

Critique

Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

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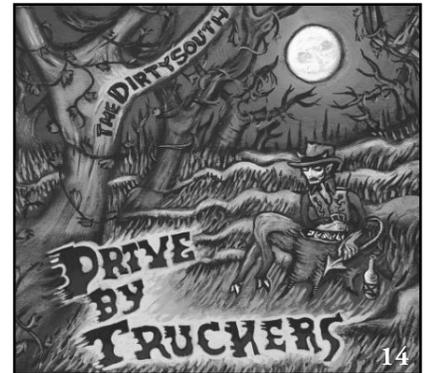
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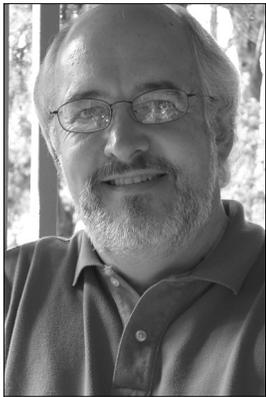
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Editor's Note



Undermind.

I was asked recently whether finding films worth discussing wasn't like "trying to find the occasional pearl in a huge heap of garbage." I said, No—unless we want to use that metaphor as a description of all of

life in a fallen world. Even shopping for apples requires discernment, which is why shoppers pick through the fruit on display, choosing the ones that have no spots and seem ripest. And before the shopper arrived on the scene, those apples had already been picked through several times, by the grower and the grocer. Yes, there is a lot of flotsam in popular culture—it is a fallen world, after all—but the fallenness has not so overwhelmed God's creation as to extinguish the image of God in his creatures.

Still, there is garbage out there. We should know, since we produce some of it ourselves. And Ransom exists to help you identify the good apples, much like the grocer does when he unpacks the crate shipped from the grower.

I love being involved in this process of discernment with you. For one thing, I still can't get over the fact that I make my living, at least in part, by reviewing movies. Young people have occasionally asked me how I managed that, and I always say I don't know. It's called grace.

The same discussion could be applied to popular music. Every album isn't necessarily good, and some are bad in all sorts of ways. In order to keep up with music, I order batches of CDs, and always look forward to the days when the UPS truck pulls up in front of Toad Hall.

I recently ordered the newest offering of Phish, *Undermind*. The four musicians of Phish are superb, thoughtful and serious about their music, and known in particular for their creativity in concert. I put the CD on, took out the liner notes, and followed along with the lyrics. I'm no expert on Phish, but this is very good stuff. When I got to the title song, however, "Undermind," I put it on repeat—a simple song, it is also the heart's cry of a generation, sung with a poignancy and authenticity that is breath-taking.

Undecided, undefined

Undisturbed yet undermined

Relocated not retired

Reprimanded and rewired

Mystified and misshapen

Misinformed but not mistaken

Reinvented, redefined

Rearranged but not refined

Unrelenting, understroked

Undeterred yet unprovoked

Reinvented, redefined

Rearranged but not refined

Mystified and misshapen

Misinformed but not mistaken

Undecided, undefined



This is not the sullen complaint of victims, but the lament of persons who know themselves to be lost.

I'm not suggesting you have to *like* this music—though I think it is great—but that we need to listen with enough care to *get* it. Get it in the sense of hearing it with our hearts. Hearts that have been tuned by the gospel so that we follow Jesus, the incarnated one. Follow him in leaving the place of safety to enter a fallen world, a world that is messy, and desperately in need of redemption. ■

~Denis Haack

Dialogue



Re: Past and present in *The Notebook*.

Send e-mail to:

letters@ransomfellowship.org

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.

Andrew Trotter's critique of *The Notebook* [Critique #5 - 2004] seems to miss the point by omission. *The Notebook's* form is a delicate balance between scenes past and present. Dr. Trotter focuses upon the past portions, and while his analysis was, as usual, wise and concise, the scenes concerned with the present deserved more than the few disparaging remarks within the body of the commentary and the open-ended negative implications of the final discussion question.

While I agree that the issues of deciding to marry are important and rarely depicted cinematically, the issues of personhood, the nature of marital commitment, and loneliness at the end of life are seen less. The young-love story and Allie's difficult choices were engaging and hopefully spurred consideration of the nature of romantic love and commitment. But Duke's choice brought me to a much more difficult dialogue between my Christian faith and the world I live in.

By asking why this movie moved between past and present, we may have a rare opportunity to define love in a biblical fashion. The definition in *The Notebook* is not the usual intense depiction of a single feeling or commitment, but is defined in terms of multiple deeds and feelings over 50 years. Just as we know God in part by seeing His deeds in history rather than by philosophical speculation, perhaps this film asks us to examine our definition of love in the context of real historical narrative.

Whatever else this film may say about love, it spoke accurately to the pain and difficulties of relationships at end-of life. This film is not perfect but as Dr. Trotter has demonstrated, context is important for interpretation.

-David P. Clark, M.D.
via email

Drew Trotter responds:

I appreciate your comments and commend you for sticking up for the present-day side of *The Notebook*; however, your criticism is a little like criticizing a car manufacturer for not making soda. I wrote an essay about common elements I found in three films and did not intend to give a comprehensive review of any of them. Instead, I focused on one aspect of *The Notebook*.

However, we do disagree about the quality of the present-day portion of the film. While the filmmaker did an admirable job of raising questions of commitment and perseverance, I still believe that his answers to those questions were poorly conceived and written. Romanticism rules in both the present and past stories. My own father died in January at the age of 91. My mother and father were married for 64 years and had a superb marriage, for which my sisters and I are grateful. But, after watching his ability to walk and his short-term memory depart to the point that he sometimes did not recognize his own daughter, much less his grandchildren, and compared to my mother's hard work at not being angry with him, and our uncertainty over when he meant what he said and when he didn't know what he was saying, I found the syrupy sweet portrayal of *The Notebook* unrealistic and sometimes downright silly and offensive. The movie also acted as if Duke and Allie had spent most of their marriage in bed, having the sort of fun they did the first time they slept together. Where was work, struggle, having and raising children? The ridiculous "together into eternity" death scene just cemented this highly idealistic portrayal of romantic love. Again, questions about love at the end of life and the nature of personhood when physical and mental attributes atrophy are important and *The Notebook* is to be commended for raising them. But the way it spoke to them left much to be desired on my part.

