

Critique

Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

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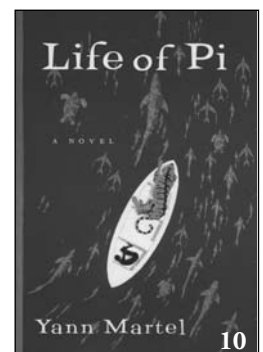
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Editor's Note



Coffee and religious discourse...

Those of you receiving this *Critique* via mail will note an insert listing a series of discussions taking place at Borders Book Store in St. Louis, MO. Both Margie and I are listed in this series, which is one of the reasons we're

sending it to you. We hope you'll pray as we lecture and field questions. That God would be pleased to use what we say to stimulate someone to consider the truth of the gospel.

Another reason we're including this *Friday Nights @ the Institute* insert is because it represents a creative effort to engage our postmodern and post-Christian culture with the gospel. Speakers are asked to address a topic that might be of interest to thoughtful folk, and to do so in a pre-evangelistic way. The goal is to generate discussion and reflection on topics that matter, encouraging listeners to re-examine their own commitments, beliefs and values in light of the Christian world and life view. *Friday Nights* is sponsored by the Francis Schaeffer Institute (of Covenant Seminary), whose vision statement gives the rationale behind the series:

"The Church is to take the Gospel of Jesus Christ to every person. Unfortunately, Christians can retreat into a subculture due to fear of the surrounding society. Many do not understand or are unsure how to respond to secularism, postmodernism, New Age spirituality, and the challenges of science and technology. Instead of seeking to grow in understanding, Christians can withdraw behind defensive barriers for protection.

"The tragedy is that the barriers work both ways. They not only keep the culture away from Christians, but they also keep the Gospel away from those who need it...The goal of the Schaeffer Institute is to assist Christians in breaking down

these barriers, to become more faithful and effective in evangelism, and to become more obedient to God's Word in all areas of life. We seek to do this by training Christians to observe and understand the culture in which they live, and by modeling respectful dialogue with those who are not Christians. In this way we hope to prepare Christians to be involved effectively as salt and light beyond the Church in the wider culture."

At a time when many believers seem convinced that postmodern (in)tolerance is shutting the door to Christian witness, *Friday Nights* proves that believers can winsomely engage people on a wide range of issues. "The Christian Gospel is universal and unchanging," Jerram Barrs says, "but the cultural contexts in which this message must be proclaimed is ever-changing. The Institute's task is to assist the Church in making that message comprehensible and relevant in the contemporary cultural context."

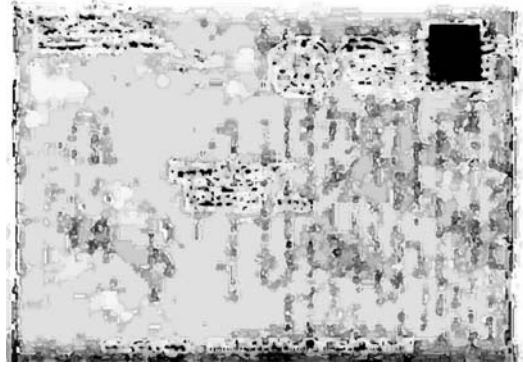
Too often Christians seem to believe that the only true methods of evangelism are those traditionally encouraged in the church. Those that hesitate to use them are often made to feel guilty, as though they show a lack of faithfulness. What must be considered, however, is that though God may have used these methods in the past, they were developed when the culture was firmly in the grip of modernism. To relate to postmoderns with approaches designed for modernity is a failure of holy spirited imagination.

Tapes of *Friday Nights* are available for \$5/tape. You might wish to order some to learn from this effort to engage non-Christians with the gospel. Perhaps by beginning a similar series in your area. Or by learning to be more winsomely pre-evangelistic in your own conversations at work or over the backyard fence. ■

~Denis Haack

For more info, contact the Schaeffer Institute by phone (314.434.4044 ext 256) or online (www.covenantseminary.edu).

Dialogue



Thanks and Classical Learning once again.

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.

I'm a new subscriber. Thank you for sending *Critique* and *Notes*. What a delight they are to me. I inhale their wisdom and comfort instantly. My husband, Michael, enjoys them as well. We are both products of the old Presbyterian church and doctrine. Where have you been all our lives? We both say "ditto" to Beth Ann Stein's Dialogue comment [*Critique* #4 - 2002]. Word of mouth is cost effective, but these publications are worthy of the street corner vendor with the loud EXTRA, EXTRA, Read ALL About It!

I'm a prime candidate for the "Bible Reading Program for Shirkers and Slackers" [*Notes from Toad Hall* Still Winter 2002]. I'll let you know how it works for me. I'm going to share it with our Sunday school class. Thank you for being so real and transparent. It IS in our weakness that He shows His strength through that unfathomable, matchless grace.

Marie Strong
Stafford, VA

Critique is a lifeline for us toward a balanced, thoughtful, and Christ-like engagement with the ideas, art, and people of our time. We eagerly await each issue! Thank you.

Steve & Glory Griffin
Watkinsville, GA

Preston Jones' critique of Douglas Wilson's views regarding Southern slavery [*Critique* #4 and 5 - 2002] touched on the need to discern and evaluate the presentation of history by Christian leaders, but not the need to discern motivations. None of the history revisionism of the South by Christian leaders that I have read is an attempt to return to bigotry but an attempt to change our current government while turning a blind

eye to bigotry. We Christians have a marvelous and amusing history of vigorously arguing towards forms of government that inevitably betray our valued principles. The Coptic church resisted the influence of the emperor in religious affairs, while Rome and Constantinople eagerly embraced imperial authority to aid their particular viewpoints. Rome supported kings who gave Rome power, and rejected them when they threatened that power. Early Protestants eagerly assigned certain kings divine authority, hoping those same kings would grant them protection from the Inquisition. Protestants in America welcomed the "wall of separation" invented by the Supreme Court in the late 1800s that supported monogamy as the government's preferred form of marriage, getting rid of those pesky Mormon polygamists. Now that the wall has been turned against us, we're not so sure it was such a good idea.

