



FALL 2025 ISSUE OF THE WRITER SHOWCASE

*The* WIDE  
WORLD  
*of* BOOKS

WORD *on* FIRE  
INSTITUTE

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# The Wide World of Books

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Welcome to the Fall 2025 issue of the *Institute Writer Showcase*, featuring the subtle art of the book review. Book reviews provide an excellent way to carry out our mission to proclaim Christ in the culture. Reviews can call readers' attention to books that present truth, goodness, and beauty; highlight the "seeds of the word"; explain aspects of our faith in a nonthreatening and inviting way; model intellectual hospitality by offering criticism thoughtfully and charitably; and provide opportunities for evangelizing conversations.

For this issue, I invited members of the Writing Groups in our Writing Community to review books with the *ad extra* mission in mind. The reviewers chose books that non-Catholic or non-Christian readers would potentially find interesting and worthwhile and wrote the reviews with an implicit, rather than direct, Christian perspective. These reviews, and the books that they encourage us to read, are ideal for opening the door for discussion with someone—either in an individual conversation or as a book club or reading group choice—who might be unwilling to pick up a distinctively "Christian" book. You may find yourself adding some of these titles to your own to-read list as well: I certainly have!

—Dr. Holly Ordway, editor, *Institute Writer Showcase*

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FICTION & POETRY



Beauty in the Becoming: Review of *The Awakening of Miss Prim* by Natalia Sanmartin Fenollera

CHRISTINE MCPARLAND ROSSI

*St. Thomas More Writing Group*

*The Awakening of Miss Prim* by Natalia Sanmartin Fenollera (Atria, 2014)

Not many novels blend lighthearted romance and philosophical themes, but readers will find both in *The Awakening of Miss Prim*. What on the surface appears to be the age-old tale of a man and a woman becomes a deeper exploration of beauty and truth. As Miss Prim discovers, how we approach and respond to these transcendentals ultimately shapes who we become.

*The Awakening of Miss Prim* tells the story of Prudencia Prim, a young woman who, in search of a refuge from modern society, takes a job as a personal librarian in the small European village of San Ireneo de Arnois. As Miss Prim gets to know her employer and the other villagers, she encounters a way of life that draws her in with its simplicity and beauty. The underlying philosophy of this community, however, both perplexes her and piques her curiosity—especially when it manifests in conversations with her employer. As Miss Prim realizes she's attracted to more than a way of life, she begins to reconsider her own rigid convictions about the world.

When readers first meet Miss Prim, they learn of her multiple degrees, refined taste, and fixation on beauty and excellence. She's a perfectionist who lives by an almost obsessive adherence to her personal views and values, looking down on those who fall short of her impossibly high standards. While her character is described almost to the point of caricature, it serves to heighten the contrast with the person Miss Prim gradually becomes throughout the book.

To the degree Miss Prim's character is exaggerated in a negative direction, the community of San Ireneo is in a positive one. The reader may be as surprised as Miss Prim is to discover the counter-cultural lifestyle of this unusual community: where parents ensure their children are educated in the ancient Greek trivium; where goods are produced locally and residents own small businesses, setting their working hours according to their family's needs; where books are abundant and computers and cell phones are nonexistent; where common conversation topics revolve around philosophy and literature; and where every visit with friends and neighbors is accompanied by handmade sweets or a home-cooked meal (and a pot of hot chocolate or glass of fine wine, of course).

Readers who wish for a simpler and more intentional lifestyle—especially one that values good books, good food, and good company—will likely find this setting delightful. Yet others may struggle to relate to the idyllic San Ireneo. But readers may think twice before categorizing this book as a fluffy, feel-good novel when they encounter thought-provoking lines like the advice of the village matriarch to Miss Prim: “Unless you allow the beauty you seek to hurt you, to break you and knock you down, you'll never find it.” Or the mysterious insight from an old monk who shares with Miss Prim that “marriage is never about two, but about three.”

As this unusual community and its interesting residents influence Miss Prim, her “awakening” slowly and organically takes shape. However, one aspect of her growth lacks the same development, and it's vital to the romantic subplot. At the beginning of the story, Miss

Prim is dead set against marriage, considering it an outdated and unnecessary institution. She is thus appalled and outraged when the women of the village, including some of her new friends, conspire to find her a husband. A few chapters later, Miss Prim is suddenly open to the idea, without any explanation for this drastic change of heart. Yet this plot hole is forgivable for the reader who's eager for the romance to unfold or who disagrees with Miss Prim's marital opinions in the first place.

The romantic element is introduced subtly as Miss Prim gets better acquainted with her employer, whom we only know as the Man in the Wing Chair (named so because he was sitting in one when Miss Prim met him). This absence of a proper name lends itself to the mystery of his character. The story doesn't reveal a lot about him except that he's the guardian of his orphaned nieces and nephews, he tutors the village's children in Latin, and he's had an experience that has profoundly changed him and led him to be a part of the San Ireneo community. He's also extremely intelligent, which the reader witnesses in the intellectual sparring matches between him and Miss Prim. These conversations intrigue and perturb her, as his perspective often challenges her own tightly held worldview.

Despite their ardent disagreements and conflicting convictions, Miss Prim discovers she's developed feelings for her employer. Yet this romantic subplot maintains a secondary place in the story, serving as one of the main instigators for Miss Prim's awakening. Whether or not her future can include the Man in the Wing Chair or staying in San Ireneo, her time there has begun a journey, and she will follow to see where it ends.

I would recommend this book to readers who enjoy light, clean romance, especially novels that go beyond romance to probe its roots in the transcendentals. *The Awakening of Miss Prim* will resonate with anyone who longs for the good, the true, and the beautiful to be the heartbeat of a fuller life and better world.



## From Seeking to Certainty: Review of *Light at the Torn Horizon* by Paul Murray

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*Light at the Torn Horizon* by Paul Murray (Word on Fire, 2022)

*Light at the Torn Horizon* by Paul Murray is a compilation of free verse poems, the sixth of seven poetry books by Murray. The collection explores the spiritual experience of traveling from darkness and doubt to light and hope.

These sixty-seven compact poems are arranged into five sections, each with a different focus. The first takes a deep dive into the wrenching uncertainty and distressing doubt we can meet when faced by the confusion, aimlessness, and sufferings of life. The poems grope for hope and direction. Murray uses the senses to examine the source and purpose of beauty, art, life, and language. By combining language's sounds and simple but evocative visual images from nature, he makes these probing philosophical questions palpable, carrying the reader with him. For example, in "Perspective," he writes: "caught by / a tumult of longing, you search / among . . . / the chaff of things for the golden / corn of meaning."

Memories of Murray's childhood, landscapes, and father are evoked in the second section, delving into the dimensions of the heart's search for foundations and identity.

The pain of paradoxes is laid bare in the third section. Murray confronts many challenges, such as those of seemingly unanswered prayer and the inexplicable events and turmoil of life. An acute longing for comfort and answers, caused by our floundering and emotional wounds, is revealed in these eight poems. We, the readers, can recognize that we share the same disquieting plight and deep yearnings.

There is also a sharp sense of the inadequacy of language to express the fullness of both our delights and our trials. Thus, Murray's prayerful plea in "In the Future" is "teach . . . those / dead words how to live." The deficiencies of language to encapsulate our feelings and experiences is in fact a recurring theme throughout the book: As a wordsmith, Murray is perhaps particularly aware of, and agonized by, this perceived meagerness. Indeed, the final poem, "Afterword," lingers on the intent and value of poems themselves.

In the fourth section, "Days and Hours," the road turns toward hope. "Look up. Yellow light is already / flooding the sky," Murray urges the reader in "Wound." The prevailing themes here are the continuity of time and existence, confidence in the power of patience and redemption, and belief in courage when facing fear, doubts, and the heart's troubles. Murray's message to the voyager in life is: Step out into the void and be brave.

The fifteen poems of the final, crucial section convey dawning light and Murray's faith in a journey worth taking. Seeking is presented as a worthy road and a path to human fulfilment. The poems' route steers into the redemptive and transcendent. What might feel like a rather grim and desolate exploration of the philosophical struggles of being and of ultimate meaning transforms to a conviction that beauty and direction underpin all existence. It exposes the radiant peace and joy that this certainty brings, however intangible that may have felt at times along the track. For example, Murray speaks of rivulets emerging "out of the darkest hollows / . . . deep and clear into the light of / morning" ("Hope Against Hope").

A sense of arrival, of eternal harmony and tranquility, is the enduring impact of this concluding section. The book's cover image, Monet's *Sunset on the Seine at Lavacourt, Winter Effect*, beautifully echoes this final serenity too.

As well as the more spiritual poems, there are many that simply capture a moment in time, or an insight, without reference to faith or the transcendent (e.g., "Weather," "In the Forest," "On Hayling Island"). Occasionally these feel like a distraction, as could the initial poem, "A Reading," which precedes the "journeying" sections. (Although, in fact, Christian readers will detect a hint of the collection's salvific quest and path in the poem's line "How can this be?," which is Mary's query at the annunciation.) Despite these side steps, however, profound sensitivity and humility tinge every line, regardless of the specific theme.

