

## Oceanside reading

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [September 3, 2014](#) issue



The North Carolina coast of the Atlantic Ocean. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Andrew VanderLeest](#)

I don't know how the ocean got in my blood, but it did. Even though we lived hundreds of miles from the ocean, my parents talked about it: water as far as the eye can see, waves rolling and splashing, soft sand to play in, and holes that, if dug deep enough, would allow the ocean to seep in.

In my working-class home, vacation was when we painted the house, put in a new sidewalk, and weeded the garden. There was only one occasion when we actually visited the ocean, but I can still see the snapshots—me at five years old and my parents as great-looking young adults.

Years later, as soon as I had vacation time my wife and I found a way to head to the ocean with our young family. I dreamed of finding a spot by the ocean without the bright lights and noisy glitz of seaside resorts in New Jersey. Friends introduced us to a barrier island in North Carolina that consisted of one road end to end, a line of cottages facing the ocean, and a general store. This is our 38th year there. There's a fresh seafood market where we purchase fish for dinner every day and greet the owners, now the third generation of them. A week in this place is part of our family's rhythm. All of them come for seven days of wonderful chaos—grown children and spouses and grandchildren all falling in love with the ocean.

I begin the day in a rocking chair on the porch with a cup of coffee, gazing in wonder at the expanse in front of me. The ocean is conducive to thinking and reading as well

as meditating and praying. This year I read *Cities of the Plain*, the third in Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy. It's a story told with passionate and deep undercurrents. No one writes dialogue as authentically and easily as McCarthy. Out of the most mundane, often violent and tragic circumstances, he takes the reader into deep theological reflection. Near the end, the surviving main character, now old and homeless, meets a stranger during the night. They talk and share packets of restaurant crackers, a kind of holy communion. "Where do we go when we die?" he asks. The stranger responds, "Where are we now?"

*The Orchardist* is by Amanda Coplin, an author who is new to me. Set in the Northwest at the turn of the last century, the novel offers fascinating, strong characters and a compelling story.

I also read Amy-Jill Levine's *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*. An [excerpt from her book](#) appears in this issue, and she will be the speaker at our [annual Century Lecture on November 6](#) (this year cosponsored by the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago and the Chicago Board of Rabbis). Levine is a distinguished scholar and a lively, witty speaker. Anyone who wants to understand the parables of Jesus in their first-century Jewish context should read her book and hear her speak.

In *The Book of Forgiveness*, Desmond Tutu and his daughter Mpho Tutu (an Anglican priest) reflect on the dynamics of forgiveness. The book includes compelling illustrations from their lives but is also a forgiveness handbook that offers guides, rituals, meditating, and keeping a journal as part of the process of learning to forgive. A critical part of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in postapartheid South Africa was telling the story of the harm that someone had suffered or inflicted. Tutu cites research suggesting that the more children know about their family's stories, the more resilient, healthy, and happy they will be.

That's another great thing about vacationing with our families: it's a chance to tell our stories and remind ourselves of who we are.