

# Ordained Servant May 2012

## LIT? Why Bother?



# *Ordained Servant Online*

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**CURRENT ISSUE: Lit? Why Bother?**

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### *From the Editor*

Along with Danny Olinger, as you will read in his review of the latest Larry Woiwode offering, I, too, have a poignant memory of Larry. Years ago, a neighbor, who was a Shakespearean actor and lover of all things literary, alerted me to a gathering of poets laureate from all over the United States in New Hampshire. Among them was poet-novelist Larry Woiwode, whom my friend recognized as someone I admired, and whom he had read in *The New Yorker* years ago. Larry was—and still is—the poet laureate of North Dakota and was back then struggling in his literary career. One Friday afternoon I traveled to our capitol, Concord, New Hampshire, to hear Larry read. I had met him at a general assembly in the 1980s, shortly after his conversion, but had never heard him read. He read with an elocution and presence that I shall never forget.

He ended up staying the night with us and reciting a Shakespeare sonnet on our deck in the presence of our neighbor. The next day he recited a section from *Richard III* at the annual Shakespeare sonnet reading at Saint Anselm College during the open mike intermission. The audience awoke quickly from its time-out mode to listen in astonishment to the powerful recitation. This reawakened my interest in the oral recitation of poetry and renewed my desire to write it. It also reinvigorated my interest in the reading of fiction as an important avocation for Christians, and for church officers particularly. Larry and I talked late into the night about his experiences with the literary apathy of pastors.

With this same concern, veteran professor of English literature Leland Ryken offers a powerful apologia for the reading of English literature, not just as an idle pastime, but as a vital part of the pastor's life and ministry in "Why Read Literature?" I also review a unique book designed to assist pastors in this endeavor, authored by Leland Ryken, his son Philip, and pastor Todd Wilson, titled *Pastors in the Classics*.

I think you will enjoy Danny Olinger's review of Woiwode's latest collection of essays, *The Word Made Fresh*. It covers a delightful range of literary topics in a most well-crafted way.

Don't miss Diane Olinger's review of Tony Reinke, *Lit! A Christian Guide to Reading Books*. The number of such guides by Christian authors in recent years is encouraging. One of the best of this genre is Louise Cowan's and Os Guinness's *An*

*Invitation to the Classics* (1998). Next month I hope to review a book with a slightly different take on this topic, Alan Jacob's *The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction*.

Finally, don't miss the literary craftsmanship of one poet, Richard Crashaw, recommending the lyrical, sacred masterpiece of another, George Herbert.

Blessings in the Lamb,

Gregory Edward Reynolds

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*Ordained Servant* exists to help encourage, inform, and equip church officers for faithful, effective, and God glorifying ministry in the visible church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Its primary audience is ministers, elders, and deacons of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, as well as interested officers from other Presbyterian and Reformed churches. Through high quality editorials, articles, and book reviews we endeavor to stimulate clear thinking and the consistent practice of historic, confessional Presbyterianism.

# ServantWord

## Why Read Literature?

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Leland Ryken

At the beginning of every summer, the weekly newsletter that accompanies the morning worship service at my church includes a sidebar listing the books that the pastors and selected elders plan to read during the upcoming summer. I can recall only once or twice when a work of literature appeared on the list. The reading lists are solidly in the category of religious reading, with an occasional excursion into such topics as leadership and current cultural hot topics.

Why do I experience this as such a huge letdown—in fact, as an annual depression? Because of the missed opportunity that it represents. The exact nature of that opportunity is what I will explore in this article.

### **A Practical Experiment**

Why read literature? Answering that question is what in the academy is called “an apology” for literature. I have been proclaiming such an apology for more than four decades, and I will do so again in this article. But it occurs to me that my readers can forge their own apology for literature if they will simply set aside the time to read a work of literature that they have not read before (or have not read for a very long time) and then analyze what the effects of that reading experience were.

I will take the lead by reconstructing a recent reading experience of my own. One of the benefits of my having coauthored a book about the portrayal of pastors in literary masterpieces is that I read works that I had never read before and that I probably would not have read without the impetus provided by the publishing venture. I will arbitrarily choose one of those books for purposes of self-scrutiny of the type I am urging upon my readers in this article.

Once the project of writing about pastors in the literary classics commenced, the list of candidates for inclusion kept growing. A colleague in my own department suggested a book entitled *The Hammer of God*, authored by a twentieth-century Swedish churchman named Bo Giertz. Initially I undertook the assignment of reading the book with the intention of adding it to the handbook section of our book (a compendium of five dozen one-page entries on books dealing with ministerial issues). But I was so captivated by what I read that the book quickly catapulted into the section of our book where we give extended coverage to twelve major classics of clerical fiction.

*The Hammer of God* is a collection of three novellas. Each of the three stories follows a young Lutheran pastor over approximately a two-year span at the beginning of his ministerial career, all in the same rural parish in Sweden. Each of the three pastors arrives fresh from theological training and decidedly immature (and in two cases a nominal

rather than genuine believer). Each of the three attains maturity of faith through encounters with parishioners, fellow pastors, and various religious movements that were in fact prominent in Sweden during the historical eras covered. There are two plot lines: the “coming of age” spiritual pilgrimages of the three young ministers, and an episodic fictional history of a rural Swedish parish.

So what transpired in my spiritual and imaginative life as I undertook my excursion into a hitherto unknown work of literature? Before I break my answer into the subjects that will indirectly comprise an apology for literature, let me comment on the exhilaration of committing myself to mastering a new realm of the imagination. When I situate myself in front of a television set for a bit of relaxation, I do not feel as though I have embarked on something momentous. But when I choose to read a novel or collection of poems, I feel elevated by what I have undertaken.

