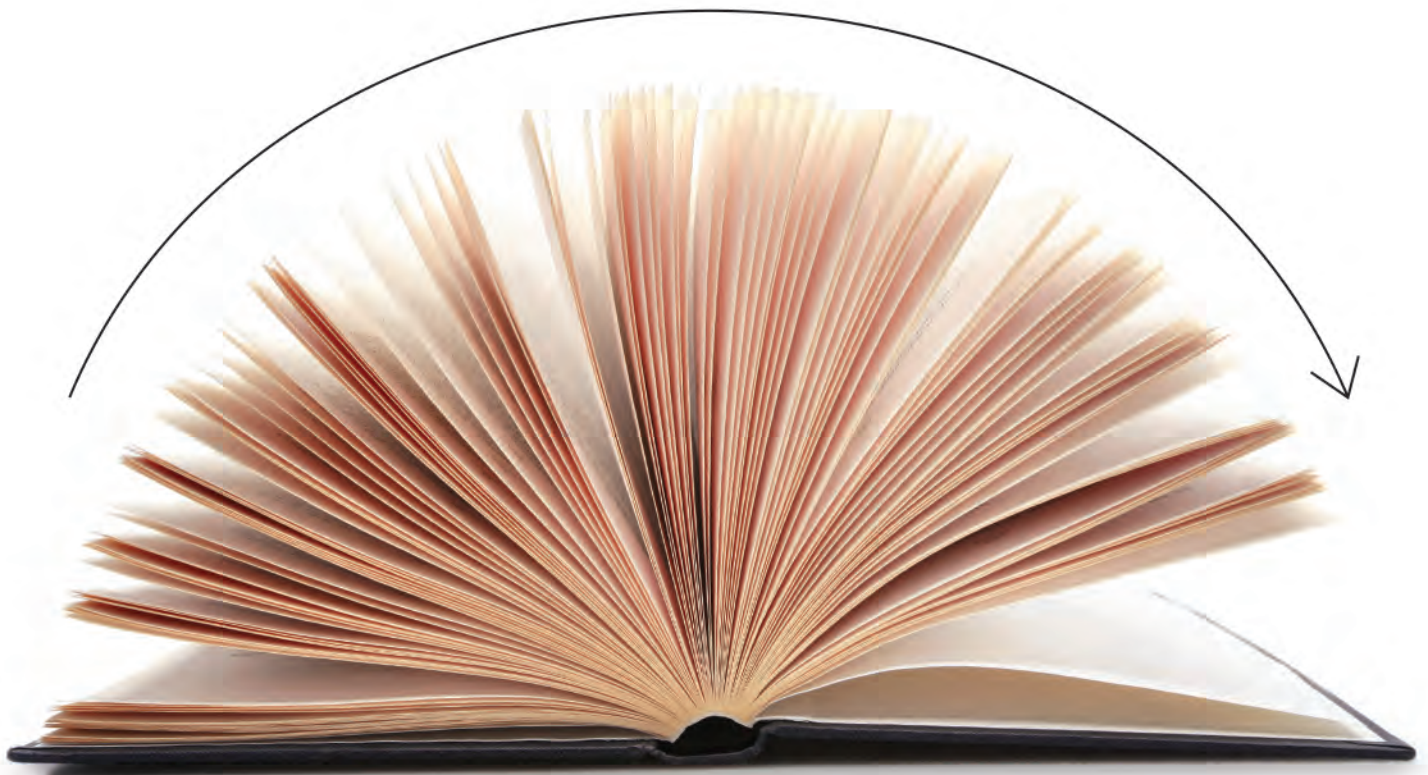


# critique

A Ransom Fellowship Publication

2017 Issue 3

## **OLD MYTHS RESURRECTED, FINDING THE BOOK, AND THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF STORY**



## CRITIQUE



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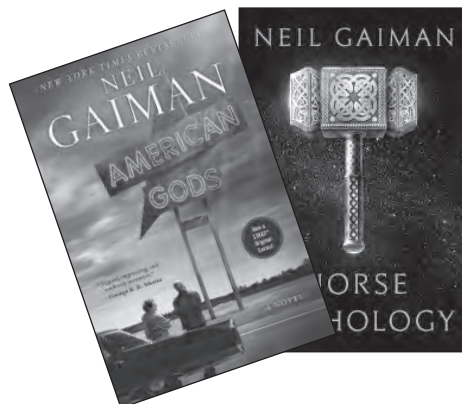
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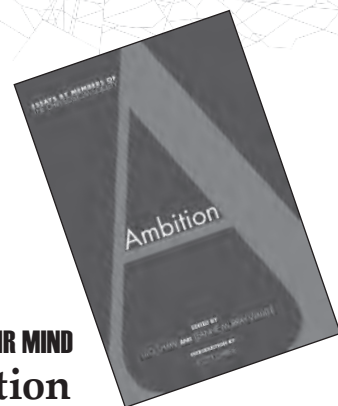


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# Old Myths Resurrected



Some of the most popular films today depict ancient pagan gods as superheroes. *The Avengers* (2012), for example, directed by Joss Whedon, one of our best storytellers, features the Norse gods Thor and Loki. The year before, in *Thor* (2011) Anthony Hopkins played Odin the all-father of the gods who exiles Thor from Asgard to earth where he becomes earth's defender. It's become a franchise, and a whole series of movies based on Marvel and DC Comic characters have appeared, with more in production. On the one hand of course, this is not necessarily very significant—these stories featuring pagan gods as heroes are only movies. And before that they were only comic books. And they are exciting stories, cosmic in scope, with bigger-than-life heroes who fight for earth against evil forces seeking to destroy humanity. What's not to like? True enough.

But yet, I sense something more. After decades of trying to keep my finger on the popular culture pulse of America, I tend to believe that there is something deeper transpiring here. I sense a yearning in this storytelling, a quiet yet insistent wistfulness for stories that tell of things greater than we can see or that science can name. I sense a desire to live in an enchanted universe,

where reality is more than mere cause and effect in the here and now. This is a desire I understand as a Christian—a world without God or gods is a lonely, cold, uninspiring place.

But, how should I as a Christian talk to my non-Christian neighbors about all this?

Growing up I was taught that Christianity was true and paganism was false, so that would frame any conversation on the topic. In *The Weight of Glory*, however, C. S. Lewis sees it in very different terms.

*Theology, while saying that a special illumination has been vouchsafed to Christians and (earlier) to Jews, also says that there is some divine illumination vouchsafed to all men. The Divine light, we are told, "lighteneth every man." We should, therefore, expect to find in the imagination of great Pagan teachers and myth makers some glimpse of that theme which we believe to be the very plot of the whole cosmic story—the theme of incarnation, death, and rebirth. And the differences between the Pagan Christs (Balder, Osiris, etc.) and the Christ Himself is much what we should expect to find. The Pagan stories are all about someone dying and rising, either every year, or else nobody knows where and nobody knows when. The Christian story is about a historical personage, whose execution can be dated pretty accurately, under a named Roman magistrate, and with whom the society that He founded is in a continuous relation down to the present day. It is not the difference between falsehood and truth. It is the difference between a real event on the one hand and dim dreams or premonitions of that same event on the other. It is like watching something come gradually into focus. (pp. 128–129)*

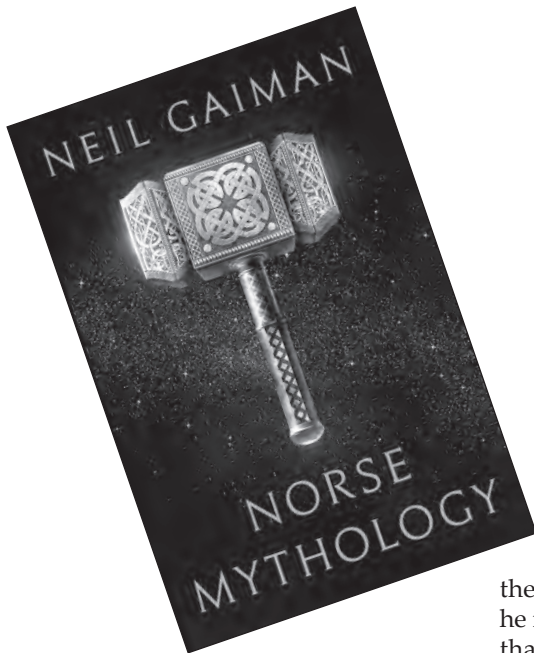
The old myths should not be treated dismissively, but seriously. They can be enjoyed as stories that have stood the test of time, engaging imaginations over many centuries. And they can be understood as echoes of The Story, the myth that is true.

