

critique

A Ransom Fellowship Publication 2013 Issue 2

In this issue you've got
liberty, pride, truth, feelings, exile,
and an exercise in



CRITIQUE



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ABOUT CRITIQUE

Critique is part of the work of Ransom Fellowship founded by Denis and Margie Haack in 1982. Together, they have created a ministry that includes lecturing, mentoring, writing, teaching, hospitality, feeding, and encouraging those who want to know more about what it means to be a Christian in the everyday life of the twenty-first century.

Except where noted, all articles are by Denis Haack.

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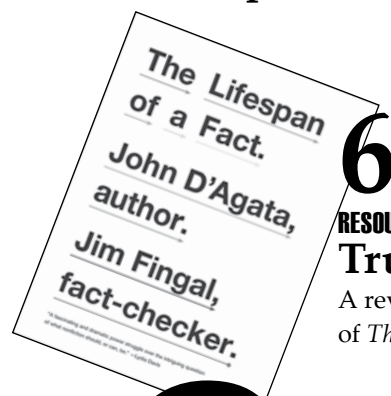
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2013:2 CONTENTS

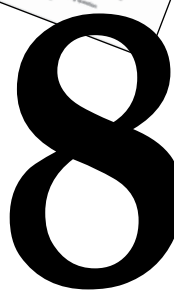
1 FROM THE EDITOR What to Do with Liberty

DIALOGUE Readers Respond 2



6 RESOURCE Truth, Reality, and Facts

A review by Andrew Trotter
of *The Lifespan of a Fact*



READING THE WORLD

Trying to See...More Clearly

A look at *Religion for Atheists*

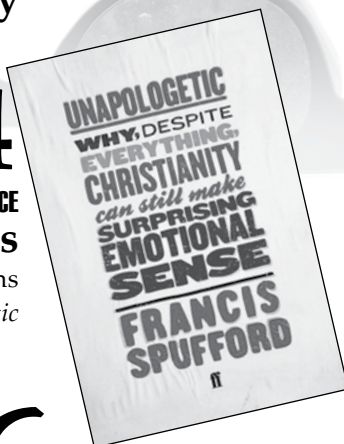


14

RESOURCE

Unapologetic Feelings

A review by Cal Boroughs
of the book *Unapologetic*



16

DARKENED ROOM

Portrait of an Artist in Exile

A film review of *Searching for Sugar Man*



What to Do with Liberty?



In his thoughtful and intriguing *Religion for Atheists*, Alain de Botton argues that the libertarian fear of a paternal state can have unfortunate consequences. It would be considered unforgiveable, in this perspective, if billboards, supported by tax revenues, exhorted citizens to excel in some virtue or reminded them to be kind or forgiving or slow to anger. It is not that the public spaces must be kept strictly neutral—witness the myriad consumerist ads with their implicit spiritual values—but that authoritarian voices seeking to mold character are seen as unfortunate relics of a by-gone era when church and state were not separated enough. Today the social ideal is personal liberty, free from dogma or propaganda. De Botton suggests this may not reflect a clear-headed understanding of our true state of affairs.

The true risks to our chances of flourishing are different from those conceived of by libertarians. A lack of freedom is no longer, in most developed societies, the problem. Our downfall lies in our inability to make the most of the freedom that our ancestors painfully secured for us over three centuries. We have grown sick from being left to do as we please without sufficient wisdom to exploit our liberty. It is not primarily the case that we find ourselves at the mercy of paternalistic authorities whose claims we resent and want to be free of. The danger runs in an opposite direction: we face temptations which we revile in those interludes when we can attain a sufficient distance from them, but which we lack any encouragement to resist, much to our eventual self-disgust and disappointment. The mature sides of us watch in despair as the infantile aspects of us trample upon our more elevated principles and ignore what we most fervently revere. Our deepest wish may be that someone would come along and save us from ourselves. [p. 77]

De Botton notes that religion, unlike secular society, feels free to paternalistically remind believers of their duty to nourish forgiveness, graciousness, civility, and other values that though universally idealized remain notoriously difficult to cultivate. Being reminded of such things is not, he insists, contrary to true liberty, and he proposes that our public spaces begin to include creatively conceived messages to that end. That is what he means by his final sentence in which he identifies the human yearning to be saved from our darker natures.

As a Christian, I inhabit a world in which the reminders to virtue and against vice are part of my surroundings. In church we review the moral

precepts of Scripture, bow in a time of confession, and are reminded of the multifaceted beauty of love with which our lives should be adorned. It is a regular part of our liturgy, weekly, and I would have it no other way. In the front of the sanctuary, banners commissioned from textile artists reinforce in symbol what the liturgy leads us to repeat in words. My experience is that the reminders, though useful and important, are in themselves insufficient. I am not alone: Augustine concurs, as his *Confessions* makes clear.

The truth is that reminders for virtue and against vice can become an inexorable burden if not accompanied by someone who will actually save us from ourselves. This is the grace the Christian experiences, we believe, through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, a mystical reality that comes from our spiritual union with Christ. Believe this is true, and gratitude transforms the reminders from burden to refreshment. ■

DIALOGUE: READERS RESPOND



To the editor:

I feel as if I know you in some ways, certainly because of *Critique* and *Notes from Toad Hall*. You give of your thoughts and reflections so freely and honestly. And then also, I feel I know you because of Steve Garber, a fellow pilgrim at The Falls Church Anglican. He speaks so highly of you both and your ministry.

It was a pleasure to read *Critique* 2012:6. Denis' encouragement of Margie's writing ["Discovering your calling... slowly"] expressed feelings I have for my best friend Nancy Ziegler's art. Revealed in just these last six years, God gifted her with a sense of beauty and color which she is using to capture creation on her canvases (you can peruse them online at www.nancyzieglerpaintings.com). It has been a joy and gift to watch this gift grow... and bring moments of peace to those who experience her art. So,

Denis, thank you for capturing the blessing of walking together as our gifts are discovered.

And thank you, also, for giving gratitude focus ["Nourishing Gratitude: Being Thankful. Again"]. Our self-centered society has come to take for granted too much... rather than receive with gratitude we expect with demand. I will take to heart the wisdom of your article and am keeping it to re-read when my own focus has become soft.

God's speed to you both for 2013.
Lindsay Hutter
Washington, D.C.

Denis Haack responds:

Thank you for your kind words, Lindsay. And when you next see Steve, who has been a friend since the seventies and a member of Ransom's board for years, give him our greetings.

Correction

To the editor:

I just received an e-mail from Paul Hedley Jones, author of the book [*Sharing God's Passion*] I reviewed ["The Story of a Passionate God"] in *Critique* 2012:6. In the fifth paragraph of my review, I said this:

Not everyone (including this reviewer) will share Jones' conviction that the prophetic mode of speech requires belief in something like "open theism" (the view that the future is unknown and ungoverned by God because, in a real sense, it does not yet exist to be known or governed). For Jones, "our speech and actions...supply the bricks and mortar paving our way through

life," and even God himself has to work around (or with) our free choices to make sure his plans are accomplished. According to Jones, for instance, Moses' intercession on Israel's behalf, for God to relent from his wrath towards Israel, "exposes God's openness to be moved by his human partners."

Jones objected to that. He told me he's not an open theist, and he's worried that this will give readers the wrong impression. So, I'm wondering if we could alter that paragraph on the Ransom Web site so that it reads instead:

Not everyone (including this reviewer) will share Jones' conviction that the prophetic mode of speech requires us to believe that human agency can cause God to change his mind. For Jones, "our speech and actions...supply the bricks and mortar paving our way through life," and even God himself has to work around (or with) our free choices to make sure his plans are accomplished. According to Jones, for instance, Moses' intercession on Israel's behalf, for God to relent from his wrath towards Israel, "exposes God's openness to be moved by his human partners."

Thanks.
Wesley Hill
Ambridge, Pa.

