

The ones that got away

As CC books editor, I get to peruse a lot of books. Too bad I can't review them all.

by [Elizabeth Palmer](#) in the [January 4, 2017](#) issue



Thinkstock

When I started as books editor at the *Century*, my predecessor said to me with a gleam in his eye: “Boxes and boxes of books are delivered to your office, and it never slows down. It’s like Christmas every day!” He was right—if your idea of Christmas is being inundated with more books than you could ever read on everything from politics to scripture to fiction to cooking.

Perusing these many books and deciding which ones to send out for review is one of the great joys of the job, and one of the challenges. There are far more books that are well written, interesting, and worthy of review than there is space in the

magazine to review them.

Deciding which books to review is more art than science. Many of the books on my shelves are impressive, but their focus is on a narrow or obscure topic, often in a scholarly manner. Nothing is automatically off the table, but I figure there's only so much interest in, for example, a detailed account of the idea—found in second- and third-century Eastern Mediterranean texts—that every person has a secret divine twin.

But for those who are interested in this topic, I highly recommend Charles M. Stang's [***Our Divine Double***](#) (Harvard University Press). Stang, who teaches at Harvard Divinity School, is a clear thinker and engaging writer. His sources are wide-ranging and his analysis is deep. Pastors who find themselves preaching each year on the second Sunday of Easter and are up for a lively academic reading of Thomas "the twin" (John 11:16) might be interested in the chapter that analyzes noncanonical accounts of that disciple. Stang's final (but too brief) chapter connects the sources analyzed in the first 230 pages with important questions about the meaning of evil, the incarnation, and the pleasures of reading and writing. If Stang writes a sequel expanding on these ideas, I will be excited to read it.

Another book that seemed too narrow for our audience is Reinhard Pummer's [***The Samaritans: A Profile***](#) (Eerdmans), at once a comprehensive history of the Samaritan people and a history of how the group has been seen by others. It ranges from ancient times to present-day Mount Gerazim, where a small group of individuals calling themselves Israelite Samaritans still live and worship. Pummer offers a primer on everything Samaritan, from the Samaritan Pentateuch and its exegesis to Samaritan rituals of circumcision and Passover. The sections that analyze Samaritan worship, New Testament accounts of Samaritans, and the group's present-day relationship to Judaism in Israel might be useful to pastors. Still, it's a book that didn't seem to have a broad enough appeal to merit a review in our pages.

Deciding which books to review is a joy and a challenge—and more art than science.

Many books on my shelves engage topics of wide interest but use a specialized vocabulary or assume a scholarly background in a way that limits their relevance to our readers. Timothy Secret's [***The Politics and Pedagogy of Mourning: On Responsibility in Eulogy***](#) (Bloomsbury) addresses a topic of interest to anyone who works with people in grief, but it demands some background in psychoanalysis

and phenomenology. Secret draws on Freud, Heidegger, Levinas, and Derrida to explore the ethics and politics of eulogies. His writing is precise and subtly humorous: “It can seem that the post-war Freud has progressively shifted from saying ‘everything is ultimately about sex’ to saying ‘everything is ultimately about death’—coffins seem to pop up everywhere in the manner that phalluses did in his earlier work.” Secret writes, “Whether the dead watch over us or not is unknowable; what matters is that we feel that they do and we actively respond to their call.” This book will be a delight to some, but it still seems like a very specialized work.

Another work that I put in the “too seriously academic” category is László Földényi’s [***Melancholy***](#) (Yale University Press, translated from the Hungarian by Tim Wilkinson, foreword by Alberto Manguel). This comprehensive history of the psychological, literary, and artistic dimensions of melancholy is beautifully written. Földényi covers a vast history of thought and prolifically cites Kant, Freud, Dante, Nicholas of Cusa, and hundreds of other thinkers. He suggests that the associations we now make between melancholy and creative genius arose in the 16th century when a sense of human creativity was growing and a sense of God as creator was declining. “The supplanting of the genius of God by individual genius is inconceivable without a not necessarily consciously felt sympathy for death.” A single clause shouldn’t contain that many consecutive negatives. As brilliant as the book is, I concluded that the style, if not the content, makes it more suited for review in a scholarly journal.

The size of a book is never an automatic trigger for rejection, but if it is heavier than my children were at birth, I’m likely to wonder about the effort required to pick it up, let alone read it. Often such books are so broad in scope that it’s hard for a review to be very helpful. Big books also tend to be expensive, and I hesitate to send out for review a book that costs more than a two-year subscription to your favorite magazine. Readers of the review who don’t have access to a well-funded library may suffer the moral dilemma of “should I buy this book or give the money to my local food pantry?”

One book that falls into this category is the encyclopedic [***Animals in Religion: Devotion, Symbol and Ritual***](#) (Reaktion Books), by Australian minister Barbara Allen. This lively volume is at once a study in comparative religion, a catalogue of the devotional and symbolic use of animals in the world’s major religions, and an appeal for humans to respect animals. Its 553 pages are fascinating. Who knew that white dogs were extremely unpopular in Japan following World War II because of the Shinto ritual association of the color white with death? Or that several commentators

on the Qur'an have speculated on whether animals might be resurrected in the world to come? Or that in the Gospel of the Ebionites, John the Baptist eats cake rather than locusts and Jesus refuses to eat the Passover lamb? Allen notes that this vegetarianism wasn't grounded in moral concerns about cruelty to animals; rather, gnostic minds simply couldn't stomach the idea of eating something as evil as flesh.