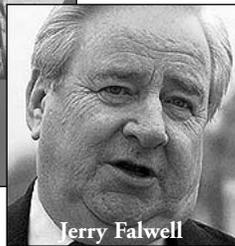
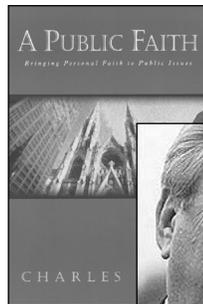
None of the Above, Take 2

In a previous column [*Critique* #7 - 2004] I raised the issue of how we can be discerning as citizens, especially in choosing which political candidate or party to support. (Find a copy at www.RansomFellowship.org/D_Vote1.html). I noted in that piece that some of us would like the option, “none of the above” to appear on our ballots, since none of the candidates accurately reflect our deepest convictions, political concerns, and values. After sending that *Critique* to the printer I found an article by Wheaton College history professor Mark Noll entitled, “None of the above: Why I Won’t be Voting for President.” Noll says he has considered his options in light of his Christian convictions and has concluded he must abstain from voting, at least for President.

Dr. Noll lists seven issues that he considers “to be paramount at the national level: race, the value of life, taxes, trade, medicine, religious freedom and the international rule of law.” Each of the seven, he believes, is rooted in

important moral considerations growing out of his evangelical commitment to Christ and the Scriptures.

In his piece, Noll defines each of the seven issues in his list. By race he means that not only must people be treated equally as persons made in God’s image, but that “sustained, accumulated wrongs



must be addressed by sustained, ongoing remediation.” Noll believes some sort of Marshall Plan is “the least that could be asked

of the major political parties as recompense for America’s longest lasting and most debilitating political crime.” By the value of life, he is saying he is “militantly pro-life.” By taxes, he is convinced that if American income tax law is in line with basic principles of justice it needs to be restructured to be made “sharply progressive.” By trade he is urging using every means to expand truly free trade. By medicine Noll wants basic medical care

offered to all without the fear that their care will bankrupt them. By religious freedom he wants the US to take a strong stand on this issue as a matter of principle in dealing with all nations. And by the international rule of law Noll means that America “must act with scrupulous justice in its actions overseas.”

“In searching for a party that is working for something close to my convictions,” Noll writes, “I am not necessarily looking for a platform supported by overtly expressed religious beliefs. It would be enough to find candidates promoting such positions by reference to broad social goals and general patterns of American democratic tradition. In fact, because each of these issues is of vital national concern for people of all faiths (and none), I am eager to find public voices willing to defend convictions similar to my own in generic social terms rather than with specifically religious arguments. My disillusionment with the major parties and their candidates comes from the fact that I do not see them willing to consider the political coherence of this combination of convictions or willing to reason about why their positions

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What is your response to Dr. Noll’s list of seven issues? What, if anything, would you add? Subtract? Why?
2. Compare and contrast Dr. Noll’s list with the five nonnegotiable moral issues (abortion, euthanasia, embryonic stem cell research, human cloning, and homosexual marriage) listed in Catholic Answers’ Voter’s Guide (http://www.catholic.com/library/voters_guide.asp).
3. To what extent have you seen politics dividing Christians? What should you do as a result?
4. What best describes your prevailing attitude concerning politics: cynicism, pessimism, optimism, fear, impatience, hope? Should your attitude be improved? Why or why not? If so, in what way?
5. To what extent do political concerns, elections, and office-holders shape your prayers? Is this sufficient, biblically (see 1 Timothy 2:1-3)? Why or why not? Do you know the names of those who hold office in your state, city, county, school district? To what extent are you aware of the issues and problems they are addressing? When was the last time you wrote to an office-holder expressing gratitude for something they had accomplished or attempted?

A Good Death

should be accepted, much less willing to break away from narrow partisanship to act for the public good. Broad principles and particular interests have never in the history of the republic been more confusedly mixed than they are today.”

All of which raises some questions worth reflection and discussion. ■

~Denis Haack

Source: “None of the above: Why I Won’t be Voting for President” by Mark Noll in *Christian Century* (September 21, 2004) pp. 8-9. Some of the questions for reflection and discussion were adapted from Charles Drew’s helpful book, *A Public Faith: Bringing Personal Faith to Public Issues* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress; 2000) pp. 27-28. “Falwell: Evangelicals control Republicans” in the Rochester, MN *Post-Bulletin* (September 25, 2004) p. 4A.

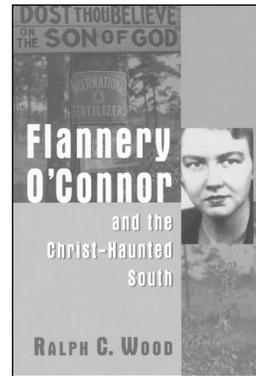
QUESTIONS CONT...

6. How should Christians speak of candidates, politicians, and office-holders with whom they disagree over serious issues while being faithful to the biblical command to “show proper respect” for those in authority? (See 1 Peter 2:16-17.) Identify the difference between respect, lack of respect, and disdain. How should we respond to Christians who speak with a lack of respect or disdain?
7. What danger, if any, do you see in Christians identifying too closely with a particular political party or candidate? Jerry Falwell believes that “evangelical Christians, after nearly 25 years of increasing political activism, now control the Republican Party and the fate of President Bush in the November election.” How helpful are such comments in the public square in an increasingly post-Christian and pluralistic culture?
8. To what extent do the parties and candidates in this election reflect your political and moral convictions? What will you do as a result as a voter?

An Excerpt from Ralph Wood on O’Connor.

Flannery O’Connor’s mind was wonderfully concentrated by the sentence of death. It enabled her to see, with uncommon clarity, that to prepare for death is the greatest of privileges. She agreed with Dostoevsky that the loss of belief in immortality is the chief sign of our nihilism. Even such a non-Christian as George Orwell confessed that our assumption that life ends in nothingness has made for a terrible moral evisceration of both our public and private existence. Mortalism is the name given to our conviction. Mortalism slides easily into nihilism. Rather than fearing God as our ancestors did, we now fear death; and so our scientific projects and materialist greed are driven by a massive dread of extinction. Hence our own desire to die quickly and cheaply, preferably during our sleep, and without bother to anyone else. We do not trust our families to help us die, and we do not want to make a painful preparation for death.