English poet John Keats wrote a great sonnet on this very subject (“Sonnet on First Looking into Chapman’s Homer,” 1815). Using the metaphor of geographic discovery, Keats pictures reading literature as “traveling in the realms of gold.” On the logic of this metaphor, encountering a new work of literature possesses all the thrill of discovering a new country.

As I make the case for the importance of literature, therefore, I want first to extend a challenge to my readers. If you want to know why it is important to read literature, answer the question for yourself by reading a novel or play or browsing in an anthology of poetry in the next two or three weeks. If a chapter per day seems like an insurmountable barrier, resolve to read six pages a day. I predict that the moment you commit to the program, you will feel that you have crossed a threshold and stepped into a liberating space.

## **The Power of Transport**

As I have already implied, the first gift that a great work of literature imparts is the power of transport. Children know this power when they thrill to the formula “once upon a time.” But this childhood thrill is actually universal. It is an impulse that adults, too, need to cultivate (as Jesus practiced when he told his parables).

The word *escape* is equally accurate as a name for what I am commending. We all need beneficial escapes from burdensome reality. We long for a sense of having *gotten out* of our workaday world with its pressures. We feel equally a sense of exhilaration when we pass through a door of the imagination and discover that we have *gotten into* an alternate world (and even a short poem is such a world). Literature illuminates the life we live in this world, but it does so by first removing us from our world.

I can think of two good reasons to undertake excursions into imaginary realms. One is that the rush of everyday duties becomes confining to the human spirit if we never get out of the daily routine and its duties. The second is that our culture seeks to encompass us and even suffocate us with the cheap and tawdry. It is untrue that we are cut off from our own culture; on the contrary, we are bombarded by it. The problem is that our secular culture is demeaning rather than elevating.

C. S. Lewis has written particularly well on the nature of reading as an escape. The discussion appears in his small classic of literary theory (the only one that Lewis wrote) entitled *An Experiment in Criticism*. In defending the reading of literature as a beneficial escape (and not automatically deserving of the stigma of being considered *escapist*), Lewis acknowledges that we need to monitor what we escape *to* in our reading

experiences.<sup>1</sup> This is exactly where great literature makes its strongest claim to our attention.

The avenues that comprise a Christian defense of literature are tried and true and are essentially three in number. The order in which I will discuss them in the rest of this article is arbitrary, so no importance should be attached to the order in which they appear.

One more preliminary point that I need to make is that when literature is commended to pastors and other church leaders, the discussion almost inevitably gets slanted toward fictional narrative, chiefly novels. But narrative makes up only half of the realms of gold that we call literature. The other half is poetry. If given the choice, I myself prefer to read poems and to give them the reflection they deserve. In any case, as I extol the rewards of reading literature, I would like my readers to have poems in view as well as novels and plays.

### **Literature as Entertainment and a Form of Beauty**

The Roman author Horace wrote a treatise (*Ars Poetica*) just twenty years before the birth of Jesus in which he bequeathed a formula regarding the function of literature that has stood the test of time. Horace claimed that literature combines what is *dolci* (literally “sweet”) with what is *utile* (useful). The words used to express this duality have varied slightly from one person to another, but perhaps the preferred formula has been delight and wisdom (or its variant truth). The writer of Ecclesiastes uses that formula near the end of his compilation of proverbs (12:9–10) when he claims to have “sought to find words of delight” and to have written “words of truth.” The Romantic poet Shelley called literature “a fountain forever overflowing with wisdom and delight.”<sup>2</sup> And Robert Frost claimed a poem “begins in delight and ends in wisdom.”<sup>3</sup>

To defend literature for the pleasure that it gives is what I call a hedonistic defense of literature, and it has been a cornerstone of my own thinking on the subject for half a century. There are two sides to such a defense. One is the element of beauty that we find in a well-crafted story or poem. Artistry is another name for it. C. S. Lewis offered the word *deliciousness* as a synonym for such beauty.

There is no need to spell out the details of what makes up artistic beauty in a story or poem. It extends all the way from the overall structure of the work to the very words that the writer has chosen. I am fond of a comment that C. S. Lewis made in defending the importance of form in literature: “Every episode, explanation, description, dialogue—ideally every sentence—must be pleasurable and interesting.”<sup>4</sup>

The other aspect of the delight of literature is its entertainment value, or its status as an enlightened use of leisure time. Again it is beyond the scope of this discussion to spell out what things make literature entertaining. I am speaking of the principle of the thing, so whatever you as a reader find entertaining in reading a poem or watching a performance of a play is what I am defending. I commend a comment by Charles Williams who follows up his observation that “*Paradise Lost* is much more fun written in

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<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 69.

<sup>2</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defense of Poetry* (1821).

<sup>3</sup> Robert Frost, “The Figure a Poem Makes,” repr. *Perspectives on Poetry*, ed. James Calderwood and Harold Toliver (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 350.

<sup>4</sup> Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, 84.

blank verse than it would be in prose” with the statement, “Let us have all the delights of which we are capable.”<sup>5</sup>

## The Authentic Voice of Human Experience

Form is half of the literary equation, and content is the other half. Of course works of literature embody ideas and offer some of them for our approval. I will get to that subject eventually, but the forte of literature is not its ability to embody ideas. The truth that literature stands ready to impart is primarily truthfulness to human experience. It is a point of vexation to me that so few people have this category as one of the types of truth.

I will hazard a guess that the element of literature that registers most clearly with my students is that the subject of literature is universal human experience concretely rendered. In fact, I never let my students lose sight of it. It is also my observation that the people who never see the point of literature are the ones who have never been coached to see the recognizable human experiences that every work of literature embodies.