Our commendation of the faith is not meant to be a debate but an exercise of love. Love for the truth, for the person challenging the truth of the gospel and, supremely, for God who created a world in which life only makes sense when seen in the gospel context of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration.

This does not suggest that we cannot demonstrate the limitations of human myths and the greater reliability of the Christian gospel. It does, however, suggest we do so with respect and honesty, and in the expectation that our non-Christian friends are right to insist that we not only talk about Christ, but that our lives demonstrate the reality of his presence.

How we speak about the gospel and the alternatives to the gospel always matters, and matters supremely today. ■

# Ancient Stories from Icy Terrain



When I heard that Neil Gaiman was publishing *Norse Mythology* (2017), a retelling of the ancient Nordic myths, I knew I needed to read it. These are stories that animated the imagination of C. S. Lewis, a thinker and storyteller I respect. And I believe in myths, believe in them in the sense that I am convinced that the old stories told and retold over generations contain some kernel of insight into the yearnings of the human heart. I am a Christian, and I believe that the story of Jesus is the great myth that is true.

The Nordic myths shaped our world, and the traces of that impact, Gaiman notes, are as close as our reckoning of the passage of time each week.

*The Norse myths are the myths of a chilly place, with long, long winter nights and endless summer days; myths of a people who did not entirely trust or even like their gods, although they respected and feared them. As best we can tell, the*

*gods of Asgard came from Germany, spread into Scandinavia, and then out into the parts of the world dominated by the Vikings—into Orkney and Scotland, Ireland and the north of England—where the invaders left places named for Thor or Odin. In English, the gods have left their names in our days of the week. You can find Tyr the one-handed (Odin's son), Odin, Thor, and Frigg, the queen of the gods, in, respectively, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday.* [p. 12–13]

I have not read classic versions of these myths and so cannot comment on Gaiman's retelling of them except to say that he makes them accessible to modern readers. And he includes a helpful, extensive glossary that identifies names, places, and events to help us keep track of the details.

Of greater interest to me is why such a book would be of interest to readers outside the halls of academia. And why one of the most successful fantasy storytellers would write it. Our scientific age has produced remarkable advances in medicine, technology, and knowledge, but at a cost that is rarely considered. Reality has been reduced to naked cause and effect, a world without windows in which nothing exists beyond the here and now, beyond that which can be proven by science. It is a bracing world, a world of progress, but it is also boring as hell—and I use this description advisedly. Hell is where creatures made in God's image cut themselves off from God, the ultimate source of life, light, and flourishing, and if that isn't a recipe for boredom I can't imagine what would be. People simply cannot live contentedly in a boring cosmos, and all they experience in life and relationships points to something more. As Lewis

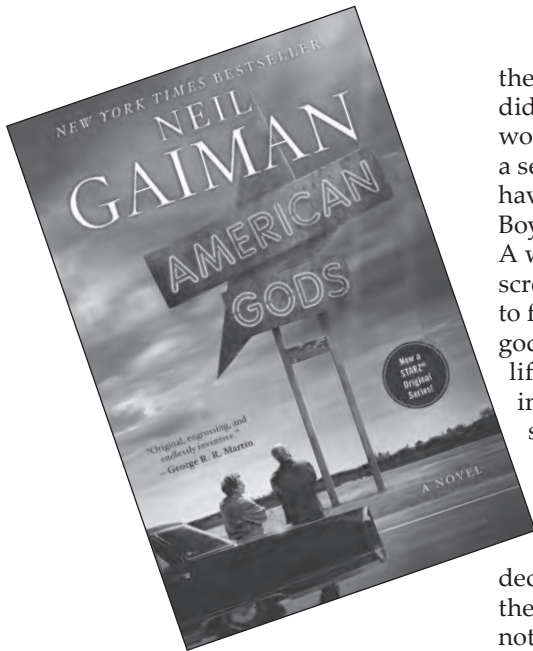
suggested in his science fiction novel, *That Hideous Strength*, a post-Christian culture drifts towards paganism when science, progress, and things displace the centrality of God.

I need to read *Norse Mythology* a second time. It imagines a cosmos that is foreign to me, foreign enough that in the first reading I was only a distanced observer. I need to read the stories again to try to indwell them, to imagine living in a world in which these myths define the nature of life and reality. It's all here—the stories begin with the world's beginning and end with its destruction in ice and fire.

My culture is shifting in the direction of pagan heroes and ideas. I do not mean that we should expect temples to be erected in honor of Odin, but that the myths of the pagan gods help to inform the social imaginary of many of our neighbors. The old stories evoke a world in which there is more to existence than merely the here and now, in all its boring, meaningless sequence of cause and effect. I want to understand this shift well enough to be able retell the story of Christ in a way that my neighbors will be able to understand and perhaps find compelling. ■

**Book recommended:** *Norse Mythology* by Neil Gaiman (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company; 2017) 283 pages + glossary.

# A Battle of the Gods



*American Gods*, by Neil Gaiman, is probably the most significant work of fiction I've read in the last several years.

The plot is rather simple, yet the ideas behind it are profound. America is the land of immigrants, and as people came they brought with them their old gods and myths. The Irish arrived and leprechauns began wandering the woods. Nordic peoples arrived, bringing Odin. Bilquis was brought from Africa, a vicious goddess of love, fertility, and sex that devours her lovers (read, worshippers) with her vagina. Immigrants of Slavic descent brought Czernobog, a brutal god that misses the days of blood sacrifice. There were many more, now mostly forgotten and ignored unless they decide to make some scene, which they occasionally do though the event is usually explained away by a society that actually believes science has the final word on reality. The immigrants to America brought

their gods, but succeeding generations did not believe in them, and without worship the gods are diminished. Now a series of young new energetic gods have appeared, gods like Technical Boy and Media, powerful and slick. A whole society bows before their screens, ordering their time and energy to fulfill the demands of these new gods for whom worship requires one's life. Conflict between old and new is inevitable, and *American Gods* tells the story of a road trip across the heartland of America as the final battle approaches.

*American Gods* is a violent, bloody story, full of cons and deceit, sex, death and lies. These are the old gods, after all, and they were not pleasant. And the new ones are voracious, compelling, seductive, and addictive. All of them, both ancient and new, roam the earth seeking whom they may consume. Everything is at stake, and no one except the gods seem to take it seriously.

Interestingly, Jesus does not make an appearance. Gaiman says he wrote a scene with Jesus but it didn't fit the story and so he took it out. Actually, the innocuous, success-driven, American version of Jesus doesn't really fit in with these loud, dark, raucous, vulgar gods. The book will offend some readers—and the Starz television series even more—and rightly so since the gods that vie for the soul of America let nothing stand in the way of their quest for worshippers.

Gaiman is a master storyteller, using compelling prose, suspense, an anything goes plot, and the yearning in ancient myths to draw us in. His vision of America is mystical, far closer to a Christian view of reality than a naturalistic one. He depicts reality not as mere cause and effect but the setting

for warring hosts that seek dominance and that feed on souls, demanding lives be given to them. He sees the world of advanced modernity not primarily in terms of science and advance, but as it truly is, a fallen world in which gods jostle for attention and where neutrality is impossible. In *American Gods*, Gaiman expresses a yearning that I think is widely found today, namely the desperate wish to believe that the world is an enchanted place, as it once was when the old gods ruled. The impersonal, empty, cold cosmos of natural science is unsatisfying, a lonely place for those created in the image of God.

*American Gods* ushers us into an America where dreams matter, where reality is a richly layered experience, where life is impossible without reference to the divine, and where we may be lost but we are most definitely not alone. And where the God of the Christian story, the one who died as redeemer so his worshippers could have life, stands in vivid, stark contrast to gods old and new. ■

**Book recommended:** *American Gods*, the tenth anniversary edition, Neil Gaiman's preferred text (New York, NY: William Morrow; 2001, 2011) 522 pages + appendix + interview + discussion questions.

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## RESOURCE

Hearts and Minds bookstore is a well-stocked haven for serious, reflective readers. When ordering resources, mention Ransom Fellowship and they will contribute 10 per cent of the total back to us. ■

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# Finding the Book

by David Heddendorf

A close friend told me recently that he can no longer read the Bible. He isn't as angry as Frank Schaeffer, whose *Why I Am an Atheist Who Believes in God* kicked up a fuss a couple of years ago, but like Schaeffer he's the son of a Calvinist preacher and has spent a long time searching for an alternative path. Both of these men, along with countless other people, can no longer

tolerate what seems to them the naiveté, sterility, and oppressiveness of certain approaches to the Bible. At some point they find they just can't read it anymore.

