

Books for pandemic reading

Nine writers tell us about a book they've read recently that's helped them reframe what it means to be a person of faith and a reader right now.

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This article appears in the [October 21, 2020](#) issue.



(Photo illustration by Daniel Richardson)

I generally avoid postapocalyptic fiction. I'm a skittish reader, prone to boundaryless encounters with dystopias, and books in this genre can spook me for weeks.

In May, my book group's pick was ***Parable of the Sower***, Octavia E. Butler's much-lauded work of Afrofuturism. Published in 1993, the book is so spectacularly prescient that my line of literary inquiry while reading went something like: "How did she know? Wait. How did she *know*?"

The novel is narrated by Lauren Olamina, a Black teenager living in the early 2020s after all givens have been decimated by climate change, extreme inequality, epidemics, shootings, and fires. State lines have become like national borders, and voters love their autocratic president, who they hope will “get us back to normal.” Adults hold on to nostalgia and denial until they no longer can.

Lauren becomes the leader of a group of refugees heading north, collecting others along the way. She begins preparing her charges for Earthseed, a community in which “we grow ourselves and our neighbors into something brand new.” She also crafts verses of a process theology to replace the Baptist faith of her childhood: “God is Change. Strange how much it helps me to remember that.”

The compounding effects of reading such a bracing and brutal novel during a pandemic undid me. The unraveling on the page, so closely tied to all that seemed to be coming undone around us, had me longing to quit reading around year 2025. But Lauren made me want to be brave, both in reading her story and in living mine. Lauren, like other Black women, faces not only the despair of collapsing systems but the cataclysm of racism. She bears the weight of her own liberation even as others expect her to lead them to theirs.

Sitting on my couch in the middle of lockdown, the women of my book group distilled into squares on my laptop screen, I wondered what the near future would require of us. I asked God for wisdom and courage. I said a breath prayer, hoping it would help to say it.

I’m still working on the brave reading project. I haven’t yet read Butler’s sequel, *Parable of the Talents*, and I’m working up the nerve to do more than leaf through Damian Duffy and John Jennings’s new graphic novel adaptation of *Parable of the Sower*. But the pandemic isn’t over yet, so who knows what courage I might yet summon?

—Valerie Weaver-Zercher, editor and writer living in central Pennsylvania

For the first few weeks after the pandemic shuttered school and church, I couldn’t read. Or rather, I couldn’t read anything except articles about the virus. My brain could only process pandemic, so the books I had been enjoying suddenly seemed as inaccessible as, say, untranslated Portuguese poetry. After a month or so, I

surrendered to the trajectory of my obsession. I compiled a short stack of books that not only restored my reading life but also grounded my perspective on the pandemic in wisdom more enduring than tweets and hot takes.

I broke the seal on my unintentional hiatus with a reread of ***Station Eleven***, by Emily St. John Mandel. In this novel about a post-pandemic world, Mandel considers the secondary casualties of catastrophe: the culture and infrastructure that perish along with the population. It is a bleak book that offers a mere wisp of optimism, which is precisely as much as I could tolerate at the time.

From there, I turned to the relatively arcane ***Death and Life: An American Theology***, by Arthur C. McGill. It's a searing critique of the American tendency to repress the reality of death and, relatedly, of the American Christian tendency to decenter the cross. I read this just as I was beginning to recognize that despite the saying that there are no atheists in foxholes, there are certainly functional atheists in pandemics—and I could easily become one of them. McGill's exquisite soteriology is helping me to resist this tendency and to entrust myself to God.

The final book in my quarantine trilogy was ***The Plague***—the book that's helped me break the habit of describing any of this as unprecedented. If Albert Camus's chilling novel makes anything clear, it's that we have been here before. I found myself infuriated with Father Paneloux, whose pastoral instincts and theological convictions are sorely insufficient to the vicissitudes of pandemic ministry. And yet I must confess: so are mine.

My pandemic reading has revealed to me that I am not one to look away. This can be a bad thing, like rubbernecking while driving past the scene of a grisly accident. But it can also be a practice of bearing witness, and I'd like to think that this is the calling beneath my fixation with all things pandemic. Do not avert your eyes from death, destruction, and despair, for in the midst of these God acts.

—Katherine Willis Pershey, associate minister at First Congregational Church in Western Springs, Illinois

Faced with the ways the pandemic has turned our lives upside down, faced as well with the first glimmers of a national reckoning with the stubborn and sacrilegious legacy of racism in this land, I have found myself gravitating to the biblical book of

Lamentations.

