

Protagonist Corner

Making the Connection Between Faith and Fiction

Arthur Ross, III

First Presbyterian Church, St. Petersburg, Florida

In his novel *Howard's End*, E. M. Forster tells a story in which the characters and the reader are called to "only connect." In Walker Percy's novel *The Moviegoer*, Binx Bolling pursues "the search."

For the past nine years my wife, Jan, and I have shared in the search to "only connect" by leading a group called "Faith and Fiction." Our goal is to provide a forum in which all who attend, ourselves included, share insights gleaned from reading good fiction and then make connections between fiction and the life of faith. One evening a month, October through April, forty to sixty of us gather in the church lounge to discuss a specific contemporary novel which each person has read (or least intended to read) during the past month.

Over the years we have read more than fifty novels. Authors as diverse as tormented, Anglo-Saxon male, Ernest Hemingway, and mystical, black female, Toni Morrison, have led us to discover new ways to connect with ourselves, with God, and with others. While almost none of the authors we have read intentionally write about faith, all writers who portray the human situation offer a setting for discussing issues of faith and theology. For people of faith, fiction offers a rich resource for theological reflection.

Charles L. Rice, in his book *Interpretation and Imagination* (Fortress, 1970), writes of the need for people of faith to draw from contemporary culture if we are to communicate the classic doctrines of belief. Good fiction not only contributes to contemporary culture, it also mirrors contemporary culture. Therefore good fiction can be a means of making connections between the life we live and the God we worship. The best twentieth century writers aid in the search for an enlarged view of life, offering the opportunity to make new connections between the fiction we read and the faith we profess.

Fiction as Truth

"Fiction may be different from fact, but fiction is not necessarily different from truth," is an observation that helps explain the relationship between faith and fiction. Facts are never as important to the pilgrimage of faith as is truth. Truth, especially truth about who God is and who we are, is always bigger than human minds can comprehend or human language convey. Faith has always relied upon stories to tell the truth about God and about all of creation. Stories are not only windows through which we come to see truth, stories are also wells. Stories allow us to grasp truth in the deepest sense of the word; from stories living truth often flows.

Faith stories are true in the deepest and most profound sense of the word "truth." The debate as to whether faith stories are factual may be important to some members of the faith community, but to become obsessed with this debate is to miss the larger, more significant purpose of faith stories: faith stories convey truth. Faith stories convey truth about God, truth about human beings, and truth about the life God intends for the human community. Fiction is a powerful voice for hearing God's truth, and a powerful teacher for those of us who seek to proclaim God's truth.

After a recent Faith and Fiction seminar, one participant wrote in a note, "Finding people who like books is not difficult. Finding a forum which stimulates you to think beyond what is written ... to areas beyond the obvious is the new dimension." Those words capture part of the power of the seminar. Finding people of faith is not difficult; finding a forum in which we are able to connect with those dimensions of truth which are beyond the obvious stimulates our search for a deeper faith and a fuller life.

Fiction as Preparation for Preaching

For preachers facing "the relentless return of the Sabbath," the constant temptation is to read fiction merely to discover good sermon illustrations. Succumbing to this desire does injustice both to the art of fiction and to the craft of preaching. However, reading great novels (and not-so-great ones), then reflecting upon the theology in the story, is part of what preaching is about. Preaching challenges us to sharpen our grasp of who we are, of who God is, and of how we grow toward maturity as the people of God.

Short stories and novels can give new insight into the "old, old story." But even more, novels and short stories break down our provincialism. Novels lead us into new worlds, and into new views of the world we already know so well. For example, we all know that "war is hell." But until we read Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, the personal pain, the cultural chaos, and the fear created by changing methods of war escapes most of us. Hemingway's novel broadens our understanding of the words "war" and "hell."

Or, abortion persists as a significant cultural issue. Most people have taken a position on the questions related to the issue. Yet John Irving's *The Cider House Rules* can move the debate into a larger arena. Irving takes readers beyond abstract ethical and religious principles into the fictional world of orphanages, farm worker camps, and the life of a physician who reluctantly, yet passionately, performs abortions while also placing children for adoption. To the eyes of faith, this novel becomes a parable about living by grace rather than by law.

Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Ralph Ellison each create new understandings of the word "black" for those who read *The Color Purple*, *Song of Solomon*, or *The Invisible Man*. Wallace Stegner's *Angle of Repose* and *Crossing to Safety* give haunting significance to the image of "covenant" as it is used to describe marriage, or any other sacred relationship.

The illustrations could go on, but the point is made: whether novelists write out of a professed Christian perspective or not, fiction gives new clarity to faith by leading the theologically informed reader to connect current issues with ancient truths.