For each disaffected former reader of the Bible, there are many more who are simply indifferent or negligent. In *The Invisible Bestseller: Searching for the Bible in America*, Kenneth

A. Briggs portrays the Bible as a book that practically every-

body owns but hardly anyone reads. The reasons are unsurprising. Modern critical scholarship has eroded confidence in an inspired, infallible Word of God. Ancient cultures and customs prove daunting for today's reader. Perhaps most significantly, fewer Americans are reading much of anything they can't skim on a screen. Briggs surveys the diminishing role of the Bible in churches, and concludes that "Bibleless Christianity has become thinkable" (42).

If the Bible really is an "invisible bestseller," in Briggs's phrase, it's invisible because it's forgotten through disuse, the way a household object disappears when it drops out of our routine. It's virtually lost, whether we're looking for it or not. The Bible is like the little espresso maker my wife and I had, which might or might not reside in the cupboard beneath our kitchen counter. The high-maintenance machine made excellent espresso and cappuccino, and for a while we used it frequently. But the novelty wore off and the thing got to seem like a lot of trouble. The whole idea of an espresso maker began to seem vaguely dated, a fad we'd left behind. Gradually it went from seldom used to never used, then from rarely thought about to forgotten. It became lost to us, much as if it had ceased to exist.

*And Hilkiah the high priest said to Shaphan the secretary, "I have found the Book of the Law in the house of the LORD." 2 Kings 22:8 (ESV)*

I like to imagine Hilkiah and his assistants rummaging around in the

temple—they were consolidating funds for repairs, following a period of neglect—and discovering the Book of the Law under a pile of old documents. I picture Hilkiah gazing in wonder at the dusty scroll, a rumored, nearly forgotten relic. He has stumbled upon the guiding light of his forefathers. How could it have vanished for so many years?

We've been re-discovering the Bible ever since, periodically re-introducing it in some novel guise, or as a cure for lassitude and drift—*Good News for Modern Man*, Bible museums, ministries like Back to the Bible. Often these endeavors involve some form of public reading, or corporate reform, or a return to sound doctrine, much as when, following Hilkiah's discovery, the king reads the law before the people, or as when Ezra reads to the assembly in Nehemiah 8. Online reviews about Briggs's book focused predictably on Americans' declining knowledge of the Bible. We've misplaced the Book, these stories warned, and our ignorance of its contents proves it.

Such recoveries emphasize the role of scripture as "the sole rule and norm of all doctrine," as the Formula of Concord puts it. We must re-learn what the Bible teaches and commands, securing our mastery of what it says. To this end, we can listen to the Bible in church services or over broadcasts. We can hear biblical teaching proclaimed by institutions of various kinds. As a matter of fact, when it comes to acquiring "knowledge of the Bible," we don't need to read it at all.

Of course instruction in the Bible by faithful teachers and preachers is an essential corrective to "Bibleless Christianity." Explaining biblical knowledge will always be a vital Christian practice. But knowing what's in the Bible just isn't the same as picking



up that dusty volume from the bedside shelf and reading it, word by word and phrase by phrase.

The modern habit of silent reading, as opposed to the corporate hearing practiced in ancient times and today, deepens our experience of the Bible. It slows it down, planting words in our minds where they reverberate over a lifetime. By silent private reading I don't necessarily mean personal devotions—which, often guided by a well-meaning pamphlet, or by our own familiarizing, categorizing tendencies, can become as automatic as an unimaginative Sunday School curriculum. Private reading, practiced at home rather than in the pew, engages our authentic weekday selves. Intimate, concrete, and uncensored, it adds spontaneity to our patiently imbibed doctrine. Alone, we read as poets and artists read. With those bold, unlicensed scavengers we ask, "What moves me here? What can I use?"

*Then Shaphan the secretary told the king, "Hilkiah the priest has given me a book." 2 Kings 22:10 (ESV)*

My first crisis over reading the Bible came during the early 1980s when I was in grad school. Without actually confronting in any systematic way the thorny challenges to scripture, I sensed that my childhood faith, based on an unquestioning trust in the Bible, put me at odds with my new intellectual milieu. I knew I was different from my secular peers, and I became increasingly uncomfortable with that difference. (Perhaps "miserable" would be a better word.) So I did what any good graduate student does. I read a book.

I found Bernard Ramm's *After Fundamentalism: The Future of Evangelical Theology* in the "New Arrivals" section of the library. The title alone enthralled

me. Ramm's book is a brief, readable, and candid introduction to Karl Barth. ("Fourth, Barth can be boring" (32).) Ramm contends that Barth rescues orthodoxy from irrelevance by facing up to the Enlightenment and reckoning with its scientific criticism. Barth thus attempts to preserve evangelical theology without resorting to obscurantism, "the denial of the validity of modern learning" (19). Obscurantism, Ramm argues, "is a losing strategy in the modern world" (27), making some such undertaking as Barth's essential.

I didn't embrace this approach so much as throw myself upon it like a drowning man. "Losing strategy" described my growing sense of my graduate school experience. Every day in my courses and reading, I absorbed a witheringly secular view of the world while clinging to a different view derided by the first. Not only that, I was dating a liberal Catholic woman—destined to develop a marked taste for espresso—who asked a lot of awkward questions, to the dismay of my rock-ribbed church friends. I figured Barth could help me survive the academy with my faith intact, while at the same time he would annoy certain evangelicals who were getting on my nerves.

It was a partial, messy solution, but it got me through a rough time. Exactly how Barth reconciled orthodoxy and the Enlightenment was never quite clear to me. I tried to read his radical, early *Epistle to the Romans*, but mostly I leaned on Ramm. Some time later I came across Barth's "Biblical Questions, Insights, and Vistas," an address from 1920 in his book *The Word of God and The Word of Man*. In that address Barth offers a homely analogy:

*We all know the curiosity that comes*

*over us when from a window we see the people in the street suddenly stop and look up—shade their eyes with their hands and look straight up into the sky toward something which is hidden from us by the roof. Our curiosity is superfluous, for what they see is doubtless an aeroplane. But as to the sudden stopping, looking up, and tense attention characteristic of the people of the Bible, our wonder will not be so lightly dismissed. (62)*

In the thirty years or so since I first read that passage, its simple, mysterious force has sustained my reading of the Bible. I still don't have answers to questions about authorship, dates, and manuscripts, but I sense with Barth that the writers I've been reading and hearing my whole life are bearing witness to a transcendent reality. The comforting words of the Psalms, the stirring exhortations in Hebrews, the spare, stern accounts in the Gospels—as Barth says of Paul's epistles, "I seem to see within so transparent a piece of literature a personality who is actually thrown out of his course and out of every ordinary course by seeing and hearing what I for my part do not see and hear" (63).

Today a different crisis looms, one much broader than my personal uneasiness about the Bible. Where Barth points to the timeless vision of the biblical writers, this new crisis demands a response within our times. Writing in 1983, Ramm remarks, "We are at the threshold of a great revolution created by the combination of the computer and electronics" (40). For better or worse, we are living in the midst of that revolution. One of its effects has been to transform the way we think and read, including the way we think about and read the Bible.

Numerous books and articles have examined and lamented the re-making of consciousness by digital devices. One piece that has received a great deal of attention is Andrew Sullivan's long *New York* magazine essay from September 2016, "I Used To Be a Human Being." Drawing on Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*, Sullivan writes that the current decline in religious faith stems less from science than from the sheer drowning out of spiritual impulses by high-tech distraction and buzz. We can't hear our own thoughts, let alone the voice of God. As Briggs's findings about the "invisible bestseller" make clear, Bible-reading is one more casualty of this assault on contemplation and the inner life. In the information deluge that Ramm and many others foresaw and that has now arrived, the Bible might be vanishing with barely a ripple.

Just when developments in technology have reached this critical stage, a stunning presidential election has convinced further millions that we live in extraordinary times. For many in the voting majority that opposed Donald Trump, his rise prompts some basic, urgent questions: "What can I do? What should I do?" In the Old Testament, a similar sense of a decisive moment prompts Mordecai to ask the reluctant Esther, "And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14 ESV) Mordecai's words—*such a time as this*—echo today in newspapers, internet articles, and countless anxious conversations. The nation seems to have reached an unprecedented turning point.

