

Shalom!

A JOURNAL FOR THE PRACTICE OF RECONCILIATION

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Books and Reading

I HAVE LOVED to read for as long as I can remember. My first memory of a specific book is from when I was only three years old. Our family was on holiday in South Africa (from our missionary home in Southern Rhodesia), and I saw a book in a store window that I desperately wanted. It was a Little Golden Book, *Katie the Kitten*. Not only was it a book, but it had a cute little gray kitten on the cover, and I loved cats and kittens! Negotiations with my parents ensued, and I got the book. Even now, paging through the book evokes fond childhood memories.

Since the early 1980s, I have been part of a neighborhood women's book club, and about twenty years ago, I joined the women's book club in my congregation. In addition to books I read on my own, I have read many books through those book clubs that I never would have chosen on my own.

So far in the past six months, I have led book club discussions of Miriam Toews's novel, *Women Talking*, a work of "female imagination" based on a horrific case of repeated sexual abuse in a Mennonite colony in Bolivia, and *Hannah Coulter*, one of Wendell Berry's famous Port Royal novels. I probably would not have read *The Years* by Annie Ernaux, the French author who won the 2022 Nobel Prize for Literature, had it not been for book club, but I'm glad I did. I might not have read *American Harvest: God, Country, and Farming in the Heartland*, by Maria Mutsuki Mockett, which describes the author's summer with a Brethren in Christ family harvesting wheat from

Texas to Idaho. Without a book club assignment, I definitely would not have read *Four Lost Cities: A Secret History of the Urban Age*, by Annalee Newitz. Even though the book was a bit of a slog for me, I learned much I didn't know before.

And that's one point of reading—to learn. I've learned about Christian faith, other countries around the world, rural life, urban life, the African American experience, the Asian and Hispanic experience, the natural world, the multiple horrors in multiple venues of World War II, and more by reading fiction and nonfiction, memoirs and biographies. I've learned much about what makes for good writing and how the creative and skilled use of language lifts a book from being mediocre or merely good to being great and perhaps unforgettable.

This edition of *Shalom!* features testimonials and "book reviews" from others who also love to read. The books they chose range from science fiction, to devotionals, to French and Russian novels, to true stories, demonstrating that we all have different tastes in reading—and that's a good thing!

The writer of Ecclesiastes says, "Of making books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh" (12:12). I'm glad there is no end to making books, and even studying need not be as wearisome as this verse suggests. What books have you enjoyed? What books have made you a better Christian, person, spouse, parent, employee, and/or friend?

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A Time to Reread

Harriet S. Bicksler, editor

One of Many of God's Good Gifts

By E. Morris Sider

EVEN BEFORE I could read, books fascinated me. I wondered why older people seemed to take pleasure in reading words on a page. And how did they read the words to obtain their meaning? The answer came as a revelation while holding a hymnal with my father in a church service: You start with the first word on the page, then slowly slide your eyes diagonally down the page to the last letter in the last line. Voila: that's how it was done!

Then I went to school where I learned to read. A new, almost magical world seemed to open to me. Wanting to be part of that magic, with a pair of Mother's scissors and brown wrapping paper I created a small book of a few pages held together in the middle by

wool yarn serving as the spine. In the book I crudely printed a tiny story. I had written my first book. In later years, I was told that when I was still a child, someone asked me what I wanted to do when I grew up. I responded, "I want to write books."

I soon became an avid reader. By the time I had graduated from Grade 8, I had read, with few exceptions, all the books in the small library of our one-room schoolhouse, including books in a series on Canadian life and people. In high school I liberally borrowed from the school's library, reading, among other books, all of Sir Walter Scott's Waverly novels (*Ivanhoe*). I also read other literature, such as *The Readers' Digest* (sometimes with a flashlight under the bed covers).

My love of reading has continued over the years. For decades I have read, on average, one book a week on a variety of subjects. I admit to reading some novels but only those I consider to be of good quality (no Danielle Steele novel to date). I am presently reading a novel by English author Graham Greene (*The Comedians*) but I am also reading psychologist Connie Zweig's *The Inner Work of Age*, which is of sufficient quality to satisfy any intellectual appetite.

Why do I read? What values lie in books that attract me to them?

One important value is reading's ability to improve communication. I like to think that I'm a better writer now than I was fifty years ago, and that this improvement has come to some degree from reading (perhaps, in part, by a kind of literary osmosis). To illustrate: Canadian author Miriam Toews's books have shown me the value of a finely-tuned cadence to a sentence; Marilynne Robinson's the effectiveness of images to heighten meaning; Paul Nisly's translation of facts into human emotions with which we can identify; Margaret Atwood's use of humor (subtle or obvious) to brighten a text.

Another value of reading is the knowledge books can convey—a trite saying, perhaps, but true nevertheless. My mind—and life—have been enriched by the knowledge I have received from the following and many

other books. I think of Harvard economist John Kenneth Galbraith's 1958 book, *The Affluent Society*, in which I was made aware of how much our consumption is generated by the advertisements of those who produce what we often do not need. Beverley McLachlin, former Chief Justice of Canada's Supreme Court, in her autobiography *Truth Be Told*, introduced me to Canada's legal system. John Ehle's *Trail of Tears* impressed me as never before about the enormity of the cruelty with which we have treated native American people. From Canadian naturalist Farley Mowat in his *Never Cry Wolf*, I learned that contrary to accepted thinking, wolves seldom, if ever, attack humans. Wendell Berry's books have made me more keenly aware of the growing environment crisis. James Herriot's *All Creatures Great and Small* informed me of the work of veterinaries (and convinced me that I would not have made a good member of that profession). Alexandra Horowitz in *Inside of a Dog* helped me to understand better the nature and activities of dogs, including what life must be like when constantly lived only one or two feet above the ground.

Another value of books is the pleasure many provide. How enjoyable it was for me to relax with a copy of Randall Balmer's *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory* in which he describes visits to various religious groups in America, including Camp Freedom in Florida. Any one of Jan Karon's books in the Mitford series serves the same purpose, as does any one of the amazingly researched projects of Malcom Gladwell. I find the nature poetry of Mary Oliver and the poetry of Luci Shaw also to be good examples of pleasurable reading.

What a blessing books have been to me. I count them as one of God's many good gifts to me—and to all who choose to read.

E. Morris Sider fulfilled his childhood desire to write books—he has written more than thirty books about some aspect of Brethren in Christ history. He is professor emeritus at Messiah University and lives at Messiah Lifeways, Mechanicsburg, PA.



