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## The Cresset (Vol. LXXVII, No. 1, Michaelmas)

Valparaiso University

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# RESSET

A review of literature, the arts, and public affairs

Michaelmas 2013



Valparaiso  
University

Technology and Human Renewal  
in Wendell Berry's Port William

Eric Miller

The Smartest Zombie Novel  
You'll Never Read

Christina Bieber Lake

I Remember, Therefore I Am

Jennifer Miller

A Meditation on Mice and Rats

Gary Fincke

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Born and raised in Indianapolis, Indiana, Tom Brand came to Chicago (after service in the US Navy) to study art at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He later worked as a journeyman printer, a trade he had first learned in his father's business in Indianapolis. As president of his own printing company in Chicago, he produced posters and comic books for the influential group of Chicago artists known as the Hairy Who, as well as catalogues for other Chicago artists. He curated exhibitions for the Beacon Street Hull House Art Center and showed in community exhibitions. As an arts activist in Chicago, he was one of the founding members of the Chicago Artists' Coalition in 1974, an organization that still exists today. Brand moved to Northern Indiana in 1996 and became active in what is now known as the Lubeznik Center for the Arts in Michigan City, Indiana. He was chairman of the Area Artists Association and also chairman of the Collections Committee. A prolific painter, Brand exhibits frequently. His works have won awards and are in many collections, including the Brauer Museum of Art's collection. Brand's paintings will be featured at the Brauer Museum in the summer of 2014.



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whatever is **TRUE**

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whatever is **LOVELY**

whatever is **ADMIRABLE**

if anything is excellent or praiseworthy

—think about such things.

Philippians 4:8

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# IN LUCE TUA

## *In Thy Light*

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### On Technology and Communion

**L**OUIS C.K. DOES NOT LIKE SMARTPHONES. The comedian recently explained why he won't give his daughter one. "Kids are mean, and it's 'cause they're trying it out." If his daughter tries out being mean to another child in person, she will see the hurt she causes in the other child's face. "They see the kid's face scrunch up and they go, 'Oh, that doesn't feel good to make a person do that.'" But when children are mean to someone via text message, "...then they just go, 'mmm, that was fun, I like that.'" Children must learn to be empathetic, and smartphones, by keeping them from seeing the pain their words cause, interrupt this learning process.

This comedian has touched on a serious issue, but not a new one. Over two hundred years ago, Jean-Jacques Rousseau made a similar observation; he argued that it is largely the human capacity for pity—which he described as a feeling of repugnance experienced when witnessing suffering in others—that renders us capable of political life. In *Discourse on The Origin of Inequality*, Rousseau argued that our social virtues flow from the sense of pity. "What are generosity, mercy, and humanity, if not pity applied to the weak, to the guilty, or to the human species in general?" When we see someone in pain, we experience a sense of revulsion. When we recognize that something we have done has caused the pain, we don't do the same thing again.

Many modern technologies were created to alleviate human pain and suffering. Agricultural technologies help us grow bountiful crops to feed the hungry. Medical technologies provide medicines to cure the sick. Improvements in food safety and sanitation technologies keep people from getting sick in the first place. Few of us would want to live in a world without these technologies; however, the blessings provided by modern technologies are mixed. They

free us from many of the limitations and privations that have plagued humanity throughout history, but these limitations and privations play an important role in connecting us to one another. We respond to others in need by sharing food and shelter, by caring for the sick, by offering companionship to the lonely. Technology frees us from our own neediness, but also from our responsibility to respond to the needs of others. As Aristotle taught, the city comes into existence for the sake of mere life, but it exists for the sake of the good life. Human communion begins because we need each other; human communion begins to draw us toward the good.

Many of the essays in this issue explore these concerns about technology in our lives. In "Ah, yes. Yes. It Has Come Again," Eric Miller demonstrates how Wendell Berry has depicted the distant and impersonal forces of modern technological society as drawing us away from experiences of genuine human communion. After reading Christina Bieber Lake's "The Smartest Zombie Novel You'll Never Read," you might just take the time to read Max Brooks's *World War Z*, a book that helps us recognize how the modern hubris that we have conquered nature and subjected it to our own ends leaves us dangerously unprepared to deal with a serious crisis. In "I Remember, Therefore I Am," Jennifer Miller finds that a recent film, *Robot & Frank*, shows that if we allow digital and online forms of memory to replace more personal and tangible ways of remembering, we will sacrifice an important aspect of our own, unique identities. And while Gary Fincke's "A Meditation on Mice and Rats" is mostly about vermin, it is also about our age's squeamishness about anything we suspect might be dirty or diseased and about the measures we take to insulate ourselves from the more unsettling aspects of reality.

Through technology, we attempt to eradicate neediness and limitation, but if we forget that we are needy and limited creatures of God, then we have forgotten who we truly are. No doubt, modern technologies have made, and will continue to make, our lives better. Technology will help us live longer and more comfortably, but the things that make life worth living are found in our neighbors and in the image of God imprinted upon them. †

—JPO

# “Ah, yes. Yes. It Has Come Again.”

## Technology and Human Renewal in Wendell Berry's Port William

Eric Miller

**W**ENDELL BERRY, THAT MARGINAL man, has over the past decade become a mainstream presence, if not quite a mainstream force. Giving the National Endowment for the Humanities' Jefferson Lecture this past spring, Berry joined a membership—to borrow a term from his own lexicon—of considerable heft, including Gwendolyn Brooks, Saul Bellow, Robert Penn Warren, Toni Morrison, and Tom Wolfe. The previous year's lecturer was Drew Gilpin Faust—the president of Harvard University. When President Obama awarded Berry the 2010 National Humanities Medal, among his fellow honorees were Harper Lee, Meryl Streep, James Taylor, and Joyce Carol Oates.

Yet Berry's mainstream presence is, strangely but instructively, the long-maturing fruit of his self-conscious marginality. The NEH, for instance, in the biography of Berry published on its website, lauds him as a “great contrary example to the compromises others take in stride.” When *New York Times* writer Mark Bittman recently wrote about a visit to Berry's Kentucky farm, the piece, though titled “Wendell Berry, American Hero” (April 24, 2012) was actually a meditation on how profoundly Berry's way differs from the American way. This American hero not only transcends the mainstream—as heroes are supposed to do—he also lives his life as a form of judgment upon it—as heroes less often do.

Perhaps in an age in which the term *counter-culture* has taken on such warm overtones we should not be surprised to find ourselves looking to the outskirts for hope. And there we find Berry, writing and farming with persisting ele-

gant force. It begins to seem worthy of honor, his long and imaginative countercultural argument with us. From a patch of land in northern Kentucky he has with acuity and grace asserted a civic claim upon us. We are, as he nears his ninth decade, palpably and publicly responding.

Public honor, of course, does not necessarily reflect social effect. Since social effect is all Berry cares about, he has continued, as the honoring has continued, to prick and probe, sometimes wooing, sometimes chastising. And perhaps no part of his quarrel with America has induced more piqued response than his assault on the enlarging technological structure of our everyday life. One may nod in agreement at his indictment of corporate irresponsibility. One may receive as a gift his rendering of our earthly home. But when he informs you, as one of his most reprinted essays puts it, “Why I Am Not Going To Buy a Computer,” you may find yourself wondering where the love—*your* love—went.

Berry believes that he has no choice but to continue in this manner, for what we in the mainstream truly honor is in his view an ill-chosen, ill-resisted road to destitution. In a synoptic passage from his 1977 book *The Unsettling of America*, a work fundamental to his counter-vision of a counterculture, Berry proposed that

The modern urban-industrial society is based on a series of radical disconnections between body and soul, husband and wife, marriage and community, community and the earth. At each of these points of disconnection the collab-

oration of corporation, government, and expert sets up a profit-enterprise that results in the further dismemberment and impoverishment of the Creation.

Each of these “radical disconnections” has been realized only through technological innovation, whether the telegraph, the tractor, the factory, or the train. To most of us such innovations add up to “progress.” To Berry they symbolize a trajectory of disaster.

If Americans have in the main shrunk from a searching interrogation of this dimension of our historical path, Berry has proved very willing—heroically willing, you might say—to offer it, in essays, poetry, and fiction. He acknowledges that his essays have mainly flowed from his anxiety about the world, often originating as public addresses; they tend toward the polemical, prophetic, and philosophic. His fiction, though, arrives with a different emotional charge. “I like the fictions best,” he said in 2006 to an interviewer, who had asked him if he was particularly pleased with any of his works. “Oh, I loved writing the fictions. I loved it. To be at work on those, I just have taken an immense happiness from it” (quoted in Bush 2007).

The celebrated loveliness of his fictional world of Port William, Kentucky certainly bears the mark of this creative joy. Indeed, it is a place where we glimpse the too often eclipsed possibilities of friendship, family, work, and the earth itself. It is a place rendered with an affection that forces the reader to confront the quality of her own associations and connections. But Port William is also an American place, and so is inevitably caught up in the epic sweep of “radical disconnections” Berry believes to be eroding all forms of earthly communion. In fact, through his fiction Berry gives his fullest rendering by far of his understanding of our fundamental historical course. If communion is for Berry the highest earthly end, and if the effect of modern technology has in the main been to diminish it, what does this historical process actually look like? His fiction reveals much about how he answers this question.

Given the vastness of Berry’s Port William fiction—eight novels and more than thirty short

stories that range from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day—anything less than an actual book on the topic of technology and Port William would be something of an injustice. But absent that, Berry’s novel *A Place on Earth* makes for a good entry point. Published in 1967 by Harcourt, Brace and World, it is Berry’s second novel but the first of what might be regarded

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as his mature stage; he turned thirty-three in August of that year and had by then settled with his young family back in his native Henry County, Kentucky, after studying at Stanford, living abroad, and teaching at New York University. Berry later described the novel as “clumsy, overwritten, and wasteful,” and although this is an overly harsh judgment, it does seem as if Berry was trying to pour out the whole Port William story in one single book—when in fact there were many books, and many kinds of stories, still to be written about this place. In 1983 he published what he called a “revision” of the novel, about a third shorter than the original, a reduction achieved mainly through subtraction. But the original edition of *A Place on Earth* offers both a revealing glimpse of Berry as a maturing thinker and the most round single portrait available of Port William.

The story, taking place in the spring and summer of 1945, moves the reader deep into the effects of World War II on the community of Port William. World War II is consistently in Berry’s writing a historical watershed, figuring centrally in several of his novels and short stories; in *A*



*Place on Earth* Berry movingly narrates his sense of how World War II affected and disrupted everyday life in consequential, catastrophic ways. And at the center of what we see in *A Place on Earth* is, not surprisingly, the anguish of disrupted communion. In the central story line of the novel, Mat Feltner, a farmer, struggles to live with the MIA status of his son Virgil, who remains in fact “missing” to the end. As the story builds, the crisis of Virgil’s absence takes us deeper and deeper into the vision of contemporary disconnection that so pervades Berry’s imagination. But at the same time, this experience of communal and personal severing also serves to place Berry’s vision of robust connection into sharper relief. In fact, it is the wondrous, fragile intricacy of human flourishing through true communion that Berry above all seeks to limn through this story (and all of his stories).

**F**oundational to any kind of human flourishing, for Berry, is the earth itself, which he conveys as a mighty and mysterious presence: the fundament of life, the guardian of life, the guide to life. In *A Place on Earth*, the omniscient narrator leads the reader into this new orientation with linguistic strokes that hit quietly and persistently. Early on, as three men play cards one afternoon in early March, “The rain slackens, falls loosely and waveringly for a moment, and stops, and after a few minutes begins again suddenly and more heavily than before.” Later in the day, “The wind has shifted a little to the north, driving the clouds into the southeast. The wind is steady and deep; it seems to move the whole sky, holding the shapes of the clouds intact.” The rain continues for days—we come to *feel* it—and culminates in a flood of immense and tragic proportions: a young couple loses their only child, a daughter who, with the father looking on, is caught in the crushing current:

And then he [the husband] hears another sound, way off, like the hard whispering of the approach of a strong wind. By the time he has thought what it is—that it’s a run-out of the creek, already close in the narrower part of the valley upstream—

he can hear the bushes tearing and the rocks rattling as they’ve picked up and carried and knocked together in the plowing headwave. He’s on his feet and running, angling along the slope in front of the house toward the bridge where the girl and dog are sitting. As he runs his mind knots in accusation against him for not having realized sooner what he realizes now.

The “weather” has gone from being the setting of the story to being the primary actor. The father feels the extremity of his vulnerability in the face of it. He “stands there, powerless, useless, stripped of everything but vision—the unbelievable taking place before his eyes without bothering to become believable.”

This is certainly an intricate relationship: the father, a farmer working in daily dependence on the natural world, now finds himself left utterly desolated by it. Yet crucially, in Berry’s world the appropriate response to such profound contingency—to in fact a state of elemental weakness—is not humanistic rage, or stoic hardness, or gnostic transcendence. It is, rather, religious humility, a humility that begins with a primal recognition that human life comes from the earth, and that whatever may befall humans, it must not dim their gratitude for the basic fact of life itself. At a crisis point in the story, Mat Feltner’s wife, Margaret, reveals to her troubled, grieving husband the means by which she has continued on in the midst of her son’s loss, and her words offer a succinct primer in this elemental posture: “From the day he was born I knew he would die. That was how I loved him, partly. Knowing I’d brought him into the world that would give him things to love, and take them away from him.” She pushes her husband to consider carefully her claims, as well as his own convictions. “I don’t believe that when his death is subtracted from his life it leaves nothing. Do you, Mat?”

Mat does not. And his admission leads, finally, to embrace, an embrace not only of his wife but of their fundamental circumstance as beings born into intricate dependence upon an earth and in a world that can offer no prom-

ise of fully satisfied yearnings, and that in fact guarantees harm. But it is a place that makes possible, amidst disappointment, the realization of enduring satisfactions—so long as the humility of creaturehood is embraced. In later essays, Berry would turn to *King Lear* to help define this posture, the spiritual condition Berry calls “the truly human estate.” *Lear*’s Gloucester, Berry notes in *The Unsettling of America*, is finally able to live and die, in Shakespeare’s words, “‘Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief.” Writing more than twenty years later in *Life Is a Miracle*, Berry would come back to the same passage, calling readers to “the properly subordinated human life of grief and joy, where change and redemption are possible.”

Such redemption, made possible only as we repent of our insubordination against our real limits and deepest ends, ends up fostering not an ethereal otherworldliness but rather a truer kind of satisfaction, the yield of a harmonic, participatory embrace of human materiality, of human creaturehood. In the devastating episode of the flood, it is the mother of the dead girl who first begins to walk this pathway of grief and joy, a pathway of not just recovery but growth. And what sparks her movement is her acceptance of the basic condition of creaturely dependence that made possible the wonder of her daughter in the first place.

When she woke on the Saturday morning at the end of that week of the flood, a great brilliant pool of sunshine lay across the kitchen floor. She sat still for a while, wrapped in the old quilt in the rocking chair, and looked at the light, letting it flood the nerves of her head with a dry brilliance and warmth. It changed her. Before she moved at all, she understood that she was no longer the same. The weather and the place, changing, had changed her... It wasn’t so much that time seemed to have begun again. It had begun to be a different time.

It continues to be a time of profound grief, to be sure; Ida goes directly to her daughter’s room

and weeps, “weeps painfully.” But she is now able to see with more clarity the particular circumstance through her reconnection, her *koinonia*, if you will, with her larger circumstance, and thus begin to bear her loss.

Berry refers to such episodes of recovered connection as “renewals” in this novel, and they

Homemade meals shared with family, cups of coffee, “the dependable small restorations of sleep”—all of these are to Berry the “little renewals” upon which human beings depend.

shape key moments in the story. Homemade meals shared with family, cups of coffee, “the dependable small restorations of sleep”—all of these are to Berry the “little renewals” upon which human beings depend. Mat Feltner finds himself, amidst his despair over his son, renewed by the arrival of spring after the long days of rain and flood. “The sunlight becomes a dwelling place. The life of the ground has begun its climb,” Mat observes. And so Mat “feels himself lifted also... And he walks, thinking, a kind of singing and crying pressing his throat: ‘Ah, yes. Yes. It has come again.’” In one of his later sabbath poems, Berry would at springtime muse, “what are we but welcomers/ of that ancient joy, always/ coming, always passing?” This welcoming is, crucially, not a gift we offer to the earth—it is a posture we learn *on* the earth, which in turn makes possible our receiving of a gift, a gift we need in the deepest of ways: joy.

But the most lasting, most satisfying kinds of renewal in Berry’s fiction come through interpersonal communion. Mat, for instance, experiences deepened friendship with a bachelor neighbor who has lost a nephew to the war and who sends off another to it on the very day

Mat receives word of Virgil's MIA status. And the same neighbor discovers that what he describes to his nephew as his "calling" wasn't in the end to "do what I'd pleased" but rather to love: to love in particular his own brother and his nephews, his brother's sons. The birth of Mat's granddaughter, the child of Virgil born in his absence, leaves Mat elated with renewing joy: "Against brutality and sorrow, something new begins, and even its beginning is somehow a triumph." After the birth, the grieving Mat even bursts into dance.

The pinnacle of renewal in Berry's fiction takes place through marriage, a theme that figures prominently in several of his other novels, including *Returning* and *Jayber Crow*. In fact, reading his corpus, it becomes evident that Berry's vision of marriage is sacramental: marriage, when fully submitted to, becomes itself a means of extraordinary grace that far transcends the ability of either spouse to supply. In *Remembering* (1988), the main character, Andy Catlett, in the midst of great marital strain, is struck by the sense that in past moments of reconciliation with his wife, "[i]t was as though grace and peace were bestowed on them out of the sanctity of marriage itself... It was as if they were not making marriage but being made by it." Hannah Coulter, in the 2004 novel whose title bears her name, suggests that "love is a great room with a lot of doors, where we are invited to knock and come in. Though it contains all the world, the sun, moon, and stars, it is so small as to be also in our hearts. It is in the hearts of those who choose to come in." And it was in this room that Hannah lived with her husband: a room not of their creation, but one that made possible the creation of their love.

In *A Place on Earth*, Mat and Margaret Feltner, straining to endure their grief—which Mat, as his anger peaks, uses as a weapon to wound Margaret, dividing them viciously—find themselves as the story concludes coming together again under a common submission to this reality of elemental goodness. As Margaret confesses to Mat her own understanding of loss and gratitude, we learn that, "Her words fall on him like water and like light, clarifying him. He feels himself rinsed and wrung, made fit for her by

what she asks of him." Within this frame of humbled reception, Mat is now more fully aligned not just with Margaret, but with the world itself. The crisis passes, though the grief goes on. Renewal has taken root.