Denis Haack responds:

We've changed it on Ransom's Web site, Wes, and I am glad to record the change here for our print readers. ■

The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism Revisited, or Pride Goeth Before a Fall

by H. David Baer

Twenty-one years ago the Soviet Union collapsed, marking the end of an era. After forty-five years of the Cold War, liberal democracy had emerged triumphant. Developing nations across the world looked to the United States and Western Europe for models of success. Francis Fukuyama wrote a book titled *The End of History*, in which he argued that Western-style liberal democracy represented the end point of political evolution; Michael Novak republished *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*, in which he defended the superiority of free markets to planned economies.

Today, however, the West is in crisis. In the United States, the securitization of mortgages within a highly opaque and poorly regulated financial sector led in 2007 to a massive market failure and the greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression. In Europe, structural defects with the common currency coupled to high levels of sovereign debt have pushed some nations into deep recession, threatening Europe's political integration and stability. When developing countries search for models of success, rather than look to the West, they often look to China, with its undemocratic, state-sponsored capitalism. The ability of free markets to outperform all competitors can no longer be taken for granted; the superiority of democratic capitalism is no longer self-evident. What went wrong?

The answer to that question is multifaceted, but underlying every facet of the answer may be a truth first discerned by Solomon, "Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall." The United States has been the world's unchallenged economic and military superpower for twenty years, and unrivaled supremacy makes for complacency. "See, see but

do not perceive," writes the prophet; "make the heart of this people fat." A fat-hearted people, concerned with comfort and privilege, refuses to notice signs of impending crisis until after it comes. In America, the failures of our domestic politics are only now becoming apparent.

We now know, for example, that the financial sector was not functioning anywhere near as well as the free marketers told us. In her recent book *Bull by the Horns* (Free Press, 2012), Former FDIC chair Sheila Bair describes the way "deregulatory dogma" deluded Washington elites, both Republican and Democrat, into believing that markets and institutions could regulate themselves. As she explains:

The groupthink was that technological innovation, coupled with the Fed's seeming mastery of maintaining an easy monetary policy without inflation, meant an end to the economic cycles of good times and bad that had characterized our financial system in the past. The golden age of banking was here and would last forever. We didn't need regulation anymore. (Bair 17)

Momentous financial crises, like those we experienced in 2007 and 2008, just weren't supposed to happen anymore. Called to testify before Congress in 2008, former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan, whose commitment to the idea of the self-correcting free market was frequently

described as ideological, could only express his "shocked disbelief" that financial institutions had failed to monitor themselves, and then reluctantly acknowledged a "flaw" in his system of thought.

However, to attribute the cause of our present discontents to the financial sector alone would be too easy; "Does a bird fall in a snare when there is no trap for it?" Over the course of the last two decades, Americans have fallen prey to a bowdlerized version of free-market philosophy, according to which markets produce prosperity automatically, and no one ever has to sacrifice or attend to the health of civil society. Perhaps nowhere is this self-deception more



striking than in our tax code, riddled through and through with exemptions, deductions, credits, and loopholes. Although the inefficiency of the tax code is universally acknowledged, its inequity is sometimes overlooked. Every tax exemption is a form of government subsidy. The popular mortgage-interest

deduction, for example, costs the federal government four times as much in lost revenue as the amount it spends directly on public housing for America's poorest quintile (see *The Economist*, "America's Tax System," October 13, 2012). But because this subsidy is hidden in the tax code, its middle- and upper-class beneficiaries can extol the virtues of the free market without ever noticing their own hypocrisy. For a moment, such hypocritical self-deception was rudely exposed by Mitt Romney's infamous reference to the 47 percent, not only—as was quickly pointed out in the press—because a

large percentage of the 47 percent are Republicans, but also—as was not much noted—because the wealthy donors whom Romney addressed, deducting their mortgage interest and health insurance premiums from their taxes paid on investment income at a lower rate than wage earners, are themselves enormous beneficiaries of government largesse. What is this, if not “to falsify the balances with deceit”?

Self-serving appeals to a free-market philosophy preached but never practiced have also blinded Americans to the problem of growing income inequality. In the mid-twentieth century, economists used to argue that while inequality increases in the early stages of industrialization, it decreases as economies develop. Today, we know that this is not necessarily the case. Since 1980, the share of national income in the United States going to the top 1 percent has doubled from 10 percent to 20 percent; the share going to the richest .01 percent has jumped from 1 percent to 5 percent. Judged by a standard measure called the Gini coefficient, the level of inequality in the United States is starting to move uncomfortably close to that of a South American country like



Brazil. Although economists used to believe that a growing economy benefits everyone, the evidence now suggests that those on the bottom and middle end of the income distribution are falling behind in absolute, not just relative terms. Wage income is stagnating (see *The Economist*, "World Economy, For Richer, for Poorer," October 13, 2012). Whatever the moral issues, economists are telling us in increasing number that large disparities in wealth pose an economic problem. Joseph Stiglitz, former chief economist of the World Bank and winner of the Nobel Prize, argues in *The Price of Inequality* (W. W. Norton, 2012), that large inequalities render an economy inefficient and unstable. Summarizing his views, Stiglitz writes:

Inequality weakens aggregate demand, because those at the middle and bottom have to spend all or almost all of what that they get, while those at the top don't. The concentration of wealth in recent decades led to bubbles and instability, as the Fed tried to offset the effects of weak demand arising from our inequality by low interest rates and lax regulation.... Mainstream economic institutions like the International Monetary Fund now recognize the connection between inequality and a weak economy. (New York Times, October 26, 2012)

Moreover, growing income inequality in America appears to be a symptom of diminishing equality of opportunity. Economists seeking to measure the extent to which the income of parents influences the income and educational attainment of children have developed something called the

"inter-generational elasticity of income" coefficient. According to this measure, parental income explains half of the differences in children's outcomes in the US, which is worse than in virtually every country in Europe, including much maligned socialist Sweden (see, *The Economist*, "Economic Opportunity," October 13, 2012). Nor can one attribute inequality in America simply to the workings of the market. American inequality is exacerbated by a skewed but invisible welfare state, one that distributes wealth upward by means of a Byzantine tax code and redistributes wealth from the young to the old through a system of entitlements.

Severe inequality, if left uncorrected, can lead to political crises. To be sure, some inequality is unavoidable, but if too much of a nation's wealth ends up in the hands of the few, a country becomes divided into factions with conflicting and irreconcilable interests. Such societies cannot discern a common good and may cease to cohere. Ancient Rome was wracked by civil wars caused by plebian resentment of aristocratic privileges, which gave rise to dictators and the end of the Republic. The twentieth century was tormented by left and right-wing totalitarianisms originating in reactions to social failures caused by earlier forms of capitalism. US history also knows its social upheavals and dangerous forms of populism.

These are truths we have forgotten, lulled into a sense of security by our self-congratulatory faith in the inevitability of history. History, however, records failure as well as success. It tells the tale of nations that declined and fell after failing to meet the challenges which confronted them. Only a stiff-necked people would believe its own history is destined to be different.