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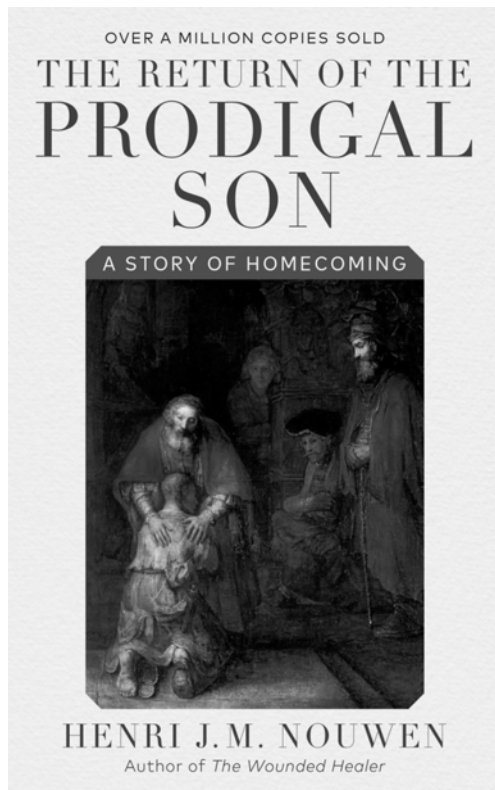
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The Gift of Reading

By Leonard Chester

THE EARLIEST MEMORY I have of reading on my own is when I had the measles; my mother made the bedroom dark with the blind down, as she thought light would be bad for my eyes. I hid a book and read in the dim light coming in the edge of the blind, possibly one of the Hardy Boys books, of which I read many as a lad. I have enjoyed books since childhood. We had no television until I was about twelve, so it was books. As a teen, I was impacted by the Sheldon book, *In His Steps. The Grapes of Wrath*, by John Steinbeck, had a large emotional effect on me in college, as I had pastored a congregation where people on the economic edge lived; they were often deprived and disrespected but attended the church.

The Return of the Prodigal Son is the book that came immediately to mind when considering writing this article. I had read several books by Henri Nouwen, all of which as-



sisted in my spiritual and pastoral development. I read this book in 1993, the year it was published. In this “Story of Homecoming,” Nouwen shares how he was powerfully

impacted by his becoming acquainted with the painting by Rembrandt when he saw a poster of the painting. Subsequently, he spent several hours meditating before the painting in The Hermitage Gallery, St. Petersburg, Russia. I was privileged to see this painting in The Hermitage in 2010.

Nouwen traces his own spiritual/emotional journey through the three characters who are central to this parable. He identified with the younger son by recalling how he had wandered all over the world as a professor and speaker, leaving his family and home in The Netherlands. As the eldest son in a large family, he relates to the self-righteous elder brother in his reflection on the lives of some of his siblings. He realizes that he is becoming the Father as an older man in his fifties, who is responsible to welcome people who may feel lost and wasteful back to the embrace of the Father/God. The parable needs to be retitled, “The Welcome by the Compassionate Father,” as this is the real focus of Jesus’s address.

At the time I first read the book, I felt excluded by the excessive competitiveness and comparisons in the Canadian Conference in relation to narrow aspects of pastoral performance. Nouwen explains that the Father does not compare the two sons; he welcomes each of them fully as they are. In the Kingdom of God, there is no comparing! The other aspect of the work that continues to speak to me is that as an older pastor, even in retirement, I am to fill the role of a welcoming Father to any and all who may be in my sphere of influence. In my local church, I have developed several supportive relationships with younger men to encourage and walk alongside them. In 2022, I concluded serving as one of two facilitators for the Equipping for Ministry Pastoral Care and Counseling course; through the years, I felt that I was fulfilling the role of assisting mostly younger adults in their spiritual and pastoral growth, as Nouwen encourages through this book.

Compassion is one of the themes of Jesus’s ministry, and he calls us to be compas-

sionate as the Father is compassionate. Nouwen outlines three aspects of life that help us to develop compassion. First is grief. As we find our way through experiences of grief toward healing, we become more aware of how much loss there is in the lives of people around us. This was dramatic for me when my closest sister died from a medical accident in 1981, my first major loss. Several years later, I began conducting Grief Recovery groups. Second is forgiveness. When we are able to adopt “magic eyes” (Lewis Smedes, *Forgive and Forget*) through which we see others as fully human, we move further into a compassionate mindset. Third is generosity. Giving is the drainplug for our greed, freeing us from the natural human tendency to grasp and retain what we have.

I enjoy reading biography, as there are so many wonderful people who have gone before me. A recent one is *End of the Spear*, by Steve Saint, a son of one of the missionaries who died in Ecuador in 1956; he was raised there and returned as an adult for periods of time. I also read a variety of books for Christian reflection and growth, as well as occasionally a mystery.

I have a friend in her mid-nineties who has serious macular degeneration. For a time, she was unable to read. A family member bought her a reading machine which enlarges the print enabling her to read again. This has brought new life to her! While she was unable to read, she hoped to die soon. Now she talks about living to one hundred! The privilege of reading is amazing!

Leonard Chester is Be In Christ Church of Canada’s representative on the Brethren in Christ Historical Society. He lives in Port Colborne, ON.

Awakening My Heart

By Julie Weatherford

IN THE DECADES since I came to know Jesus, and in recent years having completed a seminary degree and spiritual director training, I've read lots of books about faith, church, and spiritual practices. I can't begin to express my gratitude for authors and their influence on me. I consider some of them among my dearest friends even though we've never met.

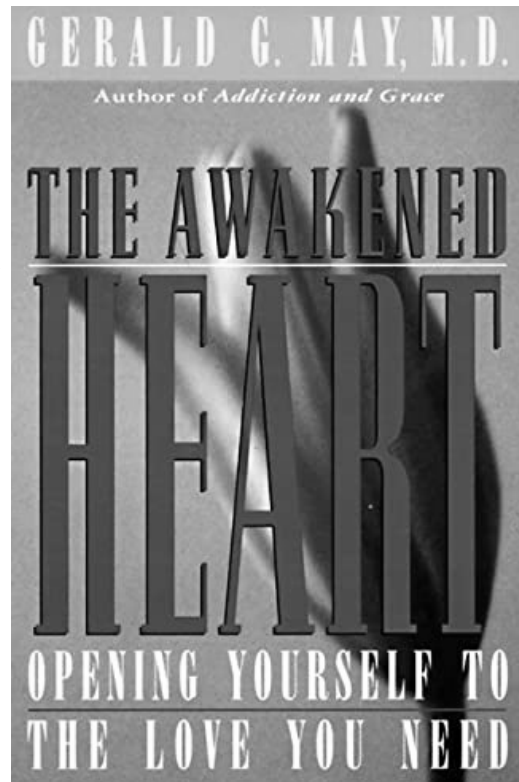
So, I'm surprised it took me so many years to discover Gerald May. Gerald May, MD, was psychiatrist, author, and director for spiritual guidance at Shalem Institute, a Christian educational organization dedicated to "nurturing contemplative living and leadership." My spiritual director recommended his books a couple years ago. So far, my favorite is *The Awakened Heart: Opening Yourself to the Love You Need*.