For Flannery O’Connor, by contrast, her fourteen-year siege of illness came as a strange blessing: it protected her against the presumption and complacency endemic to an open-ended life; it enabled her to prepare for her own dying. Hence her response to a woman perplexed by Christians who have failed to recognize that “nobody would have paid any attention to Jesus if he hadn’t been a martyr but had died at the age of eighty of athletes [sic] foot.” “She was orthodox and didn’t know it,” O’Connor replied. The very brevity of Christ’s life, O’Connor hints, provided its enormous



intensity and purpose. That Jesus set his face like flint toward Jerusalem, refusing to be turned aside reveals that he would bring in his kingdom of life even at the cost of his death. In a similar way, O’Connor’s certain terminus served to focus her own life: it enabled her, in the fine old Catholic phrase, to make a good death. “I have never been

anywhere but sick,” she wrote to Betty Hester in 1956. “In a sense sickness is a place, more instructive than a long trip to Europe, and it’s always a place where there’s no company, where nobody can follow. Sickness before death is a very appropriate thing and I think those who don’t have it miss one of God’s mercies.” O’Connor’s letters reveal the immense courage with which she faced the inexorable course of her illness. What we find is a sardonic sense of acceptance, as in this jaunty letter to Maryat Lee in 1958:

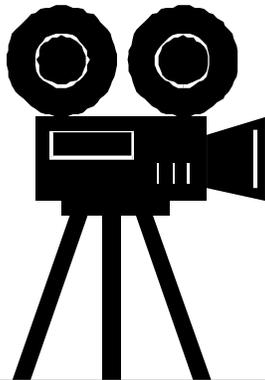
You didn’t know I had a Dread Disease didja? Well I got one. My father died of the same stuff at the age of 44 but the scientists hope to keep me here until I am 96. I owe my existence and cheerful countenance to the pituitary glands of thousands of pigs butchered daily in Chicago Illinois at the Armour packing plant. If pigs wore garments I wouldn’t be worthy to kiss the hems of them.

They have been supporting my presence in this world for the last seven years. ■

~excerpted, Ralph C. Wood

Excerpted from *Flannery O’Connor and the Christ-Haunted South* by Ralph C. Wood (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; 2004) pp. 212-214.

A Dish Best Not Served



by Drew Trotter

A review of Kill Bill & Paparazzi

Revenge is a dish best served cold.
-Klingon proverb, *Kill Bill Vol. 1*

Revenge films have exploded onto our screens. There's *Walking Tall*, *The Punisher*, *Kill Bill*, *Man on Fire* and *Paparazzi*, and the list could go on.

Chief among the current revenge films is certainly Quentin Tarantino's bloody crime and action pictures, *Kill Bill*. *Bill* was released as two separate movies, and both parts need to be seen to grasp the full import of what Tarantino is trying to do. *Kill Bill, Volume 1* is an action/adventure movie, heavily dependent for its inspiration on kung fu and samurai movies and television programs. Providing just enough plot to make the film coherent, the violent action assaults the viewer non-stop. Lathered in blood and dismemberment, scene after scene portray battles between a character known simply as The Bride and her opponents. Using swords, knives, axes, chains, buzz saws, shotguns, AK-47s, uzis, machine guns, snakes, clubs, shovels and just about anything else that can wield death, The Bride and her opponents fight in probably the most highly choreographed movie of mayhem ever made in America.

The Deadly Viper Assassination Squad, headed by The Bride's former lover—a character simply named Bill—show up at her wedding in a small, desert Texas town, to which she has escaped when she found out she was pregnant. Brutally murdering everyone there, they leave her for dead, not knowing that The Bride (played by Uma Thurman, a favorite actress of Tarantino's)

is only in a coma, out of which she suddenly awakens four years later. With fierce revenge on her mind, The Bride, in *Kill Bill 1*, finds and kills two of the Squad, leaving two more, and Bill for the second movie.

Kill Bill, Volume 2, has more dialogue. The various characters discuss revenge and death, yes, but also parenthood, change, motivation and goodness. Surprisingly believable, Beatrix Kiddo (the real name of The Bride) and Bill become likeable characters, caught in a maze of revenge and its consequences. At one point, a voice-over of Hattori Hanzo, Beatrix's mentor and maker of the finest samurai swords in the world, wistfully describes revenge as "...never a straight line. It's a forest. And like a forest it's easy to lose your way, to get lost, to forget where you came in."

For those who would analyze Tarantino's films for their contribution to the realm of cultural ideas, a difficulty arises from the films' complex interweaving of campy humor, realistic gore, movie homage and believable characterization. The movie attempts to reach beyond itself to a deeper, philosophical meaning, laying bare the wounds of our existence and what Tarantino perceives as its twisted, convoluted reality. When Beatrix has come out of the coma and lies in the back of her getaway truck, willing her legs to begin working, she muses, "When fortune smiles on something as violent and ugly as revenge, it seems proof like no other that not only does God exist, you're doing His will." In the final shot of the movie, a bird's eye view of her lying on the bathroom floor, alternately laughing and crying with relief, as she hugs her daughter's teddy bear, she repeats over and over again, the simple words, "Thank you, thank you, thank you." Because she, as mother, has eliminated Bill and all the others, is she then justified in God's eyes? Is her revenge okay because it is done in the name of a mother's love?

Kill Bill, Volume 2

Credits:

Starring:
Uma Thurman
(The Bride)
David Carradine
(Bill)
Chia Hui Liu
(Pai Mei)

Director:
Quentin Tarantino

Screenwriter:
Quentin Tarantino

Runtime: 136 min.
Rated R for violence, language and brief drug use.

Paparazzi Credits:

Starring:
Cole Hauser
(Bo Laramie)
Robin Tunney
(Abby Laramie)
Dennis Farina
(Detective Burton)

Director:
Paul Abascal

Screenwriter:
Forrest Smith

Runtime: 84 min
Rated PG-13 for intense violent sequences, sexual content and language.

It would seem that some Christians would answer “Yes,” if the Mel Gibson produced *Paparazzi* has anything to say about it. This story revolves around Bo Laramie (played by Cole Hauser) whose life is made so miserable by photographers that he decides to take matters into his own hands. Granted, the paparazzi cause a car accident that puts his son in a coma and injures his wife, but is the answer really a lawless perpetration of evil in kind? Laramie does not just kill the paparazzi. He drops one off a cliff, sets up another to be brutally murdered, bludgeons the third with a baseball bat (from behind no less), and frames the fourth for the bludgeoning.

Mel Gibson doesn't just produce the film, he appears in it in a humorous cameo. The movie clearly commends its main character's behavior. No sooner is the last paparazzi disposed of, than the son wakes up, and the movie ends with the family hugging each other happily. Bo has a clear conscience because his revenge was done in the name of defending his family.

So what is the Christian to make of

revenge? A simple “It's wrong” does not do justice to Biblical stories like that of Jael and Sisera, where the woman drives a stake through the general's head and is praised for it in a song that is as grisly and retributive as the event itself (Judges 5:24-31). The speedy demise of those who do evil is a subject for prayer and praise throughout the Psalms. Doesn't that make retribution, if the governing authorities are not going to exercise their God-given responsibility to see justice done, the duty of those who know the right?

No. The Bible regularly proclaims vengeance to be the provenance of God alone. In a passage that shows the principle to be one that transcends the divide between Old and New Covenants, Paul writes: “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ No, ‘if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him



Is revenge okay when its done in the name of family honor or motherly instinct?

drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:19-21).

