

What I learned from a year of fiction

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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I hate cleaning the house. I just do. No one in our family is super neat, but I have a lower tolerance for clutter, so I end up doing a bit more than everyone else. Then I resent it. Then I feel like a big fraud because I'm supposed to be this superfeminist, but I don't have that cleaning part figured out. I feel like this 1950s housewifey as I scurry around, wiping down cabinets.

I tried to pray and meditate during housekeeping, because I know people who do this. But they are a lot more spiritual than I am, because I just end up muttering imprecatory prayers of vengeance because I have to clean off *the baked-on food from the pan and why wasn't it done last night when it would have been a thousand times easier to get this done last night nasty and these socks who leaves their socks piled around like this and if I have to pick up another seltzer water can I will die they are all half full seriously doesn't anyone know where the recycling is in this house why do these pets have to shed so much there is hair everywhere I rue the day when I introduced my daughter to the concept of the mud masks our sinks are disgusting...*

See? Not very spiritual. I know people will argue that there is something spiritual in the mundane, but they're not in my skin and don't know the anxious irritation I feel by the time I'm done vacuuming. But somewhere along the way, I learned to listen to audio books while I clean. And while I still can't say that I love doing it, I can say that I don't hate it with a terrible venom any longer.

This year, I was slogging through my book—the one I'm writing—and realized that it has a lot of good parts, but it has no structure yet. I'm a preacher, so I know how to tell a good story in three to five minutes, but I've never really created 200 pages of one story. Since I need to develop a longer narrative arc for this book, I decided to rely on the experts. I got an audible account and began to read/listen to NYT Bestseller fiction.

Like a lot of my preacher friends, I typically read nonfiction, theology, and fiction classics. So, it was a little different for me to delve into the world of hot-off-the-press page-turners. I did it for a year. This is what I learned:

1) Pilate famously asked Jesus, **“What is truth?”** and authors seem to be toying with that question as well. [Gone Girl](#) and [Girl on the Train](#) both had unreliable narrators, and the same story was told from different perspectives. Both of them left the reader echoing Pilate.

2) **Hobophobia** (no, it’s not a typo, I got the [word from my friend Hugh Hollowell](#)) **is alive and well in literature.** There were a couple of books this year that I really enjoyed, but I couldn’t recommend them because of their portrayals of homeless people.

[Where’d You Go, Burnadette?](#) was one of them. The main character has horrendous views of those who sleep outside.

This made me pause. The author is not a pastor who has worked with the homeless. I am. Burnadette was a crank. She ranted about red lights and intersections, pretty much non-stop. So there is a bit of character development going on, but do you have to disparage the weakest group of people in our society to create a fuller personality? I don’t think so.

Another load of hobophobia? [The Dinner](#) by Herman Koch. It’s creepy, and it’s one that I *would* recommend, as an insight in human nature and a reminder of our depravity.

3) **Violence against women is getting some interesting, in-depth treatment in books.** I don't want to give away any spoilers, but I'll leave you [this link](#) if you want to explore more. Other really interesting contributions to an important topic have made this list in other forms.

4) **YA fiction has gotten a lot more interesting** since I was thirteen. My teen daughter has great taste in books, and she’s often instructing me on what to read. I tell her that we pretty much had Laura Ingalls Wilder and Judy Blume, and Blume was banned from our home.

This world that has opened up is fantastic. Of course, I’ve written about [John Green](#). Some other interesting YA authors are [Maggie Stiefvater](#) (I’m in the midst of the

Raven Cycle), [Marissa Meyer](#), [Patrick Ness](#), and [Rainbow Rowell](#). I finished Jandy Nelson's [I'll Give You the Sun](#) a couple of weeks ago, and I can't stop thinking about it. It was surreal and rich. Utter energy.

5) **Religion undervalues women.** While a great deal of religious writing seems to be by men and for men, my year-long experiment made me realize how women buy many more books. So, why does the religious market cater to men so much?

6) [Goldfinch](#) is still [the best](#).

7) **I've changed my reading habits.** I'm going to keep reading bestselling fiction, because sometimes the masses are right.

8) My preacher take-away? I know we can bemoan biblical illiteracy, but this is kind of an exciting time. **People no longer know the stories like they used to.**

Which means that the narratives can be surprising, insightful, and infuriating for our congregations. We are the keepers of some really fascinating stories that are told from different perspectives and give amazing insight into human nature.

So what fiction have you read? What did you learn?