So where in the devastated yet hopeful world of 1945 does the technology of 1945 fit, the technology that is so basic to our common memory of that awful year of both victory and defeat? And how does Berry understand it to affect the earthly communion that he sees all of life yearning toward, the flourishing human beings are born to know?

In both sweeping and subtle ways, the technological advances of the West have, in Berry's telling, by 1945 threatened Port William's deepest experience of well being. What Berry takes care to register in his narrative are not the expanding medical achievements that save life and diminish pain, or the conveniences of modern locomotion, or the wonders of long-distance communication. Instead, all of these triumphs he etches only in the shadow of the titanic industrializing world, the great globalizing juggernaut that looms as a danger beyond the ability of any particular community to resist fully.

This damning judgment is captured with great symbolic force in the opening sentence of *A Place on Earth*: "The seed bins are empty." While most immediately a reference to the shuttering of a store that is itself a casualty of the war, its meaning, given the absence of so many of Port William's young men by 1945, is far greater. Modernity is, in a word, fruitless. Always in this wartime town we overhear conversations "conditioned by the presence of the war," testament to a deepening "sense of helplessness before an immeasurable fact." One night Mat, reading a newspaper, "sits alone, face to face with the brutal history of his time"; when with the dropping of the atomic bombs his time takes a yet more barbaric turn, Mat finds himself in a hazy state of shock,

troubled by thoughts he's as yet unable to think. He has felt his mind borne, like a man in a little boat, on the crest

of history, in a violence of pure effect, as though the event of the war, having long ago outdistanced its cause, now escapes comprehension too, and speeds on. It has seemed to him that the years of violence have at last arrived at what, without his knowing it, they had been headed for, not by any human reason or motive or wish but by the logic of violence itself. And all the events of the war are at once altered by their result...

In some ways this category of negative response to our age is the obvious one, probably the one with which we in the mainstream tend to be most sympathetic. We, too, have lost sons. We, too, have experienced the modern world as a threat. Still, if even given these desolating historical realities, the mainstream adds up the credits and debits of the modern way and declares it gain, why does Berry so insistently declare it loss?

To begin with, in Berry's judgment the entire modern way is premised on a manner of regarding and relating to the material world that will prove unequal to the challenge of correcting its own disintegrating course. Berry, famously, sees disaster of the greatest proportions looming. This is an argument he has made searchingly and repeatedly in his essays more so than in his fiction, and with particularly compelling force in his commentary on agriculture. "There is no longer any honest way to deny," he wrote in 1985, "that a way of living that our leaders continue to praise is destroying all that our country is and all the best that it means. We are living even now among punishments and ruins."

But as this judgment intimates, Berry is not simply concerned to alert us to material damage at the level of "the environment." Rather, Berry is decrying a loss of spiritual proportions, a loss, we might say, of *intimacy* and *attunement*: the loss of intimacy with one another, and the loss of attunement to our fundamental material-spiritual condition—the attunement that makes intimacy and renewal possible. To Berry, modernity's elaborate infrastructure, instantiated in minute and grand ways, wars against the humility we must acquire to embrace a "properly subor-

dated human life," a life capable of grief and joy. Indeed, the modern pathway for him has emerged from the audacious, unseemly attempt to bypass a reckoning with who we actually are: embodied creatures rather than ethereal gods. Evading primal, participatory encounter with what Berry finds himself calling "the Creation,"

To Berry, modernity's elaborate infrastructure, instantiated in minute and grand ways, wars against the humility we must acquire to embrace a "properly subordinated human life," a life capable of grief and joy.

we lose contact with ourselves and with each other, and so become not fruitful but barren—destructively barren.

The radio appears in *A Place on Earth* as a prime representative of this new "way of life," both reflecting and directing the drift of America's mid-twentieth century sensibilities, diminishing both intimacy and attunement. In the novel's opening vignette a group of friends playing cards in the empty store is only partly attuned to a radio that "hums and murmurs" above them "like an idol come to life above its altar, a crude cyclopean head erected and drowsily alert on the room's edge." When the news update begins, though, "they hush for the precise voice of the announcer stating the facts of the war, continuing from the point at which it left off the hour before or the day before; the voice carefully objective, studiedly calm, a fact itself which remains whole and remote, isolated, among the facts it utters." Here, for Berry, is the deadly new ideal of human relations, of human perception: analytic, detached, numeric, amoral. "The words come to them unjudged," the book's narrator—the precise counterpoint to

the radio-narrator—observes; they are uttered “without joy or lamentation, as if spoken by the straight expressionless mouth of the instrument.” This (now) standard way of relaying “information” is clearly no harmless necessity of mass society for Berry. In our world, Berry makes clear, *words must be judged*, by speaker and auditor alike, and the kind of response each person makes to words is a measure of his or her health. But the radio—or, rather, the culture of the radio—passes matters of life and death along in the most un-lifelike way, revealing itself to be just another instrument of the great machine civilization, which knows power far more than life—which knows power at the *expense* of life.

If the radio lulls its auditors into a kind of deathly passivity, other parts of the industrial order invite more active, and thus more overtly dangerous, responses. Although characters driving trucks and cars in the story usually do so without narrational judgment, in two Twainian set pieces Berry renders the idiocy of the automobile—including the first Model T in Port William—as well as its idiocy-inducing effects on those eager to empower themselves through them. More ominous in this story are the military planes, emblematic of the war and symbolic of its invasive reach. One day Mat is enjoying work in an orchard. Up in the trees, he hears the sound of planes approaching and counts as twenty-six planes pass overhead. “The morning goes on,” we read, but:

Mat’s mind has been drawn away from his work into the big vague uneasiness of the sky, empty of all sound now. He thinks of the young men enclosed in that deathly metal, so high up, anonymous to the ground, their fates changed, made one with the vast complexity of interlocking parts and men and events which will destroy them or let them go indifferently.... It’s a long time before his mind will content itself again to take back the tree and his own hands busy in it.

Mat’s *koinonia* is disrupted. He has to fight to get it back.

Of course, only the Mat Feltners persist in this fight. Most all too easily succumb to the enclosing, isolating world—the town parson, for instance, overly impressed by the power of the Model T, or the store owner who easily adjusts his soul to the capitalist definition of gain, turning himself and his customers into “the creatures and servants of the impassive entrails of the cash register.” This, clearly, is not a town filled with fundamentally good folk stained and tarnished only by the malign influence of the external world. Rather it is a town of people ever in need of the renewal of experience and consecration of soul that will align them once more to the “truly human estate.” It is not that the industrial order corrupts them so much as it becomes a means of inflaming and fortifying their own worst tendencies.

To underscore this elemental battle in the soul of each, as well as to give hope, Berry places opposite the flawed but virtuous Mat Feltner a foil in his brother-in-law. Ernest, to be sure, has in many respects battled admirably against affliction, affliction not of his own making. As a young man he was severely wounded in World War I, and now, an unmarried carpenter, he hobbles through his days on crutches. We come to see that he has carefully chosen a life of polite, guarded isolation. Although he enjoys fellowship with Mat’s family, Ernest “has allowed Mat to know him only as he is in the shop, at his work, skilled and sufficient among his tools.” His is a life of “refined and simple order, of a few chosen certainties, of the peculiar safety of self-imposed loneliness.”

Mat, on the other hand, has through his own suffering cultivated a hopefulness set strikingly against Ernest’s hopelessness. While Ernest guards his own life, Mat guards the lives of others. He is the watchful shepherd, the patient nurturer, the sacrificing friend, afflicted and frail, yet moving in the direction of communion. He “has lived confronting the immediacy of potential calamity, in the utter commitment of his love to persons and things over which he has, at best, only partial control.” His farm is the center of this pastoral calling, described poignantly as “an opening in a wilderness which surrounds

and threatens from every side.” To its “maintenance... he has devoted the very sources of his being.” The great wilderness of war, government, economy, and machine gains ground, and Mat feels miniscule before them. Yet he is big enough to become, through his care, a beacon of strength and of hope for those near him, those threatened by the encroaching, ravaging wilderness without and within.

Ernest, though, has stopped fighting the wilderness. His shop—the precise opposite of Mat’s farm—is “a walling in of his desire, a limited and wholly manageable permanence of order.” In view of this, it does not surprise—though it hits like a shock—that his life ends in suicide. But the meaning of Ernest’s story, in Berry’s world, expands well beyond Ernest’s own, because in showing us Ernest’s flawed instincts and habits Berry also shows us the posture and instincts that led to the fateful embrace of the way of the machine in the first place. Those drawn to make the world manageable, to control for every contingency, to eliminate discomfort of every kind, to protect only one’s own in the narrowest of senses, will become the easy prey of those who would hasten to offer paler satisfactions, satisfactions that will quickly enough result in “radical disconnections,” from others, from the earth, and even from oneself. The (seemingly) safe, enclosed way of Ernest, in sum, serves mainly

to clear space for the elaborate “profit-enterprise that results in the further dismemberment and impoverishment of the Creation.”

The way of Mat is other. His vocation centers on radical connection, on going beyond the scope of self-interest to make “sure of the life of whatever is newborn”—as the narrator says of his demanding work with sheep in the winter. “His labor has been his necessity, and his profound desire,” we are told, and we ourselves see, as his long, difficult, triumphal story unfolds.

It is crucial to note, in the end, that we are *told* this story. Because although Mat Feltner is the story’s hero, it is Berry’s voice that tells us so. It is Berry’s own mind, formed in another way of seeing, that has observed, perceived, imagined, and described. It is a voice coming from the margins, speaking into our mainstream midst, a voice of judgment, warning, and hope. The margins need not remain the margins, Berry reminds. Indeed, they must not—both for their sake and for ours. ♣

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## THE DOLL HOUSE

For Helen O'Rourke

You wake as if into a dream, just a girl again  
in your old bed. A man's asleep beside you—  
now you remember, he's your husband,  
and the little girl sleeping at the foot of the bed

is his daughter. It's all coming back now:  
you're the stepmother in this story,  
and you know you will be wicked  
because you're late, the real mother

will be waiting, and it will be all your fault.  
You pull on some clothes, stuff your things  
into a bag, angry there's no time to shower,  
to have breakfast, to sit with your mother

on the sofa drinking coffee. Now your father  
tells you the backseat's not big enough to take  
both your doll house and your stepdaughter,  
and the trunk is full of beach towels

your mother bought for the homeless kids  
you work with at the school, there's no room  
for them, of course, anywhere in the world,  
so what are you crying about? Because you've

got a cold, because you couldn't sleep and  
your jeans don't fit because you're pregnant?  
And where did you think you'd put it,  
your three story Victorian farmhouse with barn,

out buildings and a wishing well—for heaven's  
sake a wishing well in your tiny apartment.  
Now you are wishing you were that girl again  
on an endless afternoon gluing sticks together

to make beds and matchboxes for dressers.  
You wish it were that easy, scrounging mattresses  
for the shelter. You wish you could believe again  
that cardboard keeps the wind out.

John Ruff

# The Smartest Zombie Novel You'll Never Read

Christina Bieber Lake

SINCE MOST OF MY CHILDHOOD WAS LIVED IN the 1970s, it took me a long time to believe that a zombie narrative could be anything but B-grade camp. And unless it is deliberate and terribly smart camp, like anything done by Joss Whedon, I'm not interested. At all.

This is why no one was more surprised than me to find myself on the postapocalyptic zombie bandwagon. Because unless you have been hiding in your basement preparing for the apocalypse yourself, you have noticed the proliferation of books, television shows, graphic novels, and movies based on the old horror conceit of people who die and then reanimate to feed on others. It is ancient comic book material come to new life in the twenty-first century, with perhaps even more strength than the vampire craze. While there are always those hip enough to declare that the genre is passé and "zombie fatigue" has set in, there is more evidence that the zombies actually will be getting stronger before they get weaker. I have already written a bit about my favorite series, AMC's *The Walking Dead*. But lately I have admired a completely different iteration of zombie material in the work of Max Brooks. Called the "Studs Terkel of zombie journalism," Brooks reached the bestseller list with *The Zombie Survival Guide* and *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War*, which was recently made into a film starring Brad Pitt and Mereille Enos. The film, though a lot of fun, is a far cry from the book. Standing as an example of what a good writer can do with a tired genre, *World War Z* is the smartest zombie novel you'll never read.

*World War Z* is not a blow-by-blow recounting of a zombie apocalypse. It is a collection of field

reports told by survivors, men and women from all over the globe, ten years after the event takes place. Like any good postapocalyptic novel (such as Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*) its mode is realism, and the zombies are just a device to get somewhere else. In this case, what readers get is a rare picture of how a global pandemic might actually operate in the post 9/11 world, a world that too often still operates under the illusion of safety. The novel reveals how a pandemic would displace traditional power centers and throw the world's hierarchies on their heads. In such a scenario, money and industrial war machines are meaningless. What matters is experience, ingenuity, geographical advantage, and a whole lot of luck. To emphasize this new reality, the book starts in China, not the United States. It also starts in China because ten years after the apocalypse, Lhasa, Tibet is the largest city in the world.

Unfortunately, the novel's strengths do not carry over to the film version. For while the book communicates the chaos of a world population disconnected from each other through its decentralized narrative (there is no plot, just a series of illustrations of individuals and communities trying to survive), the movie follows the actions of one American, Gerry Lane (Brad Pitt). Eventually, Lane uses his ingenuity to work with health professionals in Cardiff to come up with a way to hide from the zombies, attack them, and save the world. That does not happen in the book. The only place of real crossover between the book and the film is in depicting Israel's response to the crisis. Israel saves a large proportion of its population (in addition to countless refugees from other countries)



by building a high wall around Tel Aviv before the contagion spreads to them. Jurgen Warmbrunn, an Israeli intelligence operative, reveals how they managed to be so prescient. In 1973, Israeli intelligence missed all the warning signs of the Arab sneak attack in the Yom Kippur War. "We had simply 'dropped the ball,'" Warmbrunn reports. "We never considered the possibility of an all-out, coordinated, conventional assault from several nations, certainly not on our holiest of holidays. Call it stagnation, call it rigidity, call it an unforgivable herd mentality" (34). Israel learns from this mistake and implements a minority report protocol. Since 1973, Warmbrunn explains, if nine intelligence experts came to a certain conclusion, it became "the duty of the tenth to disagree," to dig deeper, to make sure their intelligence is not misleading them. Brooks does an excellent job of predicting how early

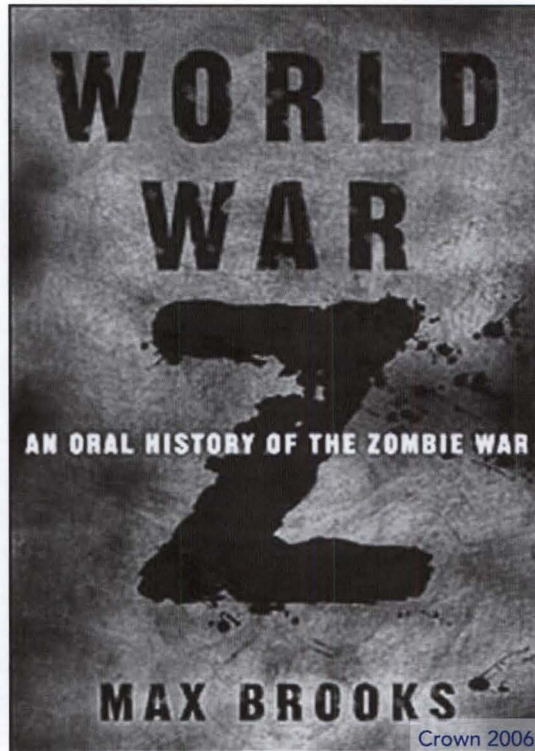
news reports of an attack from zombies would be received by most nations—by disbelief and a system of rationalizing with plausible explanations. Israel's minority report system eventually saves them, as Warmbrunn digs and digs until he recognizes that the threat is real. He writes a report and circulates it through the UN to the rest of the world. While most nations ignore the report, Israel's government decides to build the wall, and they welcome anyone into Tel Aviv as long as they can prove they are not infected. The zombie invasion thus restructures Israeli-Palestinian relations like nothing else could. A Palestinian confesses that, "I realized I practically didn't know anything about these people I'd hated my entire life. Everything I thought was true went up in smoke that day, supplanted by the face of our real enemy" (44). While the movie does tell part of this story, it moves the wall to Jerusalem, where it eventually

fails as the zombies pile up on one another and climb into the city, another lame Hollywood capitulation to the need for an ingenious American to come in and save the day.

The book highlights a number of interesting global displacements not depicted in the film. Notably, Cuba becomes the strategic center of the war against the zombies and an ironic reverse refugee situation ensues. Thousands of Americans sail to Cuba on homemade rafts. They are initially put into a "Quarantine Resettlement Program" and put to work as field hands, at least until Cuban officials cannot keep up with controlling them. Eventually, Cuba becomes the "Arsenal of Victory" against the zombie invasion, serving as the air and sea hub for both North and South America. Brooks excels in describing several other realistic scenarios: Russia decimates an army it can no longer

control because of panic, and the US army eventually learns to adapt its weaponry, but only after substantial setbacks. Many nations turn to the Redeker plan, a plan developed by a crazy South African that isolates pockets of human beings to use as zombie bait in order to protect its main civilization. Brooks has a good feel for what global panic might induce desperate nations to do.

*World War Z's* strengths reveal the interest that can be generated when the zombie genre gets converted from its usual realm of horror into a realm of terror. Though these terms are often used interchangeably, they are very different. Horror is more immediate; it is what you feel when you are with Brad Pitt's family in their car in Philadelphia when zombies are jumping out of nowhere into the windshield. Terror is deeper; it is what you feel when you hear reports you are not sure are accurate and panic sets in. Panic is the real enemy in



any pandemic, and here Brooks makes it clear that panic is a result, at least in part, of pre-war hubris. Part of that hubris is the conviction that modern technological society has conquered Mother Nature completely and that she now serves the elite. But the zombie infection has no respect for the elite; it spreads very quickly through the international organ trade, when illegally-operating doctors unwittingly transplanted infected organs into wealthy Western clientele. When the narrator of *World War Z* asks one of these doctors why more questions weren't asked, he responds that "these were the very early stages, when nobody knew anything yet. Even if they did know, like elements in the Chinese army... you want to talk about immoral... Years before the outbreak they'd been making millions on organs from executed political prisoners. You think something like a little virus is going to make them stop sucking that golden tit?" (27). This attitude is not fictional. It is a part of the current real-world organ trade, and it is truly terrifying. Furthermore, in spite of our modern technological hubris, we do get periodic reminders of the fragility of world health in the form of SARS, H1N1, the avian flu, and so on. It was not so long ago, after all, that up to 5 percent of the population of the world was killed by the Spanish flu. *World War Z* illustrates how much our technological prowess exposes us to new threats as much as it protects us from old ones.

