

Critique

Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

In This Issue

04 What's a Million Dollar Baby worth?

Million Dollar Baby raised a lot of discussion. As Drew Trotter reveals in this review, the real issue in this finely crafted film hasn't received enough attention.

08 Caring enough to probe

Is arguing with people about right and wrong really engaging them with the gospel? The 13th in the Babylon series, about being in the world but not of it.

10 How much reality can you stand?

Bruce Springsteen's latest CD can help us see reality more clearly—that is, if we are willing to see. A review of *Devils & Dust*.

07 The neo-pagan resurgence

13 Reviews of *The Sacred Cosmos*; *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today*; and *Dylan's Vision of Sin*

14 "You're Fired!" (Christianly)

Asking someone to step down, either by firing them as an employee or replacing them as a volunteer is a painful process. It is also worth thinking about.

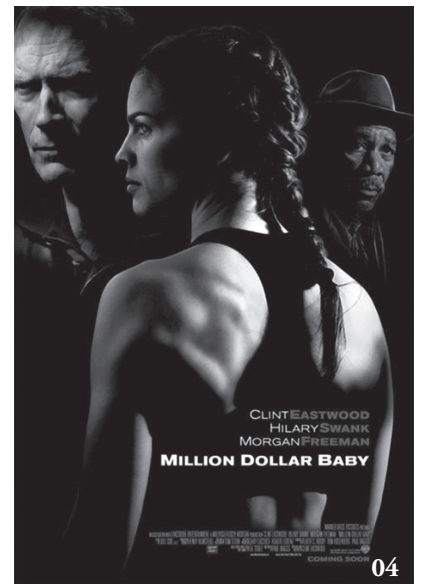
02 Editor's Note

03 Dialogue

16 On the Web

15 Caring for the earth

Francis Schaeffer talked not just about art, philosophy, and faith, but about caring for the earth. Many conservative Christians might be shocked at what he said.



Editor
Denis Haack

Layout & Web
John Hake

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

Board of Directors
Steven Garber
Scholar-in-Residence
The Evermay Project
Washington DC

Donald Guthrie
Vice President for
Academics at Covenant
Theological Seminary

Denis and Margie Haack
co-founders of Ransom Fellowship

Rev. Ed Hague
Pastor of Adult Discipleship
Wildwood Presbyterian Church

Bonnie Liefer
Director of Communications
for Coalition for Christian
Outreach

Henry Tazelaar MD
Professor of Pathology,
Mayo Medical School

Submissions
Critique considers unsolicited
manuscripts only for poetry.
info@ransomfellowship.org
or mail with SASE to:
Ransom Fellowship
1150 West Center Street
Rochester, MN 55902

Correspondence
All other correspondence
and changes of address:
Critique
1150 West Center Street
Rochester, MN 55902
info@ransomfellowship.org

Copyright © 2005 by
Ransom Fellowship

<http://www.ransomfellowship.org>

Editor's Note



More than slogans

The controversy around Clint Eastwood's film, *Million Dollar Baby* (see the review on pages 4-7), was hard to miss. I think the controversy suggests several things.

First, popular culture generates discussion about things that matter. It's not just serious novels or solemn essays that raise worthy issues. I am always surprised at the number of people who dismiss popular culture is nothing more than shallow entertainment. If we wish to be part of the conversations that matter, we need to be aware of what is generating them.

Second, the controversy around *Million Dollar Baby* suggests that just because a debate in the public square is loud and furious, it may not be very persuasive. Did the debate help people reflect thoughtfully on the deeper issues involved, or was it merely one more example of activists preaching to the already convinced? I may be mistaken, but I think the answer is obvious.

The controversy was also a reminder of how a technically correct answer might not be a sufficient answer. *Million Dollar Baby* is a rich story, richly told, not a simplistic tale with one-dimensional characters. To respond angrily that euthanasia is wrong made me wonder if people had seen the film, or if they had watched it thoughtfully. The problem with this response is not that it isn't correct, but that it gives the impression that Christian faith is limited to simplistic answers. The film deserves careful watching, because it is a well-made, compelling story; it deserves careful discussion because it raises the issue of euthanasia within a story well-developed enough to probe into ideas and assumptions that

serve as a foundation to the conclusion of the film. As Andrew Trotter's review in this *Critique* reveals, more is at stake here than a political agenda for end-of-life debates. In fact, the film raises issues so foundational that, until they are addressed thoughtfully, the arguments against euthanasia will make little sense.

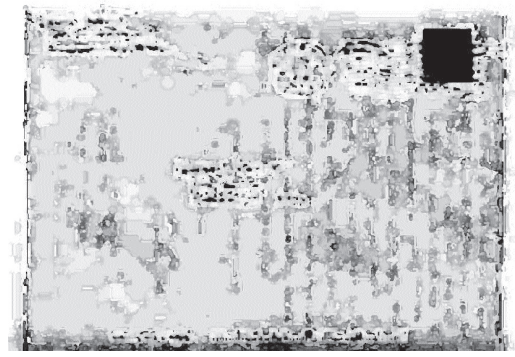
There was a curious lack of compassion in most of the debate that I heard. One of the reasons I love the art of the cinema is that it allows me to be transported into someone else's world, without for a moment giving up my own convictions and values. In *Million Dollar Baby* I was swept into the world of boxing, and came to care



for several characters that, though fictional, were compellingly portrayed. The world of the film seems to me to be a seamless continuation of the world Eastwood has shown us in *Unforgiven* and *Mystic River*. It is a dark world, with real suffering but few answers, an impotent church, and a level of injustice that seems to suck all meaning from life. In that world, what Maggie wanted and Frankie did, makes sense, and it grieved me that people created in God's image could be so lost in so much darkness. *Million Dollar Baby* should move us, but less to anger than to tears.

I'm not sure the evangelical activists and conservative pundits are as helpful in supporting traditional Christian values as they imagine. Rather than outrage, we should express delight at the chance to discuss things that matter with those who do not share our deepest convictions and values. Those discussions should be thoughtful, warmly human, authentically compassionate, and marked by careful listening. Technically correct slogans are not sufficient—not just because they are not compelling, but because they make a mockery of the rich nuance and splendid depth that is built into the very fabric of the world God created. ■

—Denis Haack



Dialogue

re: the Chosen People and Gnosticism

Send e-mail to:

letters@ransomfellowship.org

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

Ransom Fellowship
1150 West Center Street
Rochester, MN 55902

or e-mail:
letters@ransomfellowship.org

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

As a Jew, I at times find Christians to be overly zealous (understandable in this post-Christian world, but insulting to Jews, when we view ourselves as the "Chosen People"—and not in "need" of "salvation" in any way) and perhaps blindly fanatical. Now, I am of course, stereotyping—but only to explain that I approached your Ransom Fellowship website with trepidation. I was searching for discussions on a book, *The Life of Pi* which I'd just read for a book club and wanted to get some ideas on delving deeper into its meaning and message, etc. Your article on *Life of Pi* was truly excellent. Intrigued, I browsed thru more of the website. Very impressive. Despite the fact that it is a Christian website, your message of "discernment" and living a Godly life is dead on and inspiring. Even to this Jew. So, that's why I'm writing. To thank you all for the wonderful website and wish you much success. I intend to come back to it often and recommend it to my friends as well. Thank you for providing a resource for moral people (even non-Christians) to practice and hone the discernment and contemplative skills that seem so lost to today's secular society.