One of my favorite texts for proving this point is the story of Cain (Genesis 4:1–16). The story is briefly narrated, and it takes place at the dawn of history. I theorize to my students that if we can find two dozen universal human experiences in such a text, we can find it anywhere. So my strategy is to stand at the white board and announce that my hand is the pen of a ready scribe, waiting to record the universal human experiences embodied in the story. The answers typically begin with the obvious: sibling rivalry, earning a livelihood, envy, harboring a grudge, murder, lack of self-control.

At that point I declare the floodgates opened, and the answers continue to tumble forth: self-pity, attempted cover-up, exile, making a bad decision and having to live with the consequences, a sense of entitlement, etc., etc. I then clinch the point by quoting John Steinbeck’s verdict that “this is the best-known story in the world because it is everybody’s story, . . . the symbol story of the human soul.”<sup>6</sup>

Once alerted to this aspect of literature, we can scarcely avoid finding it in the literature that we read or view. I call it knowledge in the form of *right seeing*. As we contemplate the human experiences that a writer puts before us, we see those experiences clearly and accurately. Truth and knowledge are more than ideational. A good photograph or painting gets us to see life accurately, and so does a work of literature. A poem does it in more concentrated fashion than a novel does.

Why is it important for Christians to possess this form of knowledge? My answer is that it is part of our bond with the human race and one that evaporates if we do not renew our contact with it. The pressures of daily living are ready to envelope us and cut us off from broader human interests. We need windows beyond the exigencies of the moment. C. S. Lewis said in regard to literature that “we demand windows. Literature . . . is a series of windows, even of doors” (Lewis said this in the same passage at the end of *An Experiment in Criticism* where he famously endorsed literature for “the enlargement of our being” that it imparts).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Williams, *Reason and Beauty in the Poetic Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 5.

<sup>6</sup> John Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, (New York: Viking Press, 1952), chap. 22.

<sup>7</sup> Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, 138.

Let me relate this to preachers and preaching. Those who end up in the pulpit are a self-selecting group right from the start. They love the Bible, and they love theological abstraction. Unless something intervenes, these people tend to produce sermons that whisk us away to a biblical and theological world that is sealed off from daily life. Frederick Buechner wrote about this very insightfully in a book entitled *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale* (1977), which discusses the need for preachers to tell the truth with an imagination informed by contact with literature as well as a mind informed by theology.

A visit to a patient in a hospital also pulls a minister back into the world of human experience, but literature covers more territory than our personal routine is likely to do, and it silhouettes human experiences with interpretive insight. The Renaissance essayist Francis Bacon said that “reading maketh a full man.” I would challenge all of my readers, but preeminently those who are pastors, to put that to the test. I think the results will be very positive.

## The Intellectual Pleasures of Literature

Although the forte of literature and the arts is their ability to “hold the mirror up to nature”—to be an accurate picture of life in the world—that does not mean that literature is devoid of ideas. When in the first half of the twentieth century poets and critics were obsessed with the theory “no ideas but in things” (implying that literature does no more than embody human experience), poet Denise Levertov provided a counterbalance with the catchy one-liner, “No ideas but in things does not mean no ideas.”<sup>8</sup>

Given Horace's division of labor between what is “sweet” (delightful) and what is useful in the literary enterprise, I am certain that most people would put the ideational aspect of literature into the box labeled “useful.” I do not question that it is useful, but I consider my encounters with the ideas embodied in literature to be one of the intellectual pleasures of my life.

That literature embodies important ideas is one of the presuppositions that we rightly make regarding literature. A towering literary scholar of an earlier generation spoke of the rule of significance, by which he meant, “Read the [work] as expressing a significant attitude to some problem concerning man and/or his relation to the universe.”<sup>9</sup> Equally helpful is the statement of novelist Joyce Cary that “all writers . . . must have, to compose any kind of story, some picture of the world, and of what is right and wrong in that world.”<sup>10</sup>

There are multiple ways in which to encounter the great ideas of the human race. Nonetheless, I incline toward the view of Henry Zylstra that “if you really want to get at the spirit of an age and the soul of a time you can hardly do better than to consult the literature of that age and that time.”<sup>11</sup>

Part of the pleasure that I derive from contemplating and weighing the ideas of literature is akin to the pleasure of a puzzle or riddle. The process starts with figuring out what the writer is saying and offering for my approval. Then I face the task (but it is not

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<sup>8</sup> Denise Levertov, *The Poet in the World* (New York: New Directions, 1973); qtd. Leland Ryken in *The Christian Imagination* (Colorado Springs: Shaw, 2002), 143.

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 115.

<sup>10</sup> Joyce Cary, *Art and Reality* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961), 174.

<sup>11</sup> Henry Zylstra, *Testament of Vision* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 5.

burdensome) of testing the intellectual spirits to see if they are from God. Certainly this is a way of being in my own culture but not of it, but one of the great strengths of literature is that its ideas are not limited to our own moment in history. They stretch over the whole expanse of human history. One of the lessons of literary history is that not all of the good ideas were produced in the last fifty years.

When I interact with the ideas of literature, I find it useful to have a roadmap in my mind regarding the intellectual territory through which I am traversing. The type of intellectual or ideational pleasure and profit I gain from literature depends on the category to which it belongs. One category is the literature of Christian affirmation, as in the poetry of John Donne, George Herbert, and John Milton. A second category is what I call the literature of common humanity. An equally good label is the literature of clarification. Such literature does not endorse explicitly Christian ideas, but it clarifies the human situation (including the realm of ideas) to which the Christian faith speaks. Assimilating such literature in a spiritually uplifting manner depends on what a reader does with the ideas that are offered for approval, and I find this a pleasurable challenge.

A third category is the literature of unbelief. It espouses ideas that contradict the ideas of the Christian faith and world view. I find that the intellectual effort that such literature requires from me can be a highly profitable exercise. Among other things, it sends me continuously to the Bible to find the standard of truth by which I reject what an author has placed before me.

