

Hefty reading

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [November 30, 2010](#) issue

I've recently read and I highly recommend the following four books. Each is different and satisfying. Each is hefty, which is satisfying in its own way—it always feels like something of a statement to travel with a hardback book that's hard to fit into an airplane carry-on bag.

The Case for God, by Karen Armstrong, is an ambitious historical survey of the way human beings have thought about God, beginning with the beautiful and mysterious cave drawings at Lascaux, France, that date from 12,000 to 30,000 BC. The book is scholarly but accessible. In the introduction Armstrong reports that readers have told her, "That book was really hard!" She says she wants to tell them, "Of course it was. It was about God." Armstrong comments on the neoatheist best sellers by Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris. None of these authors deals much with the age-old conversation and argument about God that has gone on within the religious community, but Armstrong reminds readers that scholars have been wrestling with ultimate issues for millennia. Her book has helped me with my own project this autumn: a sermon series titled "What the Bible Says and What We Believe About God."

I read Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*, partly because I enjoyed *The Corrections* so much and partly because I think a preacher ought to know about what everybody is reading. This big, engaging story touches on many of the social issues of our time. (See Rodney Clapp's review in the November 2 *Century*, "Free for what?") Franzen's characters, I thought as I read, don't have enough important things to do. Even the attempt to save a songbird from extinction becomes compromised. I kept wishing they'd all pack up and go to church some Sunday morning and volunteer in a homeless shelter or sign up for a mission trip.

American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us, by Robert Putnam and David Campbell, is based on a host of data. The charts and graphs make us narrative types dizzy, but it's an important book. America manages to be devout and diverse and still quite tolerant, say the authors, mostly because most Americans know or are

related to a person of a different religious faith. The authors call this the Aunt Susan principle: dear old Aunt Susan may be of a different religion, but surely she's going to heaven. The book says mainline membership loss is related to a shock—the cultural upheaval of the 1960s—and to two aftershocks—the rise of the religious right and the dismissal of religion by a generation in response to the religious right's judgmentalism. My children remind me of this every time the subject of my denomination's position on sexual orientation comes up: "Dad, are you still talking about *that*? Don't you know that the world has moved on?"

For sheer pleasure and a little nostalgia, I read James S. Hirsch's *Willie Mays: The Life, the Legend*. Some believe Mays was the best all-around athlete ever to play baseball. The book is about a time when baseball players were paid modest salaries and stayed with the same team for years. For those of us who live in Chicago, where neither baseball team made it to the postseason, *Willie Mays* reminds us of the excitement that baseball continues to provide. The team Mays played for the longest, the Giants (both New York and San Francisco), just won the World Series in five well-played games against the Texas Rangers. It is the first Series victory for the Giants since Mays's 1954 team beat the Cleveland Indians at New York's Polo Grounds. Of course, that statistic does nothing for Cubs fans, who are facing the prospect of 102 years without a championship.