It might be a good time to re-discover the Book. As phones and tablets claim more of our attention—as power and wealth are exalted, as Creation and the poor are threatened—the Bible

cuts against the grain, subversive and radically countercultural. The times say stay connected, get followers, get likes. The Bible says "Be still, and know that I am God." The times say look what's trending. The Bible says "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." The times give us boastful billionaires. The Bible gives us voices that "proclaim good news to the poor." If the Bible once seemed a boring, oppressive instrument of the status quo, it's hard to see it that way now. The Bible rebukes hollow technology and exploitive policies, as well as the wistful adherents of "Bibleless Christianity." The Bible, at such a time as this, makes fresh, relevant reading, at once explosive and reassuring. It's only waiting for us to find it. ■

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### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION** by Denis Haack

1. What was your initial reaction to Heddendorf's essay? What does your response signify?
2. To what extent is the Bible lost to you? Trace the story of your Bible reading over the years—and if possible share it with a group of trusted friends. What hindrances to reading—and enjoying reading—the Bible do you experience? Was there a period during which regular Bible reading was fresh and delightful to you? When did it end, and what caused the ending?
3. Quoting from an essay by Andrew Sullivan, Heddendorf writes: "Sullivan writes that the current decline in religious faith stems less from science than from the sheer drowning out of spiritual impulses by high-tech distraction and buzz. We can't hear our own thoughts, let alone the voice of God." Do you agree? Why or why not? To what extent is unhurried contemplation a part of your life? Read aloud Heddendorf's final paragraph and discuss.
4. Find an older, godly believer who demonstrates a dogged, faithful yet alive and inspiring Bible reading discipline and ask them how they do it. How do they keep it from becoming a legalism, something they perform so as not to feel guilty? How do they read passages they know well without simply skimming through the words to complete the task?
5. To what extent are you content with your Bible reading? What plans might you consider making?

# THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER

"Culture changes," the Rev. Timothy Keller says, "when a society's mind, heart, and imagination are captured by new ideas that are developed by thinkers, expounded in both scholarly and popular forms, depicted in innumerable works of art, and then lived out attractively by communities of people who are committed to them."

That is a statement, it seems to me that is worthy of some serious reflection.

Notice, for example, that Keller doesn't mention politics. It's implied, of course, because our life together always has a political aspect, an ordering of the community to pursue justice and peace. As a culture changes, the politics of that culture will change as well. Still, it's important today to reflect on why Keller didn't highlight politics in describing the dynamics of cultural transformation. Contrary to our modern assumptions, the political is not ultimate. The belief that it is ultimate is why so many conversations on almost any topic so quickly degenerate into debates between conservative and liberal political agendas. Often people talk, even in Christian circles, as if the only way to really change the world is to engage in political activity. That real change, if it occurs, will begin with a political movement of some kind. But that is mistaken, a form of idolatry. Politics is always downstream from the culture.

Notice too that Keller's vision for cultural change involves the full spectrum of callings and vocations. This means that cultural change is not accomplished by merely a few, some elite that gets the job done while the rest of us watch from the sidelines. Instead ordinary people being faithful in the ordinary and routine of daily life is as essential for cultural transformation as

scholars developing ideas and artists making art.

And finally, notice that Keller includes the arts as part of what is needed if real cultural change is to occur. New ideas will only be plausible if they are seen to nurture our humanity. New beliefs and values will only take root if they can be imagined as attractive for human flourishing across all of life and reality. And this suggests that one art form essential to cultural transformation is storytelling. Ideas come alive when they can be indwelt, when they are shown to fit with the larger story of reality in which we live and move and have our being. As a Christian, my ideas about the gospel will only make sense to my neighbors if they can see the grace of the gospel fleshed out in the story of history and in the history of my life.

## THE POWER OF GOOD STORYTELLING

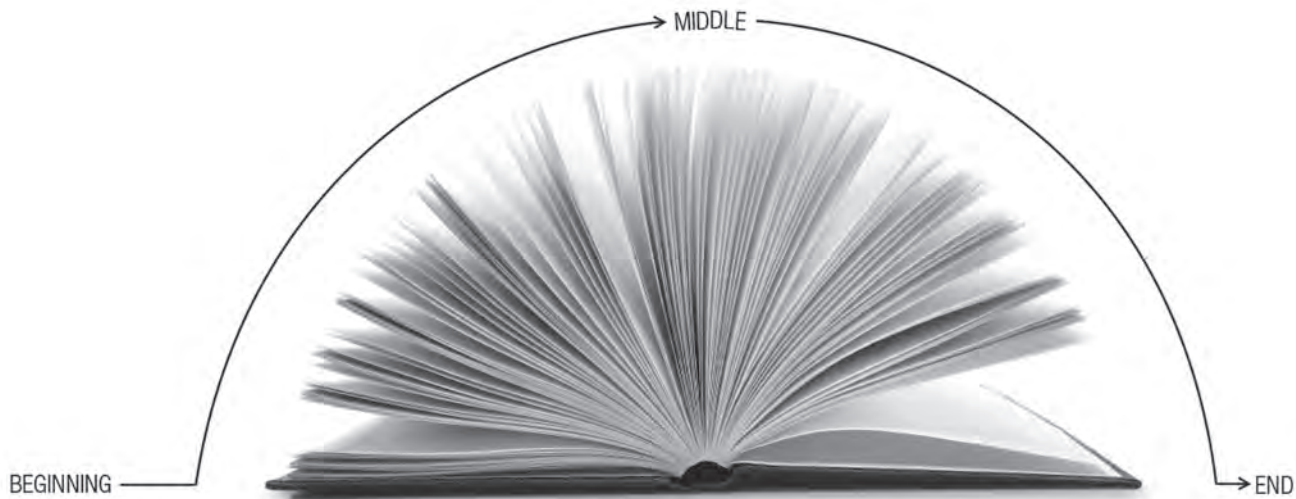
Storytelling is a particularly powerful art form because life and reality are inexplicable apart from it. We were made for story, and life is without meaning unless we see ourselves as part of a narrative that provides a sense of purpose and significance.

We are drawn to stories not just because they are entertaining, but because stories help us make sense of life in our beautiful, bewildering, and badly broken world. This is why children are instinctively drawn to storytellers.

One time when she was quite young, my oldest granddaughter picked out a book and curled up on the couch beside me. "Read it, Grandpa," she said, and I did. When I reached the final page she said, "Read it again, Grandpa." So I did. And on the last page she repeated her

# OF STORY

FIGURE 1: STORY TRAJECTORY (*flow in time*)



request once again. Now, being the sort of grandfather I am, the third reading introduced some very small changes into the narrative. Nothing too drastic, you understand, just subtle shifts in minor details not all that important to the plot. I had discovered that bigger changes could elicit a deep sigh and the taking of the book over to grandma, something that must be avoided. So I introduced my little changes as I read, and each time my granddaughter would interrupt to correct me. “No, grandpa, that’s not right. It’s blue not gray,” she would say from where she lay under the afghan. She was too young to read at the time and wasn’t looking at the pictures, but not one of my changes slipped by her. She wanted me to reread the story not because she didn’t know it but because somehow it resonated deeply within her heart, mind, and imagination. That is the power of story.

In our world of advanced modernity, film (and television) are the primary story telling mediums that both reflect and shape our imaginations, ideas, values, and worldviews. In the process of that reflection and shaping, they work to transform how we see things and respond to them. We may not be able to make films, but we can learn to engage about them in discussion with friends and colleagues and so be part of how the images, values, convictions, questions, and ideas of modern cinema are received and processed.