### **Tips for the Journey**

My readers will have noticed that I have provided few literary examples of the principles that I have asserted. That is by design. I have provided an outline for which I want my readers to fill in the illustrations. For those who lack sufficient contact with literature to provide illustrations, my advice is to take immediate corrective action.

But doesn't the Bible provide a sufficient sourcebook for a Christian's reading? I remind my readers of a command with which they are thoroughly familiar, namely, the command to sing to the Lord a new song. We do not need literature to provide our world view and doctrinal framework. Nonetheless, as English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge correctly observed, ideas can become so familiar "that they lose all the life and efficiency of truth and lie bed-ridden in the dormitory of the soul" (*Biographia Literaria*, 1817). Good literature rescues the great ideas from becoming platitudes and clichés.

I would compare the effect of literature to the effect of a good sermon. Both are capable of providing fresh insights and apt formulations of timeless truths. We do not scorn a good sermon because we already know the biblical text and its theological ideas. I propose that we should equally value what the storyteller and poet can do for us in their handling of human experience and expressing insights more beautifully and powerfully than we have recently (or ever) experienced them.

As a postscript, I find that people shun literature for two main reasons. One is that they do not know why and how literature can enrich their lives. My challenge to such people is the motto of the car salesman: take a test drive. The other category of nonreaders is people who are too busy to conceive of reading literature as a possibility. My encouragement to such people is to begin modestly, with a fifteen-minute-per-day commitment.

**Leland Ryken** is Professor of English at Wheaton College, where he has taught for forty-three years. He has had a publishing career as well as a teaching career. His three dozen books cover a broad range of subjects, including the Puritans, the Bible as literature, and Bible translation. He is the author of *The Legacy of the King James Bible* (Crossway, 2011)

# ServantReading

## Words Made Flesh and Fresh Review Article

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by Danny E. Olinger

*Words Made Fresh*, by Larry Woiwode. Wheaton: Crossway, 2011, 191 pages, \$24.99.

Larry Woiwode wouldn't remember me from our brief meeting twenty years ago. Then a ruling elder in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Woiwode was a commissioner to the Fifty-ninth General Assembly being held at Geneva College and had accepted an invitation to teach the adult Sunday School class at Grace OPC, Sewickley. After the service, I was among those with Woiwode invited to Charlie and Ginger Dennison's house for lunch. I sat quietly as Charlie, Woiwode's friend and my pastor, questioned him about his comments in the class regarding John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Charlie loved Bunyan's heavenly-mindedness. Woiwode, while appreciative of Bunyan's message and vocabulary, and urging the reading of the book, preferred literature more connected to the earth.

My recollection is spotty because my purpose that day was very exact. Charlie wanted me there to hear Larry Woiwode's voice; if possible, to hear him read from one of his books. The secret to reading Woiwode, Charlie contended, was to catch his cadence. Get the rhythm of the sentences, and the struggle Woiwode intends with his fiction comes into clearer focus.

Reading Woiwode's essays in *Words Made Fresh* brought that day back to my mind. Charlie was right in emphasizing the lyrical character of Woiwode's writings. Every sentence counts, and not just for content. The ordering of the words, the sound, even the punctuation, the late comma being his favorite mark, all have their perfect place in his writing. Alter one clause, lift one sentence, ignore the rhythms that flow from reading the words, and violence is done to the oral effect of the entire work.

But, I wish now that I had paid closer attention to the two friends' debate over place. *Words Made Fresh* reveals the intimate connection that exists for Woiwode between words and geography, or better, words flowing from place. Woiwode argues in these essays that place is the foundation of fiction.

Never straying far from these central tenets, the ten essays are divided between penetrating looks at literary figures (Wendell Berry, John Gardner, John Updike, and William Shakespeare) and at cultural attitudes towards guns, home schooling, and media. Woiwode explains that the title has a two-fold purpose. It deliberately reflects the incarnation "because it was with the incarnation that writers outside the scope of the Hebrew and Greek texts began to understand how a metaphor of words could contain the

lineaments and inner workings of a human being” (13). The title also indicates that each essay has been revisited and modernized, so as to be made fresh.

## Essays on Culture

The book’s opening essay, “Guns and Peace,” first appeared in *Esquire* in 1975. The original audience is important because Woiwode’s opening sentence—“Once in the worst of a Wisconsin winter I shot a deer, my only one, while my wife and daughter watched”—accomplishes two purposes at once. It reminds the eastern literary elite that Woiwode is a stylist of the first order. But, at the same time, it confronts their prejudice that life only takes place inside their isolated world. Woiwode recalls his love of guns as a boy, and his use of them in hunting and recreation as an adult. However, the keynote of the piece is not guns, but rather death. Death haunts him. His conscience insists that he was the one that deserved being shot and not the crippled deer. And yet, holding the .22 rifle he realizes he is the deer’s vision of approaching death, and it makes him recoil. He confesses that he lives alone in New York City because of his brutish behavior, his wife and daughter separated from him and living in Chicago. In this existence, he no longer has a romantic attachment to guns, only an emptiness as the sun goes down on his life.

In the afterword to the essay added specifically for this volume, Woiwode reflects, “What I deserved led me to understand the full and free payment of my just deserts.” He continues, “In this incarnation I own firearms, mainly for predators, especially rabid ones, and I do not cling to them as I cling to the faith that reunited my wife and me and caused our internal lives and the lives of our children to blossom and prosper in peace” (22). Woiwode emphasizes the impact of the gospel upon his life in his making fresh the title. For *Esquire*, it was “Guns.” Now, it is “Guns and Peace.”

