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Homecoming Man (Book Review)

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literature not simply as an object of beauty but as a form of human action, not only as an escape from reality or a saving transformation of it but as a response to the Creator. They argue that through the activities of reading and writing, women and men can act as responsible and significant agents in God's world. "Literary texts are not merely imaginative creations," the authors write. "[They are] also instruments composed of language that we use to perform certain activities, such as thinking about social issues, moral questions, or personal feelings" (xxv).

Even as they reject many of the sentiments that are expressed in contemporary literary theory, the authors maintain that "Christians need to be familiar with the major intellectual movements in the world so that they can carry on an intelligent dialogue with others" (163). Positions with which we disagree help us to better understand and act in God's world, for not only do encounters with new ideas allow us to better understand our neighbor and the society in which we live; they may at the same time challenge our own belief system and thus enhance our understanding of and commitment to our position.

The case that Gallagher and Lundin make for a Christian, faith-filled view of literature is cogent and articulated well in this book. The audience they address consists of undergraduate students who are well-versed in Reformed theology and who are just beginning a study of literature. In the opening paragraphs of the book, the authors state that "the task for the Christian student of literature remains that of grounding his or her thinking in the history of Christian thought" (3), and clearly this book represents the authors' attempt to aid students in that task. However, for those readers who may be looking for a more sophisticated reply to contemporary literary theory, this book offers only hints; it does not function as a convincing conversational turn in the debate among

modern literary scholars (although the broadness of their references and the scope of their subject matter indicates that such a project is not beyond the capabilities of these authors). Throughout the text, the authors are quick to reveal but reluctant to examine several of their basic underlying assumptions—assumptions about "truth" and "reality," "facts" and "correctness" that may be agreed upon within the Christian community, but which, if they are to truly engage contemporary literary theory, must be acknowledged, defined, and even debated at the outset of the discussion. More importantly, the authors summarize and counter huge systems of thought with alacrity and with ease, denying the power and complexity of modern theories and leading undiscerning readers to believe that contemporary theorists may be dismissed as easily as these theorists have in the past dismissed Christian thinkers. In their effort to clarify complex issues and thought systems, Gallagher and Lundin never fully escape the danger of misrepresentation and oversimplification.

In spite of these limitations, the authors are successful in achieving their purposes: the book grounds itself firmly in Reformed theology, then draws widely from literary theory and from literature itself. It addresses questions that are frequently raised by students of literature (Christian and non-Christian alike), and it makes some of the fundamental concepts of literary theory accessible in the college classroom. It articulates for Christian readers an alternative to contemporary ways of reading and to post-modern systems of thought. And ultimately, it explores the relationship between Christian belief and the literary experience, placing the activities of reading and writing within the history of Christian thought and providing a coherent vision of literature as seen through the eyes of faith.

The Homecoming Man. Hugh Cook Oakville, Ontario: Mosaic Press. 324 pp. \$24.95 hardcover. Reviewed by Dr. James C. Schaap, Associate Professor of English.

I don't remember the exact quote, but I know that an old actor's rule-of-thumb is to avoid sharing a stage with a kid. The danger, of course, is that you'll always be upstaged; for no matter how strong the drama, the attention of the audience will inevitably be drawn to the child.

I remembered the adage when I read Hugh Cook's *The Homecoming Man*, a powerful story about Gerrit Bloem, a Dutch immigrant nursery owner from Ontario, whose war memories from the German occupation of the Netherlands serve as the focus of this fine, well-crafted first novel. The power of the holocaust creates such a force in any story that it virtually destroys the potential power of any other sub-plot. Thus, Gerrit's story dominates our interest. While the analogy to kids on stage certainly trivializes the horror of Gerrit's suffering—and

that of all victims of the Nazi occupation—it does help to understand the overpowering effect of Gerrit's role in the novel itself.

Actually, Cook's eye seems more precisely trained on Gerrit's son Paul, an academic from British Columbia whose own Dutch past has led him into translating old country poets. Paul's life, like that of his father, has been scarred by personal tragedy and disappointment. After the apparent breakup of his marriage, he decides, at the suggestion of his father, to spend a summer back in Ontario, at his boyhood home. The reason for his visit seems largely therapeutic, a visit "to the one place that could still, through all time and loss, be considered home."

Paul's presence in the family home creates some

difficulty for his father, who has become accustomed to living alone. What makes Gerrit especially anxious, however, is Paul's interest in the war, an interest sparked when he takes on translating the poetry of Abel Rozenberg, a Dutch Jew, who came to poetry as a means of expressing the horror that haunted him long after the concentration camp he'd lived through was gone. Apparently Paul knew nothing at all of his father's life during the German occupation; certainly, he never understood his father's suffering.

Early in the novel, Cook steers us toward a slowly unfolding revelation of brutality and evil that the mere sight of the word *Nazi* conjures within us as descendants of the age. And it is the holocaust that dominates the story, even when sometimes Cook appears more interested in having us appreciate Paul's own personal problems and their sources.