A second reason for preachers to read fiction is that novelists are not only master storytellers, they are also skilled wordsmiths and keen observers of contemporary affairs. Relatively light novels such as Olive Anne Burn's *Cold Sassy Tree* or Clyde Edgerton's *Walking Across Egypt* are appealing because they tell a good story, and because most readers can identify with the loneliness, fear, pain, and hope which drives these novels. More complicated works such as Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, Gabriel Garcia Marquez' *Love in the Time of Cholera*, or John Edgar Wideman's *Sent for You Yesterday* endure because of the same qualities.

Preaching is often like fiction to the extent that both seek to meet people where they are in life and then lead them to see new possibilities for living. A profound understanding of the realities of life, and of the power of words to create new worlds, is essential to success in both proclaiming faith and writing fiction.

Faith and Fiction for Christian Education

Across the years our seminar has discovered that the relationship between faith and fiction is strengthened as we read and reflect with two basic questions in mind. First, we ask, "What do you think the work is about?" This question allows the group members to respond to the novel out of their individual perspectives and experiences. Often we list the responses on newsprint, frequently laughing at the diverse answers to this question. The question also calls for a process similar to a historical-critical approach to the Bible. Knowledge of the life situation of the author, as well as familiarity with the literary and historical influences upon the author, add much to connecting with a story. For example, realizing that Peter DeVries had a daughter who died of leukemia leads to a fuller understanding of DeVries' novel *The Blood of the Lamb*. The novel is a form of grief therapy in the same category as two important nonfiction works, *A Grief Observed*, by C.S. Lewis, and *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, by Rabbi Harold Kushner. DeVries' understanding of the relationship between faith and suffering is at least as satisfying as Lewis' - and much more so than Kushner's. DeVries never compromises the sovereignty of God, and he recognizes that faith, especially faith in the midst of tragedy, is always a gift - not a rational act.

Standard library references such as *The Dictionary of Literary Biography*, *Contemporary Authors*, and *Contemporary Literary Criticism* give easy access to general biographical data on authors, report on reviews, and give copies of interviews with authors. Encyclopedia articles on the period of time and the country in which an author lived, or articles about historical events referred to in novels, can also be of great value in answering the question "What is the novel about?"

Literary scholars will rightly insist that the reader can never fully understand an author's reasons for writing a novel, nor can readers know what an author means to say through a novel. Novels are works of art; the novelist offers a book to the world. Not even the author fully understands the purpose of the work. Indeed, authors, like all artists and like preachers, do not fully understand themselves. However, knowing biographical information about the writer will help the reader better understand the background from which the book was written and the significance of the story.

The second question our Faith and Fiction group brings to our reflection is this: how does the work influence our understanding of the great and enduring themes of our faith? How is sin portrayed? Where does redemption occur? Are there acts of grace?

Flannery O'Connor, in her short stories (*The Complete Stories*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974), writes about each of these themes, though never directly. "Mrs. Greenleaf" and "Parker's Back" are humorous yet profound treatments of the Reformed doctrine of sin. The closing scene in "Revelation" is a classic portrayal of the Kingdom of God for which we pray each time we offer The Lord's Prayer. In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, as Pilar and Robert Jordan decide how to respond to Pablo, the reader confronts the ambiguities of human life; Pablo's sinfulness creates despair and repentance. Once Pablo is received back into the band, the reader discovers the reality of grace. William Maxwell, in *Time Will Darken It*, presents the haunting story of a man who tried to save himself and those whom he loved. Through this novel Maxwell gives a twentieth century variation of the rich young man who came to Jesus seeking the key to eternal life.

Good writers do not set out to write Christian novels, or to illustrate Christian doctrine; good writers want only to write good fiction - fiction which speaks with persistence and power to a wide audience. The better the fiction, the broader and more

enduring the audience. Christian readers who have studied theology and who are committed to sharing the truths of our faith with as broad and enduring an audience as possible, will discover fiction to be a powerful aid for the task.

Conclusion

Our Faith and Fiction group is diverse in membership. Housewives, social workers, physicians, professors, a nun, business executives, mothers who have adopted abused children, and widows who have no children make up our gathering. Some in the seminar will read thirty books a year—or more; others will not finish the seven selections we discuss. Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Methodists, Baptists, Roman Catholics, and those who would answer “none” to a question on denominational affiliation are part of our group. People of different nationalities come, though we lack significant racial inclusiveness. What we have all discovered is that faith combined with fiction can lead to a rich fellowship. We have learned from one another. Books which had no meaning prior to the discussion take on rich meaning because of the discussion.

We have also come to appreciate the insight of Annie Dillard. In her book, *Living by Fiction* (Harper & Row, 1982), Dillard suggests that those who write novels and short stories are like the prehistoric artists who drew pictures on cave walls. The pictures were drawn to tell a story, a story which the artist offered for others to interpret in their search for the larger meaning of life. For our group, making the connection between faith and fiction is one way we interpret the word drawings which authors/artists use to depict life in our time.