Awakened Heart opens with a quote from *The Cloud of Unknowing*: "In the interior life we must never take our experiences as the norm for everyone else." This sets the stage for a book filled with deep wisdom from a man whose understanding of human minds, hearts, and spirits was deep and wide, whose guidance seems imbued with the Spirit, and yet whose suggestions are delivered humbly, gently and lovingly. There's no "this-is-the-best-way," "just-do-what-I-do" approach to spirituality from May. Instead, while repeatedly admitting his own struggles with spiritual practice, he issues clarion calls to God, to Love—calls that appeal to something deep inside and encourage me to respond, to be aware of God's presence, to be kind to myself, to open myself, to receive God's constant offer of love, and to live wholeheartedly out of that love.

Make no mistake: this is no "head-in-the-clouds," spiritual "woo woo" book that has little grounding in scripture or in faith in Christ. Drawing from scripture, from past and current authors, and from his own experience, May offers a wealth of wisdom and practical suggestions for readers to choose from as they desire to open themselves to ex-

periences of God's love. There is no one right way to relate to God, he writes, and he encourages readers to "let God come into your awareness as God will. Be open to any possibilities, willing to be surprised."

I love May's suggestions for opening to experiences of God's presence, even if they are only glimpses. He encourages little remembrances of love, simple contemplative glances Godward, which come and go



within the ordinary activities of our daily lives, that need not be in our minds all the time, and that we can accept happily without striving for them. There are natural, uncontrived ways of connecting with God, such as May's suggestion of intentionally using a word, a phrase, or image to make ongoing dialogue with God more conscious, all the while "being very easeful, remaining attentive to the prayer but neither holding on to it nor shutting out other things."

Having often felt inadequate in my spiritual practices, it's freeing to read: "Relationship with the source of love is the most natural thing about us. Active practice of this

relationship is nothing other than living, as best we can, in appreciation of and fidelity to the continual heart-to-heart connectedness with the holy Other whose presence makes us complete." Seeing God as loving companion is a good response to Jesus's invitation "to follow him, take him in, keep him company, and love him." May suggests beginning "with prayer expressing your desire to perceive love's invitations more accurately... be[ing] especially on the lookout for experiences that you would not normally call religious or spiritual. . . . God refuses to be compartmentalized and may show up in the most surprising places."

In May's way of thinking, the contemplative way of love and life naturally spills over into daily life and action: "Experience with very open, immediate presence during set-aside prayer expands naturally into savoring the same quality of presence at various times during the rest of the day." It involves an ongoing attitude of the heart, a practice of opening one's hand to receive the gift, an opening within us "in love to the suffering and brokenness of the world as much as to its joy and beauty."

While awareness of God's presence is gift and mystery, it does benefit by dedicated practice. May says our practice can be very natural: "If you find that you are missing the mark in one way or another with your practice, you are probably trying too hard or complicating it too much. . . . Time and again I have found something I can do to help me pray, and then later discover I am doing that thing instead of really praying." (I do this, too, so I'm encouraged by his suggestion to relax a bit.)

May has nothing to prove, no need to show off knowledge or supposed spiritual superiority. Instead, he points the reader to trust in God: "I do not have any suggestions about how to deepen faith. It grows as our spiritual life grows, and it comes in surprising and unpredictable ways. The entire notion of practicing loving presence is both an exercise of faith and a response to it. But I can say that trusting is the practice of faith, the stretch-

ing-yielding of faith. There is a dimension of learning here, a growth of confidence that comes through repeatedly choosing to trust in God and finding, again and again, that God is trustworthy. But still, in the beginning and in the end, faith is a gift.”

In *The Awakened Heart*, May’s humble manner in offering ideas, his practical suggestions for experiencing God’s presence, his

openness to mystery, and his encouragement to be kind toward oneself in spiritual practice have been gift to me. Though I wonder that I didn’t discover him till now, I’ll trust that God knew when I’d be ready.

[I can’t close without giving high praise for Penelope Wilcock’s insightful, faith-encouraging novel, *The Hawk and the Dove*. I’ve got a long way to go in following Jesus,

but I’m a more humble and gracious person for having read it. I can’t recommend it highly enough.]

Julie Weatherford is a member of Madison Street Church, Riverside, CA. Gardener, friend, spiritual director, and grandmother, she loves working with teams to welcome and support local refugees and protect the environment.

An Allegory for Our Time

by Nancy Heisey

LOIS BECK, INTREPID instructor at Messiah College, introduced me to the work of French philosopher Albert Camus. Although we didn’t read *La Peste* in class, Mrs. Beck pushed us to read in French, well beyond the literary snippets I’d done in earlier classes. Then, during a junior year in Strasbourg, France, I fell into the pleasure of reading in French, first with a dictionary in hand, and later just ploughing ahead without checking everything unless I really got stuck. During that year, I also began to enjoy reading the Bible in French, a renewal of my understanding (growing up listening to sermons in Navajo) that different ways of expressing truth are part of the human experience.

During that year I read Camus’s three novels: *L’Etranger* (*The Stranger*, 1942), *La Peste* (*The Plague*, 1947), and *La Chute* (*The Fall*, 1956). As a college student, I was intrigued by Camus’s existentialist-absurdist philosophical label, his Marxist connections, and hints by some of his readers that Camus was edging toward Christian faith when he was killed in an automobile accident in 1960. When I returned to Messiah for my final year, I wrote a paper comparing *La Peste* with John Knowles’s coming-of-age novel *A Separate Peace* (1959). My instructor was not impressed with my efforts to contrast the authors’ approaches to explaining the problem of evil, and significantly, I did not attend to the World War II background of both works.