Shalom,

Cindy A. Thielman
via email

Thank you for reviewing *Windows to Heaven* [*Critique* #2-2005]. Icons are only meaningfully understood in light of a sacramental understanding of reality. As most evangelicals have a nascent Gnostic mindset (see Philip Lee's *Against the Protestant Gnostics*), it is almost impossible for them to understand icons as anything other than idols. It is interesting that in the same issue of *Critique* you quote John Stott as saying that we have an inadequate view of creation. This

is true, because most evangelicals are dualist when it comes to matter. David Naugle in *Worldview: The History of a Concept* raises the question of whether a sacramental view of reality is in fact necessary for a thoroughgoing Christian worldview. God came to redeem not simply the spiritual life or the secular life, but the whole creation. There is an earthiness to the Gospel that is lost among those who do not see the incarnation as God's cosmic Yes to His creation. Celtic Christianity has this aspect of dirt-under-the-fingernails Christianity, a kind of "bawdy spirituality." Christians have little to say to the embodied questions of sexual identity without such a physical view of God's indwelling real presence. Sex and spirituality are intrinsically connected (see 1 Corinthians 6:12-20). Without a sacramental view of reality, icons will not make sense and we will not be able to bring the full redemptive aspect of the Gospel to a practicing homosexual or to our own gender confusions. This is an issue that goes beyond loving birds by understanding what God came to redeem. Paul says in Romans that creation groans waiting for its redemption. It probably also groans at our view of its groaning.

It should also be remembered that the Nicene Creed (381), in the end, came down on the side of icons. The creed itself was viewed iconographically as seen in its official title, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Symbol of Faith. More than an affirmation of belief, it was viewed as a picture or window into the character of God. Ancient Gnosticism coupled with modern rationalism has done much to weaken contemporary evangelicals' understanding of God's real presence—in our own lives as well as His created order.

David John Seel, Jr.
Cohasset, MA

The Darkened Room

What's a Million Dollar



by Drew Trotter

A review of Million Dollar Baby

A thoroughly surprising plot twist in this film will be openly discussed in this review. If you have not yet seen the film, and still hold out hope of seeing it without knowing about this turn in its story, first I'd like to ask, What have you been talking about for the last four months? Second, I suggest you put the review away until after you've seen the film.

Baby Credits:

Starring:

Clint Eastwood
(Frankie Dunn)
Hilary Swank
(Maggie Fitzgerald)
Morgan Freeman
(Eddie Scrap-Iron Dupris)
Brian F. O'Byrne
(Father Horvak)
Jay Baruchel
(Danger Barch)
Mike Colter
(Big Willie Little)
Lucia Rijker
(Billie "The Blue Bear")

Director:

Clint Eastwood

Producers:

Clint Eastwood
Paul Haggis

Writers:

F. X. Toole (*Rope Burns*)
Paul Haggis (screenplay)

Consultant:

Paul Rusesabagina

Cinematographer:

Tom Stern

Film Editing:

Joel Cox

Production Design:

Henry Bumstead

Original Music:

Clint Eastwood

Runtime: 132 min.

Rated PG-13 for violence,
some disturbing images, the-
matic material and language.

Million Dollar Baby, Clint Eastwood's latest movie and the 2004 Academy Award winner for Best Picture, has stirred controversy in two ways. First, reviewers have complained that those who advertised the film pulled a "bait and switch" on the audience. Advertising the movie as if it were a female *Rocky* about a gritty, female boxer's overcoming of adversity to rise (or maybe not) to the top, instead the movie focuses its emotional power on major ethical questions arising from a startling plot twist about two-thirds of the way through the film. The controversy was so widespread that Michael Medved, perhaps the chief recipient of the criticism of those who in turn criticized *Baby* in this vein, actually had to write a lengthy column in the *Wall Street Journal*, clarifying his position and defending himself against his attackers.

Secondly, many condemned the film

for the view it purportedly presented in support of assisted suicide. Frankie Dunn, an over-the-hill trainer played by Eastwood, reluctantly takes on the job of helping Maggie Fitzgerald, portrayed by Hilary Swank in a deserving Academy Award winning performance, an older female boxer whose life has never allowed her to get the coaching that would match the heart and physical ability she has for the game. Much of the film builds the rapport between the two, thoroughly depicting Dunn's reluctance and Fitzgerald's desire as the classic irresistible force meeting the unmovable object, and subtly creating one of the most memorable non-father and non-daughter father/daughter relationships in film history. All this prepares us for the heart-wrenching event at the end of the movie when Frankie sneaks into the hospital at night and injects Maggie with adrenaline, ending her life. This prompted protests by everyone from the leading disabilities rights organizations in the country to the woman upon whose similar rise to prominence and tragic end to her career the story was based, though, obviously with a different conclusion.

Both these protests have some merit; most people I have encountered who knew nothing about the film but the advertising they encountered, felt that they saw a movie that was very different from the one they thought they were going to see. Similarly, though Eastwood, when confronted with the accusation that the film

promotes mercy killing, has stated publicly that he just wanted to tell a good story, and that he is not really teaching a moral directly in *Million Dollar Baby*, it is dif-



Baby Worth?

Million Dollar Baby *subtly creates one of the most memorable non-father and non-daughter father/daughter relationships in film history.*

difficult to believe audience members are not being encouraged to think very sympathetically of Frankie and the choice he makes. A character's ability to make us get inside his shoes, and feel that he is real, is exactly what good filmmaking is all about. Anything that character does is thus a paradigm for us to consider, and the more attractive the character is, the more we will be drawn to agree with his actions. To look at it another way, nothing in the film remotely encourages the viewer to decide to continue life in the circumstances presented at the end of *Baby*; everything promotes the view that it is legitimate to take life when it's "not worth living." The "mercy killing" at the end of *Baby* seems a tragic, but necessary, good.