Brooks's sociological insights are reason enough to read the book. I love the idea that many American teenagers might be tricked into reading globally-sensitive speculative sociology. But I believe that Brooks also taps into the main reason why postapocalyptic narratives are all the rage today among advanced technological societies. Americans live in an increasingly simulated world, where technology aggressively separates us from hard realities, especially the reality of death. The more layers of simulacra that separate us from the real, the more we crave the real—and, arguably, the more we fear it. Postapocalyptic narratives allow us to safely walk that edge, to imagine what it might be like to be challenged by something greater than the question, "what's for lunch?" Another way to put this is to note that, generally speaking, no one who lives daily with gritty cir-

cumstances of actual death wants or needs to read about it for entertainment. Brooks trades on this appeal in several ways in *World War Z*. One way is through the account of T. Sean Collins, a Texan who the narrator finds in Barbados. Collins was one of the bodyguards hired by a company formed to provide a supposedly safe seaside enclave for the rich and famous. Collins reports that these celebrities initially sat back and watched the zom-

Postapocalyptic narratives allow us to safely walk that edge, to imagine what it might be like to be challenged by something greater than the question, "what's for lunch?"

bie war as if watching a reality television show. But after videos of them watching this footage circulate online, they soon find out that their sense of security is false. Another way Brooks highlights this challenge to simulacra is through the character of Joe Muhammed, a Pakistani American whose parents had settled in Washington state before the war. "They never talked to their American neighbors, never invited them over, barely knew their names unless it was to complain about loud music or a barking dog. Can't say that's the kind of world we live in now" (336). While nobody believes that a zombie apocalypse will actually happen, the appeal of an ultimate challenge to our decadent suburban isolation is real.

Sadly, although Brooks knows that religious concerns will be revved up when the world is in crisis, he does not explore any positive options. Belief instead becomes either a province of opportunistic shysters who sell hope or a way for communities to try to handle pragmatic problems. The first response happens in America, where Breckinridge "Breck" Scott invents a drug called Phalanx, a false cure for the "African rabies." Phalanx sales escalate quickly because desperate

people will pay anything to buy hope. The advertisements tell the whole story: “Piece of Phalanx, Peace of Mind” (66). Many people never let go of the thin strands of evidence of its efficacy and pay with their lives. Another example of a religious response comes from Siberia, where a former priest develops the strategy of “Final Purification.” This idea—a way to save infected people from having to commit suicide by “releasing trapped souls from infected bodies”—becomes the “first step in a religious fervor that would surpass even the Iranian revolution of the 1980s” (297). Both are very believable responses to a pandemic of these proportions.

As much as I wanted to see Brooks explore other potential faith responses to such an event, he at least consistently emphasizes that one of the reasons why the pandemic spreads so quickly is a failure among the vast majority of people to believe in anything outside the box. *World War Z* can thus be an interesting starting point for conversations. Why is it so easy for a post-industrial society to hold an illusion of ultimate control? What are the real dangers of such an illusion? What other beliefs do we allow to remain unchallenged? These are questions worth asking. That Max Brooks is interested in sparking such a dialogue became

clear to me when I was reading a recent edition of the *Atlantic Monthly*. In its “The Big Question” section, the magazine asked twelve well-known people, “How and when will the world end?” My favorite answer was from Aubrey Plaza, an actress on the television show *Parks and Recreation*: “Tomorrow, a giant asteroid will wipe us all out mid-text. Or not. But maybe we should all throw our phones away just in case.” Brooks’s answer was equally profound, if you take a moment to contemplate it. He said: “Earbuds. We’ll have our own specifically chosen world at our own comfortably blaring volume, and we’ll never hear what’s creeping up behind us.”

Indeed. ♣

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# I Remember, Therefore I Am

Jennifer Miller

**I**N HIS WORK COMMONLY CALLED *DISCOURSE on the Method*, French philosopher René Descartes searches for a source of incontrovertible truth. He methodically rejects anything that could potentially be doubted. Our senses, for instance, can be deceived; human reason is prone to error and thoughts might hold no more truth than dreams. However, he goes on to state, "...I observed that, whilst I thus wished to think that all was false, it was absolutely necessary that I, who thus thought, should be somewhat." This line of thinking led Descartes to one of the foundational notions of Western philosophy:

Cogito ergo sum. I think, therefore I am.

In other words, the very act of doubting proves the existence of someone to do the doubting. Thought alone is enough to establish the existence of the self. On a philosophical level, Descartes's dictum might be satisfying, but on a personal level, is this really enough? While existence provides a helpful starting place, the search for individual *identity* seems to demand something more. What if instead of just thinking, I need to *remember*?

Vladimir Nabokov, author of *Lolita*, seems to endorse this line of thinking in his autobiography *Speak, Memory*. As the title implies, Nabokov's autobiography draws heavily on his memories, and from the beginning, points to the act of remembrance as the way an individual can set himself apart from the rest of the universe. At the very beginning of the book, Nabokov describes existence as "a brief crack of light between two

eternities of darkness" and recalls the "colossal efforts" his mind made "to distinguish the faintest of personal glimmers in the impersonal darkness on both sides of my life." To undertake this work of separating himself from the cosmos, Nabokov looks not to the present, but to the past. In Chapter Three, he writes, "The act of vividly recalling a patch of the past is something that I seem to have been performing with the utmost zest all my life."

One particularly beautiful instance of Nabokov's use of memory in *Speak, Memory* comes as he describes his childhood love for a young French girl name Colette near the end of Chapter Seven. In the following passage, we see not only how his memories intertwine with each other, but also how they intertwine with the present:

The leaves mingle in my memory with the leather of her shoes and gloves, and there was, I remember, some detail in her attire (perhaps a ribbon on her Scottish cap, or the pattern of her stockings) that reminded me then of the rainbow spiral in a glass marble. I still seem to be holding that wisp of iridescence, not knowing exactly where to fit it, while she runs with her hoop ever faster around me and finally dissolves among the slender shadows cast on the graveled path by the interlaced arches of its low looped fence.

The alternating use of past and present tense verbs reinforces the sense that the past is linked to and

informs the present, and specifically informs who Nabokov is in relation to the world around him.

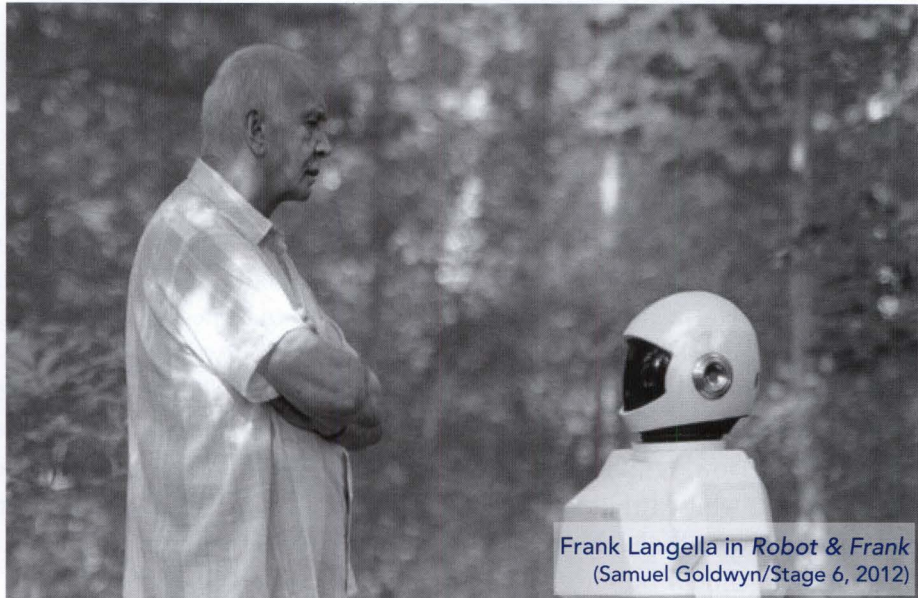
Nabokov is not the only author to emphasize the importance of memory. In *Hamlet*, the ghost of Hamlet's father bids him farewell, his final words a plea to be remembered: "Adieu, adieu, adieu, remember me." In Luke's account of the Last Supper, Christ offers bread to his disciples, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19). And the famous English folk verse about Guy Fawkes's attempt to blow up the English Parliament begins, "Remember, remember! The fifth of November, the Gunpowder treason and plot; I know of no reason why the Gunpowder treason should ever be forgot!"

For Nabokov, remembering his past gives shape to his present self. For Christ and Hamlet's father, the memories of others give hope that their identity will persist after death. And the remembrance demanded by the English folk verse helps shape a *national* identity. In each of these cases, the focus is shifted from the fact of basic existence to the specific existence made possible through memory.

The importance of memory in shaping identity is brought to the foreground in the 2012 film *Robot & Frank*. The first feature film by director Jake Schreier, *Robot & Frank* won the Sundance Film Festival's Alfred P. Sloan prize for films about technology. Set in the near future, the film tells the story of an elderly man named Frank (Frank Langella) who is suffering from the early stages of dementia. His son, Hunter (James Marsden), grows frustrated with his father's inability to care for himself, so he buys him a robot to help him cook, clean, and stay active. Frank is initially quite resistant to the robot, but when he realizes that the robot has no moral programming, he begins to use the robot to help him return to his former

life as a burglar and high-end jewel thief. (Spoilers from the film follow.)

*Robot & Frank* handles the theme of memory in a number of ways, most obviously through the direct conversations that Frank has with his robot about memory and existence. Early in the film, the robot guilt's Frank into eating healthfully and



Frank Langella in *Robot & Frank*  
(Samuel Goldwyn/Stage 6, 2012)

going for walks by telling him, "If you die eating cheeseburgers, what do you think happens to me? I'll have failed. They'll send me back to the warehouse and wipe my memory." Here, the robot identifies memory loss as the worst possible fate, rather than physical destruction or being shut off. Later, however, the robot reveals to Frank that he was lying, that he doesn't "care if [his] memory is erased or not." Frank asks, "But how can you not care about something like that?" The robot responds, "Think about it this way. You know that you're alive. You think, therefore you are."

And Frank clearly does care about losing his memory. After pulling off a multi-million dollar jewel heist, Frank destroys all the evidence of his crime, but he pauses before wiping the robot's memory, even though he knows that these very memories could be downloaded and used to convict him of the crime. Frank resists reformatting the robot because he sees a reflection of himself in the robot. If the robot were to lose its memory Frank might finally have to admit that he, too, is starting to lose his.

When the local sheriff, the man he robbed, and even Frank's own son threaten to break down the door of his home, Frank finally does reformat the robot's memory. As Frank pushes the button, the robot slumps forward, and Frank enfolds him in a brief embrace, physically bestowing upon the robot the humanity that Frank has come to see in the robot. Perhaps even more importantly, the very next scene in the movie is not a showdown between Frank and the sheriff, but an abrupt transition to Frank in a memory care center. Hunter has come to visit him, and Frank asks him how he likes Princeton, a college his son has not attended in more than a decade. Dementia is already slowly taking over Frank's mind. The reformatting of the robot resulted not only in the loss of his memory, but also in the loss of Frank's.

While the primary narrative of *Robot & Frank* directly addresses the theme of memory loss, the film reinforces issues of memory and identity in more subtle ways as well. In one particularly fascinating scene, Frank is describing the jewel heist plan to the robot. Scenes of the two of them carrying out the heist are interspersed throughout Frank's description. It is not immediately clear whether we are seeing the heist actually happening or rather a vision of what could be. This blurring of imagination and reality underscores how the stories we tell ourselves have tremendous power in shaping the reality of the world in which we live. It almost would not matter if Frank actually committed the heist. What matters is that he thinks that he did.

Additionally, the story of Frank and his robot is intertwined with the story of the town's librarian, Jennifer (Susan Sarandon), and the closing of the public library. All the books from the library are being taken and scanned, and the physical

structure of the library is being turned into a community gathering space. While the stories contained in the library books will be preserved, Frank and Jennifer still see this transition as a profound loss, and the viewer is invited to make the connection between the loss of the library and Frank's own memory loss. This connection adds yet another layer of complexity to the film, suggesting that in our increasing reliance on digital technology, we are losing something physical that gives a tangible form to our memories.

*Robot & Frank* ends on a note of warmth, yet the film's suggestion that Frank is losing his memory and, with it, his identity darkens the tone. This, along with the fact that as many as one in forty-five Americans will be affected by Alzheimer's disease by the year 2050, might leave viewers with a bleak vision of the future. Such a vision, however, overlooks a key facet of Nabokov's autobiography, and of other works of film, literature, and art. Even though *Speak, Memory* is Nabokov's way of remembering himself, it provides a way for others to remember him as well. Similarly, Christ's words, "Do this in remembrance of me," remind us that memory is not just an individual act. It is also a collective ritual, conducted together to remember those who are important to us. Through stories, songs, and pictures, we can try to remember who we are individually, and when we fail, there are others, perhaps for generations to come, who can help us remember ourselves. ♣

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# A Meditation on Mice and Rats

Gary Fincke

## In the Bakery

**T**HERE WAS GOOD REASON FOR ME TO LEARN the habits of mice and rats. My father owned a bakery. The adjoining building was a feed store. Even though the feed store patrons did not much care whether or not they noticed mice and rats as their trucks were loaded, my father's business depended on vigilance, killing every intruder and disposing of them while hoping nobody ever saw one while they purchased bread and rolls.

There were mice in the bakery, but my mother tried to make sure I didn't worry about confronting any form of rodent. "You could spend all day here and never see one," she said. She told me that mice rarely go farther than twenty feet from their nests. Most importantly, she said, "They're afraid of everything, so they stay out of sight when people are around."

Just in case, there was one lone trap under the display case closest to the door to the back rooms. My father didn't want the bait to lure mice to where the customers shopped, but he knew there were plenty of tempting smells, and the single trap acted as a guard. The rest of the building was more heavily patrolled. There were traps scattered throughout the work rooms—under the steam cabinet, the refrigerator, the sink, the workbenches, especially in the back room where one hundred pound sacks of flour and sugar were stacked. Because our mother sold baked goods in the front room three afternoons a week, my older sister and I played on those bags until she started first grade. After that I played alone, making up fantasy games about mountain climbing

and fighting in wars while she opted for books and drawing pictures in the front room where our mother worked. At home, when we played school, I let her teach me to read and do simple arithmetic, but in the bakery I preferred recess, steering jeeps and tanks over the dusty sacks. The traps were underneath the wooden pallets. I was told never to reach underneath them, and I obeyed.

## Three Blind Mice\*

In first grade, during music, we sang rounds like "Row, Row, Row Your Boat." We used hand motions when we sang. We rowed with our arms. For "Three Blind Mice," we wiggled the fingers of our left hand and threw it forward to run from the carving knife wielded by the farmer's wife, and all of us loved slicing the air with our right hands to cut off their tails.

"The three blind mice," my Aunt Margaret said. "I'd like to give their tails a good going over," meaning the three men who drank on the Kordesich's porch across the alley from her house, one of them playing a concertina to accompany the songs they wailed in Croatian. "The old stews and their squeezebox," she'd say while my grandmother, who lived with her, clucked her tongue. "I'll take the broom to them if they cut through the yard."

But no matter what Aunt Margaret said, outside of the bakery mice were fun. "Hickory Dickory Dock" was recited, not sung, but it had hand motions as well, our six-year-old fingers climbing the air until the clock struck one and knocked our hands down. Mice were the heroes

in cartoons like Tom and Jerry. They saved the day like Mighty Mouse. They were lovable like Mickey. Until I was seven, I never saw one.

I was playing on the flour sacks while I waited for my mother to close the bakery when she stepped into the room and said, "You need to be careful back here. We've had visitors lately." As if she'd planned a demonstration, she poked underneath a pallet with the tip of her broom handle and slid a trap into view. A mouse was caught in it, the metal bar pressed against its neck. "See?" she said.

I climbed down and waited with my sister in the front room where the cookies and cakes that hadn't been sold were sitting securely inside glass cases, the ones I'd been told never to leave open. "Now you know" was all she said as she tidied up and turned out the light. "Your father will take care of it before he starts baking."

### The Pied Piper

During first grade, I was a ball in the school musical, singing "Bounce, bounce, ball" over and over while my classmates and I tried to hop in unison. We had rehearsed for weeks, and the colorful, striped, ball-shaped sandwich-board costume was bulky and scratched under my chin every time I landed. I was thrilled to be on stage in front of hundreds of adults, but I was also happy to take it off. During second grade, though, I was a rat and wished I could wear my costume for repeat performances.

Being a rat was special. My classmates and I had whiskers, tails, gray body suits, big noses, and ears. The PTA mothers were extraordinary in making us look the part of vermin. Some sixth-grade girl, because she could play the flute, was the Pied Piper. None of us had speaking parts unless squeaking counted, but I loved being bunched up on stage with twenty other seven-year-old rats in a pack that was mesmerized by the music that girl dressed all in green played on her flute. We scrambled after her, clogging up near the wing while the audience laughed, and then disappearing off stage to get out of our costumes so we could return in white shirts and blouses in order to be lured away a second time

as the children of cheapskate parents, the smallest boy in our class hobbling on crutches and saved from disappearing a second time by being crippled and falling behind.

### Cleanliness

The health inspector visited the bakery a few months after my mother showed me the dead mouse. My mother announced the visit at dinner, and everyone got quiet. "I kept thinking this would be the time one of our visitors would show himself," she said. "He walked all around like he was waiting to see something move, but he was mostly interested in that old commode in the cellar. It's so filthy down there."

My sister and I looked at our father. Even when it was an emergency, neither of us ever wanted to use that toilet. The cellar was dark except for the light that came through the doorway at the top of the stairs and a single low-watt light bulb that couldn't be turned on until you found the chain that hung from it in the middle of sagging ceiling. "What's the verdict?" my father said.

"He wants a sign posted that says, 'Wash Hands After Using.' And since the sink is all the way upstairs, a sign there, too."

"That's it?"

"For now. I cut up a cake box and taped them up before I closed shop. It seemed like a lot of bother. Anybody who doesn't wash their hands after being down there is being a fool."

It turned out my mother was right to be worried. Before that week ended, shortly after she had used that toilet and washed her hands, a mouse darted past her as she sliced bread. "Thank God," she said, "the customer was too busy looking at the jelly rolls to notice."

### The Mickey Mouse Club

In his essay "A Biological Homage to Mickey Mouse," published in *Natural History*, Stephen J. Gould uses the evolution of Mickey Mouse's appearance to explain how the shape of faces and the relative size of eyes protect the young by making them appear cute. Large eyes and a round face serve the helpless well—puppies, kittens, human



babies. If an adult cartoon character is given those facial qualities, he will appear, even if he is a mouse, eternally young-looking and consistently cute.

