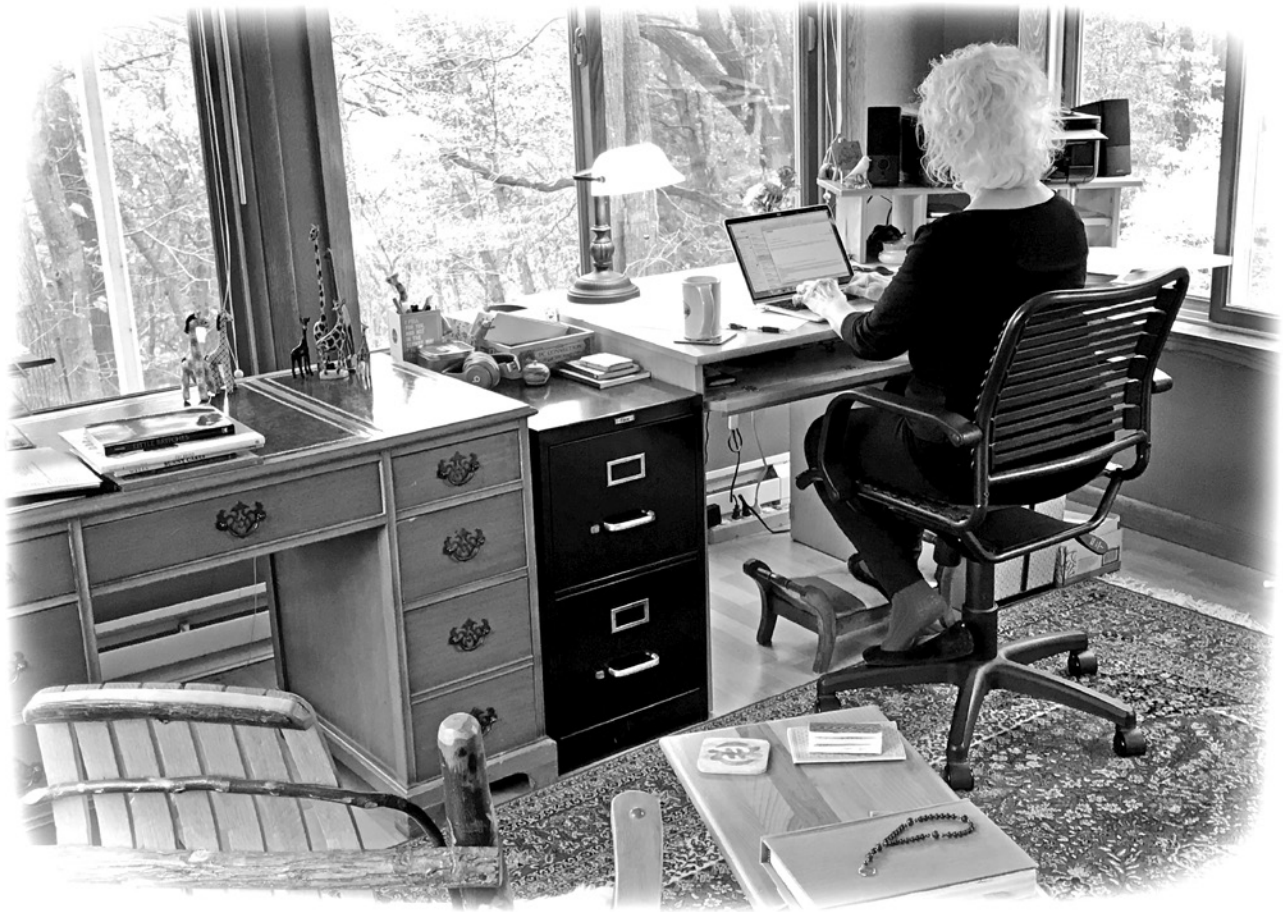


# Letters from The House Between

Formerly *Notes from Toad Hall*

Issue 4 **Winter 2020**



## Dear Friends,

A few years ago someone left a message on our answering machine. A male voice said, (This is a paraphrase. Don't recall the exact words) "Please take me off *Letters from the House Between* mailing list. I not interested in it, but would like to continue receiving *Critique*." Not being completely sainted yet, this peeved me a little. I got over it, but as you can see, I haven't forgotten. We couldn't honor his request because *Critique* and *Letters* are all on one mailing list and can't be separated. Or if they can it's beyond my pay grade. I would like to tell him now, as of today, **this is the last issue** anyone will ever receive. So, no problem. You're off the list.

It's quitting time. For 38 years Denis and I have been codirectors of Ransom Fellowship. Come this December 31 it will be dissolved. It's been a long run and we'd like to leave while we are still mobile and have most of our facilities intact. (An artful interpretation of our current state.)

Each year for the last four, our Board of Directors has discussed the timing of our closing. Last January when we met, we set up a timeline for the dissolving of Ransom Fellowship at the end of 2020.

Today my task is to say good-bye to you. It is both sad and happy. I'm not sure I can do this well, but I must make a stab at it.



*Not a saint. Yet.*

## Sadly

There is no way we could pay back or thank our supporters in the way they deserve. From the very beginning there have been friends who have believed in us, prayed and given. Some of our original supporters are still with us! It is difficult to express how grateful we are for all you have done to keep us going. Year after year, month after month we've been humbled by this. In it we recognized God's

unparalleled love and care for us. Along the way we also understood there might be a time when there wasn't enough to continue our ministry. That wouldn't mean God was unfaithful. Rather it would indicate a different plan for us.

