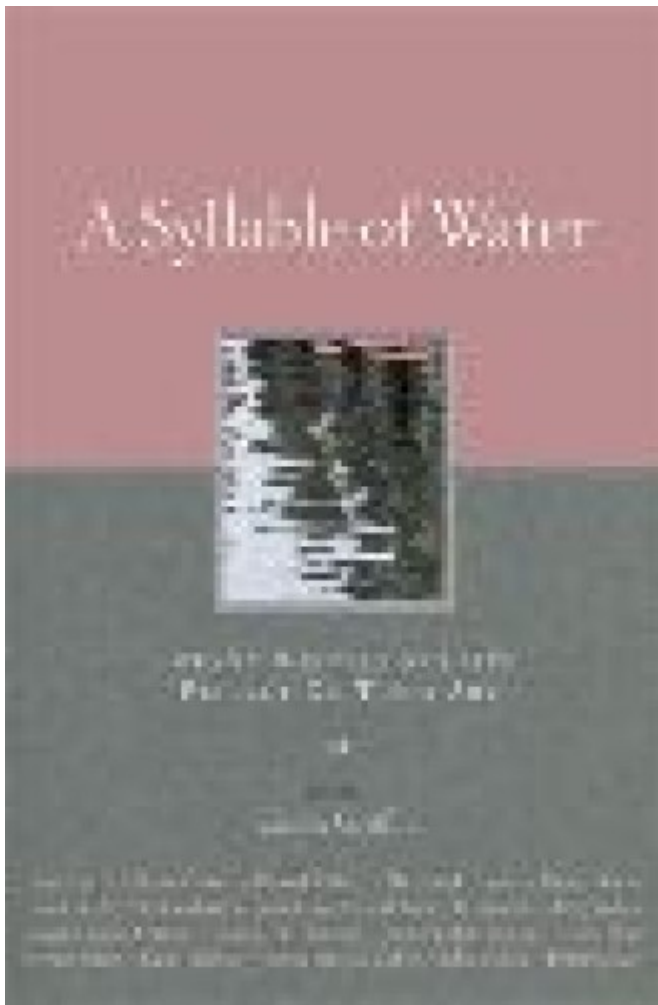


A Syllable of Water: Twenty Writers of Faith Reflect on Their Art

reviewed by [Karl Stevens](#) in the [August 25, 2009](#) issue

In Review



A Syllable of Water: Twenty Writers of Faith Reflect on Their Art

Emilie Griffin, ed.

Paraclete

In her chapter on novel writing in this collection, Doris Betts decries writing teachers who ask their students whether they really have anything to say. It's the wrong question for a writer. As Betts asserts, "Only allegorists start from that end and work backward. Most writers set out to tell a story, knowing that who they are and what they believe will whisper its way in just as they do in daily life." For Betts, and for many of the writers who appear in *A Syllable of Water*, writing is about relationship and risk.

These writers belong to multiple communities: the Chrysostom Society, the Christian writing guild that Richard Foster organized in the mid-1980s; the community of their literary forebears; the local communities in which they live and work. They are in relationship with the characters they create, or in the case of nonfiction, with the people they research. And they understand that these relationships are risky because they are rooted in Christ. As the poet John Leach states, "The Christian has only one place to be. In Christ." But "rather than simplifying anything, having one's place in Christ complicates one's life, for the range of relationships, the spiritual ecology, is all inclusive."

This sense of relationship may have the potential to complicate writers' lives, but it also helps them in their craft. For Emilie Griffin, the solution for writer's block is relationships: "We lick [it] by thinking more of others (readers and listeners) and less of ourselves. We think of the word to be given. This, too, is an exercise of faith, following the commands of love. We become more generous and less self-preoccupied." In some relationships, this generosity leads to communion with God. "I live at the deepest level of spiritual practice when I am writing," Griffin says.

James Calvin Schaap pursues a similar theme in his essay on creative nonfiction:

If writers, particularly creative nonfiction writers, pursue what needs to be accomplished, all the while desiring to be brought to their knees in awe, they will find their way to good writing. There is a sweetness in being blindsided by life, by truth, by a dark corner suddenly illumined. There is sheer joy in epiphany.

The quest for epiphany imbues writing with a sense of worship.

But these writers are aware that such worship might defy the expectations of the church. The short-story writer Erin McGraw understands that "we are called on to

know our characters better than they know themselves, and perhaps better than we know ourselves,” but also that writers are not called on to judge their characters. Even if a character acts immorally, it is not the fiction writer’s task to point to the immorality and make it obvious to readers that she disapproves. “Art calls on us to put aside everything we think we know and enter the world unarmed, trusting only art to keep us safe,” McGraw writes.

In her essay on playwriting, Jeanne Murray Walker puts it another way: “Making theater together is, in some ways, like praying together. You make fools of yourself in front of one another often enough and you learn how dependent you are on one another. You start not minding it. You see it as grace.” The relationships that these writers have with their characters and with each other uphold them by a realization of mutual risk, rather than by moral cohesiveness.

Richard Foster writes, “It is an occupational hazard of religious folk to be stuffy bores,” but the way these authors worship through writing allows them to steer clear of that hazard. A desire to do so might account for the absence of an essay on sermon writing. A few of the writers make mention of sermons, but with the exception of Diane Glancy, who credits sermons as an aid to her process of personal revision, they are not particularly enthusiastic about the genre. McGraw is willing to admit that “sermons are good and necessary things,” but, she adds, “they are best left in the hands of professionals.”

It is possible that in the minds of many of these authors, professional sermonizers are not writers of literature, and I wonder why this should be. Why is the sermon, the only kind of writing that is regularly created for the purpose of Christian worship, seen as unimportant or even detrimental to the grace that these authors experience when they practice their craft?

Perhaps the problem is that sermons are often meant to serve a didactic rather than a literary purpose. As Schaap points out, they are shaped like an O, complete and entirely closed, whereas stories “are shaped like C’s—that is, they leave a certain empty space into which the reader brings his or her own perceptions.” This implies that stories invite participation from their readers and sermons do not, something I have often found to be true. As a sermon writer myself, I hope that this can change. Perhaps it will if pastors and priests begin to understand their weekly writing as an act of risk and relationship—if they come to view their writing as poetic in the way Scott Cairns describes poetry: “the presence and activity of inexhaustible, indeterminate enormity apprehended in a discreet space.”