Mickey looked more like a mouse in his first cartoon feature. He was more mischievous too. His snout was long and pointed. His eyes were smaller and less round. But little by little he looked younger and friendlier, hardly mouse-like at all. Walt Disney knew what he was doing as he reshaped Mickey's face.

My sister and I didn't know anything about the early Mickey Mouse while we outgrew the need to spend after-school hours at the bakery. When I was in fourth grade, our parents finally purchased a television. A year later, both of us became addicted to watching the Mickey Mouse Club at five o'clock, the show ending at six just before our mother came home and made dinner for us and our just-awakened father.

By the second season, I was more interested in the girls who played Mouseketeers than I was in cartoons. My sister, entering eighth grade, stopped watching, but I paid attention to Annette Funicello and Darlene Gillespie when they pranced in front of the camera during the Mouseketeer Roll Call. They looked like girls who walked to the bus stop with my sister half an hour before me because junior high school, grades seven through nine, started earlier than grades one through six. Every afternoon they fueled my fantasies. And though none of my sixth grade friends would admit to liking the corny serials like *Spin and Marty*, all of us could remember every detail of what Annette and Darlene wore when they were in skits and serials of their own.

### Friday Night Work

The first thing my father did every night he went to work was check the traps. I learned this when, during seventh grade, I started working in the bakery on Friday nights from seven to ten. Until then, whether the victims were mice or rats, I had never touched a trap, but now it was obvious to my father that his twelve-year-old son was squeamish when it came even to just looking at the dead. Or worse, the dying, the trap sprung

without striking their heads or necks, their legs still moving, the sound of feeble squeaking.

Once, when I suggested using poison so the traps didn't have to be checked, he said, "We can't use rat poison in the bakery. We can't have that around food or have them crawl into some hole and die where we can't reach them."

"Maybe you should move the bakery into the new shopping center," I said during my first year on the job. "Leave all the mice and rats behind."

"You'll never be a baker," he said, closing the discussion with what I agreed was the truth.

Walter Godfrey, who was our closest neighbor because he lived above the feed store, always had an unlit cigar in his mouth when he came inside the bakery Friday nights around eleven, buying day-old doughnuts and sweet rolls my father sold him for half price because they went stale so quickly. Godfrey chewed on that cigar while he talked, depending on the time of year, about football, basketball, or baseball, always saying, "It's time for my movie" before he left just before 11:30.

"It's a blessing having Godfrey live upstairs over there," my father would say every time Godfrey left. "He keeps two cats, and they make it hard on the mice."

Inside the bakery, what made it hard on the mice were those traps. The bait, I learned, wasn't always cheese. Usually it was peanut butter, but just about anything would do.

For entertainment, during lulls between the simple things I could help with like greasing pans and cutting bread dough into portions, I played a form of basketball with a rolled up paper bag and a #10 can my father nailed to the wall of the room where the ovens demanded a higher ceiling.

My father, once or twice a night, would play a game of "horse" with me. From time to time, before he joined in, he would say, "You remembering to check first if that bag rolls under the steam cabinet?"

Beginning in ninth grade, I worked from 10 PM until 5:30 AM. My mother dropped me off, went home to sleep, and returned to drive me home before she reversed herself and opened the bakery at six. Eventually, when my father and I returned to the bakery on Saturday afternoons

for special orders like wedding or birthday cakes, I was expected to dump the victims of those baited traps into the trash and walk them outside to the burn barrel. They went up in flames generated by the thick paper from the flour sacks and damaged boxes and whatever other refuse that could be burned. My Aunt Margaret, who helped my mother sell on Saturday afternoons, would wait for me to return, saying, "You wash your hands with soap and scalding water. Don't you dare touch a thing until then." She loathed them. She called all of them rats even though, I was happy to note, rats were rare in the bakery.

Rats, for sure, were villains in stories I loved during high school. Late at night, I watched the movie made from the novel *1984*, despairing as the would-be hero Winston Smith is re-educated by the forces of Big Brother, but hopeful as he holds onto his love for Julia. All along I wondered what would be in Room 101, where his worst fear was waiting. And when it turned out to be a cage full of rats, the threat of being covered with them, I didn't blame him at all for pleading, "Do it to Julia." For days I imagined rats in large numbers, the sound of their squealing, the scrabble of their claws. The next Friday night I felt so much as if it was my first night of having to check the traps in the bakery that I skipped half of them and hoped my father would believe that any victim he found was fresh when he checked again while my mother opened the store in the morning.

My fear, though, made the stories better. By itself, the title of H. P. Lovecraft's "The Rats in the Walls" made me uneasy, but the scariest of all was an illustrated story in a comic book. The title and author are long forgotten, but the final panels are still vivid: a woman being tortured, a rat under a metal bowl on her stomach, the bowl being heated until the rat, the torturer explains, will have nowhere to go but inside her. I reread that story more than a few times. I thought about that rat under the bowl, how that woman would feel. What I didn't do was pay any attention when, while I was in tenth grade, France sent the first rat into space.

But Aunt Margaret did. She told me the rat's name was Hector, and he was supposed to have helped France learn new things about space flight.

"God forbid we use anything learned from a rat," she said. "We'll all end up in hell."

Neither she nor I ended up with any idea of what the French learned from Hector. The feed store closed before I finished high school. A few years later, so did the bakery. The rats and mice must have moved on, probably to hang out near the bars on either end of the block, the only businesses left after the shoe store, the jewelry store, the drug store, and the hardware store closed as well.

### The Feats of Mice and Rats

- A pair of brown rats can produce 2,000 descendants in one year.
- Rats' front teeth grow up to five and a half inches per year, so they must constantly gnaw on whatever is available to maintain the proper length.
- Mice can squeeze through a space the size of a ball point pen's width.
- A rat can tread water for three days.
- Rats can survive falls of fifty feet or more.
- Mice, when hungry enough, can survive on paper and soap or whatever is available.
- Rats can come into a house through drains or toilet pipes.
- Rats can be domesticated. They are friendly to handlers.
- A National Mouse Club was founded in England in 1895. It sponsored shows and contests for domesticated mice.
- That club was expanded, years later, to include rats.

### The Bakery Homecoming

Nearly fifty years after I last worked there, I take my father back to the bakery site. He's ninety,

struggling with a walker, a month away from my sister finding him a room in a nursing home, but it seems like a good idea to let him take what might be a last look at what is now a vacant lot that has been paved over for parking used by the residents of apartments formed from the buildings that once housed old businesses. "There's nothing," he says. "Even the mice and rats are gone."

Stuck for something to say, I try, "It's the year of the rat in China," but he doesn't seem to hear me.

"We mostly used peanut butter for bait," he says. "Cooked corn worked. Leftover macaroni. They went for just about anything, and it cost them. You could buy a dozen of those traps for about a dollar."

I sense the afternoon going wrong. "All those traps, Dad," I say. "How many do you think you killed?"

"Sometimes we went for a while without finding any, but you don't keep track of something like that," he says. "You just know the traps are empty for a while and hope they stay that way. Especially the rats. They're the worst."

"There's a rat story called 'The Giant Rat of Sumatra,'" I say, and when he struggles to face me, the walker turning in small increments, I wished I hadn't said it.

"I don't think I want to hear it."

"You don't have to worry about that. The title is all there is to it. Instead of all the words, it turns out to just be called 'A story for which the world is not yet prepared.'"

My father makes a face. "It's a joke, Dad. I read it somewhere in a Sherlock Holmes story, and that's all that's said. You're supposed to get that there really isn't a story except for the catchy title."

"Rats aren't funny," he says. "Who thinks rats are funny?"

### The History of Mouse Traps

When I look up the price of mouse traps to check on my father's memory, I find out that a trap cost five cents in 1900; sure enough, in the late 1950s, when I began working for my father, the cost had risen to only seven cents.

I keep going, reading the rest of the online article about the history of mouse traps. John Mast, the American patent holder, invented a trap that sprung in three milliseconds a few years before 1900. The design has remained almost completely unchanged, so it is no surprise when I read that he sold that business for a hefty profit. And that "building a better mouse trap" is more than a hackneyed saying.

I learn that a humane mousetrap was invented during the 1920s. It was called the Kness Ketch-All Multiple Catch, but my father wasn't interested in being humane with mice and rats, and neither was I.

### The Reminiscing about Mice and Rats

When I visit my father in the nursing home, his room is stifling, but he wears a sweater. We play a game called Crokinole that we've played since I was a boy, using one finger to shoot wooden rings at each other's through a circle of spaced pegs. For more than an hour we play, and my father, because he cannot hear what I say unless I shout, barely speaks except to belittle himself for his failing ability. By the end of the hour, though I am wearing a light shirt, I am sweating enough to make it difficult to handle the wooden rings. It is after six o'clock, the common "dinner hour," but he says nothing.

An aide appears, young and smiling, but she raises her voice to a near-shout and speaks with exaggerated slowness. "Mr. Fincke is a little devil about not eating. If he had his way we'd have to throw his dinner out for the mice to finish."

"I'll get him down there in a few minutes," I say, but suddenly, as she leaves, my father becomes agitated, cued somehow by her broadcast-volume reference to mice.

"She likes to make a fuss," he says, taking his next shot, tapping the board to insist I keep playing.

In less than five minutes the aide returns. "Mr. Fincke, please."

My father seems angry. "I'll bring him," I say. "I promise. We'll be there in two minutes." Her smile is forced now. When he doesn't speak or make a move to get his wheelchair into motion,

I point to the three half-eaten cookies beside the Crokinole board and say, "You need more than sugar to keep you going."

I back the wheelchair from the table, helping him put on an extra sweater because, he says, "They never turn up the heat in the dining room."

I push him toward the dining hall. "She's like a little mouse herself," he says. "Your Aunt Margaret hit one with a broom once. She hated them. The way they scurry around and squeak."

The room, when we arrive, is warm. The aide gestures me toward an empty seat; my father gestures me closer. "You see how they treat you?" he says. "All that hustle and bustle."

The aide makes a pushing motion with her hands, and my father shakes his head. "Don't you ever let yourself be beholden to anybody."

## Hands-on

After forty years of being homeowners, my wife and I discover our first mouse droppings, ones she confirms by finding pictures on the Internet. The thin dark turds are in the cupboard where we store boxes of cereal, crackers, and other vulnerable items. I drive to the hardware store immediately.

The clerk shows me four shelves of ways to rid my house of mice and rats. Immediately I spot the familiar spring trap. The brand name is Victor, and it looks to be a replica of the ones my father used. Some things actually do never change. The company's location, I marvel, is Lititz, Pennsylvania, the city where Mast lived when he applied for his patent. The price has gone up, but at \$1.89 it still feels like a bargain. It weighs almost nothing in my hand. Like balsa wood, I think, but I know, because I've researched, that these are made of pine.

The rat-sized Victor trap costs \$3.49. It's identical except for its dimensions, and the increased size immediately makes me uneasy. The clerk, without embarrassment, says, "This is what I use," and for a moment I think that the trap she is holding is meant to capture mice alive, but she touches it inside and I hear the familiar snap. The mouse is out of sight when it's killed. For a few dollars more I can avoid seeing the dead mouse, but it makes me consider how difficult it might be to clean if

the kill is messy. Whether the people who buy it intend never to reuse it.

A moment later I learn that if I want to capture them live, I'd need to pay \$14.99. Being humane has a price, but what I notice is the humane trap closely resembles my father's homemade rabbit traps, the two he built and placed in our backyard garden from April to October. He would drive a few miles before he released the rabbits in a field. The one time I rode along out of curiosity, I listened to the terrified animal pawing at the box as we drove, pledging to myself to find excuses not to ride along again.

D-Con is the other main brand in the hardware store. They sell a "No View, No Touch" trap, a quality I imagine many people appreciate. Attracted by bait, the mouse enters an "entryway." When the owner inspects the trap and the door is closed, the owner simply tosses the whole thing away. There is another type of "no touch" trap that is advertised as "reusable." The buyer is directed to hold the trap over the garbage can and release the mouse before resetting it again. The world seems to have become as squeamish as I was when I began to work in the bakery.

"There's some so expensive we don't carry them, but they can be ordered," the clerk says. I nod, reading the label on the "Quick Kill Glue Trap." "Kill mice quickly so there's no waiting and possibly squealing for days," it promises, though using glue rather than the trusty spring seems to guarantee the opposite.

I choose two of the cheap spring traps, but I can't help but look up the Victor website: The clerk was correct. If I want the high-tech Victor traps, I can buy electronic killers for \$199. And if I want to communicate with the Victor company, I can "like" them on Facebook where people can ask questions and give endorsements. When I check, I discover there are currently 4,391 people who "like" Victor.

These days Victor sells ten million traps a year.

## In the Kitchen

My wife holds the springs on both traps down while I drop a bit of low-fat cheddar where it looks like bait belongs. The next morning both pieces of

cheese are gone, but the traps haven't been sprung. There is a fresh scattering of droppings.

The second night of baited traps produces the same results. My wife suggests a more expensive trap. "I've seen these things work a hundred times," I say, and this time I risk my fingers and place the cheese exactly in the middle of what looks to be the ideal spot. "There," I say, as if I've shown some sort of battle-tested bravery.

I'm up early the following morning. When I open the cupboard, I see it's been a clean kill, the mouse caught perfectly across the back of its neck. I carry the trap to the garage and drop it and the mouse into the half-filled black plastic bag, carefully retying it.

Even though I never touch the dead mouse, I scrub my hands long and hard. My wife, before

the morning is over, has thoroughly cleaned the cupboard and the leftover trap. She never sees the mouse. She never asks what it looked like. ♣

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#### Note

\*Credit for the words to *Three Blind Mice* usually goes to Thomas Ravenscroft, who published the verse for the first time in a book of rhymes in 1609.

## PRAYER

In bed, your sister preparing herself  
for sleep, that slow spiral  
of consciousness, inward, perhaps,  
so the dream pooled at the stem of her brain

began its delicate splay into a childhood memory  
which, this time, included flight. Perhaps, too,  
the premonition of wings wakened her  
seconds before a moth, fluttering blindly

in that moonless room, dove  
straight into her ear. At the ER, her head  
on an examining table, the doctor's  
slight silver pincers extracted the thing

still flapping in tenacious reflex, and your sister  
could not, after such length in the keen knells  
of panic, tell the difference between  
the pulse in her ear and the moth's

jockeying beat. Is it out? she'd ask, the moth  
long gone. *Is it out?* And afterward—silence  
so bright it filled the dusty aperture of her ear  
like daybreak the corners of your Auntie's

kitchen, wick-white, linen-white, sun-white.

Susanna Childress

# On Facing Up To and Forgiving

## Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing*

Ross Moret and John Moret

**A**N EARLY SCENE IN JOSHUA OPPENHEIMER'S documentary *The Act of Killing* finds Anwar Congo, the film's central figure, on the roof of what is now a handbag shop in Sumatra, Indonesia. He is an old and bespectacled man, perhaps in his late sixties, sporting a green, short-sleeved, button-up shirt that remains untucked from his smart, white slacks. He smiles knowingly at the camera, seemingly lighthearted and sure of himself as he fastens a metal wire to a pipe attached to the building, commenting matter-of-factly, "We have to re-enact this properly." Congo's demeanor might suggest that he is about to reveal an old cooking recipe or a trick he learned long ago on the way toward perfecting a hobby. Instead, he is re-enacting his preferred method of killing human beings, many of whom he killed on this very roof. He and his compatriots began by beating their victims to death but found that method too bloody. So they began to strangle people with metal wire instead. Faster. Easier. Cleaner. After wrapping the wire around the neck of a pretend victim and simulating a full-bodied pulling motion, Congo smiles at the camera and describes how he turned to alcohol, drugs, and various amusements in order to forget the killings. Then he dances the cha-cha.

In 1965 there was a failed Communist coup in Indonesia; in response, the military enlisted the help of gangsters and paramilitary groups in seeking out and executing over a million "Communists." Anyone opposed to the new military dictatorship could be accused. With the direct aid of Western governments, the defeat of Communism in Indonesia was considered a Cold War success. Little scholarship has been done and very little media attention has been paid to these mass killings.

*The Act of Killing* is documentary filmmaker Joshua Oppenheimer's attempt to bring these

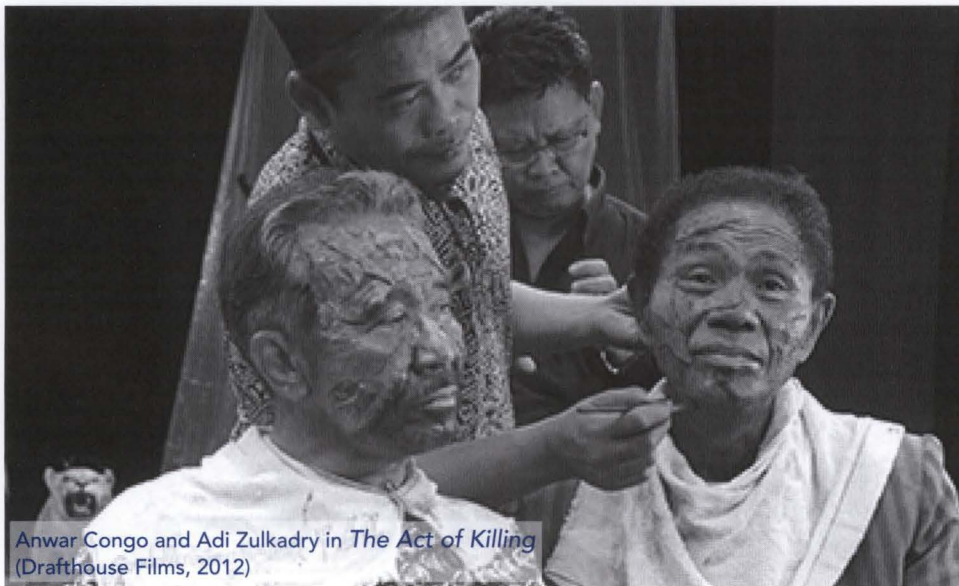
gruesome stories to light. The result is a film that is deeply disturbing, honest yet deceitful, strangely surreal, introspective, self-delusional and, at times, even funny. It is incredibly difficult to watch, but in doing so the viewer gets the sense that she is seeing something important and, as such, the film is a profound and brilliant study of evil, humanity, and how we make sense of it all through narrative. Oppenheimer argues that storytelling is a device that is enmeshed in human culture and used to distance ourselves from "monsters," to define our societies, and to reframe horrific acts such as those of Congo and his comrades.

Oppenheimer's film refuses to simply point the finger and let us gawk at an evil society, as we stand comfortably apart. Instead, he lets those that committed those horrible acts in 1965 tell their own stories. He allows them to become people to us. Like social psychologist and genocide scholar James Waller, Oppenheimer seems to be saying that "...it is ordinary individuals, like you and me, who commit extraordinary evil" (Waller 2002, 19). Indeed, we become close to them and begin to see ourselves in them.