So thank you. Thank you. We will miss the occasional notes, the letters, and calls we receive. We'll miss the contact we've had with people from all over our country. We will deeply miss our annual Board meetings with dear friends who've stood beside for many years.

## Happily

We're not retiring. (Denis hates that word.) We'll be done with government forms and reporting and keeping records. Lovely. But plan to keep writing. Especially Denis who has a head full of ideas. We are beginning a new website *Critique-Letters* ([www.critique-letters.com](http://www.critique-letters.com)) and will be regularly posting there. There will be far less pressure. We look forward to meeting you there with reviews, essays and ideas relevant to our times. **Sign up with your email on Ransom's website or visit the new site when it goes live.**

We have friends who are building a new ministry—Sage Christianity ([www.sagechristianity.com](http://www.sagechristianity.com)). We have been invited to become Senior Writers. I don't think "Senior" refers to age, but maybe... Both Mark Ryan and Zach Eswine have ties to L'Abri and Covenant Seminary. (Mark is Jerram Barrs' assistant at the Schaeffer Institute. Zack is a professor and a pastor.) We are honored to be included in their stable.

Locally we remain committed to our church—Church of the Cross and will continue to attend and be involved.

I'm excited about more intentional grandmothering. I thank God every day for the first time ever family is living in our city.



*Grandmothering*

## Last Words

Some things have been foundational to my writing. Not only writing, but all of life. Before I leave, I'd like to review them because I sense it's where many of us need encouragement.

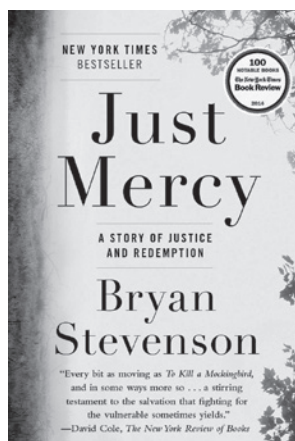
When I was a young woman, I didn't want to be ordinary. I wanted to be brilliant and sensational. As a college student my dream of becoming a medical doctor was shattered because after two years at university I was on academic probation and dropped out before I got kicked out. For years I was ashamed and even lied about this. Finally, I've had the courage to admit it.