In “Deconstructing God,” Woiwode confronts the cultural bias that exists against those who prefer to home school their children. He examines Warren Nord’s 1995 book *Religion and American Education* and agrees with Nord that education in America became secularized primarily through the liberalizing of American religion. Liberals placed confidence in human reason to determine what is right and what is wrong. This led to the displacement of Christianity in education, not religious neutrality in education. Nord observes, “For public education to be neutral, for it to minimize the extent to which it actively discourages religion, it must take religion seriously as part of the curriculum” (129).

Woiwode admits that while it may be choking on a gnat to criticize Nord’s treatment of the history that led to the federal monopoly on public education, he regrets Nord does not comment upon “the auspicious moment that forestalled, anyway for fifty years, government autocratic hegemony” (131). That moment was the February 1926 United States Senate and House hearings on a proposed Department of Education, where among those testifying was J. Gresham Machen. In his testimony, Machen argued that the proposed goal of uniformity in education was not only misguided, but also would be destructive to the country. Standardization, said Machen, is a good thing in making Ford automobiles. It is a bad thing for the education of human beings. And, to accomplish this standardization would require federal aid, and federal aid always comes with strings attached.

Despite these misgivings, Machen's greater concern was the philosophy that the children of the state must be educated for the benefit of the state. Looking at pre-World War II Europe, Machen argued that this principle of education could be found in its highest development in Germany and in its most disastrous form in Soviet Russia. When pressed at the hearings if he knew of any federal interference with the operation of any private or church school, Machen responded that his concern was not his own institution but the principle of religious liberty in education.

Some eight plus decades after Machen's testimony and three decades after Jimmy Carter finally established a Department of Education, Woiwode contends that Machen has proven prophetic. The standardized United States educational system is an abject failure and has forced parents to look for alternatives in teaching their children. Woiwode writes, "What profession has the highest percentage of children in private schools? Public school teachers. Dire indicators suggest that nearly half of all high school graduates are illiterate. This, as surely as public education's hostility to religion, has encouraged the home-school movement" (137).

The last essay on culture, "Dylan to CNN," finds Woiwode fondly remembering Bob Dylan's role as minstrel in the early sixties versus the tone-deafness of the modern media. Woiwode argues that Dylan not only gave voice to what everyone was thinking, but also he was Shakespeare-like in never underestimating the basic intelligence of his audience.

Woiwode suggests that when Dylan stopped talking openly about Jesus Christ, it didn't mean that he had turned away from faith in Christ. Not knowing Dylan's heart, who could argue with Woiwode what Dylan's motives were? But Woiwode continues to press the issue in a way that suggests confusion over the gospel and the doctrine of the church. He writes:

I'm not his apologist (think, though, of the license and backsliding we tolerate in ourselves) but I suspect he found the liberty of serving his Savior in his art rather than always assuming a churchy confession. This may be a loss to those who found faith through him, but his end is the celebration of God in the discipline and art of song and the good news that true art can bring. (146)

Vocation is one thing, confession is another. But, vocation can never be a substitute for confession. It is not that Bob Dylan needs to talk about Jesus before playing a song. Rather, it is that Mr. Zimmerman (Dylan's birth name) needs to confess Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord before the church and live in keeping with that confession as a member of the church. Individualism justified in the name of art is not biblical. Rather, as Calvin rightly argues in Book IV of his *Institutes*, perseverance in the faith is connected with the church.

## **Essays on Literature**

"In Views of Wendell Berry," Woiwode finds a fellow author driven by the same impulses that push Woiwode's own writing—faith and land. Woiwode writes, "If I had to distill the import of his thought, I might put it like this: All land is gift, and all of it is good, if we only had the sensibilities to see that" (41). Woiwode admits Berry comes close to pantheism in his seeing God everywhere present in nature, but Berry's toil with

the sin-cursed ground and his acknowledgment of a creator-creature distinction keeps him from worshipping nature.

Despite his heartfelt appreciation for Berry, the fact that Woiwode has two essays, “AmLit” and “Gardner’s Memorial in Real Time” on John Gardner is a tip-off that Gardner might be his literary twin. Gardner had lavished on Woiwode his highest praise in classifying Woiwode as a serious author who had written one of the great novels of the seventies, *Beyond the Bedroom Wall*. Woiwode in turn exalted Gardner as a writer who had an exact sense of time, Gardner’s *Mickelsson’s Ghosts* being the supreme example. When Gardner died in a motorcycle accident in 1981, Woiwode was asked to take Gardner’s place as the director of the creative writing program at the State University of New York-Binghamton, but his connection with Gardner was more than replacing his friend. Woiwode believes that Gardner, having been raised Presbyterian, possessed an awareness of the religious dimensions of writing and was not afraid to call out those he found fraudulent. The piercing directness of Gardner’s opinions, says Woiwode, “have the effect of a salutary, mind-clearing antidote” (56).

In “AmLit,” Woiwode affirms Gardner’s working premise that in the mid-1970’s American writers fell into five main groups. The five groups are (1) religious liberals and liberal agnostics (often indistinguishable); (2) orthodox or troubled-orthodox Christians; (3) Christians who have lost their faith and cannot stand it; (4) diabolists; and (5) heretics. Woiwode takes great interest in Gardner’s listing within the first (religious liberals) and last camps (heretics). The liberals, both the good writers like Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud, and the bad writers like E. L. Doctorow, share a common fault. They do not believe in art. They believe in using art to promote thought about important issues, and that is why, according to Gardner, this school produces no great writers.

Woiwode takes even greater interest in Gardner’s placing John Updike in the heretic category. Gardner writes, “Updike’s message, again and again, is a twisted version of the message of his church, neo-orthodox Presbyterianism: Christ has saved me; nothing is wrong; so come to bed with me” (57–58). Gardner personally had little interest as an adult in orthodox Presbyterianism, but professionally he lacked patience with Updike’s twisting of its historic Protestant message.

