc., is a web site you should visit. In place of motivational posters, they sell demotivational posters—as well as postcards, calendars, note cards, and mugs. Though similar to the motivational products in appearance and quality, these are products with a humorous edge. One poster, for example, shows a picture of a lone baseball player sitting dejectedly on a bench in an empty ballpark. The caption: “LOSING: If at first you don’t succeed, failure may be your style.” Another that hangs above my desk has a picture of a bunch of runners rounding a curve in a marathon, viewed from the back. The caption: DEFEAT: For every winner, there are dozens of losers. Odds are you are one of them.” The range is impressive: Adversity, Mistakes, Stupidity, Cluelessness, Idiocy, Pessimism, Burnout, Mediocrity, and many more.

Ransom Ratings

Design: Attractive and witty—Despair, Inc., doesn’t lose its sense of humor even when marketing its products.

Contents: Primarily geared to selling its products. Each design is clearly displayed in color. You can also join “The Wailing List” to receive notices of new products. “By joining our Wailing List you’ll be the first to hear about them,” the site notes, “and you might even get exclusive discounts when we feel like it.”

Ease of Use: Navigating the site is easy and intuitive. Obviously designed to make shopping easy.

Critique is not available by **subscription**; rather it is sent as a ministry to all donors to Ransom Fellowship, which is a 501(c)(3) non-profit, tax-deductible ministry. Everyone on Ransom’s mailing list also receive *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.