Democracy doesn't happen; it is built and tended to. Its success depends on effort and honesty and qualities of character which, surveying the political landscape, would appear in short supply. If the heart of the people is fat, no government of the people, by the people, and for the people can hope long to prosper. For democracy in America, a new birth of freedom may depend upon a change of heart. ■

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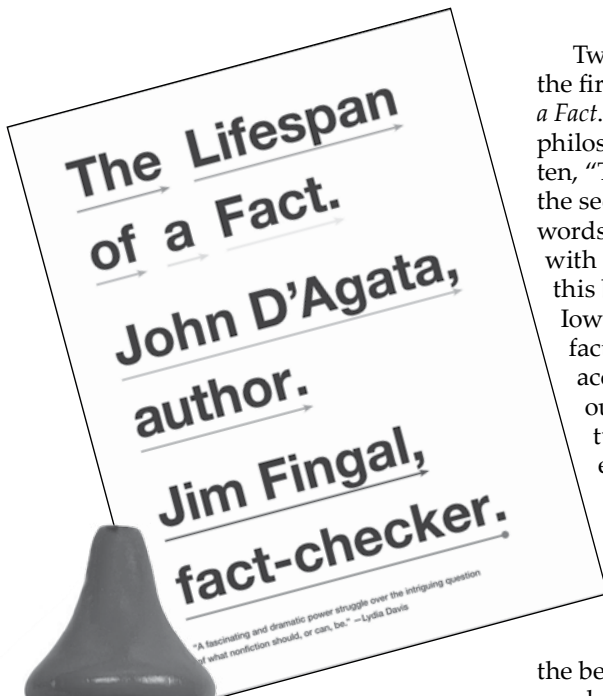
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The Cresset, published five times during the academic year by Valparaiso University, is a journal of commentary on literature, the arts, and public affairs exploring ideas and trends in contemporary culture from a perspective grounded in the Lutheran tradition of scholarship, freedom, and faith while informed by the wisdom of the broader Christian community.

Truth, Reality, and Facts

a review by Andrew Trotter



Two quotations from Lao-tzu adorn the first two pages of *The Lifespan of a Fact*. On the first page the Chinese philosopher is quoted as having written, "True words are not beautiful." On the second the saying reads: "Beautiful words are not true." The problem with the underlying philosophy of this book, penned by a University of Iowa creative writing teacher and a fact checker at a magazine that had accepted the former's essay, cries out from the juxtaposition of these two sayings, as if they contradicted each other, but were somehow both true. The fact is both could be false (I believe they are), both could be true, the first could be false and the second true, and vice versa because they deal with two different categories:

the beautiful and the true, which have ample space for each other in any reasonable discussion, especially when applied to language.

The Lifespan of a Fact does not seem to allow for this subtlety, however. The book is made up of the correspondence between John D'Agata, who submitted an essay in 2003 to the magazine *The Believer* with the understanding that there may be some actual discrepancies in it, and the fact checker for the magazine, Jim Fingal, who was given the assignment "to comb through [the essay], marking anything and everything that you can confirm as true, as well as

whatever you think is questionable" ("the Editor," p. 11). Fingal took his task seriously and thereafter followed an e-mail correspondence that lasted seven years as D'Agata and Fingal argued, revised, and "struggled to navigate the boundaries of literary nonfiction" (back cover).

The essay began with an historical fact: On July 13, 2002, a teenager named Levi Presley climbed to the observation deck of the Stratosphere Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas, Nevada, and then jumped to his death at 6:01 p.m. From that point, author D'Agata constructs an essay combining fact, arguable fact, close to fact, arguable fiction, and pure fiction (lots of the last) in such a way that, appearing to be essentially factual, the essay lies regularly to its readers.

**TRUTH IS AN ARROW
AND THE GATE IS NARROW
THAT IT PASSES THROUGH.**
—Bob Dylan, "When He Returns"
on *Slow Train Coming* (1979)

Of course D'Agata gave many personal opinions in the piece; it is an essay after all. The problem for Fingal came in the places where D'Agata seemed to be referring to an objective fact about the setting of the incident, the time or setting of other related incidents, etc.

D'Agata is completely unrepentant for his modus operandi because he simply believes that truth results from literary creation, not historical accuracy.

After ruminating about the purposes of the ancient historian Herodotus, he writes, "I guess my point is that, if we were to return to a description of this genre [the essay] that defined it according to its most inherent activity—one of curious investigation, rather than the fulfillment of some arbitrary sense of veracity—then I think we would be less inclined to make moral judgments about the choices writers make in this genre, and start instead appreciating those choices as effort on behalf of literature" (p. 112). He argues that historically the essay "is not a vehicle for facts, nor for information, nor verifiable experience. An essay is [emphasis the author's] an experience... It's an enactment of the experience of trying to find meaning..." (p. 111)

Fingal defends the readers and their expectations, but he does not really do so on the basis that there is a reality, an objective truth, and the essayist should at least try to approximate it. He argues only that in our culture the genre "essay," rightly or wrongly, implies "nonfiction essay" and a trustworthiness of the details described in the essay as historical facts. Thus he regularly accuses D'Agata of misleading his readers, while arguing that would be okay if D'Agata just admitted that he was writing fiction. D'Agata steadfastly refuses to do so, arguing throughout the book that he has the right as an author to manipulate the facts in such a way that he gives the reader a feeling of the truth of the subject of the essay.

The discussion in this book reminds me of a recent public letter I received from Ken Myers of the *Mars Hill Audio Journal*. In it, Myers refers to an essay by C. S. Lewis entitled "Modern Man

and his Categories of Thought" written as a working paper for the study department of the World Council of Churches, and published in *Present Concerns: Essays by C. S. Lewis*. Reflecting on Lewis' essay, Myers writes: "But the ascendancy of materialism as the only public orthodoxy has whittled away the once sturdy stock of generally shared convictions, so that...the 'common vocabulary' is not adequate to describe the kinds of creatures we really are. It does not offer resources for the common good, since it cannot recognize that the good pre-exists our desires." Myers is right: the world we live in is so divided in politics, individual and social mores, even in standards of civility, not because "people are just different," but because a set of commonly accepted ideas, the basis of our conversations and of all our important social actions, has almost vanished. We simply don't agree anymore on anything foundational from which we can build a case, and so we can't even begin to act or think together about what is good, beautiful, or true.

Such is the world D'Agata and Fingal inhabit; there are no facts. For D'Agata at least, there aren't even any obligations to aspire to truth telling. There are only stories. The major difference between D'Agata's point of view and that of the Christian is this: he embraces that framework of reality, while we strive with all our might against it.

Lifespan of a Fact provides a rich source of topics for discussion, including the nature of historical truth and its relation to concepts like facticity, veracity, reality, and history. The book

can also lead a group into an important investigation of the forms in which writers choose to write and those writers' responsibility to themselves, to their readers, and to the discipline of writing. Lastly, the question of different kinds of truth, e.g. historical truth, imaginative truth, exhaustive truth, finite truth (to name just a few), relates in a deep and important way to the way we understand the ways of God with humankind, and *Lifespan* gives one a platform for framing these questions, too. ■

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Book reviewed: *The Lifespan of a Fact* by John D'Agata and Jim Fingal (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012)



Drew Trotter is an occasional contributor to *Critique* and the executive director of the Consortium of Christian Study Centers. He lives with his wife, Marie, and their dog, Fenway, in Charlottesville, Virginia.

An earlier version of this review first appeared online at <http://studycentersonline.org/resource/truth-reality-and-facts>.

TRYING TO SEE...MORE CL



THE PROCESS OF DISCERNMENT

One way we express our *raison d'être* in Ransom is this: we desire to help Christians deepen their discipleship by developing discernment. It's a catchy phrase, with nice alliteration, so it works well as a description.

It's what we've tried to be about in everything we've done—in our writing, our travel and speaking, or when we're with people at Toad Hall or away. From the beginning, it's been the passion that has animated us, the calling we've sensed impressed on our souls. We remain convinced that being discerning is essential to human flourishing. After all, being faithful in a pluralistic and fallen world requires having a means by which we can thread our way through the various truth-claims that vie for acceptance. It doesn't mean having all

the answers—no one can claim that, and we don't really need it. Instead, discernment involves growing in wisdom, nurturing skill in increasingly seeing things from the perspective of the truth of God's word, though we'll never achieve it perfectly of course.

