

Protagonist Corner

Summer Reading

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One of the great pleasures of summer is enjoying time to read. Stretched out on the beach, curled up on a screened-in-porch, to the tune of mountain streams running by, summer vacation beckons the preacher to leave biblical studies, commentaries, lectionary helps, and serious theology behind. Taking time to bask in a good novel, remember the human dilemmas of another era, or dance with a fictional character, is not only delightful escape for the mind, but a wonderful way to nurture the spirit. Holding a mirror up to who we are and what we could become, for better or worse, reading enhances our sensitivity and quickens our perceptions of worlds and relationships, both human and divine.

Good summer reading will deepen the well of the preacher's resources with new insights into human character and holy presence. These contemporary works are full of stories and struggles and glimpses of the divine that will help bring home the gospel.

THE LIVING, by Annie Dillard, Harper Collins Publishers, 1992.

Annie Dillard is a favorite of many preachers because she dares to look for signs of the presence of God through her microscopic view of the world around her. She sees divine handiwork in the lights in a tree, in the coastal wonders of Puget Sound, in memories of a childhood Sunday morning communion service. What she sees spills out in remarkable poetry and prose.

With her latest book Dillard has moved from her famous narrative essays to novel. She said she "wanted to write about little-bitty people in a great big landscape," choosing the Northwest in the nineteenth century to spin her tale. *The Living* spans from 1855 to 1897 describing the hard lives of a group of settlers, families and loners, white, Native American, and Chinese, all linked by proximity in communities on Washington's Bellingham Bay.

One would imagine that the essayist's way with words might interfere with letting the story carry the reader, and occasionally it does with description and character slowing movement and plot to a halt. Insights abound, however, as the settling is spurred on by success and beset by tragedy. The title comes from Psalm 66:9, "Bless the Lord who has kept us among the living," which attests to both the painful loss of many to the cruel pioneer challenge and the amazing resilience of those still living.

OBJECT LESSONS, by Anna Quindlen, Random House, 1991.

Object Lessons is also a first novel of well-known writer-journalist and essayist Anna Quindlen of the *New York Times*. Her coming-of-age novel centers around Maggie, an adolescent member of a large Irish Catholic clan in suburban New York in the 1960's. Maggie's paternal grandfather, John Scanlan, made his fortune manufacturing rosaries and communion wafers, and seeks to control his grown children and grandchildren doling out tuition, orthodontist's fees, and an occasional new house. All he asks in return is obedience and total devotion.

Maggie's father's first act of rebellion was to marry her lowerclass Italian mother, which continues to add dimension and complexity to the family saga. However, Maggie's character is the only one which is fully developed and through her eyes we perceive the rest of the caricatures that make up the family. What they may lack in depth of character, Maggie makes up in insight. In the midst of one big family's infighting, competition with one another, struggling for love and affection, and struggling to love, Maggie begins to find herself, and through her self-discovery the reader may catch a glimpse of a familiar likeness in the mirror.

IN MEMORY OF JUNIOR, by Clyde Edgerton, Algonquin Books, 1992.

Clyde Edgerton continues to delight with a lighthearted style and characters who live in one's imagination and humor. Even when the theme of the book is death, the reader comes away with a new outlook on life. This time the cast of characters are wanting to die, waiting for someone else to die, or reminiscing about a remembered one who thankfully and finally died. The plot thickens when an old couple die unnoticed during the same night, and needing to know who died first determines which heir inherits the old home place.

While the location of extended family gatherings has moved from church and home to cemetery, the simple, yet outrageous, characters and strained relationships sound familiar to those who have enjoyed other Edgerton novels. Occasionally more morbid and somber, the contemporary master of family tales in the North Carolina Piedmont, continues to weave a fascinating story out of ordinary down-home folks. Truth is here to be found in Edgerton's always unpredictable family relationships, and subtle jabs at Southern customs and religion.

PRAISING FOR SHEETROCK, by Melissa A. Greene, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1992.

Not a novel but well worth high placement on your summer reading list is *Praying for Sheetrock*, a deeply moving chronicle of the civil rights struggle in McIntosh County, Georgia.

Over the course of fifteen years, Melissa Fay Greene recorded the voices of black and white citizens, as the black community sought to find freedom from the stranglehold of the white power structure. This award-winning book brings to life those voices and the political struggle resonates with their conflict, truth and depth.

A decade after the civil rights movement moved through most of the South, this coastal community of Georgia finds a high proportion of its black inhabitants in segregated schools, living without plumbing, telephones, electricity, or paved roads. Greene's assessment of McIntosh County and their small town revolution speaks boldly to the racism within all of our communities and within ourselves. The African American churches take the leadership role as headquarters of this civil rights movement which reaches well into the political, judicial, and civil arenas. These are real people telling their story, and its contemporary relevance hits home. This one will not only preach, it ought to shake up the preacher.