Individually, each poem stands alone and can be pondered and meditated upon separately. They can be dipped into sporadically and randomly. The themes are those any seeker of truth, or anyone experiencing life's highs and lows, is likely to have ruminated upon. However, as a whole the author holds our hand through a personal journey from pain, uncertainty, restless doubt, and darkness toward hope, acceptance, and enduring faith. It is therefore worth reading the collection roughly in the order presented to be drawn along Murray's intended trajectory. As this will not initially be apparent to a reader selecting only a handful of poems from across the sections, it could be a drawback, for they will then miss the cumulative ascent of the journey.

These compact poems have a colloquial style that makes for easy accessibility, as does the clarity of the book's font, layout, and contents page. Some readers may prefer more formal poetic forms or balk at the location of specific line breaks. But the lyrical cadence of the words and phrases evoking nature, the senses, language, and the eternal Presence makes each poem sing.

Murray is absolutely honest about his own inadequacy, trials, dryness, and difficulties, as well as his experience of wonder, revelation, exuberance, and confidence in the transcendent. Readers may well find reassurance in the fact that within these questing, probing poems, Murray undergoes the same struggles and questions with which they too may have wrestled. As a man of faith, an Irish Dominican priest, and an expert in the literature of Western mystical tradition, Murray's conviction in an eternal Presence and purpose undergirds the journey of these poems. But don't let this deter, or indeed attract, you. Any reader who enjoys poetry, no matter what their faith or lack of it, will be drawn to Murray's stirring words because they reflect the ebb and flow of every person's intellectual and emotional life and daily experiences.

This collection will speak powerfully to anyone who has confronted grief, suffering, or missed opportunities; who has searched for truth, and the nature and purpose of life and of its creator; or who has known uplift, delight, and joy after travails. It does indeed offer a shining "light at the torn horizon" to today's troubled and tumultuous world.



## Art That Is Larger than Life: Review of *Anecdotes of Destiny* by Isak Dinesen

LISA GALALIS

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*Anecdotes of Destiny* by Isak Dinesen (Random House, 1958)

When a young person decides to pursue writing fiction or music, or acting or photography or screenwriting, a well-meaning uncle is likely to say, “When are you going to get a real job?” A sympathetic aunt might exchange a glance with his mother and say, “He’s an artist. Maybe he will be famous one day.”

For many adults, making art is an unrealistic pursuit, something risky, something we must put down and shove into a drawer when we come to an age to take up the serious work of living.

But *is* it true that art and storytelling are a distraction from life? *Does* art get in the way of real relationships? Or can fiction serve us in our real lives? Could it be worthwhile for an artist to pursue his art, even if he does not become famous? Does an artist need a grand talent or a grand stage to justify his pursuit of art?

Anyone interested in these questions might enjoy the final short story collection published by the late Danish author Karen Blixen, best known for her memoir, *Out of Africa*. This collection, *Anecdotes of Destiny* by Isak Dinesen (Blixen’s pen name), published just four years before her death, is a collection of five short stories that traverse the globe from Norway and Denmark to Persia and China.

The five stories feature, in turn, a Persian theology student who believes he is visited by an angel (“The Diver”), two Puritan sisters who host a French refugee who becomes their cook (“Babette’s Feast”), a teenaged actress who helps save a ship caught in a storm (“Tempests”), a miserly sea merchant who attempts to twist an old sailor’s yarn into a fact (“The Immortal Story”), and a young wife who encounters a thief (“The Ring”).

Throughout this collection, Blixen was particularly interested in exploring the relationship between art and life, fiction and fact. She effectively uses omniscient third-person narration to give us finely sculpted characters who live on in the reader’s mind long after the book has been closed.

The highlight of the collection—and the most famous—is “Babette’s Feast,” which was adapted into an Academy Award–winning foreign language film. Here Blixen most skillfully uses her fine prose style and vivid characters in service of a unified whole.

In this story, a French cook and political refugee comes to live as a servant for two spinster sisters, Martine and Philippa, who preside over the elderly remnant of a small Puritan congregation founded by their late father, who had ruled both the congregation and his daughters with a heavy hand. In her youth, each sister had been a great beauty and had had a young admirer. Martine’s was a young officer, to whom she gave little encouragement and who was intimidated by her father and fled in despair. Philippa’s admirer was a French opera singer named Pepin, who recognized her astonishing singing voice and dreamed in vain of stealing her away to the concert halls of Paris.

The titular “feast” comes about when Babette wins 10,000 francs in a lottery and asks the sisters for permission to use it to host a “real French dinner.” When their guests include Martine’s former admirer, the story builds to its breathtaking climax, in which a sensual dining experience becomes the vessel of spiritual insight, and in its glow old bitterness and regrets are dissolved in the possibility

of forgiveness—even forgiveness of oneself. As one guest puts it: We “tremble before making our choice in life,” but “grace is infinite,” so that “that which we have chosen is given us, and that which we have refused is, also and at the same time, granted us.”

This story also touches on whether great artistry in fact demands a grand stage. In the eyes of Pepin, Philippa’s exceptional voice had been destined to “fill the Grand Opera of Paris”; but years later, finding himself “gray, lonely, forgotten by those who once applauded and adored me,” even Pepin wonders if fame and glory were what he had once thought them to be. He tells Philippa that, in paradise, “You will be the great artist that God meant you to be. Ah! How you will enchant the angels.” The same words will be spoken to a very different sort of artist later in the story, to great effect.

In the other four stories, Blixen’s theme centers less on artistic expression than on the power and peril of the stories one tells or that one is told. They all involve the possibility of discovering that one’s happiness was to some degree based on illusion.

For instance, in “The Diver,” a Persian student of the Qur’an finds that the “angel” who has given him so much joy is not what she at first appeared to be, and he himself is also a character first introduced in a story within the story; in “Tempests,” a young actress creates a dilemma for herself when she falls so deeply under the spell of Shakespeare that she does not always distinguish between her dramatic role and her real life; in “The Immortal Story,” an elderly miser, Mr. Clay, is ashamed to discover that a story whose factual authenticity he had long taken for granted is just an old sailor’s yarn that nobody else believed, and he devotes the last days of his life to collecting real people who will act out their parts in it—the titular immortal story—so that the story will come true after all; and in “The Ring,” a sheltered young wife’s comfortable notions about herself and her marriage are shattered by a brief encounter with a sheep thief.

The intermingling of sensual and spiritual experience evidently fascinates Blixen. In most of the stories, one gets the impression of an author who senses the power of the spiritual side of life—verses from the prophet Isaiah are a major plot driver in two of them—but is not encumbered by “conventional morality” in romantic pairings and is skeptical of happy endings. Only in “Babette’s Feast” does Blixen suggest that, through an artist’s skill, an appeal to the senses might point the way to some degree of human happiness.

The best part of Blixen’s writing is her rich character portraits. Seen through her sympathetic prose, one comes to pity even the pitiless Mr. Clay: wracked with painful gout but trying desperately to control other people. In two of the longer stories (“Tempests” and “The Immortal Story”), however, Blixen delves so deep into character study that the reader loses track of the arc of the story.

In “The Diver,” the weakest of the five, her spiritual meanderings are more muddled than insightful; she seems to allude to Jesus’s parable of the pearl of great price and devotes a lengthy digression to a fish’s perspective on Noah’s flood, but one is not sure exactly what she is trying to say about either one, or what they have to say about the transformation of the disillusioned theology student whom we meet in the first half of the story into the successful pearl fisherman of the second half.

Notwithstanding these weaknesses, Blixen’s fine style and her careful character portraits make these stories a pleasure to read. *Anecdotes of Destiny* will intrigue and delight readers who share Blixen’s fascination with the power of words and who are spiritual, if not necessarily religious. It might be a good choice for a monthly book club read. And for some readers, Blixen’s exploration of art and the artist in “Babette’s Feast” might even inspire them to pull that old notepad out of the drawer or instrument out of the closet and try to make a little art of their own.



# Ahab, Jonah, and the Whale: Review of *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville

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*Moby Dick* by Herman Melville (Arcturus, 2019)

Just as iron sharpens iron, reading a rigorous yet exciting book is a great way for one man to sharpen another's mind and potentially even hone a desire to chase impossible dreams. The book I have found to accomplish this feat is *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville (Arcturus, 2019). Though many readers will enjoy this book, I specifically propose it to young men who are in search of a challenge that can only be found through an adventure. Here is a story that involves men chasing dreams to get rich in the whale oil industry, to catch the uncatchable, or simply to enjoy the thrill of the chase.

This book provides a challenge, on several fronts. First of all, and most obviously, it is a tome, meaning a commitment is required to read this book. The edition used for this review is 538 pages spread unevenly over 135 chapters. Many have tried to read it and failed; many have read it only because they were required to read it. And even those who have committed to reading it of their own accord have often given up because of time constraints. The four different audio editions available on Spotify list the listening time between twenty-three and twenty-five hours, so the average reader would need to commit to about one hour nearly every day for a month. Of

course, “sharpening” requires sacrifice, and substituting the reading of a classic American story for a small part of the time that is typically spent online seems reasonable and an easy way to upgrade one’s use of time with a good habit.