That Woiwode would be interested in Gardner’s opinion of Updike is no surprise, given Woiwode’s complex relationship with Updike, the multi-Pulitzer Prize winning author. First, there is the personal connection, as the two men were united by the same editor at the *New Yorker* in the sixties and seventies, William Maxwell. Woiwode further admires Updike as the most gifted of stylists, a professional among professionals. But, there is a moral discomfort for Woiwode that comes in reading Updike, something that nags at him. In the longest essay in the book, “Updike’s Sheltered Self,” Woiwode gives expression to this mix of appreciation and frustration regarding Updike, even admitting that the phrase “yes, but” appears too often. However, to make sure that his reader doesn’t miss the point, Woiwode adds, “as I reassess a contemporary whose work I admire above most others, the diligent auditor will note that nearly all the *buts* relate to the same point: Updike’s professed Christianity measured against the content of his work” (86).

Woiwode traces Updike’s open adherence to Christianity in his literature to *Olinger Stories*, a collection of short stories in which Updike exchanges the name “Olinger” for Shillington, his hometown near Reading, Pennsylvania. The significance is the sense of

place that the local family name from Shillington lyrically conveys, “O linger!”<sup>1</sup> Two stories in particular, “Pigeon Feathers” and “Packed Dirt, Churchgoing, A Dying Cat, A Traded Car,” are personal reflections upon homeplace and faith. *The Centaur* and *On the Farm* continue Updike’s faith emphasis as he concretely traces the tearing of the fabric of American culture that comes from a loss of Christian consciousness found in previous generations.

The transition for Updike from the faith expressed in his early fiction to his ruffling feathers in unpleasant ways, says Woiwode, came in *Couples*, the book that landed Updike on the cover of *TIME* magazine. Woiwode guesses that this is Updike’s evaluation of suburban Christianity in the late sixties. It’s *awful*. He writes, “With *Couples*, the philosophy of *Playboy* moved into the hearts of heartland America. The people there became swingers along Hefner’s lines, Piets and Foxys, numbed” (105).

But Woiwode also sees *Couples* as the transitional point for Updike in surrendering to the liberalism that he disdained in his earlier works, most pointedly in “Pigeon Feathers” where the liberal Lutheran pastor is abhorred by the adolescent. He writes:

What *Couples* conveys is the paradox of neoorthodoxy, and perhaps this was Updike’s burden of illumination: its “kind” character can lead to destruction. All Christian doctrine comes down to this: love your neighbor, period. Going to bed with her may stem from a love-limned motive but it’s not great for her husband, one suspects— or for the children or both families, as the disruptions in *Couples* convey. (101)

Woiwode agrees with John Gardner that this change in Updike’s fiction is no small thing, for writing has moral implications. It has an effect on how people act. *Couples* promotes wife-swapping, even if Updike found the coupling unsound. It is not until Updike’s *In the Beauty of the Lilies* that he regains “the visceral engagement and potential reach, even grandeur of *The Centaur*, *Pigeon Feathers*, and *Of the Farm*, and portions of the *Rabbit* quartet” (106).

The Updike book, however, that captures Woiwode’s interest the most is *Self-Consciousness*, Updike’s semi-autobiographical book of essays. Two of the essays, “A Soft Spring Night in Shillington” and “Getting the Words Out,” says Woiwode, “are perhaps the best examples we have of what it was like to come of age in America in the last half of the last century” (108). Undoubtedly both essays strike a true chord with Woiwode because the former deals with place and the latter deals with words.

In “A Soft Spring Night in Shillington,” Updike finds himself as a middle-aged man walking the streets of his hometown while waiting for his lost luggage to arrive from the Lehigh Valley airport. As he walks, the rain gently falls from the sky, and it speaks to Updike of God’s grace. As if walking unnoticed beside Updike, so in tune is he with what Updike is writing, Woiwode observes, “On this night of grace, then, in Updike’s life, he

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<sup>1</sup> Yes, I am related, my ancestors arriving from Germany and first settling around Reading in Berks County. Thankfully, in his foreword to *Olinger Stories*, Updike provided the standard response for a generation of Olingers when questioned how properly to say the family name: “the name Olinger (pronounced with a long O, a hard g, and the emphasis on the first syllable).” John Updike, *Olinger Stories* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), v.

walks down a street to his old neighborhood, to the house where he was born, the locus of his consciousness” (109).

Woiwode understands the story then as the key to Updike: Shillington is home, and home is where identity is cultivated.

This is the best American essay on the prerogatives of place and its relationship to identity that I know. And since the identity examined is of a prominent writer, a definition of the prerogative of place in its relationship to writing is established, and I don't think a more eloquent examination of their relationship exists in twentieth-century American literature. (109)

“Getting the Words Out” is Updike's explanation of how he writes. He recalls his youthful stammer and difficulty in saying what he wanted to say. Woiwode locates the stammer as the source of Updike's precision with language, the never ending desire to get every word properly placed. Woiwode recalls Maxwell describing Updike as an Olympian when it came to examining page proofs, so passionate was he in refining the language of his writing.

