

critique

The background of the top half of the cover features a silhouette of an oil derrick in the center, with a horse on the left and two human figures on the right, all set against a gradient background transitioning from yellow at the top to red at the bottom, suggesting a sunset or sunrise.

A RANSOM FELLOWSHIP PUBLICATION

ISSUE FIVE 2008

A Few Like You

**Will The Church Be The Church
For Homosexual Christians**

Singing Sharp Beauty Into A Broken World

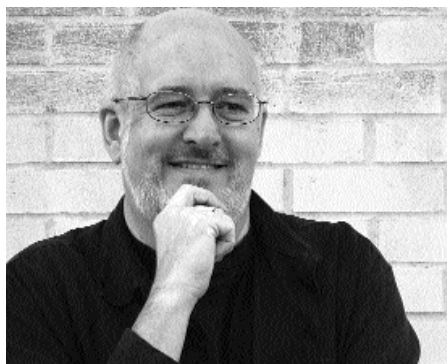
Concern For Children At Play and Work

Sin That Afflicts The Righteous

There Will Be Blood

Drained Dry: Oil, Religion and The Shriveling of Souls

Why The Gospel Is Not A Romantic Comedy



Engaging Doubt For Clarity's Sake

Some things should become habits of the heart. Things like not agreeing to commitments until we've had an adequate chance to reflect on our calendars. Things like listening and asking questions before we begin to speak.

Developing habits always feels unnatural at first, especially if they mark a distinct change from how we've tended to operate in the past. If we keep at it faithfully, however, they can become a completely natural part of how we think, imagine, interact, and live.

At the beginning of *The Reason for God*, Tim Keller outlines a simple, yet radical idea.

We Christians must be willing to make this a habit of the heart (even if skeptics don't). Sound bites are not sufficient for making an adequate case for the faith, nor are easy arguments against unbelief convincing. A good way to demonstrate our conviction that non-

I commend two processes to my readers. I urge skeptics to wrestle with the unexamined "blind faith" on which skepticism is based, and to see how hard it is to justify those beliefs to those who do not share them. I also urge believers to wrestle with their personal and culture's objections to the faith. At the end of each process, even if you remain the skeptic or believer you have been, you will hold your own position with both greater clarity and greater humility. Then there will be an understanding, sympathy, and respect for the other side that did not exist before. Believers and nonbelievers will rise to the level of disagreement rather than simply denouncing one another. This happens when each side has learned to represent the other's argument in its strongest and most positive form. Only then is it safe and fair to disagree with it. That achieves civility in a pluralistic society, which is no small thing.

Christians are made in God's image is to search out and engage their most profound doubts and challenges to Christian faith. Which means that at times we may help them formulate a stronger version of the challenge than they originally expressed. Doing that is a service of love, as is going on to engage it thoughtfully with them.

In the past, I think, the unspoken assumption has been to keep a respectful distance from doubt--make that a fearful, defensive distance. And to answer doubt quickly when it shows up, as if a quick answer ever solves the issue. Let's engage it fully, carefully instead, for clarity's sake.

And if we find ourselves too busy for this task, then we're too busy. ❖

SOURCE

The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism (New York, NY: Dutton; 2008) p. xviii-xix.

critique

ISSUE FIVE 2008

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06



14



12

01 COVER

02 ED NOTE
Engaging Doubt For
Clarity's Sake

03 CONTENTS

04 DIALOGUE

06 TUNED IN
Singing Sharp Beauty
Into A Broken World
The Folk Music of Eliza
Gilkyson on *Paradise Hotel*

08 DISCERNING LIFE
Concern For Children
At Play And Work

10 DARKENED ROOM
The Story Of My Demise
A Review Of The Film:
Stranger Than Fiction

12 DARKENED ROOM
Drained Dry: Oil, Religion
And The Shriveling Of Souls
A Review Of The Film:
There Will Be Blood

14 REFLECTIONS
"A Few Like You"
Will The Church
Be The Church For
Homosexual Christians?

18 OUT OF THEIR MINDS
Sin That Afflicts
The Righteous

20 READING THE WORLD
Why The Gospel Is Not
A Romantic Comedy

24 BACK PAGE

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To the Editor:

Thank you again for your service to the body of Christ. Your insights into modern culture are helpful and challenging. I especially relate to Editor's Notes, Denis--they usually hit me in the spot I need God's grace the most.

Thanks!

Jean Opelt

DePere, WI

To the Editor:

We hope your time in Colorado was restful. It is so hard to carve out time for yourself when there is something one "ought" to be doing. My challenge is to be a human being rather than a human doing.

We enjoyed your article on Emmylou Harris [*Critique* #3 2008]. She is a great artist who has, in my opinion, grown with the years. She was a joy to listen to in the 70's and remains so today. If you have not listened to John Prine I would recommend him. Not so much for his voice, which is rural and unrefined, but for the lyrics.

Blessings,

Scott & Jackie Barnes

Denver, CO

To the Editor:

It has been ten years since my wife Alicia and I met you both and discovered Ransom at the 1998 Rochester L'Abri Conference. We were new parents, long-term ministers of God's redemption through Jesus Christ (first in paid positions, then "lay" ones), and we were caught strongly by your emphasis on discernment and winsomeness before a watching world.

We have been gripped so many times by *Critique* and *Notes from Toad Hall*. Whether it is the extent to which the phrase "we are living in Babylon" is used in our home to remind ourselves of our life context or the numerous times we laugh-so-hard-we-snort or cry-more-than-is-seemly because of Margie's honest assessments of life between Calvary and Mt. Zion, we are not the same people we would be if we had not met you and your work. As Alicia says, "I just love them."

Since 1998, we have added a second child to our family, and have moved from Chicagoland to Vancouver, BC, and then Waco, TX, as I decided to leave my computer consulting work to go back to school. I long to teach young Christian women and men about philosophical reflection done from the place of confessional Christian commitment. My vision for this is in many ways just an extension of the type of discernment exercises we find in *Critique*.

Thank you so much for your ministry. We are so grateful for its impact, both in our lives and the many others we know you reach. Our hearts hurt each time we read about God's faithful ministers being in a position where finances are not sufficient. We support missionaries with Wycliffe who are in their 60s and have only recently achieved the level of support the mission says they should have to get by with. Shameful! Anyway, we are sending (what seems) a pittance that we hope helps.

In the name of our Lord,

Brad Brummeler

Waco, TX

Denis Haack responds:

Publishing *Critique* is an act of communication, and I never feel my task is fully completed until I gain some sense of how readers understood and responded to each issue. I commented recently to a friend after preaching a sermon that I always think of public speaking rather like archery. I always hope and pray I hit a bull's eye, or close to it, but often am not able to examine the target to be certain how it came out. Writing is very similar, which is why I look forward to hearing from readers. Thank you for taking the time in your busy lives to write. Only a few letters can fit into these pages, but we read each one with interest and appreciation.

Jean. Usually my Editor's Note is the most difficult column for me to write. Difficult enough, in fact, that I've been tempted occasionally to drop it. It's short, for one thing, which is always a challenge. (I'm wordy, in other words. Not proud of it, but there it is.) And I want it to be fresh and thought provoking and non-legalistic and winsome--and a whole lot more. I appreciate the encouragement to keep at it.

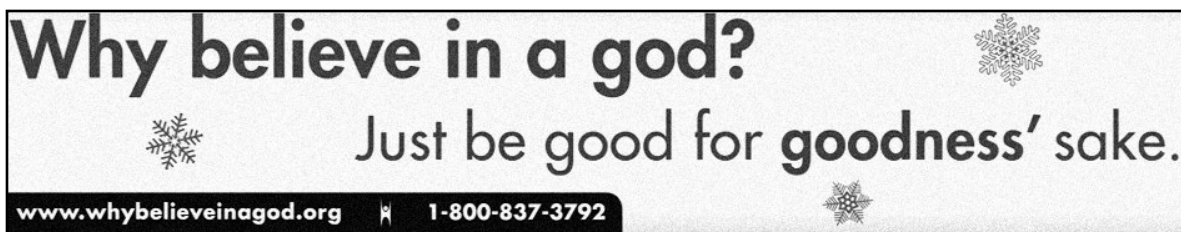
Scott. Haven't listened to Prine but will put him on my list. If you could recommend a specific album to order first, I'd appreciate it--the piles of CDs beside my desk are achieving a height that is getting dangerous. I agree about Emmylou Harris--a few artists in each generation achieve greatness over a lifetime of creative hard work, and she is definitely in that category.

