

Everything I know about writing I learned in Sunday school

by [Doris Betts](#) in the [October 21, 1998](#) issue

I am a storyteller whose themes are informed by faith, but I do not preach it. In fact, one reader mailed back one of my novels complaining that it was filthy; with a magic marker she had blacked out everything she found offensive. When I saw that the first casualty was the mere mention of Jack Daniels bourbon, I knew there was no need to look any further. I mailed her a refund check.

Such readers want literature to set a good example. They want writers to pretend that people do not drink, shack up or commit incest and blasphemy. They want us either to take sin out of our fictional world entirely or to punish it more thoroughly than real life does: to stop that tower of Siloam from falling on the innocent and to make sure that every Job gets new wealth and a just-as-good replacement family.

Flannery O'Connor wrote that a writer who believes that human beings have been "found by God to be worth dying for" must use shock to make her Christian faith visible to a reading audience that does not share it. "To the hard of hearing you shout," she wrote, "and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures." Like mothers and kindergarten teachers, I find that whispering is also sometimes effective, and even with the volume turned down I hope my theology can be heard in my stories. Most church libraries contain more "shout" than "whisper" authors. The volume is turned up high in a Christian bestseller like Frank Peretti's *This Present Darkness*.

Annie Dillard once warned that in serious American literature today, to be called "religious" would be a "death knell," and one reviewer said Frederick Buechner wrote from an "unfashionable center." When *Publishers Weekly*, in its religion section, talked about one of my novels and one of John Updike's as crossover books by mainstream writers, I doubt that our editors at Knopf were pleased. On the other hand, some religious book publishers actively require their authors to produce what I consider bad prose: obvious, sentimental, contrived, cute and preachy.

Yet despite the cutesy guardian angels and New Age metaphysics that seem to dominate popular culture, I do hear in current serious fiction a whisper of that still, small voice for which our faith has taught us to listen. A recent novel I admire is Ron Hansen's *Atticus*. Though reviewers have treated it as a literary detective story, all biblically literate people will recognize the parable of the prodigal son in this story of a contemporary father who searches for a son who once was thought to have died in Mexico but then is alive again. I also like a collection of essays by Thomas Lynch, a poet who is also a funeral director, called *The Undertaking*. One reviewer said irritably, "This book has little to offer the secular humanist."

When a British magazine recently listed what its editors considered the best young American novelists, it noted that writers were turning back to childhood, growing up and family relationships as subject matter--what some grumbling critics called "the Norman Rockwellization of the novel." Yet such life stories are the most apt to raise questions of ultimate meaning. I hear a "whispering hope" when the erudite Reynolds Price writes openly about his vision of Jesus during his cancer ordeal, or when thousands buy his translation of three of the Gospels; when books of interviews with writers--like Susan Ketchin's *The Christ-Haunted Landscape* or Dale Brown's *Of Fiction and Faith*--seep into the academy. Mary Gordon's disclaimers finally give way to her admission about priests and nuns: "Nevertheless I can't quite give up what they stand for." Cormac McCarthy writes about a blind amputee who is arguing with a street preacher. The beggar says, "Look at me, legless and everything, I reckon you think I ought to love God." The preacher answers, "Yeah, I reckon you ought. An old blind mess and a legless fool is a flower in the garden of God."

Many writers, wherever they may be located on their own pilgrimages, also admit how much the Good Book and the Good News still whisper to them. They are still haunted by the statement Goethe's Faust struggles with: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." We children destined to be writers took that word literally before we knew a logos from a hole in the ground. In Genesis, the whole universe is called into existence by God's imperative sentence, "Let there be light!" That moment when humans are created in his image must be the very evolutionary moment when vocal chords and brain were linked to produce language. The other million species on earth speak not a word.

The Bible, from the creation story onwards, is a cornucopia of language. Were the Ten Commandments not inscribed into a stone by God's hot finger itself? Did not the

burning bush speak, the moving finger write on a despot's wall, the Tower of Babel confound language and, thus, communication, the Pentecost bring tongues of fire that translated love into each listener's native language? Didn't Philip climb into a chariot to teach the Ethiopian the meaning of what he was reading? And though the church, like its members, has sinned, did it not keep words alive through the Dark Ages and illuminate and make beautiful even the alphabet?

In this film and video age that emphasizes pictures, some people think that if Jesus had wanted us to take heaven seriously he would have brought along snapshots instead of telling stories. But those stories taught us the power and magic of words. The Bible taught us the uses of metaphor--"I am the vine, you are the branches." In Sunday school we absorbed the effectiveness of repetition and echo ("He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters").