Melville’s book, originally published in 1851, sharpens one’s mind because it is written in a style that requires the reader to spend time to properly understand each sentence. The words that make up these sentences are often only vaguely familiar and the sentence structure is frequently of the compound-complex variety. In other words, a picture is worth a thousand words and there are no pictures in this book, so the words are plentiful. The reader must engage his mind through the exercise of deep reading and to overcome the weakness of mind that comes from reading the bare minimum that is so prevalent today.

Another habit-building activity herein is the impetus to read additional texts to decipher and fully understand the author’s meaning. This ancillary activity will expand the mind of the committed reader as he finds himself reading—or at least referring to—history and biology texts, as well as Shakespeare’s sonnets, to supplement the already unrestrained story. The most common text to reference for this book, though, is surely the Bible, as the story has biblical allusions aplenty. Ishmael and Ahab are biblical characters and are joined by many others, and the whale can easily be seen as symbolic of the biblical Leviathan.

The famous first line of the novel, “Call me Ishmael,” introduces the narrator, who is also a character in the story. The biblical Ishmael survived harsh conditions after being set free to roam in the wilderness; Ishmael the narrator—spoiler alert—survived the harsh wilderness of a three-year whale-hunting voyage. He tells the reader intricate details about the main characters, especially Captain Ahab and his nemesis, the white whale named Moby Dick.

As exciting as those two characters and their interactions with each other are, the backstory and supporting characters are also

essential to the development and interpretation of the story. Those characters include a few Nantucketers, who are introduced before the actual voyage begins in order to emphasize the glory that is lauded on whalers. Then there are the numerous unique characters that make up the crew, including Queequeg, an oddly tattooed harpooner of Polynesian descent, whose desire to “visit Christendom” led him to leave his homeland. Readers will likely find Starbuck an interesting character to meet and to ponder about his connection to coffee. Other characters include a man named Elijah who, like his biblical namesake, prophesied to avoid the evil ways of Ahab, a prophecy that was ignored.

The reader becomes well acquainted with the *Pequod*, the whaling ship that serves as home for the crew for most of the book, and is treated to a voyage that nearly circumnavigates the earth. The *Pequod* encounters numerous other whaling ships, and these ships and their crews continue to present symbolic puzzles for the reader to piece together.

This exhilarating story takes the reader on an adventure that is almost certainly unfamiliar and exotic. It is a grand story with many nuances. While there is a voluminous amount of the story devoted to developing the riveting character of Ahab, in contrast there are only a few short chapters about another famous whale encounter: Jonah and the whale. His story is told, early in the book, in a Nantucket church that is as nautical as a building could be without being afloat. It is told by Father Mapple, who passionately extols the consequences of disobeying a prophetic command. The brevity of the Jonah story may be because it was and is a well-known story thanks to the role of the whale, but the reader should consider keeping this story in mind to contrast Jonah and Ahab’s interactions with forces much more powerful than themselves.

I heartily recommend this great book, Melville’s magnum opus, not only for entertainment and not merely to learn about whales

but to examine and challenge one's own paradigm in comparison to these two whalemens, Ahab and Jonah.



## Finding Meaning: Review of *The Children of Men* by P. D. James

TERESA HOLTEN

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*The Children of Men* by P. D. James (Vintage Books, 1992)

No children have been born in decades and no one can figure out why. Science cannot cure this global epidemic of infertility. How will humanity respond to becoming an endangered species? Author P. D. James explores this in her 1992 alternate-reality dystopia, *The Children of Men*.

Middle-aged Oxford historian Theo Faron leads a quiet life since he left his government position. When a group of activists ask Theo to deliver their list of social reforms to his former colleagues, Theo sees no harm in cooperating—but in the words often attributed to Oscar Wilde, “No good deed goes unpunished.”

Told from Theo’s perspective, *The Children of Men* is divided into two parts. The first part, “Omega,” focuses on world-building. We’re told that “overnight, it seemed, the human race had lost its power to breed.” Institutions once tasked with preserving a legacy and preparing generations to come have been repurposed and reallocated. The new goal is to make still-contributing members of society as mentally, physically, and emotionally comfortable as possible, for as long as possible. Non-contributing members of society receive far less

humane treatment—which the Five Fishes (the activists mentioned earlier) want to change.

The author's world-building is exemplary. As seen through Theo's eyes, James paints a portrait of a society that is sterile in multiple ways. People go through the motions of day-to-day life, but few are really *living*. There is no joy in this world; no despair; no rage. It's all just . . . sameness for its own sake.

The second part, "Alpha," describes the impact that change has on a society determined to maintain the status quo. A surprise (and miraculous?) pregnancy leads the Fishes to enlist Theo's help once more. This time, Theo is asked to take the mother-to-be off the radar before the government can discover (and exploit) her. In helping the mother-to-be, Theo becomes a fugitive.

The second half of *Children* leans more heavily on the characters. The author's neutral, understated voice, used so effectively in world-building, becomes more problematic when used for characterization. James provides little explanation of the characters' inner lives or true motives. Readers who struggle to infer meaning beyond stated facts may find this somewhat off-putting.

As someone on the autism spectrum, I rely on authors' use of emotion-laden verbs and modifiers to help me understand and connect with their characters. I struggled at times to understand *why* James's characters said or did certain things. James's style kept me removed from the characters, to the point where I neither connected with them nor really cared what happened to them. This may not be an obstacle for more allistic individuals.

To be clear, *The Children of Men* is not science fiction. The author expects readers to accept the core premise that humans simply cannot create offspring either through natural or scientific means. There is no exploration of continuing the human race through such techy means as cloning, genetic engineering, or cybernetic enhancements. (Readers who want something more along those lines should consider Richard Morgan's *Altered Carbon* or the works of Philip K. Dick.)

*Children* is an exploration of human nature. As a species, we're hard-coded to replicate. A goodly chunk of human existence is tied up in this fact. The very existence of museums, schools, libraries—culture itself—assumes that future generations will exist. When all that is taken off the table, James asks the reader: How will humanity fill the void?

Through her characters' actions, James suggests that we can find meaning in one another, regardless of what the future may hold. The future doesn't matter; we're here *now*—and now is reason enough. By treating everyone with dignity and respect, regardless of their "usefulness," we make existence better for all of us.

*The Children of Men* isn't easy to like. Readers looking for heart-pounding suspense may find James's restrained prose rather dry and unengaging. Readers of a more philosophical mindset are more likely to appreciate *The Children of Men* for what it is: an exploration of what drives human behavior beyond the desire to procreate, prepare for future generations, and leave a legacy. Taken on its own terms, *The Children of Men* is a thought-provoking read and well worth the time.



## A Collision of Mysteries: Review of *A Murderous Relation* by Deanna Raybourn

RAINE PYNE

*St. Jerome Writing Group (co-leader) and St. Thomas More Writing Group*

*A Murderous Relation* by Deanna Raybourn (Berkley, 2020)

It's 1888, and the chilling event of the Whitechapel murders and atrocious crimes of serial killer Jack the Ripper are sending terror through London's Victorian society. This historical backdrop is what distinguishes *A Murderous Relation* from the previous four books in Deanna Raybourn's Veronica Speedwell mystery series. The impact of the Ripper murders on this story's mystery creates a sense of danger and uncertainty that allows Raybourn to weave a story between those vulnerable to such threats and those who, mistakenly, thought they were not.

In *A Murderous Relation*, a particular member of the royal family recruits Veronica Speedwell and her partner Stoker to retrieve a significant identifying jewel from the questionable proprietress, Madame Aurore. Aurore runs a private, high-end club, and the tracing back of such a jewel to such a location would potentially cause a royal scandal. Furthermore, said jewel could implicate its giver, Prince Albert Victor, in the larger threat plaguing London: the Whitechapel murders. To solve the mystery that ensues, Veronica and Stoker must navigate royal relations, societal expectations, and human attractions. They are kept at the forefront of danger, and

the reader is kept at the intersection of dynamics which both create and resolve conflict.

*A Murderous Relation* is told through Veronica Speedwell's first-person narration, allowing the reader access to the mind of an independent and worldly female character who is motivated by her sense of adventure. Veronica's astute but opinionated perspective drives the character interactions to be active and engaging. Her relationship with Stoker illustrates the complementarity of the feminine and the masculine: Stoker simply balances Veronica. Also of interest is Veronica's developing relationship with two other strong female characters from the series: Lady Wellie, a wise and meddling elder dedicated to the royal family's preservation, and JJ Butterworth, described as a gifted and audacious reporter and firebrand. Her encounters with these women capture the tension of ambition alongside mutual respect and how such shared similarities can provide the potential for a friendship. And though *A Murderous Relation* does feature strong female characters, male characters are neither underrepresented nor misrepresented.

The eccentricity of many of the characters contributes to lively and colorful scenes, creating an almost theatrical sense of play even when the topics at hand are heavy. In fact, *A Murderous Relation* opens with the Earl of Rosemorran, on whose estate Veronica and Stoker live, requesting Stoker to officiate the wedding of his beloved Patricia—a Galapagos tortoise. All in all, it is a refreshing and vibrant blend of personalities.

