

Reading with Deeper Eyes

reviewed by [Trudy Bush](#) in the [July 14, 1999](#) issue

**Reading with Deeper Eyes: The Love of Literature and the Life of Faith.**

*By William H. Willimon. Upper Room Books, 125 pp.*

One of the best things about William Willimon's new book is that he introduces us to serious, spiritually significant works of fiction and makes us want to read them. One of the worst is that we might be tempted to take Willimon's book as a shortcut, using his summaries of great novels as a substitute for reading them. The book's format—short chapters followed by study questions—suggests it is intended to be used in adult classes or for private study. But what six-to-nine-page summary and analysis can do justice to Homer's *Odyssey*, Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Walker Percy's *Love in the Ruins* or Peter De Vries's *The Blood of the Lamb*?

Willimon's selection of books is excellent, leaning heavily on the contemporary. Among classical narratives, he discusses only the Book of Job in addition to Homer and Dostoevsky. Among contemporary works, he includes novels by Oscar Hijuelos, Anne Tyler and Ron Hansen, along with the obligatory Flannery O'Connor and John Updike.

Given the inevitable limitations and didacticism of a book like this, Willimon does a fine job of showing the relevance of these novels to the life of faith—both his own and the reader's. He treats Hijuelos's *Mr. Ives' Christmas* as a paradigmatic account of a faithful Christian and good man's response to devastating personal tragedy, Updike's *In the Beauty of the Lilies* as a wrenching examination of acedia, the spiritual sloth and indifference that robs life of meaning.

Many of the novels he chooses wrestle with theodicy, "the question of God's justice." Willimon suggests that the problem of reconciling the idea of a good God with a world of suffering is best approached not through philosophy but through story. Ultimately, our answer is the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

Less successful than the discussion of the novels are the questions or assignments that follow. For example: "In what ways have you mistakenly thought of yourself as the center of God's creation?" And: "Before the end of this week, visit someone who

is currently experiencing a time of suffering." Such comments seem overly simple in juxtaposition to the books and Willimon's insightful analysis of them.