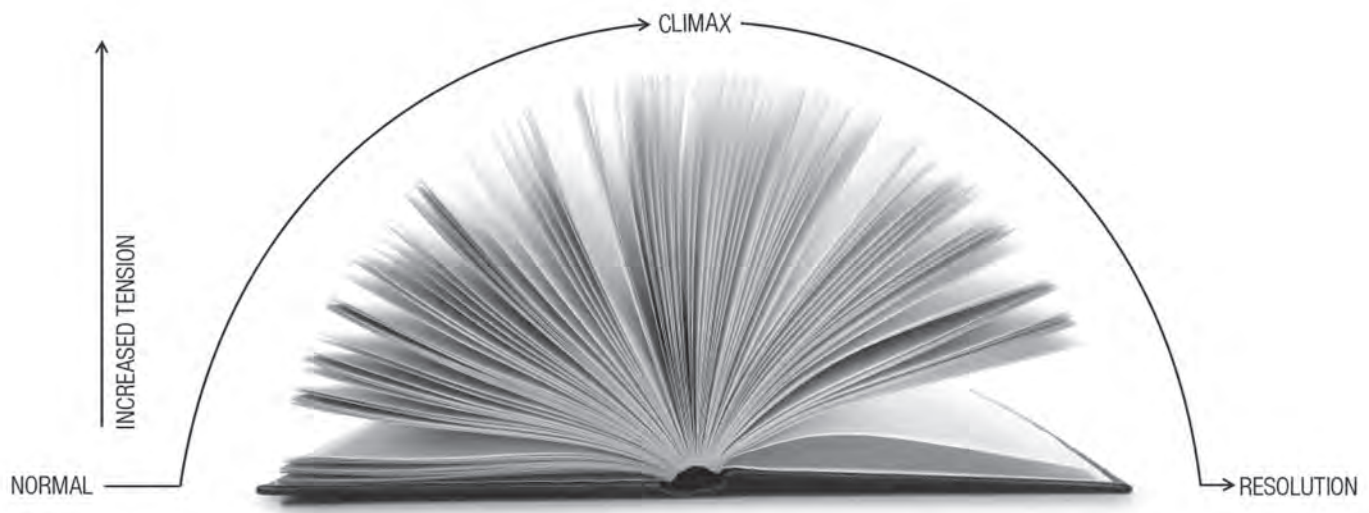
Let me suggest an exercise that makes clear the power of story. Watch the 2016 movie *Sully*, starring Tom Hanks as Captain Chesley ‘Sully’ Sullenberger and directed by Clint Eastwood. Even if you haven’t seen the film, you probably know the story because it was in the news. On January 15, 2009, US Airways flight 1549 took

off from LaGuardia Airport in New York. Three minutes into the flight, a bit northeast of the George Washington Bridge, the plane hit a flock of Canadian geese knocking out both engines on the Airbus A320. Captain Sully and First Officer Jeff Skiles, played by Aaron Eckhart in the film, successfully landed the plane on the Hudson River. The temperature that day was below freezing, and the water temperature in the river was just above freezing. Seven ferry boats with 130 commuters on board and hundreds of first responders rescued all 155 passengers and crew safely within 24 minutes.

And since you know the story and how it ends, I have an assignment for you—try not to be drawn in as you watch the film. I’m serious about this—try your best to remain aloof and detached as you watch it, to not be drawn into the story that unfolds on



FIGURE 2: STORY TRAJECTORY (*tension*)



the screen.

I can't know this for certain, of course, but I seriously doubt that anyone can successfully fulfill my assignment. I know the story, I remember the day it occurred, I've seen the film more than once, and I've even worked on extracting clips from the movie to use in lectures, and I still find myself moved by and drawn into the story that the film depicts so powerfully.

## THE TRAJECTORY OF STORIES

We are drawn into story because we are creatures living in a greater story within the passage of time. We have a beginning, a middle, and an end, just as stories do, so we instinctively fit in them and are drawn into them. (See figure 1.) This may seem to be a very simple fact, and it is, but the simplicity should not detract us from recognizing the

importance of this dynamic. It can be argued of course that this is merely an adaptation that has been developed over millennia of human evolution. Perhaps, but it should not be forgotten that this explanation reduces the dynamic to chance and requires that no overarching purpose accompanies our love of and embrace of story. I prefer the Christian explanation, finding it both more satisfying and plausible.

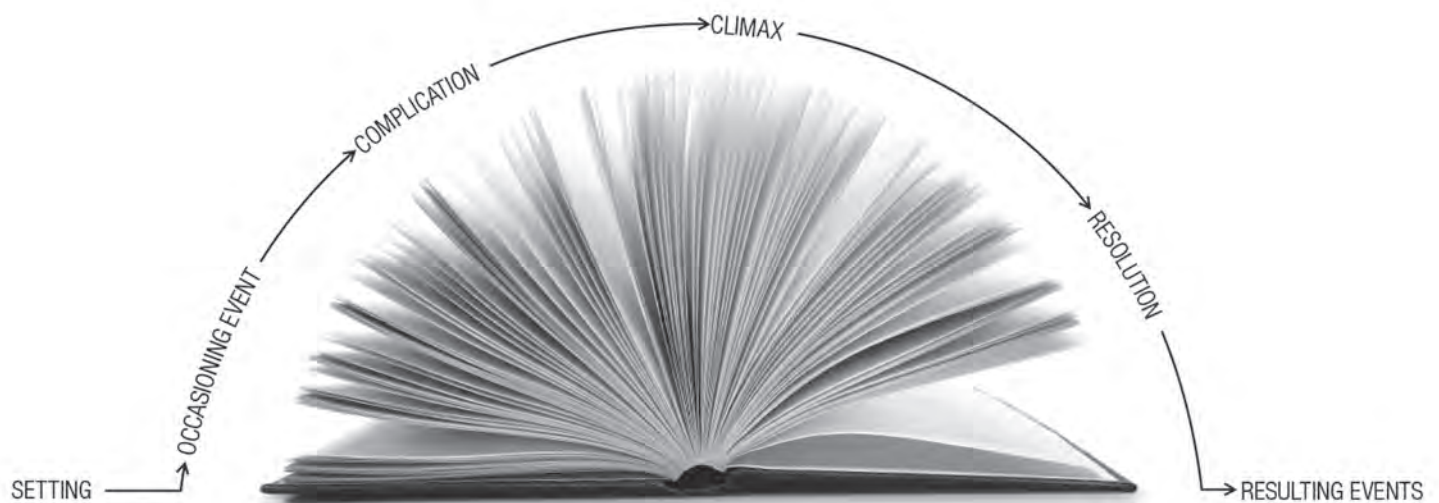
We are drawn in because stories follow a trajectory that reflects our experience of life in a broken world. (See figure 2.) Stories include an element of tension that must be resolved and, in doing so, echo the deep yearning we have for redemption from the alienation, fragmentation, failure, and disappointment that always lurks in the shadows, bringing tension that we cannot escape. Of course not every good story includes all these elements.

Good storytellers can mix the order that things are revealed and can leave out elements that we supply with imagination. Still, the trajectory remains and remains the reason that we are drawn in so powerfully.

The creativity we enjoy in storytelling fleshes out this trajectory with details that paint a picture and engage our imagination. (See figure 3.) We learn of some setting, some context whether fantastic or realistic, that defines the normal of the story. An occasioning event occurs, introducing tension, and then complications bring the tension towards some climax, when we hope that some hero will appear to bring resolution and allow life to go on, even if a bit changed from where things started.

And we are drawn into story because the gospel is the true story, unfolding in history that defines the trajectory

FIGURE 3: STORY ELEMENTS IN TRAJECTORY



for all human stories. (See figure 4.) Creation, fall, redemption, and restoration is not an exotic doctrinal nicety that Christians believe as a matter of ritual. Rather, it is a definition of the reality in which all human beings live and move and have their being.

"Biblical dramas do not follow the patterns of literary dramas because someone 'massaged' the stories to make them fit," Dan Doriani says. "Rather, God has structured human nature and creation so that certain elements are present in all stories worth telling. If biblical dramas have the same structure as fiction, it is because art imitates life, not because the Bible imitates art."

### TRANSFORMATIVE STORIES IN SCRIPTURE

The power of story to transform should not surprise us as Christians. Consider four texts of scripture that

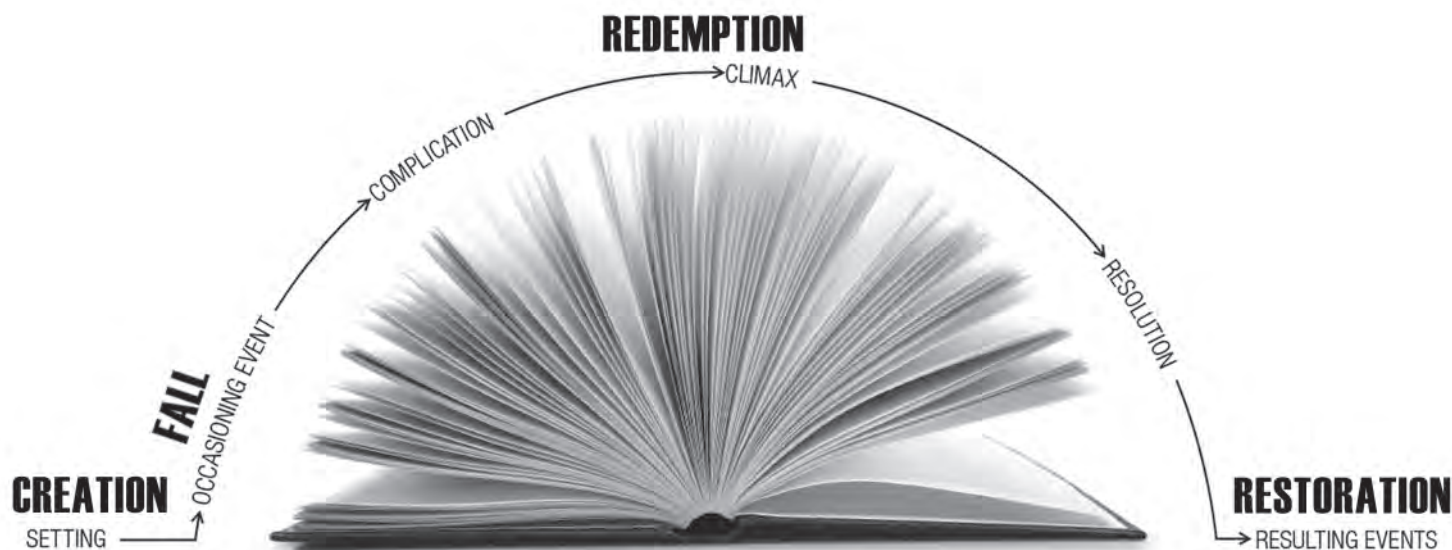
reveal something of the dynamic of what is involved. The first two texts are foundational texts for the Christian worldview, and the second two are illustrative, but all point to the essential and powerful impact of story as we live out our lives before the face of God.