The attempt to recast the antebellum South as a vastly superior Christian country by such as Douglas Wilson is merely another line in the same history. Now that the federal government is against us in the important issues of the day, many Christians would like to reshape the government by giving individual states greater power. Sometimes they use rather odd views of history to argue their points. These apologists of Christian values have good goals in mind, but they often argue for the use of tools that will inevitably splinter in our hands.

We live in Babylon, and we are here to engage Babylonians, rather than attempting to change them through their government. Fiddling with the government is the American way. There's nothing wrong with reexamining the system, but let's not forget that the same tool used tomorrow to outlaw abortion may

continued on page 16...

Love It or Leave It

Though America is obviously a country of immigrants—after all, very few of us are Native Americans—over the years each major wave of immigration has been met with discrimination, political agitation, and fear on the part of many citizens. Would the new immigrants assimilate seamlessly into American society or would they insist on maintaining their own separate cultural identities? What effect would they have on American culture? Would they earn their own way or be parasites on the rest of us? Would they assume the responsibilities of citizenship in a modern democracy or merely insist on their rights as new citizens?

Since 9/11, a terrorist attack by a group of men all of whom were from countries in the Middle East, renewed debate about immigration has arisen. Should immigration be restricted, and if so, how? How open and free should our borders be? And how should we respond

to those who are already here but who don't seem to "fit in" the way many think they should?

In the 1960's, the slogan, "Love it or leave it" was applied to hippies and peace activists who refused involvement in the Vietnam war. Now it is being applied to recent immigrants and social activists who are perceived as a threat because they represent those who would institute unacceptable change into American society. For example, I received the following message via email from a Christian. "I thought this was too good to keep a secret," he wrote. The message—reproduced below as I received it—was apparently taken from an editorial which appeared originally in a Tampa, FL newspaper:

IMMIGRANTS, NOT AMERICANS MUST CHANGE

I am tired of this nation worrying about whether we are offending some

individual or their culture. Since the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, we have experienced a surge in patriotism by the majority of Americans. However, the dust from the attacks had barely settled when the 'politically correct' crowd began complaining about the possibility that our patriotism was offending others.

I am not against immigration, nor do I hold a grudge against anyone who is seeking a better life by coming to America. Our population is almost entirely comprised of descendants of immigrants. However, there are a few things that those who have recently come to our country, and apparently [sic] some born here, need to understand. This idea of America being a multicultural community has served only to dilute our sovereignty and our national identity. As Americans we have our own culture, our own society, our own language and our own lifestyle.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What was your initial response to the email? Why do you think you responded that way? Have you heard similar ideas expressed elsewhere? Why might this message be attractive to someone? To a Christian?
2. How would you define the "tone" of the email? Is it an appropriate tone for a Christian to adopt in the public square? In an email to friends? In a mass e-mailing? Why or why not?
3. The email raises several issues that could legitimately be discussed by citizens in the public square. What are those issues? What position(s) might Christians take on these issues? To what extent might we need to give one another freedom to disagree on these issues?
4. How should the Christian community respond to immigrants? To immigrants who do not want to be assimilated into mainstream American culture? To what extent can our outreach to them with the gospel be mixed with our concerns as citizens?
5. "In God We Trust" is our national motto," the email reads. "This is not some Christian, right wing, political slogan. We adopted this motto because Christian men and women, on Christian principles, founded this nation, and this is clearly documented." When was this slogan actually adopted? Under what circumstances? Since many believers are convinced America is becoming increasingly post-Christian, and since religious pluralism is clearly on the rise, how appropriate is this slogan? If you consider it appropriate now, under what cultural conditions might you think it inappropriate? How "clearly documented" is the assertion made in this email?

This culture has been developed over centuries of struggles, trials, and victories by millions of men and women who have sought freedom.

We speak English, not Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Russian, or any other language. Therefore, if you wish to become part of our society, learn the language!

“In God We Trust” is our national motto. This is not some Christian, right wing, political slogan. We adopted this motto because Christian men and women, on Christian principles, founded this nation, and this is clearly documented. It is certainly appropriate to display on the walls of our schools. If God offence [sic] you, then I suggest to you consider another part of the world as your new home, because God is part of our culture. If Stars and Stripes offend you, or you don't like uncle Sam, then you should seriously consider a move to another part of this planet. We are happy with our culture and have no desire to change, and we really don't care how you

did things where you came from.

This is OUR COUNTRY, our land, and our lifestyle. Our First Amendment gives every citizen the right to express his opinion and we will allow you every opportunity to do so. But once you have done complaining, whining, and griping about our flag, our pledge, our national motto, our way of life, I highly encourage you to take advantage of one other great American freedom, THE RIGHT TO LEAVE.

If you agree—pass this along: if you don't agree—I don't want to hear about it.

All of which raises some interesting questions for the discerning Christian. ■

~Denis Haack

QUESTIONS CONTINUED...