Brad. Your gift to Ransom is not a pittance, I assure you, but a ministry of grace to us, and we are very grateful. I'm not certain how all the details fit together--I'm not certain anyone knows that--but whether due to the financial crisis or some other reason, giving remains low. We seem to have no indication that we should read this as a providential leading to stop what we are doing, though we will have to make some tough choices if this continues. Margie and I are always grateful for the wise leadership Ransom's Board of Directors provides in such things. In any case, your letter along with so many others, invitations to lecture and mentor, opportunities for ministry, all these things suggest we should, as Francis Schaeffer was fond of saying, keep on keeping on. So we are, trusting that our gracious Father has plans for good that we cannot see at present. So, thank you for your gift and for your very kind words (both of which are a great encouragement) and blessings on your work in philosophy. May your studies and teaching resound to God's glory.

POSTSCRIPT by Denis Haack:

In "Engaging New Atheists: Agreeing with Christopher Hitchens" [*Critique* #4-2008], I showed that Hitchens is correct when he argues that people can be good without believing in God. And that he is correct to feel insulted when Christians argue the opposite, since it fails to take seriously the image of God in those who happen to be unbelievers.

CNN.com reports that the American Humanist Association is launching a campaign for the 2008 Christmas season. Buses in the Washington, DC area will carry the message, "Why believe in a god? Just be good for goodness' sake."



The president of the American Family Association, Tim Wildmon, is not impressed. "It's a stupid ad," he said. "How do we define 'good' if we don't believe in God? God in his word, the Bible, tells us what's good and bad and right and wrong. If we are each ourselves defining what's good, it's going to be a crazy world."

I would encourage Mr Wildmon to read Romans 2:14-16. It does not do to argue for the faith before a watching world in ways that contradict the claims of that faith and demean skeptics created in God's image. ❖

singing sharp beauty into a broken world

the folk music of Eliza Gilkyson
on *Paradise Hotel*

I am just a troubadour
A tried and true believer
If there's nothing
that I can live for
I don't want to be here

["Clever Disguise"]

The Hebrew Scriptures mark a moment that stretches so far back into the mists of history that it is easy to miss its significance. A mention of people long dead, but whose unfolding lives capture an evidence of God's grace. The creation which danced into existence out of nothing at the word of the Creator was not a static thing, but was, instead, profoundly rich in possibility. Human beings in service to God could apply their God-imaged creativity to the world and find new things, develop new skills, and uncover new discoveries in a process that, millennia later, shows no sign of ever abating. Which, given the nature of the Creator, should not be a surprise. In any case, in the unfolding story told by Moses a man named Jubal is for all time remembered as "the father of all those who play the lyre and pipe" (Genesis 4:21). This text not only affirms the deep affinity human beings have for music, but that from the beginning a gift of music often seemed to reside in families, across succeeding generations.

Eliza Gilkyson continues the creative tradition. Her father, Terry Gilkyson, is a well-known songwriter (he wrote a #1 hit for Dean Martin & music for *The Jungle Book*), and her siblings are involved in music as well, a brother in punk rock and a sister in the music industry. Gilkyson has charted her own path, however, and brings a clear voice, crisp lyrics, a passion for justice, and an imagination keen on beauty to shape music that satisfies not as background noise, but as music of the heart.

Eliza Gilkyson's 2005 album, *Paradise Hotel*, is superbly produced, each song unique and compelling in its own right, the entire collection fitting together to make a satisfying whole. In "Man of God," she honors the long tradition in folk of raising a protest against what she and so many others around the world perceives as an unjust war.



the cowboy came from out of the west
with his snakeskin boots
and his bulletproof vest
gang of goons and his big war chest
fortunate son he was doubly blessed
corporate cronies
and the chiefs of staff
bowin' to the image of the golden calf
startin' up wars
in the name of god's son
gonna blow us all
the way to kingdom come
man of god, man of god
that ain't the teachings
of a man of god

["Man of God"] ►

"The actions of this regime do not follow the teachings of Christ, what I call real Christianity," Gilkyson said of the Bush administration in an interview. "I just don't appreciate the religious right acting like I don't love God and my country just because I'm not in their corner." It's important to note that the next song on the CD, "Jedidiah 1777," takes us back to another war, the lyrics adapted from one of Gilkyson's relatives who fought in and wrote from the front lines of the Civil War.

i rejoice that
the cause we're engaged in
is in the hands of
an all-wise sovereign
who I doubt not is accomplishing
the ends of his desire
my love to you and the fair miss moore
spare me a bottle from the cellar store
and in my name let the contents pour
jedidiah

["Jedidiah 1777"]

Gilkyson's stance, whether you happen to agree or not, is not a mindlessly utopian anti-war dream, but an honest attempt to see the matter justly. Each song is performed with integrity, the music and instrumentation chosen with care to highlight the message.

Gilkyson sings of love disappointed ("Think About You"), the unfolding mystery that is life, and life after death ("When You Walk On"), falling in love ("Borderline"), and the possibility of hope while we're "sailing cross the seas / pursuing sorry ships don't know they're sinking" ("Paradise Hotel"). Some CDs seem to sound basically the same from beginning to end, and albums with too much variation can feel like they were thrown together by the random output of a party shuffle. *Paradise Hotel* avoids both mistakes, revealing a lovely range of sound and performance without ever appearing to break apart.

Gilkyson has also recently released a live album, *Your Town Tonight* (2007), and in 2008, *Beautiful World*, which is a bit more stylized in feel, with something of a pop/jazz sensibility on top of her more traditional folk approach. Though *Beautiful World* is charming and is an album I return to frequently, it does not measure up to the brilliance, musicality, and balance of the earlier *Paradise Hotel*.

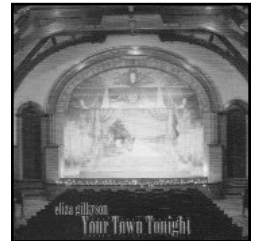
The high point of *Paradise Hotel*, both emotionally and musically, is "Requiem," a song Gilkyson wrote after the tragic 2004 tsunami that ripped through the villages, families, and lives of so many people living along the coasts of the Indian Ocean. Though not a Roman Catholic herself, Gilkyson draws on the long tradition of

Marian devotion to gain a sense of comfort and hope in the face of so much death and devastation.

mother mary, full of grace, awaken
all our homes are gone,
our loved ones taken
taken by the sea
mother mary, calm our fears, have mercy
drowning in a sea of tears, have mercy
hear our mournful plea
our world has been shaken
we wander our homelands forsaken
in the dark night of the soul
bring some comfort to us all
oh mother mary come
and carry us in your embrace
that our sorrows may be faced
mary, fill the glass to overflowing
illuminate the path where we are going
have mercy on us all
in funeral fires burning
each flame to your mystery returning
["Requiem"]

Sung with a poignancy formed by her own humanity, Gilkyson memorializes a so-called act of God with the grace of God, and thus sets it in a proper cosmic perspective.

Gilkyson honors the traditional folk tradition without becoming lost in the past. Like the best troubadours of old, she sees clearly enough that her songs can perhaps keep at the bay the complacency and cynicism that threatens to overwhelm our souls. ❖



Concern for Children at Play and Work

by Denis Haack

One of *The New York Times Magazine* columns I always read is "The Ethicist," by Randy Cohen. Mr. Cohen, a graduate of the California Institute of the Arts, has written for *The New Yorker*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and *Harper's*. He has an interest in comedy writing, winning three Emmy's for writing he has done for *The David Letterman Show*. And besides the weekly column in *NYT Magazine*, Cohen also writes on ethics for the *Times of London*. "I'm not sure that anyone actually does anything I suggest," Cohen says. "On a good day, however, I hope I've helped the readers reach their own conclusions. My job is to make the discussion illuminating, the analysis thoughtful, and the prose lively. At least, that's what I try to do, and if I can present the questions in a way that lets the reader see them fresh, I'm pleased."