Veronica and Stoker are highly articulate natural scientists, and the story is filled with their intelligent banter and argument, scientific references, and intricate descriptions of specialized interests. For example, in the opening of chapter 4, the reader finds Veronica “penning a rousing rebuttal” to a criticism of her latest contribution to *The Lepidopterist's Quarterly Guide to South American Butterflies and Greater Moths*, while Stoker is stuffing a hippopotamus that Veronica describes as “emitting an insalubrious fragrance.” Albeit

verbose and obscure at times, their discourse injects humor and wit throughout the story.

Where *A Murderous Relation* may give readers pause is at the “home” of Madame Aurore. In order to retrieve the jewel in question, Veronica and Stoker must attend a masquerade ball at Madame Aurore’s establishment. She welcomes the disguised sleuths with a disclaimer: “I suppose I ought to point out that this is not, strictly speaking, a brothel . . .” Continuing, Madame Aurore explains, “My house is open to people who understand what they desire. . . . Things you never imagined possible in the light become desirable in the dark.” And here is where Veronica and Stoker, along with the reader, are led into a show of sorts, as hosted by the enigmatic Madame Aurore, to consider the things some do find desirable in the dark.

The scenes that follow may feel disreputable enough for certain readers to turn down this book. However, the story’s purpose is not to stoke up lust in its reader. So, while the protagonists do not rush through the darkness of Madame Aurore’s house since many of the mystery’s complexities are planted there, they do avoid graphic descriptions of its “entertainment.” Rather, their narration moves the reader through the scenes like scientists describing their specimen. Such objectivity, along with Veronica and Stoker’s Victorian decorum, allows the topic of sexual activity to be attended to but not indulged in.

Readers who have followed Veronica from book one into the present installment should be pleased to catch glimpses of her confronting her own heart: “The room was a riot of color and music and glamour, and for just this moment, I permitted myself to surrender to it. When the dance was finished, I should remind myself that we were there with a purpose, tasked with the impossible, and in danger of exposure. But not *this* moment, I told myself.” Unfortunately, fans may also find themselves impatient at times, as previous developing substories are interrupted to accommodate

this book's distinct narrative thread. This thread, however, is what makes *A Murderous Relation* an appealing standout in the series.

Because the serial murders in the Whitehouse neighborhood are juxtaposed with the mystery at Madame Aurore's home, an opportunity is provided early on for *A Murderous Relation* to establish that the female victims of the violent and dehumanizing murders of Jack the Ripper will not be treated as an anonymous part of a historical setting. Neither will they be simply catalogued and dismissed as prostitutes. Lady Wellie introduces this thread when she corrects Stoker for referring to the murderer's victims as prostitutes. In their defense, she tells him, "None of them has been a true professional," a reference to how the Victorian times defined such work. "Does it make a difference?" Veronica asks. Without pause, Lady Wellie replies, "I imagine it does to them."

The refrain is repeated in the story's public arena by the firebrand JJ Butterworth. With her journalist pen, Butterworth counters the media's current narrative in order to tell the victims' stories, describe their lives, and call them by name. Veronica and Stoker then subtly collect this thread of dignity and carry it into the twists and turns of their story.

Overall, if readers are willing to confront tricky aspects of human behavior, such as the darker side of desire and distortions of the sensual, *A Murderous Relation* offers both an entertaining and a thoughtful read. Furthermore, it filters a revealing light on contrasts between classes: those for whom sexual activity can be indulged in like a carnival show and those surviving on the margins of society whose circumstances make utilizing the body as a commodity seem like the only solution. Readers inclined to deeper contemplation might even be nudged to move beyond the book into history's archives and explore the mystery of the dynamics shaping such contrasts. Or, then again, maybe they will just sit back and enjoy watching how mysteries collide.



Finding the Grace of God in All  
Circumstances: Review of *Ordinary Grace*  
by William Kent Krueger

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*Ordinary Grace* by William Kent Krueger (Atria, 2013)

*Ordinary Grace* by William Kent Krueger is a novel that does not fit neatly into a single genre. It is a mystery story. It is a coming-of-age story. It is a story about death, murder, suicide, grief, and, in the midst of suffering and grief, the struggle to find comfort in the grace of God.

*Ordinary Grace* is set in a small Minnesota town in 1961. The story is told by Frank Drum, the family's middle child. As an adult looking back some forty years, he recalls the tumultuous summer of his thirteenth year when a series of deaths plunged him from carefree adolescence into the trials and tribulations of adulthood.

Frank's father is a Methodist minister, a man of steadfast faith haunted by his experiences in World War II. His mother is a talented musician who resents her husband's constant reliance on God to deal with any and all problems. Frank's older sister is also a talented musician, a teenager in love and with a secret life. Frank's younger brother is an innocent but perceptive child, always tagging along with Frank as the tragic events unfold. The summer begins when a young boy about Frank's age is killed when struck by a train. It is

the first in a series of deaths that rock the town and rip into the heart and soul of the Drum family, testing relationships among family and community members and their faith in God.

The mystery story buried inside *Ordinary Grace* is full of colorful suspects, false leads, and a twist at the end that leaves the reader with conflicted feelings about the culprit. The coming-of-age story depicts the many real and sometimes amusing ordinary graces a thirteen-year-old boy confronts about adult behavior, sex, and family life. *Ordinary Grace*, however, is far richer than a mystery or coming-of-age story. The heart and soul of the story is how the Drum family and town come to grips with suffering, death, and grief. Krueger writes of the events as “the terrible price of wisdom. The awful grace of God.”

John Vianney wrote, “There are two ways of suffering—to suffer with love, and to suffer without love.” In the First Letter of Peter, the author writes, “And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.” In *Ordinary Grace*, we witness suffering with and without the love that Vianney wrote of. And we walk with the family and community on the long and twisted journey that can bring a person from the awful grace of God to the grace of God described by the First Letter of Peter that supports and strengthens.

The father’s faith never wavers; he prays often; he reaches out to others. The mother sits in the dark, withdraws, and runs. Frank questions and searches for answers, recalling, “In his sermons my father often talked about trusting God and trusting that no matter how alone we might feel God was always with us. In all that terrible waiting, I didn’t feel the presence of God, not one bit. I prayed but unlike my father who seemed to believe he was being heard, I felt as if I was talking to the air.” Without being sentimental, condescending, trite, or simplistic, Krueger captures the raw emotions and spiritual struggles we all face when confronted with the unwanted,

unexpected, painful, and inexplicable events of life that Krueger calls the “awful graces” of God.

I find very little that I don't like about this story, though I found the father too quick to expose his sons to the unseemly side of life in their small town and the character of a police officer is a bit over the top with his unprofessional behavior. Those are minor issues. I recommend *Ordinary Grace* to anyone who enjoys a good mystery and anyone who enjoys a good read about the difficult passage through adolescence. The book is easy to read, the dialogue is natural, the story flows well, the character development is excellent, and the story line provides a realistic examination of the varied ways we deal with tragedy and grief. I strongly recommend *Ordinary Grace* to anyone interested in a realistic and heartfelt examination of how we deal with the awful and ordinary graces that flow into our lives.



## Deciphering Truth: Review of *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown

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*The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown (Doubleday, 2003)

Intrigue, mystery, action, adventure, and a highly controversial theme—*The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown remains one of the most popular novels of the past twenty years. Written in 2003 as the second of a six-book series, *The Da Vinci Code* skyrocketed to the top of *The New York Times* best seller list, where it remained for two years. Several years later, its plot became a hit movie featuring high-profile stars. What makes this book popular is a mix of Dan Brown's keep-you-on-the-edge-of-your-seat writing style and a well-crafted fictional conspiracy theory.

The book opens with the murder of a famous museum curator, Jacques Saunière, a renowned expert on the life and art of Leonardo da Vinci. Saunière's body, discovered in the Grand Gallery of the Louvre, shocks the immediate world of museum staff and local police authorities. But what turns the investigation into a spiral of intrigue and conspiracy are the mysterious clues that Saunière leaves behind during his painful and lingering death.

Called to the scene are Robert Langdon, Harvard professor of religious iconology and symbology, and Sophie Neveu, cryptologist and police agent. Saunière's body lay naked and spread-eagled on

the gallery floor. Numerical symbols and an anagram written with black-light ink are scrawled on the floor beside his corpse. Additional clues undetected by the police direct Langdon and Neveu to escape the investigators to protect Saunière's secret.

The plot exponentially thickens as Langdon and Neveu are thrust into a dangerous world—a world in which violence becomes a method of protecting two opposing theological beliefs. One can hardly breathe while racing along with the duo, who uncover a secret society, a treasure map of sorts, and an alternate story of the history of Christianity.

*The Da Vinci Code* is fiction steeped in historical truths twisted into imaginative outcomes. For Christian readers, this novel is not for the faint of heart. Brown's story rewrites Jesus's life and the mission of the apostles. A gifted storyteller, Brown spins a tale that includes enough historical accuracy for the reader to believe that the conspiracy *could* be true. Its historical and theological claims, however, have been discredited by historians, theologians, and Christian scholars throughout the world.

