

Letters from The House Between

Formerly *Notes from Toad Hall*

Issue 4 **Winter 2019**



Dear Friends,

This year I read a book written by Mark Boyle, a young man who decided to live for one year without technology. He admits the definition of technology could refer to something as complex as a computer or as simple as a shovel. He decided to draw the line in front of a bicycle, a rocket stove and hinges that open and close doors. However, he *is* living with out electricity, indoor bath, and cell phone. Perhaps the technology I'd miss most is a hot shower and a washing machine. While writing this book the author intended to use only paper and pencil forgoing modern inventions for publishing. His stressed-out editor convinced him to use a manual typewriter to finish his manuscript or else.

He titled this book “The Way Home” (OneWorldBooks 2019) since it encapsulates his desire to find a way to live in a place where all life, including humans, are safe and welcome. His valiant efforts to live simply, kindly, to cause as little harm as possible fall just short of convincing me it is possible. But I’m sympathetic. He sees that in our thirst for the newest appliances with all their built-in obsolescence, our drive for greater profits, the enormous need for energy all have done great harm to life on earth. I agree that much of the damage continues to grow and is sadly irreversible.

Gone

Last spring I counted the number bird species we saw at our feeders, some were only passing through, but still 23 different kinds was some kind of wonderful! Though I question the practice of some, like the cowbird who lays her eggs in others’ nests and when the baby hatches it kills the natives by pushing them from the nest. We saw one ugly fledgling being fed by the poor harassed cardinal parents who didn’t know they were raising a killer.

Twenty-three is great until you learn that massive numbers – almost three billion birds have disappeared from the population in the last 50 years – due largely to pesticides, herbicides, loss of habitat and feral cats. It is sad and disturbing. <https://www.birds.cornell.edu/home/bring-birds-back> While I’m with him in criticizing parts of modern life I’m not against all modernity. There are many aspects I would hate to live without like water purification plants.



My happy place

However, I agree with one consequence of technology he abhors: modern living has a way of isolating us from one another and thus from important human interactions only found within community.

For example, media can be a good thing, but one unintended consequence is that it limits our interactions to images on a screen. There are legitimate concerns about the affect this has on us. Plenty of research proves the use of devices changes our brains. They can keep us from doing more healthy things for our mind, body, and spirit like spending time alone, being outdoors, sleeping or even reading. My grandchildren’s parents have rules to control the amount of exposure, still, like most kids they find ways to circumvent the rules and gobble time on screens anyway. I worry about them.

Better Shut up

However in the interest of full disclosure I must be honest. I love to play games. In the past games were dependent on finding someone willing to play with you. With the advent of the iPhone it no longer required me to corral someone to beat at boggle. It certainly wouldn’t

be my husband in any case who thinks most games are boring. Perhaps because someone beats him and laughs while doing so. I began a habit of playing on my phone after I went to bed. It became addicting. No matter what time I lay me down, I must play a series of games until I win them all or become too tired to focus. My brain has power to stay awake forever when it is a matter of winning at something. No wonder it has made insomnia worse. Lately I’m trying to break this addiction by leaving my phone too far away for me to care about reaching for it in the middle of the night. No turning over in bed to check the time and oh, playing a little Sudoku until I fall asleep again which might be hours later. So I can’t say much to my grandkids or to anyone else

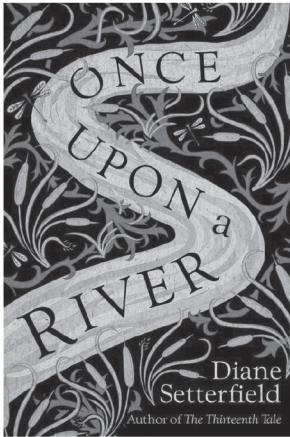


It takes community & friends to dig a stump.

for that matter about controlling hours spent on the screen, unless I want to be a hypocrite. Let me testify to one small change. Staying off has given brain space for more important things than hearing “Amazing!! Well DONE!!” shouted from a completely mindless machine. Things like creative writing ideas, prayer, staring, dreaming or just plain sleeping are restored.