Woiwode concludes with an essay on William Shakespeare, or WS as Woiwode refers to him with a wink throughout. Woiwode builds the case that Shakespeare still stands at the summit of writers in English because he was an unparalleled wordsmith who wrote with a Christian sensibility that is transcendent. Woiwode writes:

In his native isolation and affinity for the actual, the original, the primitive, he is the best linguistic guide to the English language, and we step nearer to who he was by his words and their rhythms and the multitude of characters he fitted together as messengers of his many permutations. Through his characters, in a further way, he speaks to us as an *integrated bearer of ultimate Good News*. Above all, he placed the impress of Christ, whose outlines are love and mercy and reconciliation, into more universally appealing characters than any other writer in the history of the Western world. (175)

## Homeplace, Heaven or Hell

Woiwode combines his beliefs on literature, culture, and faith in the representative essay of the volume, “*Homeplace, Heaven or Hell? On the Order of Existence*.” In this essay, first delivered in 1983 as a lecture at the Conference on Christianity and Literature at Northwestern College, Orange City, Iowa, Woiwode stresses once more the significance of place. He states, “The definition of home or homeplace, and the implication of the locale we call home, is the matter I'm after. Is that home a haven? Is it a miniature heaven, a *picture* of heaven? Or is it hell?” (27).

The writer who draws from his or her familiarity with a particular place might be scornfully labeled a regionalist today, but historically such a writer had been called a poet. The ability to describe a place in exacting detail, narrowing the focus within a given environment, creates a better opportunity for the reader to enter into that world.

But, Woiwode also talks about the importance of another world. He writes, I don't serve myself or the academy per se, though I do teach, nor the place or populace of North Dakota. I serve God, through the person of Jesus as portrayed in

the Bible. That should send a legion scurrying off in alarm or setting this aside in embarrassment—perhaps with the wish that I were a plain old regionalist and not a religionist.” (27)

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# ServantReading

## Lit! A Christian Guide to Reading Books

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by Diane L. Olinger

*Lit! A Christian Guide to Reading Books*, by Tony Reinke. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011, 202 pages, \$15.99, paper.

Much of Tony Reinke's book *Lit!* is autobiographical, reflecting his journey in literature (89). He doesn't consider himself a natural born reader or scholar, but one who developed these characteristics, in spite of himself, as a result of his desire to learn more and more about Christ. Speaking of his conversion experience, he writes: "The sight of Christ's glory permanently changed my life. And it forever changed how I read books." Reinke is a theological researcher, writer, and blogger who has worked for C. J. Mahaney (who provides a foreword for *Lit!*) and Sovereign Grace Ministries. The title of the book refers to "the motto of the reading Christian": "In your light do we see light" (Ps. 36:9).

The book is separated into two parts: a theology of reading (chapters 1–6), and a collection of practical suggestions for readers (chapters 7–15). With respect to his theology of reading, Reinke begins with the idea that there are essentially two categories of literature: Scripture, which is inspired, inerrant, and supreme; and everything else, which is not. Reinke encourages us to "read the imperfect in light of the perfect, the deficient in light of the sufficient, the temporary in light of the eternal" (28). Christians can read a broad array of books to their benefit, but only if they read with the discernment that comes from a biblical worldview (59). Fallen creation "continues to emit the Creator's glory, a glow that can be found in the pages of great books" (16).

Reinke presents a theological justification for reading non-Christian books (which he defines as books not written by Christians or not written from "an explicitly Christian motive," (65). In doing so, Reinke acknowledges that Christianity is positioned antithetically to the world. We must read with an awareness of the gulf fixed between ourselves and the greater part of contemporary literature (60). However, Reinke insists that non-Christian literature has value as a bridge over this gulf. A biblical example is provided by Paul's address to a pagan audience in Acts 17. Paul proclaimed that what the pagan poets sought in Zeus and other deities could be found only in the living God. In other words, non-Christian literature, whether it be Greek poetry, business or scientific texts, or modern fiction, begs questions that can only be resolved in Christ (73). Realizing this "will protect us from posturing ourselves *only* antithetically to the religious impulses of our culture" and will allow us to "discover that non-Christian authors occasionally articulate genuine spiritual desires that we know can be satisfied nowhere else but in the living original, in the essence, in Christ himself"(75).

So, while Reinke cautiously embraces non-Christian literature, he warns us against an uncritical stance toward “Christian literature.” He writes, “The most treacherous spiritual dangers arise from theologically twisted books written by wolves in sheepskin” (60). Heresies necessarily spring from the church. Reinke sees one of the greatest pitfalls, not in theological tracts, but in poorly chosen Christian “how-to” books which may “feed a person’s doubt, entrench a soul in legalism, and ignite a heart with self-righteousness” (100).

In the practical part of *Lit!*, Reinke gives us many tips and tricks he has found useful as a reader, including reading with a pen in hand, how to find more time in the day for reading, and doing “background checks” on authors. Reinke advises readers to adopt any of these tips that prove useful and ignore those that don’t. (Much of this section sounds like something my fourth and fifth graders would go over in a study skills unit for reading class—will anyone who needs this advice make it this far into Reinke’s book? I’m not sure.)

In this second part of the book Reinke also gives advice on what to read: begin with Scripture and theological books which kindle spiritual reflection and increase knowledge of and delight in Christ; follow that with reading to accomplish certain ends, like initiating personal change and pursuing vocational excellence; and finally read to enjoy a good story (95). Of particular interest among Reinke’s comments on what to read are those concerning fiction that depicts sin. According to Reinke, the authors (Christian and non-Christian) who are most aware of man’s sinfulness are those who are most in tune with the reality of this world (126). He quotes Christian novelist Larry Woiwode: “If sin isn’t mentioned or depicted, there’s no need for redemption. How can the majesty of God’s might arm be defined in a saccharin romance?” (124).<sup>1</sup> So, how much sin is too much in our books? This is a difficult question, says Reinke, and readers must listen carefully to their consciences.

Mahaney’s foreword tells us that “*Lit!* is a book for nonreaders” (14). As such, much of the book is likely to be “preaching to the choir” for *OS* readers, at least as far as theological reading goes. However, even avid readers will enjoy Reinke’s musings on a multitude of reading-related subjects, from the benefits of exercising our imaginations with fiction (including fringe benefits to our reading of image-filled biblical passages, like those in Revelation, 88–89); to the need for Christian stewardship with respect to technology (e-readers, blogs). In fact, one of the best features of *Lit!* is that Reinke has managed to cover such a wide range of topics in a relatively short book. It is sure to prompt fruitful discussion at a Christian book club or in a young adult Sunday school class.