The image that perhaps best captures this process is the idea of clarity, a lens we can use through which confusing details can be brought into sharper focus. St. Paul famously claimed that even in the best of circumstances we "see in a mirror, dimly," or as the old King James version renders it, "through a glass, darkly" (1 Corinthians 13:12). Either way, the idea is the same: part of the brokenness of the world means we see less clearly than we would like along a path that is far less benign than we would prefer. It's like we are peering through a window and find it smudged, streaked with grime so that no matter how long we look the clarity we want keeps eluding us. And whether we acknowledge it or not, we all have lenses through which we look at life

and reality, a view of the world that we use to bring meaning to the myriad, often confusing details that confront us. Developing discernment, then, refers to developing skill in clarifying how we see. Of refining our ability to focus in on the details of life and culture so that we can assess them in light of the things that matter most.

St. Paul never suggests we can get fully and completely past the dim mirror—that is a grace that awaits us. In God's presence, rather than seeing only reflected things, we will see "face to face" (1 Corinthians 13:12). Then, he says, we will "know fully," which doesn't mean we will have all knowledge (we will remain finite) but that the dimness that obscures our vision of reality will be removed.

Living in a world plagued with shadows does not mean that we are left to bumble around in the dark. Many Christians seem to be content to live this way. They blunder up against something new and react, much like when trying to find the bathroom at night and discover the sharp edge of a coffee table with their shin. It's embarrassing to be caught unawares, and so we turn away a bit angry, reacting with whatever comes to mind at the moment. This is not true discipleship. A disciple follows his Lord, and being reactionary is the very opposite to the way Jesus lived. Christ did not react, or bumble about, but lived intentionally, faithful to his Father.

Developing discernment includes answering a series of simple yet probing questions that together serve to clarify the things that confront us. They help bring the things of the world into clearer focus, acting like a lens or glass that helps us see. Shadows remain, of course—the darkness will be finally

EARLY

erased only when the King of light appears—but the process is a like a guide so we can do more than merely react.

I thought about this when I learned that Alain de Botton had published a new book. He is an author I have appreciated ever since being entranced by *The Architecture of Happiness* (2008), a sensitive reflection on how the spaces of our lives and world touch on what it means to be human. His latest book turns out to be on religion, which made me all the more eager to read it.

WHAT DOES HE SAY?

Alain de Botton is a convinced atheist who is convinced there are elements of religious belief and practice that secularists would be wise to learn from and borrow. He makes his case in *Religion for Atheists: A Non-believers Guide to the Uses of Religion*. “The premise of this book,” de Botton says, “is that it must be possible to remain a committed atheist and nevertheless find religions sporadically useful, interesting, and consoling—and be curious as to the possibilities of importing certain of their ideas and practices into the secular realm.” [p. 11–12]

After an initial chapter in which de Botton identifies his purpose, he addresses chapters on a succession of topics he believes are areas in which religion might be usefully mined by secularists: community, kindness, education, tenderness, pessimism, perspective, art, architecture, and institutions.

What follows is an attempt to read the faiths, primarily Christianity and to a lesser extent Judaism and Buddhism, in the hope of gleaning insights which might be of use within secular life, particularly in relation to the challenges of

community and of mental and bodily suffering. The underlying thesis is not that secularism is wrong, but that we have too often secularized badly—inasmuch as, in the course of ridding ourselves of unfeasible ideas, we have unnecessarily surrendered some of the most useful and attractive parts of the faiths. [p. 16–17]

De Botton does not take the time to defend atheism, nor does he provide reasons to disbelieve religious claims. Rather, he assumes his position, stating it clearly so readers are in no doubt about his worldview and proceeds on the quest he has set as his purpose.

This first question must always be answered as objectively as possible if it is to be the first facet of the lens that clarifies our vision. Our goal must be to treat the author and his ideas with the dignity they are due as creatures made in God’s image.

WHAT IS ATTRACTIVE?

If something is true but appears implausible, it will be harder to believe. And ideas that are false, in part or in whole, may seem believable if they are presented in a way that makes them plausible. Identifying what is attractive, made plausible—to Christians and/or to those who do not share our deepest convictions and values—helps bring into clearer focus whatever of our world we happen to be considering.

Alain de Botton is one of those rare philosophers who refused to remain in the cloisters of academia. He believes that the real point of philosophy, of the

pursuit of truth and beauty, is to help people live well. He seems to be slowly gaining attention through his published works and through the innovative and creative School of Life (www.theschooloflife.com) that he helped establish in London. De Botton’s interests range widely. He is a thoughtful generalist with endless curiosity, someone who always asks what it means to flourish as human beings in society and eagerly explores the full range of life and culture. In this he strikes me as standing in the tradition of the ancient Hebrew wisdom literature that identifies wisdom as the art of living well. This breadth of interest and depth of concern in persons and society make de Botton an important voice in a world where the speed of life, the constant clamor of media and distraction, and the flood of consumerist values make quiet reflection a rare commodity and threaten the very fabric of what it means to live as creatures made in the image of a personal God.

Religion for Atheists is a pleasure to read because de Botton cares about words, desires to be persuasive, and so composes prose that is thoughtfully crafted and beautifully rendered. Here he is making the argument that lecturing is an insufficient method of teaching young adults:

defenders of secular university education... implicitly maintain that people will be properly affected by concepts even when they hear about them only once or twice, at the age of twenty, before a fifty-year career in finance or market research, via a lecturer standing in a bare room speaking in a monotone. According to this view, ideas may fall out of the mind in much the same random order as the contents of an upturned handbag,

or may be expressed with all the graceless banality of an instruction manual, without threatening the overall purpose of intellectual endeavour. [p. 125]

And here de Botton reflects on what he calls pessimism, a term he uses to refer to the view that human beings are deeply flawed—even evil at heart—rather than inherently good:

A pessimistic worldview does not have to entail a life stripped of joy. Pessimists can have a far greater capacity for appreciation than their opposite numbers, for they never expect things to turn out well and so may be amazed by the modest successes which occasionally break across their darkened horizon. Modern secular optimists, on the other hand, with their well-developed sense of entitlement, generally fail to savour any epiphanies of everyday life as they busy themselves with the construction of earthly paradise. [p. 188]

As I read de Botton's work I always reread some sentences and paragraphs—or occasionally read them aloud to whoever is nearby—not merely to be certain I have understood correctly but to relish them as the good prose they are.

WHERE DO I AGREE? WHY?

With this question we cross a line from objective observation to personal response. Our focus is sharpened by bringing our deepest convictions and values to bear on the object of our discernment—as a Christian that

means trying to see it through the lens of the biblical story of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration.

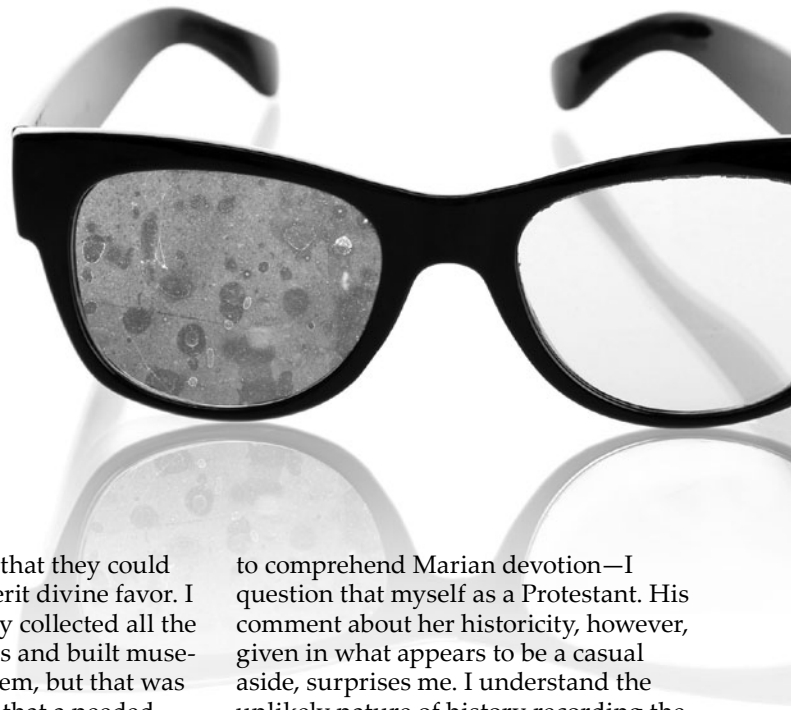
Alain de Botton is a keen observer of our world, and his assessment that secular society has failed to develop means whereby to nurture humanness seems to me to be unassailable. His analysis in *Religion for Atheists* is convincing, and the fact that he draws his evidence from such a wide swath of Western culture and society only makes his conclusion more persuasive. Besides, this is hardly a novel argument; what is novel is de Botton's argument that the solution is that secularists borrow from religion means to rectify the imbalance.