(continued on page 6)

Christmas Gift List 2019



Once Upon a River

by Diane Setterfield, Simon & Schuster, 2018. (Fiction)

The Thames River. Small communities. A pub where folks gather to drink and tell stories. Miracles when someone encounters the thin places of earth. Here you meet good people who live ordinary lives who serve others in their various callings. Characters of all sorts appear: charming, trustworthy, or treacherous – a father whose prodigal son never returns, parents who lose a daughter without a trace, a woman burdened with false guilt and beaten until you feel you must find a way to enter the story

and help. It is about the mesmerizing power and strange beauty of the River – a character on her own. Setterfield lays down sentences, describes scenes and develops characters so sharp she pulls you to the center of life in the book where the visible meets the invisible. This by far was my favorite book of fiction of 2019.

A father has a conversation with his horse:

Armstrong looked into the distance. “A hundred times that boy has broken my heart. And he will do it a hundred times more before my days are done.”

“His sister! His own sister!” Armstrong exclaimed, shaking his head, and Fleet whinnied in sympathy. “Sometimes I think there is nothing more a man can do. A child is not an empty vessel, Fleet, to be formed in whatever way the parent thinks fit. They are born with their own hearts and they cannot be made otherwise, no matter what love a man lavishes on them.” p.410



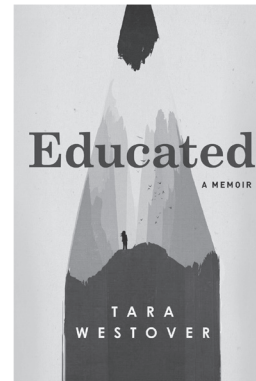
The Lord's Prayer, A Guide to Praying to Our Father

by Wesley Hill, Lexham Press, 2019. (Devotional)

Every Sunday our congregation prays the Lord's Prayer. Often as Denis and I sit down together we use *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals*, for daily readings and prayer that always includes praying The Lord's Prayer together. Often as I pray I try to fathom the words we say, as I want to make them sincere, relevant and real to our life.

Wesley Hill helps expand and fulfill my desire, to deepen the meaning of this prayer. About

“Give us today our daily bread” Hill writes, *It is not enough for God to kick-start the process of sustaining human beings and then sit back like a parent retreating into a book while the children race off to attempt some task or play by themselves. On the contrary, we rely on God's provision each moment of our lives.* Meditating on this book is giving renewed life to this prayer that Jesus has taught us to say. And besides all this, the book itself is a small hardback that is pleasant to hold. Although that isn't the main thing, is it? And so, amen.

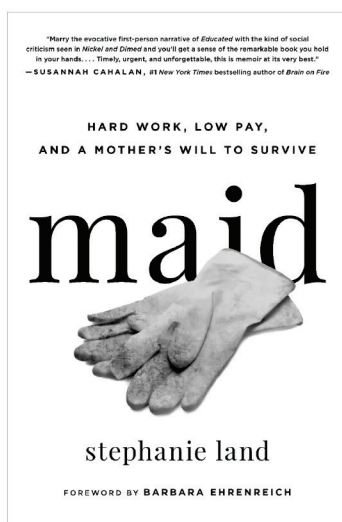


Educated

by Tara Westover, Random House, 2018. (Memoir)

Westover's heartbreaking, superb story is difficult to put down because it is so well written. Tara