At first I wasn't sure why. But over time I've come to appreciate the ways that Lamentations offers devastating testimony to excruciating pain. In fact, I think the book is less about articulating a theology than it is about giving voice to pain in all its raw horror. It is about the universal desire to be seen and heard, to remind others and to have them remind us that degradation and despair notwithstanding, we are still human. "Remember, O Lord, what has befallen us; behold, and see our disgrace" (5:1).

As I have worked through the text and begun to teach it, I'm struck again and again by the tendency among scholars—often good, careful, judicious scholars—to clean it up. Great pain is expressed in the text, they maintain, but ultimately faith and hope emerge triumphant. The people acknowledge that they have sinned, and they are confident that God will yet redeem them.

But Lamentations, like life, doesn't come tied with a bow. Yes, there are moments in the text when the people confess their sins, but these passages pale in comparison to the tortuously graphic images of the unfathomable horrors that have befallen them. (To take the most wrenching example, good mothers are forced to eat their children in hopes of staying alive.) After spending five chapters swimming in an ocean of pain, we are left to wonder whether any sin could possibly justify the agony that the people have been forced to endure, with no end in sight.

Lamentations concludes without resolution—I am tempted to say in defiance of the very possibility of resolution. "Take us back, O Lord, to Yourself, and let us come back; renew our days as old" says the second to last verse, but it is followed by a harrowing conclusion: "Unless [or perhaps, indeed] You have rejected us, bitterly raged against us" (5:21-22).

These days we are flooded with anxiety and uncertainty: Will we be safe from the pandemic? Will our children, our parents and grandparents, those who pack our groceries and deliver our packages? Will we ever embrace the full humanity of people of color, or will we fail as we have in the past? Will democracy survive and flourish, or is it gasping its last breaths?

I am not comparing the crises we face with the time after the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. But I believe we can learn something vital from Lamentations. Sometimes the healthiest, most courageous posture is to admit uncertainty and

embrace it. We are commanded to act with hope but also to be honest about when hopelessness threatens to consume us. Perhaps, in giving voice to our anguish, we paradoxically create glimmers of hope.

—Shai Held, president and dean of the Hadar Institute in New York

While I have read many books about how other people think about the future, I myself almost never plan ahead. It's true even now, with the pandemic as the context in which I do everything I do: read, write, scroll down my Twitter feed, listen to music, follow baseball, walk with my wife, Wendy, talk on the phone with our distant children and grandchildren, and sit on the couch for remote Sunday worship flanked by the cats.

Looking ahead has been one of the regnant themes of the last six months. Laurie Garrett and other science writers joined epidemiologists in warning against just such a pandemic as we are experiencing, urging greater readiness. Bill Gates did too. Every day features dueling predictions about the course of the virus and what will happen if such-and-such policy is (or isn't) strictly followed.

Ten years ago, reviewing Bruce Bueno de Mesquita's book *The Predictioneer's Game* for *Christianity Today* magazine, I wrote that "whatever else we are—forked radishes, singing Neanderthals, political animals, and so on—we are also predictioneers, all of us, in a way that distinguishes us from our fellow creatures. (*Prediction + engineer = predictioneer.*) Like chess players, we look ahead, weighing alternative possibilities. By anticipating what might be, we hope—within our modest sphere of influence—to shape what is."

It's no surprise, then, that one of the books that has interested me most this year is Martin van Creveld's ***Seeing into the Future: A Short History of Prediction***. Drawing on great learning, yet with a refreshing fund of wit and common sense, Van Creveld at once acknowledges the centrality of "looking ahead" in our lives and debunks pretensions of godlike knowledge of the future.

None of this is intended to debunk reasonable foresight (such as a stay-at-home order when faced with a pandemic). It is, rather, a prescription for humility mixed with a generous dose of irony. To which I would add faith: "Into thine hand I commit my spirit: thou hast redeemed me, O Lord God of truth."

—John Wilson, contributing editor for *Englewood Review of Books* and senior editor at *Marginalia*

In the first days of quarantine, with libraries and bookstores closed and my budget restricted to essentials, I stood in front of my bookcases and identified the books I hadn't gotten around to reading. As I finished each title, I added it to the "complete" stack, a new way of measuring time in a pandemic. When I finished those, I started rereading old favorites, including Mary Doria Russell's Jesuits-in-space saga, ***The Sparrow***, and its sequel, ***Children of God***.