If revenge were justifiable on our part, it would only be at the call of God to revenge His name, and even then one would have to know without doubt that the revenge was really God's. Nothing like this is portrayed in American revenge movies today. The actions of Bo Laramie and Beatrix Kiddo are driven entirely by a blurred vision of family honor or motherly instinct; they take no account of the human consequences of their conduct, much less divine ones. Of course, Tarantino's killings all take place in an unreal world, but if *Kill Bill* is only a fantasy, then the question of meaning becomes especially pointed. What does this kind of “fantasy world” revenge have to teach us? Very little. That the movie is free of moral teaching probably suits Tarantino just fine, but then why does he pretend to be elaborating on high moral themes like motherhood, family and honor? That is having your cake and eating it, too. Better not to serve the dish of revenge at all, but to forgive, as the Scripture enjoins us. ■

~Drew Trotter

Note: A fuller review is now online (www.RansomFellowship.org/M_Revenge.html). Dr. Andrew H. Trotter, Jr., is the executive director of the Center for Christian Study in Charlottesville, VA, where he teaches and writes on theology and culture, focusing on modern American film. Copyright © 2004 by Andrew H. Trotter, Jr.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. In an interview on the DVD, Uma Thurman says the movie is about “justice and redemption.” Do you agree? Why or why not?
2. What is the place of violent action in the Christian's view of the world? Is revenge ever justified? When? What do you think of violent action in general; is self-defense or war ever right?
3. What do you think the *Kill Bill* movies demonstrate about belief in God? What is the significance of the teddy bear in Beatrix Kiddo's arms at the end of the movie?
4. What other significant Scripture pertains to the idea of revenge? What are the elements of a complete Christian doctrine of revenge?
5. What do you make of the character of Bill? Did you like him at all? Why or why not? If you did, how do you explain your attraction to him?
6. Did you think *Paparazzi* was as morally off-base as the reviewer portrays it? Why or why not?
7. Did any piece of dialogue or any particular scene summarize either movie for you? If so, which ones and how and why did they do so?

Marriage in

Part two of two. Adapted from a lecture given by Mardi Keyes

Having explored the roots of our culture's ideas about love and romance in part one, we can ask where that leaves us today.

While some extremist groups attack marriage directly, Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher describe the contemporary war on marriage as not so much a "frontal assault from outside enemies but a sideways tug-of-war inside each of us between competing values: between rights and needs, between individualism and community, between fear and hope, between freedom and love. On the one hand, we cherish marriage as the repository of our deepest hopes and wishes to forge stable families, to find lasting love. On the other hand, we fear being 'tied down' or 'trapped' and jealously guard our right to redefine ourselves and our lives, with or without our partners' consent."¹

Widespread Cynicism about Marriage

Laura Kipnis, author of *Against Love, A Polemic*, writes, "for a significant percentage of the population, marriage just doesn't turn out to be as gratifying as it promises. In other words, the institution itself isn't living up to its vows."²

For many, Christian marriage is particularly intolerable and unrealistic because it restricts sexual intimacy to monogamous, lifelong, heterosexual marriage. From all quarters, we pick up the message that healthy people have active sex lives whether they are married or not.³

On college campuses today, not only is sex disconnected from marriage, but from dating. One student writes, "College is about casual sex, hooking up and one-

night stands." It's sex unburdened with meaning. I wish I could say those attitudes and behavior are totally different among Christians, but many believers seem to experience very little dissonance between their faith and casual sex.

Our culture saturates us with a version of the medieval ideology of romantic love: marriage and family are too banal for romance; grand romantic passion can only happen in adulterous affairs. *The Bridges of Madison County* is a good example of this. After a three-day affair, Robert tells Francesca, the wife of an Iowa farmer, "My whole life has brought

"On the one hand we cherish marriage as the repository of our deepest hopes...and on the other, we fear being 'tied down' or 'trapped.'"

me here to you...Do you think love like this happens to everyone? Don't throw us away...Come away with me."

In this genre of romance stories, the "grand passion" is fleeting, unfulfillable and ultimately a fantasy. If Francesca went off with Robert, what are the chances that he wouldn't neglect her like his first wife? The everyday routines of life would inevitably change their relationship, and their "romance" would be tarnished with their guilt and the pain inflicted on Francesca's family. While knowing these things in our heads, these kinds of stories can still breed discontent and tempt us to throw away a good but imperfect marriage to chase a fantasy.

Today, divorce is so commonplace that it's possible to speak of "a divorce culture" as Barbara Defoe Whitehead does in her book by that title. According

to one estimate, half of all marriages made in the mid-1970's will end in divorce; for marriages made more recently, some project that as many as 64% will end in divorce.⁴ Whitehead writes: "With each passing year, the culture of divorce becomes more deeply entrenched. American children are routinely schooled in divorce." Books, movies and TV shows "carry an unmistakable message about the impermanence and unreliability of family bonds... The children's storybooks say, family love comes and goes. Daddies disappear. Mommies find new boyfriends. Mommies' boyfriends leave. Grandparents go away. Even pets must be left behind."⁵ Not surprisingly, many children of divorce are extremely cynical about marriage as a relationship of permanent commitment.⁶

Marriage is Still Popular

Despite widespread cynicism, 93% of Americans rate "having a happy marriage" as one of their most important objectives.⁷ Yet, they fear this may be impossible.

Even when "marriage" is not spoken of, there is a longing for what marriage represents: a permanent relationship of love and commitment. Think of the popularity of romantic comedies about finding Mr. (or Ms.) Right who you will spend your life with. Intrinsic to these movies is the assumption that a certain chemistry—reciprocal romantic love—is the ONLY basis for a lasting relationship.

Here's an example: a letter sent to Dear Abby, along with Abby's response.

DEAR ABBY: I have been engaged to a wonderful man for more than two years and cannot seem to set a wedding date. He loves

Western Culture

at a L'Abri Conference in Rochester, MN, February 2004.

me and my nine-year-old daughter. He does all of the laundry, the dishes and the cleaning, and he accepts my daughter as his own. He works two jobs so we don't go without anything.

Sounds perfect, right? The problem is, I don't think I love him. I say that I do, but I don't feel it. He is all a woman could ask for in a husband, but is that enough to replace love? Or have I read too many romance novels? He wants to get married as soon as possible. I am 29, have never been married and I feel my daughter needs a father. I am also afraid I won't find a man who will ever love me as much as he does. Can I find a man whom I love, who accepts my daughter as his own—or should I marry a man I don't love but who would be a wonderful husband and father?