I was tempted to find a reviewer for Ola Sigurdson's massive [***Heavenly Bodies: Incarnation, the Gaze, and Embodiment in Christian Theology***](#) (Eerdmans, translated from the Swedish by Carl Olsen). The publisher's description of the book as a "profound engagement with the whole history of Christian life and thought" may be a slight exaggeration, but it engages a whole lot of Christian life, thought, and history. And Sigurdson, a Swedish systematic theologian, does it well. Though huge and verging on the "too academic" category, it is beautifully written: "God's movement towards [the mystic] occurs through the fact that her entire being is touched, setting her body afire." Its claims are provocative, all 673 pages of them. One of my favorite sections is the discussion of materiality, gender, and holy communion, which concludes:

Since the worship service, not least the liturgy of communion, aims to incorporate people into the body of Christ through the fact that they receive Christ as a gift in the bread and wine of communion, which disrupts and challenges every centered subject position—every attempt to dominate the divine—a unisexed, or hierarchically sexed, sacramental body is quite simply theologically impossible.

Bravo, Professor Sigurdson.

Some of the books that I find most intriguing come from perspectives that are likely to be unfamiliar to most *Century* readers. I worry that a review in our pages could give a misleading sense of a field or end up as an exercise in voyeurism. For example, I loved Alawiya Sobh's novel [***Maryam, Keeper of Stories***](#) (Seagull Books, translated from the Arabic by Nirvana Tanoukhi), which beautifully and painfully portrays the daily lives of Muslim women in Lebanon during the civil war. The book's narrative structure mirrors the chaos and complexity of the era it portrays. It wasn't the scenes of a Bedouin teenager teaching himself about sex through carnal encounters with barn animals that made me squeamish. It was the repeated scenes of exploitation (particularly sexual exploitation) of the female characters. I found

myself simultaneously hoping that this portrayal was a gross exaggeration and angrily judging the misogynistic culture portrayed in the book. Reading novels is to some extent inherently voyeuristic, but I couldn't imagine what a fair critical review might look like in the case of this messy soup of violence, sexual abuse, Islam, and war that deliberately blurs the line between fact and fiction.

I was fascinated by Joel Salatin's [***The Marvelous Pigness of Pigs: Respecting and Caring for All God's Creation***](#) (FaithWords). Salatin defies easy categorization. He is a self-described "Christian libertarian environmentalist capitalist lunatic farmer." This book, his tenth, also defies categorization. It is the story of the author's years at Bob Jones University, a rant against "the industrial agricultural complex," a marvelous celebration of the beauty of nature, an argument for libertarianism, and an earnest Bible study (with frequent quotations from the King James Version always typeset IN ALL CAPS). The book is intentionally humorous and reads easily. It's also wise and blunt:

We Christians have this smug idea that God is proud of whatever we're capable of doing. . . . We invent things that destroy the surrounding nature for a hundred years, create toxic waste sites, radioactive zones, and feel great that we've expressed our dominion so beautifully. Instead, we should be repenting in sackcloth and ashes.

Salatin's faith is beautifully, albeit crankily, intertwined with his environmentalism and political engagement. "God doesn't need me to save His planet. Goodness, He might start the millennial renovation process tomorrow. But He wants us to occupy, to care, to be faithful servants whether we have one day or centuries." This mélange of radical politics, gentle humor, and theological conviction makes the book hard to put down—even if you don't share the author's millennialist eschatology. It also makes the book hard to pin down, and thus hard to review. But I hope Christians across the political and theological spectrum will read it.

Some books I am too invested in to send out for review.

Occasionally a book comes across my desk that's so good and unburdened by potential controversy that I can't imagine what a reviewer would say other than to praise it. One example is Jon M. Sweeney's retelling of Leo Tolstoy's [***Three Simple Men & Other Holy Folktales***](#) (Paraclete, illustrated by Anna Mitchell). The introduction and critical notes at the end situate the folktales both within Tolstoy's

oeuvre and in relation to the religious function of narratives in general. Sweeney makes clear where he has altered the tales for the sake of accessibility. The illustrations are rich. There's nothing to critique. A review of this tiny but substantive book would consist primarily of: "Read it!"

Finally, there are sometimes books in which I am so personally invested that sending them out for review would be an act of nepotism. That's not to say that none of the authors I know personally can have their books reviewed in the *Century*. I'm talking about extreme cases, like when my former dissertation-writing partner, with whom I shared prolific amounts of coffee and tears during the worst days of graduate school, finally publishes her book, the early drafts of which I read over a number of years.

Such is the case with Sally Stamper's [**Horror and Its Aftermath: Reconsidering Theology and Human Experience**](#) (Fortress). This exploration of horror, hope, and God's hiddenness brilliantly draws together theories of child development and trauma, children's literature, and theologians from Augustine to Marilyn McCord Adams. Stamper, who is a psychoanalyst as well as a theologian, writes in a clear and accessible way. "What [then] has *Goodnight Moon* to do with Jerusalem?" is not only a section title but also a clue to the book's larger underlying questions. (There's more anxiety in the well-loved children's classic than you might think.) Although Stamper's book has a steep price tag, it's worth reading. That's my unbiased opinion.