Russell's Jesuits are explorers like their forebears, seeking intelligent life on the frontier after a satellite picks up the transmission of unearthly music. But the novels are also about the tragedy of time and the impact Einstein's special theory of relativity might have on human relationships. Because of time dilation, which occurs when traveling faster than the speed of light, time passes differently for the Jesuits in space. If they ever make it home they'll only be a few years older, while those they've left behind will be elderly or dead.

As I read, I began to feel as if I, too, was marooned in some vessel with only my children, time elongating. In the earliest days of sheltering in place, I noticed a new quiet, punctuated only by bursts of news from my Alexa speaker and the intermittent squeak of the trampoline springs outside. I often fell asleep in my reading chair, mulling over the frequent refrain of the priests when faced with any mystery or inexplicable tragedy: *Deus vult*. God wills it, or, God wants.

I'd wake, book on my lap, to the scrape of my daughter's desk chair across the wood floor in her upstairs bedroom or to my son's feet pounding the carpet in a Fortnite rage. One of them might come downstairs to the kitchen, open and close the fridge, the utensil drawer, a cabinet. They'd place a glass on the counter. I'd hear the watercooler bubble. Then they'd float past my reading chair, my fellow astronauts, silent, headphones connected by Bluetooth to their devices.

Russell's books helped me access a strange calm. Often, her characters must accept that they are not going to be rescued. They have to contend with a now-relatable unknowing when lethal illnesses they've never seen on earth strike members of their party without warning or explanation. But as Russell's Jesuit linguist, Sandoz, gets better at waiting, listening, and letting meaning emerge, I too was getting better at

calmly piloting my own little vessel through this unexpected time.

—Jessica Mesman, *Century* associate editor

I've had no desire to read Eddie S. Glaude Jr. since he encouraged Black Americans to vote "none of the above" in 2016. My years of working in politics told me that this was not a winning strategy; it was naive at best and reckless at worst. Now, amid a public health crisis, those fears have been realized: COVID-19 has had a disproportionate impact on Black, Latino, and Indigenous communities' morbidity and mortality. The death-dealing horrors of systemic racism are also intimately related to the moral reckoning that is 2020.

These harsh realities were the backdrop as I rethought my self-imposed Glaude ban when ***Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own*** was released. The excerpts I read resonated with me as spiritual meditation in both depth and cadence. It's not an explicitly theological book, but when I read, "Love takes off the mask and when experienced deeply, it fortifies the soul and offers a cure for what ails our living together," I realized that Glaude offers the theological reflection I've been yearning for during the pandemic.

There's no need for the word *God* to be written on the page for me to understand that Glaude is offering confession and modeling lament as he apologizes for underestimating the power of Whiteness during the 2016 election. And I don't need explicitly religious language to encounter the Holy as Glaude invites me into his conversation with the beauty of Baldwin's writing and personal narrative. This is an invitation to love.

By guiding the reader through Baldwin's literature, Glaude offers more than an invitation to the love required by basic human decency, more than the love for individuals and community that rudimentary Sunday school Christianity teaches. He offers a love that summons Black people to resistance, one that encourages a Black love of self—reminding us that we fight to survive today so we might live to fight to thrive tomorrow.

Glaude doesn't need to use theological words or heady concepts to evoke God's power to provide testimony and a path of revolution in art and literature. The spiritual dimension of Black literature and art is a reality rooted in the experience of

Blackness that has been developed as a theological method by womanists over decades.

My unexpected encounter with *Begin Again* was balm for this pandemic moment. Amid the existential exhaustion of grief and loss, I find hope in drawing from the wisdom and beauty of Black literature and art as spiritual food for the ongoing struggle.

—Kerri N. Allen, theologian and clinical ethicist for Advocate Aurora Health Care

When the pandemic first set in, I had the impulse to read about vampires, so I read Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* and *The Vampire Lestat*. At first I didn't know why.

Rice's vampires are immortal but also trapped by mortality in a way that humankind is not. Vampires are being; humans are becoming. Vampires live in the ecstasy of moments, but they cannot enter back into time and can only really lay hold of moments through killing. Most vampires eventually kill themselves.

"You can't imagine what it's like for us to look on living flesh," Rice's signature vampire, Lestat, tells us. "Beautiful, that's what any human being is to us, if we stop to consider it, even the old and the diseased. . . . They are all like that, like flowers ever in the process of opening, butterflies ever unfolding out of the cocoon."

