



critique

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***Seeing into Other Worlds,
Discerning Cultural Liturgies,
and a Theology of Writing***

CRITIQUE



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

Except where noted, all articles are by Denis Haack.

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A New Normal



Margie and I have been talking recently about what we call our *new normal*. We're aging, which is no surprise since we've been doing that since birth, except that the process seems to be getting a bit more intrusive. The intrusiveness has been very annoying.

Actually, it isn't just aging that introduces us to a new normal. Changes do the same at any age. A change in vocation, the suicide of a friend, the decision to move, the arrival of a baby, a sudden flood, the discovery of mold in the walls, the fragility of a once confident faith, a graduation—all these and more usher us through a metaphorical portal out of what used to be our normal into what is for us a new normal.

Sometimes the new normal is highly anticipated and exciting, and sometimes it is not.

At the same time we've been discussing this I've been reading a novel recommended by my rector. We were sitting together at a recent church potluck where by the time I got through the line my wife's offering of green chili flat enchiladas had been eradicated. As an introvert I've never been particularly fond of potlucks, but missing the enchiladas after having smelled them

baking that morning meant I had something to mention in next week's Confession. In any case, Christian asked if I had read Amor Towles' *A Gentleman in Moscow* (2016). I said I hadn't; he said I must, and added it was good enough that we should consider hosting a book discussion. So, since I always do what my rector says, I ordered a copy and began reading it. The book is an utter delight—I'm already fearful of reaching the final page.

But I've gotten off track—my topic is a new normal.

A Gentleman in Moscow, set in 1922, is about Count Alexander Rostov who is placed under house arrest by the Bolsheviks in the Hotel Metropol. Talk about a new normal: a wealthy Russian aristocrat, a world traveler is suddenly reduced to living entirely within the walls of a single building. Not only that, but when Rostov returns from his interrogation in the Kremlin, he discovers the Bolsheviks, not content to restrict him to the confines of the hotel have ruled he must move from his suite into a tiny, cramped room in the attic. Granted, the Metropol is a grand old establishment and contains just about everything anyone could want, but still the Count's new normal is a far cry from his former life. From a life of meeting with movers and shakers, visiting galleries and the best restaurants, having tea with the best and the brightest, of travel and balls and comfort Rostov has been stripped by Russia's Communists to an existence of bare essentials. And what's fascinating is that he accepts his new normal with complete equanimity.

As he is moved out of his suite he is forced to leave behind several rooms full of furniture and art that had been in his family for generations. They were all

very lovely things, full of sentimental value, to say nothing of their monetary worth. "But, of course," the Count thinks, "a thing is just a thing." He chooses a few items to take with him to his attic room, and then "looked once more at what heirlooms remained and then expunged them from his heartache forever."

If that sounds implausible you have not met Count Alexander Ilyich Rostov. It's called contentment, and it's a virtue Rostov has nurtured until it's become a habit of his heart.

Our new normal involves very different circumstances and has not been met with either equanimity or contentment. I've become less steady on my feet and find that using a cane helps me maintain balance. (I fell again, a sidewalk face plant, this summer.) We can accomplish less in the same amount of time. Margie is unable to work in her garden like she used to. (She's only planted tomatoes and cucumbers this year.) Her arthritis is worsening (she was allergic to the last, very effective drug) and is even thinking of giving up her beloved hens. And so it goes.

Having a new normal is well... normal for finite creatures, but that doesn't always make it easy. Depends on the habits of the heart we have nurtured, or not, as the case may be. ■

DIALOGUE



To the editor:

Dear Denis and Margie,

I unexpectedly received a large inheritance check from a distant unknown relative who died without leaving a will, and I'm very happy to share some of it with Ransom Fellowship. Honest! I'm not making this up!

Thanks for your perseverance. I'm very glad you are still producing paper copies of *Critique* and *Letters from the House Between*!

Love,

Linny Dey, Bolton, Mass.

To the editor:

Dear Denis and Margie,

I signed up to receive your mailings at the L'Abri Conference last year. As the mother of a big family, I don't always get the time to thoroughly digest *Critique* and *Letters from the House Between*. This time I read the entire issues. (By the way... I still had time to do some laundry and feed hungry children.)

Because of Margie's recommendation of a book by Louise Penny [*Letters from the House Between* #1-2019], I enjoyed this new author, relaxing to the audio version when I had time to myself. Thank you, Margie!

I enjoyed the issue of *Critique* [2019:2]—from the liar-liar-pants-on-fire cover to the very end. "Ashes and Repentance" brought me to tears. So beautifully written. I loved the poetry by Sam Hamer. "Random Reflections on Lying" made me think, because

I just heard another sermon about Rahab's valor and wondered for the first time why it was okay for her to lie. I'm going to pass this article along to my daughter who works with memory care clients. I have just been grappling with my sour attitudes about sharing space with Muslims here in Minnesota. The book by Matthew Kaemingk is already on order from the library, and it's just what I needed. A timely book recommendation.

Thank you for sharing your time and thoughts with people like me. You are making a difference!

Gratefully,

Lisa Luciano, Lester Prairie, Minn.

To the editor:

Denis and Margie—

Hope all is well with you. Judi has been recovering well from her fall—up to 95% now, by God's grace.

Meant to tell you how much I enjoyed the article, "Knowledge Isn't Enough," [*Critique* 2018:6], especially the paragraph:

The wise person answers your question by saying something that invites quiet reflection; the expert answers by outlining knowledge that solves your problem. The expert's preferred tool for communication is PowerPoint; those who are wise tend to tell a story, a proverb and send you away with the suggestion you learn to live in them. Wisdom is always relationally centered, so that being with the one who is wise, and spending time with them is essential to becoming wise. Knowledge can be emailed. Wisdom insists that things are convoluted, interrelated and very richly textured, that reality is messy, and

that answers always lead to more questions. Expertise insists that when things are reduced to their basic essentials the solutions and proposals will be precise, straightforward and easy to comprehend. Wisdom suggests that life is best lived in the company of the faithful; expertise argues that enough studies will present a solution.

Shared the article with our men's group when we were discussing what Proverbs says about wisdom. Also very insightful thoughts to share with my med students who are professional knowledge hunters. I keep the quote on my phone.

BTW, I tried to donate online but it said, "the site (JustGive.org) can't be reached."

Fond aloha,

Bill and Judi, Honolulu, Hawaii

Denis Haack responds:

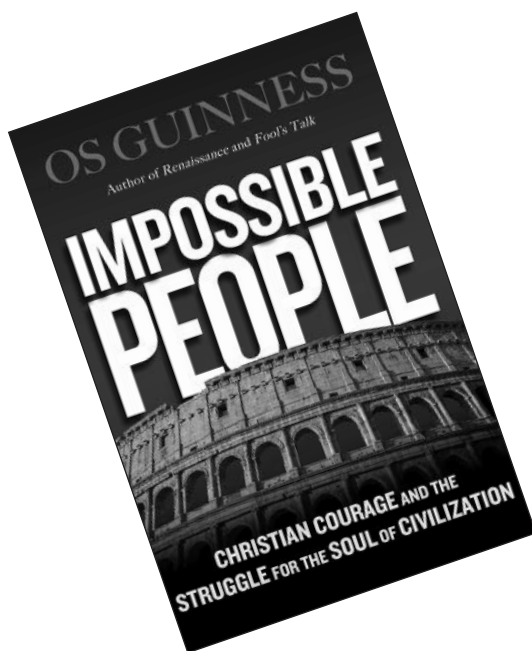
Oh, Linny, good friend. Thank you for your gracious generosity. And may all of us by God's grace be blessed with a distant unknown relative who dies without leaving a will!

Lisa: I'm so glad what Margie and I have published has been an encouragement to you. Matthew Kaemingk's *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration* in an Age of Fear is an excellent study, biblical, thoughtful, and practical. I'm so glad you are reading it.

Bill: Thanks so much for your kind words and good news about Judi. I'm so glad to know what I've written might be helpful in the relationships and groups that are part of your life and calling. And I am so sorry about the online donate button on Ransom's website. Sometimes Margie and I despair over our inability to keep up with Ransom's online presence. The donate button should be working now.