As a Christian, I agree with de Botton that much of secular society seems antithetical to our flourishing as human beings. The world was created good but, in the Fall, the *shalom* of God is shattered. Much education is geared to produce skilled workers rather than wise persons who are skilled at living. Much architecture is designed for efficiency or according to abstract ideals so that the only things out of place within these spaces are persons craving a sense of home. And the frantic pace of life, along with the constant pressure of media and technology, rob us of the wonder of silence, the chance to rest, and engage in unhurried conversation and the fostering of uninterrupted creativity. De Botton's diagnosis, it seems to me, is correct, his description of social ills is astute, and his yearning for a society that is more in tune with our deepest yearnings as human beings is admirable. In this, de Botton displays what Christians term common grace, an embrace of truth that is rooted in being made in the image of God (Romans 2:14–15).

I agree with de Botton that religion offers secular society a rich tradition that contains potential solutions to the social ills he has identified. It is God's law, the ancient psalmist insists, that allows human beings to prosper (Psalm 1). Though I share a deep respect for the advance of science and cherish its wealth, science alone is insufficient to adequately answer all the questions that must be addressed if society is to reflect the deepest needs of the human heart.

When de Botton draws from Christianity in *Religion for Atheists*, he often has Catholicism in mind. The Catholic veneration of relics, Marian devotion, stations of the cross, cult of saints, and sacrament of confession are among the many observances he examines to uncover how these rituals and traditions meet deep human needs. Once, however, he turns his gaze specifically on Protestantism—in his chapter on Architecture—and his conclusion is scathing.

When Protestantism took hold in northern Europe in the first half of the sixteenth century, it manifested an extreme hostility towards the visual arts, attacking Catholics for their complicated and richly decorated buildings. "For anyone to arrive at God the Creator, he needs only Scripture as his Guide and Teacher," insisted John Calvin, giving voice to the anti-aesthetic sentiment of many in the new denomination. What mattered to Protestants was the written word. This, rather than elaborate architecture, would be enough to lead us to God. Devotion could be fostered by a Bible in a bare room just as well as it could in the nave of a jewel-encrusted cathedral. Indeed, there was a risk that



through their sensory richness, sumptuous buildings could distract us, making us prefer beauty over holiness. It was no coincidence that Protestant reformers presided over repeated incidents of aesthetic desecration, during which statues were smashed, paintings burnt and alabaster angels brutally separated from their wings...

Not coincidentally, surely, it was the Protestant countries in Europe which first witnessed the extremes of ugliness that would become so typical of the modern world. Manchester, Leeds and other cities like them subjected their inhabitants to hitherto unparalleled degrees of unsightliness, as if they were testing to the full John Calvin's contention that architecture and art have no role to play in the condition of our souls and that a godly life can therefore satisfactorily unfold in a slum tenement with a view on to an open-cast coal mine, just so long as there is a Bible to hand. [p. 248–251, 254]

Sadly, though I would quibble over details, I must confess guilty as charged. And I say this not merely as a Protestant, but as a Calvinist. It is difficult today to comprehend the passion ignited in those who were freed from the crude idolatry of medieval Catholicism towards the artifacts that had kept them burdened under a weight of inexorable guilt. The message that it was not their penance but Christ's sacrifice that made them right with God filled them with contempt for the religious objects that had long existed

as constant reminders that they could never do enough to merit divine favor. I wish they had carefully collected all the statues and decorations and built museums to safely house them, but that was not to be. It is sad, too, that a needed ecclesiastical iconoclasm in the sixteenth century hardened into a dogmatic rejection of beauty and sacred art in the Reformed movement, but that legacy still haunts us. In this, the disciples of Calvin have honored his biblical teaching on the danger of idolatry but ignored his equally biblical teaching on the significance of art. Thankfully some thinkers in this tradition are attempting to restore a proper understanding and practice—a good example is William Dyrness' *Visual Faith* (Baker, 2001).

WHAT WOULD I CHALLENGE? WHY?

In a book with as much detail as is included in *Religion for Atheists*, it is possible to get sidetracked into endlessly discussing minor disagreements, but that should be resisted. Such things are minor and their pursuit sidetracks us from the primary issues. Besides, when sweeping cultural analysis is attempted, it is possible to disagree on specific parts of the argument while agreeing with the overall conclusions.

Only once did I pause and think that a statement was so patently misguided as to need comment. While writing about Marian devotion, de Botton questions not only the mystical meaning of the practice but also the historicity of Mary. "How could any reasonable adult trust in the existence of a woman," he writes, "who lived several thousand years ago (if she ever lived at all)...?" [p. 168] I do not question his inability

to comprehend Marian devotion—I question that myself as a Protestant. His comment about her historicity, however, given in what appears to be a casual aside, surprises me. I understand the unlikely nature of history recording the story of a young woman from a remote province in the Roman Empire in the first century. That is rare, indeed. I also understand that there are very limited records of her, namely, the Gospels of the New Testament. Still, the issue of the historicity of the New Testament documents has been carefully explored. Accusations of inaccuracy need to be made with greater care and scholarship than this, as the work of F. F. Bruce and N. T. Wright demonstrates. In this, de Botton's aside reminds me of a snarky comment made by a preacher to dismissively question some secular claim.

The primary challenge I wish to raise, however, comes from my conviction that the Christian story of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration holds together so brilliantly as a coherent worldview. Together they provide answers to the perennial questions of human life and existence, so the faith is not merely a random collection of ideas and practices, as Ellis Potter demonstrates in *3 Theories of Everything* (2012). Separate the practices from the foundational beliefs from which they arose and the practices soon devolve into lifeless formulas and worse, burdensome reminders of our inability to achieve our ideals. As a Christian, I am not certain that secularism can muster the same coherence as a worldview.

De Botton says that secular society "has been unfairly impoverished by the loss of an array of practices and themes that atheists typically find it impossible to live with because they seem too closely associated with, to



quote Nietzsche's useful phrase, "the bad odours of religion" [p. 14]. He argues "not that secularism is wrong, but that we have too often secularized badly" [p. 17].

The observation that secularism has failed to provide a coherent framework for a humanizing social system is difficult to dispute. "The plain fact," Os Guinness writes, "is that no free and lasting civilization anywhere in history has so far been built on atheist foundations. At the very least, it would be a welcome change for secularists to shift from their strident attacks on religiously based virtues to building their own replacements and attempting to persuade a majority of their fellow citizens of their merits" [*A Free People's Suicide* (2012) p. 120]. The shift that Guinness calls for is embodied in Alain de Botton's work and demonstrated in *The School of Life*. This represents, it seems to me, a courageous and admirable effort.

One challenge that comes to mind is why de Botton's vision of the good life should be, on purely secular terms, the preferred one. How does one make a compelling case within the worldview of atheism that human flourishing along the lines desired by de Botton is the vision of life that should shape not just our individual lives but the contours of society? Though de Botton and I would be co-belligerents in rejecting a vision for society based on social Darwinism, it is difficult for me to imagine how anyone could reject that possibility as incompatible with basic secularist assumptions. Once the basic assumptions of the Christian worldview are granted—that God exists and has

spoken—virtue is not up for debate. Is the same true for secularism?