The culture that Oppenheimer unveils is eerily similar to images of Nazi Germany; one of the great contributions of the film is how it illustrates that the abuses and corruption that enabled the 1965 massacres are still in place. Indeed, Oppenheimer commented at a question and answer session in Minneapolis, "I had this feeling that I had wandered into Germany forty years after the Holocaust and found the Nazis still in power." Perpetrators boast openly about cutting the throats of ethnic Chinese, raping whole villages, and sadistically torturing those suspected of being enemies of the state. Parades are held for the paramilitaries, the Vice President publicly supports the use of violence against "Communist"

threats, and public television programs glorify the killings.

Social vignettes like this are pivotal in establishing context in the film; however, the heart of the film is comprised of the more intimate interactions with the individual perpetrators. Oppenheimer began the project by seeking out the families of the victims, but found that fear of reprisal kept them largely silent. He also learned that the executioners, gangsters, and paramilitary groups are still applauded as heroes in Indonesia and are proud to relate stories of how they killed. After conducting forty interviews with such



Anwar Congo and Adi Zulkadry in *The Act of Killing* (Drafthouse Films, 2012)

people, Oppenheimer met Anwar Congo and Adi Zulkadry.

Congo and Zulkadry, both of whom were eager to tell their stories, started out as “movie theater gangsters,” scalping tickets at a cinema that showed American films. They were eventually recruited by the “New Order” government to interrogate and execute alleged Communists. They did so efficiently and ruthlessly. Oppenheimer encouraged them to tell their stories in any way they desired. Congo and Zulkadry began by simply recounting their experiences but soon turned to physical demonstrations of their methods. These demonstrations evolved into re-enactments on soundstages with make-up, costumes, and props and were finally mixed with imaginative depictions of Congo’s nightmares and even an astounding scene of

imagined reconciliation between Congo and his Communist victims.

Nevertheless, most of the film is comprised of dialogue or monologues aimed at the camera, and these are the primary devices through which we get to know Zulkadry. He is now successful. One scene shows him with his wife and daughter as they visit a mall and receive massages. He has learned to deal with the situation through repression. The key to avoiding feelings of guilt, he tells Congo, “is to find the right excuse.” The ends, for Zulkadry, justify the means. Intellectualizing his actions, then, Zulkadry justifies himself by appeal-

ing to a form of power-centered relativism that allows him to reject things like international law. “The Geneva Conventions may be today’s morality, but tomorrow we’ll have the Jakarta Conventions and dump the Geneva Conventions. War crimes are defined by the winners. I’m a winner. So I can make my own

definition.” Zulkadry is the most forthright perpetrator in the film. He calls killing “the worst crime” and readily admits that he and his companions were the cruel ones: not the Communists. However, he does not think that such information should be made public. “Not everything true is good,” he comments, before suggesting that the truth of their cruelty might give the victims’ families enough legitimacy to rekindle the struggle.

Congo’s attitude is much different. He has become an intensely conflicted man. Like Augustine in the grips of his intense, internal struggle with sin, Congo seems to cry out “Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet.” On one hand, he seems to relish his image as a gangster, appearing on television in a cowboy hat, smiling about his escapades, and attending paramilitary meetings. On the other hand, he is deeply



tormented by the memory of his actions. His nightmares intensify as the film progresses, and he begins to feel more and more overwhelmed, describing his victims as ghosts who continually haunt him. A re-enactment of a village being burned is too much for him; he relays, "I didn't think it would be this awful." During the filming of an interrogation scene, he sits in a chair with a blindfold over his eyes. His friend and fellow gangster, Herman Coto, wraps a wire around his neck and begins to pull. Congo fidgets and shakes, waving Herman off. They remove the blindfold, and he slumps in the chair, visibly weak, saying, "I can't do that again." Later, he says to Oppenheimer, "I could feel what the people I tortured felt." Oppenheimer steps in to speak for us, "Actually, the people you tortured felt a lot worse, because they weren't making a movie. They were actually going to die."

Max Weber wrote that there is a "universal phenomenon," a "basic psychological pattern" such that "When a man who is happy compares his position with that of one who is unhappy, he is not content with the fact of his happiness, but desires something more, namely the right to this happiness, the consciousness that he has earned his good fortune, in contrast to the unfortunate one who must equally have earned his misfortune" (Weber 491). The word for the satisfaction of this impulse is legitimation. Both Zulkadry and Congo openly admit this necessity. The difference is that while Zulkadry feels legitimized, Congo's sense of legitimation is crumbling.

*The Act of Killing* is a film about the narratives that allow people to legitimize horrific acts, but it is also about the process of telling a narrative that brings these acts to light. Acting out the killings in front of a camera forces the perpetrators to face up to their acts of killing and pushes the audience to hold them, and ourselves, accountable for the continuing legitimation of such acts. As such, it is a film not only about evil, but about the requirements of repentance and reconciliation as well. Yet it is difficult to know how far Congo, or Indonesian society, or the world community is willing to go down the long and difficult road that facing up to these crimes would require. Near the end of the film, Congo constructs a scene that truly

defies description, but includes a host of dancing women, a waterfall, a cross-dressing gangster, and for a soundtrack "Born Free" by Andy Williams. He is then presented with a gold medal by two of his victims who thank him "a thousand times" for executing them and sending them to heaven. Legitimation writ large.

And so the last sequence is perhaps the best way to sum up this rich and complex film. We return to the place where many of Congo's crimes occurred; the rooftop of a handbag shop with weather beaten tiles and grates—this time at night. Congo no longer seems lighthearted, but weighed-down. He is unable, or unwilling, to look into the camera, slowly explaining, "This is where we tortured and killed the people we captured. I know it was wrong, but I had to do it." He stands and describes how they disposed of the bodies. He takes a burlap sack and explains that in order to keep things discreet it was important to conceal the body in a bag. In mid-sentence, he stops and leans over, holding his stomach. He then begins to retch, but nothing comes of it. All of the guilt and remorse haven't led to any type of forgiveness or reconciliation. It's only dry-heaving. ♣

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# Taking Flight

## John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*

Erin Strybis

IN MANY WAYS, HAZEL GRACE LANCASTER IS a typical sixteen-year-old: she loves hiding away in her room reading, has a mild obsession with reality television (*ANTM*—America's Next Top Model—is her favorite), and has a penchant for sarcasm. But Hazel is anything but typical. She is incredibly smart, observant, witty, and often wise beyond her years. She also has experienced an uncommon amount of pain and continually fights to survive.

Hazel has cancer. "Thyroid originally but with an impressive and long-settled satellite colony in my lungs," (5) she explains each week at the support group she resentfully attends. "I went... for the same reason that I once allowed nurses with a mere eighteen months of graduate education to poison me with chemicals: to make (my parents) happy. There is only one thing (worse) in this world than biting it from cancer when you're sixteen, and that's having a child who bites it from cancer" (7–8). Hazel's outlook is shaped by the knowledge that she is living on borrowed time, that sooner or later, the cancer living in her cells will be the cause of her demise. It is no wonder she feels depressed.

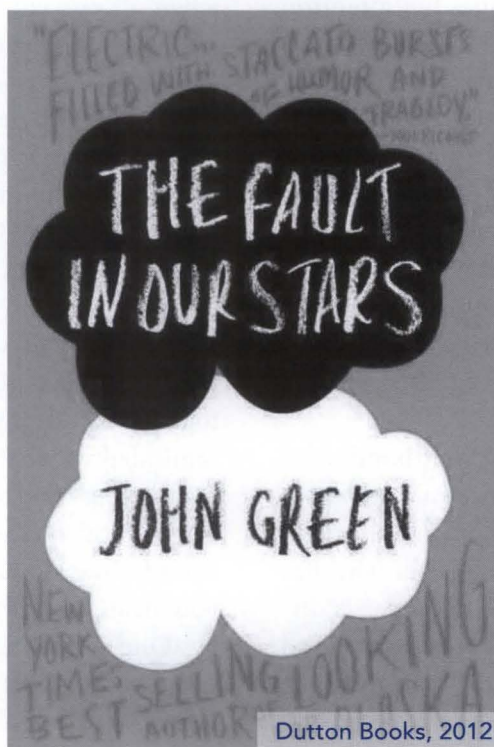
And yet—if you are wondering why to read a young adult novel about a girl who has cancer—it is because John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* is not depressing. Quite the contrary: it is

engaging and funny and entertaining. Moreover it is poignant, uplifting and one of the only books I read this past summer that I just could not put down. I laughed out loud and also shed some tears as I followed Green's young characters as they wrestled with big issues of love, mortality, and wanting to matter. In many ways, it is a coming-of-age novel that takes place largely against the backdrop of hospital and home life.

It doesn't really matter if you're sixteen or sixty; *The Fault in Our Stars* is relevant across generations. As NPR's reviewer Rachel Syme said, "Green writes books for young adults, but his voice is so compulsively readable that it defies categorization. He writes for youth, rather than to them, and the difference is palpable." That is the reason this novel soars: Green's characters are incredibly intelligent, vulnerable, and authentic, with a remark-

able depth of personality that sets them apart from their contemporaries.

Since being diagnosed with cancer at the age of thirteen, Hazel has missed out on so much of her childhood. Thanks to an experimental drug called Phalanxifor (which exists only in the novel), her cancer is in remission, but when readers first meet Hazel, she is still living vicariously through the pages of the novels she devours and the reality television she follows. Her mother, seeing this, says: "Hazel, you deserve a life."



Dutton Books, 2012

Hazel joins a support group to please her parents, but she despises going and attends as an observer rather than a participant, maintaining a safe distance from other members and avoiding any real emotional connections. Her closest acquaintance is Isaac, a fellow member with whom she trades exasperated sighs throughout each session. Then Isaac's friend, the devastatingly handsome cancer survivor, Augustus Waters, shows up at group and Hazel is propelled to step outside of her comfort zone.

A former basketball star, seventeen-year-old Augustus had osteosarcoma, which resulted in the tragic loss of his leg. Now his cancer is in remission. Charming, clever, and totally enamored with Hazel, Augustus piques her attention with his smoldering gaze and insightful comments to the group. After talking with Augustus after support group ends, Hazel realizes she has a crush too: "I liked Augustus Waters. I really, really, really liked him... I liked that he took *existentially fraught free throws*. I liked that he was a tenured professor in the Department of Slightly Crooked Smiles with a dual appointment in the Department of Having a Voice That Made My Skin Feel More Like Skin" (31). Hazel feels alive.

They plan a date and further bond over Hazel's favorite book, *An Imperial Affliction*. Written by a man named Peter Van Houten, the book is about a girl named Anna who has cancer. Van Houten's portrayal of cancer is different than anything Hazel has read before and it resonates with her. Hazel can't stop thinking about the book's cliffhanger ending. As they discuss it, Hazel says: "That's... what I like about the book in some ways. It portrays death truthfully. You die in the middle of your life, in the middle of a sentence. But I do—God, I really want to know what happens to everyone else. That's what I asked (the author) in my letters" (67). Hazel has sent several letters to Van Houten about the characters that are left behind when Anna dies, but does not receive any answers. It seems that Hazel's fixation with the ending of his novel might have something to do with her more deep-seated desire to know what life is like beyond cancer or after death.

In a dramatic romantic gesture, Augustus decides to use his wish from "The Genies" (similar to the Make-a-Wish Foundation) to help Hazel fulfill her deepest wish—to get answers to her questions about *An Imperial Affliction*. Getting these answers, however, means traveling to Amsterdam to visit the one and only Peter Van Houten in his home. On the plane to Amsterdam, Augustus makes a bold confession to Hazel: "I'm in love with you, and I'm not in the business of denying myself the simple pleasure of saying true things. I'm in love with you, and I know that love is not just a shout into the void, and that oblivion is inevitable, and that we're all doomed and that there will come a day when all our labor has returned to dust, and I know that the sun will swallow the only earth we'll ever have, and I am in love with you" (153). It is an elegant, beautiful admission of love, and a statement that makes Hazel's heart hurt with happiness. The rest of what happens on the journey, and to Hazel and Augustus, I will not disclose. You will have to pick up the book to find out.

What I will share is what stood out most to me in this novel: the remarkable coming together of two young kindred spirits. I was reminded of what it was like to be sixteen and for the first time to have someone recognize me the way I always wanted to be recognized, to go from feeling alone in the world to being so close you mean the world to someone.

One cannot read *The Fault in Our Stars* and not wonder what to make of the title, which John Green noted on his blog was inspired by Shakespeare: "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, / But in ourselves, that we are underlings" (*Julius Caesar* Act 1, scene 2). Shakespeare says that it is not fate, but our own faults that doom us. Nevertheless so much of Hazel's and Augustus's personal narratives are prescribed by the fault in their bodies—the cancer they cannot control and do not deserve. They do not know what sort of future they will have, and if their diseases will return, but they live with the reminder of their own fragility every day. Unlike Shakespeare, Green argues that cancer is not his characters' fault to claim at all but an incredibly

unfortunate fate. What makes this novel so triumphant is that these young people refuse to let their cancer define them.

Hazel and Augustus lift each other up beyond their circumstances to embrace life. They choose to live loudly even though their days are numbered, but truth be told, each and every one of us lives with this uncertainty. We are all mortal, all fragile, all vulnerable. Their romance, their story is a celebration of claiming and enjoying life despite the “fault in our stars.” It is about

stepping outside of one’s comfort zone, taking risks, and taking flight. ✦

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## THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL DAUGHTER

And when she returned in April, her thick hair cropped like grass above her ears, she could no longer imagine herself walking where the table hushed and the bed became a crazy quilt. So who would tell her what

she needed, why she had gone and where she was the joyless one? Grandma had descended into the cellar, slipped and frozen to the floor, and three days later when her friends came looking, said her false teeth chattering

on the kitchen sink had kept her alive. *Couldn't die wifout fem in her mouth.* Of course, that was January and now it was snowing out of season, the trees

losing their definition like a sheet. Perhaps her father could still find her if she slipped in like the child who slipped outside in a snow storm and drifted away.

Lois Marie Harrod

# Holding On

## Marjorie Maddox's *Local News from Someplace Else*

Philip C. Kolin

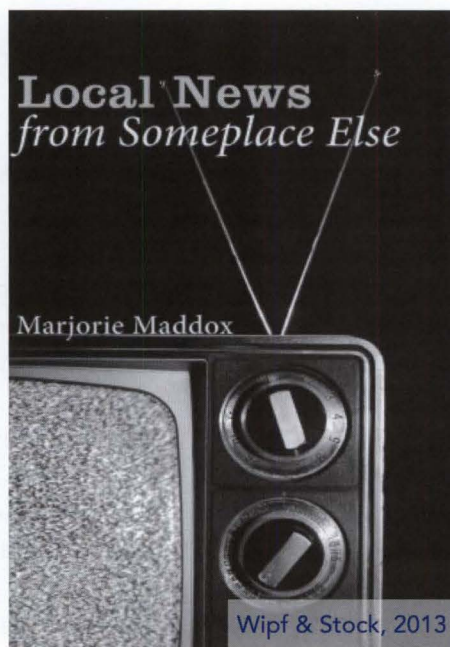
LONGTIME SPEAKER OF THE US HOUSE of Representatives, Tip O'Neil staunchly believed that "all politics is local." In her ninth collection of poetry, *Local News from Someplace Else*, Marjorie Maddox maintains that joys and tragedies, national and global, are local as well. A courageous collection of sixty-five poems divided into three untitled sections, *Local News* charts some of the most soul-wrenching traumas in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Taking titles and epigraphs from newspaper headlines, Maddox offers poems on 9/11; school shootings at Columbine, Santana High, West Nickel Mines, and Central, Pennsylvania; floods; Hurricanes Sandy and Katrina; the Oklahoma tornadoes; kidnappings; gang executions; airplane crashes. But *Local News from Someplace Else* does more than bemoan apocalypse now. It issues a brave wakeup call to stop seeking "relief in reliability" and to pull ourselves "away from [our] picket-fence memory" (5) to look beyond an "overly optimistic horizon" (48). What dooms us is resting in the quotidian, not examining our "fabricated lives" (46).

Maddox challenges the unexamined ordinary life using a keen theological pun on the constant hours of the Mass. In her poem on "June 1st Liturgy," she relates a story about a retired priest who "stretches truth/across a congregation chewing the Ordinary" (25). By the poem's hopeful end, the narrator affirms, "We believe everything/in all its extraordinary rhythms,/hum a liturgy between

Buds/composed from your leftover Bach." In another poem, "Minersville Diner," she expostulates: "we pass into the life we pretend is safe/from explosion, from unexpected/and total collapse" (40), our delusions engineered and aided by television, that "three channel, living room imagination" (8), and by "YouTube depictions of history" (22). Fittingly, a picture of a television set, circa 1960s, with rabbit ears and twist knobs, adorns the cover of Maddox's book, the fuzziness on the screen an iconic reflection of our static lives. There is a "price we pay for turbulence" (44), Maddox proclaims.

No one pays a higher price than families, and especially children, in Maddox's poems. In Maddox's America, faith and children are our central hope, and yet the young also are kidnapped, hunted down, their lives not unlike the holy

innocents under Herod's wrathful knife (Matthew 2:16). For Maddox, a comfortable America is a fiction. As Gertrude Stein said over three quarters of a century ago, "There is no there anymore." The land of domestic peace and harmony has vanished. In another poem, "Later," Maddox alludes to how America has changed: "At fourteen, my daughter/can't recall Harris and Klebold,/cafeterias mangled by massacre" (21), and yet the dangers continue to mount. In "Fifth-Grader Imagined Taking Over School," the poet punctures the myth that residents of Newtown doubtless lived by: "All the safe, small towns—/gas streetlights silly in retrospect—/proclaim surprise. What else/



when their children's open/veins stain the school tiles?" (13). Schools have ceased being sanctuaries.

Maddox's style is conversational, confessional, and reads like a diary of the soul's wounds: "My baby and I stay home/from the funeral for the murdered child,/unrecognizably battered and stabbed/in last week's news photos" (12). Nearly sixty years after his martyrdom, shades of Emmett Till still haunt America. In "Seven-Year-Old Girl Escapes from Kidnappers," Maddox conjoins us to the victim: "And we climb with her/out of that abandoned basement/through the now-broken window,/her mouth and wrists a raw witness/of what she clawed through,/a temper tantrum to reclaim her life" (27). In another poem she subverts media imagery to make her point: "All week they've [the media] stolen [a missing] daughter's face,/rolled it up, delivered it in late editions/to each waiting neighbor, all of whom/are quoted passionately as saying,/She comes from a good family./We don't understand" (14). Maddox's grim irony catches and indicts us. No wonder that she confesses in one poem, "I had a life disappear once." In an unexpected line of pure lyrical beauty, she asks, "How can the wrens sing?" (20).