I slowly came to terms with God's call to stop that toxic thinking and learn to be content by practicing faithfulness in the middle of my unremarkable, everyday life. I wasn't going to be a martyred missionary. I would write a book,

*(continued on page 6)*

# Christmas Gift List 2020

Since this is the final gift list I will ever write for **Letters** I decided to look back over the years and chose some of my favorites to leave with you. There were many, but alas and alack because of space, I had to narrow it to nine. During this time of national turmoil and stress a book that opens the heart to joy, hope and new ideas can turn our eyes from despair and remind us to place our faith in God's powerful hand who sits at the wheel of all creation. Over the years I have been filled with wonder by books I never would have picked on my own, except for someone who enthusiastically recommended them.

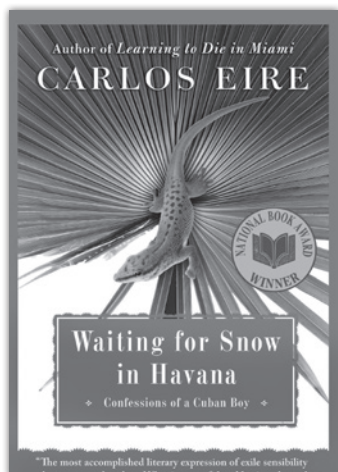


## 1 Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption

by Bryan Stevenson, Spiegel & Grau, 2014 (Non-fiction).

My very top pick is *Just Mercy*. Stevenson has never given up his calling to exonerate and free people unjustly imprisoned by our justice system in spite of the many obstacles he and his organization *Equal Justice Initiative* have faced. It is the story of victory, sorrow, and loss. For example, one of his clients, Roy Hinton, was wrongly accused of murder and on death

row for 30 years before finally being released. The book was relevant from the time it was published in 2014, but now in the midst of protests and change it must be read if we are to even begin to understand what has brought us to this point in our nation's history. The movie version of this story is good, but the book is better. There is joy in knowing heroes like Bryan Stevenson exist.

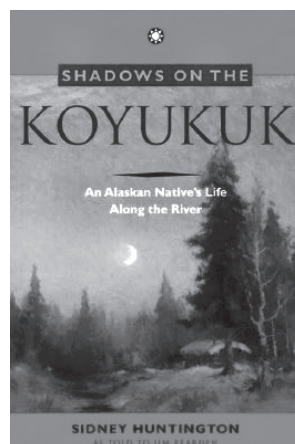


## 2 Waiting for Snow in Havana by Carlos Eire, Free Press, 2003. (Memoir).

There are so many reasons to love this book. I've tried to get people to read it many times by gushing, insisting, and even threatening. I've not been very successful. Here is my last plug.

As a child, Eire was one of 14,000 children flown from Havana to Miami in 1962. They were kept in camps and orphanages until volunteers chose to foster them. It was a harrowing time for an 11 year old. Eire's mother tried to follow. Three years later she was finally able to leave Cuba and join her sons. He never saw his father again. Eire's account of his life as a young boy is filled with stories so vibrant and alive you are taken straight to this island of turquoise seas and bright sun. It is a tribute to Eire's writing that his story could have been only angry and tragic, but it is so much more. So, yes, he was angry, but

his story is also one of redemption. His reflections on his spiritual journey are patterned after Thomas Aquinas' five proofs for the existence of God. This book reads like fiction, but is decidedly not. He has an irreverent sense of humor that kills me.



## 3 Shadows on the Koyukuk: An Alaskan Native's Life Along the River

by Sidney Huntington, Pictorial Histories Publishing, 1993. (Memoir).

This is still one of my favorite memoirs ever.

Sidney Huntington's

remarkable life of growing up in Alaska in the 1900s (born 1915) was riveting from the first page. His stories of *making a life*, not just surviving, but making life in places we call wilderness are deeply engaging. He speaks humbly and truthfully so as not to make himself into some sort of iconic figure. Learning survival in the Alaskan wilderness from his native Koyukon mother and learning to work and trade from his white father, naturally translated into caring about creation, not just exploiting it as many have done.