Westover grew up in the mountains of Idaho in a family of survivalists who sought to escape every tie to the outside world as they prepared for its end. None of the siblings were allowed to go to school, see a medical doctor when sick or even when seriously injured, or become friends with anyone outside their family and limited religious community. Such an isolated life without checks or balances can become fertile ground for abuse and insanity. What kept me reading was sensing that in spite of the suffering there was a slow redemption coming. Despite the increasingly unpredictable danger of her father's temper, her mother's silent submission, and her violent brother who often beat her, she began to dream of getting out. Her fierce loyalty to the family and knowing she would be banned made escape an excruciating choice. She chose to secretly begin her journey out by educating herself, and then in a series of schools and colleges she finally ended by receiving a PHD from Cambridge. With the help of therapy, much pondering, and the act of writing this book she has been able to find a certain peace in becoming “a changed person, a new self.” She ends the book with: *You could call this selfhood many things. Transformation. Metamorphosis. Falsity. Betrayal. I call it an education.*

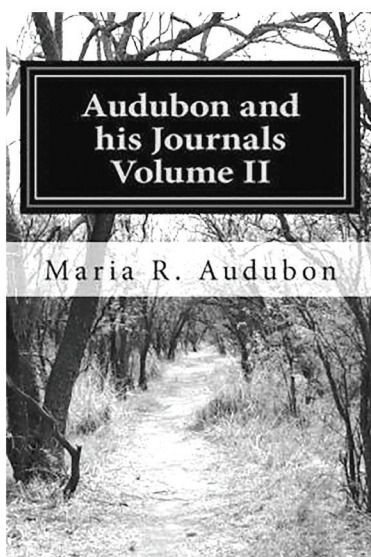


Maid: Hard Work, Low Pay, and a Mother's Will to Survive

by Stephanie Land, Hachette Books, 2019. (Memoir)

The reason we read certain books is because they take us to places we haven't been and to people we don't know. That is why I highly recommend this book. And bonus! It's well written. Land gives us a window of insight into fighting one's way out of despair and hopelessness. Many of us don't know what it's like to be a

single mother, work a minimum wage job, need the help of WIC and food stamps, live in homeless shelters, wait for government housing while hoping no unexpected trouble happens because you don't have one extra dime even for a birthday gift for your kid. Finding ways to love our neighbors means touching the lives of those living on the margins in some way, even if it is a small way. Just understanding the barriers and hardships they endure is a start. Land recounts an incident that reminded me of exactly what happened to someone I know and love. As she was checking out of the store with her baby on her hip and Food Stamps in her hand, the couple behind her glared with anger and scoffed for all to hear "Our tax dollars at WORK! You're WELCOME!" Burning with shame, she left for the car and cried. Stephanie Land is a woman with grit and courage and her book ends on a positive note. Although, everyone likes a hopeful ending, we absolutely know this isn't always the case in life.

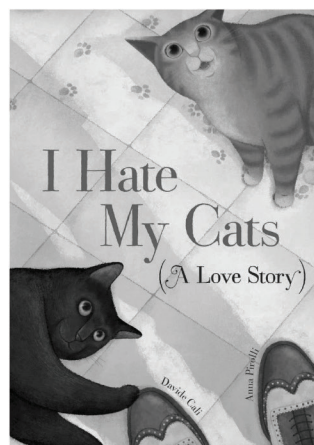


Audubon and His Journals, Volume II

edited by Maria R. Audubon, Dover 1994, First edition, 1897. (Nonfiction)

I reviewed this edition years ago, but am prompted to list it again because of a recent study from Cornell Lab of Ornithology documenting the devastating loss of nearly 3 billion birds since 1970. Be reminded this isn't the end of the story because when God's Kingdom comes, the earth will be restored in all its natural glory and we'll find the lost birds again. Audubon (1785-1851) was a naturalist and a famed American ornithologist who cataloged and drew the birds of North America. This volume isn't only about birds, it includes journal entries from the Missouri River explorations and a dangerous trip along the coast of Eastern Canada to gather plants, animals, and water fowl. His observations are enthusiastic, enthralling and sometimes appalling. Shining, detailed, historical descriptions of what our country was like – the teeming wild-life, the impenetrable swamps and forests, the lakes and seas heavy with fish are mind-boggling. Although at the time it was unthinkable that men could collapse or annihilate species or log out old-growth forests Audubon did give some prescient warnings. For eg, he despised "egggers," men who collected eggs from wild birds

nesting on rocky isles along the East Coast to sell. Eggers systematically destroyed incubating eggs and chicks by the millions, then returned a short while later to get the fresh eggs as parent birds tried to start anew. This is a fascinating book taking us back to the 1800s. I give it five stars.

