

Nourishing Faith Through Fiction, by John R. May

reviewed by [Roy M. Anker](#) in the [January 11, 2003](#) issue

Faith is a meaning-seeking venture, says John May, and believers are those who sense the grace-full Mystery afoot in this world. The church's tasks are to clarify as best it can the mysteries of an unfathomable God and the "implications of those mysteries for us." Theology tries hard to couch Mystery in words, but "reasoned discourse" rarely reaches the depths of the whole person. For that the arts often work better, especially storied arts like literature and film that wrestle with the shape and meaning of lives. Perhaps the best example is Jesus' own penchant for explaining with stories the riddles of God's care for the world.

Appropriately, then, May sets about the task of nourishing faith through fiction by exploring a wealth of stories that illumine one historic locus of faith, the Apostles' Creed. And an invigorating tour it is, made so by the depth of May's insight into theology and fiction. May treats each focus of the Creed--Creator, Savior and Lifegiver--and offers a concise theological primer on the central mysteries of Christian faith. From these May extracts real-world experiential themes that he deftly illustrates with "fiction"--poems, short stories, novels and films.

That's where the fun starts. May chooses telling stories and lovingly treats their riches. The bent is decidedly Roman Catholic, as is May himself, but then much of the best art has come from Roman Catholic artists: in fiction, Walker Percy and Flannery O'Connor, and in film, John Ford, Frank Capra and Martin Scorsese. But over all, May's references are diverse and rich, ranging from Robert Benton to Clint Eastwood.

What separates this book from others that link religion and film is that May relishes film as art, and his references are something more than arty prooftexts for a theological point. This is no surprise for film scholars, since May has long led in the burgeoning academic study of religion and film. In *Nourishing Faith*, he has wonderfully distilled decades of study into an enticing and rewarding reflection for use by the church.