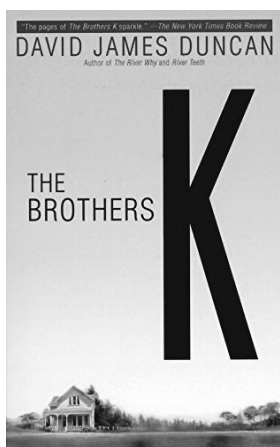
When his Mother died in their cabin after his father left for supplies, Sidney, 7, helped his 5 year old brother and toddler sister survive alone for weeks in the Alaskan wilderness until rescued. That is just a beginning. As Sidney matures and raises his own family the adventures only continue. Surviving storms and cold to minus 70

(Continued on page 4)

degrees, floods, changes in the animal populations that supported their lives, education in a mission school, rearing seventeen children, learning new skills to support his family, fighting alcoholism, and finally, living long enough to receive an honorary doctorate from the University of Alaska for his knowledge and work in conservation—all this and more make him a fascinating, heroic man. I loved this story. Anyone with interest in Alaska or wilderness survival would enjoy this book.

#### 4 **The Brothers K**

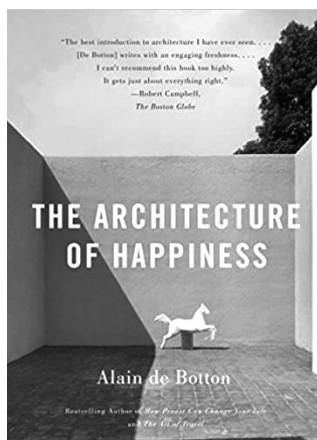
by David James Duncan. Bantam Books, New York, NY, 1994. (Fiction).



This is a top tier novel in my library. Anyone who can convince me baseball is interesting, make me laugh uproariously, cry, or stare into space is a genius. This powerful story spans decades of loyalty, anger, regret, and love in the lives of

the Chance family: a father whose dreams of becoming a professional baseball pitcher are shattered by a mill accident, a mother who clings obsessively to religion as a ward against the darkest hour of her past, and four brothers who come of age during the seismic upheavals of the sixties with each choosing a different path to adulthood. Set in the beautiful American Northwest, there is a remarkable thread of redemption running through it particularly toward the end of the book.

I once heard Duncan speak at a writer's conference, and he said he was raised in a very strict Seventh Day Adventist family and wrote this book to *learn to love and heal the wounds of growing up*. Many of us could relate. He considers himself a "Christian mystic," so don't expect perfect theology. Some language and adult situations, but none of it is gratuitous. His writing is lyrical, often funny, and compelling.

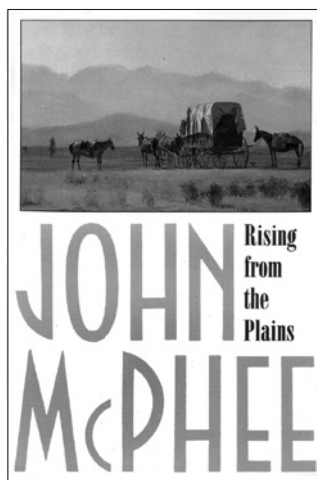


#### 5 **The Architecture of Happiness**

by Alain de Botton, Vintage Books, 2008. (Non-fiction).

I came to this book quite by accident—architecture is not a topic that would ordinarily interest me. But once I began reading and looking at the photos, which were fascinating and extremely helpful in illustrating his observations, I could not stop. De Botton takes us on a generous journey through the psychology and philosophy of architecture. He explains why we perceive certain structures as

beautiful or ugly. There are definite reasons behind our responses that have to do with a certain ideal of what makes things delightful to the eye, or as de Botton would describe it, happiness. We may be drawn to the human dimensions of a home or building because it makes us feel safe and comfortable or, on the other hand, we may find a place uninviting, cold or even threatening. De Botton unpacks these ideas as he explores classic and modern architecture. In a strange way this book reminds me of the beauty of what it means to be created in the image of God, to be human yet finite.