Another challenge is whether de Botton's desire to borrow from religion will work. As Christians learn from bitter experience, most Christian practice quickly becomes deadening when removed from the assumptions that gave rise to it in the first place. As someone who believes in prayer, for example, and acknowledges the way the practice deepens our humanness (by making us grateful, providing moments of quiet reflection, and so much more) let me suggest that it is not called a spiritual discipline for nothing. It is difficult to nurture a life of prayer, and I have worked at it for six decades. Only the conviction that a personal God exists, calls me into relationship, hears, and acts in human history is sufficient motivation to keep praying when little seems to result from my attempts.

Accepting that existence is inherently frustrating, that we are forever hemmed in by atrocious realities, can give us the impetus to say 'Thank you' a little more often. It is telling that the secular world is not well versed in the art of gratitude: we no longer offer up thanks for harvests, meals, bees or clement weather. On a superficial level, we might suppose that this is because there is no one to say 'Thank you' to. But at base it seems more a matter of ambition and expectation. [p. 188]

Without for a moment suggesting that ambition and expectation do not fit into the difficulty, let me say this does

not jive with my experience. Having someone to speak to—being convinced by good and sufficient evidence that God exists and is the personal infinite God of Scripture—makes all the difference in the world.

I follow Alain de Botton on Twitter, and recently he posted a series of "secular prayers":

Secular prayer: for those who desperately need sleep, rest and calm but have forgotten how to find it.

Secular prayer: for those terrified of financial humiliation and of losing the love and respect of those they want to protect.

Secular prayer: for those who adore their children but despair of coping with their demands and uncontrollable ways.

Secular prayer: for those desperate to make an authentic contribution to society but who agonisingly don't know how.

Secular prayer: for those who were badly treated and humiliated and who, despite constant effort, can't forget and recover.

Secular prayer: for those who started marriage with the best intentions but can't be the person they should to make it work.

Secular prayer: for those gripped by anxieties and phobias that have no basis in reason and yet make an ordinary life hell.

Secular prayer: for those unknowingly incubating the mortal diseases that will make 2013 their last.

Secular prayer: for those who long for a true friend, someone with whom it's possible to be totally weak—and still be loved.

Secular prayer: for those who need more than anything to find perspective; a look at themselves from a distant star.

[<http://storify.com/danielcoats/secular-prayer>]

I am not a secularist. God exists and life makes sense only when seen through the lens of that conviction. The beauty of creation, the order of the cosmos, the humanness that we share, the coherence of the scriptural story, and the historical fact of an empty tomb form a body of evidence that is to my mind and heart compelling. Given this, prayer makes sense, and the Christian practices of prayer I follow remind me of God's presence and invite my response, both gratitude and request. I find de Botton's prayers sensitive and appealing—I prayed them myself as they appeared on Twitter. What I don't understand is how this can become a compelling practice out of a worldview in which the person at prayer believes their act is done in an impersonal universe in which no final purpose is possible. That challenge will be fascinating to watch unfold as de Botton continues his writing and lecturing.

HOW CAN THIS BE DISCUSSED WINSOMELY IN OUR PLURALISTIC WORLD?

Intentionally examining something through the lens of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration allows us to see where we agree and disagree, and allow us to reflect on why. And since we live in a pluralistic world where everyone does not share our convictions and values, reflecting on how we can live and talk about these issues in an understandable way provides us with practical ideas about how we can demonstrate our position winsomely.

As Os Guinness demonstrates in *A Free People's Suicide*, democratic freedom and humane civility can be maintained only in a society whose citizens aspire to virtue. As a Christian, I have doubts about de Botton's program, for the reasons I have explained. Still, his program

is admirable, and I pray he is successful in stimulating his fellow secularists to lives of love and good works. If I lived in London, I would eagerly attend some of the events sponsored by The School of Life. And as a Christian I pray that some of the secularists who explore the humanizing aspects of Christian practice might discover the consoling nature of the beliefs that underlie those practices. If speaking de Botton's secular prayers is attractive, imagine actually praying them to a Father who is in the process of restoring this broken world so that in the end righteousness covers the creation as water covers the sea.

I recommend *Religion for Atheists* to Christians for several reasons. First, Alain de Botton models how to communicate clearly and with civility when examining a worldview with which one disagrees. Sadly the public square in America is filled with rhetoric that is unkind and sometimes abusive, and many Christians are the ones expressing their opinions without charity. I am grateful for the tone and approach demonstrated in *Religion for Atheists*. De Botton's examination of my faith reminds me of the care I need to take when examining his. It is a model worth emulating.

Second, it is very refreshing when someone who rejects my faith takes an appreciative look at Christianity and records their impressions. I usually think about prayer, for example, as *prayer to God* but pass

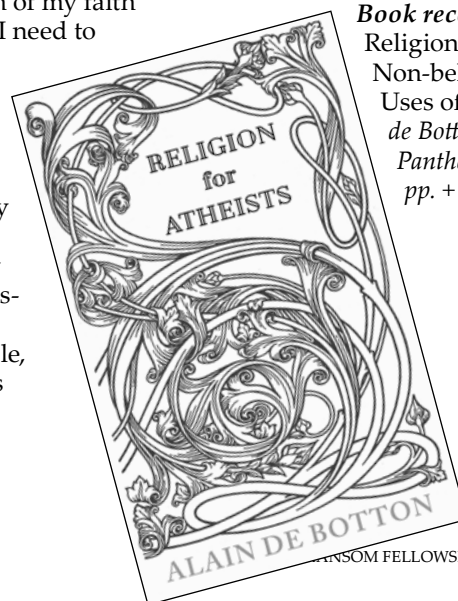
over the ways the practice of prayer is humanizing. That it is humanizing is not surprising since we believe God made us for himself, so all aspects of our relationship with him will enhance our life and existence as his creatures. His reflections as a disbeliever gave me new eyes to see what I believe.

And finally, it is challenging to realize that my Christian view of the ills of modern society is echoed in the analysis of observers who do not share my deepest convictions and values. Alain de Botton is a convinced atheist and I am a convinced Christian, yet we are co-belligerents in wanting secular society to more deeply reflect and nourish the deepest yearnings of what it means to be human. I suspect I would enjoy him as a friend.

Reading *Religion for Atheists* does not make me want to go out and change society—a task for which I am neither called nor in a position to try to accomplish. It makes me want to begin at home, among the family of God, by suggesting we have much of value to learn from Alain de Botton. ■

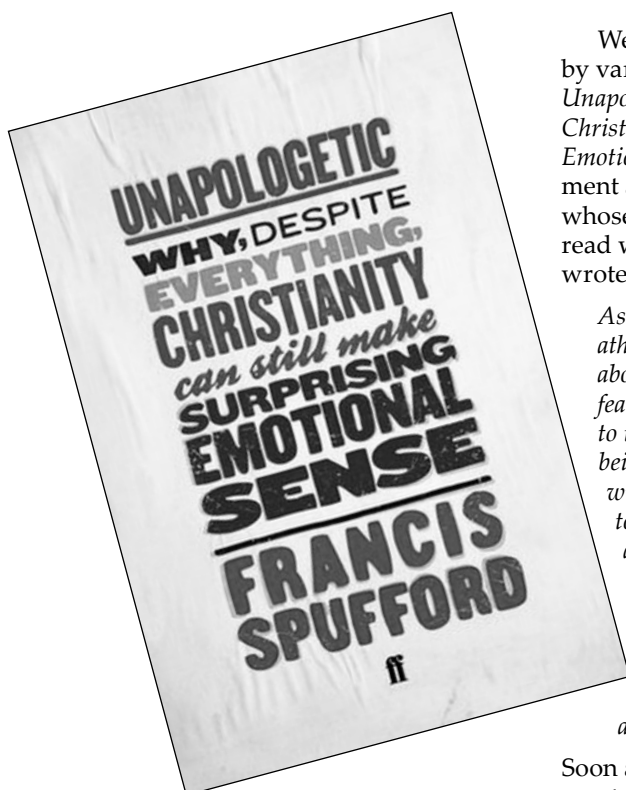
Book recommended:

Religion for Atheists: A Non-believers Guide to the Uses of Religion by Alain de Botton (New York, N.Y.: Pantheon Books; 2012) 312 pp. + index.