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<sup>1</sup> Citing Chris Stamper and Gene Edward Veith, “Get Real: Master of Reality Fiction, Acclaimed Author Larry Woiwode Has Found Christ, But Can He Find an Audience?” *World Magazine*, July 4, 1998.

# ServantReading

## A Profitable Pleasure for Pastors

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Gregory E. Reynolds

*Pastors in the Classics: Timeless Lessons on Life and Ministry from World Literature*, by Leland Ryken, Philip Ryken, and Todd Wilson. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012, 185 pages, \$16.99.

English professor Leland Ryken conveys his life-long passion to interest Christians and pastors in the value of the best literature in this brief volume. He does this with his son Philip, president of Wheaton College, and pastor Todd Wilson, senior pastor of Calvary Memorial Church in Oak Park, Illinois. As far as I know, this book is unique in distinguishing literature that deals with pastoral life and ministry.

The book consists of two parts: a guide and a handbook. The first twelve chapters consist of a guide to the most important books in the genre. A concise survey of the work provides themes and interpretive analysis to whet the reader's appetite. The second part consists of fifty-nine brief book summaries for further exploration. The brilliance of this arrangement lies in its extension of the trust the authors build in the more comprehensive coverage in the first part, to the handbook.

Of the listed titles I was pleased to discover authors of which I knew nothing, such as *Witch Wood* by John Buchan (1927), as well as titles I had not expected to find, such as Updike's *A Month of Sundays*. Then there are books that I was aware of, but had never had an interest in reading, until I read the comments of the Rykens and Pastor Wilson. I also discovered books by authors I know, but books of which I was unaware, like Trollop's *The Warden* (1855).

Some classics, such as *The Scarlett Letter*, are known by most only anecdotally. The description in the guide portion of the book corrects common misconceptions, like the idea that Hawthorne is simply unmasking an inherent flaw of Puritan orthodox Christianity—the hypocrisy and censoriousness, especially of its clergy. The authors set the value of this classic in a whole new light by demonstrating Hawthorne's interest in portraying Christianity at its best as a religion of forgiveness and grace.

The twelve books explored in detail in the guide portion make up a hundred pages, while the fifty-nine listed in the handbook cover only a little over seventy pages. The pattern of analysis in the first section invites the reader to employ the same as he reads the works suggested in the handbook, which dedicates slightly more than a page to each work. The guide begins with a brief description of the book, followed by a taxonomy of the contents, with author, dates, length, present publishers, genres, setting, characters, and plot summary. Then the main themes and value of the work for the minister are explored, with provocative questions for reflection or discussion interspersed.

It took only a few of the descriptions of these masterworks in clerical literature to convince me of this book's immense value. The self-reflection that even these brief introductions stimulate is enough to invite the pastor to begin the journey of reading or rereading the classics themselves. The subtitle sounds to me like something an editor suggested. "Timeless lessons" doesn't do justice to the nature of the classics. Each embodies aspects of the ministerial vocation as it appears in actual life settings in story form. As the introduction so well states,

The literary author's first task is to present human experience. This means that the subject of literature is human experience concretely presented. A work of literature is not primarily a delivery system for an idea; it is an embodiment of human experience. A work of literature is a house in which we are invited to take up residence and out of which we look at life. (13)

This has Leland Ryken's fingerprints all over it. In a future edition, his article in *Ordained Servant* (May 2012), "Why Read Literature?" would make a superb introduction.

Unlike the school marm approach to the classics, pressing the *duty* of reading the time-honored tomes, this book invites the reader through the special interests of the pastor, to enjoy a kind of reading that at once delights and edifies. Many pastors avoid fiction because of the mistaken notion that it does not deal with real life the way nonfiction does. Another way of stating this is that fiction does not address the immediate needs of the minister in his vocation. A quick perusal of the first few suggested books should quickly disabuse the reader of these notions. The unique exploration of human existence and experience offered by well-crafted fiction provides the pastor with insight that ordinary life may not afford.

My only criticism is an editorial problem. It would have been helpful to list authors as well as titles in the table of contents, since this also functions like an index. An alphabetical list of authors would also be useful, especially since the book functions as a reference tool. I would enjoy seeing a similar treatment of poetry for pastors.

One cannot overestimate the value of this work, both for its function as an introduction to an excellent selection of fiction and for the insight ministers will gain from reading these works. In *Pastors in the Classics*, the value of good fiction as an entrée into the human condition is simply focused on the minister's life—a very clever and worthwhile way to catch the attention of the clergy.

Once the appetite is whetted, my hope is that pastors will realize the great value of good fiction, whatever its subject matter. Entering into various worlds of reflection on the human situation can only enrich our ministries.

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# Servant Poetry

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By Richard Crashaw (1613?–49)

On Mr. G. Herbert's Book  
intituled *The Temple of Sacred Poems*, sent to a Gentlewoman

Know you fair, on what you look;  
Divinest love lies in this book,  
Expecting fire from your eyes,  
To kindle this his sacrifice.  
When your hands untie these strings,  
Think you've have an angel by th' wings.  
One that gladly will be nigh,  
To wait upon each morning sigh.  
To flutter in the balmy air  
Of your well-perfumed prayer.  
These white plumes of his he'll lend you,  
Which every day to heaven will send you,  
To take acquaintance of the sphere,  
And all the smooth-fac'd kindred there.  
    And though Herbert's name do owe  
    These devotions, fairest, know  
    That while I lay them on the shrine  
    Of your white hand, they are mine.