6. Can a Christian ever take the position that some immigrants need to be encouraged to leave? If yes, under what circumstances? What form should such encouragement take? If no, why not? If as Christians we are critical of American culture (as secular, or post-Christian, or decadent, or whatever) yet tell immigrants who do not wish to be assimilated into this culture to leave, can we expect them to be open to the gospel we desire to tell them? If people desiring to live in America are forced either by government action or societal pressure to leave, what sort of ministry(s) might the church be wise to offer to them?
7. To what extent can Christians claim that America (or any other modern nation-state) is “OUR COUNTRY?” In this regard, how would you define a proper patriotism for the believer, balancing our responsibility as a citizen and our citizenship in the kingdom of God?
8. How can we develop accountability before God so that our political convictions are molded by and carefully examined in the light of the truth of the gospel?

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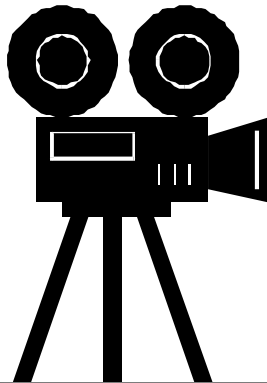
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Because Fathers Matter



A review of movies with Father/Child Themes

by Denis Haack

Films Reviewed:

Searching for Bobby Fischer

Affliction

October Sky

Character

Magnolia

The Royal Tenenbaums

For cast and crew info, log on to the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com) where you'll find all the stars, directors, and writers of these movies. IMDB also has photos, quotes, and enough trivia to satisfy the most curious film buff.

A theme that appears often in stories—in both literature and film—has to do with fathers and fathering. The love of a faithful father, or a father's absence or abuse leaves an indelible mark on succeeding generations. In *Star Wars*, for example, the hero Luke Skywalker discovers that his dreaded nemesis, Darth Vader is none other than his father. It is a discovery that colors all that he is and all he becomes. Viewers weren't too surprised at that twist in the plot because we all know that our relationship with our father casts a long shadow over our life, for blessing or for curse. A shadow which we never really outgrow, no matter how many years go past.

Fatherhood has an added significance for Christians. Not only is the relationship we have with our fathers crucial to growing up, but our relationship with God as Father is central to our faith. Theologian Sinclair Ferguson says that the conviction that God is our Father (which means we are children of God and Christ is our Elder Brother) is “*the way—not the only way, but the fundamental way for the Christian to think about himself or herself*” (his emphasis). Having God be our Father is not merely a doctrine we confess, it is a relationship which defines who we are in Christ and how we live as a result.

Films that explore fathering, both good and bad, can help us “imaginatively stand on the other side of the fence.”

J. I. Packer agrees. “If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity,” he writes, “find out how much he makes of the thought of being God's child, and having God as his Father. If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his worship and prayers and his whole outlook on life, it means that he does not understand Christianity very well at all.”

Fatherhood takes on added significance in a society like ours where so many never experience the grace it can bestow. Fathering is never perfect in this broken world, but we face a crisis in fathering as we enter the 21st century. Around 1 million children endure the divorce of their parents each year. 34% of all children (24 million) do not live with their biological father. Almost 20 million of those young

people are in single-parent homes. Approximately 40% of children in father-absent homes have not seen their father at all in the past 12

months, and 50% have never set foot in their father's home. On average, children who live absent their biological fathers are 2-3 times more likely to live in poverty, to experience educational, emotional, and behavioral problems, to use drugs, and to engage in criminal behavior. If you doubt the impact of fatherlessness, listen with sensitivity to the rap music of Eminem.

A number of films produced in the past few years deal with this theme, sometimes with gentle humor and sometimes in ways that are painful to watch. We must not as Christians shield ourselves from the reality of the situation, however, if we expect to speak a healing word to the next generation. We can hardly expect post-

moderns to take seriously our good news that God can be their Father if we are unwilling to enter their fatherlessness with the same intimacy with which Christ entered our world in the Incarnation. It was Charles Williams, K. J. Gilchrist reminds us, who “complained of the many so-called champions of Christianity who never allowed themselves imaginatively to stand on the other side of the fence and ponder what it might be to live without hope, to live without belief, ultimately, to imagine life without those suppositions which make a believer’s life whole.” Films that explore the theme of fathering, both good and bad, like the ones noted here, can help us “imaginatively to stand on the other side of the fence.” For that we can be thankful, even if climbing over to that other side takes us out of our comfort zone. These films deal with more than fathering, but touch on that topic in enough depth to warrant careful reflection and discussion.



Searching for Bobby Fischer (1993)

The sweet and lovely story of a young chess prodigy who must come to grips with what is required to be a champion—and to be the son of a father who passionately wants him to win. The relationship between father and son is healthy, though both must learn what success and failure really mean, and how to love one another through all the ups and downs of competition. This is a family film, celebrating parenting without perfection where love brings grace and forgiveness. Though warm and affectionate, the story never becomes sentimental, and



Not only is the relationship we have with our fathers crucial to growing up, but our relationship with God as Father is central to our faith.



both father and son develop as characters in the story.

Based on a true story, *Searching for Bobby Fischer* is about winning, chess, giftedness, and fathers who love their sons enough to set aside their own dreams for the sake of their child.

(107 minutes; Rated PG.)



Affliction (1997)

Written and directed by Paul Schrader, *Affliction* is raw and painful to watch. Wade Whitehouse, played by Nick Nolte, is following in his father’s footsteps, a path of alcoholism, venom, and meanness that wreaks havoc, fragmenting relationships and inflicting pain.

James Coburn plays Wade’s father with a power remarkable for a man who has not been known for greatness as an actor. Nolte is a big man who projects a powerful presence on the screen, but in Coburn’s presence he seems to shrink and become a child once again. Both actors rise to the occasion and their relationship on the screen takes on a depth of reality that is achieved only rarely in film. This is a bleak story, set in a bleak landscape which invites us into the lives of three siblings who grew up with an abusive father. One of those siblings has become a Christian, and it is worth reflecting on

whether that faith has enough substance to address the sin that inflicts this family.