A third aspect of the film, though, is what Christians ought to be most concerned about, and there were no protests about it. *Million Dollar Baby* assumes, and its controversial relationship and resolution is based upon, the legitimacy of making something other than God Himself our ultimate basis for living. No Christian should expect anything different from those outside the faith, but *Baby* not only assumes this, the film emphasizes it. The world calls this having a

sense of purpose; Christianity calls it idolatry.

Frankie Dunn's ultimate joy is the daughter he has now found, but the movie really fails ethically when it portrays Maggie as giving up on life because she can no longer box. From having a worth of \$1M to having a worth of nothing, Maggie sees herself as useless to any and everyone, and begs to die. It is true that her efforts to love her despicable white-trash family are shockingly rejected; she has only enabled them to become even more evil as the film goes on.

It is true that the crowds will no longer get the pleasure of watching Maggie triumph in the ring, and her Irish fans won't be able to root for her with cheers of the pet name, bestowed on her by Eastwood, "Mo Cuishle," which we find out later is Gaelic shorthand for, "My darling, my blood."

It is even true that Eastwood, who has



become the father she hasn't had for years, will now be burdened with caring for her, and she knows that. He will not get his title fighter, not get the pleasure of managing her through the subtleties of however many years she would have had left in the ring.

But most of all, she makes it clear that she has lost her worth to herself, that, as she puts it early in the film, "the only thing she ever felt good doing," is now denied her. She makes a long list of all the joys she has experienced that she

never thought possible: being in magazines, traveling the world, staying in fancy hotels, getting a title shot. Now, she says, all that is slowly draining away from her, as she has her leg amputated, and any hope of recovery departs. Maggie does not want those memories to fade, so she begs Frankie to let her go out while they are still fresh in her mind, and

A third aspect of the film is what Christians ought to be most concerned about, and there were no protests about it.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What do you think of the controversy surrounding the advertising of the film? Was it justified? Is it ever justifiable to create trailers and posters that entice viewers to see one thing, when you know that it will be something else?
2. How important is it to you to know what the filmmakers were trying to do with their story? Does *Million Dollar Baby* actually advocate assisted suicide? Justify your answer with reference to specific scenes and dialogue in the film.
3. It is generally accepted that *Baby* was a very powerfully emotional film. How did it affect you? What scenes were the most powerful? Why?
4. No positive reviewer of the film has used the word "murder" to describe what Frankie does at the end of the movie. Would you? Why or why not?

Questions continued on page 7...

Darkened Room cont.

he accedes to her wishes.

As Christians, when we try to wrestle with what we would have done in this situation, we recognize first that this is not an unrealistic

question. The Terri Schiavo case, which remarkably captured so much of our attention just at the moment this film was playing and garnering its

awards, shows us that. Birth and death in an age of genetic engineering will only increasingly become life events that we have more and more responsibility for. Just a few days ago, I spoke with a friend in NYC who knows a young woman her age who has two children. My friend remarked to her that her two children, two years apart in age, looked amazingly alike, almost as if they were twins. The woman replied: "That's because they are." The

woman and her husband had frozen the fertilized eggs, and implanted them two years apart resulting in twins who are two years apart in age. The kinds of decisions we

face in a world in which such things are possible are innumerable.

So what is a million dollar baby worth? The Scripture is quite clear. At the very beginning of the Bible, we are told that humans, apart from all the other animals, are created in God's image. This puts us on the side of all other created

things as opposed to God who is not created, but on the side of God, as opposed to all other created things in that we alone

Million Dollar Baby presents a relentlessly hopeless view that we have no one else to help us, that we are trapped in this vale of tears, powerless and alone.

bear his image. In this space we cannot go into the very thorny question of what the image of God actually consists of, but we do know this: it bestows on every man, woman and child who exists today on the face of the planet—and whoever existed, or ever will exist for that matter—a worth that is infinite in value. We are immeasurably valuable, no matter what our sex, race, color or even creed, and that includes our physical state, as well.



But the fact that we are of worth does not answer the question of the worth of our continued existence on this earth, i.e. the worth of our "life." Who determines when that worthy life should end? How do we determine it?

The Scripture teaches that we should fight to preserve life at all times, but that life is not simply continuing to make the heart pump blood. Neither is it,

however, whatever we would define for ourselves as "normal." The movie gets it

wrong in portraying Maggie as not having anything left to live for. Her life has changed, but it is not over. One can come up with a million ways in which she could have led a worthy life; Frankie Dunn even investigates some of those for her. She has decided that her own life is only worthy if it is lived in the "natural" mode within which she was able to box, and that is where Christians

should weep at the ideas this movie assumes. We are not our own, we are bought with a price, as St. Paul puts it, and so we do not have the right to determine our own worth. That right is God's alone. Maggie worships an idol and when that idol is taken away, life is not worth living. Ironically, both Maggie and Frankie seem to feel that gods outside themselves are more important than they are, but they have the wrong gods.

Baby also presents a relentlessly hopeless view that we have no one else to help us, that we are trapped in this vale of tears, powerless and alone. At the end, Scrap, Frankie's friend played by Morgan Freeman, says he never saw Frankie again, but that he guessed he was "probably somewhere between nowhere and goodbye." We see Frankie sitting in the diner that he had wanted to buy some day, drinking his coffee and eating his lemon pie. No hope is coming, and none is expected. Frankie is shattered, and that is the end of it, as it is of the film.

This bleak conclusion is bad enough, but what is worse is that Eastwood makes a strong point of portraying the church as actually having an answer for Frankie's dilemma—but having none of the grace to help him understand it, implement it, or transfer it to Maggie. The priest, a prominent minor character in the movie, is a stereotype of the unfeeling, doctrinally correct, smiley-faced jerk that too many people outside the church project onto the priesthood. The church—

It is one of the starkest condemnations of the irrelevance of the church in films of recent memory, and it hurts to see it because it is too often true of Christians.

and with it Christianity, and ultimately, Christ—doesn't understand, doesn't want to understand, and actively refuses to understand, Frankie and his dilemma. It is one of the starkest condemnations of the irrelevance of the church in films of recent memory, and it hurts to see it because, for one thing, it is too often true of Christians, but, for another, it flows from a lack of understanding who Jesus is as the very source of Hope.