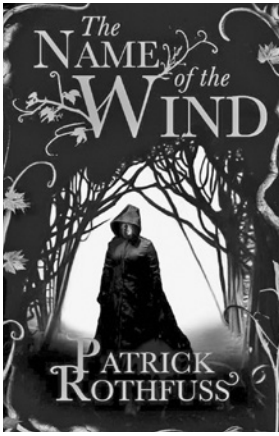
#### 6 **Rising From the Plains**

by John McPhee Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1986 (Non-fiction).

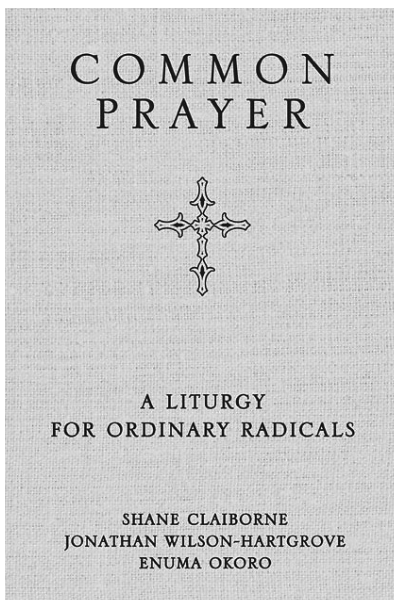
Geology. Who would have thought? McPhee is a great non-fiction writer and he always stirs my wonder. Here, he creates a love for what God made in the geology of Wyoming where every period of the history of the world is seen on the surface in its outcroppings, streambeds, embayments? I didn't think it possible. He captures readers first with a detailed account of the life of Wyoming geologist David Love who uncovered secrets of the earth and its move-

ments. Love's research became foundational to the studies and scholarship of geologists world-wide. It is instructive in our age of devices that many of Love's discoveries came from hours and hours spent just sitting on a cliff side observing some remote part of the state. They were observations that could not be found in a lab or on a device. (Lesson noted. There is much we miss in life if we only rely on our devices for information.) McPhee takes us across the state of Wyoming helping us discover and even feel its awesome surface. Beginning with his mother we climb aboard the story of Love's life and work.

*This is about high country geology and a Rocky Mountain geologist. I raise that semaphore here at the start so no one will feel misled by an opening passage in which a slim young woman who is not in any sense a geologist steps down from a train in Rawlins, Wyoming, in order to go north by stagecoach into a country that was still very much the Old West. (p. 4).*



*The Wise Man's Fear* continues the story of Kovothe's life in volume two. Meantime, in the world outside the doors of the inn, Kovothe's future approaches with ominous sounds and strange reports of violence. We nervously wait for the publication of the third book hoping our hero, Kovothe, will somehow survive the mysterious coming disaster.