FOR BETTER OR WORSE

DEAR FOR BETTER: If you marry this man, knowing in your heart that you do not love him, you will be doing yourself and him a great disservice. Marriage is supposed to last forever. And forever is a long time to live with yourself, feeling that you sold out because you were afraid you wouldn't find a man you can love. Let him go.⁸

Think about the assumptions behind this correspondence. With the exception of a wedding ceremony, *all* of the elements which anthropologists recognize as universal to marriage and family are already present in this relationship. They are living together, raising a daughter, working for the family's well-being, and (presumably) having a sexual relationship. The man's feelings and actions prove that he loves the woman and her daughter very much. The only thing missing is a feeling of "romantic love" on the part of the woman, who wonders whether her doubts comes from too many romance novels! Yet to Abby, all those univer-

sal elements should be thrown away. Though this woman *promised* to marry him over two years ago, she has no obligations to the man who has sacrificed so much for her and her daughter; nor does she have any duty to her daughter, who has come to know him "like a father."

This is the "ethic of expressive individualism" at work. When your highest obligation is to yourself, it becomes your *moral obligation* to leave a relationship when you experience any personal dissatisfaction with it.

"Like romantic love, the children's storybooks say, family love comes and goes. Daddies disappear. Mommies find new boyfriends...Even pets must be left behind."

Finding a Partner

There is also widespread anxiety today about how to find a spouse. Since Americans are marrying later, they are less likely to meet their spouses in school or college (except at Christian colleges, where more students are engaged by graduation). Single men and women spend most of their time at work, but fears of sexual harassment suits have made dating co-workers risky. The bar scene is horribly depressing. If you don't meet people at church or some kind of voluntary club, where can you meet potential spouses?

Matchmaking has become a huge online business, catering to the generation that already surfs the web for everything else. There are websites for everyone including busy professionals, Christians, and those who want to hook up just for sex. In the first half of 2003, Americans spent \$214.3 million on personals and dating sites. Forty million Americans vis-

ited at least one online dating site in the month of August 2003.⁹

Clearly there are negatives to this. The absence of any real life context makes it much easier for people to deceive, use, cheat on, dump each other and then disappear into thin air. There is also the temptation to never commit to a *good* relationship while waiting for the *perfect* one.

But I don't think online dating is *all* negative. The web is the route for those who want to be pro-active, and there are many happy stories of couples who have found each other online.

Others trust chance or fate; an attitude reinforced by romantic comedies that tell of a secularized Providence bringing people together.¹⁰ Often their trust in serendipity leads them to break existing engagements. I know of a woman who breaks up with her boyfriend every time she watches a romantic comedy. Now, there may be good reasons for her to break up with him, but that is a very poor one! One Christian seminary professor and counselor says that romantic comedies often function for women as pornography does for men—as addictions to fantasies.

Marriage in the Bible

God's greatest gifts are those things we are most likely to treat as God substitutes, or idols. Throughout history, marriage and family have served as some of the most powerful idols.

In the "Parable of the Great Dinner" (Luke 14:15-24), Jesus tells a surprising story about the different excuses people make to avoid a banquet. One had to inspect his new field, another had to try out his new oxen, and the other just got married. The invited

continued on next page...

guests turned down an invitation to feast with God the Father and Son! The three excuses represent three universal idol systems which serve as God substitutes: property/wealth, work, and marriage/family.

Some of Jesus' most disturbing statements are direct challenges to the idolatry of marriage and family.¹¹ For example, "unless you hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even life itself, you cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26-27). He made both marriage and blood family subservient to the Kingdom of God. When his family came looking for him, Jesus asked, "Who are my mother and my brothers? Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:31-35).

For Romans and Jews, marriage and childbearing were mandatory duties. Probably the most radical challenge to the idolatry of marriage was Jesus and Paul's teaching that singleness was a high calling (Mt 19:12). Paul recommended the single life because unmarried people have a vocational freedom to serve Christ with "unhindered, undivided devotion" that is impossible for married people (1 Cor 7:28-38).

I recently reread the amazing story of Gladys Aylward, a London parlormaid whose missionary work in war-ravaged China made her a legend. Gladys was in love with Colonel Linnan, and although they both longed to get married, Gladys said, 'No.' The war had to be won first. Marriage, their personal happiness, must wait. As a result, they never married.¹²

How do you react to that? If Gladys' painful decision to refuse marriage seems totally unthinkable, marriage may be an idol in your life. Her situation was an exact illustration of Paul's teaching and of

Jesus' call to take up the cross and follow him. Personal happiness is not our highest calling. The Kingdom of God is.

Marriage can serve the idol of motherhood and procreation. Jesus challenged this idol when a woman cried out to him, "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!" Without denigrating motherhood, Jesus expanded her view of womanhood, saying, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!" The blessing of discipleship is accessible to anyone, man or

When your highest obligation is to yourself, it becomes your moral obligation to leave a marriage when you experience any personal dissatisfaction with it.

woman, young or old, married or single, parent or not. Jesus rejected the common view that a woman without children was by definition barren, cursed and outside of God's blessing (Luke 11:27-28).

If you have a list of qualifications for the spouse you want to marry, check that list carefully for idols. Does your mate have to be a beauty queen (or king)? I have met a surprising number of Christians (mostly men) who have a list of physical qualifications, like "she must be at least 5'8" tall, blond, a good figure," etc. Remember the words of Proverbs 31:30: "Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman (or man) who fears the Lord is to be praised." Even the most gorgeous grow old, wrinkle, change shape, and are vulnerable to defacing accidents and illnesses. It is good to be romantically and sexually attracted to your spouse. But if a fantasy version of romance and sexual fulfillment are number one on your list of specifications, you will start looking outside your marriage

for more exciting romance and hotter sex.

All idols kill love and therefore undermine or destroy marriage. When we treat marriage as an idol, we put impossible demands on our spouses to fill the place of God for us.

What is Marriage?

When challenged by Pharisees about divorce, Jesus referred to the central issue, the created nature and purpose of marriage. "Have you not read that the one

who made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

What do we learn here about the nature and purpose of marriage? It is a union between a man and a woman. It is a "leaving" the parents and establishing a new social unit. While Scripture commands us to respect and care for birth family members, the center of commitment, submission, loyalty, and decision-making is now with the new couple. "Becoming one flesh" is the goal. Jesus says they are no longer two, but one, having been joined together by God.

The sexual union accomplishes many good purposes like procreation, unity and pleasure. The Bible never ranks these purposes or justifies marital sex by them. Paul commanded married couples not to deprive each other and assumed the woman's sexual desires and needs as much as the man's, as well as their equal rights to initiate intimacy and experience pleasure (1 Cor 7). Similarly, the writer of Proverbs exhorted husbands to "rejoice in the wife of your youth (i.e., as

she ages!); may her breasts satisfy you at all times; may you be intoxicated always by her love” (Prov 5:15-23).