The Significance of Choice

an excerpt from *Impossible People* by Os Guinness



Choice—unbounded autonomous, subjective sovereign individual choice—is the playboy king of consumerland, and with comfort and convenience as his closest courtiers and cronies, he now rules much of life. Authority and obedience are therefore banished together. They are the unwelcome spoilsports whose entry might ruin the fantasy game of infinite choices. The result is no surprise—a grave crisis of authority within the church, and a rash of positions and interpretations that in any clearer thinking generation would be frankly seen as the rejection of the authority of Jesus and the Scriptures that they are.

Evangelicals are especially vulnerable to this distortion of choice because of the exaggerated place they give to choice in the call to conversion. It may even be their Achilles' heel. Whereas the Jews are the *chosen people*,

so that their faith is their destiny, Evangelicals are a *choosing people*, and their faith is often merely their decision. The step of faith is of course a choice, the most important and fully responsible choice a person ever makes. But when the overwhelming emphasis is put on choice as an act of decision, choosing becomes everything, but it can then suffer the fate of many modern choices and shrink to being lightweight, changeable and nonbinding. Choice and change are close companions, and those who decide for a faith because they choose to believe it can as easily defect from the faith when they choose not to.

Contrast this modern casualness with the early church's deep theology surrounding conversion and especially the costly stress on the public witness of the sacrament of baptism. This was a direct and deliberate counterpoint to the Roman practice of sacrament. For the Romans, the *sacramentum* was far more serious than a normal oath in a law court. It was the solemn vow by which a person gave his or her word before an authority and put his or her life in forfeit as a guarantee of what had been sworn. Those who had given their *sacramentum* were then *sacer*. They were “given to the gods” if they violated the vow. They had given their sacred bond and they were no longer their own. For example, the *sacramentum* was the oath of allegiance sworn by Roman soldiers to the emperor as they joined the legions and by gladiators as they went out to fight and die.

For Christians, then, baptism was no casual choice. It was a public vow, a decisive break with the past and a solemn binding oath of allegiance to Jesus, sworn to God and before God—and before their fellow believers and the watching world. This was

probably one reason why there were so many deathbed baptisms, such as the Emperor Constantine's (“I am now numbered among the people of God... I shall now set out for myself rules of life which befit God”). People did not wish to die unforgiven, but neither did they wish to commit themselves any earlier than they needed to live under a vow (*sacramentum*) that was so costly and so binding. Choice today can always be casual, whereas the covenantal vow of faith is costly because we commit ourselves to Jesus and mortgage our very selves as we do so. We have chosen, and we are committed. We have picked up our crosses, and there is no turning back. We are no longer our own. ■

Source: This excerpt is from *Impossible People: Christian Courage and the Struggle for the Soul of Civilization* by Os Guinness (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2016) pp. 70-71

RESOURCE

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Discerning Cultural Liturgies

In *Desiring the Kingdom*, philosopher James K. A. Smith says that to be culturally discerning we need to view and respond Christianly to our world in terms of *both* worldview *and* liturgy. Worldview analysis identifies cultural ideas, beliefs, and values and then examines them in light of the ideas, beliefs, and values revealed in the gospel. Liturgical analysis identifies cultural practice—rituals that tend to subtly shape one's view of human flourishing—and then examines them in terms of what we love most.

Smith asks us to think in a fresh way about going to a shopping mall. We do a bit of shopping, buying a new shirt to replace the one that got torn last week, we check the wedding registry in a store for a possible gift for a niece that is getting married, and then we take in a movie at the theater that is just beyond the food court.

During our time at the mall we will pass by numerous ads that include, implicitly or explicitly, cultural ideas and values. The movie will also include all sorts of ideas and values—some implied by the flow of the story and others explicitly explored in the dialogue and plot. The discerning Christian can identify these ideas and values and can note how they stack up against biblical ideas and values. Perhaps, for example, the movie is a thriller, exciting but one in which the hero claims to be seeking justice but in the end is only really interested in vengeance. Whatever the specifics, this is worldview analysis, and is an exercise of the mind.

Smith argues, correctly, that this is helpful and important for cultural discernment, but it is also insufficient.

Human culture doesn't just express ideas and values; it also contains rituals and practices that work on a deeper, subconscious level, subtly shaping our desires.

I've been suggesting that a Christian analysis and critique of culture will be insufficient if it only looks at culture through the lens of the worldview paradigm. I'm inviting us to try on another pair of glasses for looking at culture, considering it through the lens of identity-forming practices, or what we're now calling liturgy. So the question we bring to culture is not primarily or only, What does this or that institution have to say? Or, What is the message being communicated in this film? Or, What ideas or values are contained in this or that policy? Rather, the questions we should be asking are quite different and will often be aimed at sectors of culture that have hitherto received little attention. We should be asking: What vision of human flourishing is implicit in this or that practice? What does the good life look like as embedded in cultural rituals? What sort of person will I become after being immersed in this or that cultural liturgy? This is a

Human culture doesn't just express ideas and values; it also contains rituals and practices that work on a deeper, subconscious level, subtly shaping our desires.

process that we can describe as cultural exegesis. The first question in cultural exegesis is discerning the shape of the kingdom toward which cultural practices and institutions are aimed. If we read through such cultural practices—if we read between the lines, so to speak, and discern their teleological aim—what

do we see? What do these practices and institutions envision as the good life? What picture of human flourishing is implicit or "carried" in the practices?...

But then we also need to ask the same question regarding the practices of Christian worship: How do the practices of Christian worship inscribe a desire for the kingdom within us in a way that is more affective than grasping doctrines or beliefs? In what sense does worship

precede a worldview? What picture of the kingdom is embedded in Christian liturgy? What vision of the good life is being "automated" in us when we participate in Christian worship? And how does this compare with the visions of human flourishing implicit in other cultural practices?...

I want to give you a heightened awareness of the religious nature of many of the cultural institutions we inhabit that you might not otherwise think of as having anything to do with Christian



discipleship. By religious, I mean that they are institutions that command our allegiance, that vie for our passion, and that aim to capture our heart with a particular vision of the good life. They don't want to just give us entertainment or an education; they want to make us

into certain kinds of people. So one of the most important aspects of this theology of culture is first a moment of recognition: recognizing cultural practices and rituals as liturgies. We need to recognize that these practices are not neutral or benign, but rather intentionally loaded to form

us into certain kinds of people—to unwittingly make us disciples of rival kings and patriotic citizens of rival kingdoms. [pages 89–91]

Imagine again our time at the mall—far more is going on with and in

us than the ideas and values in the ads on the walls and the movie we watch. We may not be aware of it most of the time, but our heart is engaged as well as our mind; what we love and consider ultimate in life is being shaped. When our loves and desires are being shaped, it tends to occur not by asking us to adopt certain ideas, beliefs, and values but more subtly by shaping how we feel about life as we participate in the institutions and practices of our world. We don't think about the fact that we feel better when we buy something, for example, but because we do feel better at such moments we are shaped over time into becoming better consumers. And later, when we are culling what we own, we find we have stuff that we don't really need but that we purchased after a hard week when we were feeling a bit down.

So Smith argues that though we don't tend to think about *cultural liturgies*, we should—and when we do we gain deeper insight into what faithfulness looks like in a broken world. At the mall we are in a space carefully designed for a specific purpose that is defined by a particular view of what it means to flourish as a person. The mall itself gives expression to a cultural understanding of the good life. This touches on our deepest desires, many of which may be unexpressed and that in turn shape what it is we love and feel we need. Think, for example, of the wedding registry we browsed, looking for a gift for our niece. On the one hand it's a very helpful tool—Margie and I received five (5!) clocks at our wedding 51 years ago and so had to return four of them. On the other hand, is it not true that the registry's very existence suggests that things, stuff, are essential to the good life? Is it not seductively

easy to register for things we don't need but simply want because owning them makes us feel better about ourselves? The point here is not to refuse using wedding registries—they provide a good and helpful service—but to realize they also are a form of cultural liturgy that touches on the desires of the heart, and so are a proper focus for Christian discernment.