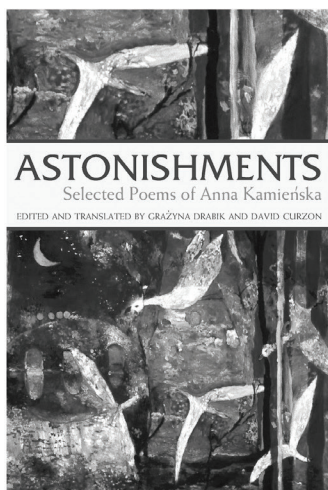


I Hate My Cats (A Love Story)

by David Cali and Anna Pirolli, Chronicle Books, 2018. (Picture book for Children & Adults who love cats.)

A book just for fun because sometimes there is precious little to laugh about. We

can't have cats in our home, because I'm allergic to them. So I enjoy others' cat pics and charming stories about them. Cats are so weird, so different from dogs, but you have to admit they are especially entertaining even while being annoying. This book in a minimum of words with perfect illustrations captures all their quirkiness and the pleasure of owning such creatures. A sweet gift for any cat lover.

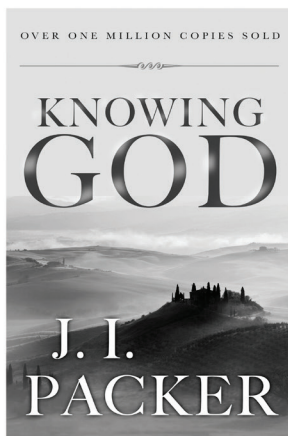


Astonishments

by Anna Kamienska, Paraclete Press, 2018.
(Poetry)

Anna passed from this earth more than thirty years ago but I only discovered her this past year. Born in 1920, in Poland, she lived through the Great War and saw many of her family and friends die under the Nazi regime. In defiance she taught in underground schools and witnessed the tragedy of children deported and murdered in the gas chambers. It's difficult to describe the work of this woman who is worthy of being called a saint. Except in one sense she is already, since all who proclaim Christ as King are saints.

In this collection you see the progression of her life as she shifts from atheistic materialism and is astonished to end up committed to historical Christianity. The catalyst came partly through unmanageable personal loss and when she meets Job of the Bible and argues with him through her poetry, she begins the shift toward belief in God. She never shrinks from life or pretends our difficulties yield a perfect ending. At the same time she writes with subtle humor, often with love and gratefulness for people, creation, and for the existence of such ordinary creatures as a hedgehog. This Polish woman speaks my language. She moves my heart. I know there are some poetry lovers out there who will read this insufficient little review and will grab this volume for yourself or some other poetry lover and find you won't regret the purchase!

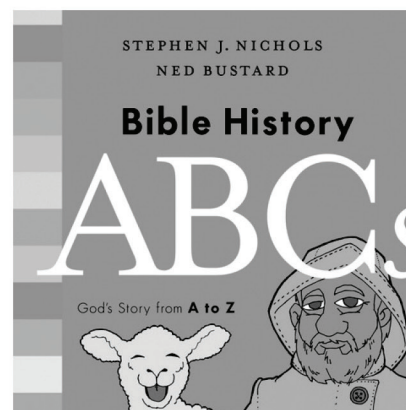


Knowing God

by J.I. Packer, InterVarsity Press, 1973. (Nonfiction)