Of the three Camus novels I read, *La Peste* called me back over and over. This story

described the sudden rise of a rat-borne plague in the Algerian city of Oran. I was fascinated by Dr. Rieux, the man who treats the mysterious illness’s victims, and first calls what was happening a “plague.” Dr. Rieux works tirelessly and altruistically throughout the epidemic, although at times hardening himself against the suffering he encounters in order to keep working. Dr. Rieux also represents the personal toll of the epidemic, worrying about his wife, who left the city earlier for a TB sanatorium.

La Peste is replete with other colorful

stay and help to care for the sick. Most gripping to me was Father Panélox, a stern Jesuit who preaches from the cathedral that the plague was sent to challenge those who had hardened their hearts against God. Later, however, after a child he prayed for dies of the plague, Panélox joins the volunteer caregivers throughout the city, declaring that the child’s death is a test of faith. As the plague wanes, Panélox falls ill and refuses treatment, promising that God would care for him. Dr. Rieux wonders whether Panélox’s death is plague-induced or something else.

Early on I read *La Peste* in English as well as in French. During my teaching years at Eastern Mennonite University, I co-taught an interdisciplinary course titled “Plague,” which provided a global overview of the history, epidemiology, sociology, and theology related to epidemics. For our course packet, I selected excerpts from *The Plague* to represent the arguments of Panélox. Students, however, found his character too extreme for much discussion. During the coronavirus lock-down, I came back to the English version, found it less satisfying, but couldn’t get my hands on a French edition. I heard that many others were re-discovering the novel, or finding it for the first time, and noting its resonances with our own experiences.

In between my readings of *La Peste*, I read other critical essays and remembrances of Camus. I learned more about his life as a pied-noir, the label given by mainland French citizens to European immigrants who settled in Algeria under French colonial rule, thus becoming “French” without being “French.” I learned about Camus’s work

Albert Camus *La peste*



characters, including Mr. Rambert, an out-of-town journalist trapped by the city lock-down. Rambert first tries to get himself smuggled out of the city, but then decides to

within the French resistance as a journalist, and glimpsed how *La Peste* was a sort of “allegory” about the rise of Nazism. I also learned about Camus’s moral struggle over the death penalty. As World War II ended, Camus wrote chilling editorials calling for the execution of French collaborators with the Nazis. As historian Robert Zaretsky writes: “It speaks to Camus’ moral resilience that he eventually renounced this position, admitting publicly that he had been wrong.”

Camus’s *Dr. Rieux* remains with me. The novel concludes: “[Rieux] knew what those

jubilant crowds did not know but could have learned from books: that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city.”

Sobering, and challenging, this view! Yet in our time, Camus’s moral courage and belief in human dignity, in the face of evil, cry

out to me as a disciple of Jesus Christ. This story strengthens my desire to join all the citizens of this world, whatever their stories, who share such commitments, as we also share the divine image.

Nancy Heisey is professor emerita of biblical studies and church history at Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, VA.

The World Rendered in a Book

By Zach Spidel

I WAS EITHER a sophomore or junior at Messiah when I first read Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. I’ve returned to it repeatedly since then. It’s a famous book, and justly so, praised in lavish terms by people far more profound than myself. Nothing I could say here about this book will not already have been said, and said much better, by someone else.

So, I cannot add substantively to the volumes of praise already heaped on this novel, but what I can do is testify. I can share with you what this great book has meant to me, or rather, I can share a fraction of what it has meant, because it is a book that gave me back the world in a different form, a book that made me see the world and the God who made and loves this world in a startling new light. It’s a book in which I’ve found myself repeatedly. In fact, I’ve found different versions and visions of myself in its pages: what I might become if I persist in making a way for divine love in my soul; what I might become if I listen, instead, to the lusts of the flesh, or the cynicism of thought unmoored from thought’s telos, or

the insidious whisper of that primordial malice which seems to seep out from the dark, unwatched corners of my heart when they’ve been left to shadow for far too long.

It’s a book that renders holiness in all its hard, strange glory and which renders the

different types and levels of evil with equal verisimilitude. It manages to show those two realities, as they often are, intermingled in individual lives and even in individual acts. Yet it never falls prey to cheap relativism. The novel knows of goodness and evil both; it knows they are opposites, and it knows these opposites live in all of us.

It is a novel that communicates pro-

found truth but does so without that fatal flaw in well-intentioned art—didacticism. This is an especially amazing feat in a book so full of monologues, parables, homilies, and treatises rendered in the voices of characters whose purposes are often, in various specific cases, didactic. Yet the play of these competing voices and the way their (very)



different visions of the world contend so vigorously against one other on the page prevents the novel itself from falling into the trap of triteness.

That is not to say, however, that the novel leaves you with a mere competition between perspectives. For those with eyes to see and ears to hear, the truth wins out. It is Alyosha—the meek and saintly brother—following the wisdom of the holy elder Zosima, who we finally see vindicated in the novel, even if that vindication is neither simple nor easy. The humble way of love, the commitment to gentleness in a world of cruelty—these are vindicated against the helpless, twisted malice of Alyosha’s father, the wantonness of his brother Dimitri, and the strange hybrid of idealism and cynicism which has gripped his intellectual brother, Ivan.

But saying all this, I’ve still not come close to illustrating for those of you who may not have read the novel why it deserves such striking praise. So, while there are passages more important to me personally, I will select the novel’s most well-known moment in the off chance that you’ve read this chapter in an anthology somewhere along the way and I might build on some level of advance knowledge.



Faithful Alyosha is meeting with his atheist, intellectual brother Ivan. Far from malicious, Ivan is a sensitive soul and strives to live morally. In fact, his deepest problem with God is not the irrationality of the idea of a Creator, but what he regards as the moral horror of it. For if the world is the work of an omnipotent Maker, then he has, Ivan feels very deeply, subjected his creatures to an inexcusable fate. Ivan is especially troubled by the stories of children who die young after terrible abuse. Rather than accept from such a God the existence of a world in which such things happen, Ivan would wish to “return his ticket” from such a God into such a world. He rejects God on that basis. But his rejection is perhaps not as complete, or purely rational, as he sometimes makes it seem.

For, on the occasion I am mentioning, he offers a “parable” of his own making to Alyosha to explain his views. In it, Jesus returns incognito rather than in glory during the Spanish Inquisition. He has come for un-

known reasons, but he has come quietly and barely noticed, until he is caught and brought to the Grand Inquisitor. The Inquisitor knows who he is, and berates Jesus with increasing anger. The Inquisitor says that he and the church have worked hard to undo all Jesus’ terrible work. He says that Jesus rejected (in the desert) the powers of bread, and spectacle, and politics—and that he left people, therefore, defenseless in a wretched world. In this hard world, the church has, in Jesus’s name, accepted all three powers in order to tell them sweet lies and let them have a little solace in the midst of the horror, even if it’s at the price of the summons to freedom which Jesus left.