What Smith is proposing here is a somewhat radical notion. Most of us don't think of liturgy outside a specifically religious or church setting. Liturgies occur or are used in services of worship. Even non-liturgical churches tend to follow orders of service that are repeated each week and, though not considered sacrosanct, would cause discomfort if not uproar if some Sunday they were replaced with something new. Smith is saying this is too narrow a view. Yes, liturgies are found in church, but they can also be found in other cultural institutions.

Because our hearts are oriented primarily by desire, by what we love, and because those desires are shaped and molded by the habit-forming practices in which we participate, it is the rituals and practices of the mall—the liturgies of mall and market—that shape our imaginations and how we orient ourselves to the world. Embedded in them is a common set of assumptions about the shape of human flourishing, which becomes an implicit telos, or goal, of our own desires and actions. That is, the visions of the good life embedded in these practices become surreptitiously embedded in us through our participation in the rituals and rhythms of these institutions. These quasi-liturgies effect an education of desire, a pedagogy of the heart. ...

The core claim of this book is that

liturgies—whether “sacred” or “secular”—shape and constitute our identities by forming our most fundamental desires and our most basic attunement to the world. In short, liturgies make us certain kinds of people, and what defines us is what we love. They do this because we are the sorts of animals whose orientation to the world is shaped from the body up more than from the head down. Liturgies aim our love to different ends precisely by training our hearts through our bodies. They prime us to approach the world in a certain way, to value certain things, to aim for certain goals, to pursue certain dreams, to work together on certain projects. In short, every liturgy constitutes a pedagogy that teaches us, in all sorts of precognitive ways, to be a certain kind of person. Hence every liturgy is an education, and embedded in every liturgy is an implicit worldview or “understanding” of the world. And by this I don’t mean that implanted in the liturgies are all kind of ideas to be culled from them; rather, implicit in them is an understanding of the world that is pretheoretical, that is on a different register than ideas. That is why the education of desire requires a project that aims below the head; it requires the pedagogical formation of our imagination, which, we might say, lies closer to our gut [or heart] (kardia) than our head. [pages 25–26]

Smith is arguing for the cumulative effect of cultural *liturgies*. He is not suggesting that a visit to the mall to buy a shirt will transform our heart and change our deepest desires. He is suggesting that going to the mall is a secular liturgy—a repeated practice or ritual that takes us into a space that is designed around a specific view of the good life and that functions in a way

designed to draw us into a pursuit of that life by desiring it. We don't need to be aware of it for it to be effective, and in fact, it works most powerfully when we remain unaware of how our desires are being subtly shaped by our surroundings.

Once we start looking for rituals in culture it's easy to spot them. I have several friends who love going to trendy bars for carefully crafted cocktails. They do it for the fellowship with friends, not to get drunk. Mixing the cocktails is an elaborate ritual performed by a professional that uses utensils set aside exclusively for this special use. The ritual, an expression of practiced repetition and creativity, along with the shared beverage causes them to enjoy the evening together in a fresh way. That's not simply from the expected buzz from the alcohol—even alcohol-free cocktails mixed for pregnant or non-drinking friends take on a similar significance. Somehow an ordinary time together is made to feel a bit extraordinary, meaningful, and special. Pointing this out doesn't make the experience bad or questionable—it's just that human beings cannot live without rituals and liturgies, and so they will be found within their shared culture.

Smith relates this to Charles Taylor's notion of *social imaginary* that he proposed in *A Secular Age* (2007). By that he meant the image people have about life and reality before they even begin thinking much about it. It's the way ordinary people imagine things to be, and is formed not by being convinced of certain philosophical or theological

concepts and arguments, but is rather absorbed from stories, images, and experiences. As people mature, they may develop reasons and arguments for what they assume life is about, but that comes later. As they grow up indwelling various cultural liturgies, their desires are shaped and a way of imagining life is formed.

Smith is pointing out that people are not just thinking beings; we are worshipping beings. Even secularists who reject both organized religion and belief in the supernatural hold some notion of the good life. They imagine what it means to flourish as a person and have some idea of the ultimate nature of reality. And though they may resist the notion that this brings them solidly into the realm of religion—especially since our culture adheres to the dubious notion of being *None*—that is exactly what has transpired. The difference between the secularist and me as a Christian is merely that we provide very different definitions of the good life, of reality, and of human flourishing. We desire different things and our deepest love is directed to very different ends.

One practical step that can help in this process is to spend more time at the mall. This is not a joke—I mean it. To go to the mall, not to shop or to consume, but to walk and sit, look and feel, observe and sense how we feel, what we imagine, what is made attractive and desirable. And when we do go to shop, to slow ourselves down enough to become more aware of what we are participating in so we get a better sense of the liturgy involved.

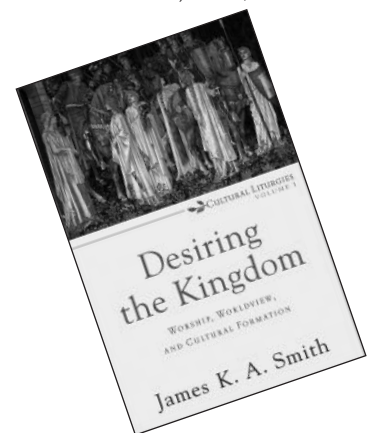
And of course, cultural liturgies are not just limited to the mall. Places like political rallies, museums and galleries, concert halls, the Internet, coffee shops, sports venues, discussion groups—all the places we inhabit that, unbeknownst to us, help to shape our desires about the good life.

We should be certain we are part of a church that takes its liturgy seriously, intentionally shaping our deepest desires and loves with the gospel of Christ. And I recommend you read and discuss *Desiring the Kingdom*.

So, living in a fallen world means we should expect that the cultural liturgies in which we participate will not necessarily deepen our love of God. There is no conspiracy here—this is the way things are and will remain until the king returns to consummate his kingdom.

The point is not to be fearful living in such a world, but to be discerning, so we can be faithful, and so that our deepest desire, our most profound love is Christ, and Christ alone. ■

Source: *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* by James K. A. Smith (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic; 2009).



A Theology of Writing

by Douglas Groothuis

Since we should pray all the time and about everything (1 Thessalonians 5:17; Ephesians 6:19), we should be able to pray through our theology and our sense of calling. To that end, I cite *The Book of Common Prayer's* "Prayer For Those Who Influence Public Opinion":

Almighty God, you proclaim your truth in every age by many voices: Direct, in our time, we pray, those who speak where many listen and write what many read; that they may do their part in making the heart of this people wise, its mind sound, and its will righteous; to the honor of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Everyone reading this who has written or will write comes under the province of this fine prayer, as do public speakers (but I won't address that here). For those who pray this prayer and who want to be the recipients of its blessing, a theology of writing is in order. Those who desire to write what is true so that what is written makes hearts wise, minds strong, and wills righteous need to know what Almighty God might have to say about their vocation or avocation of writing. As in all things, our writing should be for the glory and honor of Jesus Christ, our Lord (1 Corinthians 10:31; Colossians 3:17). Since my expertise is in writing nonfiction, my comments have this in mind.¹

First comes the metaphysics. Our words can have meaning, be true, and be wise only because of who God is and how he made the universe. The universe is not "just there," as Bertrand Russell said. It was fashioned for communication.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word

was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind (John 1:1–4, NIV).²

The word used for Word in Greek is *Logos* and refers to Christ before he incarnated as Jesus of Nazareth. The *Logos* is fully divine, eternal, and "with God." As the original Greek emphasizes, the *Logos* and God are not merely adjacent to each other like two stone pillars, but face-to-face. Later in John's Gospel, Jesus speaks of his fellowship with God the Father "before the foundation of the world" (John 17). We again see that the Father and the *Logos* were communicating in perfect communion. From other texts, we know that the Holy Spirit was there as well, making up the Holy Trinity: One God who exists in three co-equal and co-eternal persons (Matthew 3:13–17; 28:18–20; Acts 5:1–4; 2 Corinthians 13:14).³

Logos (word) has a rich treasury of meaning, which is germane to our writing. It is a unit of intelligible meaning that can be communicated truly. Meaning requires a rational ordering and structure. Words without definition and context are meaningless. This ties into another meaning for *Logos*, which is, not surprisingly, *logic*. Theo-logy means the logic of God. Anthro-po-logy means the logic of man. John tells us that the *Logos* is the ordering principle and logic of the universe. But, unlike the Greek philosophers, such as the Stoics, who viewed the *Logos* as an impersonal and faceless principle, this *Logos* is a personal and interpersonal being, God himself. The *Logos* ensures that his


creation has enough light in which to see him and others truly. "In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind" (John 1:4; see also Psalm 36:9).