Like many award-winning films last year, *Million Dollar Baby* demonstrates an



excellence in filmmaking that is stunning. Its use of lighting, for instance, is as beautiful and true as that of any color film in memory. One only wishes its ideas were of the same stature. ■

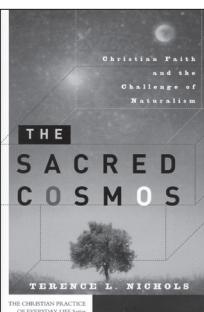
—Drew Trotter

...QUESTIONS CONTINUED

5. Scrap, Frankie's friend played by Morgan Freeman (who also won the Academy Award as Best Supporting Actor), is a powerful presence in the film. How does he move the story and influence Maggie and Frankie? What role does he play in their lives? What significance do you attribute to his presence at the end of the film?
6. Discuss, if you can using examples of which you have some firsthand experience, the issues surrounding the death of an infirm or comatose person. What are the similarities, for instance, between this movie and the Terry Schiavo case? What are the differences?
7. Why do you think the characters in this movie seem so real? Is it the writing, the direction, the acting, some combination of these? What other elements make this film so successful in helping you "get inside the skin" of Scrap, Frankie and Maggie?

Briefly Noted: Evolution without naturalism

by Denis Haack



In *The Sacred Cosmos*, Terence Nichols, theology professor at St Thomas University (St Paul) argues that philosophical naturalism is an insufficient basis for science, and that evolution is compatible with Christian theology. "I will maintain," Nichols writes, "that evolution does not have to be understood naturalistically, that is, as a purely natural and unguided process. Instead, I maintain that evolution has a direction, and is ultimately guided by God. But God does not determine every detail of evolution. Rather God allows an element of freedom (which may appear to us as chance) in that process. Thus both nature and God, or, more exactly, God's Spirit, are causal elements in the process of evolution. Evolution can therefore be seen by Christians as a journey, whose end is the free uniting of persons and creation with God in the resurrection."

Those who follow the ongoing discussion of science, faith, and naturalism might find this book of interest. ■

Book reviewed: *The Sacred Cosmos: Christian Faith and the Challenge of Naturalism* by Terence L. Nichols (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press; 2003) 227 pp. + notes.

Caring enough to probe

Imagine you are sitting with some friends—perhaps at work or a coffee shop—and one says he'd like some advice. "Ashley and I have been going out for almost a year," Justin says. "We really hit it off, love the same music, and enjoy hanging out. So, we're thinking of moving in together. One of us is always staying at the other's apartment anyway, so we could save time and a pile of money if we consoli-

dated living arrangements. Here's where I need your help: I'd like to move in with Ashley, but

don't know if I should. My mom says I shouldn't, but then you know how mothers are. What do you think?"

Imagine the conversation that results. Someone tells how some friends knew when to move in together, and how it turned out. Someone else tells how the last time she moved in with someone it was a disaster, and recommends that Justin hold onto his apartment for a few months after he and Ashley move in together. And someone who knows Ashley tells Justin he's crazy not to marry her. "You shouldn't let her get away, Justin," she tells him.

"Nope," Justin responds. "Ashley and I have talked about that. We don't intend to stay together forever. We need to concentrate on our careers, and marriage would complicate that. We both need to be free to move if an opportunity comes up, and neither of us wants to be tied down. Marriage isn't an option."

Now imagine that Justin turns to you, the only person who hasn't said anything, and, as far as you know, the only

Christian in the group. "What do you think I should do?" he asks.

What do you say?

I suspect that many Christians will explain why they think it would be wrong for Justin to move in with Ashley. They will assure Justin that God loves him, that God's law defines what is best for people created in God's image, and that things work out better when we live

according to his word. They may mention the sanctity of marriage, the problems with promiscuity, and the fulfillment possible when

men and women live faithfully together as God intended. And they might mention that this might not be easy to hear, but that friends don't let friends hurt themselves without warning them of the danger.

I also suspect that the Christian who says these things does it with good intentions: a desire to speak the truth in love, to stand for righteousness, and to pray that God will use this to draw Justin to himself. As a dutiful Christian, they may even wonder if anything except this can be said. To not say it feels like a betrayal of the truth, and they certainly don't want to be so anxious for Justin to like them that

they sacrifice the truth.

Certainly the rhetoric in many Christian magazines and

on Christian radio stations suggest this is precisely the stand required if America is

The rhetoric in many Christian magazines and on Christian radio stations suggest this is precisely the stand required if America is to be won back to Christ.

"Ashley and I don't intend to stay together forever. We need to concentrate on our careers, and marriage would complicate that."

to be won back to Christ.

Still, I have a two problems with this approach.

My first problem is that, in my experience at least, such conversations always turn out badly. I realize that as Christians we dare not only say things that everyone likes. Sometimes the truth hurts, and though we must exercise care at such moments, being certain of what, when, and how we speak, Christian faithfulness includes speaking the truth, even when unpopular. My problem is not that non-Christians might dismiss the truth, but that they are told too little of the truth to actually understand what they are dismissing, so end up merely turned off by a caricature of the truth. Can Justin really understand the 7th commandment if he has no sense of the character of the God who commanded it? Does the prohibition of promiscuity make sense if he knows nothing of the deep human and spiritual meaning of sexuality? Is telling Justin he is wrong going to be convincing if it is based on an authority which Justin does not accept? It is one thing if Justin hears the gospel, understands it, and rejects it. It is another if he is turned off by an appeal to a command that when taken out of context sounds like little more than an up-tight puritanical view of sex, and the very antithesis of a life-affirming conception of human relationships. And that is precisely how, in

my experience, such conversations usually turn out.

My second problem—closely related to the first—is

that this usual "Christian" response is less than fully biblical. Consider, for example,

when Jesus was talking to the woman by the well in Samaria (John 4). She had been married five times, and was living with a man to whom she wasn't married. Not only did Jesus never tell her this was wrong, he affirmed her, and used her admission to reveal her deep spiritual thirst, not her guilt. Consider how Paul talked about the truth when he was in Athens (Acts 17). He was talking to people who did not share his deepest convictions, so he appealed not to his authority (the Scriptures) but to their's (pagan writings and shrines). And finally consider how often Jesus did not answer the immediate question that someone asked (for example, John 12:34-36), but instead said something that probed into the issues which lay behind their question. He said what they needed to hear, addressing deeper foundational issues which they needed to understand before the answer to their specific question would make sense.

When we weave these biblical threads together, another approach to responding to Justin becomes apparent.

First, we could ask some questions, questions designed to take him seriously as someone made in God's image, and to discover the authority he follows in his life. Why is it important for him to know what we think? What does he see as the pros and cons of moving in with Ashley? Why does he think his mother disapproves? How does he usually decide what is right and wrong? What authority does he base his decisions on? What does his mother base her opinions on? Is he satisfied with his approach to right and wrong? How does it work out in daily life? Would he commend it to us?