Affliction is also about free will and determinism, alcoholism, and the cross-generational consequences of choices made by members of a family. It is an unsparing window into the souls and lives of two men, father and son, who are tied together by blood, but whose sinfulness cries out for understanding, for love, and for redemption.

(114 minutes; Rated R for language and violence.)

October Sky (1999)

Another film based on a true story, *October Sky* tells of Homer Hickman and three of his friends in a mining town in Appalachia who are galvanized into action by the Russian launching of Sputnik in October, 1957. Determined to stay out of the dreary and monotonous life represented by working deep underground mining coal, they apply themselves in school and begin experimenting with home-made rockets. Homer’s father is not a bad man nor a bad father, but he is the mine supervisor, and is eager to have his son follow in his footsteps. Tension develops between them, fueled by a science teacher who encourages Homer to pursue his dream.

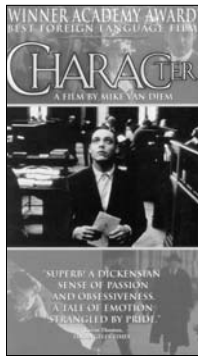


The Darkened Room cont.



Homer must break free from the narrow vision of his father, yet respect him while he waits for his father to see him as a full person in his own right. *October Sky* is not a particularly deep movie, but for all its faults, it can open the door to discussing how the dreams of a good father might not always represent the best plan for his son.

(108 minutes; Rated PG.)



Character (1997)

This Dutch film (English subtitles) won an Academy Award for Best Foreign Film, which was richly deserved. Raised by his mother who never married, Jacob learns that the fearsome court bailiff

Dreverhaven is his father. A man of the law, Dreverhaven seems devoid of mercy as he ruthlessly evicts the poor who are behind in their rent. Determined to beat his father at his own game, Jacob sets out to become a lawyer, caring for nothing except the chance to prove his father wrong. Quickly, of course, the question becomes whether he is beating his father or merely becoming like him. Jacob's life story is framed in the police investigation of a death, the death of Dreverhaven. Jacob was the last one to see his father

alive, and the encounter was not a happy one. As he is questioned by the police, his story slowly unfolds. We watch an unmarried woman in an unforgiving society struggle to raise a child, and that child struggle to forgive the man who sternly relates to him on the basis of law, but never grace. *Character* is an intense film, and almost begs to be compared to *Les Miserable*, another story of guilt, law, and grace. (A review with discussion questions appeared in *Critique* #5-2000.)

(114 minutes; Not rated but clearly intended for adults.)



Magnolia (1999)

Steve Garber has written at length and so well about this film (in *Critique* #4-2002) that all that remains to be mentioned here is that the story of *Magnolia* revolves

around several father/child relationships. It is not an easy film, and the fragmentation that is depicted involves scenes which are among the most painful to watch in cinematic history. Yet, sadly, many young people resonate with precisely this theme in the film, and the fact that they do should sober us. It is also a film of judgment (God's judgment) and grace, though many in our post-Christian culture may be so biblically illiterate that they will need a Christian's winsome discussion of the film to fully comprehend its message. What they need to be told, in a way they can hear, is that the God who is the Judge can become—amazing news!—our Father.

(188 minutes; Rated R for strong language, drug use, sexuality, and violence.)

The Royal Tenenbaums (2001)

Like *Magnolia*, this film is post-modern to the core, in this case merging comedy and tragedy in a way that is unsettling yet poignant. Gene Hackman



plays Royal Tenenbaum, a father who is alienated from his quirky family and now seeks forgiveness and reconciliation, but goes about it in ways that sometimes widen the gap between them rather than bring healing. Our emotions are taken on a roller-coaster ride, sometimes laughing, sometimes moved by scenes of great sadness. *The Royal Tenenbaums* is not intended as a slice of life, but as a metaphor for it, inviting us to ponder the significance of forgiveness in the midst of the imperfection, the sadness, the laughter, and the mysterious relationships that make up a family. The film "is at heart profoundly silly, and loving," Roger Ebert says. "It stands in amazement as the Tenenbaums and their extended family unveil one strategy after another to get attention, carve out space, and find love. It doesn't mock their efforts, dysfunctional as they are, because it understands them—and sympathizes."

(103 minutes; Rated R for language, nudity, a suicide attempt, and drug use.)

A Final Word

Dr. Ferguson points out in his book, *Children of the Living God*, that the biblical teaching on the doctrine of adoption has been ignored by evangelicals today. That's sad for at least two reasons. First, it

is a biblical teaching of primary importance, and so can be ignored only at our peril. As well, the Scriptures present the gospel in a number of ways, using a variety of metaphors to capture its reality and wonder. We are law-

Against all odds God himself desires to make us his children.

breakers, and Christ has endured the penalty of our disobedience to restore us to a proper relationship with a holy God. We are slaves to sin, but Christ has paid our ransom to buy us out of the kingdom of darkness and set us free in the Kingdom of God. And the explanation a fatherless generation needs to hear: We are alone in this broken world but hope is not lost, because against all odds God himself desires to make us his children. He sent his Son to enter our world and experience the horror and ultimate aloneness of death so we could be adopted into God's own family. God becomes our Father, Christ our Elder Brother, not because we are good enough or clever enough to deserve it, but because he loves us enough to make us his very own.