I always find "The Ethicist" to be interesting. Interesting for the range of questions and issues that he receives from readers and chooses to reflect on. Interesting for the principles, either assumed or identified, that he brings to bear on the issues. Sometimes I agree with Cohen; sometimes I disagree, but always I am glad I am listening in on this ongoing conversation about ethics published in one of the world's most widely read newspapers.

A recent column caught my attention both because of the question raised and the answer Mr. Cohen provides. As you read, please note your immediate response. Although I believe gut responses are not dependable guides to Christian faithfulness, they often provide insight as to who we are as people. And that is something that is always worth some serious reflection. In any case, here is the letter Mr. Cohen received, and his reply:

A woman I hired to do simple gardening comes weekly and, when school is out, brings her kids. While her twin pre-schoolers play in the shade, her approximately 9-year-old daughter works alongside her. I am uncomfortable watching my 8- and 11-year-old boys kicking a soccer ball as the girl walks past pushing a wheelbarrow. Should I ask the mother to keep her daughter from working? Should I not employ this woman? - Jane E., Albuquerque

You are rightly dismayed by this situation, but you've phrased the question curiously, emphasizing your discomfort rather than a child's well-being. If you are concerned about the daughter, as you admirably seem to be, you ought not make her life harder, which firing her mother would certainly do. And rather than insist that the mother make the daughter drop that wheelbarrow, you might encourage your sons to invite the daughter to play soccer with them. Her mother will likely be relieved: having a 9-year-old "help out" all but guarantees the task will take longer.

It would be commendable if you could proffer some practical advice. Presumably this woman brings along her children because she has no alternative. Does your town offer inexpensive day-care programs? Are there other social services that might benefit her three kids? A bit of time on the phone or online might lead you to something that helps this family and eases your own mind.

UPDATE: The gardener failed to show up a few times, and Jane "used that as an excuse" to find someone else for the job.

I recommend Cohen's weekly "The Ethicist" to you, and suggest that the particular column I've included here provides several layers of issues worth careful thought by discerning Christians. ►





QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION & DISCUSSION

1. What was your immediate or gut reaction as you read the letter from Jane and Mr. Cohen's response? What does this say about you?
2. It could be easy for some people to be dismissive of Jane's concern. What better way for children to learn the significance and joy of work than to work alongside their parents in tasks that really count towards the family's livelihood? Is it ever right to demonstrate or express such a dismissive reaction to someone like Jane? Why or why not?
3. If people in our pluralistic culture hold concerns that you do not tend to share, how can your beliefs and ethical standards be made to seem relevant in such a situation?
4. If you share Jane's and Cohen's concerns, what would you say to Christians who are dismissive of the situation?
5. If Jane were a friend from work and shared this problem with you, what questions would you ask her to help you understand her concern? What questions might you ask to help her consider if there might be another way to understand the situation?
6. Write a response, maximum 160 words. Remember, this is to be published in the *New York Times Magazine*.
7. If the interchange between Jane and Cohen was a conversation between two colleagues at work, and they invited your reaction, what would you say?
8. If you believe the woman Jane hired is doing nothing to cause concern, what would need to change about the situation before you felt concern?
9. To what extent does the final outcome, noted in the "Update," resolve the issue? To what extent are you tempted to use "easy outs" like this in order to keep from having to address a potentially uncomfortable situation?

SOURCE

The column from "The Ethicist" in *The New York Times Magazine* (October 12, 2008) by Randy Cohen; comment by Cohen from an interview on BookReporter.com. Randy Cohen's podcasts of "The Ethicist" are now available at NYTimes.com, iTunes and Yahoo.com.



The Story of My Demise

a review of the film

Stranger than Fiction

In one of his finest performances to date, Will Ferrell uses his comedic gifts to raise some of the deepest questions of life in the film *Stranger Than Fiction*. It's a film that makes you laugh, and think.

Farrell plays Harold Crick, an IRS agent so regimented that every part of his life is tightly controlled and measured. Then, one day, out of the blue, he hears a voice narrating his life.

Kay Eiffel: [*narrating*] This is a story about a man named Harold Crick and his wristwatch. Harold Crick was a man of infinite numbers, endless calculations, and remarkably few words. And his wristwatch said even less. Every weekday, for twelve years, Harold would brush each of his thirty-two teeth seventy-six times. Thirty-eight times back and forth, thirty-eight times up and down. Every weekday, for twelve years, Harold would tie his tie in a single Windsor knot instead of the double, thereby saving up to forty-three seconds. His wristwatch thought the single Windsor made his neck look fat, but said nothing.

The situation is, to say the least, disconcerting. So, Crick visits a psychiatrist.

Dr. Mittag-Leffler: I'm afraid what you're describing is schizophrenia. Harold Crick: No, no. It's not schizophrenia. It's just a voice in my head. I mean, the voice isn't telling me to do anything. It's telling me what I've already done... accurately, and with a better vocabulary.

But then a bigger problem arises. Crick doesn't like what he hears. It's not just that the mysterious voice is uncannily accurate--it is beginning to discuss his impending death.

Kay Eiffel: [*narrating*] Little did he know that this simple seemingly innocuous act would result in his imminent death.

Harold Crick: [*on a street corner waiting for a bus*] What? What? Hey! HELLOO! What? Why? Why MY death? HELLO? Excuse me? WHEN?

Novelist Karen Eiffel, played by Emma Thompson, is writing a story about a character named Francis Crick. Dustin Hoffman plays a literature professor whom Crick approaches for help in understanding stories, and Maggie Gyllenhaal plays a baker, Ana Pascal, who has not paid all her taxes and so is being audited by Crick. ►

Starring

Will Ferrell (Harold Crick)
Maggie Gyllenhaal (Ana Pascal)
Emma Thompson (Karen Eiffel)
Queen Latifah (Penny Escher)
Dustin Hoffman (Professor Jules Hilbert)
Tony Hale (Dave)

Director
Marc Forster

Writers
Zach Helm

Producers
Joseph Drake, Nathan Kahane, Eric Kopeloff

Original Music
Britt Daniel, Brian Reitzell

Cinematographer
Roberto Schaefer

Runtime
113 minutes

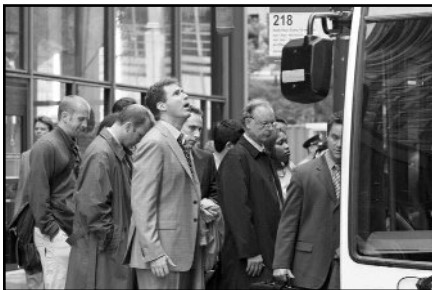
Release
USA; 2006

Rated PG-13
(for some disturbing images, sexuality, brief language and nudity)

Ana Pascal: Listen, I'm a big supporter of fixing potholes and erecting swing sets and building shelters. I am more than happy to pay those taxes. I'm just not such a big fan of the percentage that the government uses for national defense, corporate bailouts, and campaign discretionary funds. So, I didn't pay those taxes. I think I sent a letter to that effect with my return.

Harold Crick: Would it be the letter that begins "Dear Imperialist Swine"?

Ana thinks he's a creep for working for the IRS but then is appalled to learn no one has ever baked him a cookie. You can guess where things go from there.

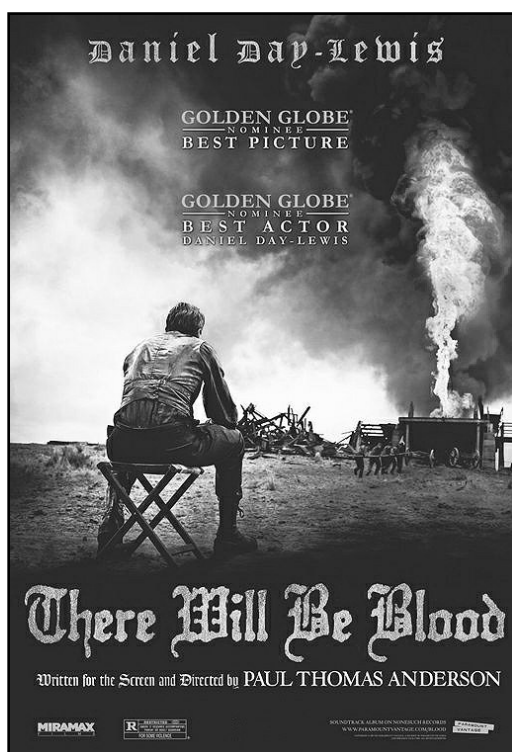


The dialogue is witty and as sharply delivered as it was written. The performances are believable without being sentimental, even when falling in love or standing on the edge of meaninglessness and despair. The characters are all stereotypes, but so warmly crafted by the actors and story as to make us believe in them and care about them. And the film as a whole raises the question of whether life has significance and whether having a bigger Story to define our story is necessary to provide meaning in a world made up of what seems to be nothing but meaningless details.