The creation narrative teaches us that we were made for story, since we were created to live in God's story of reality as we live out the story of our lives. God made our first parents, we are told in Genesis 2:15, to be creative in and to tenderly care for God's world, "to work it and keep it." This was to be an ongoing and unfolding adventure of learning, creativity, exploration, and work. The story for life and reality was not invented by human beings but was initiated by the Creator, and the creatures he made in his image were placed in that narrative. In this view story is essential to being human.

In the narrative of the fall, the second text, our first parents determined they would prefer living by their own wits rather than according to God's word and, in so doing, walked away from the ultimate source of light, life, and truth. "What is this that you have done?" God asks in Genesis 3:13, eliciting their story and demonstrating how seriously he takes it by actually listening to it.

The creation and fall narratives in scripture are foundational texts for the Christian understanding of life and reality. The creation narrative reveals that story is not an alien or unimportant part of human existence but essential to who we are as human beings created in the image of God. The fall narrative reveals that this distinctive part of our humanness is not erased by the fall, but instead is identified by God as the way in which we must account for ourselves as his creatures. God not only made us

FIGURE 4: STORY ELEMENTS IN TRAJECTORY



for story; he actually asks to hear ours.

And now we can consider two more scriptures, this time texts that illustrate how stories have the power of transform, for blessing or for curse. In each case we will be exploring a story that is told within a story, and seeing the effect of that story on those who heard it.

The first illustrative text of scripture is a famous story involving Israel's king David. It was spring, and the kings from neighboring nations mustered their armies for war. There were grievances that went back generations, numerous border and water disputes, and constant jockeying to control the lucrative trade routes that were essential to the region's economy. David sent Israel's army out to besiege the city of Rabbah, which today is Amman, the capital of Jordan, but he stayed behind in Jerusalem. Then one day he walked on the roof of his house and spied a woman, Bathsheba, bathing;

"the woman was very beautiful," the scriptures record (2 Samuel 11:2). So the king sent for her, she came, they had an affair, and not too long afterward Bathsheba sent word that she was pregnant. Now that was problematic because her husband, Uriah, was off with the army in Jordan. David tried a few clever maneuvers to cover up the problem and when they backfired he ordered the army commander to assign Uriah to a dangerous corner of the battle and Uriah was cut down in the fighting. Bathsheba mourned the death of her husband and then married King David and bore him a son.

"But the thing that David had done," the scriptures record, "displeased the Lord. And the Lord sent the prophet Nathan to David. He came to him and said to him, 'There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor.'" (11:27-12:1). In other words,

Nathan gained an audience with the king and told him a story. The story is a simple one, though I suspect that the version recorded in the Bible is only the briefest summary of what he actually said. In any case, the rich man had numerous sheep while the poor man had only one, a lamb that was the family pet and beloved by both the poor man and his children. Then one day a friend showed up at the rich man's house and rather than slaughter any of his own animals for dinner, he took the poor man's lamb and made that the main course.

David had been drawn into the story, maybe because he himself had been a shepherd as a young man and perhaps Nathan's story awakened memories of lambs he had cared for and loved. As king he cared very much for justice, and so he angrily said the rich man must make restitution and be punished for



his act. “Nathan said to David,” the scriptures say, “You are the man!” (12:7).

It was a transformative moment. David repented of his wickedness, of his deceit, abuse of power, adultery, and murder—the text is an illustration of the power of story to work change, for blessing in a broken world.

And finally, a fourth passage of scripture, once again a story within a story only this time it transforms in a way that leads to curse rather than blessing. This too is a famous story, about Joseph as a young man when he was in Egypt. Joseph was born into a rather dysfunctional family. Though he had a dozen brothers, his father doted on him, even having him wear a special robe that set him apart from the rest. And Joseph must have been more than a little annoying, telling his brothers about dreams he had that predicted they would someday bow before him as a great ruler. So they sold him to a passing band of slave traders who took Joseph to Egypt and in turn sold him to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh’s officials. Joseph served his new master faithfully and soon was in charge of everything Potiphar owned.

“Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance,” the scriptures record. “And after a time his master’s wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, ‘Lie with me.’” (39:6–7). She apparently tried to seduce him a number of times, but Joseph resisted. One day while Joseph went about his work, Potiphar’s wife noticed that all the men of the household happened to be gone. She tried once more to entice Joseph, grabbing his clothes to pull him towards her, but Joseph “left his garment in her hand,” the scripture says, “and fled and got out of the house” (39:13). She called the men of the household and told them Joseph

had assaulted her, but that she had screamed and he had run away, leaving his clothing behind.

Later, when Potiphar returned home, “she told him the same story,” the scriptures say (39:17). Potiphar was enraged and threw Joseph into prison. Though the scriptures give us no details, without doubt the prison we’re reading about was not a pleasant place. The text uses an unusual word for prison, found only here in all of scripture, which is from a Hebrew term suggesting a round structure, perhaps a fortress of some kind. The text says it held the king’s prisoners and history tells us that the Egyptians had established remote desert outposts, fortresses where convicts were sentenced to hard labor. Whatever the details of Joseph’s imprisonment, here is a story that transformed Potiphar’s view of Joseph and then transformed Joseph’s life, not for blessing, but for curse.

The point here is this: from a Christian perspective, story is essential to human life, the way we try to make sense of things in a broken world, and can be used for blessing or for curse. The premier story-telling art form in our world is cinema, and it is here that competing visions of reality and differing answers to the perennial questions of existence are considered and explored.

### SOME STORIES OF OUR DAY

Consider some of the films and television series capturing attention today, and look past the surface details to identify some of the great themes on which they based. The great myths and perennial questions that human cultures have always wrestled with are explored and explicated in the art of storytelling that is the cinema.

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## STORY IS ESSENTIAL TO HUMAN LIFE, THE WAY WE TRY TO MAKE SENSE OF THINGS IN A BROKEN WORLD.

*Penny Dreadful* tells a story in which the great myths of Western literature, the myths of Frankenstein, werewolves, and Dracula might suggest that supernatural powers of evil are arrayed against both God and humankind. *Stranger Things* suggests that forces greater than we can possibly imagine might be at work in the shadows of modern society, unleashed by science, hidden by secret governmental departments, but beyond technology to control.

*Manchester by the Sea* explores how tragedy distorts lives and perspective, producing ripples that fan out over time and across generations. *Silence*, based on the classic novel by Shusaku Endo, tells the story of persecution that drives Christians in seventeenth century Japan to hide their faith and wonder why God has become silent in the face of their suffering.

*Hidden Figures* tells the true story of people made in God's image who are marginalized by a racist society, by our society, and who are yet crucial for some of the grandest scientific exploits of that society. *Hacksaw Ridge* explores what it means to be a person of conscience even when that person's convictions are despised and vilified as traitorous and cowardly by everyone else.

*Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, written by J. K. Rowling, uses fantasy to confirm what I as a child knew instinctively, that strange powers and creatures, some good and others very bad, actually exist and make a difference even though my parents scoffed and told me not to worry because there is nothing hiding in the darkness. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* asks questions that are relevant to today's news headlines—and I recommend you see it and discuss it with friends. Since at best we know only in part, what does it mean to see only part of someone's story, especially if that person is other, different from us? And how do we live and love in a world where contrasting and competing fundamentals are passionately believed but that threaten to tear apart the delicate fabric of relationships and societies?