It's enough to take your breath away. ■

~Denis Haack

Sources:

Ferguson in *Children of the Living God* by Sinclair Ferguson (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust; 1989) p. 2; Packer in *Knowing God* by J. I. Packer (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 1973) p. 201; Statistics on fathering from "Top Ten Father Facts" from the National Fatherhood Institute (www.fatherhood.org); Gilchrist from "Escaping Fundagelicalism" by K. J. Gilchrist in *Mars Hill Review* (Issue #20) p. 137; Ebert on *The Royal Tenenbaums* from his review (www.suntimes.com).

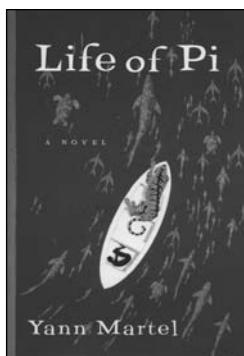
QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What was your initial or immediate reaction to the film? Why do you think you reacted that way?
2. How does the film explore fathering as a theme? What insight does it yield? What is attractive here? How is it made attractive? Where do you agree? Where do you disagree? Why? In the areas in which we might disagree, how can we talk about and demonstrate the truth in a winsome and creative way in our pluralistic culture?
3. In what ways were the techniques of film-making (casting, direction, script, music, sets, action, cinematography, editing, etc.) used to get the film's message(s) across, or to make the message plausible or compelling? In what ways were they ineffective or misused?
4. If you found the film disturbing or unsettling, was it worth watching anyway? Why? How would you explain your answer to someone who feels the film is too raw to be of value for the believer?
5. With whom did you identify in the film? Why? With whom were we meant to identify? Discuss each main character in the film and their significance to the story.
6. What insight does the film give into the way postmodern people see life, meaning, and reality? How can you use the film as a useful window of insight for Christians to better understand our non-Christian friends and neighbors?
7. Might the film be a useful point of contact for discussion with non-Christians? What plans should you make?

Faith, Survival

On the first day of vacation I purchased *Life of Pi*, a novel that has been winning accolades for Canadian author Yann Martel. It wasn't the awards that piqued my interest, but a brief review which said the book was "packed with curious disquisitions on philosophy, zoology, linguistics and God." As I stood in Barnes & Noble I opened to the flyleaf, and read:

*A boy.
A tiger.
And the vast Pacific Ocean.
This is a novel of such rare
and wondrous storytelling that
it may, as one character claims,
make you believe in God.
Can a reader reasonably
ask for anything more?*



But since I am aware that publisher's blurbs sometimes are more in tune to marketing than the prose they advertise, I opened to page one, began reading, and was hooked. My plan had been to savor it over the course of the entire vacation; I finished it in two days.

Some readers may find the story of *Life of Pi* so fantastic, so unbelievable that their credibility is strained so badly that they set the novel aside. That would be a mistake, since the very notion of what is credible in life—of what we believe is true and why we believe it—is a central theme in the book. Or it may cause them to skip ahead to read the final chapter, to see if credibility is restored in the end. That too, would be a mistake, since the end involves a surprise integral to the exploration of truth and faith which Martel intends us to experience.

Life of Pi can perhaps best be understood as a novel containing three levels.

First, there is the story of Pi, a sixteen-year old traveling with his family who have chosen to move from their native India to Canada. Pi's father is a zoo-keeper, and so the cargo ship on which they travel is laden with cages of animals which Mr. Patel has sold to various zoos in North America. Then, suddenly in the middle of the night near the equator in the Pacific, the *Tsimtsum* sinks, and Pi finds himself marooned on a lifeboat with another survivor of the tragedy, a 450-pound Bengal tiger named Richard Parker. How they survive 227 days at sea is the adventure which animates *Life of Pi*. On another level the

novel is an exploration of zoos, their management and ethics, the life cycle of various animals, and something of what is required to survive in a lifeboat adrift in the Pacific.

Martel is a wonderful writer, weaving fact and fiction so seamlessly that learning about zoos is as fascinating as Pi's adventure. On the deepest level, however, *Life of Pi* is a meditation on faith, it's relationship to truth, science, and religion, and the centrality of story to finding meaning in life—all viewed from a profoundly postmodern perspective. In this novel, a new high is achieved in religious tolerance: Pi is a Hindu, a Moslem, and a Catholic, simultaneously devoted to practicing all three without ever seeing even the possibility of conflict between them.

After his ordeal at sea, Pi eventually attends college in Toronto, with a double major in zoology (his thesis was on the South American three-toed sloth) and

religious studies. "The three-toed sloth," he tells us,

...lives a peaceful, vegetarian life in perfect harmony with its environment. 'A good natured smile is forever on its lips,' reported Tivler (1966). I have seen that smile with my own eyes. I am not one given to projecting human traits and emotions onto animals, but many a time during that month in Brazil, looking up at sloths in repose, I felt I was in the presence of upside-down yogis deep in meditation or hermits deep in prayer, wise beings whose intense imaginative lives were beyond the reach of my scientific probing.

Sometimes I got my majors mixed up. A number of my fellow religious-studies students—muddled agnostics who didn't know which way was up, who were in the thrall of reason, that fool's gold for the bright—reminded me of the three-toed sloth; and the three-toed sloth, such a beautiful example of the miracle of life, reminded me of God.

I never had problems with my fellow scientists. Scientists are a friendly, atheistic, hard-working, beer-drinking lot whose minds are preoccupied with sex, chess and baseball when they are not preoccupied with science.

I was a very good student, if I may say so myself. I was tops at St. Michael's College four years in a row. I got every possible student award from the Department of Zoology. If I got none from the Department of Religious Studies, it is simply because there are no student awards in this department (the rewards of religious study are not in mortal hands, we all know that).