Paradoxically, though, Maddox excoriates yet redeems us from the violence and terror of this world through the domestic lens of a mother, a wife, a caregiver. Bombings, shootings, crashes, cancer, the unleashed fury of fanaticism erupt in *Local News*, that also—just as importantly—includes poems about what happens while "At the Gynecologist's," and while "Swimming Pregnant at the YWCA," showing a daughter the Mona Lisa, and relishing extra thick towels at a hotel. With the skill of a poet versed in both pain and promise, Maddox creates memorable vignettes in "Twin Infants at the Olan Mills Portrait Studio" (76), "Woman, 91, Frozen to Floor" (53), and "Goldfish" (85).

In many ways, Maddox belongs to a feminist tradition of American poetics stretching back to Anne Bradstreet and Emily Dickinson and then on to Gwendolyn Brooks, Anne Sexton, Jeanne Murray Walker, and Luci Shaw, a tradition of using domestic settings, situations, and tropes to explore political and moral issues. Miraculously, Maddox asserts that women "are hungry for spirit" (23) and "the blue of possibility" (55) with a continued capacity for empathy and forgiveness (24). One of her most allusive poems about hope, "Backwards Barn Raising," was occasioned by an October 2006 Amish schoolhouse shooting:

Can what is lost be leveled?  
You hold each other's hands,  
  
huddle in an unending circle,  
"...as we forgive those who trespass  
against us."

Even out of this,  
you build forgiveness.

According to Maddox, our strength comes in part from the fact that "what we hold/is ourselves holding on" (80). The ultimate question in Maddox's poetic theodicy for the third millennium of Christianity is this: "And those of us, the survivors of 'bad things,'/of storms blindingly fierce and electric,/ even on clear, bright days, will we continue, with hope/or fear, to look up straight/ into whatever warms us?" (62). Like Maddox, I believe that while we may flicker, the *Lux Mundi* never does. ♣

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# Bearing Our Crosses in Marriage

Paul Koch

**O**UR SMALL-TOWN LIBRARY HAS A MODEST collection of books, and so the ability to request books from other libraries is a blessing. The librarian must laugh, though, when a pile of books comes in for our family. Most recently, a pile arrived with titles such as *Healthy Sleep Habits, Happy Child*, and *Solve Your Child's Sleep Problems*. It does not take a rocket scientist to figure out that the Koch kids are not sleeping through the night.

Sleepless nights are just one of the crosses God places on marriage. It is amazing, actually, that our world is so surprised by the inevitable difficulty of marriage and family. Hollywood superstar Ben Affleck shocked the Academy Awards audience by admitting that marriage is work. His comments were spoken in gratitude to his wife for working together on their marriage for ten years, and he admitted that it is the best kind of work there is, but reading the blogosphere the next day, you would think he had called his wife a shrew.

Popular culture is not the only place where people stumble over the difficulty of family life. If hymnals are any indication, then the church, too, has been reluctant to claim its teaching that there are crosses here and that God himself places them there.

A few generations ago, some Lutheran prayer books (e.g. *Lutheran Liturgy and Agenda* of 1921) had pastors instructing brides and grooms during the wedding: "Hear also the cross which by reason of sin God hath laid upon this estate." The pastor went on to recite God's curse upon our first parents after they had eaten the forbidden fruit. These books echoed Martin Luther's "Marriage Booklet for Simple Pastors" which included similar words.

In 1958, the *Service Book and Hymnal* order for marriage referred to the cross, but with a subtle

difference. The minister says, "And although, by reason of sin, many a cross hath been laid thereon, nevertheless our gracious Father in heaven doth not forsake his children." Many a cross has been laid on marriage, but the hymnal doesn't make clear by whom.

By 1978, in *Lutheran Book of Worship's* marriage service, explicit reference to the cross disappeared. Prior to the vows, the minister instructs the couple about God's founding of marriage, and then adds, "Because of sin, our age old rebellion, the gladness of marriage can be overcast and the gift of the family can become a burden." One can feel the liturgists hedging their predictions. Things might get overcast. We're not promising. But it can happen. These changes were no oversight. The *Commentary on the Lutheran Book of Worship* tells us that references to the cross were avoided precisely because the editors didn't want to imply that suffering and hardship were God's doing.

The latest round of Lutheran hymnals goes a step further. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* tucks those words about marriage becoming overcast into an optional part found only in the minister's edition. To be sure, there is an alternative set of vows in which couples promise faithfulness "in joy and in sorrow, in plenty and in want, in sickness and in health." But these are only alternative B, benchwarmers, if you will, as though hardship were an option. We've gone from "God places a cross on you" to "a cross is placed on you" to "you might have trouble in your marriage" to "it's all good!" No wonder a Hollywood star shocks people with a bit of loving honesty.

In his commentary on Genesis, Martin Luther speaks of God's curse on our first parents, noting that the cross is applied to the body, which "has its cross and death here," leaving the new life created in the Spirit. In the same commentary he speaks

about the fruit of misfortunes: "They tend to humble and hold down our nature, which could not be held in check without a cross." Traditionally, Christians have understood cross-bearing in two ways. One is more general, referring to various kinds of affliction that God brings upon us, such as illness or punishment for crimes. The other is more specific, referring to the suffering that Christians endure for their faith and confession of Christ. Luther believed that this second kind was the true cross-bearing. Nevertheless, he continued to speak of cross-bearing in its more general sense. In his Genesis commentary, for example, he speaks of God's curse on our first parents, noting that the cross is applied to the body, which "has its cross and death here," leaving the new life created in the Spirit. In the same commentary he speaks about the fruit of misfortunes: "They tend to humble and hold down our nature, which could not be held in check without a cross."

In giving us crosses, God curbs our sinful flesh, the old self. My sinful flesh would rather stay up late surfing the Internet, reading the latest developments on the Minnesota Vikings, but then I face the prospect of another night holding a crying infant, or waking up to lead a toddler to the potty. As interesting as quarterback controversies can be, there is a high premium on sleep when you can get it.

Furthermore, these crosses make Christians long for God's help and the final day of deliverance. The disciples asked Christ, "Teach us to pray." The Lord's Prayer is his immediate answer to that request, but his injunction to take up the cross is another. By giving us a cross to carry, our Lord teaches us to pray, showing us the limits of our ability to care for ourselves, and with his prayer "Our Father who art in heaven," he shows us where to find help in such times. When the crosses are especially heavy, we yearn all the more for the great hope we have in heavenly glory.

When considering cross-carrying, one notices a couple of points that are often missing from current discourse. The first is the inevitability of the cross. You cannot run away from it.

Since becoming parents, my wife and I have received a barrage of parenting magazines. The headlines on the covers have something in

common: they offer ways to avoid the cross, or at least shorten its duration. *Parents* magazine has promised "The 1-Week Fix for Your Child's Worst Behavior" as well as "The 1-Minute Fix for Biting, Tantrums, and Hitting." If you're really short on time, the February 2009 issue offers the "5-Second Discipline Fix."

The problem with all such methods is that they can't deal with the root of the problem, namely the stubborn sin of our old nature. Our Lord has given us one remedy, one that requires only a little more

**If when Christ calls a man, he  
bids him come and die, then my  
vocation is where I am being  
put to death, day after day.**

time than the "5-Second Fix," that is, the amount of time to say, "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Simple in its execution, yet profound in its effects, such birth by water and the Spirit means death to the old nature. However, even after baptism that very nature continues insisting that it is alive and well until it is buried in the ground, and so God continues applying the cross as long as we are breathing.

Parenting magazines have been working their way into the conscience of my parishioners. I have heard moms and dads ask why it never gets easier, or what they are doing wrong that their children are so disobedient. What technique have we missed? If there are five-second fixes, why is my family such a chore? Or, why are my neighbors' kids such brats? What are *they* doing wrong?

Family life is full of demands, and left in the conscience, it leads to despair or judgment of one's neighbor. If we reclaim our teaching that there are crosses in marriage and family, and at the same time preach the one who died on the cross, we can hope to seat Christ on the throne of the conscience where he belongs, with its demands. Take



up your work of marriage and parenting. You are free from its condemnation.

Another point missing from current discourse is that God is the one who applies the cross. We take up our crosses, because we trust the one who has given them to us. This is especially important to remember when facing those afflictions that are apparently meaningless. I can make sense of the loneliness and heartache a husband and wife feel when there is no mutual forgiveness, but how does one make sense of a child's death? Bereaved parents don't need explanations, but they do need Christ's mercy and the hope of eternal life. They need a heavenly Father with loving and strong hands into which they may commend all their questions and sorrows.

It would be easier if we could choose our own crosses. I might choose something more glamorous than rocking a crying child. Frederick Buechner suggests that one's vocation is where one's gladness meets the world's need, but I'm never that glad about being roused out of sleep. Bonhoeffer provides a better definition. If when Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die, then my vocation is where I am being put to death, day after day. It hardly requires the reflective moment, asking myself where gladness and need intersect. Look around. Who is standing next to you?

Jesus' words about serving one's neighbor are unsettling, precisely because he speaks of one's neighbor, not humanity in general. The Samaritan helped the man in his path. For most of us, most of the time, the person in our path is a spouse, child, parent, sibling, coworker, or classmate. You do not have to go far to carry the cross. Just get married and stay married. Have kids.

In his marriage booklet, Luther offers a boon to brides and grooms who are preparing to carry their crosses. "This is your comfort," he says, "that you may know and believe that your estate is pleasing to God and blessed by him." To human reasoning, such comfort seems small. When I am suffering, I want a way out of that suffering, not simply a change of mind and heart. Who cares if God is happy? I want to be happy. And yet for Christians, faith is always our consolation.

It is helpful to remember the context of Luther's words. Repeatedly in his writings on marriage, he supplies husbands and wives with encouragement that God's word sanctions their union. Whereas the church had taught that monastic life was a higher calling, spiritual as opposed to carnal, Luther discovered in scripture that God commanded and approved of marriage.

The relevance of Luther's words are perhaps difficult to see. Not many today feel pressured to flee domestic life in favor of monastic vows. The pressure to flee, however, remains. At one time, people fled marriage and childrearing for tonsure and cowl. Today, they flee for necktie and pantsuit. A parishioner once told me that she felt like a failure, that she had betrayed the women who had supported her in her education, simply because she had stopped working to stay home and raise her children. The question remains: do our gods smile on us in marriage? Those things we fear, love, and trust the most—whether they are friends or societal standards of justice and success—are they pleased by marriage and children? Luther's comments are quite relevant. There is a God, the Father of our Lord Jesus, who smiles on husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, when they discharge their familial duties with faith in his Son.

What does it mean that God smiles on you? Look at his Son. At Jesus' Baptism, God tore open the heavens to declare that he was pleased with his Son. Jesus trusted in that pleasure, and knew that his Father was caring for him even more than he cared for ravens and lilies. His Father's pleasure also led him to the cross, but then beyond the walls of the tomb. By faith, your God is smiling on you, and you will find more blessings than ravens and lilies. You will also find a cross to carry, as well as a place to lay it down. ✝

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## COSMOS

no way of knowing how many there may be

the prime numbers are

God's fingers

and all other numbers are

transparent monofilaments fanning out

from each of God's odd digits

at the frayed ends of which are

all the other things

times and places – every elsewhere all at once

suspended –

even this

thing, *sadness*, and how

far all the numbers are from understanding

Brad Davis

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# For the Birds

Joel Kurz

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**L**AST FALL, DURING A BREAK AT A SEMINARY symposium on justice as the Church's faith in action, I decided to head outside for a breather before the next session. I was in a casual conversation with another pastor when he reached the door and pushed it open. On the steps was a wood thrush, beautiful but recently devoid of life. I wanted to say something and stop but didn't since my companion was talking and moving ahead. Once we parted ways a bit later, I returned to the steps and moved the small creature to a hidden area underneath a bush. I felt sadness and said a prayer of thanksgiving that this bird had lived, however short or long.

Some might find this eccentric or suspect and remind me that it was "just a bird," but if Jesus could say that not even a common sparrow falls to the ground "apart from the Father" (Matt. 10:29), cannot his human creatures stop to take notice too? Jesus did say, after all, that we should pause amidst the anxiety-ridden pursuit of life's necessities to "look at the birds of the air" who don't plant or harvest or gather into barns yet see that the Father feeds them (Matt. 6:26) and gives them also their daily bread through their daily work. About these words of Jesus, Luther wrote,

You see, He is making the birds our schoolmasters and teachers. It is a great and abiding disgrace to us that in the Gospel a helpless sparrow should become a theologian and a preacher to the wisest of men, and daily should emphasize this to our eyes and ears, as if he were saying to us: "If you do not know that you have supplies and cannot see them before your very eyes, you cannot trust God to give you food for one day..." But we are

as hard as stone, and we pay no attention even though we hear the great multitude preaching and singing every day.... We, who are rational people and who have the Scriptures in addition, do not have enough wisdom to imitate the birds (quoted in Marty 4–5, 7).

One cannot help but call to mind the celebrated account of St. Francis and the birds. Not long after his conversion, Francis went with a few companions to a castle and began to preach after instructing the swallows to keep silent for as long as he talked. They did, and Francis's fervent preaching brought forth new companions in his fledgling order. Not long later, Francis saw some trees along the roadside which were filled with birds. He went to those trees and preached to those birds. When he dismissed them with the sign of the cross, they took flight in the four directions and filled the air with songs of praise. Those avian creatures encouraged Francis and his brothers in entrusting themselves to the proclamation of Christ while depending daily on what the Father gives.

The birds are worth noticing. They have much to teach us about direction and changing course, about being attentive to what really matters and attending to the matters at hand. If we humans think something is demeaning or worthless, we often dismiss it as "for the birds," but it truly is amazing to see what birds do with the worthless and the waste of our "economy." And thinking of economy, it is astounding how frequently people who have never used a slingshot (which is most of us) speak of "killing two birds with one stone" as the mantra of efficiency. Remembering Francis and the birds and how he begged for stones when rebuilding the ruined chapel, I am quick to coun-

ter: "Let's let the birds live and build with the stone."

Luther was right; we often are hard as stone and pay no attention to things that should shake us out of ourselves and lead us to trusting praise and merciful action. The Lord spoke through the prophet Ezekiel to a wayward and mindless people who he promised to cleanse with water and reclaim through his Spirit; to remove their "heart of stone" and give them a "heart of flesh"—one alive with compassion and feeling (see 36:22–31). If we cannot live out gratitude and mercy in the small and seemingly insignificant spheres of life, how can we do so in even greater and more important situations?

One day St. Malo (c. 640) was working in the vineyard pruning vines when he took off his cloak and tossed it aside. On finishing the job and returning to get his cloak, he found that a wren had laid an egg in it. Recalling that God cares for the birds, he left it there until all the eggs were hatched and the wren's brood was safely on its way. People marveled at Malo's compassion and gloried in the care he extended to those smaller fellow creatures (Waddell 51).

In "Apologia," an essay about removing killed animals spotted on roadways, Barry Lopez related the incident of the sage sparrow he accidentally killed while driving through Idaho:

I rest the walloped bird in my left hand,  
my right thumb pressed to its chest. I feel  
for the wail of the heart. Its eyes glisten  
like rain on crystal. Nothing but warmth.  
I shut the tiny eyelids and lay it beside a  
clump of bunchgrass.... I nod before I go,  
a ridiculous gesture, out of simple grief  
(114).

I recalled Lopez's practice recently when I was out on a run and I encountered a dead squirrel on the pavement. I don't normally stop for anyone or anything while running, but it didn't take

long for me to know that I had to turn around and move the squirrel to the tall grass. I thought of the wood thrush at the seminary and the rightness of so simple an act as I finished the rest of my run. Nothing is beneath us if we are compelled to live out our Lord's compassion and mercy, trust and praise.

Oscar Wilde wrote more than a century ago about a "generation that knows the price of everything and the value of nothing." If we pause long enough from our self-imposed deadlines and market-driven desires, maybe we can look at the birds (and all of Creation) and see that all we need truly is given as we "seek first the reign and righteousness of God" (Matt. 6:33). Those who "set their hearts on the pilgrim's way" will find God's contentment and strength, but also that "the sparrow has found a home and the swallow a nest where she may lay her young; by the side of your altars, O Lord of hosts" (Psalm 84:4,2). ✚

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# Saint Timothy

## Patron Saint of Peach-Fuzzed Pastors

A. Trevor Sutton

I HAVE DECIDED TO GROW A MUSTACHE. I will channel my inner Tom Selleck and join the illustrious ranks of mustachioed men. With that bushy display of age growing on my upper lip, folks undoubtedly will believe that I am old enough to be a pastor.

At least once a day someone reminds me of how I am too young to be a pastor. Sometimes it is subtle. Upon introducing myself as a pastor the usual response is, "Oh neat, like a youth pastor?"

Other times it is more blatant. When I am calling upon my parishioners, the same hospital receptionist is perpetually shocked that a "young boy" (her words, not mine) could be a pastor.

This ageism is not all bad. At least once a day someone reminds me of how wonderful it is to have a youthful pastor. A parishioner says, "We just love the youthful excitement that you bring!" But once moments before I officiated a wedding, the mother of the bride felt compelled to tell me how glad she was that some "moldy, old pastor" wasn't performing her daughter's wedding.

Welcome to the peculiar sort of ageism that young clergy face. Folks want their thirty-year-

old pastor to have sixty years of life experiences under his belt. They want him to have grayish hair and a soul patch. They want him to drive a Buick and play Frisbee golf. People want their pastor to use a tablet during Bible study and be old enough to remember Charlton Heston lugging the stone tablets down from Mount Sinai.

This ageism is more than just an inconvenience for a baby-faced pastor; it is a symptom of a deeper ailment in the modern church. Just as there is an absurd longing for pastors who are both young and old, there is confusion surrounding what a pastor is actually supposed to do. The church has split expectations: it wants new leaders with new perspectives while it also wants old leaders maintaining old routines.

There is a deep yearning for pastors to preserve the age-old conventions of Christendom: an hour-long worship service, easy-to-sing hymns,

followed by coffee and doughnuts to wash it all down. We assume there will always be semi-assigned seating in the pews. And somewhere in Leviticus it is written that pastors must have salt-and-pepper hair, a tender disposition, and reasonably soft hands. This is the type of pastor



Stained glass depicting Saint Timothy, ca. 1160.  
Musée national du Moyen Âge, Paris.

people had as children; this is the type of pastor people want spreading a pall over their casket.

Yet, at the same there is a palpable longing for someone to come in and repair the church. The great affirmations given to young clergy are also veiled criticisms of the existing church. Allow me to translate: "We want the excitement of a young pastor," means, "This congregation hasn't been excited since Reagan left office." "A young pastor will relate better with our youth," means, "Maybe you can keep our kids from leaving the faith in droves." "We are excited to try your new ideas," means, "What we've been doing sure ain't working!"