The novel's storyline is bold and deserves an equally bold review. Brown's admirable creativity is overshadowed by his audacity to alter the greatest salvific story of all time. While this novel is entertaining and popular among mystery, thriller, and conspiracy fiction readers, its subject confuses non-Christians and non-Catholic Christians with severe falsehoods. Over the years, this work of fiction has inspired misunderstanding of Christianity, the Catholic Church, and the life of Leonardo da Vinci.

These misconceptions, however, provide a rich opportunity for discernment and discussion about the truths of the Christian faith. For readers who are not easily swayed by conspiracy theories or those who have a solid understanding of and steadfast belief in Christianity, this is an enjoyable, adrenaline-triggering story. *The Da Vinci Code* is exciting to explore, but reader beware that this fictional story reads as if it could be true.



# Rainbows and Shadows, Princes and Princesses: Review of *The Golden Key and Other Fairy Tales* by George MacDonald

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*The Golden Key and Other Fairy Tales* by George MacDonald (Word on Fire, 2023)

In the 1800s, a Scottish man wrote fairy tales that would inspire some of the most beloved fantasy authors, like C. S. Lewis, Madeleine L'Engle, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Lewis Carroll. That man was George MacDonald, and he is often considered the father of modern fantasy writing. MacDonald was one of nine children, born into a family with a love for literature. Eventually, he and his wife had eleven children of their own. In addition to writing, MacDonald served as a minister, teacher, and editor at different times in his life. With a house full of children and a desire to share his knowledge, it is not hard to imagine why MacDonald pursued writing for children.

Three of MacDonald's short fairy tales have recently been republished by Word on Fire Votive as *The Golden Key and Other Fairy Tales*. The collection includes "The Golden Key," "The Light Princess," and "Little Daylight." All three stories feature some kind of magical element, but they all feel like their own story set in their own worlds. "The Golden Key" features a boy and girl's journey through fantastical lands. "The Light Princess" features a princess

who can fly and is quite silly because a witch has stolen her gravity, in both senses of the word. While she finds the world to be all fun and games, her royal parents are not quite as amused and hope to bring their daughter back down to earth. “Little Daylight” has an unfortunate name because she was cursed and must sleep all day and only wake at night. But the moon’s light doesn’t always shine. When the moon is full, so is she—full of youth and life. But on nights when the moon’s light is hidden, Little Daylight becomes pale, old, and seems more dead than alive.

These stories are unique, imaginative, and fun, but best of all, they veil deep moral truths within them. In “The Golden Key,” the story kicks off with a little boy, Mossy, finding himself at the foot of a rainbow. It’s not just any rainbow; it has more colors than a typical rainbow, some Mossy has never even seen before. Upon closer inspection, Mossy discovers vague figures moving up the rainbow as if it were some kind of transport system. We might recall the story of Jacob’s ladder in the Bible, in which Jacob dreamed of angels descending and ascending into heaven on a ladder. Right away, the reader gets the impression there is more than meets the eye in these stories. “The Light Princess” had the most moral food for thought and seems to cloak deeper truths, especially about self-sacrificial love. “Little Daylight” teaches the lessons of treating others the way you want to be treated and not judging someone based on their appearance.

All three stories are delightful and surprising because they don’t follow modern clichés. However, some things may come across as rather odd or unnerving to the modern reader. For example, in “The Golden Key,” when Tangle, a little girl, comes across a strange but beautiful old woman in the forest, the woman says she hopes Tangle will not be afraid of her or anything she does. Next the woman takes off all of Tangle’s clothes and throws her into a fish tank to give her a bath. Tangle is dressed in a beautiful gown afterward. While

MacDonald's message about baptism is evident here, one would not want to encourage a child to undress with a stranger in our time.

These fairy tales can be enjoyed by those both young and old, just keep in mind very young children may be confused or misled by old-fashioned notions or frightened by the evil witches.

The three stories in this collection are the kind of stories that tend to linger in one's mind long after reading them; perhaps they may reveal even deeper truths the more one ponders them.

NONFICTION



## Micro-Christendoms: Review of *The Rise of Western Christendom* by Peter Brown

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*The Rise of Western Christendom*, second edition, by Peter Brown (Blackwell, 2003)

It began with wondering. Why, I wondered, was the English term for *Easter* so different, etymologically, from that of much of the rest of Christian Europe: French *Pâques*, Italian *Pasqua*, Spanish *Pascua*, Greek *Pascha*, and so on? All these derive from the Hebrew word *Pesach*, designating the Passover feast. What was different about Christianity in the ancient Anglo-Saxon world—the precursor of modern England—that led to this and other differences, both in Christian terminology and in worship practices?

The quest for insight was amply rewarded by a book titled *The Rise of Western Christendom*, whose subtitle, “Triumph and Diversity: A.D. 200–1000,” suggested the promise of an answer.

The author, Peter Brown, born in Dublin in 1935, is currently a professor emeritus of history at Princeton University, as well as the recipient of numerous prizes and honors around the world for his many contributions in the field of study known as “Late Antiquity.” Fluent in many modern languages, he also taught himself ancient ones (Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Syriac, Coptic, Arabic, and more) so that he could read both modern and ancient texts in their original languages. In addition, extensive travels through all the regions of

Europe, the Near East, and the Middle East allowed him to study the artifacts and monuments of ancient cultures. These efforts gave him access to a wealth of new material with which he has enriched the study of this period, and *The Rise of Western Christendom* is a product of this research. The original book was published in 1996, but the book under review is the substantially revised second edition, published in 2003.

In *The Rise of Western Christendom*, Brown's aim was to correct the conventional view of the period of history that had been so depressingly described by Edward Gibbon in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. This had become the grand narrative for the period—the “Dark Ages”—a period in which the fall of the Roman Empire ushered in the “triumph of religion and barbarism” throughout western Europe. As Brown states, in Gibbon's view this was a period of “violent disorder” in which no high culture emerged until the bright lights of the Renaissance suddenly burst onto the scene. In Brown's book, rather than a decline into barbarism, we discover that western Europe in this time enjoyed a rich and living tradition.

Brown begins his survey in A.D. 200, while the Roman Empire was still pagan and before Christian persecutions had ceased. He shows how Constantine's conversion of the empire to a Christian one was not the revolution we have been taught to believe but rather a gradual growth, where Christian churches had “an intense sense of order and of belonging to a network of similar communities which stretched from one end of the Roman world to the other.” Early Christians achieved this on pagan soil. First, they did not deny the existence of the pagan gods; they simply treated them as evil. As well, they transformed the philosophers' idea of *individual* self-improvement to the God-given one *available to all*, able to transform the human person entirely, through conversion and baptism. In addition, the practice of almsgiving added an attractiveness to this new religion: Christians were known to look after their own.

Constantine's conversion, then, can be seen as only the final step in Christianity's triumph in the Roman Empire.

From this beginning, Brown covers the following periods that make up the four parts of the book: Empire and Aftermath: A.D. 200–500; Divergent Legacies: A.D. 500–600; The End of Ancient Christianity: A.D. 600–750; and New Christendoms: A.D. 750–1000. Hence, the scope is from the rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire from around A.D. 200 to the conversion of the Scandinavian world in A.D. 1000. He ranges far and wide throughout the known world, to the far reaches of the empire and beyond—from Spain to China to Ireland to Ethiopia—to weave a narrative of Christianity's remarkable growth.

Through stories about particular Christians, such as Patricius (Saint Patrick), Gregory of Tours, and Columbanus, using ancient texts as his sources, Brown paints a picture of how Christianity, in spreading to remote places—carried sometimes by a single holy person—far from remaining a homogeneous “Christendom” (that did not come till later), developed into many “micro-Christendoms,” each with its own worship practices and customs.

The answer to the question about the term *Easter* was found in chapter 15, which deals with the “re-conversion” of Saxon Britain in the early seventh century (Christianity had been in this area as early as the second century). We learn in this section that then-Pope Gregory the Great, when hearing reports about the stubbornness of the local people in clinging to old pagan practices, made a judicious decision for this region, allowing for an adaptation to local conditions, writing, “It is doubtless impossible to cut out everything at once from their stubborn minds.” Hence, among other things, the name of Easter, derived from the name of the pagan goddess of spring, Eostre, was allowed to remain. Henceforward, the joy of a pagan spring festival was transferred to the joy of Easter.

Another interesting discovery, for this reviewer, was to learn that the birth of Islam in Arabia took place in a region to which

Christianity had already spread. There was at that time (late sixth century) an intense battle of ideas between Jews and Christians of the area. Muhammad, who at the age of forty began to have visions, claimed that “the same God who had spoken to Moses and to Jesus . . . now spoke again, once and for all, to himself.” The messages claimed that neglect and partisan strife had caused Jews and Christians to distort the messages of the prophets and called on Arabs, as descendants of Abraham through Ishmael, to return to the original purity of the past. The seriousness of the messages led Muhammad’s followers to try to convert, by force if necessary, all “infidels.” The dilemma for Christians and Jews was how to deal with this new religion, which closely resembled their own—not pagan but a monotheistic “in-between religion,” and which, like Christianity, considered itself the sole true religion.

Written in an engaging style, free of jargon, the book reads almost like a story and thus, though scholarly, is very accessible to the lay reader. An ample and very helpful introduction states the author’s objective and summarizes what we will discover in the rest of the book. The book also benefits from timelines and maps that accompany each section, as well as copious notes and an extensive bibliography. In addition, the numerous quotes from ancient authors throughout the book conveyed for this reviewer an immediacy, a “being there” that contributed to the pleasure of learning about this historical period.