I'm going to suggest a Christian classic because it has become just that since it was first published in 1973. If you haven't read it, you should. If you have read it, perhaps long ago, you should read it again. Years ago, it became a milestone helping me recover from some very twisted misconceptions about God. When I went back to it this year it may have done as much for me again. This is not a fun book. It is not light-hearted or easy. It knocked me back. It revealed weaknesses and ill-placed affections. I must say I loved and needed

it. I'm still far from being what I hope to be one day. The result of listening to Packer's teaching is not to learn all sorts of new and esoteric theological things about God – though I do learn – it's about God knowing me and what he does to and for me based on that intimate, sometimes devastating knowledge. (I put this in a very inadequate way.) Just one quote that humbles, saddens and yet gives me the kind of joy in knowing God that nothing else on earth can give: *There is tremendous relief in knowing that His love to me is utterly realistic, based at every point on prior knowledge of the worst about me, so that no discovery now can disillusion him about me, in the way I am so often disillusioned about myself and quench his determination to love me.*



Bible History, God's Story from A to Z

by Ned Bustard & Stephen J. Nichols, Crossway, 2019. (Children's Picture/Story Book for preschoolers to 8 years)

This beautifully illustrated book is a good teaching tool for preschool children who can't read, for those who are beginning readers, on up to the more skilled reader. ABC books are never out of date for learning the bones of language and writing and in this case, the story of the Bible. An appealing thing about this book is that it combines several elements for teaching a child. The letter itself. Words that begin with the letter. An explanation of the bolded important word beginning with the letter. A fine art reproduction from the Metropolitan Museum of Art illustrating one of the words, and finally a portion of scripture to accompany it. For example U appears with urchins in the sea, umbrella, unicorn and UNFADING. In this case UNFADING as the bolded word points to the fact that everything fades: puppies, flowers, leaves, but only our salvation is imperishable. "It never goes yucky or stale ... it is always pure and unusually white." This would be a good addition to any child's library.

And Finally...

(Continued from p. 2)

And then ... all my good intentions are sabotaged by a self that loves distraction. Yesterday I spent most of the afternoon watching YouTube videos of dogs being reunited with owners and wild horses being tamed. MOST of the AFTERNOON! I'm disappointed and ashamed. I know I could find worse things to do. But why must we distract ourselves at the most critical times of work? Writing has always been a calling I both love and abhor. I often force myself to sit staring at words while nothing visible happens. I think and wait until I am quite sure it is time to give up this hopeless occupation altogether. It's never been any different. At the end of that day I had nothing to show even as my deadline continued to bear down on me. God, help! That which I don't want to do, I do! But then, slowly, slowly the next day it came together word by word.

But here is the hope we have despite our disgust over failure and loss. There exists a reality, unseen right now, but God helping us, we have faith in his word and work that keeps us from complete despair. Our current situation is NOT the end of the story. As all creation waits, groaning for its redemption, the day is coming when Christ will return to make all things new. Not only will sickness and grief be banished, the birds will come back and the earth itself will be restored, renewed, regenerated (Romans 8:22-23).

This is our hope as Christians. We anticipate it even as we witness the collapse of populations, micro plastics in our water, and broken efforts to stop frivolous distractions. One day the darkness will roll back as Christ calls forth unimaginable teeming beauty.

And so, come Immanuel, come.



Pileated Woodpecker.
Photo credit: Fernando Ortega.
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Margie Haack

About Letters From the House Between

If you drive through western Kentucky where two great southern rivers – the Cumberland and the Tennessee – come together, you pass over the dams that bind them and a land emerges bordered on all sides by water, simply called The Land Between the Lakes. As we drove, we thought about the changes coming as we aged and needed to move from Toad Hall, our home of thirty-three years. We needed a place where certain features were on the main floor so as body parts fail one doesn't need to climb stairs to reach them. We thought of that place as "The House Between," a place bound on one side by years past where we raised children, continued our ministry and grew older, and on the other side, a place in heaven where God holds a perfect place of restoration yet to come. Our new home is a reminder that this is only a "place between" what is now and what will one day be true Home forever. Thus: The House Between.

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