Because of the Word, our words can serve reality by being true and fitting. We are not writing in the void, hoping our scribbling will somehow set off felicitous effects here and there. Rather, our use of semantics, grammar, and style reflects the *Logos* himself and shows his workings in edifying communication.⁴

The atheist philosopher Frederick Nietzsche (1844–1900) testified to this in a backhanded way. "I am afraid we are not rid of God because we still have faith in grammar."⁵ Grammar presupposes a universal and rational order known through language. The structure of intelligible language approximates the structure of reality outside of language. The best explanation for grammar is its creation by a rational and personal God to reflect reality and give humans knowledge through thought and language. Every time Nietzsche wrote anything, he acted against his own worldview, since he denied the only reality that could give any meaning to his own ideas. Christians are not so stricken with intellectual inconsistency. For this, we should thank and praise our God.

Several writers of scripture tell us why they write, and they can inspire us to write well. Luke, in his Gospel, tells us why he wrote and of his method of gaining knowledge.

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants



of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught (Luke 1:1–4).

Luke was, along with others, a servant of “the word” (logos). Thus, he writes a well-researched, accurate, and orderly report of the life of Jesus. Therefore, Theophilus could have intellectual confidence about the Word.

The wise man of Ecclesiastes demonstrated a patient zeal for knowledge as well.

Not only was the Teacher wise, but he also imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true (Ecclesiastes 12:9–10).

BECAUSE OF THE WORD, OUR WORDS CAN SERVE REALITY BY BEING TRUE AND FITTING.

While we cannot write Holy Scripture, we can be “servants of the word” through studious preparation and orderly presentation, keeping in mind what needs to be written for the sake of the Gospel and the common good.

Since the church is the “pillar and foundation of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15), Christians should be people of truth who yearn to impart knowledge to those in need of it. While this should be especially focused on the household of faith (Galatians 6:10), we must extend

our efforts toward both the lost and the deceived—those who are “always learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth” (2 Timothy 3:7). Jesus said, “For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matthew 12:37; see also James 3:1–12).

This applies to both spoken and written words.

We read John’s emphasis on the Word in his prologue, and such emphases are throughout his work. Near the end of his Gospel, after describing Jesus’ crucifixion, he

writes...

The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe (John 19:35).


John also wrote...

Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is

the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name (John 20:30–31).

In all of my writing, I attempt indirectly or directly to commend the Christian worldview. I may critique a non-Christian viewpoint, suggest Christian themes, defend the gospel itself, or encourage Christians to speak the truth in love in their lives. I scheme to be published in settings where Christianity is seldom or never on view. Paul, the great church planter and apologist, inspires me: “It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else’s foundation” (Romans 15:20).

Christian writers need to break out of the Christian bubble by getting published in books, journals, secular magazines, newspapers, blogs, Web pages, and everywhere else. Even reviews on Amazon and YouTube can change hearts and minds for the better.



Risking failure in writing for the glory of God has rewards unknown to those who always play it safe. Remember the teacher in Ecclesiastes:

*Ship your grain
across the sea;
after many days
you may receive
a return.*

*Invest in seven ventures, yes, in eight;
you do not know what disaster may
come upon the land.*

*If clouds are full of water,
they pour rain on the earth.*

*Whether a tree falls to the south or to
the north,
in the place where it falls, there it
will lie.*

*Whoever watches the wind will
not plant;
whoever looks at the clouds will
not reap.*

*As you do not know the path of the wind,
or how the body is formed in a
mother's womb,
so you cannot understand the work
of God,
the Maker of all things.*

*Sow your seed in the morning
and at evening let your hands not
be idle,
for you do not know which
will succeed,
whether this or that,
or whether both will do
equally well
(Ecclesiastes 11:1–6; see also
Luke 18:1–8).*

Rejection notices come with the craft of writing. If you write a query letter, a

publisher will accept your idea or not. If you don't try, your writing definitely will not get published. We are sowing literary seed. Only God knows what kind of soil it will fall on. Our job is to sow faithfully, pray earnestly, wait on the Lord, and jump on any chances God provides.

While risk is inherent in getting published, foolishness is never called for. One must be prudent in calibrating expectations to effort. Spending three months writing an unsolicited editorial for *The New York Times* is foolish—unless you have a big name or God has vouchsafed a revelation that they will publish it against all odds. But spending a half hour writing a letter to *The New York Times* is not imprudent, even if it remains unpublished. (I have done this about eight times.)

Writing is a craft requiring a distinctive style or voice. Each Gospel writer has his own manner of writing, for example. Some talent is inborn, but most is acquired through practice, critique, tenacity, and humility. God gives all good gifts and bestows wisdom (James 1:5; Proverbs 8). Therefore, prayer is essential in writing and publishing—and everything else (1 Thessalonians 5:17; Ephesians 6:19). That is why I began this essay with a prayer.

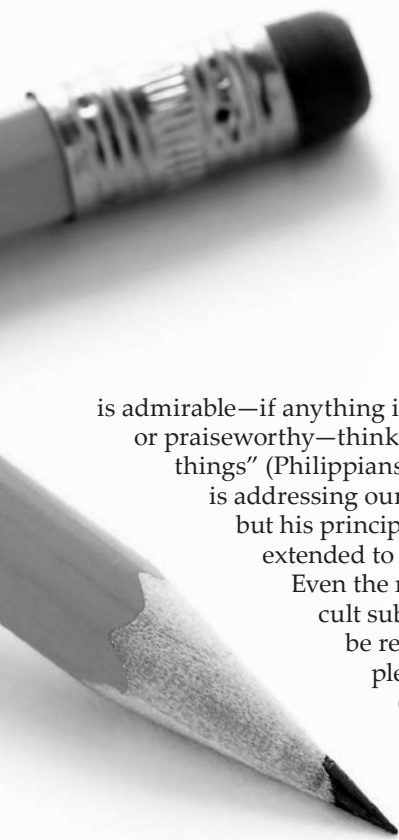
Good writers write regularly. Some

of us can't stop and border on hypergraphia. Since anyone can publish anything anytime from anywhere, it is easy to air one's writing for public inspection. Literary profligacy, however, is not advised. Too many words already mar the intellectual landscape. "The more the words, the less the meaning, and how does that profit anyone?" (Ecclesiastes 6:11).

Good writers need good editors. To accept adept editing requires humility. My first wife, Rebecca Merrill Groothuis (1954–2018), expertly edited nearly all my work through *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Christian Faith* (2011). She made me a better thinker and writer. Her judgments were impeccable, and I quickly learned—while we were still dating—that her suggestions and corrections trumped my original offerings. Sadly, I lost her skills years ago when she contracted dementia.⁶ God has graciously given me a kind and skillful soul who edits me in a style similar to Becky's.

Everyone's writing can be improved through editing. Believe me, bad editors exist (and I have suffered through a few), but professional editors nearly always improve your work. "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another" (Proverbs 27:17). Good writing is always teamwork in some way.

Writers have a better chance of being read if they possess a pleasing style. Paul says: "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever



is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things” (Philippians 4:8). Paul is addressing our thoughts, but his principle can be extended to writing.

Even the most difficult subjects can be rendered in pleasing prose (and the simplest can be poorly written).⁷

By reading and reflecting

on masterful writers throughout history, we can learn to imitate their virtues of clarity, sincerity, descriptive prowess, insight, cleverness, and concision. Outside of the biblical authors, I am inspired by the classic writing of Blaise Pascal, G. K. Chesterton, Dorothy Sayers, and C. S. Lewis, as well as contemporary authors such as Os Guinness, J. I. Packer, and Roger Scruton.