The Inquisitor grows more and more erratic and angry as he berates his nominal Lord, and all the time Jesus is silent before his accuser. And when, at last, the Inquisitor is in full froth and demands an answer from Jesus for the horrors of the world and his refusal to use those three great powers to protect people from them, Jesus simply rises and

gently kisses the man that would kill him again.

Ivan concludes this story in something of a froth himself, but Alyosha is astonished. For what Ivan sees as a fatal indictment of Jesus—in fact what he crafted to be an indictment—Alyosha sees instead as a holy and beautiful portrait. Yes indeed, that is what Jesus is like, and isn’t it beautiful that he would kiss you, and kissing you, give you the only answer to your agony that could ever suffice?

It’s a testament to the power of Dostoevsky’s story that not a few non-Christians of significant insight have read Ivan’s story as the indictment he meant it to be, while not a few Christians (like myself) have seen it as Alyosha did. A story within a story, two views of that story on offer—truth for those with eyes to see.

Zach Spidel is pastor of East Dayton Fellowship, Dayton, OH.

Lessons from One Person’s Miraculous Conversion

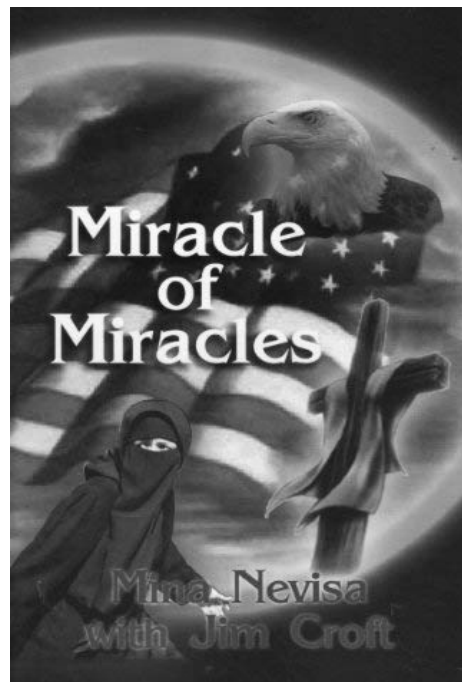
By Edie Asbury

WHEN I WAS asked to name an influential book in my life, the memoir of Mina Nevisa, *Miracle of Miracles: A Muslim Woman’s Conversion to Christ and Flight from the Perils of Islam*, came to mind. It was introduced to me by my young adult son who has a longstanding heart for missions. He obtained it from the Brethren in Christ World Missions office and passed it on to me when he finished reading it.

The author, Mina Nevisa, was the youngest of seven children, born into a wealthy fundamentalist Muslim family in Tehran, the capital of Iran. Her father, described as gentle and loving, read the Koran at least two hours per day and was a professor of Islamic theology at the University of Tehran. Her grandfather, an Islamic high priest who also lived with her family, was a famous author of more than sixty-five books on Islamic topics.

At age five, Mina began wearing the hijab (head covering). Her native language was

Farsi, but at age nine she was taught to say the daily prayers in Arabic. At age fourteen, she says that the Holy Spirit quickened her



soul to be dissatisfied with Islam. Why must prayers be said in Arabic? Doesn't Allah understand other languages? Why must prayers be said at specific times? Is Allah only available then? She longed for a meaningful relationship with God; her prayers were one-way to Allah. Obedience, reciting prayers, and reading the Koran left her feeling empty.

While studying at the university library one day at age seventeen, she looked down and saw a copy of the book *Injil Sharif*, a Christian Bible in her own language. She tried to turn it in to the librarian, but the librarian insisted that it was not a library copy and no one had reported it as lost, so she should keep it. Taking it home, she showed it to her family and “witnessed the male members of my family being transformed from loving people into hate-ridden radical Muslims.” Her father demanded that she return the book, but she hid the Bible and secretly read it, especially concentrating on learning about Jesus. The manner in which

Jesus protected and honored women was comforting, because it was so different from what she saw Muslim women commonly experience from spiritual leaders and husbands.

Eventually Mina connected with other Christians and met secretly with them at great risk of imprisonment and death if discovered, often turned in by their own family members to instill fear of what happens to those who leave the Islam faith. When her father arranged a marriage for her, she was uncertain about whether her new husband would tolerate her practicing her newly-found Christian faith. Seeing God's hand in their journey together is an amazing and truly inspirational life story.

I connected with this book on three levels. First, it impacted my devotional life, bringing a new and continuing appreciation for being able to pray in my own language, using my own words to express praise and seek God's will. Unlike Muslim practices, spending time in prayer can be done at any time of the day but still needs to be a priority. Also, having the Bible in the language most

familiar to me is something to be cherished.

Second, her story is an example to me of relying on God through uncertain times of life. Even in a life that may seem settled and safe in comparison to hers, there are inevitably uncertainties at times that can cause anxiety or worries. Relying on God brings hope and a peace that passes understanding in the face of despair.

Third, as a librarian I am challenged to listen to the Spirit's prompting to share the Good News in intentional ways. Though I don't understand why the librarian in Mina's story was not deterred by the cultural dangers that put Mina at risk when taking a Bible into her fundamentalist Muslim home, her action undeniably became a key turning point in Mina's life. I am reminded of how the power of the Bible and other books, some obtained from libraries, can impact lives and point people to the God that looks like Jesus. Another prompting by the Spirit that I sense as a librarian is to pray for situations that arise in the library setting. Librarians at the Antrim Brethren in Christ

Church once shared with other church librarians that they offer to pray with persons in the library when they sense a need. While researching topics for patient care professionals in my hospital library, I often quietly say a prayer for the patients and healthcare providers facing that particular need.

My description of Mina Nevisa's story sets the stage but purposely does not reveal the details of the rest of her faithful and adventurous journey through the many difficulties and sometimes unexpected miracles of her life. To read more about her inspiring story and find out what the "miracle of miracles" was, get a copy of the book and pass it on to someone else when you are finished, as my son did!

