

New Books for the Preacher

Summer Reading

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Piled high on the desk is a stack of theological journals, denominational newspapers, at least half a dozen *Christian Century*'s, and an assortment of must-read articles and clippings - all thumbed through and few studied. Beckoning to be read from the bookshelf nearby are two volumes of poetry, Flannery O'Connor's collected works, a new Buechner book, and a couple of new Bible commentaries. The study at home looks the same and more so.

No preacher has enough time to read everything she would like, but every preacher knows that reading enriches preaching from which gospel truths take root and grow and bloom. The Bible is our best instructor on the importance of literature for communicating truth through its poetry, parable, biography, mystery, and narrative. Even as the stories of scripture flesh out the gospel, the stories of our contemporary world can help bring it home.

"The reading of fiction deepens preaching because it deepens the preacher," wrote professor of systematic theology, Cornelius Plantinga. "The person who presumes to speak for God had better struggle to understand human character, divine grace, and the ironies and surprises of their intersection."¹ The following pieces of contemporary fiction offer the preacher human characters whose stories and struggles intersect with divine grace. They will make for good summer reading, as well as enrich preaching.

KILLER DILLER, by Clyde Edgerton. Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1991.

Clyde Edgerton is a wonderful storyteller whose oddly believable characters intersect at a fictional rural North Carolina community's crossroads of fallibility and grace.

From *Walking Across Egypt* two of the author's more memorable characters are introduced in *Killer Diller*. Wesley Benfield, a reforming criminal with a penchant for other people's cars and a good heart, currently resides at BOTA (Back On Track Again) House, a halfway house neighboring a Christian college. Mattie Rigsby, his adopted grandmother who has fed Wesley's stomach and soul with good home cooking, is back, a little feistier and frailer.

Wesley is in love with Phoebe Trent, a redheaded kindergarten aide participating in the college's nationally known diet program for overweight Christians, and struggles to reconcile his libido with the biblical injunctions about sexuality. He plays in a gospel band with other reforming criminals, and teaches masonry at Project Promise where he befriends Vernon Jackson, a minimally retarded and musically gifted youth who eventually joins the band.

Ted and Ned Sears, college president and provost, try to keep homosexual students from slipping through the admissions committee, and court wealthy widows to leave their fortunes to the school.

Beneath the hilarity of plot and character, Clyde Edgerton calls his readers to laugh and look at our own peculiar Christian moralism and institutionalism. In a roundabout way he pokes fun at us preachers who sometimes presume to know with