Yann Martel is well equipped to write a cross-cultural novel. Born in Spain in

and a Bengal Tiger

1963, he has lived or spent time in Costa Rica, France, Mexico, Alaska, Iran, Turkey, India, and now lives in Montreal. After studying philosophy in college, he began earning his living as an author in 1990. He is a wonderful writer, with spirited prose, fine wit, and the ability to spin even an outrageous tale and keep us interested.

"If Canadian writer Yann Martel were a preacher," Charlotte Innes says, "he'd be charismatic, funny and convert all the non-believers. He baits his readers with serious themes and trawls them through a sea of questions and confusion, but he makes one laugh so much, and at times feel so awed and chilled, that even thrashing around in bewilderment or disagreement one can't help but be captured by his prose."

Some of the most mystifying and frustrating aspects of a postmodern consciousness for the Christian—an unwavering commitment to tolerance, and the blithe dismissal of traditional religion in favor of a subjective,

individualized, and syncretistic spirituality—are central themes in *Life of Pi*. I don't mean they are merely assumed by the author (though they are); they are also discussed at

Life of Pi is a profoundly postmodern meditation on faith, it's relationship to truth, science, and religion, and the centrality of story to finding meaning in life.

length, and then, because Martel is a master story-teller, they are made plausible by the life of Pi, and by the stories he tells to make sense of it. "*Life of Pi* is a fascinating story filled with... elements of faith, truth, terror, bravery and wonderment in generous portions," comments one reader who was late for work because he couldn't put down the book. "Some of it seems far fetched," he continues. "But, who are we to judge? This is a novel based in truth. The question is, which truth? Whose truth? You will not be disappointed."

In a culture where truth is up for grabs, *Life of Pi* is a novel that is a delight to read

for the craftsmanship of its prose, and that is worth reading as a window of insight into our postmodern and post-Christian world. It is this world we are called to engage with the gospel, telling the Story of Jesus in all its mind-boggling mystery so that the Creator of Bengal tigers is revealed to be the all-attractive King and Redeemer. ■

~Denis Haack

Fiction reviewed:

Life of Pi by Yann Martel (New York, NY: Harcourt, Inc.; 2001) 319 pp.

Sources:

A review of *Life of Pi* by Paul Evans in *Book* (July/August 2002) p.78. Innes from *The Nation* quoted on amazon.com. Reader from *Customer Review* on amazon.com (June 19, 2002).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What was your reaction to *Life of Pi* as you read it? Why do you think you responded the way you did?
2. Who is telling the story, whose voice do you hear? What significance does this have for the story? What does Pi stand to lose and/or gain within the story? What is he trying to seek or avoid? What is most important to him?
3. What is the relationship between this story-world and reality? Does this story function as a slice of reality? a microcosm of reality? a metaphor for reality?
4. What role does Richard Parker play in the story? The other animals we learn about?
5. Within the world of the story, examine the assumptions or statements which are made about reality, morals, and the meaning of life. More specifically:
 - a.) Is there a God? If so, how is he/she/it portrayed? Do characters exhibit a sense of transcendence? How is spirituality portrayed? How are human beings portrayed, and what is their significance? How are nonhuman creatures portrayed?

Questions continued on next page...

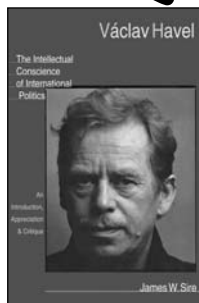
Paper and Canvas cont.

QUESTIONS CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE...

5. b.) What is the basis for truth and morality? Is there anything that's truly true? What makes it so? What is the relationship of faith and truth? Is there right and wrong? What makes it so? What really matters? How is tolerance defined? In chapter 23, there is a debate between Pi's Hindu, Christian, and Moslem teachers, while Pi insists that he must accept all three faiths. What is Pi seeking in this religious quest?
 - c.) What is the meaning of life and reality? What makes it so? What happens at death?
 - d.) What motivates Pi? What does he value most and work hardest to obtain? What tests him in his undertaking? What results from their choices? Does Pi succeed or fail in their quest? How do you know?
6. Does the world and life view in the fictional universe of the story resonate with or fail to resonate with the biblical Story of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Consummation? Where is there agreement? Where is there disagreement? What in this regard is made attractive in *Life of Pi*? To the extent the work contains ideas and values which are Christian, are they inclusively or exclusively Christian?
7. How do you respond to Pi's alternative story which he tells the Japanese investigators? To Pi's question about which story they prefer? What is the significance of this ending?
8. How has this work of fiction affected you? If you did not enjoy *Life of Pi*, is there a reason why you should encounter it anyway? Would you recommend this work of fiction to others? Why or why not? How would you describe the work—and your reaction to it—in a way that would make sense to a Christian friend? To a nonchristian friend? Do the two descriptions differ? Why? Should they?
9. To what extent does this work act as a window of insight into some aspect of life, culture, and reality? To what extent can it be a point of contact with those who may not share your deepest conviction?

Briefly Noted: World Views in Action

by Denis Haack



James Sire is probably best known for *The Universe Next Door*, a practical introduction to the notion of world view which has helped Christians probe the assumptions that make up a person's understanding of life and reality. Now Sire allows us to listen in as he engages the world view of Václav Havel, the celebrated playwright, dissident (under the Marxists), and president of the Czech Republic. The book will introduce you to a man of integrity, courage, and commitment to truth. It will also provide an illustration of how as Christians we can simultaneously appreciate and critique the world view of an unbeliever. "If this volume sparks greater interest in the man and his ideas," Dr. Sire writes, "if it leads its readers to heed Havel's call to responsibility, if it stimulates readers to respond positively to Havel's charge to 'live in the truth,' if it causes readers to reflect and assess the truth of their own world view, most of my goals for the book will have been realized."