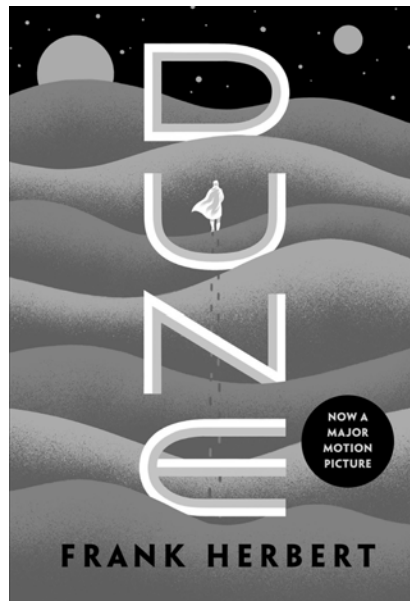
Edie Asbury is a medical librarian at Penn State Health Holy Spirit Medical Center, Camp Hill, PA. She attends the Grantham Brethren in Christ Church where she has served as the church librarian for many years. She also serves as editor of the Brethren in Christ Church Librarians Newsletter.

Jumping Down the Rabbit Hole of a Good Story

By Martha Byers

WHEN I WAS in seventh grade, I remember reading a story in a science fiction magazine where the illustration depicted a giant worm rising out of the sand, with a gaping maw filled with rows of sharp teeth. I was curious and wanted to read more. However, I didn't connect this mesmerizing, fantastical world with the book *Dune* until I bought it when participating in the subscription book club in school. After discovering this dense, complicated epic, I lost the book. It wasn't until I rediscovered my book, several years later, sitting on a homeroom bookshelf, that I could finish reading it. This book remains intact in my possession to this day, albeit with browned pages.

Now for the rest of the story: A young son must emigrate with his family as his dad, a duke, must take up the mantle of governing. Through his dad's trusted bodyguards, they teach him how to defend against the political intrigue of the court. In addition, his mother, steeped in ancient hereditary



powers, influences his defensive and offensive skills.

The plot thickens as his father is assassinated. Young Paul escapes and finds himself among the native peoples of the planet, who

know how to survive in the unforgiving desert planet. Their skills cultivate the galaxy-coveted addictive and enhancing spice.

Somehow the big worms from my long ago sci-fi story are involved with producing the spice. Since the galaxy hegemony is desperate to control the spice, the desert people are locked in an existential struggle to protect their planet. Through legendary prophecies coming to a head, the indigenous folk are hanging their hopes on Paul as the embedded messianic figure to lead them forward and protect them.

The germ of my fascination with sci-fi in general was planted by that story of a monstrous worm rising out of the sand. Boy, was I thrilled when I found out that this worm, an integral part of the Dune ecosystem, had more to tell me! How exciting to find out that Dune (and the worm) was only the first in a series of many Dune-oriented books.

The Dune saga contains many topics rel-

evant to countless machinations throughout human history: the struggle between good and evil, justice versus corruption, honor versus dishonor, clarity versus intrigue, hope versus despair, greed versus benevolence, and so on.

As I mentioned earlier, while Paul's mother experiences mental images through her inherited female sect, so too the aboriginal people of this planet foretell a bold leader to lead them out of the oppressed shadows into a glorious political victory. Paul too is plagued with confusing dreams.

Inspiration in Small Doses

By Beth Saba

FROM THE TIME I learned to read, books have been a passion, and at first an escape from a somewhat restricted life experience. Our conservative Brethren in Christ home did not allow television. We were encouraged to invent play and because of my mother's love of books also frequent the local library. She and I would weekly take the bus downtown to the Lois Lenski Room which was located at the very top of our public library. There I checked out the maximum books allowed which included Lois Lenski's own titles, Laura Ingalls Wilder, The Bobbsey Twins and eventually Nancy Drew Mysteries. I read the Sugar Creek Gang from our church library and my parents subscribed to the *Highlights* magazine for me. In sixth grade, my math grades were suffering and my library card was confiscated until I could improve them.

In college I chose to major in history to teach secondary education. There I discovered a curiosity about the past centuries that enhanced my repertoire to include historical fiction, Russian literature, and almost everything Anglophile, from C. S. Lewis, N. T. Wright, and J. R. Tolkien to Agatha Christie and Ellis Peters. Before I began teaching in middle schools, I decided to pursue a Master's degree program at Vanderbilt University and major in medieval history and minor in church history. Writing a thesis was a requirement to graduate. The title of my thesis was "The Life of Margery Kempe." She was a woman of late fourteenth and early fif-

teenth century England who kept a journal. She was married, a business woman and a mystic, who eventually took vows of celibacy and poverty. In my research I needed to read writings of Tertullian, Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Sienna, and Francis of Assisi among others. The contemplative life of intimacy with Jesus from the Roman Catholic perspective piqued my interest.

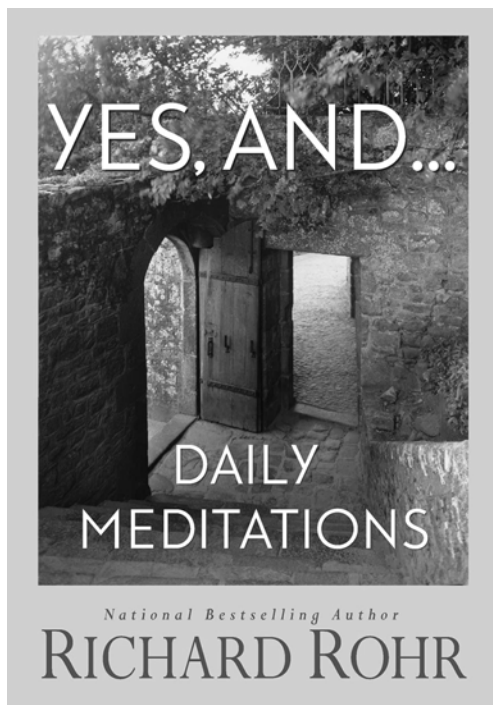
I'm not really that deep. I just like to read and jump down the rabbit hole of a good story. *Dune* did that for me.

Martha Byers grew up in the Five Forks Brethren in Christ Church, Waynesboro, PA. She has lived in Washington, DC for the past thirty-five years and attends Washington Community Fellowship (Mennonite). After working as a nurse, then on disability for an autoimmune illness, she is now officially retired. She enjoys her neighborhood, faith community, family, and four cats.

teenth century England who kept a journal. She was married, a business woman and a mystic, who eventually took vows of celibacy and poverty. In my research I needed to read writings of Tertullian, Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Sienna, and Francis of Assisi among others. The contemplative life of intimacy with Jesus from the Roman Catholic perspective piqued my interest.

mary school (Terra Santa) that my husband had attended before his family became refugees in 1948. It was a school still operated by the Franciscans. As Brethren in Christ, we have held St. Francis in esteem to include one prayer of his in the last hymnal publication (*Hymns for Worship*, 499). We Protestants do not know how influential the Franciscan Order has been over the centuries, and I am beginning to have a deep appreciation for this para-organization of the Roman Catholic Church. How would a twenty-first century Franciscan friar present this religious practice and philosophy today? Richard Rohr is a well-known ecumenical teacher, a bestselling author, and a Franciscan priest of the New Mexico Province. He is the founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, NM.