Delightful, genuinely funny, and worth discussing, we recommend *Stranger Than Fiction* to you. ❖

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION & DISCUSSION

1. What was your immediate or initial response to *Stranger Than Fiction*? Why do you think you responded as you did?
2. How effective was the film as a comedy? To what extent does the fact it is a comedy make the point(s) of the story that much more poignant?
3. Did the film ever misuse the limits of humor and comedy--say, by making cruel fun of a character?
4. In what ways were the techniques of film-making (casting, direction, lighting, script, music, sets and backgrounds, action, cinematography, editing, etc.) used to get the film's message(s) across, or to make the message plausible or compelling? In what ways were they ineffective or misused?
5. Identify and describe, as objectively as possible, each of the main characters in the story. What is their role and significance?
6. With whom do you identify? With whom are we meant to identify?
7. Stories are only as captivating as they are plausible. To what extent did you find the film plausible? How was the film director able to make an unbelievable story plausible?
8. What specific scenes in the film stand out as particularly impressive? What makes them so?
9. The biblical narrative tells a 4-part Story, that of Creation, Fall, Redemption and Restoration. To what extent is this narrative structure echoed in *Stranger Than Fiction*? How could this connection be explored in terms that skeptical non-Christians might be able to appreciate and understand? How does the novelist's narration of his life--and particularly his death--bring Harold Crick to see reality in new ways?
10. Explain in practical terms how a larger Narrative or Story gives meaning, significance, and direction to the story of your life.



Drained Dry Oil, Religion and The Shriveling of Souls

A Review of the Film *There Will be Blood*

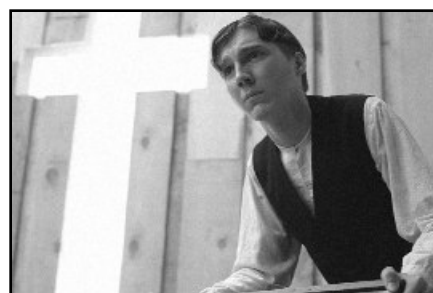
There Will be Blood is a brutally honest, brutally violent film. Greedy souls are dissected in plain view on the screen, hard souls for whom truth is a weapon, wealth is a god, and power is embraced in an unrelenting push to win, regardless of the cost. In a world where the possibility of truth is doubted and where evil is often reduced to genetic or environmental determinism, *There Will be Blood* proclaims that wickedness is real and is profoundly, violently destructive to all that is beautiful and human and noble.



Based very loosely on Upton Sinclair's classic 1927 novel, *Oil*, the film is a deeply American story. A wild frontier is settled, human ingenuity developed, sales-pitches made, contracts signed, emotional religion embraced, family values pitched, resources discovered, hard labor endured, and wealth achieved.

Adapting the story for the screen allows an image to burn itself into our memory, a symbol of progress that acts as a metaphor for the corrosive

action of evil within the human heart. "There was a tower of flame," Sinclair writes, "and the most amazing spectacle--the burning oil would hit the ground, and bounce up, and explode, and leap again and fall again, and great red masses of flame would unfold, and burst, and yield black masses of smoke, and these in turn red. Mountains of smoke rose to the sky, and mountains of flame came seething down to the earth; every jet that struck the ground turned into a volcano, and rose again, higher than before; the whole mass, boiling and bursting, became a river of fire, a lava flood that went streaming down the valley, turning everything it touched into flame, then swallowing it up and hiding the flames in a cloud of smoke." *There Will be Blood* is a visual epic, scenes so carefully crafted that we are not merely drawn into the story but made a part of it. This is, whether we like it or not, the world in which we live and of which we are a part. ►



Starring:

Daniel Day-Lewis (Daniel Plainview)
Kevin J. O'Connor (Henry)
Paul Tompkins (Prescott)
Barry Del Sherman (H.B.Ailman)
David Willis (Abel Sunday)
Paul Dano (Paul Sunday/Eli Sunday)
Ciaran Hinds (Fletcher)
Colleen Foy (Adult Mary Sunday)
Dillon Freasier (Young H.W. Plainview)

Director:

Paul Thomas Anderson

Writers:

Paul Thomas Anderson (screenplay);
Upton Sinclair (novel)

Producers:

Paul Thomas Anderson, Eric Schlosser,
Scott Rudin, David Williams

Original Music:

Jonny Greenwood

Cinematographer:

Robert Elswit

Runtime:

158 min

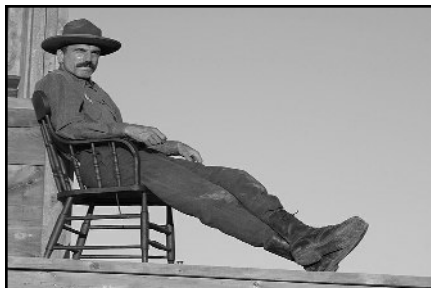
Release:

USA; 2008

Rating:

R (for some violence)

My friend Steve Garber commented that as he watched *There Will be Blood* he couldn't stop thinking that writer/director Paul Thomas Anderson was channeling Flannery O'Connor. Like O'Connor, Anderson is a Roman Catholic who takes faith seriously. If you doubt that, watch his 1999 film, *Magnolia*, a story of sin, grace, and the desperate search for forgiveness in the face of guilt and death. Both O'Connor and Anderson understand that speaking truth requires creativity in a secularized or skeptical culture. "When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs as you do, you can relax a little and use more normal means of talking to it," O'Connor said. "When you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock, to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind, you draw large and startling figures."



One of the highlights of *There Will be Blood* is the musical score. Composed, played and conducted by Jonny Greenwood, the classically trained musician best known as the lead guitarist for Radiohead. It is a "sweeping, surging, constantly surprising score," Todd McCarthy notes in *Variety*, "which could be described as avant-garde symphonic. It's a daring, adventurous, exploratory piece of work, one that on its own signals the picture's seriousness."

"The truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it," Flannery O'Connor said. *There Will be Blood* reminds us that what we worship, in commerce or in religion, will define what we will be like. Mistakes here are not just unfortunate, but deadly. ❖

SOURCES

Sinclair quote from "Blood and 'Oil!'" by Anthony Arthur in *The New York Times Sunday Book Review* (February 24, 2008) available online (<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/24/books/review/Essay-t.html>)

McCarthy from review posted online November 1, 2007 (www.variety.com).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION & DISCUSSION

1. What was your immediate or initial response to *There Will be Blood*? Why do you think you responded as you did?
2. In what ways were the techniques of film-making (casting, direction, lighting, script, music, sets and backgrounds, action, cinematography, editing, etc.) used to get the film's message(s) across, or to make the message plausible or compelling? In what ways were they ineffective or misused? How did Jonny Greenwood's music help tell the story?
3. Identify and describe, as objectively as possible, each of the main characters in the story. What is their role and significance? With whom do you identify? With whom are we meant to identify?
4. Is the story simply a tale about the oil business, or is oil a metaphor for something larger?
5. Some have interpreted the film as an attack on America, or on the free market, or on organized religion. How would you respond?
6. Two recent films, *There Will be Blood* and *No Country for Old Men*, are similar in that both depicted violence graphically. Why did these stories require this imagery?
7. What questions do you think *There Will be Blood* asks of our skeptical culture? What questions does it ask of the

"A Few Like You"

Will the Church be the Church for Homosexual Christians?