Developing a style worth reading requires the mastery of grammar, syntax, and vocabulary. Above all, writers must be clear in order to communicate at all. What Paul says about speaking in a known language in church (as opposed to tongues) applies

to writing as well:

Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the pipe or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes? Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air (1 Corinthians 14:7–9).

But there is more to style than clarity. Many books have been written on style, but I offer a few suggestions. The thinnest and best book is still *Elements of Style* by Strunk and White, which allows for no fluff, lack of clarity, ambiguity,

loquacity, or eccentricity. George Orwell’s essay, “Politics and the English Language,” is a moral and literary critique of the dissimulation and obfuscation that passes for truth in much political and other kinds of writing. Harry Frankfurt’s little gem, *On Bullshit*, takes aim and hits

the same targets.⁸

Dull prose about great things is inexcusable. The Christian writer should write creatively and with a lively imagination, as much as his or her gifts allow. As Francis Schaeffer wrote:

Christian artists do not need to be threatened by fantasy and imagination, for they have a basis for knowing the

difference between them and the real world “out there”... The Christian is the really free man—he is free to have imagination. This too is our heritage. The Christian is the one whose imagination should fly beyond the stars.⁹

For inspiration to write lively prose about profound topics, you can do no better than to read Dorothy Sayers’s classic essay, “The Greatest Dogma Ever Staged.”¹⁰ It begins thus:

Official Christianity, of late years, has been having what is known as “a bad press.” We are constantly assured that the churches are empty because preachers insist too much upon doctrine—“dull dogma,” as people call it. The fact is the precise opposite. It is the neglect of dogma that makes for dullness. The Christian faith is the most exciting drama that ever staggered the imagination of man—and the dogma is the drama.¹¹

That God became man and died at the hands of men is a truth that should never be turned into a platitude. Read Sayer’s priceless essay as a tonic against lifeless writing about eternal life!

Style should never get in the way of meaning, nor should personal style be ostentatious or idiosyncratic. Flashing lights make for tiresome prose. The writer is the servant of the reader and ultimately the servant of God, the Author of all things. Thus, the writer should take a humble but confident stance as a messenger. One’s talents should be at full throttle, and there is no sin in aspiring to great writing. But, egotism is as annoying in writing as it is anywhere else. As skilled as C. S. Lewis was as a writer, I have never gotten the sense that he was showing off.

RISKING FAILURE IN WRITING FOR THE GLORY OF GOD HAS REWARDS UNKNOWN TO THOSE WHO ALWAYS PLAY IT SAFE.



More nuance and substance should be added to a theology of writing. May others continue where I now end. I have written this that my reader may learn to write well for the glory of God and the common good. While it is true that “when words are many, transgression is not lacking” (Proverbs 10:19, NRSV), “a word in season” brings joy to both writer and reader (Proverbs 15:23).

May we write and read such words. ■

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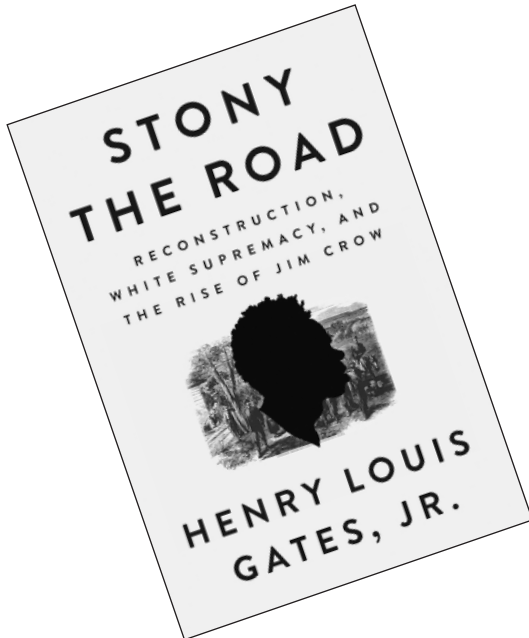


Douglas Groothuis is professor of philosophy at Denver Seminary. He is the author of Walking through Twilight: A Wife's Illness, a Philosopher's Lament (InterVarsity Press, 2017), Philosophy in Seven Sentences: A Short Introduction to a Vast Topic (InterVarsity Press, 2016), and Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith (InterVarsity Press, 2011), as well as ten other books. www.DouglasGroothuis.com

ENDNOTES

1. I have written a few dialogues and Screwtape-like letters, but no short stories, plays, or novels. Philosophy Now published my fictional dialogue, “At the Existentialist Park” (October/November 2018). It is on line at https://philosophynow.org/issues/128/At_the_Existentialist_Park.
2. All subsequent biblical quotes are in the New International Version, unless noted.
3. On the Trinity, see The Athanasian Creed at <https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/creeds/athanasian-creed>.
4. Francis Schaeffer develops these themes in “The Epistemological Necessity: the Problem” and “The Epistemological Necessity: the Answer” in He is There and He is not Silent (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001).
5. Frederick Nietzsche, “Twilight of the Idols,” Walter Kaufmann, ed., The Portable Nietzsche (New York: Penguin, 1982), 483.
6. See Douglas Groothuis, Walking through Twilight: A Wife's Illness—A Philosopher's Lament (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017).
7. Steven Pinker argues against bad academic writing in “Why Academic Writing Stinks,” Chronicle of Higher Education (September 26, 2014). On line at: https://stevenpinker.com/files/pinker/files/why_academics_stink_at_writing.pdf.
8. Harry Frankfurt, On Bullshit (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).
9. Francis Schaeffer, Art and the Bible (orig. pub. 1972; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 90-91.
10. For an introduction to Dorothy Sayers, see Chris Armstrong, “Dorothy Sayers: The Dogma is the Drama: Interview with Barbara Reynolds,” Christianity Today (December 15, 2005). <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/december-web-only/52.0a.html>.
11. Dorothy L. Sayers, “The Greatest Drama Ever Staged” in The Whimsical Christian (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co, Inc., 1978), 11.

The Fight Against Emancipation



On January 1, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, forever abolishing slavery in the United States. It would be nice to report that, at that point, the 3.5 million enslaved African Americans were legally free and were able to freely participate fully in all aspects of American society. Sadly, while the first part of that sentence is true—they were legally free—the second half is not true because a concerted, wicked effort was immediately made to whip up racial bias, promote fear, and keep them segregated as second-class citizens. What occurred over succeeding decades was shameful, a direct, intentional assault on the dignity of Black Americans. There were overt political and economic efforts to promote systemic inequality, segregation, and public lynching advertised in newspapers that drew crowds. There were also efforts in the media—in film, cartoons, kitschy trinkets, and advertising, for

example—that promoted racial bias against African Americans.

In *Stony the Road*, using extensive illustrations and carefully researched narrative, Harvard University professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. tells the story of that post-emancipation racist oppression. I was stunned with sadness at the cruelty involved and also with amazement at the numerous stories of courage—and it is part of America's story and essential that it be known.

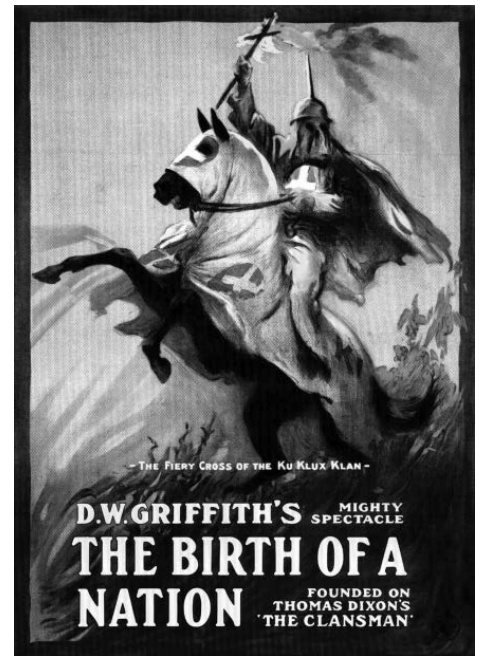
What seems clear to me today is that it was in this period that white supremacist ideology, especially as it was transmuted into powerful new forms of media, poisoned the American imagination in ways that have long outlasted the circumstances of its origin. You might say that anti-black racism once helped fuel an economic system, and that black crude was pumped and freighted around the world. Now, more than a century and a half since the end of slavery in the United States, it drifts like a toxic oil slick as the supertanker lists into the sea... I have written this book both to celebrate the triumphs of African Americans following the Civil War and to explain how the forces of white supremacy did their best to undermine those triumphs in all the years since, through to the present [p. xxii].