Book recommended: *Václav Havel: The Intellectual Conscience of International Politics, An Introduction, Appreciation & Critique* by James W. Sire (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2001) 120 pp. + notes + index.

Spiritual Formation 101

All my life I've had a deep desire to be a disciple of Jesus. Few could tell me how. Some advised more sound doctrine, others a special spiritual experience. I have pursued them all with vigor. And then one day I met a disheveled academic, humble and unassuming, the farthest thing imaginable from the "celebrity" Christians I had witnessed. To listen to him speak in his quiet rambling style was spellbinding. One

knew instantly, here was a man who had been with the Savior. At the time I had never read his books, I was taken with his life. His name was Dallas Willard. Since that time I've been criticized for quoting him too often, but it's humble recognition of the debt I owe.

I am not alone in appreciating Willard's contribution to kingdom discipleship. Richard Foster, one of the seminal contemporary writers in spiritual formation wrote of Willard's book, *The Divine Conspiracy*, "I would place [this book] in rare company indeed: alongside the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and John Wesley, John Calvin and Martin Luther, Teresa of Avila and Hildegard of Bingen, and perhaps even Thomas Aquinas and Augustine of Hippo. If the *parousia* tarries, this is a book for the next millennium." That is a pretty arresting statement.

Willard is deep. He's a philosopher who for years taught at the University of Southern California. He is also a Baptist minister and writer on the spiritual disciplines (www.dwillard.org). His books are not quick reads; they are the sort that one reads and rereads. Like the classics of literature, they demand much from the reader. Also like the classics, they are worth the effort.

This past April, NavPress released a new book from Willard: *Renovation of the Heart*:



Putting on the Character of Christ. This book pulls all the loose ends of his previous books and articles into a comprehensive statement on the process of becoming like Jesus. It is a curriculum in Christ-likeness, "the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ

Like the classics of literature, Willard's books demand much from the reader and are worth the effort.

himself." This is a process that involves both human effort and the Spirit's work.

The unique value of this book is his systematic analysis of human nature: thought, feeling, choice, body, social context, and soul. The book then discusses how one can begin to bring each aspect of the human self under the integrating authority of God. The focus is not on action or behavior—except as it provides an indication of the unconscious spiritual depths within. "Actions are not impositions on who we are," he explains, "but are expressions of who we are...spiritual formation only happens as each essential dimension of the human being is transformed to Christlikeness under the direction of a regenerate will interacting with constant overtures of grace from God. Such transformation is not the result of mere human effort and cannot be accomplished by putting pressure on the will alone."

What unfolds is a map of the most exciting life adventure imaginable. Pivotal in understanding the process of heart transformation is to realize that everyone is in the process of "spiritual" formation whether or not he or she is following Jesus. The New England transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson observed, "The Gods we worship write their names on our faces; be sure of

that. And a man will worship something—have no doubt about that, either. He may think that his tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of his heart—but it will out. That which dominates will determine his life and character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming." Likewise, Willard writes, "[Spiritual formation] is a

process that happens to everyone. The most despicable as well as the most admirable of persons have had a spiritual formation.

Terrorists as well as saints are the outcome of spiritual formation."

God's plan for spiritual formation, Willard suggests, involves three steps: making apprentices of Jesus, immersing apprentices in Trinitarian presence, and inwardly transforming apprentices in such a way that their actions are embodied, intrinsic, and automatic.

Many who read these pages have leadership responsibilities. We have influence over those around us—in homes, in businesses, in schools, as well as in churches. Willard concludes by asking: "If I have some role of leadership among Christ's people, am I doing all that I reasonably can to aid and direct their progress in inward transformation into Christlikeness?" Reading this book is an invaluable place to begin. ■

~David John Seel, Jr.

David John Seel, Jr., M.Div., Ph.D., is the headmaster of The Cambridge School of Dallas, a Christ-centered, classical college preparatory school. He is the author of Parenting Without Perfection: Being a Kingdom Influence in a Toxic World (NavPress, 2000). Copyright © 2002 by David John Seel, Jr.

Book reviewed: *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* by Dallas Willard (Colorado Springs, CO:NavPress; 2002) 272 pp.

Called to Be Worldly

The Bible does warn against the “world” and “worldliness” and so if we are to be faithful we have to find out what that means. Extremism comes from confusing two biblical usages of the word *world*. On the one hand, there is the created world that God deemed “good,” which is contrasted with the rest of the universe. “For God so loved the world” is as much a statement about our globe, distinguished from the rest of the universe, as it is about love. On the other hand, there is the rebellious system of thinking we might contrast with the kingdom of heaven. “Love not the world” means neither “Don’t care for the planet” nor “Drop out of society,” but “Don’t embrace anti-God thinking.”

Confusing these two usages can lead to disaster. Some strict fundamentalist sects show disdain toward creation and culture, and yet in doing so become proud, arrogant and uncaring. They therefore become worldly in the very way the Bible condemns and yet are not worldly enough in the way the Bible commands. We are told to be in the world but not of it. People like this are often of the world but not in it.

Richard Lovelace, in his classic study *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, sums up the world in its negative sense as “the total system of corporate flesh operating on earth under satanic control, with all its incentives of reward and restraints of loss, its characteristic patterns of behavior, and its anti-christian structures, methods, goals and ideologies.”