If Justin presses us for what we think as Christians, we could respond not with the

7th commandment, but by helping him see what is behind it: "Let me tell you what I believe about sex as a Christian," we could say. "I believe sex is the coming together of two people made in God's image in a way that is both physical and spiritual, both mystical and time-bound. When two people have sex they become one in

the deepest core of their being so that ripples are set up in their lives that flow out beyond space and time. It is an act that takes us beyond the here and now to a deeper level of reality." Hopefully that will prompt discussion that touches on real issues of the heart.

And if Justin asks whether Christians believe sex outside of marriage is wrong, we could once again respond by addressing the reality of grace which lies behind his question: "There is something unique in Christianity," we could say, "something that is utterly different from any other religion or religious impulse.

In every other religion, people obey the god in order to gain the god's blessing, in order to merit the god's attention or care. In Christianity, however, all that is turned upside down. In Christ we receive the blessing of God, so that he becomes our heavenly Father and Christ our elder brother. He puts his grace on us, unites us with him, so that we obey his word not because we have to, or to earn merit, but out of love and gratitude. Unless you understand that, talking about his law simply doesn't make any sense."

I do not write this because I think that if we approach things this way every conversation will turn out well, and all the Justins in

There is a difference between arguing over what is right and wrong, and truly engaging someone with the gospel.

our life will be drawn to Christianity. We live in a fallen world, and no "approach" should be made into a technique that "works." On the contrary, I write this because I wonder if we have thought deeply enough, and biblically enough, about these all-too-common encounters in our pluralistic world. There is a difference between arguing over what is right and wrong, and truly engaging someone with the gospel.

We should think about this creatively, because if we're engaged with the culture to any degree, the scenario about Justin isn't all that farfetched. ■

~Denis Haack

This is the 13th in a series of articles on living faithfully in Babylon, in the world but not of it.

Order From:



Distinctive Books and Music

www.heartsandmindsbooks.com
read@heartsandmindsbooks.com

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

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

How much reality



**Latest
CD
by
Bruce
Springsteen**

Pfc. Lynndie England has become the notorious symbol of the moral corruption of the Abu Ghraib prison abuse scandal. Pictures of her holding a hooded prisoner on a dog leash, standing next to a pyramid of naked Iraqi prisoners, or pointing at a prisoner's genitals have filled the nation's newspapers. Moral outrage is an automatic response from the distanced reader, who then turns the page and pours

another cup of coffee.

She originally pled guilty to the charges, but now questions are being raised about her competence to determine the rightness or wrongness of her actions. The legal wrangling will go on, but what of Lynndie—the person? The West Virginia girl born with a speech-impediment and learning disability? The accused prisoner-abuser who gave birth to an infant son out of wedlock, allegedly by convicted co-conspirator Pvt. Charles Graner? (Graner, now in prison, recently married another woman.) Who is taking care of Lynndie's baby as she awaits her sentencing? Where is our profound sense of tragedy? Why is it not more than coffee that we spill on the morning paper?

There is something seriously wrong with many American Christians. We fail to acknowledge the evil lurking in every human heart. We fail to see ourselves as sinners. Instead, we adopt the hubris of thinking like Pharisees.

Humanity is deeply wounded, broken, and scarred. The sins of fathers are morally and emotionally passed on from generation to generation. And yet we categorize, demonize, and politicize rather than see neighbors or ourselves as we really are. In doing so, we make the gospel irrelevant to both. When we see life merely through narrow moral categories, precise doctrinal abstractions, rather than

through a veil of tears marked by the smell of stale beer, we have squeezed reality into the lie of sanitized superficial suburban respectability.

Life is not like a TV sitcom—neatly wrapped up in 25 minutes. Life is much more like Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, where pride, murder, infidelity, and revenge leave the main characters dead on the floor as the curtain falls. Life this side of eternity is messy and open-ended. Doubts persist. Temptations linger. Dreams go unfulfilled. We live with the radical disconnect between our longings and our living.

How much reality can the gospel stand? I suspect a lot more than most Christians.

Bruce Springsteen's latest studio album, *Devils & Dust* (2005) is a good case study and is worthy of our close attention as it is an antidote to our religiously-sanctioned hard hearts. Dylanesque in style and feel, this album has been compared to his earlier folk-rock albums, *Nebraska* (1982) and *The Ghost of Tom Joad* (1995).

***Where is our profound sense of tragedy?
Why is it not more than coffee that we
spill on the morning paper?***

The music's sparseness matches the lyrics' gritty realism and haunting reflections about longing and loss. Many of the songs were written while touring in support of *The Ghost of Tom Joad* and predate his recent political activism. They are universal in their message and appeal. Hank Kalet describes the collection of songs in *Pop Matters*, as "a search for redemption through the minefield of broken dreams and frayed relations, chance encounters and temporary salvation that lies, ultimately, just out of reach." Just as life is ambiguous and unresolved, so too these songs often end with little or no resolution—the



can you stand?

agony and bitterness of life not going as planned, the questions left hanging in the air.

There will be those who will write off the artistry of Springsteen's album by remembering his high profile support for Democratic Presidential candidate, John Kerry, through organizing last summer's Vote For Change concerts. A similar mistake would be to fail to heed the lessons learned by Jane Fonda as revealed in her new book, *My Life So Far*.

There will be those who will object to the deeply human and moral message of Springsteen because the album has an "Adult Imagery" warning label for its sexually explicit depiction of a man's encounter with a Reno prostitute.

There will be others who object to the "f-word" used in "Long Time Comin'," when a homeless father looks at his pregnant wife and sleeping children and promises to do better. (Apparently the first use of the word in Springsteen's *oeuvre*.)

There will be those who object to his theologically vague description of God as "the soul of the universe" in the song, "Jesus Was an Only Son."

And all of these reactions will cloud the spiritual perception needed to understand the implications of Jesus' statement, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matthew 9:12-13). Springsteen's *Devils & Dust* provides an opportunity to go and learn what this means. "I like to write about people whose souls are in danger, who are at risk. In every song on this record, somebody's in some spiritual struggle between the worst of themselves and the best of themselves, and everybody comes out in a slightly different place. That thread runs through the record, and it's what gives the record its grounding in the spirit," he told Jon Pareles in a recent *The New York Times* interview.

In the title track, "Devils & Dust," Springsteen explores the thoughts of a U.S. soldier on guard duty in Iraq—the kind of young eighteen-year-old who has seen so many of his comrades killed in random acts of premeditated violence, charged with making the split second decision of whether the approaching car is a terrorist intent on taking his life or a family of Iraqi mourners or Italian journalists.