## 7 **The Name of the Wind** (2007) and **The Wise Man's Fear** (2011) by Patrick Rothfuss, Daw Books (fantasy fiction)

Patrick Rothfuss writes fiction that kept me riveted for hours. It's been *forever* since I read fantasy novels as good as these. He reminds me of Tolkien or Lewis, except, as far as I can tell, he doesn't share their Judeo-Christian worldview although he adheres to ideas of right and wrong. There are despicable characters who completely lack any kind of moral uprightness and others who uphold a sense of justice and kindness that is persuasive. Like Tolkien he created a world with history that goes back centuries filled with strange human cultures and wild beings from other dimensions both good and evil who sometimes cross over into the human world. Kovothe, the main character, became the hero and villain of a thousand tales, but as years pass no one knows what became of him. He is presumed dead but actually lives in a backwater under an assumed name as the proprietor of the Waystone Inn. A Chronicler recognizes Kovothe's true identity and convinces him to tell his life's story in three days of intense writing. Volume one of the trilogy chronicles the first day of Kovothe telling the story of his boyhood. He was the son of a gypsies gifted in the arts of music, poetry, theater, and magic. One day when their troupe was camping in a wild forest all were murdered and their belongings, horses and carts burned. Kovothe who was a little boy had wandered off and returned to the campsite in time to witness the death of his parents in the last of this savage attack. He escaped only to make it a lifelong quest to become educated in the higher magic of naming and to find and punish the dreadful demonic creatures, the Chandrian, who had killed his troupe and about whom little is known, or if known, is repressed in fear.

## 8 **All the books by Louise Penny** Minotaur Books, New York. (Fiction)

Penny is the Canadian author of a crime series featuring Chief Inspector Armand Gamache, a homicide investigator with the Surete du Quebec. There are unusual and welcome elements that keep me reading her books:

- The setting is in the beautiful province of Quebec.
- Gamache is a complex character. Not one dimensional.
- It's extremely unusual for a crime inspector to confess: "I was wrong. Forgive me. I need help."
- A thread of grace and compassion runs through all her stories.
- An attractive and loyal community surrounds Gamache.

## 9 **Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals**

by Claiborne, Wilson-Hartgrove, and Okoro, Zondervan, 2010.

We often use this gathering of prayers, quotes and Scriptures to greet the day. It's meant to be used in communities, families or with groups of friends anywhere, anytime. It reminds us that the Kingdom of God is large and diverse. Each day's structure includes Scripture and a quote ranging from ancient church fathers like Augustine to contemporaries like Frederick Beuchner. Each day ends with this comforting blessing:

*May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you: wherever he may send you;  
May he guide you through the wilderness: protect you through the storm;  
May he bring you home rejoicing: at the wonders he has shown you;  
May he bring you home rejoicing: once again into our doors.*

# And Finally...

(Continued from p. 2)

but it wouldn't a bestseller. I make a pretty good pie crust and was a champion at a county fair, but there were only three other contestants. Rather, God has called me to live for him using my very ordinary gifts to serve a few people beginning with those right in front of me—my family and neighbors. One of those ways of serving has been to write to you reporting on Ransom, and giving an account of my messy pilgrimage with Jesus.

Writing honestly about life has been critical. Real life is full of wounds and failures, funny incidents and complicated twists. Making my story "The Victorious Christian Life" has not been possible, in fact, the idea makes me retch a little. The challenge has always been how to trust God to complete his work in me in the midst of slogging through ordinary life.

Zach Eswine, a theologian, a pastor, author and one who's suffered some tragedies in life reminds me of a very countercultural attitude: "Christ says, 'Follow me' and I will teach you to do small things, slowly over a long period of time." This perspective is a complete game-changer for us ordinary people.

Believing that God works slowly, inexorably, helps me not measure the success of my life by commonly held American cultural standards. So, this is what I wish and pray—that you would revel in God's slow, beautiful work in you. And bet all your life on this: *I am sure ... that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ* (Philippians 1:6).



With love,

Margie Haack



This past year I wrote a new book – *No Place* about how Denis and I met, the years of our early marriage, and our wandering in a kind of spiritual desert. In 2021 it will be published as the second book of a trilogy. *The Exact Place* being the first. *This Place* (formerly *God in the Sink*) with additional new material being the third book. I will post more about it on our new website. May it bring hope to many of us who struggle with faithfulness in the ordinary.

## 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.

*Letters from the House Between* is not available by subscription. Rather, interested readers can request to be added to Ransom's mailing list, which is updated frequently. Donors to Ransom Fellowship, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, tax-deductible ministry, are added automatically unless requesting otherwise. Everyone on Ransom's mailing list also receives Critique magazine. To receive them send your mailing address to:

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