The book *Yes, And...: Daily Meditations* is a compilation of Rohr's scholarship and separates his themes from his various books and recordings into daily readings. I found this less intimidating than starting with one of his books like *Contemplation in Action*. Perusing his thoughts in small doses gave me time to think about and compare what he says with the theology I have understood since childhood. It also feeds my curiosity into the mystical and contemplative practices of ancient and contemporary Christianity. I am discovering a richness of language in his thoughts. When analyzing the passage in Colossians 1:15-20 on reconciliation, he writes, "This is not a problem-solving Christ,



In 2019 my husband and I went to Israel/Palestine and we noticed banners throughout the country celebrating eight hundred years of Franciscan presence in the Middle East. On tour we stopped at the pri-

not a denominational or cultural Christ, not a Christ domesticated by the churches. This Christ names in his life and person what matters, what lasts and finally what is. He holds it all together in significance, reveals the redemptive pattern that we call the life and death of things, and holds the meaning and value of our lives *outside of ourselves*" (italics his).

When commenting on Romans 10:9 which states "Jesus is Lord," he penned "Early Christians were quite aware that their 'citizenship' was in a new, universal kingdom announced by Jesus (Philippians 3:20) and that

the kingdoms of this world were not their primary loyalty systems. How have we managed to lose that and what price have we paid for it?" I learned new meanings for symbolism such as the Celtic knot. It was the Celts' way of saying "all is connected, everything belongs, and all is one in God."

On page 191, he defined why he titled his book *Yes, And....* 1 Corinthians 12:10 discusses the spiritual gift of discernment. Rohr believes that discernment has been undeveloped among ordinary Christians and writes that discernment invites "people into what I call Yes/And thinking rather than simplistic

either/or thinking...Both knowledge and wisdom are good, but wisdom is much better...which is what it takes to develop a truly *consistent ethic of life*" (italics his).

I have not finished the book, but continue to find his words helpful and challenging! at this time in my life.

Beth Saba is a retired middle school history teacher and attends the Westside Christian Community Church (Brethren in Christ) in Springfield, OH.

A Life in Books

By Harriet Sider Bicksler

DURING MY BIRTHDAY month this year (April), I wrote on Facebook every day about books that are part of my life story. Four of the thirty "Life in Books" posts are reproduced here (slightly edited).

In January 1954, my mother started homeschooling me at Wanezi Mission in Southern Rhodesia, using materials provided by correspondence from the British government. By the time of my sixth birthday in late April, I had started reading—a really big deal for me because I couldn't wait to learn to read.

My maternal grandmother had a tradition of giving a New Testament to each of her grandchildren for their sixth birthdays. I was the ninth of her fourteen grandchildren to receive a small black faux-leather New Testament—mailed all the way from Pennsylvania to Southern Rhodesia, probably by ship.

I have a very vague childhood memory of receiving that New Testament. In my memory, I am opening the package in the living room of our house at Wanezi and excitedly reading from it—perhaps John 3:16, since one of the single missionary ladies (Pauline Frey, who later married my uncle Elmer Sider) had recently taught me to recite that verse—in the King James Version, of course.

I still have that New Testament. Inside there is an inscription: "To Harriet on her sixth birthday. Grandma Bohlen."

My college years were right in the middle of the turbulent 1960s, including racial unrest and the ongoing civil rights movement. As a senior in high school in 1964, I had written a short story called "Created Equal," about a black family that was unable to find decent housing because of their race. Obviously, I was aware of racial tensions even though I was living in lily white Grantham/Mechanicsburg. During my years at Messiah College from 1964-1968, the college was almost all white.

Into this very white academic setting came John Howard Griffin, the author of *Black Like Me*, published in 1961. All students were encouraged to read the book before Griffin spoke on campus. In the book, Griffin, who was white, tells the story of his decision in 1959 to darken his skin, "become black," and travel the southern US so he could find out firsthand what it was like to be a black man in America. As you might imagine in the south in 1959, it was not a pretty story.

Reading that book gave me my first real insight into the daily lived experience of African Americans in the US. I was appalled, although I had no sense of what I should do with my outrage. In the years since, I have read and learned from many more books that describe the lived experience of blacks throughout the history of the US and into

the present in all its horror and injustice, but the first to begin that awakening was *Black Like Me*.

In 1978, I became a stay-at-home mom to my kindergartener daughter and newborn son. While I was mothering and starting to launch a small home-based freelance writing and editorial "business," two books were published that significantly influenced my thinking and in many ways changed the trajectory of my Christian faith.

The first was *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, by Ronald J. Sider. This book completely changed my thinking. I had never before heard or read such an indictment of affluence and materialism or so clear a biblical call to work for economic justice in the world. Some people dismissed the book as using faulty analysis and/or inaccurate information, but the core premise of the book resonated deeply with me and instinctively felt right.

Paired with *Rich Christians* was *The Upside-Down Kingdom* by Donald Kraybill. To Sider's treatment of economic justice, Kraybill added the power-under nature of Jesus's ministry and his clear call to peacemaking and nonviolence and different kind of kingdom. Kraybill's analysis of the radical and much more political meaning of Jesus's three temptations than I had ever heard before has stayed with me.

Together, these two books plus another one by Sider, *Christ and Violence*, propelled me into a lifelong commitment to the biblical call to pursue peace, nonviolence, and social justice. Having grown up in an historic peace church but not having been taught all that much of the theological and biblical underpinnings of pacifism, these books helped to fill that gap. I have failed many times and not always lived consistently when it comes to peace and social justice, but the basic commitment has remained constant. These books transformed my thinking about what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

Along with the civil rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s was the women's movement, and I was coming of age right in the middle of it all. The Equal Rights Amendment was passed by Congress in 1972 (although it has never been ratified by enough states), the year after I got married. In the Brethren in Christ Church, however, women were still not involved much in church leadership, either in congregations or at the denominational level.