In 1947, the great English poet W. H. Auden wrote a letter to his friend Ursula Niebuhr in which he confessed: "I don't think I'm over-anxious about the future, though I do quail a bit before the possibility that it will be lonely. When I see you surrounded by family and its problems, I alternate between self-congratulation and bitter envy." The root of Auden's fear of loneliness and his envy of the comforts of family is not hard to uncover: Auden was a homosexual Christian. And this dual identity created a tension for him: As a Christian of a relatively traditional sort, he believed homosexuality missed the mark of God's good design for human flourishing. But as a homosexually oriented person, despite his Christian beliefs, he craved intimacy and companionship with other men. Caught on the horns of a dilemma like that, what was he to do with his loneliness?

Four years before writing to Niebuhr, Auden corresponded with another friend, Elizabeth Mayer. He described to her how he felt inescapably "different" from others because of his preference for same-sex relations: "There are days when the knowledge that there will never be a place which I can call home, that there will never be a person with whom I shall be one flesh, seems more than I can bear."

I am drawn to these haunting confessions of Auden's because I, too, am a homosexual Christian. Since puberty, I've been conscious of an exclusive attraction to persons of my own sex. Though I have never been in a gay relationship as Auden was, I have also never experienced the "healing" or transformation of my sexual orientation that some formerly gay Christians profess to have received. But I remain a Christian, a follower of Jesus. And, like Auden, I accept the Christian teaching that homosexuality is a tragic sign that things are "not the way they're supposed to be." Reading New Testament texts like Romans 1:26-27 and 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 through the lens of time-honored Christian reflection on the meaning and purpose of marriage between a man and a woman, I find myself--much as I might wish things to be otherwise--compelled to abstain from homosexual practice.

As a result, I feel, more often than not, desperately lonely. ►

In recent years I have made it a point to read as many biographies of homosexual Christians as I can find. ("We read to know we're not alone," as the characters in the movie *Shadowlands* say.) Invariably, they talk about loneliness.

Henri Nouwen, to take one example, the late Catholic priest and popular author on spirituality who was also a celibate gay man, wrote this in one of his last journal entries before his death: "[I have an] inner wound that is so easily touched and starts bleeding again... I don't think this wound--this immense need for affection, and this immense fear of rejection--will ever go away."

Philip Yancey describes the reason for Nouwen's loneliness:

[Knowing about his homosexuality,] I go back through Nouwen's writings and sense the deeper, unspoken agony that underlay what he wrote about rejection, about the wound of loneliness that never heals, about friendships that never satisfy.... Nouwen sought counseling from a center that ministered to homosexual men and women, and he listened as gay friends proposed several options. He could remain a celibate priest and "come out" as a gay man, which would at least release the secret he bore in anguish. He could declare himself, leave the priesthood, and seek a gay companion. Or he could remain a priest publicly and develop private gay relationships. Nouwen carefully weighed each course and rejected it. Any public confession of his identity would hurt his ministry, he feared. The last two options seemed impossible for one who had taken a vow of celibacy, and who looked to the Bible and to Rome for guidance on sexual morality. Instead, he decided to keep living with the wound. Again and again, he decided.

Yancey concludes, poignantly: "I know of no more difficult path for a person of integrity to tread."

The same theme--loneliness--is sounded over and over in the biographies of homosexual Christians I've read. Auden's, Nouwen's, many others' I can't name here--it comes up in all of them. And it is my experience.

Perhaps the greatest unresolved question of my life is, How can I give and receive love, how can I experience intimacy and mutual self-giving commitment, if I am not permitted to marry a person of the gender to which I am attracted?

With every year that passes, I realize more and more that I don't want to live life on my own. More than anything, I would like to have a life partner. But I keep circling back to the conclusion Nouwen arrived at: fulfilling that desire seems impossible, so long as I continue looking to Scripture to guide my moral choices. ►

When I quoted earlier from W. H. Auden's letter to Elizabeth Mayer, I stopped mid-sentence. Here's the full quotation: "There are days when the knowledge that there will never be a place which I can call home, that there will never be a person with whom I shall be one flesh, seems more than I can bear, and if it wasn't for you, and a few--how few--like you, I don't think I could." Mayer was a supportive friend to Auden, one who helped him bear his loneliness. He felt he wouldn't have been able to endure it otherwise.

I know well-meaning Christians who often remind me, "God's love for you is better than any love you might find in a human relationship." While I believe this is true in an ultimate and profound sense, putting it this way seems to set up a false dichotomy. A statement more in sync with the drift of the New Testament might go something like this: "God's love for us is expressed and experienced mainly through the medium of human relationships."

Jesus, after all, reminds Peter and his other disciples that in choosing to follow him, they are not asked to give up human community altogether. Although the demands of discipleship may entail putting their commitment to the Kingdom of God ahead of cherished familial ties (see Matthew 10:37-38), Jesus' disciples also have the assurance of being welcomed into a new family, one knit together not biologically but spiritually (Mark 10:29-30). Similarly, the apostle Paul holds up a model of mutual burden-bearing as the template for Christian living (see Galatians 6:2). "Above all, keep loving one another earnestly," adds Peter. "Show hospitality to one another" (1 Peter 4:8, 9).

In the subsequent, post-New-Testament era of the Church, whenever Christians took on vocations of celibacy, they did so most often in community in monastic orders, for example. (Peter Brown's book *The Body and Society* tells this story magnificently.) Those committed to a life of sexual abstinence recognized that such a commitment would best be undertaken not in isolation but with others and would be sustained by the rhythms of corporate worship and the mundane tasks of providing for one another's daily needs.

In light of all this, I would echo Auden's sentiment: If it weren't for other people, I don't think I'd make it. For me to live faithfully before God as a sexually-abstinent homosexual Christian must be to trust that God in Christ can meet me in my loneliness not simply with God's own love but with God's love *mediated through the human faces and arms of my fellow believers.* ►

When I graduated from college, I had talked with no one else my age about my sexuality. One night shortly after graduation, sitting on the dirty carpeted floor of the bedroom of a dingy bachelor pad in a circle of guy friends, I came so close to breaking down and asking them for help and for prayer. A black light was glowing, incense was burning on a shelf, one of the guys was strumming a guitar, and we were shooting the breeze after a spaghetti dinner. Knees tucked under my chin, I listened as someone brought up the topic of homosexuality. I felt my heart start to pound and my palms grow sweaty. "Have any of you ever had a gay or lesbian friend?" he asked. Another one of the guys, Charlie, said yes, he had had a close friend in college who had wrestled with homosexuality. "He and I would go climbing together and talk about it," Charlie said. "Mainly I listened. We would get excited when he hadn't looked at porn for a day or two-or even just for several hours. And we would talk about the grace that God always held out to us because of Jesus."

As I listened to Charlie describe his relationship with his friend, I heard what seemed to me at that time to be a rare compassion, understanding, and respect in his voice. A few weeks later I decided to take a risk and trust that that same sensitivity might be there for me. After an anxious dinner at an Indian restaurant, I finally blurted out, "Could we talk about something before we head home?"

"Sure," Charlie said. Did he wonder why my voice was shaking? He pulled off the road, parked his Explorer in an empty lot, and turned off the engine.

"There's something I'd like you to know about me...." I began weakly. I told him that I knew I was gay. I had known since puberty or soon after and had probably experienced some foretastes of my sexual orientation even as a child. I told him I had prayed for healing. I said I just wanted Christian friends who would be there for me, who would help me figure out how to live with a tension and confusion that felt overwhelming.

We talked that night until we got too cold, then Charlie started the engine again, prayed for me, and drove me back to my apartment. It was the very first time I had shared my deepest secret with a peer, and I felt some relief. The burden of

loneliness wasn't quite so heavy that night as it had been before.

After that, I grew less timid. I began to take chances on my fellow Christians. I shared my story with other people I went to church with and began a process of learning to wrestle with my homosexuality and loneliness in a community. If it weren't for these few--how few...

In a recent reflection on contemporary society, novelist Marilynne Robinson posed the simple question: "will people shelter and nourish and humanize one another?" Read in light of the Christian Church's relationship to its gay members, her question takes on an added poignancy. Will the Church shelter and nourish and humanize those who are deeply lonely and struggling desperately to remain faithful? ❖

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Arthur Kirsch, *Auden and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 172-3;

Walter Moberly, "The Use of Scripture in Contemporary Debates about Homosexuality," *Theology* 103 (2000), 251-8;

Marilynne Robinson, "Family," in *The Death of Adam* (New York: Picador, 2005), 87-107;

Philip Yancey, *Soul Survivor: How My Faith Survived the Church* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 302.