Some readers may find that the author’s choice to use the structure of time periods rather than regions leads to a disjointed narrative. For instance, in order to learn about the history of a particular region, one must jump from one section to another to maintain the thread. In addition, some may find that the wealth of details that Brown gives us can be overwhelming, yet skipping over sections may leave the reader at a loss when the author refers to someone or something mentioned in an earlier passage. Lastly, this is a lengthy book—nearly five hundred pages of 10-point text—and

therefore perhaps not for those who would prefer a more succinct history.

In summary, this book offers a wonderful adventure of discovery for those who love history and are interested in getting a more granular view of the usually overlooked period from the fall of the Roman Empire to the High Middle Ages. It is undeniable that our entire Western culture finds its roots in the history of Christianity, and this book will reward the interested reader abundantly.



## The Hidden Revolution: Review of *Dominion* by Tom Holland

KATHARINE TARVAINEN

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*Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* by Tom Holland (Basic Books, 2021)

When the word “revolution” is mentioned today, images of tanks, toppled statues, and perhaps even guillotines may pop into our heads. In his book *Dominion*, historian Tom Holland explores the transformative power of a centuries-old revolution that was so successful that its enduring influence “has come to be hidden from view.” This revolution did not begin with bombs or bayonets but with a different means of intimidation: a crucifixion.

*Dominion* is not a theological treatise either for or against Christianity, nor is it a comprehensive, scholarly history of Christianity itself. Rather, as Holland writes in the book’s preface, it is an attempt “to trace the currents of Christian influence that have spread most widely, and been most enduring into the present day.” *Dominion* is separated into three sections—Antiquity, Christendom, and Modernitas—each containing chapters focused on Christianity’s impact at different places and times, ranging from pre-Christian Athens all the way to the United States in 2015. The result is a fast-paced, sweeping, nonfiction epic exploring the “Christian revolution” and how its success was so complete that we no longer feel the shock of what a scandal it once was. “It is the incomplete revolutions which

are remembered,” Holland argues. “The fate of those which triumph is to be taken for granted.”

Despite its six hundred-plus pages, *Dominion* is no dry, academic tome, but reads almost like an adventure story thanks to Holland’s engaging writing style. Listeners of the popular podcast *The Rest Is History*, which Holland cohosts, will recognize his thoughtful, enthusiastic, and often humorous tone in *Dominion* as well. Whether readers find themselves in the Colosseum with early Christian martyrs, the soaring cathedrals and abbeys of the Middle Ages, or the mud-drenched trenches of the Somme, the people and places of the past are brought to vivid life in *Dominion*. This also means that the reader will sometimes come face-to-face with some of the more grisly and violent episodes of history. These scenes are not gratuitous, and Holland’s detailed descriptions are effective in illustrating the gruesome realities of martyrdom, war, and other horrors. However, sensitive readers, as well as those wondering if this book might be a good choice for a history-loving teen, should be aware of these occasional graphic descriptions.

Some of the most interesting chapters in *Dominion* cover the first centuries of Christianity and detail just how subversive it was in its earliest days. The Romans were no strangers to the concept of self-sacrifice, but the idea that “criminals” could achieve the same glory as mighty Roman warriors was, to them, “liable to seem so ludicrous, so utterly offensive, as to verge on the incomprehensible.” Holland drives this point home with the example of a slave named Blandina whose “heroism had put even her fellow martyrs in the shade.” Indeed, her mistress was condemned to the same fate, yet “did not merit being named.” While today we might find it natural to root for the underdog, the fact that Christians viewed the lowly Blandina and her horrific death as an example of strength and power was utterly bewildering to the Roman authorities: “That a slave, ‘a slight, frail, despised woman,’ might be set among the elite of heaven . . . ahead of those who in the fallen world had been her

immeasurable superiors, was a potent illustration of the mystery that lay at the heart of the Christian faith.” In the story of Blandina, as with dozens of others throughout *Dominion*, Holland takes the faith and worldview of his subjects seriously, making no attempt to pass judgement or apply anachronistic twenty-first-century assumptions to a bygone age. Indeed, one of the great strengths of *Dominion* is that it prompts the reader to examine those assumptions more closely through a new lens.

As Holland digs into the landscape of Western civilization, the reader begins to see that the various epochs and upheavals of the last two thousand years may not have been the world-shattering earthquakes we once believed them to be. Rather, in some way or another, they all took their shape from the original seismic eruption of the Christian revolution. For example, our modern understanding of human rights, especially in America, most likely aligns with the claims of our Enlightenment-era forefathers: that they “existed naturally within the fabric of things, and had always done so, transcending time and space.” However, as Holland points out, “The concept of human rights, mediated as it had been since the Reformation by Protestant jurists and *philosophes*, had come to obscure its original authors.” These assumptions about the rights of man, Holland explains, were not natural, nor were they from classical antiquity, but were in fact “an inheritance from the canon lawyers of the Middle Ages.” Throughout *Dominion*, Holland offers us many such revelations and invites the reader to hold them up against our own assumptions. The later chapters about our modern age are particularly thought-provoking, as Holland teases out the thread of Christian influence present in everything from the Great War to the Beatles to the #MeToo movement: “The trace elements of Christianity continued to infuse people’s morals and presumptions so utterly that many failed even to detect their presence.”

*Dominion* is an excellent addition to any history lover’s shelf, even those who might be wary of picking up a book about Christianity.

Holland's engaging prose and historical, rather than theological, viewpoint make *Dominion* a fascinating and approachable read, regardless of one's personal beliefs. However, Holland's style may also strike some readers as too sensational or gruesome at times. While *Dominion* does not pretend to be a comprehensive or academic study, it is still well researched and those who are curious will find its impressive bibliography to be a great jumping-off point for further reading. As with many of the best history books, *Dominion* allows the reader to take a closer look at our past to better understand our present. Indeed, after reading this book, even those who are "doubtful of religion's claims" may be surprised to find that their values and instincts are, in fact, "thoroughly Christian."



A Man of Compassion: Review of *Mission at Nuremberg: An American Army Chaplain and the Trial of the Nazis* by Tim Townsend

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*Mission at Nuremberg: An American Army Chaplain and the Trial of the Nazis*  
by Tim Townsend (William Morrow, 2014)

After the collapse of the Third Reich at the end of World War II, the highest-ranking Nazi officials were put on trial in Nuremberg, Germany, before an International Military Tribunal composed of the victorious Allies: America, Britain, France, and Russia. The Nuremberg Trials have been the subject of numerous books, but Tim Townsend offers a unique perspective in *Mission at Nuremberg: An American Army Chaplain and the Trial of the Nazis*, his profile of US Army Chaplain Henry Gerecke.

In April 1945, with Russian troops surrounding Berlin, Adolf Hitler and Joseph Goebbels committed suicide in the Führerbunker. As Allied troops moved through Germany, the highest-ranking German officers and Nazi party officials were captured and imprisoned. Townsend relates that the generals and politicians, stripped of their military rank and party authority, “looked more like the tenants of a Bowery house than the recent leaders of a mighty nation.”

Under the Geneva Convention, prisoners of war are entitled to spiritual resources from their own faith tradition. The US Army

operated Nuremberg Prison, and Chaplain Henry Gerecke, a Lutheran, was recruited to minister to the imprisoned men. Chaplain Gerecke spoke German and had an exemplary military service record. Gerecke had also served in a civilian prison before the war, although there was an obvious difference between “burglars in St. Louis and mass murderers in Nuremberg.”

Townsend, a former journalist, has a vivid, readable style that brings Gerecke’s daily work to life. For example, the reader accompanies Gerecke in his first approach to the cell of Rudolf Hess, former aide to Hitler and deputy Nazi Party leader. The reader can feel the tension as Gerecke worries about what he will say and whether his German is good enough. As Gerecke enters the cell, Hess extends his hand and Gerecke shakes it. He was later criticized for offering a handshake to the Nazi leaders, but Gerecke responded, “I knew I could never win any of them to my way of thinking unless they liked me first. . . . I was there as the representative of an all-loving Father. I recalled too, that God loves sinners like me.”

Over the course of the yearlong trial, Townsend follows the chaplain’s success at returning seven of the men to communion with the Lutheran Church. Even the men who rejected the chaplain’s Christian message held him in high esteem. When a rumor circulated that Gerecke’s wife was impatient for her husband to return home, all of the defendants signed a letter to Mrs. Gerecke asking that Gerecke remain until the verdicts were reached. The letter read, in part, “In this stage of the trial, it is impossible for any other man than him to break through the walls that have been built up around us, in a spiritual sense even stronger than a material one.”

In October 1946, the tribunal handed down the sentences: Eleven men were condemned to death by hanging, seven were given lengthy prison sentences, and three were acquitted. Townsend paints a sobering picture of Gerecke spending nearly all of his time with the condemned men in their cells as they awaited execution. Townsend

leads the reader through the dark, early morning hours of October 16, 1946, as Gerecke accompanied the men to the gallows.