Over the next ten years, there was increasing conversation about the role of women in the church and whether women could be church leaders and pastors, or even serve on church boards. Even though I had observed many strong women with leadership gifts as a child on the mission field, I had assumed without question that only men

could be pastors; after all, Paul had said in 1 Timothy 2:12: "I do not permit a woman to teach." But as the conversation continued, I began to understand the Bible differently, and in 1982, fully agreed with the Brethren in Christ General Conference's statement affirming "the ministry of women in the life and programs of the church." This opened the door to licensing and ordaining women as ministers, appointing them as pastors, and welcoming women into all positions of leadership, including as bishops.

A really important part of my journey on the issue of women in ministry and leadership was the 1979 book, *Women, Men, and the Bible*, by Virginia Ramey Mollenkott. That book clearly and forthrightly interpreted the broad sweep of the Bible as "liberating" women from their second-class status and affirming their full participation in the life of the church (e.g., "there is neither male nor female--we are all one in Jesus"). It was indeed a liberating book for me, followed by many others, and they all helped to lead me into and sustain me through forty-plus years of advocacy for women in the church.

Harriet Sider Bicksler is editor of *Shalom!* and editor for the Brethren in Christ Historical Society. She attends the Grantham (PA) Brethren in Christ Church where she serves on the Peace and Social Justice Commission.

continued from page 12

faith can falter and fall while still holding onto and wanting to live holy lives. Howatch has a keen mind and writes theology in fiction, showing the reader how theology and real life interact for better or worse. Read it for the story or the theology or psychology or the mysticism. They are all there woven together in intriguing and satisfying patterns.

Nonfiction

Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith by Kathleen Norris (1998): Norris is a poet and essayist writing several books about living the Christian faith. *Amazing Grace* is a book of small individual essays that I can return to

frequently. My study group once took about two years to read, digest, and discuss all she has to say and what we had to say about what she had to say. The book is arranged by writing about one word of faith at a time and she can write one page or a few more on each word. The short essays are a part of her own coming to grips with "scary" words of her coming back to faith. Some of her word ponderings include idolatry, repentance, annunciation, neighbor, truth, infallibility, asceticism, and, of course, grace. She writes about faith lived out in experience and by thinking deeply and broadly about each. Whether you resonate or question her mus-

Editor's Notes

Subscription renewals: You should have received the 2023 subscription renewal letter, and many of you have responded. Thank you! If you have not renewed yet, there is still time. The price for a one-year subscription is \$20, with additional contributions welcome to cover the cost of mailing overseas and to each Brethren in Christ student enrolled at Messiah University. Checks should be payable to Brethren in Christ US and mailed to the editor (address on page 2). You can also renew online at bicus.org/resources/publications/shalom/.

The rest of 2023: The summer edition will consider the practical applications of Micah 6:8's description of what God requires: love mercy, do justice, and walk humbly with God. The fall edition will explore our identity as Brethren in Christ (based on Project 250's first goal of reaffirming our identity as a community of Christ-followers.)

Then what? What else should we be exploring in *Shalom!*? What topics deserved to be repeated? What haven't we covered that you think we should? Contact the with suggestions: bickhouse@aol.com.

ings, Kathleen Norris gives her reader rich ground to explore. And she does it in bite-size pieces.

Lois Saylor is an editorial advisor for *Shalom!* and attends the Harrisburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church.

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Books: A Time to Reread

By Lois A. Saylor

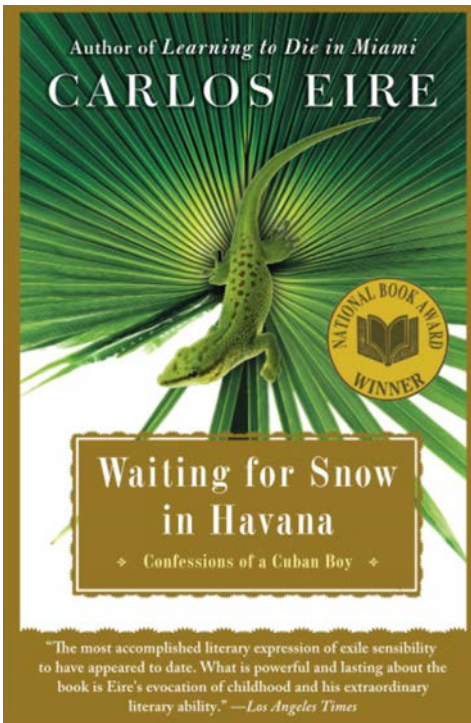
FOR THIS ISSUE on favorite books here are a few of my “go to” reads. They open up new ways to understand the world and live more knowledgeably in it—a good reason to read and reread a good book.

Memoirs

Waiting for Snow in Havana by Carlos Eire (2003): This colorfully and poetically written memoir is a child’s view of life in pre-Castro Cuba, during the Cuban revolution, and then in the Peter Pan airlift of young Cuban boys escaping from the dangers that changed a childhood wonderland into chaos, disruption, and family segregation. The reader learns to see the beauty of the Cuban island through a young boy’s eyes and how life can radically change as guerrilla warfare overtakes his homeland. Eire writes with passion as his childhood memories explode on the page. The reader feels his joys and his losses, and hopefully some catharsis too as this memoir is written with a profound depth of emotion.

The Glass Castle by Jeannette Walls (2005): This memoir is a roller coaster of events, emotions, and energy. The Walls family is highly dysfunctional and damaging, but also oddly imaginative and fun, although only at times. As a young child, Walls is

burned when a gas stove catches her clothes on fire and she is scarred for life, but that is perhaps the easier scar to bare. Some of her childhood experiences made me want to call



social services retroactively. Other times she lets us enter the wonder she felt at her father’s intelligent and creative mind. He really did contemplate how to build a glass castle. But

mostly the family falters in addiction, job loss, homelessness, mental health issues, and running from the law. Walls and her siblings in amazing resiliency escape their odd and difficult childhood even as their parents remain dysfunctional and delusional. It’s a ride worth taking if you think you can.

Fiction

The Starbridge series by Susan Howatch: In six novels, Howatch takes her readers on a journey through the changing landscape of Anglican church life and theology in twentieth century England. From the 1930s to the 1960s, the novels center on the fictional cathedral of Starbridge. These novels explore theology, psychology, and Christian mysticism through the lives of an ensemble cast of characters who appear throughout the series, sometimes taking center stage and sometimes receding. In a following series, she has three novels that take place in the 1980s and 90s following a son of one of the original characters. He is first introduced in the Starbridge series. Most intriguing in the books is the exploration of truth from the various angles of evolving theology, modern psychology, and the ancient vocabulary, thoughts, and practice of Christian mysticism. Howatch also explores how far people of