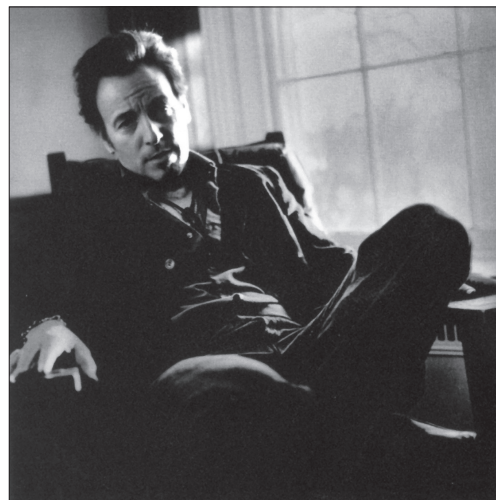
***When we see life
merely through
narrow moral
categories rather
than through
a veil of tears
marked by the
smell of stale beer,
we have squeezed
reality into the lie
of sanitized super-
ficial suburban
respectability.***

*I've got my finger on the trigger
But I don't know who to trust
When I look into your eyes
There's just devils and dust
We're a long, long way from home,
Bobbie
Home's a long, long way from us
I feel a dirty wind blowing
Devils and dust*

Though he reassures himself that "God is on our side," the requirements of survival make him wonder if it's all worth it if it kills the things you love. Over time, the price is one's soul—"It'll take your God filled soul fill it with devils and dust."

In such a pressure cooker so far away from all that is familiar and safe, political and religious verities melt into profound self-doubt.

*Now every woman and every man
They want to take a righteous stand
Find the love that God wills
And the faith that He commands
I've got my finger on the trigger
And tonight faith just ain't enough
When I look inside my heart
There's just devils and dust*



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



Tuned In cont.

We do well to remember that truth does not change based on whether we believe it or not, but that our convictions are susceptible to the plausibility of our context. It is a human reality that demands far more compassion for doubt and confusion. We have not stood guard at an Iraqi checkpoint. Our response should not be catechetical instruction, but human reassurance, making real the incarnate presence of God.

The controversial song, “Reno,” describes the thoughts of an older man making a visit to a Nevada prostitute. Its lyrics are graphic in detail and yet there has rarely been a more poignant critique of casual sex. Springsteen explains in *The New York Times*, “He’s in this room with this proxy, because he couldn’t handle the real thing. The physicality, the sexual content of the song was important, because casual sex is kind of a closing the book on you. It’s ecstasy, and it’s release. Sex with someone you love is opening the book on you, which is always a risky and frightening read.”

While the lyrics will make a Christian listener wince, his memories of his former love, Maria, contrast powerfully the difference between sex and love.

*I was sure the work and the smile coming out
‘neath your hat was all I’d ever need
Somehow all you ever need’s, never really
quite enough you know
You and I, Maria, we learned it’s so*

Now years later, as he stares out the motel blinds he thinks about the sunlight on her hair, and horseback rides they took together with the cowboys down into the cool rivers of green. Sexual passion is released, while the memory of love lost painfully remains.

The final song on the album is

“Matamoros Banks,” the story of an illegal immigrant’s unsuccessful attempt to swim the Rio Grande River into Texas. The story of his drowning is told in reverse—from death realized back to dreams anticipated.

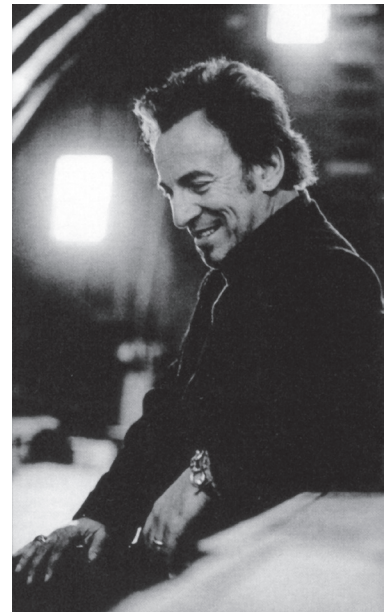
*For two days the river keeps you down
Then you rise to the light without a sound
Past the playgrounds and empty switching
yards
The turtles eat the skin from your eyes, so
they lay open to the stars*

The stories here do not have happy endings or neat resolutions. A child runs away from a drug-laden home. A retired boxer, bruised and battered, asks his mother to let him lie down for a while before returning to his violent world. A thirteen-year-old muses on the meaning of his mother’s unexpected death. A mother struggles with the death of her only son.

Life is deeply tragic if viewed only from birth to death. Herein is the flaw in Springsteen’s depiction of the human condition. He leaves the movie early and wonders at its meaning. His songs end almost mid-sentence. When he sings of the Blessed Mary’s loss in “Jesus Was an Only Son,” he captures her human emotion, but not her spiritual understanding.

*Now there’s a loss that can never be replaced
A destination that can never be reached
A light you’ll never find in another’s face
A sea whose distance cannot be breached*

There is in every human heart a deep longing for home—in its most profound metaphysical sense. And it was of this home that Jesus spoke, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me. In my Father’s house are many



rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you” (John 14:2). C.S. Lewis writes in *Till We Have Faces*, “Do you think it all meant nothing, all the longing? The longing for home?” Life only makes sense in the light of eternity and all our deepest longings only find their final fulfillment in the home He provides.

But until we can identify with those who live on the edge of hope and face the tragedy of sin, we will never be able to connect emotionally long enough to point those most in need of grace to its Source. Keep Lynndie and her son in your prayers. Far more than religious sacrifice, God wants our hearts of mercy. ■

—John Seel

John Seel is the headmaster of South Shore Christian Academy. His most recent book is Parenting Without Perfection: Being a Kingdom Influence in a Toxic World (Navpress). He lives with his wife, Kathryn, in Cohasset, Massachusetts.

The neo-pagan resurgence

I first heard her name on National Public Radio as she signed off as the correspondent on a report that impressed me as fair and balanced. The story had caught my attention because it touched on questions of faith, and I remember thinking she must be sensitive to such things to take such care in her reporting. A correspondent based in New York, Margot Adler is host of NPR's weekly "Justice Talking," which explores the various cases and issues facing America's courts. Margot Adler is also a Wiccan priestess.

In *Drawing Down the Moon*, Adler gives us an in-depth, clearly written glimpse into a world of ritual, belief, and deep yearning for spirituality and personal meaning that for most of us is a world we know little or nothing about. "If you go far enough back," she writes, "all our ancestors practiced religions that had neither creeds nor dogmas, neither prophets nor holy books. These religions were based on the celebrations of the seasonal cycles of nature. They were based on what people did, as opposed to what people believed. It is these polytheistic religions of imminence that are being revived and re-created by Neo-Pagans today. This book

is the story of that Pagan resurgence."