Stony the Road should be compelling reading for all who name Jesus as Lord and Savior. And faithfulness is called for—not only has racism raised its ugly head with a vengeance in political, economic, and cultural circles, but Sunday morning remains a profoundly segregated time.

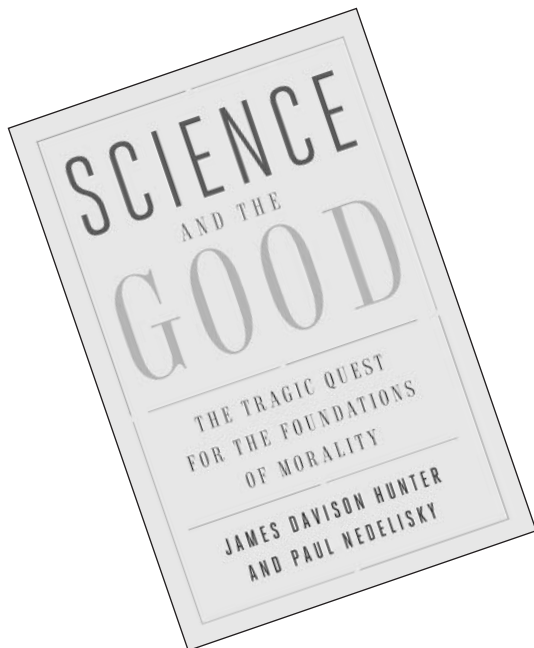
I recommend *Stony the Road* to you. ■

Book recommended: *Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy, and the Rise of Jim Crow* by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York, NY: Penguin Press; 2019) 256 pages + notes + index.

Images: Poster of film, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915); postcard of Duluth, MN lynching, June 15, 1920 (Wikimedia Commons).



A Scientific Morality



To be plausible a worldview needs to be able to account for morality. It's not a surprise then that, in the modern era, thinkers in the West, influenced by the Enlightenment, assumed that science rather than religion, tradition, or revelation would provide an empirical foundation for right and wrong. For one thing, science had made admirable strides in all sorts of other areas, so there was every reason to hope that a science of morality could be developed. Besides, after so many centuries in which religion provided the basis for morality, competing visions of the good often resulted in discord and even religious wars. Surely science, with its emphasis on careful experimentation, could move humanity past subjective notions of morality to an objective one that would prove credible to all neutral observers.

In *Science and the Good: The Tragic Quest for the Foundations of Morality*, James Davison Hunter (sociologist) and

Paul Nedelisky (philosopher), both of the University of Virginia, tell the story of this important effort. And as their subtitle implies, they conclude that this modern science of morality—despite claims in the popular press to the contrary—has failed to credibly demonstrate that science can serve as the foundation for morality.

But has the new moral science actually brought us closer to achieving its aspirations?

Sadly, no. What it has actually produced is a modest though interesting descriptive science of moral thought and behavior. We now know more, to take one example, about what is happening at the neural level during moral decision-making.

Yet many of its proponents claim much more for these types of findings than the science can justify. While some of this overreaching is due to honest mistakes or misunderstandings about what science has shown, some of it appears fraudulent, designed to capitalize on science's prestige and the public interest in practical moral advice. In the end, the new moral science still tells us nothing about what moral conclusions we should draw.

This is not happenstance. There are good reasons why science has not given us moral answers. The history of these attempts, along with careful reflection on the nature of moral concepts, suggests that empirically detectable moral concepts must leave out too much of what morality really is, and moral concepts that capture the real phenomena aren't empirically detectable. Whether they realize it or not, today's practitioners of moral science face this quandary, too.

But here the story takes a surprising

turn. While the new science of morality presses onward, the idea of morality—as a mind-independent reality—has lost plausibility for the new moral scientists. They no longer believe such a thing exists. Thus, when they say they are investigating morality scientifically, they now mean something different by “morality” from what most people in the past have meant by it and what most people today still mean by it. In place of moral goodness, they substitute the merely useful, which is something science can discover. Despite using the language of morality, they embrace a view that, in its net effect, amounts to moral nihilism.

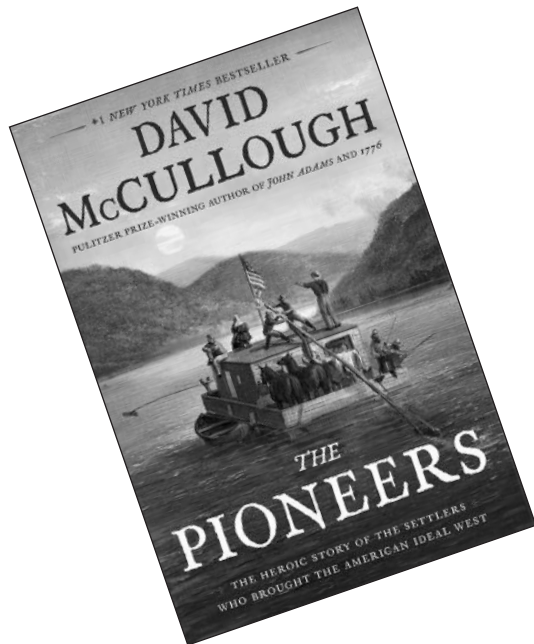
When it began, the quest for a moral science sought to discover the good. The new moral science has abandoned that quest and now, at best, tells us how to get what we want. With this turn, the new moral science, for all its recent fanfare, has produced a world picture that simply cannot bear the weight of the wide-ranging moral burdens of our time. [pp. xiv-xv]

This is a serious work of inquiry, not a quick read. It stretched my thinking but was worth the effort. I appreciate the careful way Hunter and Nedelisky explore their topic and the nuanced way they express their conclusions. *Science and the Good* is not merely an important study of an important issue for our time, it is a demonstration of how to disagree with civility, thoughtfulness and care in a pluralistic world.

I recommend *Science and the Good*. ■

Book recommended: *Science and the Good: The Tragic Quest for the Foundations of Morality* by James Davison Hunter and Paul Nedelisky (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press) 215 pages + notes + bibliography + index.

A Problem in Storytelling



David McCullough knows how to tell a good story, and as a historian has published a series of well written and well researched books. He has penned biographies of *Truman* (1992) and *John Adams* (2001), a book on the events that unfolded in 1776 (2005), *The Path Between the Seas* (1977) on the building of the Panama Canal, and eight more. It's little wonder he has won the Pulitzer Prize (twice), the National Book Award (twice) and been awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

In *The Pioneers* (2019) McCullough tells the story of the settlers who ventured into the Northwest Territory—land previously claimed by Great Britain and acquired by America after the Revolutionary War. Located northwest of the original colonies, it included the huge tract of land that eventually became the states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, and the eastern tip of Minnesota.

In the settlers' perspective, the

land was not merely unsettled but uncivilized. It was heavily forested (not made productive with farms and roads), and the only people around were Native Americans who did not share the settler's views of land ownership, government, culture or religion. Still, in the ordinance passed by Congress governing the settling of the Territory was this provision: "utmost good faith shall always be observed towards the Indians; their lands and property shall never be taken from them without their consent... they shall never be invaded or disturbed, unless in just and lawful wars authorized by Congress."

The difficulty, of course, was the unspoken assumptions behind this provision. Namely, the settler's views of land ownership were assumed to be normative, the Native Americans were assumed to be savages in need of the settler's civilizing influence, and any resistance by the Native Americans to the settlers' encroachment was considered reason to bring in the army.

The settlers clearing land in the Territory were no doubt courageous. Besides facing armed resistance from the various Indian tribes, going west involved enormous economic and personal risk. Some failed and others simply could not endure the hardship that was required to flourish in such a setting. It is also true they brought with them a set of virtuous ideals: thrift, hard work, an insistence the Territory be non-slavery, the importance of education, the rule of law, honesty, the freedom of the individual, an open marketplace, a love for God and a devotion to Christianity.