We become worldly not by engaging with the world but by allowing it to

shape our thinking. Jesus was clear about this. His prayer for his disciples was “not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one” (John 17:15). Paul underscored it. He reminded the Corinthians that his warning not to associate with the sexually immoral, the greedy, swindlers and idolaters was



We become worldly by allowing it to shape our thinking.

“not at all meaning the people of this world.” Why? Because if he had meant that, “You would have to leave this world” (I Corinthians 5: 9-11). His warning was against fraternizing with those calling themselves Christians who lived this way.

The art of nonbelievers, like the friendship of nonbelievers, could be part of a process pressing us to conform to the “pattern of this world” as Paul called it in Romans, but it doesn’t have to be if we are being transformed through godly mind renewal. In fact, wrestling with worldly ideas is one way in which our minds are renewed. It challenges our assumptions and threatens our complacency. It sends us back to the Bible and forces us to kneel in prayer.

Having a renewed mind doesn’t mean that we become spiritually invincible. It’s my renewed mind that urges me to switch off certain TV talk shows when I realize that I’m actually enjoying the humiliation of the guest and the bloodlust of the audience. It’s my renewed mind that warns me that certain volumes of theology may encour-

age my doubts rather than build my assurance.

Positively, the world is all that God made and Christ came to redeem. This includes culture because humans have never lived in isolation from each other, and when they get together they automatically create culture. It would be impossible to think of loving humans and yet hating human culture, of loving individuals and yet hating their music, songs, stories, paintings, games, rituals, decorations, clothes, language and hairstyles. God made us cultural beings.

Therefore, Christians should be worldly in this positive sense. They should be lovers of life because God is the giver of life. No one is more worldly than God—he made the world and sent his Son to die for the world. Christianity doesn’t teach that the world is an illusion that will trap us or a hell that prevents from attaining our true purpose. ■

~excerpted, Steve Turner

Excerpted from: *Imagine: A Vision for Christians in the Arts* by Steve Turner (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2001). Reprinted by permission.

Jazzing It Up

Joe Henderson, *Double Rainbow*

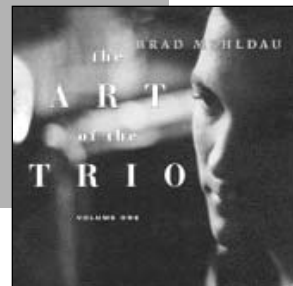
A brilliantly conceived recording of all Antonio Carlos Jobim tunes that features jazz master Henderson (1937-2002) with two different all-star rhythm sections; a Brazilian group led by pianist Eliane Elias and guitarist/producer Oscar Castro-Neves backs Henderson on cuts 1- 5, the American group led by Herbie Hancock follows on cuts 6-12. If anyone out there can hear the sound of my voice please help me, I can't stop listening to this!



Duke Ellington and Ray Brown, *This One's for Blanton*

This playful 1972 recording pays tribute to a Brown idol, bassist Jimmy Blanton, (1918 - 1942), who in his short career with Ellington changed the way bass was played forever. Ray Brown's (1926 - 2002) recent passing is another huge loss to the jazz world.

Brad Mehldau, *The Art of the Trio, volume one*
5/4 never felt so free and swinging as does Mehldau's engaging treatment of "I Didn't Know What Time It Was". Veteran engineer Bernie Kirsh knows what bass and drums should sound like, (in my opinion).



-Randy Mattson

Randy Mattson is bassist with the Navy Band Commodores in Washington, DC, and is director of music and worship at Reston Presbyterian Church in Reston, VA.



Diana Krall, *The Look of Love*

A big budget recording of standard tunes that places Krall before a symphony orchestra arranged and conducted by the incomparable Claus Ogerman, recorded by first-call engineer Al Schmitt. After wading through the over the top packaging (read way too many pictures of the sultry Krall), I found this recording to be right on target for its intent, (and I'm enjoying it).

Dialogue cont.

...continued from page 3

the next day outlaw Christianity. And we should be honest about our true goals, so we can be discerning about the way we try to attain them.

**Erik Powers
Nunn, CO**

Preston Jones responds:

There is much wisdom in Mr. Powers' letter. While his point of view could lead to a detached and ironic stance toward the world, he understands that there is a proper distance from the world that Christians need to keep. Because we are in this world, we have responsibilities to it—otherwise life on earth is nothing more than preparation for the next life and that seems unbiblical. Part of my responsibility in this life, for example, is to vote for politicians who claim to value the life of the unborn. But, as Mr. Powers rightly suggests, if the political views I hold come to usurp, or subtly to displace, genuine faith, then the faith has been corrupted. Up to now I have always voted for Republicans, chiefly because they tend to care (or at least say

they care) about the unborn. But it would be foolish to construe the Republican party as a Christian party, as many evangelicals have tended to do in recent years. One reason is that on other issues (e.g., care for the elderly), Democrats seem to approximate the Christian ideal more nearly. In this troubled world, a vote cast for either side (or for any third party) involves getting into the mud. One can't know the long-term consequences of one's actions; things done with the best of intentions can go wrong. That's one mark of a sinful world. This fact should make one wary without creating paralysis.

The ineluctable challenge Christians face is figuring out how to be in the world and yet not of it. Another challenge is living with the fact that different Christians will work things out differently since God has given people different experiences, personalities, temperaments and so on. And, as Mr. Powers suggests, when Christians swallow and promote things that are obviously bogus, then they should be called on it.

Separation from the world and engagement with the world, practical pluralism within one faith, the exercise of the proph-

etic voice and of charity—Christians are supposed to prize and promote each of these, simultaneously! No wonder St. Paul said that if Christ isn't risen, then we're to be the most pitied of men and women.

Preston Jones

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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.

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