If we have eyes to see and ears to hear, the neo-pagan resurgence occurring around us is not news. It can be spotted as a theme weaving its way throughout film, music, television shows, science, medicine, and Super Bowl half-time shows, to name just a few of the more obvious venues. If you haven't met a neo-pagan yet, you will soon.

"The Earth-based traditions," Adler says in one of her columns on Beliefnet.com, "those religions that are based not in scripture

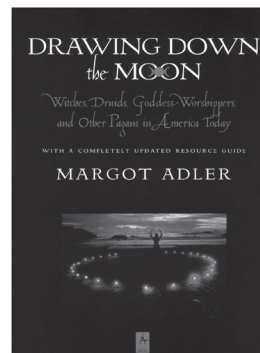
but in seasonal celebrations and customs of peoples, have never understood our odd Western dichotomies: how we split play and seriousness, mind and body, light and dark, earth and sky, black and white, spirit and matter. These religions have always understood that matter and spirit both partake of the sacredness and vitality of life.

One of the great lessons of the Earth traditions is that the world is something to embrace, not to escape from. This land, this earth, this place

of joys and sadness where we live out our days is where the sacred lives."

Christians need to take this growing movement seriously. We need to understand what it is neo-pagans believe and do, and why. We need to reflect on how we can engage them as friends and neighbors, how we might both learn from them, and how we can live and speak of our faith in a way they might be able to understand. And we need to ask why a generation which tends to find Christianity negative, judgmental, uncreative, withdrawn, and unauthentic, tends to find neo-paganism to be positive, welcoming, creative, involved, and deeply human. ■

~Denis Haack



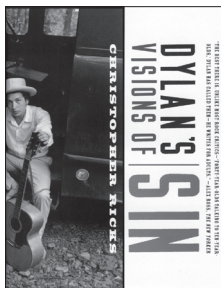
Source: *Drawing Down the Moon* p. ix; "All of a Piece: A reminder that the sacred and the secular are not separate" by Margot Adler (http://www.beliefnet.com/story/1/story_122_1.html).

Book reviewed: *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today* by Margot Adler (New York, NY: Penguin Compass; 1979, 1986) 442 pp. + appendices + notes + index.



Briefly Noted: Sin, Virtue, & Grace in Dylan's Music

by Denis Haack



In *Dylan's Vision of Sin*, Christopher Ricks, humanities professor at Boston University and author of works on Milton, Tennyson, Keats, Beckett, and T. S. Eliot, examines Bob Dylan's lyrics. "Dylan's is an art," Ricks argues, "in which sins are laid bare (and resisted), virtues are valued (and manifested), and the graces brought home." The chapters follow that order, the first seven on the seven deadly sins (envy, covetousness, greed, sloth, lust, anger, pride), then four on the cardinal virtues (justice, prudence, temperance, fortitude), and three on the heavenly graces (faith, hope, charity). One of the interesting aspects of this book is that Ricks, who identifies himself as an atheist, has such deep appreciation for the values which form the foundation of Dylan's music. "One delight of Dylan's Christian songs," he says, "can arise from finding (to your surprise and not chagrin) that your own system of beliefs doesn't have a monopoly of intuition, sensitivity, scruple, and concern."

Dylan's Vision of Sin is probably too detailed a study of Dylan's lyrics for all except Dylan fans and those who want to reflect with care on his legacy in popular music. But for those of us who fit that category, Ricks' book is a fascinating read. ■

Book recommended: *Dylan's Vision of Sin* by Christopher Ricks (New York, NY: HarperCollins; 2003) 490 pp. + indices.

The Discerning Life

"You're Fired!" (Christianly)

One of the finest training seminars I ever experienced was led by a consulting firm which specialized in preparing people for management positions. I remember being dubious about it when my supervisor asked me to attend, but was quickly won over by the thoughtfulness of the leaders and the quality of the material. I'm still grateful for what I learned that week: how to read a resume, lead a team, conduct an evaluation, how to hire and fire. After the seminar, I spent several days with my supervisor and his manager so the training I had received could be applied specifically to my situation. Since I worked for a Christian ministry, we processed the material in light of Scripture. In most instances the principles meshed with biblical standards, but not in every case. Our desire was not to conform to the newest ideas in management theory, but to live faithfully as Christian managers, eager to learn all we could without being squeezed into the world's mold.

If Donald Trump's "The Apprentice"

(NBC) proves anything, it is that managers should give some thought to how they fire employees. *Wired* magazine published a brief list of tips for managers as to how to best accomplish this sad task. The tips were from Drake Beam Morin, an HR firm about which I know nothing except to appreciate the text on their home page: "In transitions, facts are more than just figures. Behind the numbers are people..." That's correct: firing someone is not merely a financial business decision, but a human interaction which will deeply impact, for blessing and for curse, both the company and the employee. The tips from DBM fall into two categories, things to do and things to avoid:

Do:

- invite the person to sit down;
- raise the topic immediately instead of chatting first;
- use notes so you don't ramble;
- keep the meeting brief, about 15 minutes is recommended; &
- invite and listen to their response to the bad news.

Don't:

- sympathize or be defensive;
- begin by saying "How are you?";
- tell them you disagree with the decision to fire them;
- say inappropriate things such as "This hurts me as much as it hurts you" or "I know just how you feel";
- make promises about contacting them if another position opens up; &
- be apologetic since this decision, though painful, is good for the company and will also allow them to find a position which better fits them.

If you think that reflecting on how to fire someone is a task only professional managers need consider, please reconsider. Parents telling a baby-sitter they will no longer be calling them, a leader telling a volunteer they are being replaced, or asking an ineffective small group leader to step down are tasks we all will face at some point.

So, let's try to be discerning about how to tell someone they're fired. ■

~Denis Haack

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Have you been fired? How was the news communicated to you? How did you respond? What did you learn from the experience? Should the news have been communicated differently? Why?
2. Remembering that DBM's training for managers is much more complete than the few tips listed here, consider each of the tips in turn. What is your immediate response to the list of Dos and Don'ts? Why do you think you responded as you did? Could you follow them? Why or why not?
3. Have you ever had to fire someone? How did you do it? If you had to do it again, would you do it differently?

Questions continued on next page...

Caring for the earth

...QUESTIONS CONT.