Unapologetic Feelings

a review by Cal Boroughs



We come to the books we read by various roads. In the case of *Unapologetic: Why Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense* I read a positive statement about the book by Alain de Botton, whose *The Architecture of Happiness* I had read with great enjoyment. De Botton wrote:

As a non-Christian, indeed a committed atheist, I was worried about how I'd feel about this book but it pulled off a rare feat: making Christianity seem appealing to those who have no interest in ever being Christians. A number of Christian writers have over the past decade tried to write books defending their faith against the onslaughts of the new atheists—but they've generally failed. Spufford understands that the trick isn't to try to convince the reader that Christianity is true but rather to show why it's interesting, wise and sometimes consoling.

Soon after reading De Botton's comments I read an account by Jeff Cook, lecturer in philosophy at the University of Northern Colorado, of a recent debate between William Lane Craig, a Christian, and Sam Harris, an atheist. The viewer noted that Craig had, in his mind, won the argument but not the audience:

...the new atheists excel on the only evangelistically-effective playing field that matters—that of human emotion and desire. Most Christian apologists conversely seem content to surrender that ground in their preference for mere rationality. This is a tragic mistake and it's the primary reason Christian belief is diminishing, marginalized and an easy target for nighttime comedians.

Spufford would agree with Cook and this is the reason he wrote *Unapologetic*. His title gives it away—“[*Unapologetic*] is a defense of Christian emotions—of their intelligibility, of their grown-up dignity. The book is called *Unapologetic* because it isn't giving an 'apologia', the technical term for a defense of the ideas.”

Spufford describes himself as a “fairly orthodox Christian” but emphasizes that “it is still a mistake to suppose that it is assent to the propositions that makes you a believer. It is the feelings that are primary. I assent to the ideas because I have the feelings; I don't have the feelings because I've assented to the ideas.” He closes his book with these words:

If, that is, there is a God. There may well not be. I don't know whether there is. And neither do you, and neither does Richard bloody Dawkins, and neither does anyone. It not being, as mentioned before, a knowable item. What I do know is that, when I am lucky, when I have managed to pay attention, when for once I have hushed my noise for a little while, it can feel as if there is one. And so it makes emotional sense to proceed as if He's there; to dare the conditional. And not timid death-fearing emotional sense, or cowering craven master-seeking sense, or censorious holier-than-thou sense, either. Hopeful sense. Realistic sense. Battered-about-but-still-trying sense. The sense recommended by our awkward star fairy, who says: don't be careful. Don't be surprised by any human cruelty. But don't be afraid. Far more can be mended than you know.

Spufford is, as the quotes above demonstrate, a gifted and incisive writer. His critique of the new atheism's pretensions can be devastating as when

he demolishes the snarky London bus ad "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy life." But what about the person whose life is a living hell or the one whose body is wracked by disease or degraded by addictions—the one who is not enjoying life? "So when the atheist bus comes by, and tells you that there's probably no God, so you should stop worrying and enjoy your life, the slogan is not just bitterly inappropriate in mood. What it means, if it's true, is that anyone who isn't enjoying themselves is entirely on their own."

Spufford teaches writing at Goldsmiths College, London and his writing is both provocative and winsome. The provocative side is seen, for example, in his definition of sin – "the human propensity to fuck things up," abbreviated throughout as HPtFtU. While this may not be a definition that will be used in most church services it does function well in Spufford's hands. The HPtFtU is provocative—but it is true, and at the level of our feelings we get smacked up the side of our heads by its reality every day, and that should cause us to ask "What's wrong with me?" Here Spufford is on target in crafting an appeal to our emotions. The winsome part is seen in this description of the life of faith:

Early on in this I compared beginning to believe to falling in love, and the way that faith settles down in a life is also very like the way that the first dizzy-intense phase of attraction settles (if it does) into a relationship. Rapture develops into routine, a process which keeps its customary doubleness where religion is concerned. It's both loss and gain together, with excitement dwindling and trust growing;

like all human ties, it constricts at the same time it supports, ruling out other choices by the very act of being a choice. And so as with any commitment, there are times when you notice the limit on your theoretical freedom more than you feel what the attachment is giving you, and then it tends to be habit, or the awareness of a promise given, that keeps you trying. God makes an elusive lover. The unequivocal blaze of His presence may come rarely or not at all, for years and years—and in any case cannot be commanded, will not ever present itself tamely to order. He-doesn't-exist-the-bastard may be much more your daily experience than anything even faintly rapturous. And yet, and yet. He may come at any moment, when and how you least expect it, and that somehow slightly colours every moment in the mass of moments when he doesn't come. And grace, you come to recognize, never stops, whether you presently feel it or not.

The Christianity that Spufford presents is the merest Christianity. While he characterizes himself as a "fairly orthodox Christian," he voices disagreement with historically orthodox teachings such as human sexuality and the existence of heaven and hell. We can agree that the HPtFtU means that as Christians we can speak and act in ways that historically have been harmful and at times cruel, but by what criteria do we decide that historic Christian teaching is wrong? What I believe that Spufford presents is a criteria that emanates from his conviction that feelings are primary over propositions—a "I'll

agree with what makes sense to me" sort of position. While this may be attractive to atheists like de Botton I question whether it is an adequate platform for our faith. But at the same time it is a welcome push toward an apologetic that engages both the mind and heart. ■

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If you are interested: You can watch Francis Spufford speak about his book online (www.youtube.com/watch?v=iwEe4c2bzVo).



Cal Boroughs is pastor of St. Elmo Presbyterian Church in Chattanooga, Tenn. where he lives with his wife Susan. A graduate of Covenant College and

Covenant Theological Seminary, he is the proud father of Abigail Schultz, a book artist in Kauai, and Megan Bingham, an architect in Florida.

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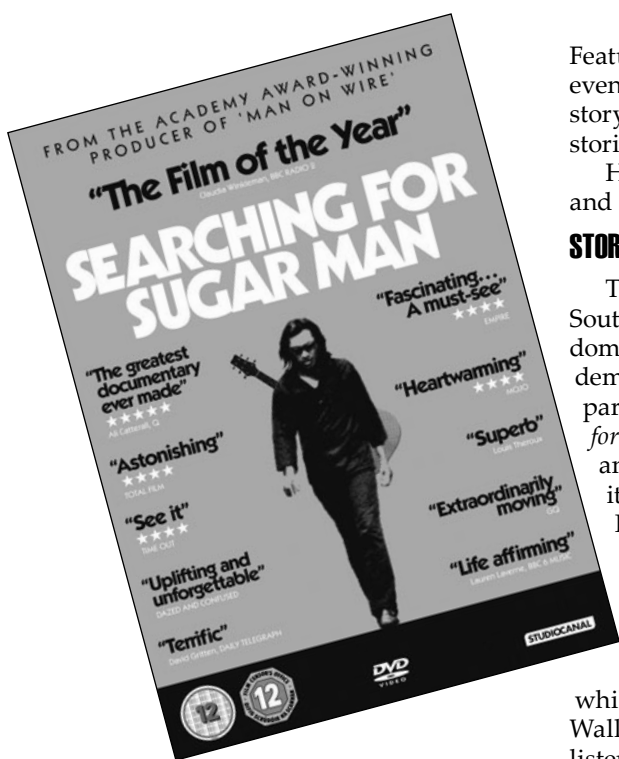
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Portrait of an Artist in Exile

a review by **Greg Grooms**



If you plan to see *Searching for Sugar Man*, please stop reading this and watch the film first. Most films, in my opinion, should be viewed without introduction, if at all possible, but none more so than this. Should you ignore my warning, the review may do more than spoil the film's drama for you; it may color your experience of it. I still feel guilty for reading Tolkien out loud to my children before they were able to know it firsthand for themselves. One of the many things they must forgive me for.