Wesley Hill is a graduate of Wheaton College (B.A.) and the University of Durham, U.K. (M.A.). His interests include hiking, camping, coffee, novels, unhurried conversation with good friends, and lived theology. He is currently at work on a book on Christianity and homosexuality.

SIN

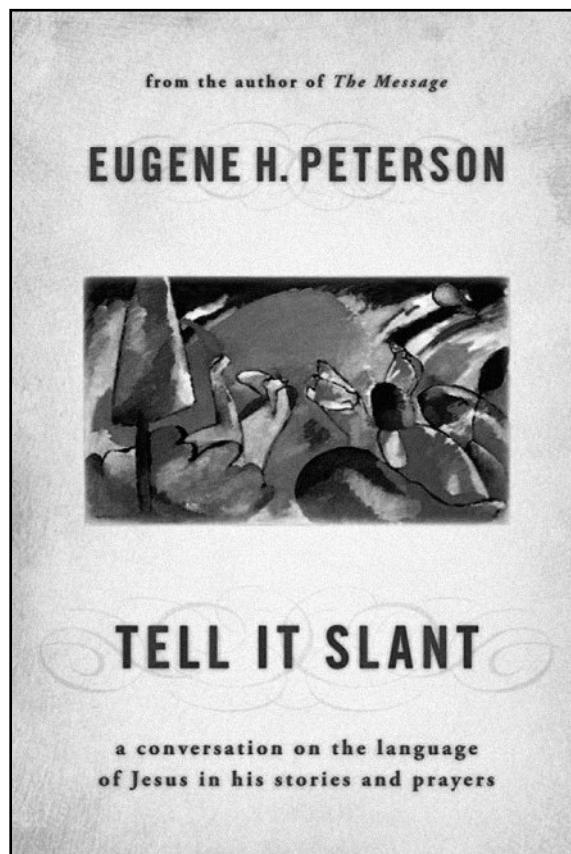
that afflicts the righteous

When I was twenty-five years old and a graduate student in Baltimore, I entered Johns Hopkins Hospital for surgery on my knee. An old athletic injury, a torn cartilage in my knee, had recently been getting increasingly inconvenient and painful...

I was happy with the prospect of walking pain-free in a month or so. But then, while still in the hospital, I contracted a staphylococcus infection that nearly killed me. The knee healed within the prescribed month; the infection held on stubbornly for eighteen months. In those eighteen months I lost twenty of my 160 pounds under the assault of a series of boils up and down my back that put me in a league with Job...

In the course of being treated for my infection, I learned a new word from my surgeon: *iatrogenic*. I became very fond of the word and used it every chance I got. Iatrogenic refers to a disease or illness that is contracted in the process of being treated by a physician. The physician treats you for one sickness, but the treatment, while healing you of that one sickness, makes you ill with another. *Iatros*, physician (or healer); *genic*, origin...

The Christian church is a Holy Spirit-formed community where salvation is proclaimed and sins



forgiven; men and women are redefined by baptism in the company of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; a life in Christ is formed; a eucharistic-shaped worship of God is enacted; and a holy life is practiced in a world of suffering, injustice, war, despair, addictions, and sin, both blatant and covert--a world at odds with both neighbor and God. It seems like quite a wonderful thing. It is a wonderful thing--all these people getting a taste of new life, Real Life, "ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven," and finding themselves participating in the holy operations of the

Trinity.

But it doesn't take long for those of us who are in on this to realize that this new life isn't a finished life but a life in process. Many of us are slow learners. Many of us hang on to selfish immaturities for as long as we can, unwilling to grow up. Others of us slip back into old habits of disobedience as we look for shortcuts to holiness. Still others experiment with ways in which we attempt to stay in control of our lives and manipulate God to do for us what we can't do for ourselves. Not a few of us keep trying to find a way to deal with God without having to pay attention▶

to our neighbors. When we take a good, long-good, long look at any congregation we see that most of the spiritual sins, moral and emotional, and the social disorders rampant in the general population continue to make their way, sometimes even flourish, among the elect...

But there is one form of sin that flourishes in religious communities in ways hardly possible outside of them--it *begins* in places of worship. Religious communities provide the conditions for this spiritual disorder, this sin, far in excess to what is provided in the secularized world. The common name for the sin is self-righteousness. In order to take root it requires the soil of a community in which righteousness is honored and pursued. Without a community in which righteous ways are practiced, self-righteousness would not be possible... unlike the sins that are commonly noticed and repented of by a worshipping congregation, self-righteousness is almost never recognized in the mirror. Occasionally in someone else, never in me.

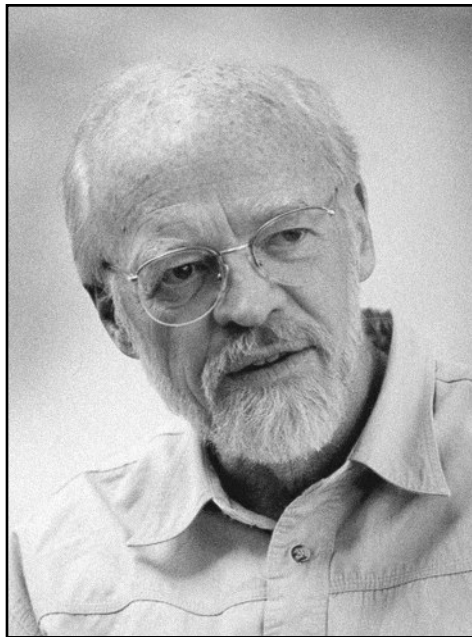
This phenomenon is so common, so damaging, so unnoticed much of the time, and therefore unremarked other than in its stereotyped cartoon forms, I thought it required a special naming, "eusebeigenic," to call attention to it. I am forming the word on analogy with the medical term, "iatrogenic." The Greek word *eusebeia* means godly, reverent, devout. It describes a person who is living a godly life, full of faith and obedient before our Lord: *righteous*...

But here's the thing: these people who are characterized by *eusebeia* are in a position to sin and cause others to sin in ways that non-*eusebeia* people--the people who couldn't care less about righteousness but are unapologetically out for more

money, more pleasure, better sex, and a secure retirement--can't do. In other words, there are some sins simply not accessible to the non-Christian, the person outside the faith. Only men and women who become Christians are capable of and have the opportunity for some sins, with self-righteousness at the top of the list. Both capacity and opportunity for self-righteousness expand exponentially when we become openly professed Christians living in what we have all been told is a Christian country...

The best protection against eusebeigenic sin is an acute awareness of our lost condition in which we so desperately and at all times need a Savior. But that is a difficult awareness to maintain when we walk into our workplace in a fresh cotton dress or a coat and tie and are greeted with "Good morning, pastor," or "Nice to see you, doctor," or "I just read your latest book, professor--you sure got it all together in that one." How do we cultivate a sharply imagined realization of "nothing in my hand I bring, only to the cross I cling" while in the other hand we are carrying our university diploma or Sunday school lesson plan or latest job assignment to lead a mission trip to Zimbabwe? After all, we are Christians, with credentials as Christ's chosen witnesses!

Eusebeigenic sin is difficult to detect because the sin is always embedded in words and acts that have every appearance of being righteous, *eusebes*--godly, devout (in Hebrew, *tzadik*). Just as iatrogenic illness is most frequently picked up in a place of healing, a hospital or clinic or physician's office, eusebeigenic sin is most often picked up in a place associated with righteousness, a church or Bible study or prayer meeting. ❖



EXCERPTED FROM *Tell It Slant: a conversation on the language of Jesus in his stories and prayers* by Eugene H. Peterson (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing; 2008) pp. 85-89.

WHY THE GOSPEL IS NOT A ROMANTIC COMEDY

Answers:

"It was too violent."

"It was too depressing."

"There wasn't enough hope."

"All I remember is that they cursed a lot."

"There was nothing redemptive about that story so I didn't like it."

Question:

What are common statements made by Christians after experiencing one of Hollywood's many violent or grotesque films?

Right you are Dick...

We've all made these comments, or at least known someone who has, after watching a particularly violent or shocking film. And it got me wondering:

Why are we so put off by violence?