What happens, I believe, is that Gerrit becomes a much more powerful character than his son—something that may well have happened, as it often does, within the process of writing. Gerrit's story is the novel, perhaps because Nazi horror will, on the basis of its characteristic evil, dominate our attention whenever we experience it on a stage or in a narrative.

The reason for its universal appeal is obvious. The violence of that era, whenever we experience it, tests deeply our attitudes toward humanity itself. We see the ragged bodies of Auschwitz as they are piled, like old logs, outside the camp; and we cannot help but wonder how it could be that human beings—with art and music and faith in their genes and souls—could have their sensibilities short-circuited in such a way as to allow them to carry out such atrocities without flinching. The holocaust is a horror, not only because it *did* happen, but also because it *could*.

After the first one hundred pages of Cook's novel, we come to care much less for Paul's attempt to find himself after the loss of his wife and the death of his son, than we do for Gerrit's plunge back into a horrifying experience he'd somehow been able to repress for forty years. The effect is that we read very quickly over Paul's problems, hoping to get back to that which has engaged us more fully—Gerrit's horror, even though we slowly come to see that their problems stem from the same root.

But Paul's problems simply aren't as concretely presented as Gerrit's. We never really see his wife Rita, for instance. We come to understand that she left Paul for reasons that had to do with her lack of identity and self-esteem, an attempt to find herself. In today's society that's a frequent explanation for marital problems; but the fact that it does happen with some regularity makes it incumbent upon the writer to create the situation with some uniqueness.

Paul has also never really been able to grieve over the

loss of his son, who died in a car accident when his father swerved and lost control, the car spinning in a way that made the passenger side take the brunt of the crash. No one can minimize the effects of the death of a child; however, again the amount of specific detail given to that death doesn't create sufficient empathy. In short, Paul's problems never quite captured my attention and sympathies—at least not to the extent that his father's did. And at least part of the reason for that, it seems, is the sheer evocative power of the holocaust.

Perhaps the strongest parts of the novel, at least in the early going, are those passages when Cook draws out the details of how Gerrit sees and feels, passages which evoke such a clear sense of aging that I was left marvelling at the depth of Cook's insight. A chapter early in the novel brings us into a supermarket with Gerrit and shows us in unflinching detail the way the man's mind and sensibilities operate. It's a marvelous chapter.

One cannot help but note too the meticulous style of the novel, a style already in evidence in Cook's prior collection of short stories, *Cracked Wheat*. Cook, who taught English at Dordt College for twelve years before leaving for Redeemer College, in Hamilton, Ontario, is a studied craftsman. He prides himself on the balance and strategy of his sentences; he works very slowly, and the result, so evident again here, is a fabric woven like something tendered slowly and accomplished through years of intimate husbandry. The first several chapters of the novel are so fresh with the details of Gerrit's nursery that many paragraphs, all by themselves, are very charming. It's the poet in Cook that pushes him towards that kind of treasured exactness.

Once Gerrit's entire war experience surfaces—and it does so in graphic, painful detail—the whole truth is out. The problems of both major characters are explained at the end of the novel in almost perfect detail, when Abel Rozenberg's own daughter, who becomes an acquaintance of Paul's during his Ontario homecoming, proceeds to explain what she knows as the "survivor syndrome."

With that explanation, all the problems of the novel are solved—Gerrit's locked basement room, his inability to love his own son, Paul's problems within his marriage and his inability to grieve, even his clumsiness in talking with any warmth to Ms. Rosenberg. It all fits perfectly. Everything is explained. Gerrit's story is a case study of the effects of a holocaust survivor's buried trauma.

In some ways, the perfect explanation makes psychiatry the hero of the novel, science—the science of the human mind—the answer for our lives. It seems to me that we are asked to understand all Gerrit's mysteries—and those of his son—on the basis of psychiatric theory. The effect on the narrative is to make it a problem novel—a piece of art devoted to the evocation of a peculiarly debilitating

syndrome, not to the mystery of being human.

I believe Cook attempts to stifle the exact reading of the novel with a sub-plot which begins when Paul unknowingly hits a fawn with a mower one afternoon, then nurtures it back to health slowly throughout the second half of the novel. Unfortunately, I didn't find myself moved sufficiently by the incident or its aftermath to the point where its power had some effect on the novel's outcome.

To me, the perfect fit of peg and hole somehow detracts from the drama inherent in the way each of us is created uniquely, not simply as typical.

Hugh Cook's *The Homecoming Man* is a powerfully-driven novel. I found myself engaged throughout, drawn in by Gerrit's slow revelation of an event he himself had

packed away almost completely. The war drama itself is very compelling, and the thematic link between the trees he tried to protect as a kid from the Nazis, with the trees he now wants to protect from real-estate development is nicely accomplished.

The novel is ambitious in the sense that it seeks to take real human issues—suffering, grief, the need for forgiveness—and give them real human character. It's a substantial novel, strong and unrelenting in its descriptions of Nazi brutality, daring and provocative in the way it unfolds the need all of us have for forgiveness in this vale of tears. It's a remarkable first novel from one of the strongest Christian voices in contemporary fiction.