Any scene in a vampire novel is thick with contagion, with unknown vulnerability, the inability to protect yourself. And vampires are lonely. They cannot really be close to the people they love and hunger for, nor can they be close to each other.

Contagion, danger, loneliness, preoccupation with death—really it's a wonder I've been reading about anything else. I have the third book in Rice's vampire series, but I've been waiting for when things feel really bad. It may be time to crack it open.

—B. D. McClay, senior editor of the *Hedgehog Review*

In recent months I have immersed myself in two of Wendell Berry's elegantly written novels, *Hannah Coulter* and *Jayber Crow*. They are set in fictional Port William, a

small town situated on the Kentucky River, in the time between the Civil War and the present day. These small, quiet stories touch lightly on everything that truly matters, including what Berry calls *membership*—the connection between people and a spirit of place, a sense of belonging and responsibility to the land, animals, people, and community. Membership is never sentimental but mysterious, fierce, and enduring.

Hannah is a farmwife and mother, and Jayber is the town barber and a philosopher. Both demonstrate that life can contain great loss and grief and still be experienced as a series of simple but profound kindnesses: a good meal at the end of a long day, the light on a stand of old trees, friendships that span decades, a river that continues to unwind itself, forever changing and changeless.

In Port William, extraordinary things happen in ordinary places. There's meaning in daily tasks, and life is able to hold both disappointment and gratitude, suffering and hope. There is a sacred presence in Port William, a light that shines upon the fields and cow pastures, the backroads and rivers, the town and wild places, connecting everything.

The same sacred presence illuminates my own story, which is unfolding now as the world lives through profound disruption and a great unraveling. I've needed to ground myself in the kind of resilience that grows up after the flood has carried many trees away. I've needed to listen to the voices of those who have endured for generations, finding hope and meaning while facing great hardship—like Hannah and Jayber, and like my brothers and sisters of color as we live into a long-needed racial reckoning.

I am a creatively and spiritually restless person. I'm like an old dog that lifts its nose to the wind and senses something far off calling. But like the people of Port William, I've found that following my spiritual longing always brings me back to wander the creeks and wooded ravines around my home, leading me inward to the banks of another ever-changing and changeless river.

—Carrie Newcomer, singer, songwriter, and author of *A Permeable Life: Poems and Essays*

Just before my family and I moved to the four acres where we now live, I bought a barely used copy of the 1994 ninth edition of Carla Emery's ***The Encyclopedia of Country Living*** at a yard sale for a dollar. The 858-page, 8-by-12-inch paperback, first published in 1974 as *An Old Fashioned Recipe Book*, is something like a back-to-the-land bible. I had skimmed it and sometimes borrowed it from friends, and I think my parents have a copy, but I wanted my own.

Over the past six months, the binding has cracked, the back cover has fallen off, and it opens automatically to the poultry section. In March, we got a pregnant goat. One April morning, my daughters and I sat in the hay and recorded the live birth. In June, 15 chicks arrived in the mail to add to our little flock of ten. In July, we got another goat. I kept *The Encyclopedia of Country Living* by my bed. After my nightly ritual of watching a map of the country go from scattered dots to a red splotch of infection and bearing witness to the continuum of violence toward Black lives in our land, I would set down my phone and hold a book heavy with guidance on how to nurture and sustain life.

Emery started writing her book in 1970 for people who wanted practical farming skills and needed some guidance. Although everything about farming is now entirely Googleable, there is something comforting about one woman's valiant attempt to preserve what was being lost as society moved away from agrarian life. Scattered between instructions on care for soil and seedlings are stories from the author and the community of readers that formed around her vision. Rare and honest is the gardening book that tells you not only how to grow and prepare beans but also how embarrassing it is to fart in church.

Emery's husband left her after the birth of their seventh child, and she lost the land and animals around which her identity had formed. As she became a single mother of six children under 18 living in rented apartments in town, her book became a guide for others to live into the dreams that she had once lived but had to bury in her own life.

One spring night I woke with a start, my husband sniffling with allergies and asthma. I listened to his breath, a wheeze, the shake of the inhaler, the invasive worry, the collective grief. "I will bury you beyond the fence and plant a dogwood," I whispered to him, confident that if the time came, I would know how to do it. He thought it was a good idea.

There's a common perception that country living is an escape, a time of preparation for disaster. For some that may be true. But for me, this book, these months have been the fulfillment of dreams, gratitude for the delicate murmur of a beating heart.

—Josina Guess, writer and editor at *The Bitter Southerner*

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Pandemic reading."