4. What biblical principles should inform and shape a Christian's approach to firing someone (in whatever context)?
5. Those supervising volunteers in church ministries often face added hurdles in trying to deal with volunteers who either are not gifted for the task, or who fail to do the necessary work, or who don't fit well in the position for which they volunteered. What hurdles are those? How should they be dealt with? Have you ever been hurt in a situation like this? Have you ever hurt someone else? What problems arise when a volunteer is allowed to remain in a position for which they are unsuited? How would you want to be treated if your church elders believed you were in the wrong position as a volunteer?
6. A Christian manager disagrees with some aspects of her company's policy guidelines for firing employees. In particular, she believes that the news is communicated too coldly, with employees viewed primarily in financial terms instead as human beings, and with little attention to the employee's future since the company has little difficulty recruiting qualified, motivated workers. Her request that the company reconsider the guidelines was denied, and she was told she was expected to follow them. She otherwise likes the company, its products and policies. Should she follow the guidelines or quietly subvert them when she fires someone? Why? To what extent are Christians required to act Christianly when we are employed by non-Christians who hold values and convictions different from our own?

Sources: "Come In, Sit Down, You're Fired" in *Wired* (June 2001) p. 75; Drake Beam Morin (www.dbm.com).

Francis Schaeffer on creation

Pagan beauty, Christian ugliness

"Some years ago I was lecturing in a certain Christian school. Just across a ravine from the school there was what they called a 'hippie community.' On the far side of the ravine one saw trees and some farms. Here, I was told, they had pagan grape stomps. Being interested, I made my way across the ravine and met one of the leading men in this 'Bohemian' community.

"We got on very well as we talked of ecology, and I was able to speak of the Christian answer to life and ecology. He paid me the compliment (and I accepted it as such) of telling me that I was the first person from 'across the ravine' who had ever been shown the place where they did, indeed, have grape stomps and to see the pagan image they had there. This image was the center of these rites. The whole thing was set against the classical background of Greece and Rome.

"Having shown me all this, he looked across to the Christian school and said to me, 'Look at that; isn't that ugly?' And it was! I could not deny it. It was an ugly building, without even trees around it.

"It was then that I realized what a poor situation this was. When I stood on Christian ground and looked at the Bohemian people's place, it was beautiful. They had even gone to the trouble of running their electric cables under the level of the trees so that they couldn't be seen. Then I stood on pagan ground and looked at the Christian community and saw ugliness. Here you have a Christianity that is failing to take into account man's responsibility and proper relationship to nature."

~Francis A. Schaeffer

Trees, rocks and people

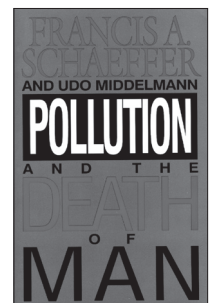
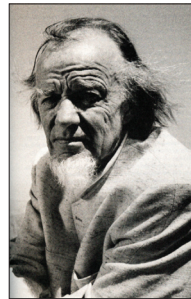
"Christians, of all people, should not be the destroyers. We should treat nature with an overwhelming respect. We may cut down a tree to build a house, or to make a fire to keep the family warm. But we should not

cut down the tree just to cut down the tree. We may, if necessary, bark the tree in order to have the use of the bark. But what we should not do is bark the tree simply for the sake of doing so, and let it dry and stand there a dead skeleton in the wind. To do so is not to treat the tree with integrity. We have the right to rid our houses of ants; but

what we have not the right to do is to forget the honor the ant as God made it, in its rightful place in nature. When we meet the ant on the sidewalk, we step over him. He is a creature, like ourselves; not made in the image of God, but equal with us as far as creation is concerned.

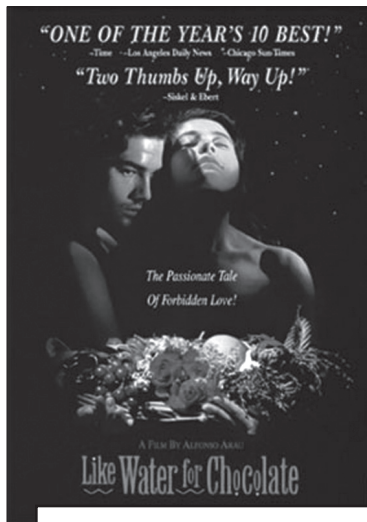
"One does not deface things simply to deface them. After all, the rock has a God-given right to be a rock as He made it. If you must move the rock in order to build the foundation of a house, then by all means move it. But on a walk in the woods do not strip the moss from it for no reason, and then leave the moss to lie by the side and die. Even the moss has a right to live. It is equal with man as a creature of God." ■

~Francis A. Schaeffer



Francis A. Schaeffer in *Pollution and the Death of Man* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books; 1970) pp. 43-43, pp. 74-76.

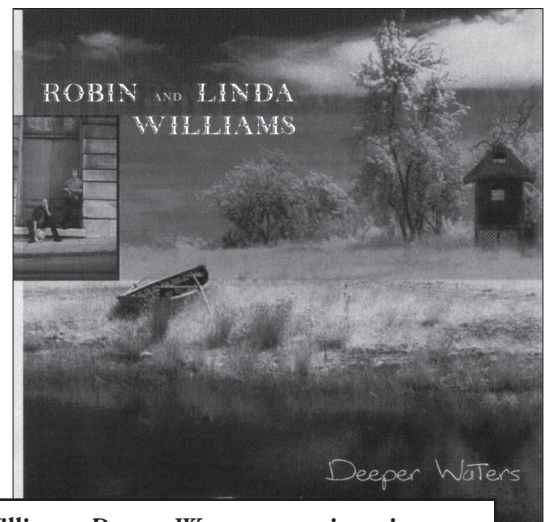
On the Web



***Like Water for Chocolate*—a movie review**
http://www.ransomfellowship.org/M_LikeWater.html



***A Stick Becomes the Staff of God: Reflections on Faithfulness in the Ordinary & the Routine*—a reprinted article by Denis Haack**
http://www.ransomfellowship.org/Article_StaffOfGod.htm



Robin & Linda Williams: *Deeper Water*—a music review
http://www.ransomfellowship.org/Music_Williams_DeepWater.htm

Critique Mailing List:

Critique is not available by subscription. Rather, interested readers can request to be added to Ransom's mailing list, which is updated frequently. Donors to Ransom Fellowship, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, tax-deductible ministry, are added to the mailing list automatically unless requesting otherwise. **To receive *Critique***, send your mailing address to:

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

Everyone on Ransom's mailing list also receives *Notes from Toad Hall*, a newsletter written by Margie Haack in which she reflects on what it means to be faithful in the ordinary and routine of daily life, and gives news about Ransom's ministry.

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

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

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

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

Now on the web: www.ransomfellowship.org