Recently, two large national surveys concluded that married couples experience the most satisfying sex—physically and emotionally—than any other group. Another national poll found that married men and women with “traditional” ideas about the meaning of sex as a sacred union exclusive to marriage experience the best sex of all!¹³ Many were churchgoers. Given our culture’s myths about “hot sex,” these statistics may seem surprising. But if we believe God made sex for marriage, we shouldn’t be surprised.

The problem with non-marital sexual intercourse is that it performs a life-uniting act without a life-uniting intent, and thereby violates its intrinsic meaning. What God hates about it is not the sex act itself, but the walking away afterward, the exploitation and abandonment of the person you have been “one flesh” with.

Is Laura Kipnis right that the institution of marriage itself “isn’t living up to its vows”? I don’t think so. David Blankenhorn writes, “To understand why the United States has the highest divorce rate in the world, go to some weddings and listen to what the brides and grooms say. In particular, listen to the vows (because) it is the content and the integrity of the dedicating promise itself—what we say and mean when we say ‘I do’—that shapes the nature and destiny of the marriage.”¹⁴ If a man and woman promise to stay together as long as love lasts, their only hope is that the feelings of love they have on their wedding day will endure so they can beat the odds.

The power in the traditional Christian marriage vows is that they force a man and woman, at the beginning of their marriage, to anticipate the worst-case scenarios for their future together. In the presence of God, family and friends, they vow to each other: “In

the Name of God, I take you to be my wedded husband/wife, to have and hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer; with all my worldly goods I do thee endow; in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, and forsaking all others, keep myself only to you, until we are parted by death. This is my solemn vow.”

There is no romanticism in these vows. My husband calls them a pre-emptive strike against cynicism. “Am I really willing to love and support him/her in chronic disease, accident, bankruptcy, betrayal, disappointment, suffering and loss, all the while knowing that we will both change in unpredictable ways? Am I willing to face my own sin, vanity, jeal-

All idols kill love and therefore undermine or destroy marriage.

ousy, selfishness in the confidence of God’s forgiveness, but also in my own willingness to apologize, forgive and be forgiven by my spouse? The realism and humility that makes a relationship to God possible starts a couple in the direction of honest love for each other.”¹⁵ This is the only sure way to experience marriage as “good news.”

The alternative to a cynical rejection of marriage on the one hand, and an idolatrous inflation of marriage on the other, is not achieving some golden middle ground of medium-sized hope. It is building our marriages on a different foundation altogether, on the biblical worldview, and the Christian Story.

In our confusing culture, it is a temptation to romanticize the past and think that finding a mate used to be easy. I don’t think it’s ever been easy; the history of courtship reveals different struggles for men and women in every culture and era. There is no one sanctified model of courtship, no fool-

proof paradigm that will guarantee a successful, happy marriage. Whether to marry, when to marry, who to marry, how to find him or her...are all part of the life of faith, of trusting God to hold our hands and walk with us into a future that we are blind to, but He is not. The priorities of the Christian life in general, apply here. “Seek first His Kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Mt. 6:33).

I will end with the wisdom of J.R.R. Tolkien: “Nearly all marriages, even happy ones, are mistakes, in the sense that almost certainly (in a more perfect world, or even with a little more care in this very imperfect one) both partners might be found more suitable mates. But the real soul-mate is the one you are actually married to.” ■

~Mardi Keyes

Note: This article is worth reading in its entirety; the complete version is online: (www.RansomFellowship.org/R_Marriage.html). *Mardi Keyes co-directs the Southborough, MA, branch of L’Abri Fellowship with her husband Dick.* Copyright © Mardi Keyes 2004

Endnotes:

- ¹Waite and Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage*, (New York: Broadway Books, 2000) p. 2
- ²Kipnis, “The State of the Unions: Should This Marriage Be Saved?” in the *New York Times*, 1/25/04, p. 15
- ³*Time* (health benefits of an active sex-life) 1/19/04
- ^{4/5}Whitehead, *The Divorce Culture: Rethinking Our Commitments to Marriage and Family* (NY: Vintage, 1998), p. 44 & p. 11
- ⁶*The Divorce Culture*, p. 188 and 128
- ⁷Waite and Gallagher, p. 3
- ⁸Yalom, p. xi
- ⁹There’s Match.com, Nerve.com, Dream-Mates, The Right Stuff, eCrush, TurboDate, and It’s Just Lunch
- ¹⁰There’s *Love Actually*, *Sleepless in Seattle*, *You’ve Got Mail*, *Serendipity*, *Ever After*.
- ¹¹Luke 9:59-62, Mt. 8:21, Mt. 10:34, Mark 10:28-31
- ¹²Burgess, *The Small Woman* (NY: Dutton & Co., 1957), p. 189-190
- ¹³Waite and Gallagher, chapter 6
- ¹⁴Blankenhorn, “I Do” in *Wing to Wing, Oar to Oar: Readings on Courting and Marrying*, p.77
- ¹⁵Dick Keyes, manuscript of book on *Cynicism*, ch. 19

Faith, Mystery &

Ever since there has been such things as novels, the world has been flooded with bad fiction for which the religious impulse has been responsible. The sorry religious novel comes about when the writer supposes that because of his belief, he is somehow dispensed from the obligation to penetrate concrete reality.

Flannery O'Connor,
"Novelist and Believer"

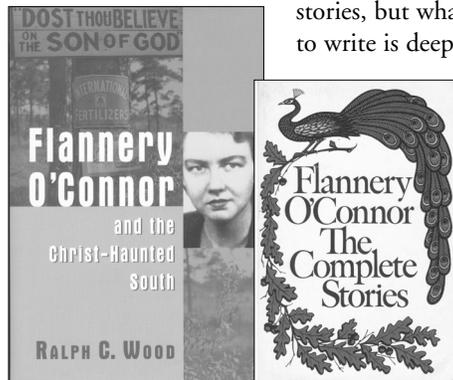
Flannery O'Connor lived a brief life, with long periods of illness, but in the few short years allotted to her she was faithful to the gift she had been given. "There is no excuse for anyone to write fiction for public consumption," she said, "unless he has been called to do so by the presence of a gift. It is the nature of fiction not to be good unless it is good in itself." Her stories sear our imaginations, and reveal a profoundly Christian mind at work. As a committed Roman Catholic, O'Connor abhorred the secular nihilism eating away at the modern world, and saw her stories as her opportunity to witness to the truth of reality.

Each O'Connor story is a carefully crafted piece of literature. Each also contains some glimpse of mystery, a surprising hint of transcendence that usually appears in a way we would least expect. Grace is not, however, the thing many readers notice first, since O'Connor's stories also contain startling images of the grotesque. What we call grotesque she called realism—and was designed to shock smugly complacent readers with the

news that something is horribly wrong with the world and with us, and that we can't solve the problem on our own.