The hope for church revitalization has been entrusted to the young, whether they asked for it or not. There is a perpetual optimism that maybe this next batch of pastors will be the ones to get it right. Maybe this next generation of pastors will be the ones to moisten dusty baptismal fonts and polish off all those the stale communion wafers.

Charged with such a task, it would seem that young clergy need a patron saint. Who better than Paul's peach-fuzzed protégé, Saint Timothy? I am certain that Timothy's stomach problems came from congregants calling him "Little Timmy." Constantly being confused with a member of the youth group would cause any pastor a level of anxiety.

Thankfully, Timothy had an older and wiser father in the faith to help him curtail the self-doubt brought on by ageism. Paul left this young pastor with a piece of advice: "O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you." (1 Timothy 6:20)

Timothy was not tasked with guarding the congregation's endowment. This wet-behind-the-ears pastor was not instructed to preserve potlucks, pipe organs, or attractional church programs. On the other hand, Timothy was also not there to form a praise band or decorate the youth room. Timothy was not given a bunch of gift cards and told to hang out at the Starbucks in Ephesus.

Instead, Timothy was there to guard the Gospel. He was charged with protecting the message of Jesus Christ. He was to pass it on to later generations in the same condition as when he had received it. It did not matter whether Timothy was young or old. It did not matter whether Timothy had a soul patch or a moustache. Paul could care less whether this young pastor played golf or played Settlers of Catan.

What mattered most was espousing the cross of Christ. Timothy was to guard with his

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life the proclamation that all things are made new through Christ's death and resurrection. The old life of death and decay is over; the new life of love and restoration has begun. Guarding this deposit was the crux of this young pastor's ministry. And guarding that very same deposit is the crux of any young pastor's ministry. ✠

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# Occupy the NFL!

David Lott

**W**E HUMAN BEINGS HAVE AN AMAZING capacity to avert our eyes from anything that might detract from the pleasure of something we enjoy. Fast-food burgers, fries, and shakes taste awfully good, as long as we do not look at the fat, sodium, and calorie counts attached to those meals. Everyone loves to score a bargain on an item of clothing, as long as we do not think about the workplace conditions and wretched lives of the garment workers who toil in places like Bangladesh. Our consumer goods, fresh foods, and homes all gratify us, at least until we stop to consider the natural and human resources exploited to make them available. There is hardly a daily human practice that doesn't carry some element of ethical risk or compromise to it, if we stop to think about it—but thinking about it too much can be exhausting.

Many Americans escape from such discomfiting concerns by watching sports on television, online, or in person, but it has become clear that even such entertainments can and should prick our consciences. This has become most evident in the case of professional football. There have been many disturbing accounts of how multiple concussions and other head injuries are leading to chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) and other irreversible brain diseases for untold numbers of football players. Recently the news media have reported that nearly three dozen NFL players have received post-mortem diagnoses of CTE. Prior to their deaths, many of these players exhibited symptoms of early-onset Alzheimer's, frontotemporal dementia, and unstable behaviors. Some committed suicide, most famously Atlanta Falcons safety Ray Easterling and San Diego Chargers linebacker Junior Seau. No one knows how many current or former players now live with CTE, but it is estimated that one in three

retired players will suffer some sort of cognitive impairment.

Brain injuries are not the only physical ailment afflicting football players. Robert Griffin III (RGIII), the acclaimed quarterback for Washington's NFL franchise, suffered a gruesome knee injury in the 2013 playoffs. What made this particular injury so controversial is that despite being injured early in the game, RGIII continued to play until his knee totally gave way. For weeks afterwards, football fans debated, often vociferously, whether to blame this potentially catastrophic injury on RGIII's stubborn insistence that he stay in the game or on coach Michael Shanahan's arrogant willingness to put his star's health at risk. RGIII was cleared to return as Washington's starting quarterback this fall, though no one seems fully certain whether the reconstructive knee surgery he underwent (for the second time in his football career) will permanently affect his play.

Of course, professional football is not the only sport in which players risk injuries, but professional football has come under particular scrutiny. As sportswriters Sally Jenkins and Robert Maese report in "Do No Harm," a powerful series in the *Washington Post*, "There is medicine, and then there is National Football League medicine, and the practice of the two isn't always the same" (March 16, 2013). Over the course of five in-depth articles, they show how players are pressured to play through pain and act against their best interests. The NFL hires doctors to give top players short-term fixes, which include drug therapies that involve their own dangers, including abuse and addiction. Of course, most football players are young men, many not yet out of their twenties. They often regard themselves as invincible, or at least infinitely capable of rebounding from injuries. They are less prone to think of the long-term effects of the hits and hurts they bear. Yes, the NFL has made efforts to raise awareness among its players, particularly rookies, but such knowledge is easily tossed aside when a game—and career possibilities—are on the line.

The truth is, the most profound effects of these injuries do not appear until years later, sometimes not until after retirement. As Jenkins and Maese report, many of the players who encounter later

problems discover that NFL health benefits do not cover their mounting medical bills, and that they do not qualify for disability benefits. This, despite the facts that one in four retired players will require a joint replacement (Weir, Jackson, and Sonnenga 2009) and that retired players are four times as likely as their generational peers to have neurodegenerative problems (Lehman *et al* 2012).

Because of these mounting problems, 4,500 former NFL players have filed lawsuits against the league, charging that the NFL “was aware of the evidence and the risks associated with repetitive traumatic brain injuries virtually at the inception, but deliberately ignored and actively concealed the information from the Plaintiffs and all others who participated in organized football at all levels” ([www.nflconcussionmdl.org](http://www.nflconcussionmdl.org)). Just before the start of the 2013 season, the NFL and these litigants reached a proposed settlement: the league offered to pay \$765 million to provide care for 18,000 players over the course of twenty years, plus provide an additional \$10 million for brain injury research. A judge has yet to approve the settlement, which will provide immediate compensation to players with the most pressing needs. However, many are hoping it will be rejected because it is inadequate to the long-term problems that past and future players will suffer. Moreover, the settlement shields the NFL from revealing what it has always known about the evidence and the risks.

Of course, \$765 million is no small amount of money. But the details of the settlement suggest that it will be inadequate to cover even the three hundred most severely impaired players, much less the thousands of others who might be eligible for compensation, and certainly not at a rate that meets their needs. In addition, families of players who died of CTE-related injuries before 2006 may not be eligible for compensation (Fainaru and Fainaru-Wada, “Some players may be out...”). Indeed, the settlement total is less than the estimated market price of the lowest-valued NFL team, the Oakland Raiders, which still ranks within the top fifty most valuable sports franchises in the world ([www.forbes.com](http://www.forbes.com)). And yet these spectacularly wealthy NFL owners still routinely threaten to withdraw their franchises from municipalities that balk at paying billions for new

stadiums that cater first and foremost to the richest ticket holders. The sheer economic power they wield over cities, players, and even fans is almost unfathomable.

But what is wrong with the proposed settlement is not only the relatively paltry sum the NFL is willing to pay the suffering retirees. The real ethical problem is that it salves the consciences

**The outsized devotion of football fans for their favored teams contributes to the very real physical and mental devastation experienced by thousands of players past, present, and future.**

of those of us who are football fans. Many of us will be too quick to argue that football players now know the risks when they decide to play the game and thus should bear the consequences. In effect, we will exonerate the team and the owners. Perhaps such thinking reflects how football fans relate to their sport. We show our allegiance to particular teams more than to particular players. After all, it is a team sport. That is not to say that individual players, particularly quarterbacks like RGIII, do not win and deserve their fame and fans’ devotion. But the fans of other team sports like basketball and baseball tend to focus more on individual players and follow their fortunes from team to team.

This kind of team loyalty seems a bit strange in a country like the United States that so celebrates individual achievement. But the outsized devotion of football fans for their favorite teams contributes to the very real physical and mental devastation experienced by thousands of players past, present, and future. Fans demand that players like RGIII tough it out, even if injured, for the good of the team, reinforcing other pressures players already face. So yes, the players go into the sport knowing



the risks, and most get paid extraordinary sums in return, but the real reason for this quid pro quo is our refusal as fans to own up to how our fandom abets these catastrophic injuries.

Professional football today is far more physically dangerous, even brutal, than the sport of ages past, in part because fans demand a more action-packed experience. Surely this mindset contributed to the "Bountygate" scandal a few years ago when several players and a defensive coordinator for the New Orleans Saints were charged with operating a slush fund that paid players bonuses for inflicting injuries on their opponents. And now NFL owners are discussing extending the regular season by two games, thus increasing the risk to their players.

If we really care for the welfare of the thousands of players who are suffering long-term debilitation for the prospect of a career in football, we must be willing to sacrifice at least some of the pleasures of fandom. Faced with the health risks associated with fast foods, many of us cut them out of our diets or consume them as only an occasional indulgence. Our rising awareness of the ethics of clothing manufacturing has led many consumers to forgo bargains and press for labor and environmental safeguards, and many retailers are responding. But are we willing to give up our game tickets, forgo buying team paraphernalia, and turn off broadcast games?

The NFL tried to settle the concussion lawsuits prior to the 2013 season to divert the public's attention away from its culpability and back to the game. But long-term injuries and the personal tragedies they create will not go away. Of course, we cannot make football played at any level risk-free. But if we refuse to give up the habits of fandom, perhaps we can find other ways to raise awareness of and confront the problems those habits encourage. Many parents are having second thoughts about letting their children play football and are steering them toward less risky sports. As schools with football programs are confronted with insurance liability issues, they will have to reconsider the viability of their programs. The pool for future professional players could become seriously depleted.

Sports fandom, like virtually every other life practice, carries ethical implications. Playing and loving the sport of football is no sin. But shouldn't we acknowledge that we have been baptized into its idolatrous culture, at least on Sunday afternoons and Monday nights? Professional football depends not only on players who provide the fodder for its violence, but also on spectators who passively accept the terms of play. The proposed NFL concussion settlement makes it clear that changing the ethos of football will depend on fans who love the sport and respect the players, not on the owners whose fortunes depend on our unquestioning devotion and their players' servitude. The question is, will we expend our energies to sustain this culture's power over our lives, or work to hasten its reformation? ♣

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# The NSA and Your E-Mail

## Better Read Than Dead?

Peter Meilaender

**H**EARING ABOUT THE NEWS AT HOME from foreign sources can be an interesting experience, as I discovered earlier this year when Edward Snowden leaked his story about massive electronic surveillance by the United States' National Security Administration. At the time, I was finishing teaching a study-abroad course in Vienna, and my information about the surveillance scandal thus came primarily from Austrian (and later, while traveling, Swiss and German) newspapers. Two things struck me. One was the immediate and high level of interest in the story. About a week or so after the news broke, as I was traveling by train from Vienna to Bern, I fell into conversation with the gentleman sitting across from me, an orchestra conductor. When he learned I was American, the first words out of his mouth were, "So, what do you think about this huge surveillance program your government is running?" This was not just an American scandal; it was of profound concern to many Europeans also.

The second thing that struck me was that the European level of interest not only seemed high, it seemed even higher than that in the United States. Perhaps this was in part due to greater feelings of vulnerability among Europeans, who, unlike American citizens, could not hope to exercise much influence on future debates over American policy. It was clear also that many Europeans—especially in Germany—felt a sudden sense of betrayal: their powerful ally and friend spied on them just as it did on everyone else. But almost every news article I read commented specifically on the low levels of interest and outrage among Americans over the revelations. Americans, it seemed, were taking this in stride, either assuming that their government had been engaged in such surveillance all along,

or even relieved to learn that it had, or at least confident that it would not abuse its power. News reports gave off a certain tone of resignation on this score: Europeans could not do anything about American electronic espionage, and Americans, alas, would not.

Now perhaps these reports exaggerated the degree of American indifference. I was not in a position to judge. And concern among American citizens did seem to increase over the course of the summer, as new revelations about NSA excesses appeared on an almost weekly basis. But in light of the amount of data being collected by the government about American citizens, one might have expected more anger among citizens, perhaps even a few political heads rolling. The details of NSA operations are fuzzy, but we do know that they collect "meta-data" on most telephone calls made in the US (i.e., the numbers of the phones making and receiving the calls, the calls' location, and their duration); huge quantities of Internet traffic, which is intercepted and temporarily stored for filtering and analysis; e-mail and social media posts for a significant but unknown number of people; and the content of phone calls for those people (again, the number is unknown) who have been identified as intelligence "targets." Because the government may collect additional information on these targets, their phone data leads out into networks of others with whom they have contact, potentially including a great many people. For much of the information collected, the NSA does not require a warrant. And there is at least some evidence to suggest that the NSA is moving toward a system in which they simply collect and store as much Internet traffic as they can.

Where, as they say, is the outrage?

As I puzzled over this, I found myself thinking about a case I often teach in Constitutional Law, class discussions of which never fail to surprise me. In 1990 the Supreme Court decided the case of *Michigan State Police v. Sitz* (496 US 444), in which the Court upheld the state of Michigan's program of sobriety checkpoints to combat drunk driving. Under the program, Michigan police would set up checkpoints, typically at night, on selected roads and would then stop all vehicles passing through the checkpoint. If a driver showed signs of intoxication, the officer would then direct his vehicle to the side of the road for further tests to determine whether or not to make an arrest. These checkpoints were challenged as violating the Fourth Amendment's protection against unreasonable searches and seizures. The Court resolved the case by balancing the state's interest in combating drunk driving against the degree of intrusion on privacy suffered by motorists at the checkpoints. Judging the former to be substantial and the latter minimal, it upheld the program.

Although there is plenty of competition for the title, and others will no doubt have their preferred candidates, I have always regarded this outcome as the most obviously wrongheaded Court decision I know. If the police set up a checkpoint and just stop everyone who passes by, it seems patently obvious that these are not reasonable searches. Indeed, they are by definition unreasonable: there is, literally, no reason for them. There may, of course, be a reason why the police decide to erect their checkpoint at some particular location, perhaps along some county road with a reputation for alcohol-related accidents. But that does not provide a reason for stopping *me*, that is, for stopping any *particular* driver. Even if it is true, as the Court argued, that these stops are not terribly intrusive (a claim I am inclined to challenge—how do you feel about being stopped by the police on a dark road at night?), that does not supply a reason for stopping or searching any individual driver. As Justice Brennan wrote in a fine dissent in the case, "Some level of individualized suspicion is a core component of the protection

that the Fourth Amendment provides against arbitrary government action."

While it is obvious to *me* that this case was wrongly decided, this has never seemed obvious to my *students*. The first time I taught it I was utterly astounded that not one student out of a class of a dozen seemed to think there was anything wrong with the decision at all. On the contrary, they all seemed rather surprised that I felt strongly about it. And student reactions have remained consistent over the years. I have not yet succeeded in working up any outrage in them over this case! That first group was about a decade ago, so these were students who would have grown up with things like mandatory drug testing regimes for school athletes or ubiquitous security cameras. Thus they were perhaps more accustomed than I to a world in which authorities at various times and for various reasons could access details about their private lives without their consent. Still, these students would not yet have been accustomed to sharing all the details of their private lives on Facebook, Twitter, and the like, or to a world in which practically everybody walks around with a pocket phone capable of photographing anything, any time, and immediately posting it online for all the world to see. It seems unlikely that people's expectations of privacy today are higher than those of my first con law class ten years ago.

As revelations about the extent of NSA surveillance operations have mounted, citizen concern does appear to have increased, but the response nevertheless remains muted. The similarities to the *Sitz* case are suggestive. In both cases, authorities, out of a concern for public safety, stop all vehicles (vacuum up all electronic communications) passing through a certain point, without a warrant, or consent, or the "individualized suspicion" that Brennan pointed to in his *Sitz* dissent. (Even the additional information that can be gathered about those identified as "targets" involves evidential standards lower than those necessary to obtain a normal warrant.) And in both cases, the public—perhaps happy to be protected against harm—shows only modest concern.

I suggest that there are a few lessons to be learned here.

(1) **Hobbes was right.** Almost four hundred years ago, Thomas Hobbes, in his *Leviathan*, argued that the first duty of governments was to protect their subjects. People would submit to and obey a government that could ensure basic security; a government that proved unable to do so could not expect (and was not entitled) to retain its subjects' allegiance. People's greatest fear, Hobbes argued, is fear of violent death. More than anything, they want their lives *not* to be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." And so they demand a power sufficient to protect them. The modern West has enjoyed so much liberty and prosperity that it is easy to forget this basic fact. But presidents know it. Both Bush and Obama, for all their differences, have understood the importance of not allowing another 9/11 on their watch. The public demands security and will sacrifice a great deal of liberty for it. And as Hobbes understood, this desire for safety is a force tending to concentrate tremendous power in the hands of any government that can satisfy it.

(2) **Tocqueville was also right.** Tocqueville concluded his classic study of American democracy with several chapters pondering "what sort of despotism democratic nations have to fear." He did not expect democracies to suffer the kinds of obvious, brutal despotism nations had known in the past, the tyranny of the rack and screw. But he did fear that their love of a calm, predictable life allowing a steady accumulation of wealth and comfort—the house in the suburbs, the two-car garage, the iPhones and flat-screen televisions, with a Whole Foods Market a ten-minute drive away—might lead them to submit to a new kind of despotism, "servitude of [a] regular, quiet, and gentle kind." In particular, a government that could protect their comfortable lifestyle would have a free hand to accumulate ever more power without citizens objecting to it:

[T]he increasing love of well-being and the fluctuating character of property cause democratic nations to dread all

violent disturbances. The love of public tranquillity is frequently the only passion which these nations retain, and it becomes more active and powerful among them in proportion as all other passions droop and die. This naturally disposes the members of the community constantly to give or to surrender additional rights to the central power, which alone seems to be interested in defending them by the same means that it uses to defend itself.

We should not underestimate the way in which this kind of habituation over time leads us to accept ever greater infringements on our liberties, to take for granted a world in which the authorities (and others) know or can easily find out whatever they wish to know about us, and thus in which the very concept of an "unreasonable search and seizure" gradually loses meaning. There is a line of descent to be traced from sobriety checkpoints to the online world of Facebook to NSA surveillance.