As word spread about the settler's achievements, more settlers poured in to clear yet more land, and interested visitors arrived to see for themselves.

Former vice-president Aaron Burr came with a scheme of secession that came to nothing, and European travelers passed through who went on to become famous in their own right.

If there was a reality of American life that Frances Trollope, Charles Dickens, and others found most disgraceful and unacceptable, it was the removal of the native tribes to more remote reservations to the west, brought on by the members of Congress. "If the American character may be judged by their conduct in this matter," wrote Mrs. Trollope, "they are most lamentably deficient of every feeling of honor and integrity." It was "impossible for any mind of common honesty not to be revolted by the contradictions in their principles and practice." [p. 230]

In a real sense America has yet to face and repent of this sin of genocide. It is a dark stain on the American story and one reason for the ongoing bitter fragmentation of our society.

McCullough is correct: the white settlers of the Northwest Territory were both heroic and sinners, and therein is the problem in telling their story truthfully. McCullough tries to tell it well, with balance and care, but every reader of *The Pioneers* will not agree on whether he succeeded.

I recommend *The Pioneers* to you—as a good read of history and as an exercise in discernment. ■

Book reviewed: *The Pioneers: The Heroic Story of the Settlers Who Brought the American Ideal West* by David McCullough (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster; 2019) 258 pages + bibliography + index.

Seeing into Other Worlds



Friends recommended *Once Upon a River* to us over dinner, saying it was one of their favorite novels. They promised that if we read it the four of us would want—no, would need—to meet again to talk about it, probably over dinner. Well, Margie and I have both read it, and next month we'll be at Nina and Andrew's art-filled home near Lake Minnetonka to share a meal and talk about this lovely story. Trouble is, I doubt one evening will be sufficient—far too much to discuss. One full evening could be spent just reading sections aloud for the pure delight of it. I suspect more unhurried conversations over meals are in our future.

Diane Setterfield begins her novel with an epigram on the page immediately preceding the beginning of her story. It can't be missed, and jolts the reader's imagination that something is going to happen. "Along the borders of this world lie others," she writes. "There

are places you can cross. This is one such place." A good start, I think.

Once Upon a River is set along the river Thames, in the houses that have been built along the shore and even more in the pubs where people gather.

There was once an inn that sat peacefully on the bank of the Thames at Radcot, a day's walk from the source. There were a great many inns along the upper reaches of the Thames at the time of this story and you could get drunk in all of them, but beyond the usual ale and cider each one had some particular pleasure to offer. The Red Lion at Kelmscott was musical: bargemen played their fiddles in the evening and cheesemakers sang plaintively of lost love. Inglesham had the Green Dragon, a tobacco-scented haven of contemplation. If you were a gambling man, the Stag at Eaton Hastings was the place for you, and if you preferred brawling, there was nowhere better than the Plough just outside Buscot. The Swan at Racicot had its own specialty. It was where you went for storytelling.

The Swan was a very ancient inn, perhaps the most ancient of them all. It had been constructed in three parts: one was old, one was very old, and one was older still. These different elements had been harmonized by the thatch that roofed them, the lichen that grew on the old stones, and the ivy that scrambled up the walls. In summertime day-trippers came out from the towns on the new railway, to hire a punt or a skiff at the Swan and spend an afternoon on the river with a bottle of ale and a picnic, but in winter the drinkers were all locals, and they congregated in the winter room. It was a plain room in the oldest part of the inn, with a single window pierced through the thick stone wall. In daylight

this window showed you Radcot Bridge and the river flowing through its three serene arches. By night (and this story begins at night) the bridge was drowned black and it was only when your ears noticed the low and borderless sound of great quantities of moving water that you could make out the stretch of liquid blackness that flowed outside the window, shifting and undulating, darkly illuminated by some energy of its own making. [p. 3–4]

The river is not merely part of the landscape in the book, a background feature that sets the atmosphere but remains out of focus. It is virtually a character, shaping lives and deaths, the river sometimes delightful, always present and always dangerous.

We meet Rita, a nurse who cares for the people living along the river, delivering babies, mending cuts, setting broken bones, diagnosing illness, and dispensing both medicine and wise advice. We meet Lily White, a deeply troubled, fearful and abused woman caring for a herd of swine and living in the damp moldy abandoned Basketman's Cottage at the very edge of the water. There is Robert and Bess Armstrong, grieving for their wayward son, Robin. There is the parson, always in his study, ineffective to do much beyond giving Lily a job and helping her save some of her meager pay. And along with others there are the Vaughans, who like Lily and the Armstrongs have each lost a little girl to the river and have never gotten over the loss.

Then one cold, winter night a wounded, wet man stumbles into the Swan carrying the body of a drowned little girl. She appears to be the identical age of the lost children, and

hope is ignited when the drowned girl miraculously comes back to life. The man carrying her collapses into unconsciousness, but recovers. He is a photographer named Henry Daunt, whose studio is aboard a boat named the Collodion. Multiple claims are made on the little girl, multiple stories are told of how all this came to be, and multiple theories are put forward to make sense of it all.

Setterfield is a master storyteller, and crafts prose of subtle beauty. Margie refers to her as a writer's writer, meaning she writes with such creativity and brute beauty that writers will read her simply to figure out how she manages it. *Once Upon a River* is a gripping tale, with well-developed characters in a setting that comes alive with Setterfield's vivid descriptions. This is fiction worth reading for the excellence of its prose alone, although it was the story that initially drew me in so that I couldn't put the book down.

And to increase the reader's delight, there is a deeper level at work as the story unfolds. In an online *BookPage* interview of Setterfield titled, "Mysterious Matters of Life and Death," Alice Cary explains:

One of the novel's central premises is "the different ways human beings create stories to explain something miraculous or impossible or unlikely." As a result, setting the book in the latter part of the 19th century made immediate sense, Setterfield says, because "science had just gotten started explaining human beings to themselves," and she could contrast these scientific theories with prevailing notions of superstition, folklore and gossip.

Setterfield is able to allow her story freedom to unfold imaginatively while

steadily sorting out the conflicting claims of storytellers with conflicting perspectives shaped by an assortment of legends, myths, religious notions and bigotry.

I loved *Once Upon a River*. And yet, as I read, I grew troubled. Lily's story in particular broke my heart, a life of abuse at the hands of a cruel and heartless man. It is not the cruelty that troubled me. My difficulty came as I sensed that this story was not able to be concerned for justice, and so none would be forthcoming—for Lily or anyone else. In the end the horizons of this imaginary world are not expansive enough to hope that someday, somehow, justice would prevail. Life is simply what happens, and the other worlds of the epigram into which we can cross are merely figments of the imagination. The river becomes a metaphor for reality: it just keeps flowing, impersonal, unmoved, unseeing, uncaring and imperious to the things that matter most.

Once Upon a River is set in 1887, the opening years of the modern scientific revolution. Late in the story Darwinian thought, in poorly understood bits and pieces weaves its way into the conversations in the Swan. Parts are ridiculed, yet the desire for scientific truth is given compelling voice by Rita and Daunt, who represent medicine and technology. They seek facts and want rational explanations of events.

By the end even the coming back to life of the little drowned girl is revealed to be not a miracle—can anyone really believe in miracles anymore? It is merely the result of lowered body temperature in the cold water of the river, and then being warmed up under Rita's care in the Swan.

As a Christian I find *Once Upon a River* a delectable read, an enthralling

story, and a wonderful effort to craft imaginative fiction in a world without windows. I also find it deeply sad, utterly devoid of hope that an even greater story exists that is beyond all our imagining. A greater story of meaning and justice that promises that even Lily's suffering can someday be redeemed.

I warmly recommend *Once Upon a River*. Read to enjoy it. And read it as an exercise in discernment. ■

Source: BookPage interview online (<https://bookpage.com/interviews/23411-diane-setterfield-fiction#.XS9PSC2ZMWo>)

Recommended fiction: *Once Upon a River* by Diane Setterfield (New York, NY: Emily Bestler Books; 2018) 460 pages.