The safe details: *Searching for Sugar Man* is a documentary released last year by Swedish director Malik Bendjelloul. It's had rave reviews at Sundance, Tribeca, and SXSW, won many awards, and been nominated for many more, including an Oscar for Best Documentary

Feature. This is a well-made film. But even more important, it tells a good story, or perhaps I should say two good stories.

Here's where the line between safe and spoiler gets crossed.

STORY #1

The first story is the story of how South Africa changed from a white-dominated police state to an open democracy. To be sure, only a small part of this story is told in *Searching for Sugar Man*, but for anyone who is an artist first and a historian later, it's one of the best parts of the story. It's the story of how art has the power to change what politics often cannot.

I know how this works. In Alabama, where I grew up during the 50s, 60s, and 70s, while our parents were electing George Wallace governor four times, we were listening to Bob Dylan: "How many roads must a man walk down, before they call him a man?" No one quotes George Wallace anymore, not even in Alabama, but I still listen to Dylan.

While we were listening to him, white South Africans were listening to someone else. Cape Town record shop owner Stephen Segerman says that during the seventies every South African record collection contained at least three records: the Beatles' *Abbey Road*, Simon and Garfunkel's *Bridge Over Troubled Water*, and *Cold Fact* by Sixto Rodriguez. Yes, I know. This begs the Sesame Street question: which one of these things is not like the other? But, you see, South Africans didn't know that no one in the United States had heard of Rodriguez. They thought that he was just another famous American rocker, and his music lit the flames of South Africa's

counter-culture.

*I wonder how many times you've been had
And I wonder how many plans have
gone bad*

*I wonder how many times you had sex
I wonder do you know who'll be next
I wonder...I wonder...wonder I do.*

[*"I Wonder"* from *Cold Fact* (1970)]

*Sugar man, won't you hurry
'Cos I'm tired of these scenes.
For a blue coin won't you bring back
all those colors to my dreams.
Silver magic ships you carry,
Jumpers, coke, sweet Mary Jane.*

[*"Sugar Man"* from *Cold Fact*]

*The mayor hides the crime rate
council woman hesitates
Public gets irate but forget the vote date
Weatherman complaining, predicted sun,
it's raining
Everyone's protesting, boyfriend keeps
suggesting
You're not like all of the rest.*

[*"This is not a Song, It's an
Outburst"* or *"The Establishment's
Blues"* from *Cold Fact*]

Forty years later the old sex-drugs-and-rebellion message in Rodriguez' lyrics feels rather tired and generic, but his voice (imagine a cross between Jim Croce and James Taylor) and his simple sincerity give them an enduring power. And in authoritarian apartheid South Africa it was subversive, illegal (*"Sugar Man"* was banned by South African censors), and inspiring. A generation of Afrikaaner musicians turned to Rodriguez and his music for the courage to speak out against their own system. And as they followed in his musical footsteps, they wondered about his fate.

The two most popular stories of

Rodriguez' end imagined him committing suicide onstage after a concert. In version one after singing "Forget It", he pulled out a pistol and blew his brains out.

*But thanks for your time
Then you can thank me for mine
And after that's said
Forget it.
Don't be inane
There's no one to blame
No reason why
You should stay here
And lie to me.*

["Forget It" from Cold Fact]

In version two he doused himself with gasoline and set himself on fire. Either way he was outrageous, rebellious, and mysterious to the end, at least in the minds of his fans. But neither tale is true.

STORY #2

The second good story told by *Searching for Sugar Man* is the true story of Sixto Rodriguez, an aspiring folk rock musician in Detroit in the early 70s. His first album, *Cold Fact*, got a four star review from *Billboard* magazine, but failed to sell. After his second album—*Coming from Reality* (1971)—met the same fate, he abandoned his career in music, started work in demolishing and restoring old buildings, and raised his family. Quite simply, the artist turned from his art to the more mundane pursuits of family and community. But art has a way of refusing to be ignored even when we turn our backs on it.

If you've ever written a song or published a book, you know that once you turn it loose, it takes on a life of its own. People that you don't know read it or sing it and find things in it that

you never imagined. In a way you are connected to everyone who knows your work and at the same time alienated from them painfully. While no fan has an inalienable right to discuss art with the artist, every artist should have the chance to know the people touched by his art if he wishes to. Circumstances conspired to deny Sixto Rodriguez this opportunity for over two decades.

Then in 1996 South African journalist Craig Batholomew Strydom began looking for Rodriguez. Well, to be more accurate, I should say he began investigating the myths of his fate and found, to his surprise, that Rodriguez was alive and well and living in Detroit with no idea that he is a musical legend in South Africa. It's hard to tell who was more surprised by this revelation: the South Africans, who had celebrated his music and the tales of his death, or Rodriguez himself, still working as a laborer. But surprise rapidly gave way to delight and plans for five concerts in South Africa. Rodriguez daughter, Regan, hoped that 20 people might show up so that her Dad wouldn't be disappointed. Twenty thousand did. Every concert was sold out.

And they all lived happily ever after? Not quite. It's estimated that Rodriguez albums sold around 500,000 copies in South Africa during his exile. A major mystery that remains is who got the money? Not Rodriguez himself. And in a recent interview on NPR he washed his hands of the matter, declaring that he doesn't know who got it and he doesn't care. Of course, the cynic in me whispers, "That's never true," but it may well be so in this case. Since his renaissance Rodriguez has played five sold out concert tours in South Africa and has given away the money he made on them to family and friends. He still lives

in the same old house in Detroit that he has for years.

*And you can keep your symbols of
success
Then I'll pursue my own happiness
And you can keep your clocks and
routines
Then I'll go mend all my shattered
dreams
Maybe today, yeah, I'll slip away*

["Slip Away" from Cold Fact]

One last footnote: critics of *Searching for Sugar Man* point out, rightly, that the story it tells is a bit misleading. Evidently Rodriguez toured New Zealand and Australia and sold lots of records there right in the midst of his supposed exile. It seems Bendjelloul is guilty not so much of misrepresenting the facts as selectively emphasizing some at the cost of others for dramatic purposes. If so, he's not the first storyteller to do so, and if he needs forgiveness for this, then, I think, forgiveness is in order here for *Searching for Sugar Man* tells one heck of a story.

If you are an artist and wonder about the value of your work, please, watch *Searching for Sugar Man*. If you're a cynic and need to hear a story that may shake your cynicism, watch it. If you're simply someone who likes a good story, or two, watch it. You won't be disappointed. ■

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Greg Grooms, a contributing editor for Critique, lives with his wife Mary Jane in Hill House, a large home across the street from the University of Texas in Austin, where they regularly welcome students to meals, to warm hospitality, to ask questions, and to seriously wrestle with the proposition that Jesus is actually Lord of all.

BACK PAGE

Credits for *Searching for Sugar Man*

Starring: (all playing themselves)

Rodriguez
Stephen 'Sugar' Segerman
Dennis Coffey
Mike Theodore
Jerome Ferretti
Dan DiMaggio
Steve Rowland

Director: Malik Bendjelloul

Writer: Malik Bendjelloul

Producers: John Battsek, Sheryl Crown, Malik Bendjelloul and others

Cinematography: Camilla Skagerström

USA, 2012; 86 minutes

Rated PG-13 (for brief language and some drug references)