(3) **Lessons from Luther.** Despite polling data showing negative opinions about or low levels of confidence in politicians, at a basic level Americans nevertheless retain a fair amount of trust in their government. They believe that the NSA really is working to protect us against security threats (as it surely is), and they don't *really* expect it to abuse its growing power or, if it does, they expect the abuse will be the exception rather than the rule, will be corrected, and in any case is better than some terrorist setting off a bomb in one of our cities. This is all no doubt true, and certainly we are fortunate to live in a country where we need not routinely expect the worst of our rulers, one far removed from the world of Hobbes or, to pick a more contemporary example, Bashar al-Assad. But perhaps we might still want to learn a lesson or two from Luther as well. "[S]ince the beginning of the world," Luther warned in his essay on "Temporal Authority," "a wise prince is a mighty rare bird, and an upright prince even rarer. They are generally the biggest fools or the worst scoundrels on earth; therefore, one must

constantly expect the worst from them and look for little good....” With our system of separated powers, checks and balances, and federalism, we have taken more precautions against these fools and scoundrels than Hobbes did. But this may lull us, as Tocqueville feared, into a false sense of security. We would do well to remember that political rulers exercise, first and foremost, power. They are—Luther again—“God’s executioners and hangmen.” If these executioners and

hangmen want to know the details of our private lives, perhaps we should make them work a little harder for it than the NSA appears to be doing these days. †

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## ALWAYS AUTUMN

*In Heaven, it is always autumn.*

John Donne

Dear to us ever  
the changes of raiment:  
leaves breaking,  
pod to penury.  
But if it were  
always autumn,  
we’d sit by the lake  
with no fear  
of its freezing over,  
nearby squirrels,  
their perch unthreatened,  
their food secure,  
and plentiful the bees,  
impenitent and princely  
in their golden drone.  
The sky we’d breathe  
would hold us  
in its grip—cool,  
relentless, blue.  
Like harvest sheaves,  
we would brim with birds.

E. Louise Beach

# The Importance of Student and Faculty Bodies

## A Beginner's Guide

Charles Taliaferro and Thomas Churchill

IN THE SUMMER OF 2013, WE (A PROFESSOR AND a student) were shocked when we realized how little professors and students utilize or respond to bodily behavior in class, especially at St. Olaf College and other schools founded in the Christian tradition with its stress on the *incarnation* (enfleshment) of the Word or Logos (John 1:14). We are now ready to share the results of our research. A warning is in order at the beginning: we believe it is true that education, at its best, should include play and humor. After all, the Greek term for education is closely related to the term for play (παιδιά), but we are writing this not to advocate the play of children but the role of play in adult, higher education, much as this was advocated by Frerich von Schiller's *The Aesthetic Education of Man* and in Montaigne's essays on education. More on Schiller and Montaigne at the end, after reporting our findings on crying, laughing, yawning, and coughing.

Imagine the following scenario: as a professor, you are in class and you hear crying. The first and probably most important thing to determine is whether you are the one crying. This can be accomplished in two reliable ways: 1) With the tips of your fingers, gently wipe the region of your face immediately below your lower eyelid(s) along the ridge of your nose to check for moisture, or 2) Observe the faces of your students, paying close attention to facial expressions of horror, sympathy, or fear oriented in your direction. If either of these measures find anything, it is highly probable that you are the source of the auditory expression of distress.

If this is the case, you are probably in extreme physical pain, one or both of your eyes are irritated by some foreign object(s), or you are in some kind of emotional pain or anxiety. You can use this crying to your advantage: tell the class you are upset that their papers were not submitted on time or that you are unhappy that not all members of the class got an A.

Weeping may also be effective in fending off criticism and building up solidarity. You will need to decide how long and how much crying will be needed to meet your objectives. Located near your eyelids you will find the lacrimal glands; if you need to produce more tears, blink excessively. Each blink should draw additional fluid from the glands and, with practice, you will be able to produce a visible stream of tears in no time! Be prepared for students to respond with crying, if they are not already weeping.

If you discover that the crying is not yours, but belongs to one or more students, do not try to comfort them with a lecture about how tears are not just water and salt, but also contain immunoglobulin, lysozymes (antibacterials), fats and mucin (lubricants). It may be smart to mention these facts later as part of the lesson plan, but in the moment you should focus on locating the weepers and determining as quickly and accurately as possible the cause of the weeping. Take a look at the weeper(s) to see if the cause of the crying is severe injury and, if so, take immediate, appropriate action, which will likely include calling in a professional medical team. If the crying is not due to physical injury or ocular irritation, they may be responding to some emotional harm, perhaps caused by a peer. If you can rule out the possibility of a flesh wound (and this will have to be done very quickly), consider the possibility that *you* might have caused the crying. Perhaps you have disappointed one or more students in some way, or said something harsh or otherwise inappropriate. If you are confused and unsure how to correct some hurtful comment with the usual tools (such as saying "I take it back. What was I thinking? I am a prize-winning idiot. Sorry."), then, as noted by Cardoso and Sabbatini in their important paper "The Animal that Weeps," your crying along with the students could actually restore some kind of balance in the class or seminar room. They note that crying could

“be considered as a kind of psychic homeostatic mechanism, returning [a classroom] to an emotional equilibrium that has been upset.”

**N**ow consider matters from the other side: You are a student in a class and hear crying. Follow the same procedure as a professor in determining the source of the crying and be aware that (as noted above) you can control the flow of tears through blinking or self-induced physical pain or emotional trauma. So long as your crying is not due to the infliction of harsh physical pain, try to relax and consider your options. You now have tremendous power. You can work the tears into a kind of wordless accusation about some wrong that you believe your professor has done, and you also have the perfect way to silence the professor. If the professor tries to comfort you or give an account of why crying can be a way of expelling dangerous toxins and is thus good for you, add auditions to the weeping. If the professor continues to talk, add wailing.

Once tears have been mastered, we are ready to move on to the second scenario: laughter. If you are a professor and you hear laughter in a class or seminar room, follow the same initial procedure as with crying. Find out as soon as possible whether the person laughing is you or someone else. Most people laugh in distinctive ways and so, if you know your “laughter signature,” you will be able to determine pretty quickly whether you are the one emitting the relevant sound structures. In a close study of shrieks, laughter, and “belly laughs,” Robert Provine has determined that: “A laugh is composed of a series of short vowel-like notes (syllables) each about 75 milliseconds long, that are repeated at regular intervals about 210 milliseconds apart.” If the students are laughing, try to work with the harmonic structure of the laugh(s); when someone laughs, they usually have to stick with a specific vowel sound such as “ho, ho, ho” or “ha, ha, ha” and, once begun, this is almost never altered. Try to use terms in your discipline that can be linked to these sounds; for example, you could refer to “holism” if you have a “ho, ho” student, or speak about “habitat” if the student is in the “ha, ha” mode.

From a student perspective, if it is the professor who is laughing, study the sound structure and make sure that any further contributions you make that

day harmonize with the relevant vowel structures you hear coming from his face. Also try to determine whether the noises are a genuine case of laughing or whether he or she is simply making nervous noises, perhaps to relieve anxiety. Also of importance to gauge is whether the laughing has an objective: is the professor trying to be ingratiating or seem like “one of us”? You have a number of choices and can work the situation to your advantage. Imagine the professor has just told a joke that neither you nor your peers find funny. Nonetheless, imagine you are fond of your professor and do not want the professor to lose self-confidence or become embarrassed (and perhaps take it out on innocent students). A full-out fake smile or laugh is too easily detected. But you can make a single, short, syllable sound—not a grunt, but a loud, closed-mouth “mm” sound—while at the same time tapping your chair or table with your hand and shaking your head back or forth. The vagueness of this gesture is a surefire way to displace any potential discomfort or embarrassment.

If you are a student and a peer laughs, and you can laugh genuinely in response to an amusing gesture or clever remark, we suggest that laughing is a good and proper response.

**W**e come now to what may appear to be the worst-case scenario: yawning. The first thing to do when you see or hear a yawn is to reassure yourself that yawning is not the worst thing that can happen. In fact, it could be much, much worse. Some think the worst event is the professor and/or all of the students falling asleep during a lecture. Sleeping in class is not a serious problem. If everyone falls asleep and everyone wakes up at the same time, chances are no one will dare to ask whether everyone else was asleep. Being asleep in class can also be a wonderful opportunity for both professor and student. First, as a professor, if you can teach people even when they are asleep, you are a super-star. Actually, far worse than sleeping or yawning in class or a seminar is vomiting. This can be bad from both points of view: students should worry if their performance has been so bad that the professor vomits; likewise the professor should worry if the students are vomiting because of *his or her* performance. Vomiting is clearly the hardest thing either to contain (one person vomiting in a room of twenty

makes it 70 percent probable that at least one other person will vomit) or recover from (unless the vomiting can be explained in terms of food poisoning, noxious gasses, motion sickness, and so on). So if you find students or professors yawning, relax. Things could be worse, and we have a solution that is guaranteed to work.

If you are a professor and you are faced with a student yawning, relax. Do not automatically conclude that you or your discipline is boring. Every vertebrate yawns, so tell yourself that the yawning is no big deal. The average person yawns 250,000 times during their life, and there is evidence of yawning prior to birth. Some claim that a fetus yawns from the eleventh week onward. Still, yawning can be a problem because it is contagious; you are 50 percent more likely to yawn if you are next to someone you see yawn. Action must be taken. And this is true for students as well, especially if you are contributing to a seminar or class and the professor starts yawning as you begin. This is when you have to be proactive.

In the face of the yawn, you have an antidote: the cough. We hesitate to commend this in the context of Christian higher education as it may involve some subterfuge, but in light of Matthew 10:16, if your class or seminar is the equivalent of a pack of wolves, this is where and when a little serpent wisdom should be considered. At the beginning of a class or seminar, whether you are a professor or student, somehow give the impression that you may have a cold. If at all possible you might use an honest, truthful statement like "I hope I am not contagious," for while this may suggest you *might* be contagious, strictly speaking, we assume that all of us hope we are not sick and contagious. Next step: identify the person who is both most likely to yawn and whom you are most motivated to prevent from yawning. Let us refer to this person as the alpha yawner (AY). Once you have identified the AY, get into proximity of the AY and begin coughing without covering your mouth. A few modest coughs at the beginning are likely to be unobjectionable, and you can increase the depth of the cough as time goes on. Once you reach the point when the AY believes the air around him or her is contaminated, you are safe! A yawn is essentially a large-intake of air. Even if the AY believes that

he or she needs to breathe in large amounts of air in order to restore blood oxygen, students or professors will not in fact do so if they believe the air is heavily contaminated. (We have in fact field tested this technique and found it to work well in all trials.)

This, of course, is only the beginning of our study of the choreography of the class or seminar room. We commend these techniques not just to help keep a class or professor on their toes, but to help minimize the darker side of approaching education with a sense of play (Schiller) or entertainment (Montaigne). We all know how play can inadvertently involve harm, and we find Montaigne's advice on what to do with a student who resists the charms of education profoundly disturbing and to be avoided at all costs: "I know no remedy except that his tutor should quickly strangle him." Although we are sure Montaigne was simply using his Gallic sense of humor, we still find especially sinister Montaigne's adding that this homicide is best done "when nobody is looking." We beg you to take a different course: if your students or your professor begins to yawn, do not strangle them. Instead, start coughing. †

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## BOUND

Stiff and bent out from being tied by stretched  
Twine, the ram's leg

Had to be cut off. Heat  
Swooshed too close as a brief gust vented through.

Upon this mountain cove, he remembered less and less.

He had raised  
Then shunted the knife aside—

*Off, Off!* As if no blood should set into clotted silver.

He knew more than he desired. He could have  
Kicked the ram's skewed stillness to breath.

How had he done  
Wrong?

The angel called out for him to spare  
His favored son, whom God had charged  
To take there.

He had to let go.

His wife could not  
End her grief:

She'd given up  
Her boy to a worshipping not her own,  
To be at peace  
With her husband. Alone,

Each of them a son had left for good.

*Off! Off!* She heard fire swallow itself like memory.

Robert Manaster

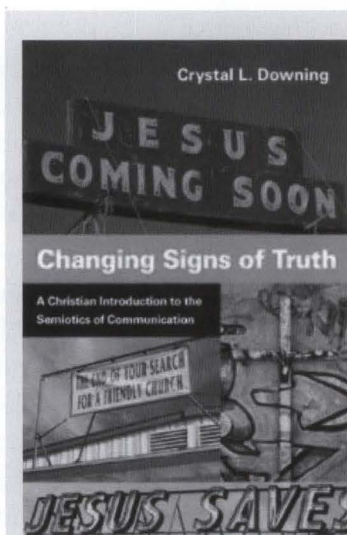
## Reviewed in this issue...

### Crystal Downing's *Changing Signs of Truth*



CHRISTIAN COMMUNICATORS CAN FIND themselves caught between the church and the world as they seek to use signs that appropriately resonate with God's truth. The difficulty lies in distinguishing between words and images borrowed from the original context of God's revelation in the Bible and those signs invented to define God in later contexts. If Christians borrow signs from the world, can they remain truthful followers of God? Christian t-shirts sometimes use slogans from secular brands and twist their meaning to produce Christian messages. Borrowing from the "Got Milk?" advertising campaign, a Christian t-shirt asks, "Got Jesus?" Worship music that I hear

in the chapel of the Christian university where I teach uses the tune of the song *Hotel California*. A Christian rock group changed the lyrics to fit the praise and worship scene. Although appropriating recognizable secular-cultural artifacts can make Christian tradition accessible to the newly initiated, at what point are Christian commitments violated? Some might find that the hedonism described in *Hotel California* makes the song inappropriate to use for Christian purposes, but Christians have long practiced appropriation from non-Christian cultures. Consider for a moment



the doctrine of the Trinity. Downing points out that the word "Trinity" never appears in the Bible. Not until the fourth-century Council of Nicaea did it become a doctrinal sign to define the Triune nature of God. If it is not in the Bible, how essential is this word to Christianity? And if Christians seek to convert Muslims who see Trinitarian theology as sacrificing the essential one-ness of God, then

shouldn't Christians be willing to sacrifice non-Biblical aspects of theology to advance conversion?

Downing's book takes seriously these issues as she wrestles with, and provides persuasive answers to, the question of how to act as a Christian communicator. Her account offers a tour through modern and post-

#### CHANGING SIGNS OF TRUTH: A CHRISTIAN INTRODUCTION TO THE SEMIOTICS OF COMMUNICATION

Crystal Downing

Downers Grove, Ill:  
IVP Academic, 2012.

342 pages

\$24.00

Reviewed by  
Jason Moyer  
Malone College

modern developments in the fields of linguistics and critical theory that she believes can contribute to faithful Christian advocacy as well as an academic study of communication from an evangelical Christian perspective.

Downing focuses on the historically "changing signs" that have helped to define Christianity, noticing specifically how Christian signs in one moment may have been secular in another. For a simple example: although December 25 marked a pagan holiday at one historical moment, Christianity gave it new meaning in another. The

purpose of the Christian communicator involves using profane and shifting signs on behalf of Christian truth that exceeds the surface level of semiotics: "...Christians might influence the flow of culture by changing their signs of truth. This does not mean it will call into question Christian truth itself" (21).

To describe the precariousness of choosing signs to claim for Christianity Downing uses the metaphor of a US quarter standing on its edge. She describes Christians as "on the edge of the coin" caught between the symbolic conventions of history and the demands of the present. The coin

Whereas a Christian community will most often see the Trinity as a legitimate sign of a singular God, a Muslim community might see the same sign as a polytheistic, and therefore inaccurate, account of God.

captures convention through the image of George Washington's head, on one side of the coin, which has not been changed since it was drawn by John Flanagan in 1932. On the other side, the symbol of an eagle was replaced with images of states in 1999 as part of the State Quarter Program. Christians should likewise sit on the edge, balancing the truth they receive from the past with the need for relevant Christian messaging in the present. In Downing's terms, this is a problem of *(re)signing*: "1. As Christians, we are *resigned* to essential truths revealed by God. 2. As communicators we recognize the need to *re-sign* those truths, generating fresh signs that make ancient truths meaningful to contemporary audiences" (22).

Downing's tour through semiotic theory hits the right theological notes as she evaluates theory based on her Christian theological commitments. In probably her most important theoretical move, she emphasizes Charles Sanders Peirce's semiot-

ics, a threefold notion of the meaning making that humans experience in relationship to signs: "representamen," "object," and "interpretant." When coming across an "object" in the world, humans make sense of the tangible thing as a "representamen," or sign. But some form of interpretive process is necessary to establish that meaning. Peirce uses the term "interpretant" to describe people who might read the same representamen differently. Take, for instance, the representamen "Trinity." The *object* under analysis is the nature of God. Depending on what community you come from—Christian, on the one hand, or Muslim on the other—the interpretant will be different. Whereas a Christian community will most often see the Trinity as a legitimate sign of a singular God, a Muslim community might see the same sign as a polytheistic, and therefore inaccurate, account of God. The meaning of each sign thus depends on the community in which it is interpreted.

Downing embraces Peirce's notion of signs and meaning as rooted in community. She argues that on one side of the coin sits those who seek to shed "Trinity" because it wasn't included in scripture and, on the other, those who inaccurately argue that the sign "Trinity" was used in scripture. She advocates for Christians to sit on the edge of this coin, recognizing the Trinity as a construct of human history, but nevertheless a valuable reflection of a necessarily fallible human effort to define God's truth.

Overall, Downing's key contribution is her unwillingness to differentiate between serious engagement with the practices of Christian theology—like the question of the Trinity—and theoretical approaches to sign reading. By treating semiotics as a theological issue, while writing in a manner accessible to the newly initiated, this book can offer Christian communities academic lessons as they wrestle with questions of communication. ✦

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## ON THE POETS

John Ruff is Associate Professor of English and Director of the First-Year Core Program at Valparaiso University. He formerly served as Poetry Editor of *The Cresset*.

Susanna Childress's book of poems, *Jagged with Love*, won the 2005 Brittingham Prize, and *Entering the House of Awe* won the 2012 Society of Midland Authors Award. She and musician Josh Banner comprise the band Ordinary Neighbors, whose album *The Necessary Dark* borrows from her writing.

Brad Davis teaches at Pomfret School in Connecticut. His recent books include the anthology *Sunken Garden Poetry, 1992-2011* (Wesleyan, 2012) and a book of poems, *Opening King David* (Wipf & Stock, 2011). He has taught creative writing at the College of the Holy Cross and Eastern Connecticut State University.

Lois Marie Harrod's thirteenth poetry collection, *Fragments from the Biography of Nemesis*, was recently published by Word Tech (2013). She is widely published in literary journals and online magazines. She teaches Creative Writing at The College of New Jersey. Read her work at [www.loismarieharrod.com](http://www.loismarieharrod.com).

E. Louise Beach is a poet, critic, translator, and librettist. Recently, composer Gerald P. Coleman, Director of Music at Christ Lutheran Church of Washington, DC, arranged "Always Autumn" for baritone and piano. The piece will be performed during a service this fall.

Robert Manaster's poetry has appeared in *First Things*, *European Judaism*, *Anglican Theological Review*, *Image*, *The Christian Century*, and *International Poetry Review*.

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