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Musing On The Physics of Grace

July 22, 2019 / by Denis Haack

Denis Haack
Principal/Director

Denis holds a Master of Arts in Theological Studies (summa cum laude) from Covenant Seminary in St. Louis. He studied at the Universities of Minnesota and New Mexico, and at LaBri Fellowship with Francis Schaeffer.

He is the editor of *Critique*, a bi-monthly publication, author of *The Rest of Success: What the World Didn't Tell You About Having It All* (1989), and blogs at *A Glass Darkly*. He lectures on Christian culture and Christian faithfulness when invited at LaBri conferences, and theology at Covenant Seminary. He is visiting instructor in film on Christian faithfulness in a pluralistic world and the other on.

After a few years of living in a Christian commune (yes, that's right, they were hippies), he staffed a church as a youth pastor and was recruited by InterVarsity Christian Fellowship where he eventually became area director of New Mexico and Arizona. With Margie he began Ransom in 1983 with the desire to help Christians not react to modern culture but to engage it creatively and intelligently with the Gospel.

Favorite addition: English Black Tea by Yorkshire Gold and Bulleit.

Favorite collecting: Denis (that he might prefer you not to collect).
Favorite addition: coffee.
Favorite hobbies: Yarn bombing. Collecting mugs which ones would kill you if you ate them.
For all who want to punish themselves by learning, there's an interview of Margie by Margie.

Denis And Margie Haack



Margie Haack
Principal/Co-director

Margie is author of *Letters from the House of Hades* (from *Toad Hall*) a four-times published book. She has been a featured speaker at various conferences and a minister of the church. Her topics ranging from the significance of tattooing, to challenges her is what is real in everyday life.

She is the author of *The Exact Faith*, and *God in the Sink* a collection of essays. She finds ourselves facing life with all its sacrifices.

She's now grateful she didn't pursue a career in writing and hospitality, which involves food, painting every room a vibrant color, and eclectic furniture that invite you in and out.

Favorite addition: coffee.

Favorite hobbies: Yarn bombing. Collecting mugs which ones would kill you if you ate them.
For all who want to punish themselves by learning, there's an interview of Margie by Margie.

in the mail by August 20, 2018

September 21-22, 2018

St. Louis, MO
both on film.

St. Louis, MO September 23, 2018
10:10:45 am

Nashville, TN October 6, 2018
in speaking

October 7, 2018
Wood Elementary
worship 10 am

wedding celebration October 13-27

in the mail by October 15, 2018

ORDINARY LIFE/SACRED/SECULAR

Summer – Not What You Thought

by Margie Haack

SUMMER and what you thought would be completely doable suddenly becomes Boot Camp for the unwary.

Does this happen to you? You look at the weeks ahead and think, great! The calendar is clear and I'm way ahead of the game. Besides my regular work, I'll plant the garden, attack mold in the bathtub and scrub out the chicken house. I'll read good books to improve my character which will also give best-book picks for that end of the year gift list I scramble to publish every November.

Suddenly, weeks fill with unexpected obligations, out-of-town company (not to say you aren't delighted to see them), with deadlines and appointments entirely forgotten, and celebrations you can't avoid. And sadnesses like the death of your mother-in-law.

To accomplish anything at all I'll need to be very stern with myself, especially since I know how easy it is to push aside things that are absolutely part of my calling and obedience to God. The problem is being the kind of person who thinks, yes, please kill me, I'll gladly be here because if I'm not who will love me? (Number 2 on the Enneagram. Dangit.)

You might pray I steady on and continue what seems to be a life-long mission – learning when to say "no" and when it is right to say yes whatever the cost. Fortunately, I'm blessed with a husband who knows how to say "no" and is happy to advise. We are good for each other, you understand? A little more self-restraint versus a little less reserve makes an almost perfect couple.

Life in our Ransom Fellowship ministry has always been complicated like this – a crossing of boundaries from what could be technically called our "ministry" and the blending of ordinary living that touches the lives of others and something we work at every day. This is where most of us live – struggling with the dichotomy of the spiritual versus the physical and discerning where we are most in need of redemption from this error.

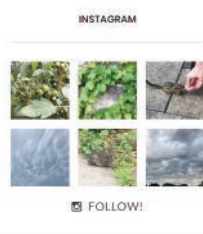
Jerram Barris writes in *Being Human*:

All we do is to be done under the lordship of Christ – even washing the floors. Everything we do as human beings is spiritually important. There is no sacred and secular... That does not mean merely that we see practical value in "secular" tasks like peeling potatoes and washing the floor. It means for more: God himself delights in them because he has created the realm of the physical. Therefore, we are to value every part of our lives just as he does.

the summer months hoping to find the proper time

for the sake

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INSTAGRAM

FOLLOW!

A Glass Darkly / DEATH/REPENTANCE

by Denis Haack

The association

ashes for dust

repentance

history

exist

God

begin?

Denis (DH): Ransom was an idea that germinated while I was on staff

with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, a ministry to college students.

IV was very keen on a particular Bible study method which I found

helpful for myself and for students. I began to see that in the same

way we studied Scripture through asking questions—such as what

being said in this passage, what does it mean, and then what do we do

about it. When we saw a movie, attended a concert, or

merely let it happen, we could think about it.

showing movies followed by discussions with group

mean by asking ourselves if we were really listening

said. Or were we just reacting according to a

we're putting our minds on idle and merely

to react, it led us to a deeper understanding

then that led to a purely natural opening for

ple around us. Films, for example were

questions about life, death, and meaning, and

es. We also found that watching a film in

setting for our non-Christian

Q: And

have

the more our friends said, hey,

the campus, but come and do it

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Since Jesus is Lord of all, the gospel speaks intelligently and creatively to every aspect

life and culture. In safe places the things that matter most can be explored and discussed,

and the truth of Christ can provide hope in a world where too much hurt occurs.

Summer – Not What You Thought

by Margie Haack

SUMMER and what

you thought would be

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suddenly becomes

Boot Camp for the

unwary. Does this

happen to you? You

look at...

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HEART OF RANSOM

A GLASS DARKLY / EVANGELISM/JUSTICE

✦ The Growth of Nones

by Denis Haack

It is an interesting

exercise to ask friends

what changes going on

in our world seem to

them to be most

significant. The

answers...

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Safe place (hospitality)

We all yearn for a safe place to raise our doubts and questions, hopes and fears. A place

where we'll be listened to and cared for, not judged for what we believe or have done or

think about or imagine. A place where coffee or tea, a glass of wine or a simple meal can be

shared in the expectation that unhurried conversation is valuable because every person

bears the image of God.

Ransom Fellowship seeks to demonstrate this sort of warm welcome and civil discussion

about the things that matter most. We believe that Christians are called by our Lord to be

safe places for our neighbors and friends. A willingness to listen, to ask questions, and to

hear the stories of others can provide opportunities for healing, deepening relationships,

and reflection.

In an increasingly pluralistic society where fearfulness and fragmentation seems to splinter

rather than unify, Christians should be agents of reconciliation. Our living rooms and dining

table, or a corner of a coffee shop can be made a safe place where strangers are welcomed

to become friends and where understanding and the warmth of personal contact is

nurtured.

Since Jesus is Lord of all, the gospel speaks intelligently and creatively to every aspect

life and culture. In safe places the things that matter most can be explored and discussed,

and the truth of Christ can provide hope in a world where too much hurt occurs.

Discernment

In an increasingly pluralistic world there is a growing assortment of lifestyles, values,

choices, and worldviews that compete for acceptance in the public square. In the business

of life we often just react to such things, hoping our choice works out for the best.



Russian Doll (Leslye Head Babbit, Natasha Lyonne,

June 11, 2019 / by Denis Haack

MOVIES

Playing with time, reality and death Russian Doll is a Netflix (2019) series of eight half

binge...

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Indivisible (David G. Evans, 2018)

January 7, 2019 / by Preston Jones

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50 Views

First Reformed (Paul Schrader, 2018)

January 7, 2019 / by R. Greg Grooms

MOVIES

Living with War: A Job-like wondering met with silence Making

their way to Panama in late 1989 to overthrow the drug-running

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Read More >

50 Views

RANSOM FELLOWSHIP ONLINE

Have you visited lately? Find expanded and archived articles and reviews, along with helpful links and encouragements from Denis and Margie.