Townsend provides a robust portrait of Gerecke's life before his assignment to Nuremberg and his military service in a hospital unit, as well as an interesting history of the role of the military chaplain. While this background is very helpful, it comprises nearly a third of the book and the reader may be impatient to get to the action at Nuremberg.

Townsend's book is an important addition to the history of the Nuremberg Trials and he provides extensive footnotes on his source material. However, this book is not for a reader who is looking for details of the legal aspects of the trial. Nor does Townsend dwell on the horrific acts committed by the Nazi regime, which are well documented elsewhere. Townsend sketches each defendant's background but does not provide details of their crimes.

Townsend attempts to put Gerecke's ministry in context with a limited discussion of the Christian and Jewish concepts of forgiveness and repentance. The brief discussion may leave the reader confused by the weighty topic of whether those who have committed heinous crimes can be forgiven. The book is not intended as a theology text, but a deeper exploration of these topics would have given readers a better understanding of the chaplain's motivation.

Townsend's book is a fascinating behind-the-scenes look into Nuremberg Prison and the most notorious war criminals of the Nazi regime. The book is equal parts history and biography. Gerecke's story challenges the reader to consider their own capacity for compassion and reconciliation: Can we forgive the unforgivable? Townsend provides a moving portrait of a humble man of sincere faith and ably demonstrates how one man can lead others to healing and repentance.



The Path of Healing: Review of *Bruised and Wounded: Struggling to Understand Suicide* by Ronald Rolheiser

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*Bruised and Wounded: Struggling to Understand Suicide* by Ronald Rolheiser (Paraclete, 2017)

Approximately 50,000 people die from suicide in the United States each year. The arrival of a new statistical year does not erase the sting of sorrow and grief that accompanies these deaths. Anyone who has experienced the death of a loved one, or is an acquaintance of or a caregiver for someone having this experience, will benefit from Ronald Rolheiser's *Bruised and Wounded: Struggling to Understand Suicide*. In his brief volume (just seventy-seven pages), Rolheiser helps the reader understand and make some sense of—as much as humanly possible—death by suicide. He attempts to lead the reader onto a path of healing and hope.

*Bruised and Wounded* is a guide to coping with the suffering that accompanies the death of a loved one by suicide and provides a reflective process that encourages the journey to recovery to gestate and evolve. The introduction lays the foundation for Rolheiser's main thesis—that suicide is an involuntary consequence of a terminal emotional disease rather than one of self-centered despair. This concept is central to his arguments throughout the book. From there, he addresses the stigma, shock, and stream of painful emotions

experienced by those who survive. Words used by those whose stories are told include shock, numbness, anger, guilt, hate, abandonment, darkness, and despair. They ask, “Why did they do this?” and “What should I have done to have prevented it?” Rolheiser also provides insight into how one might reestablish joyful memories of the deceased and once again celebrate their lives. Rolheiser infuses the text with universal concepts of love, hope, mercy, and compassion by talking about Christian concepts of the human person and humanity and the unmatched, unimaginable love of God for his creation, especially the suffering, including those who have died by suicide and those who survive them.

Rolheiser encourages the reader to consider suicidal despair as weakness prompted by a malignant psychological illness rather than sinful abandonment of personal responsibility for one’s life. He includes narratives told by survivors and explains that no one he has known who died by suicide fits the description of “acting contrary to the just love of oneself.” He states that all have been sensitive, wounded, bruised, and overcome by a fatal illness. They were crushed, broken, and claimed by an illness they did not choose. He also argues that “to believe that God withholds mercy from those who are most broken in spirit betrays a profound misunderstanding of the nature and mercy of God.” He also reminds the reader that hopeful prayer for those who have departed this way, even when overwhelmed by helplessness, is an important way to bring some solace while waiting to recover.

In the remaining chapters, Rolheiser offers ways to reclaim the memory of loved ones and to return to celebrating the lives of those lost. This leads naturally into dealing with the profound pain experienced by survivors and ways to do that. A fracturing of human bonds and relationships among family and friends has occurred, and this reclamation is important to recovery.

The closing chapter challenges the reader to think differently about recovering from the pain of such a death. It is aptly titled

“Dying into Safe Hands.” When any death occurs, there are no words to ease the pain; there is no soothing salve, and recovering is very hard. Yet this chapter is rich in insight that can provide comfort for the bereaved. Rolheiser suggests that comfort is found by embracing the belief that the deceased has “died into the safe, gentle, merciful and loving hands of Christ.” He includes references to Silent Night, the prodigal son, the good shepherd, St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans, and a compelling comment from Dietrich Bonhoeffer to drive home this point.

The journey of recovery from the death of a loved one by suicide is a personal exodus that takes time, persistence, and fortitude. Rolheiser walks the reader through that exodus and walks along with them. He writes in the first person, and the reader will sense that the author is in this with them. He provides direction for survivors that will help ease their own pain and help comfort others who also survive.

His thesis will be of help to the secular reader who is searching, as well as those connected to a religious tradition. Rolheiser presents his thoughts carefully, with every person in mind. He offers his spiritual guidance as options for the reader that will help them deal compassionately with their thoughts about the deceased, those around them, and themselves. This path will help anyone searching the recesses of their hearts and minds for answers to the existential questions that daunt them, including how and why this happened and how to recover from this deep, dark, painful abyss. While not a clinical volume, this book also provides much wisdom for those who professionally care for people who have experienced this loss and will help them in the care of their patients.



Timeless Tips for a Balanced, Successful Life:  
Review of *Time Tactics of Very Successful  
People* by B. Eugene Griessman

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*Time Tactics of Very Successful People* by B. Eugene Griessman (McGraw-Hill, 1994)

As recently as two years ago, B. Eugene Griessman's *Time Tactics of Very Successful People* was still getting five-star ratings on Goodreads. For a practical self-help book published about three decades ago, it seems to have crossed a certain threshold in maintaining its appeal to readers today.

*Time Tactics* is a compendium of advice on how to be successful. It encompasses endeavors that affect businesses, relationships, careers, studies, and more, which invariably require the proper use of time. In outlining what one can learn from the book, Griessman covers almost everyone who wants to achieve a balanced life.

The author's proposed strategy for improvement is to study and model after successful (but not necessarily famous) individuals. Accordingly, the book is full of advice and practices by high achievers. His interviewees include corporate leaders, politicians, salespeople, writers, musicians, athletes, and consultants, as well as his workshop participants. Snippets of accounts of famous figures, including scientists and Nobel laureates, give glimpses into principles

and habits that bear significant results. The book also draws from the wisdom and thoughts of historical figures, major religions of the world, and ancient philosophy, including Socrates, the *Tao Te Ching*, Sanskrit proverbs, and traditional sayings. The examples and scenarios Griessman narrates illustrate how the business world operates, how to communicate and engage with people, what to do and not to do in certain circumstances, and much more.

Griessman writes in a conversational, easy-to-read style with a sense of humor throughout. The teacher in him shows through lists of do's and don'ts or rules in lecture-note style, which help present the comprehensive information simply and clearly. He even provides templates of rejection letters or notes that one can use by just filling in the blanks! However, far from being academic, the book reads like listening to stories and anecdotes from a guru. Many of the titles in it are imaginative and instructive, such as "Spend More Time in the Now," "Don't Adopt Other People's Monkeys," and "To Save Time, Smile." Some expressions and corporate jargon, however, may not be immediately comprehensible to certain readers.

Most surprising is the breadth of disciplines the book covers. Some of its advice seems unrelated to time management and more inclined toward attaining goals or improving one's life. Alongside more conventional time management tactics like setting priorities, delegating, and planning ahead, it discusses topics such as chronological patterns, diet, exercise, managing moods, and conflict management. However, not all sections or tactics receive equal treatment; some are longer and deeper, some only at surface level. Other seemingly unexpected advice is on becoming an all-rounder and contributing to the good of the society and nation, living in the present moment, and loving oneself. The book also offers contradictory advice such as embracing underemployment to cultivate innovative minds.

References to outdated technologies, such as fax, audio cassettes, and car phones in the book may put off some readers. Nevertheless,

an initiated reader can easily think of present substitutes. A whole chapter on using technology that works may seem redundant for the current technology-savvy generation, but it shows how advanced Griessman's advice was at the time of writing. He rightly points out how useful the computer, internet, and mobile phones are in discussing their then-possible uses, which have materialized now.

*Time Tactics* comes across as unbiased, as Griessman objectively discusses different perspectives. He presents both sides of the coin for many of the time tactics and identifies those who may or may not benefit from them. For instance, while he dedicated a whole chapter to avoiding procrastination, one section elsewhere talks about the benefits of delaying work on something. Even from the onset, Griessman acknowledges that “not every tactic will work for every reader, every personality, every situation.”

The author's care in presenting information lends credibility to the book. For example, in mentioning an experiment that showed the positive effects of music on intelligence performance, he states that it incidentally used Mozart's piano sonatas but whether all music has the same effect has not been ascertained. He also conscientiously calls out where he's forgotten who told him about a useful tactic.