It seems to me that there are two main reasons. The first reason is good. The second reason is bad. ►

The first reason is that, simply put, violence is violent. At its core, it is damaging. It is stress inducing and cruel. It destroys the things we love. This reason makes sense.

The second reason stems from the fact that we often impose an incorrect version of the Christian narrative onto our stories. This belief states that the Christian narrative is clean and devoid of violence. This belief is wrong. In fact, the Christian narrative contains imagery far more violent than popular cinematic and fictional expressions. But the issue goes deeper than just violence.

If fictional stories are intended to be reflections on the state of the human condition, which centers on our heart-wrenching separation from God, why do we continually demand spotless fairy-tales? Why do we so often play the abominably dangerous game of "What is Christian and What is Not?"

Stuck in the annals of modernity we too often subscribe to talking about and referencing the cleanest stories for the cleanest people. This method of filtering out stories that don't smack of the latest upbeat worship song is a form of watering down the Gospel, polarizing to the secular world, and is far more dangerous than the art we are so quick to shy away from.

Scripture could be considered the original horror film. Just read Leviticus. Burning ague and diseased bowels abound generously. Our oldest stories involve entire cities being annihilated in one divine fell swoop. Deception, incest, talking donkeys, men living inside whales. This is the stuff of the summer blockbuster.

This is not to say that the Christian community hasn't embraced violence in cinematic form before. It's just only been when the subject matter is spot on, in a direct representation of the bible. But why do we apply a different line of logic to fiction?

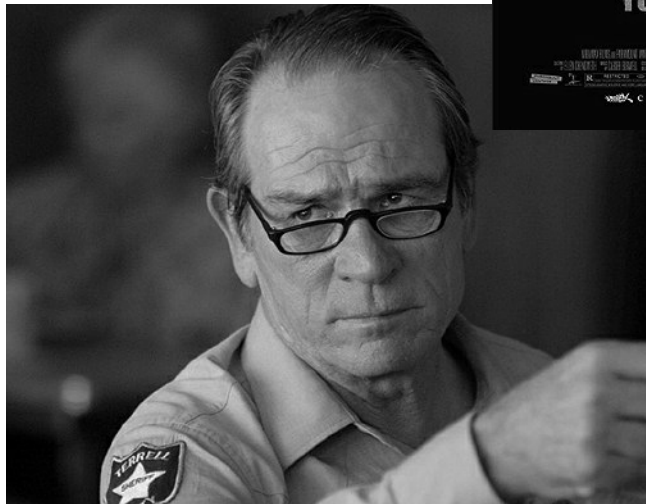
With studios like Fox and Sony creating divisions solely committed to producing "Christian" or "faith-based" films, it's apparent what the secular world and private sector think Christians are "into." The studio heads have implemented a philosophy that says Christians want their movies and entertainment to be cozy

factories of feel-goodery, tucked away from the outside pitfalls of relativistic culture and foreboding evil. And, generally speaking, they are right. What we oftentimes fail to realize is that the practice of limiting our tastes to what we call "safe" and "redemptive" actually separates us from the outside world, dragging us away from the cultural discussion table and therein sacrificing opportunities to speak up merely by having a piece of imagery to commiserate with in a great piece of art. Requiring art to always be entertaining and happy is like praying to win the lottery. It is narrow-minded and shallow and should be avoided at all costs.

If we limit our idea of hope in the artistic world to "something that makes us feel good" then we are completely missing Scripture's very definition of the word. In Romans chapter 8, Paul tells us "hope seen is no hope at all." Our logic doesn't line up if we expect our representational stories to be fulfillments of the hope that Paul explains to be a future glory that the whole creation waits for with eager expectation, "inwardly groaning with the pains of childbirth." Later on in the chapter, he reminds us from Psalm 44:22 that this condition is perpetual: "[for] your sake we face death all day long, we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." Hope is found in the lack of glory, more so than in its fulfillment; otherwise, it wouldn't be hope at all. ►



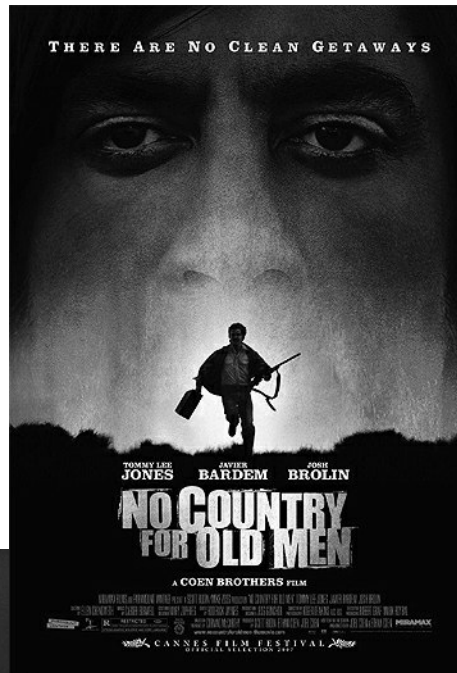
The Coen brothers' grippingly first-rate film adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's novel *No Country for Old Men* is one of the most realistically violent and Gospel-centered films in the last decade. From the beginning, *No Country* stares us down with a directly Christian predicament that is remarkably straightforward: This is no country for old men. In fact, this is no place for anyone. Themes of the "inward groaning" flourish in the barren and seemingly hopeless land-



scape of the Texas border. In its extremely violent characters, we are affronted with an Old-Testament-esque tenor of incessant damage. The character of Sheriff Bell articulates this early on in the story:

"Somewhere out there is a true and living prophet of destruction and I don't want to confront him. I know he's real. I have seen his work."

We find a similar sentiment all throughout Scripture: we don't belong here. There is a gap. Yet there is something deeper inside of us that hopes for something unseen. There is a future glory unrealized and we live as foreigners in this current world that has been broken by sin. What we've been given in the work of the Coen broth-



ers and McCarthy is an honest (yet fictional) depiction of a broken world. A place so thickly riddled with the contaminant of the Fall that we can't help but admit to the universality of evil. In her essay "Catholic Novelists", Flannery O'Connor writes:

I don't believe we shall have great religious fiction until we have again that happy combination of believing artist and believing society. Until that time, the novelist will have to do the best he can in travail with the world he has. He may find in the end that instead of reflecting the image at the heart of things, he has only

reflected our broken condition and, through it, the face of the devil we are possessed by. This is a modest achievement, but perhaps a necessary one.

When a "secular" piece of art admits this radically objective truth, it should be lauded and praised.

Yet even when we're given such creative spiritual fodder we tend to toss these types of stories away because they aren't palatable to our strict moral movie-going standards, typically because there was "too much violence" or "too much foul language" or because "it was depressing."

By doing this we are telling the artists who created the piece that we would rather them gloss over the evil they see and commit to the good. This censoring of vision is ultimately something a true artist is incapable of doing, as their primary task is to

interpret the world in front of them. To mutate the artist's perception is not possible. In fact, by inadvertently subscribing to a more sugary brand of fiction we in turn exacerbate a growing sense of relativism. Though our aim in personal censorship might be well-intentioned, it is a fruitless effort that keeps us far too safe and distances us from the rest of society and biblical truth itself. We must no longer treat our artistic standards like a moral compass. ►



Now surely these are gross generalizations, made to emphasize a point and there are, of course, exceptions to be made. Sensationalism, for one, has become a pop-culture favorite in the form of horror flicks and quasi-snuff films and is not the dramatic form I am trying to endorse. Although in rare cases effective, sensationalism is an anti-art in practice of great immoderation and any thinking person should be able to identify it at their local video store as "not worth their time." And surely there is content inappropriate for children and others that needs to be avoided, but a redemptive story with hope and happiness is not the one we should always be looking for.

The surface idea that films today are devoid of redeeming qualities is a near-sighted stricture in practice of personal piety and misses the point entirely. The reality is that displaying a void of hope or lack of redemption in a film actually serves as a beautifully tooled juxtapositional device in which there is no hope seen, but a hope sought after. These grotesque displays of violence, foul language, and relationships wrought with sin might be difficult to sit through, but more importantly, they are universal declarations of the brokenness we live in and the limits of our capabilities for grace and compassion; a truthful affirmation, made through imagery and parable, of the need for something larger than ourselves.