In *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South*, Baylor University professor of theology and literature Ralph C. Wood provides a scholarly study of O'Connor's life, work, and the Southern culture in which she lived. He has a deep appreciation for O'Connor's stories, but what motivates him to write is deeper than merely

the desire to publish literary criticism. "I believe that the church," Wood asserts, "altogether as



O'Connor saw her stories as her opportunity to witness to the truth of reality.

much as the secular world, requires the awakening jolt of O'Connor's fiction. Most Christian communities have failed to embody, in both worship and witness, their own saving alternative to our 'terrible world.' They have lost what is repeatedly found in O'Connor's fiction: the glad news that God's goodness is even more shocking than our violations of it." The book is a study of O'Connor's fiction, but set within a theological assessment of American society so that we can better hear what O'Connor had to say, both to her own day, and to ours.

Wood structures *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South* around a series of themes: race and racism, South-

ern fundamentalism, the modern embrace of nihilism, preaching as a Protestant sacrament, the vocation and nature of writing fiction, and O'Connor's distinctly Christian vision of life, reality, and the life to come. "This book," Wood says in his introduction, "seeks to demonstrate the immense social and religious relevance of Flannery O'Connor's work. It does not offer yet another close literary examination of O'Connor's individual stories and novels. Nor is it an attempt to set forth, in a systematic way, the theological vision embodied in her fiction. On the contrary, this is a study of O'Connor's work as it bears on the life of the contemporary church and one of its regional cultures, specifically the church that is situated in her own native realm—the Christ-haunted South."

We recommend *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South* to you. It is a serious read, but a worthwhile one, especially for readers who love Flannery O'Connor.

If, however, you have read little or nothing of Flannery O'Connor's fiction, please begin by correcting that lack. Her fiction—short stories and novels—are available in a number of editions, including *The Complete Stories*. We have often used short stories like "Greenleaf," "A Good Man is Hard to Find," "The Lame Shall Enter First," and "The Enduring Chill" in small group discussions. Each is so keenly crafted and provocatively imagined that discussion erupts naturally.

There are numerous short story writers who are worth reading, but the stories of Flannery O'Connor seem in a class of their own. Her stories burn themselves into my memory, refusing to fade quietly away as if they didn't matter, since, after all, they are only stories. She wrote as if her life depended on it, which of course

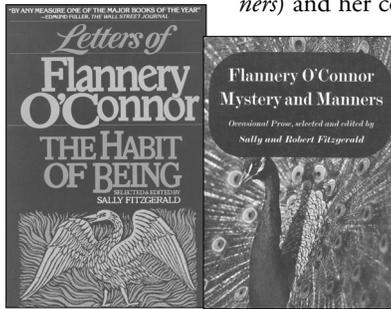
the Grotesque

it did. "Story-writers are always talking about what makes a story 'work,'" she said. "From my own experience in trying to make stories 'work,' I have discovered that what is needed is an action that is totally unexpected, yet totally believable, and I have found that, for me, this is always an action which indicates that grace has been offered. And frequently it is an action in which the devil has been the unwilling instrument of grace.

This is not a piece of knowledge that I consciously put into my stories; it is a discovery that I get out of them. I have found, in short, from reading my own writing, that my subject in fiction is the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil. I have also found that what I write is read by an audience which puts little stock either in grace or the devil. You discover your audience at the

same time and in the same way that you discover your subject; but it is an added blow."

Flannery O'Connor's occasional prose pieces, mostly speeches (*Mystery and Manners*) and her collected letters (*The Habit of Being*) have also been published. Readers who love her fiction will find a



"My subject in fiction is the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil."

treasure-chest of insight into a highly gifted woman whose remarkable imagination, deep faith, courage, and thoughtfulness is a demonstration of Christian faithfulness in crafting fiction which, I have little doubt, will stand the test of time. ■

-Denis Haack

Book reviewed:

Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South by Ralph C. Wood (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; 2004) 265 pp. + indices.

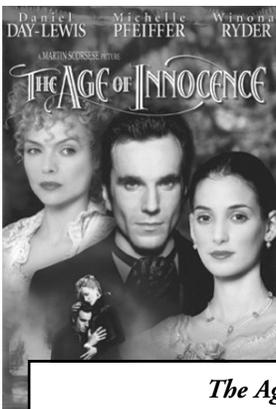
Books also recommended:

Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose of Flannery O'Connor, edited by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux; 1962) 234 pp. + notes.

The Complete Stories by Flannery O'Connor (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux; 1971) 550 pp. + notes.

The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor edited by Sally Fitzgerald (New York, NY: Vintage Books; 1979) 596 pp. + index.

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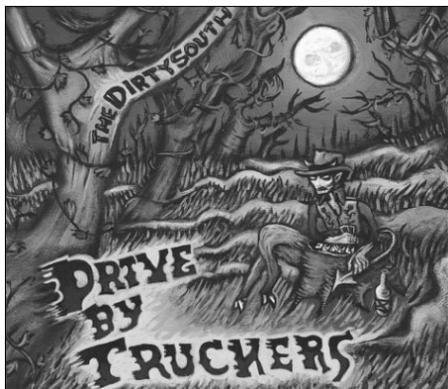
The Age of Innocence
Movie review with discussion questions
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Article on Marriage by Mardi Keyes
Fuller examples, in-depth discussion.
www.ransomfellowship.org/R_Marriage.html



Big Fish
In-depth Discussion Questions
www.ransomfellowship.org/M_BigFish.html

If I Died in Colbert Cnty,



Drive by Trucker's The Dirty South

As I swing my Land Rover into the drive-through at Starbucks to order a Venti Nonfat Double-Cup Extra-Hot Two-Spenda Latté, a morning ritual after crew practice, I wonder about the relevance of the words I had read earlier in the day during my morning meditations by the swimming pool behind my condo. “Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is

coming upon you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in these days. Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you” (James 5:1-6). These are not the words of some firebrand Old Testament prophet. These are the words of James, Jesus’ half-brother, who reminds us that religion that God honors does not turn a blind eye to the widow or orphan—more specifically to those society abandons emotionally and economically.

Ironically, my bourgeois lifestyle (much as those discussed in David Brooks’ *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There*) and my Christian suburbia North Dallas conscience was pricked by the authentic voices of a Southern rock ‘n’ roll band and the stories told about *The Dirty South*. In the music and lyrics of Drive By Truckers the indictment of James finally came home.

Drive By Truckers are an Athens, Georgia band, who received wide recognition for their 2003 release, *Decoration Day*. *Rolling Stone* listed the album on the year’s 50 best, *Spin* listed it at #28 in their 40 best albums, and amazon.com picked it as the #1 best alternative rock CD of

2003. This August, DBT released their seventh album, *The Dirty South*. If unknown to rock aficionados, they won’t be unknown long. “It’s hard to find rock ‘n’ roll this tough, this serious anymore,” writes Steve Terrell in *The New Mexican*. *The Dirty South* combines pulsing rock music with compelling storytelling—Southern history told from the perspective of the bad guy and outcast.