The Bible differs from other sacred texts such as the Qu'ran and the Hindu Veda in the way its cosmic story becomes the all-too-personal story of us all. For us, too, there was a childhood garden before the snakes came, and we keep trying to get back to that innocent garden, as the hippies sang at Woodstock. Like the Israelites in Egypt, some of us have been enslaved. Listen to Africans singing "Go Down, Moses" so that Pharaoh in the plantation house can hear. Listen to the enslaved crack addict. Sometimes we travel the long way through the wilderness, stopping off at the shopping mall to worship a golden calf. Sometimes the tyrant we fight is named Nebuchadnezzar, sometimes Nero, sometimes Hitler. In every major city there are streets as wicked as some in Babylon.

Besides teaching us to appreciate language and to see the patterns of our lives, the Bible also taught us the techniques of fiction. Like the *Iliad*, it opens with a great booming omniscient voice: IN THE BEGINNING GOD CREATED THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH! If the reader asks, "Who says so?" there's no answer, just as we don't know who booms out "Sing, muse, of the wrath of the son of Peleus Achilles" at the beginning of the *Iliad*. The great 19th-century novelists also write with the godlike authority conveyed by this omniscient point of view. But the Bible also teaches us how to use more limited and personal voices. In the 23rd Psalm, the point of view shifts from the first-person my shepherd leading me, to the third-person he and then all the way to the intimate second-person thou when things get tough in the valley of the shadow of death.

A pastor taught me all I know about characterization in a sermon with the text "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." I yawned when he announced that text. Been there; heard that. But then the pastor said, "Bear in mind that you do not always love yourself. Sometimes you dislike yourself and are embarrassed by your own behavior; sometimes you may even hate yourself. Even then, what do you do? You make excuses. You put your own conduct into a favorable context. 'I wouldn't have said that if I hadn't had this headache,' you say. Or, 'Well, actually, he asked for it!' And so on."

The Golden Rule asks of writers the same thing it asks of all who are trying to love their neighbors: to put themselves inside others, inside their characters, even the villains; to know what excuses they would make for themselves; to imagine how it feels to be Shylock or Hamlet or Anna Karenina or Willy Loman. Writers love their characters as themselves. They remember, as one minister put it, that "we're all related to God on his mother's side."

The Bible doesn't concentrate on one-sided, goody-goody characters. Career thieves get redeemed at the very last minute. God seems to love human beings, warts and all. A trickster like Jacob and an adulterer like King David are of great interest to Yahweh; doubting Thomas and cowardly Peter are important to Christ. Will Campbell once stated it bluntly: "We're all bastards, but God loves us anyway."

The Bible also teaches the power of the concrete. The 5,000 eat not generic food but five loaves and two fishes. Jezebel's death is not merely "unpleasant." Rather, dogs devour all of her body except her hands and feet. But the Bible not only teaches us the effectiveness of detail, it also teaches us the importance of omission. It leaves us with questions. How did Bathsheba feel when she got old? Why didn't Lazarus tell us what death was like? Did Ishmael remember being cast out into the desert and curse the henpecked Abraham? Where was Delilah when she heard about the collapse of the Philistine temple? What effect did the crucifixion have on Pontius Pilate during the three remaining years of his rule? Like all serious literature, the Bible tells us that mystery remains a part of every story, every life.

Scripture even teaches irony, as when God sarcastically addresses Jonah, who is complaining about the collapse of his bean vine: "Should I not spare Nineveh, this great city, wherein are more than six score thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand, and also much cattle?"

And Sunday school gave us basic training in the value of allusion, at first by showing us how the New Testament refers to the Old, and then by getting us ready to see how the scripture still whispers through most of the literature of the Western world. As one man complained, "I can't stand to read the Bible. It's full of quotations."

Though I'm not an overtly devotional writer, I agree with Charlotte Brontë's assessment of Christianity's effect on her work--and, in my case, of the effect of old-fashioned Calvinism as taught in Associate Reformed Presbyterian Sunday schools: "It all went through me and through me, like wine through water, and altered the color of my mind."

Kierkegaard has reminded us that we are not all called to be apostles; we are not all fitted by nature to stand in the pulpit. But all Christians are called to do what they can for the faith. I hope a few of my stories are one more mustard seed, one more widow's mite.