Flannery O'Connor explained this reality by saying, "[violence] is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace... This idea, that reality is something to which we must be returned at considerable cost, is one which is seldom understood by the casual reader, but it is one which is implicit in the Christian view of the world."

We should not be squeamish or put off by such shocking stories. In turn, we should try lining up with our bible studies to see films from the Coen brothers, Paul Thomas Anderson, and Martin McDonagh and discussing in our small groups the fiction of Cormac McCarthy and the plays of Tracy Letts and Adam Rapp, squirming and retching in community with one another. As a past article from this very publication reminds us: If we truly believe what we believe as Christians then we shouldn't be shocked by anything.

At the end of *No Country*, after two hours of devastating violence, we are given a glimpse of this yearning for a hope fulfilled. McCarthy beautifully manifests it in an image of father and son that is wrought with spiritual implication:

It was like we was both back in older times and I was on horseback goin through the mountains of a night. Goin through this pass in the mountains. It was cold and there was snow on the ground and he rode past me and kept on goin. Never said nothin. He just rode on past and he had this blanket wrapped around him and he had his head down and when he rode past I seen he was carryin fire in a horn the way people used to do and I could see the horn from the light inside of it. About the color of the moon. And in the dream I knew he was goin on ahead and that he was fixin to make a fire somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold and I knew that whenever I got there he would be there. And then I woke up.

This same quote was cited in *Critique's* earlier review of this movie, but given its sheer beauty, I think it is something we all need to read more than once.

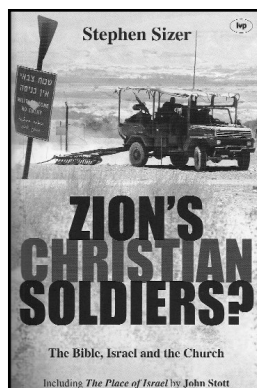
McCarthy's body of work, and the work of artists like him, serves as a reminder that the world of Scripture is far bigger than the normal path to positive inspiration we often make it out to be. To not seek out its different manifestations would be a gross disservice to our neighbors and to ourselves. ❖

SOURCES

Flannery O'Connor. *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald. (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969), p. 112, 171;

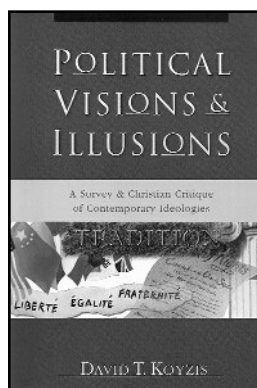
Cormac McCarthy. *No Country For Old Men*. (New York: Vintage, 2007), p. 2, 309.

Brian Watkins is a writer and actor living in Brooklyn, NY. His most recent play *High Plains* was produced this May at Emerging Artists Theatre in New York City. Other plays include *The Bison of Kiowa* and *Harold and Nettie*. You can see more of his work at: www.fivecentwhiskey.com



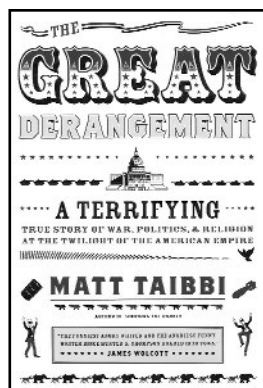
This book is a case study in interpreting Scripture correctly, on an issue with enormous political implications. Sizer examines the idea, commonly held by American evangelicals, that the nation of Israel is the fulfillment of prophecy. As a result, Israeli actions and policies are rarely examined in terms of justice, and Palestinian voices are rarely taken seriously. Sizer studies the biblical texts and arguments, and finds them wanting. Sadly, Sizer points out that Christian Zionism have done as much as militant Islam to erase the Palestinian Christian community. Correcting this inadequate approach to Scripture provides an adequate basis for supporting a Jewish homeland while standing for justice for all those created in God's image living in the battle scarred lands of the Middle East.

Zion's Christian Soldiers? The Bible, Israel and the Church
Stephen Sizer (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2007).
172 pp.



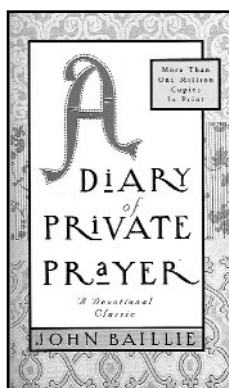
We live in a politicized world amid a confusing array of claims, counter-claims, choices, and a public square where civility is in short supply. Koyzis' helps us find our way through the heated rhetoric by carefully examining the ideologies of liberalism, conservatism, nationalism, democracy, and socialism. He argues that viewed biblically, each is a form of idolatry, elevating some aspect of created reality to absolute status and seeing all of life in its terms. Koyzis ends with a proposal for a third way, an understanding of politics that is rooted in biblical revelation and consistent with Christian faithfulness. Few books on politics have been as helpful to me as this one. I recommend it warmly.

Political Visions & Illusions: A Survey and Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies
David T. Koyzis (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2003)
267 pp.



Irreverent and passionate, a writer for *Rolling Stone* goes undercover in American society. He follows the military into Iraq, Big Money in Washington, DC, the conspiracy theories of the 9/11 Truth Movement, and the mega-church of John Hagee in San Antonio, TX. Sadly, Taibbi identifies John Hagee's theology and conservative politics as standard for those who confess an evangelical faith. An excerpt from the book, "Jesus Made Me Puke: & other tales from the evangelical front lines" appeared in the magazine (May 1, 2008), is available online, and is worth reading. Those of us who hold to historic Christian orthodoxy are being misunderstood and need to find winsome, creative ways to correct the misperception.

The Great Derangement: A Terrifying True Story of War, Politics, and Religion at the Twilight of the American Empire
by Matt Taibbi (New York, NY: Spiegel & Grau; 2008)
269 pp.



Dr Baillie (1886-1960), a Church of Scotland minister and theologian, published this collection of prayers, one for each morning and evening for a month, which has since become a beloved devotional classic. Shaped by Scripture and a passion for walking with God, using them guides us into adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and intercession.

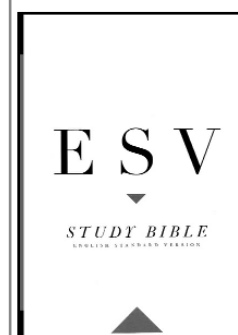
"O Holy Spirit of God, visit now this soul of mine, and tarry within it until eventide. Inspire all my thoughts. Pervade all my imaginations. Suggest all my decisions. Lodge in my will's most inward citadel and order all my doings. Be with me in my silence and in my speech, in my haste and in my leisure, in company and in solitude, in the freshness of the morning and in the weariness of the evening; and give me grace at all times to rejoice in Thy mysterious companionship." [an excerpt from the prayer for the morning, 21st day, p. 89.]

A Diary of Private Prayer
John Baillie (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster; 1949)
135 pp.



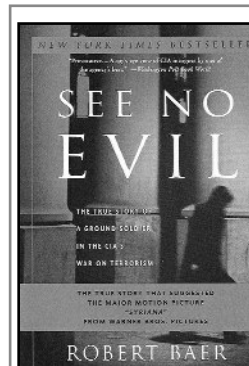
An older album with poetically charged lyrics, inventive instrumentation, and passionate vocals. Satisfying and thought provoking, the album's songs grew out of lyricist and vocalist Jeff Mangum's dreams about the story of Anne Frank's courageous life and death.

In the Aeroplane Over the Sea
Neutral Milk Hotel (1998).



OK, it's big; huge, in fact--the entire Scriptures plus footnotes, articles, graphics, and much more. If you use a study Bible, this is the one to own because the list of scholars preparing it is impressive: J. I. Packer and John Piper, David Chapman, Hans Bayer, and Jay Sklar of Covenant Seminary, among others. Dependably orthodox, accessible, and helpful.

ESV Study Bible
(Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles)
2750 pp.



After a career as a CIA case officer working in the Middle East, Robert Baer reflects on how American intelligence has changed in the face of the threat of global terrorism, and what those changes mean for America's future. The story he tells is fascinating, important, and not reassuring.

See No Evil: The True Story of a Ground Soldier in the CIA's War on Terrorism
Robert Baer
(New York, NY: Three Rivers Press; 2001)
283 pp.