And then consider the life and work of Philip Mangano. One afternoon in the 1970s, while working as a music agent in Los Angeles, Mangano went to see *Brother Sun Sister Moon* (1972), a new film by Italian director Franco Zeffirelli. The movie tells the story of St. Francis of Assisi who gave up his wealth to serve the poor. "This movie slipped behind my defenses, because it was so beautifully portrayed by Zeffirelli," Mangano recalls. "For the first time, I understood one could give expression to one's life in committing it to the poor." Mangano

gave up his music agency, moved home to Boston, and launched the Housing First movement, working to end homelessness. Mangano says his work to eradicate homelessness is a spiritual calling, not a profession.

Stories act subversively in all sorts of ways. They challenge our view of things, subtly raise questions and doubts, propose alternative answers, portray characters that surprise us, define old ideas in new ways, and so much more. Movies and television as cultural storytellers have the advantage of including music, camera angles, lighting, color, and all the other cinematic techniques and technologies available to draw us in so we experience the plot from the inside instead of merely as a disinterested observer. This is not a reason to be fearful of the power of these art forms, but it is a reason to be people of discernment who do not leave their brains at the box office.

One of the interesting things about being drawn into the story of *Sully* is that much of the film is actually relatively slow and unexciting. That is the power of good storytelling as demonstrated in cinematic art. We experience something vicariously that is actually outside our experience, identify with people we do not know, see admirable and despicable characters, and invest in the plot emotionally—we are drawn in. Though we may not realize it, even though we may know how it ends, we are involved and changed—we are not quite the same afterwards.

Few of us make films, but people love to talk about the movies they watch. This allows us access to stories that subversively work on our hearts, minds, and imaginations.

Every human story is an echo of the True Story. This is why the gospel can

speak intelligently and creatively into every human story and into the story of every person's life. "Trying to understand another person, Vern Poythress reminds us, "is a form of love." Story is transformative. The gospel speaks intelligently and substantially to every human story. And when we engage in conversation about the story, we get to see into our neighbor's hearts and imaginations, into our own, and then we can explore the things that matter most.

"Though I personally will defend the value of bedtime stories to my last gasp," Rowling says, "I have learned to value imagination in a much broader sense. Imagination is not only the uniquely human capacity to envision that which is not, and therefore the fount of all invention and innovation. In its arguably most transformative and revelatory capacity, it is the power that enables us to empathize with humans whose experiences we have never shared." ■

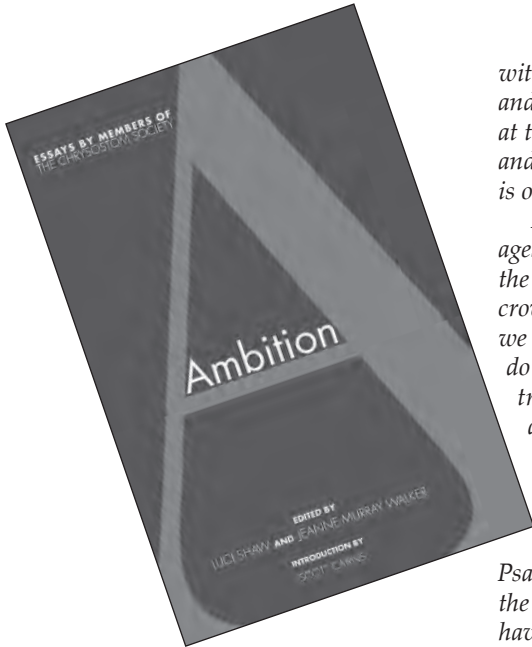
#### Sources:

*The story and quotes of Philip Mangano online (www.governing.com).*

*Daniel Doriani from Getting the Message by Daniel Doriani (P&R Publishing, 1996).*

*Poythress quote and figures 1–4 based on In the Beginning was the Word by Vern Poythress (Crossway Books, 2009).*

# Ambition



*Ambition carries us into terrible places. I don't understand why it has such a good reputation. People remark that so-and-so is very ambitious, and we're given to understand that so-and-so is full of drive and moxie. Even when the ambition edges into shadier territory, and we start modifying it with adjectives like "blind" or "ruthless," admiration still clings to our sense of the word. "My. That's an ambitious project," the teacher says to the student who has just announced that she wants to decode the human genome or write a five-volume novel based on a ninth-century Icelandic saga. Bless her heart, she's in way over her head. But you've got to admire her ambition.*

*Where will she be in six months? Most likely, sunk in a nest of notes and books and web sites. Maybe she'll be grimly trying to chew her way through the task she's set for herself, acknowledging with small despair that she's already months behind the timetable she had set for herself. Maybe she'll already have given up and be playing video games. No matter what, she'll be*

*witnessing the gulf between her ambition and her skills and strength. Like standing at the edge of a chasm that must be crossed, and realizing the length of rope in your hand is only fifteen inches long.*

*Ambition is a false friend. It encourages us to imagine ourselves bearing home the victory. We hear the cheers from the crowd and see our picture on TV where we look a good deal better than we usually do in pictures. In the case of particularly triumphant ambition, our enemies and detractors have been pushed to the front of the crowd. There they watch our apotheosis with impotent rage. I've always appreciated the psalmist who included in the rhapsody of the 23rd Psalm not only the gracious pleasures of the Lord, but the incredible satisfaction of having a table set before us in the sight of our foes. If you have an imagination like mine, you can linger on that moment for quite a long, sweet time.*

*The problem is that eventually we have to return to our regularly scheduled programming. The cat box needs cleaning. The tattered spot on the sofa looks just terrible. We're behind on three projects for work and we're sick of all of them. We know every single corner and turn of our lives, and they're small and unenviable and dull. The truth is that a lot of our enemies are doing significantly better than we are, and the moments we give in to ambitious daydreaming only serve to point up the tawdry minginess of what we've actually accomplished.*

*I'm not supposed to think like this. Rightly applied, ambition is the goad that will prod me into getting the sofa reupholstered, and going on not only to finish but to excel at my tasks at work, using them as a launch pad to blast off so that my potential greatness is recognized and rewarded—whoops, I'm daydreaming again. And the cat box still needs [to be] cleaned.*

*Just about any monastic or faith tradition would remind me to keep my eyes trained on what I'm supposed to be doing, to live in the present and let the future take care of itself...*

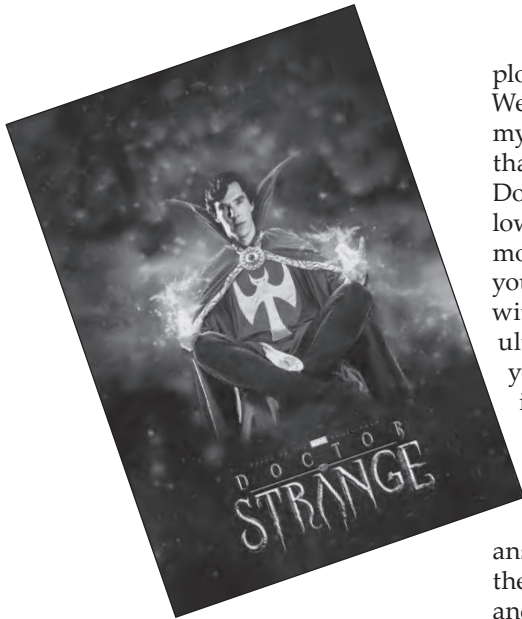
*This is a pretty un-American approach. We are people who have founded our identity and tradition on the nearly sacred idea of ambition. What could be more ambitious than the thrilled, lovely hope of a child to be president one day? That's what Jimmy Carter told his mother, adding that he meant president of the United States. When he informed her, she reportedly told him to move his feet from the bed. That's a mother who doesn't truck too much with ambition.*

*But she didn't get in the way of it, either. Maybe her boy was going to be president of the United States, maybe not. No reason he shouldn't have a shot at it so long as he remembered not to put his feet on the bed.*

**Excerpt from "What's a Heaven For?" by Erin McGraw in *Ambition*, edited by Luci Shaw and Jeanne Murray Walker (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books; 2015) pp. 2–3.**



# When Battles are Within and



Stephen Strange (played by Benedict Cumberbatch) is a brilliant neurosurgeon with a worldwide reputation and an ego that is slightly larger. Life is simple for Strange: science has explained reality and people need to stay out of the way while he performs medical miracles. A car accident, however, crushes his hands and, when traditional therapy to restore the use of his fingers is too slow, he looks beyond modern medicine for help. He tracks down a man who was paralyzed but now walks, who tells Strange the answer he is looking for can be found at Kamar-Taj in Nepal. It is a monastery where Strange meets The Ancient One (played by Tilda Swinton) who demonstrates to him that behind science is a hidden world of magic, that reality is not as simple as natural science asserts, and that his body will not heal when his soul is in disrepair.