The concept of balanced time usage is present throughout, but Griessman underscores its importance by closing the book with the chapter “Balancing Work, Family, and Social Life.” Its last section that expounds on the difference between “time tactics” and “time strategies” more explicitly advocates careful consideration on *why* one saves time. In Griessman's words, “The ‘What for?’ question should be asked about the life you live, not just the work that you do.”

*Time Tactics* would be suitable not only for discerning readers hoping to use time effectively but also for those aspiring to be successful. Students, fresh graduates, and executives climbing the corporate ladder can expect to gain firm footing for navigating the work and business environment. All in all, *Time Tactics* makes for a handy reference and guide for achieving a full, balanced life and can

even be an enjoyable read. Offering more than time management tactics, the book's holistic scope and timeless principles are why it is still relevant now.



# A New Approach to Planning: Review of *The PLAN: Manage Your Time Like a Lazy Genius* by Kendra Adachi

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*The PLAN: Manage Your Time Like a Lazy Genius* by Kendra Adachi (Convergent, 2024)

When schedules begin to spiral out of control and the laundry is overflowing, it can be difficult to identify what really needs to be done. If everything is important, it is challenging to choose which things to do and which ones to let go. While Kendra Adachi's *The PLAN: Manage Your Time Like a Lazy Genius* can't tell readers what matters most on their calendar, it can provide a framework to answer that question and then make meaningful decisions about day-to-day life. Adachi wants to help her readers become lazy geniuses when it comes to time management—to “be geniuses about the things that matter and lazy about the things that don't.”

*The PLAN* is not another planner. Nor is it full of schedule hacks and tips for optimizing every second of the day. Instead, Adachi has set out to write a time management book, specifically for women (however, the principles can be utilized by anyone), that offers simple methods to “live an integrated life that starts exactly where you are.” For Adachi, an integrated life is one that highlights the good and beautiful of the present moment. It honors and provides space for the current season of life to be settled into rather than pushed

through. Finally, an integrated life celebrates the person you are today instead of longing for a possible future self.

PLAN is an acronym for prepare, live, adjust, notice. Though the acronym holds true, Adachi actually uses a pyramid image to describe how the steps work together. The base of the pyramid is to name what matters most, as everything in her lazy genius philosophy rests upon this point. From that perspective, the steps of prepare, adjust, and notice work together as the three sides of the pyramid. Too much of one and the pyramid will be lopsided. The pinnacle of the pyramid is to live.

Starting with the base of the pyramid, Adachi encourages the reader to take time asking questions about the current season they are experiencing in order to name what matters most—season of the year, of life, of toddlerhood, of preparing for a wedding, etc. Adachi defines a “season” as the current present moment and next period of time based on the reader’s life circumstances. Identifying and naming the current season provides a helpful framework to work within that is defined, specific, and able to be broken into smaller pieces. It is also an opportunity to consider where enjoyment could be found in this season and where the good is within it, even if it is a season of hardship or sorrow.

After naming what matters most for that season, the three sides of prepare, adjust, and notice are brought to the table. These three sides of Adachi’s PLAN pyramid are highly intertwined and can be used daily, weekly, monthly, and seasonally. There is no correct order, as each has its own value and purpose.

Adachi advises readers to think about the upcoming season and look for opportunities to prepare today so that tomorrow, or the next event on the schedule, is a little easier. Preparing well gives greater flexibility to adjust when things don’t go according to plan. Adachi is very practical in her methods and examples: Life doesn’t often go according to plan. By adjusting expectations for the season, as well as being willing to adjust in the moment when things go awry, life

becomes less frantic. Adachi encourages frequent noticing during the season. This could mean noticing where adjustments are needed or what kind of preparation done today will lighten a future load. It could also mean noticing the feelings and emotions brought up by a certain event or individual.

The pinnacle of the PLAN pyramid is to live. By this, Adachi means to live an integrated life where all the parts of a person are present and valued. Simply put, “When we are integrated, we compassionately love our true selves and seek to live smack-dab in the center of who we know ourselves to be.”

As I read this book, I felt that the principles and methods were ones I wanted to incorporate into my daily and weekly routines. However, there are lots of ideas, options, lists, and tools offered in the book. Midway through I began to feel overwhelmed by the options available to me: daily check-ins, weekly planning updates, monthly overviews, seasonal checklists. They are each individually strong options, but in my opinion, it could be a challenge to implement everything all at once.

Thankfully, Adachi does not recommend this course of action. One of the guiding principles of the lazy genius model is to start small. She wisely includes a concluding chapter reminding the reader that starting small, with today, is the best place to begin.

Male readers may struggle with the beginning chapters of the book, where Adachi asserts that the time management techniques typically advocated for in most self-help books come from and assume a male perspective and lifestyle. While many of these books are read by women, they are written by men. In Adachi’s opinion, the current productivity-focused culture is not a sustainable model to live one’s life by, especially if that person is a woman with a wide range of hormones throughout the month, invisible mental loads in the home and at work, cultural expectations of body type, and the expectation to achieve perfection in all areas of life. Adachi believes that the current paradigms and time management tools were not

written with women in mind. She would like to offer an alternative option with her book.

As someone who has tried multiple planners in the quest to find the one that would finally solve my scheduling headaches, this book was very refreshing. It offered me new ideas for the way I plan my family's schedules and how to identify why we do what we do. The encouragement to use tools that help me live my life today, rather than be constantly trying to achieve tomorrow, takes a load off my shoulders. Today is the day I am living and there is good here—today—even if it hasn't gone according to plan.



## Desire Unmasked and Transformed: Review of *Wanting* by Luke Burgis

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*Wanting: The Power of Mimetic Desire in Everyday Life* by Luke Burgis (St. Martin's, 2021)

Before he turned thirty, Luke Burgis had completed a college degree, worked on Wall Street, and founded successful companies. Yet when the biggest deal of his career fell through, the one he thought would secure the money and prestige he was seeking, he felt unexpectedly relieved. Why did the loss of all he'd been striving for seem mysteriously welcome?

In *Wanting: The Power of Mimetic Desire in Everyday Life*, Burgis reveals what he discovered when he stopped chasing the next deal and began questioning the motives that had driven him. But Burgis does more than tell his own story in this book. *Wanting* is an invitation to question the quality of the things we most desire. Ultimately, Burgis discloses, *Wanting* is about “why *you* want what you want.”

Part memoir, part sociology, and part philosophical reflection, *Wanting* reveals why people want what they want by teaching us how to recognize when mimesis, the hidden power behind our desires, is at work. Once we understand how mimetic desire operates, we see it everywhere, and we are finally offered a daring opportunity to see how it operates in us.

While Burgis struggled to understand the dreams he chased in his twenties and the relief he felt when the ultimate deal was denied, a mentor encouraged him to look into the ideas of French academic René Girard. Girard's theories about the role mimesis plays in human behavior changed the way Burgis looked at everything in his life, and in Part I of this book, he explains why.

We tend to assume our desires are completely original. Girard calls this "the Romantic Lie." In reality, our desires are mediated by models: people, groups, or things that help us know *what* to want. While illustrating Girardian concepts, Burgis employs his gift as a storyteller. We learn, for example, of the legendary rivalry between Ferruccio Lamborghini and Enzo Ferrari and of the American Tobacco Company's advertising campaign that enticed women in the 1920s to enjoy the "freedom" of smoking by strategically placing an attractive woman with a cigarette at the New York City Easter parade.

Burgis continues narrating his own story as well. He reflects on the cultural landscape and offers scientific support for Girard's theories in Andrew Meltzoff's research in imitation and social-cognitive development. His reflections render Girardian thought increasingly accessible. From mythology to mechanical engineering, from *Seinfeld* to Scripture, we begin to understand how mimetic desire leads to rivalry, social contagion, and scapegoating.

But we also sense it doesn't have to be this way. Once the power of mimesis is unmasked, it can be leveraged in the process of personal transformation. Burgis explores this possibility in Part II. Considering insights from Augustine, Dante, Dostoevsky, C. S. Lewis, and Flannery O'Connor, Burgis urges readers to begin discerning which of our own desires are "thin" and ephemeral and which are "thick" and satisfying. Sidebars throughout the book provide "tactics" for applying mimetic theory in positive ways, such as naming our own models, sharing stories of deeply fulfilling action, and investing in deep silence. Simple illustrations along the way remind us to smile.

“Desire is by its very nature transcendent,” Burgis reminds us. “We are always wanting more.” Following “thick desires” can free us from the mimetic rivalry, political scapegoating, and copycat consumerism that so often drive us. The greatest writers and artists in history were “not confined to the popular desires of their age,” but transcended them, he points out. *Wanting* concludes with a model of leadership that encourages readers to push past self-serving goals by helping others find meaning and mission.

Two appendices, a glossary of terms and a mimetic theory reading list, are helpful additions to the text. The final appendix, a compilation of motivational themes, is intriguing but lacks development. The link to a corresponding online assessment (MCode) is no longer active, so an updated edition of this book would be most welcome.

While *Wanting* is initially valuable as an introduction to the work of René Girard, it is much more than that. *Wanting* exposes the inner workings of the human heart and charts a path to self-examination and positive action. Readers weary of social contagion and trendy temptations will find *Wanting* a helpful lens for understanding the cultural landscape and a pathway to a life enriched by contemplation and contribution.