Here is where the album makes its distinctive contribution. It puts a human face on a social stereotype. Like William Faulkner’s depiction of the Bundrens and Snopes, the band uses Southern regionalism as a window on the universal longings of the human heart. The band has met with a larger following outside of the South. Earlier this summer, Howard Dean was widely criticized during the Democratic presidential primary by referring to “guys with Confederate flags on their pickup trucks” as legitimizing a Southern stereotype—a stereotype the New South would like to ignore. Rather than ignoring this culture, the Drive By Truckers punctures the stereotype by humanizing them. DBT speak with an accent that isn’t faked. They speak of a reality they have lived. Four of the five band members grew up in Muscle Shoals, Alabama, where the album was also recorded. Muscle Shoals is a small town in a dirt-poor part of northwestern Alabama. This is music from their veins about their blood. *The Dirty South* examines the back roads of the Deep South and paints a portrait of poverty, despair, and hopelessness—the faces of guilty anti-heroes. Here is a culture of victims who cry out against heartless politicians, corrupt law enforcement agents, greedy business executives, relentless natural disasters, callous Christian ministers, and skewed national priorities. “Their Dixieland has been decimated by outsourcing and downsizing, leaving good people to brew moonshine, sling dope, kill one another, or suffer in silence,” writes David Peisner in *Maxim*. The words of James—“You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you”—have a new context: Detroit automakers, Wal-Mart retailers, TVA bureaucrats, and NASA scientists.

Would it Make the News?

*Tell me how to tell the difference between what they tell
me is the truth or a lie
Tell me why the ones who have so much make the ones
who don't go mad
With the same skin stretched over their white bones and
the same jug in their hand*

Songwriter and lead singer, Patterson Hood, told the Pittsburgh *Tribune-Review*, "Some people do some terrible things. But I wanted to try to understand why they do those kinds of things. I tried to take that point of view when writing about some of the unsavory characters that pop up on the record. I didn't really want to say that 'this is good' and 'this is bad.' 'Cause to me, the things they do speak for themselves."

The last three DBT albums suggest a progression of analysis: *Southern Rock Opera* told the story of young adults who are told to go out and conquer the world and die; *Decoration Day* spoke of adults who make choices and now have to live with the consequences of their choices; and *The Dirty South* portrays a world where people don't feel they have any choices anymore. Youthful dreams have given way to disillusionment and the fight for mere survival. "Many of the hard times being sung about in these songs have been replaced by even harder times," the band explains on their website. The logic of survival is laced with drugs, alcohol, and crime. For these folks time in the penitentiary is viewed as a vacation. Government reports indicate that rural teens are 83% more likely to use crack cocaine, 34% more likely to smoke marijuana and twice as likely to use amphetamines than teens in large cities.

We do well to remember that every statistic has a story. DBT's "Puttin' People on the Moon" tells the story of a Georgia autoworker who loses his job to an overseas plant, turns to selling drugs to make ends meet, unemployed and without health insurance his wife gets cancer from upstream industrial waste, without chemotherapy she dies, and he goes to work for Wal-Mart, cynical and broken by a life where every promise given has been a promise broken. He notes with biting irony that just down the road in Huntsville, they're putting people on the moon.

*Another Joker in the White House,
said a change was comin' round
But I'm still workin' at The Wal-Mart
and Mary Alice, in the ground
And all them politicians, they all
lyin' sacks of sh**
They say better days upon us but
I'm sucking left hind tit
And the preacher on the TV says it
ain't too late for me
But I bet he drives a Cadillac and
I'm broke with some hungry
mouths to feed*

*I wish I'z still an outlaw, was a better way of life
I could clothe and feed my family still have time to love
my pretty wife
And if you say I'm being punished. Ain't he got better
things to do?
Turnin' mountains into oceans Puttin' people on the moon*

The Dirty South depicts a culture of poverty, where "hope" has long since been removed from the social vocabulary. "The Lives of the Rich and Famous" is beamed by TV satellite dishes to mobile home trailers where despair sucks the oxygen out of the room. "The central ideology of 'mainstream culture,' the belief system that most of us share, is liberal consumerism—a secular, individualist creed that essentially adds more shopping hours to the old exaltation of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," writes William Finnegan in *Cold New World: Growing Up in a Harder Country*. "A new American class structure is being born—one that is harsher, in many ways, than the one it is replacing." Economic inequality is coupled with cultural alienation and individual hopelessness. In "Lookout Mountain," a song about suicide, the singer hesitates as he wonders "Who's gonna mow the cemetery when all of my family's gone? Who will Mom and Daddy find to continue the family name?" DBT gives voice to this reality and these feelings. Here one finds haunting stories and hardened perspectives of lives

continued on next page...



by
**Dr.
David
John
Seel,
Jr.**

Tuned In cont.

we'd rather ignore.

*We ain't never gonna
change.*

*We ain't doin' nothin'
wrong.*

*We ain't never gonna
change
so shut your mouth and
play along.*

*You can throw me in the
Colbert Cnty jailhouse.*

*You can throw me off the
Wilson Dam*

*but there ain't much difference in the man I
wanna be and the man I really am.*



We can warn against the self-fulfilling prophesy of playing the victim. But sometimes the voices of victims are real—their suffering undeniable.

A number of years ago I was asked to work with Daniel, a twelve-year-old sixth

grader whose father had tried to kill his mother by running over her in the Ingle's grocery store parking lot. When this failed, he jumped out of the car and stabbed her with a knife until stopped by shoppers. This horrific crime was in the quiet rural community of Black Mountain, North Carolina, the home of Billy Graham.

For weeks I met with Daniel in his mountainside dilapidated mobile home, read letters to him from his father in prison, talked about school and Pokéman. I've lost contact with Daniel. He would be sixteen or seventeen now. I wonder if he listens to Drive By Truckers. I wonder what difference it might have made if I had written to him over these past years. Is a handwritten note to a boy without a father like giving a

cup of cold water in My name? These lives of quiet desperation will not be changed by social programs or presidential elections, but by the simple touch of another's heart. Helen Keller is also from Muscle Shoals, Alabama. "Although the world is full of suffering, it is full also of the overcoming of it," she writes. Yet Helen Keller had Anne Sullivan. Few overcome suffering alone. ■

~John Seel

David John Seel, Jr., is an educational consultant, speaker, and author, most recently of Parenting Without Perfection: Being a Kingdom Influence in a Toxic World. He lives in Dallas, Texas. Copyright © 2004 John Seel.

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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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