Doctor Strange is a comic book character, a hero whose story originated in Marvel Comics in 1963. In one sense the

plot is simple: a man of science from the West travels to the East to learn ancient mystic arts and saves the world. From that perspective, comic book series like Doctor Strange are easy to dismiss as lowbrow entertainment, but there is more going on. After all, where else can you find rollicking melodrama infused with philosophical questions about the ultimate nature of reality? Where do you find young people reading stories in which naturalism is depicted as an inadequate answer to life's deepest questions? And I would say as a Christian that we of the West do need to travel to the East for

answers, though I am convinced that the word spoken by Hebrew prophets and poets contains answers that in the end are more fully credible. And The Ancient One is correct to insist that reality is not limited to the here and now, but that principalities and powers beyond imagining exist just out of sight, if we have eyes to see.

In an interview in *Relevant*, director Scott Derrickson said the movie was "one man's journey from being this soulless, but self-satisfied, ego-maniacal, high-level New York neurosurgeon to being brought down to the deepest valley and losing everything. Losing his identity, his sense of self, his personal relationships, and then having to go on a journey that takes him up and out of himself and into something much, much greater and much, much bigger than he ever knew he could be." Doctor Strange has to battle cosmic evil forces as the film comes to its climax, but it was not this external battle that drew Derrickson to the story.

*There have been a lot of good boxing movies in the history of cinema and there's always the top contender that*

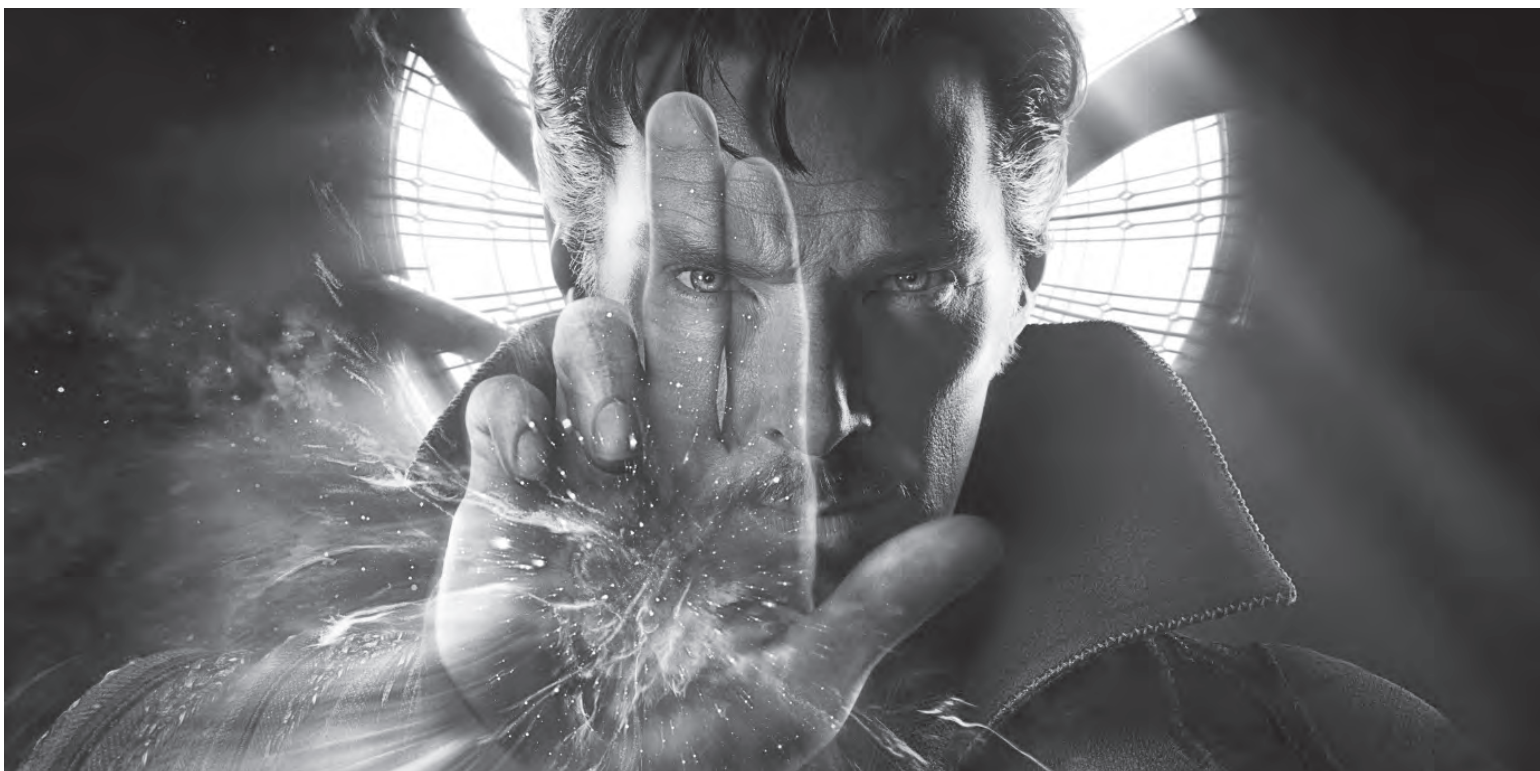
*your hero's got to fight at the end, but no good boxing movie is about that conflict. It's really always about an individual finding out who they are, what they're capable of, are they strong enough to build themselves up to be able to accomplish something like that. I think in this case it's great because it's not about physical achievement, it's not about a character manifesting himself in physical strength, it really is about getting past one's ego and coming to recognize that true growth and true power come from a sense of surrender to something greater than yourself and service to something greater than yourself.*

It is this inner transformation, the battle past ego into sacrificial love that is at the heart of the story of Doctor Strange.

Derrickson (*The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, 2005) has produced a film of mind-bending special effects while telling a compelling story with moments of wit and insight. And he has made a film with appeal. With a budget of \$165 million, *Doctor Strange* made half that back the opening weekend and within five months the film had grossed \$233 million. This is a blockbuster that speaks to some of the deepest questions of young adults today, an enjoyable film in which multiple issues are raised in the plot and dialogue that are worth discussing. ■

**Source:** *Relevant magazine online* (<http://archives.relevantmagazine.com/culture/film/director-strange>).

# Without



## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What was your initial or immediate reaction to the film? Why do you think you reacted that way? Do you tend to enjoy fantasy as a cinematic genre? Why or why not? In what ways can fantasy do a better job than realism in revealing the deeper, spiritual aspects of reality?
2. In what ways were the techniques of film-making (casting, direction, lighting, script, music, sets, action, cinematography, editing, etc.) used to get the film's message(s) across, or to make the message plausible or compelling? In what ways were they ineffective or misused?
3. What was made attractive? How is it made attractive?
4. With whom did you identify in the film? Why? With whom were we meant to identify? How do you know? Discuss the main characters in the film and their significance to the story.
5. How do you see reality? Why? How satisfying is it?
6. If you are a Christian, what texts of scripture speak about the nature of reality? Which texts offer insight into the realm of existence that lies beyond what our eyes can see or that science can discover and study? Many of us as Christians are more comfortable with a somewhat secularized, scientific view of reality than one that involves teeming hosts of principalities and powers, demons and angels, and reality altering prayer, chant, and worship. At least that's how we ordinarily tend to view things. Are you comfortable with how you are acting on your conviction that these texts are God's word of life?
7. In the context of such an exciting world of fantasy evoked by Dr. Strange, how is possible to speak of the Christian gospel in a way that provokes interest?





### Credits: *Doctor Strange*

Directed by Scott Derrickson

Written by Jon Spaihts, Scott Derrickson, and  
C. Robert Cargill

Based on Marvel Comics by Stan Lee and  
Steve Ditko

Produced by Victoria Alonso, Stan Lee,  
Stephen Broussard, and others

Music by Michael Giacchino

Cinematography by Ben Davis

Starring:

Benedict Cumberbatch (Dr. Stephen Strange)

Chiwetel Ejiofor (Mordo)

Rachel McAdams (Christine Palmer)

Benedict Wong (Wong)

Mads Mikkelsen (Kaecilius)

Tilda Swinton (The Ancient One)

U.S.A. 2016; 115 minutes

Rated PG-13 (for sci-fi violence and action  
throughout, and an intense crash sequence)

