Seeing with a thousand eyes: Passion for reading

by Lawrence Wood in the May 17, 2005 issue

For several weeks I've toted around Bruce Chatwin's book *The Songlines*, on the off chance of having more time for it. Before he died at 48, Chatwin wrote a handful of brilliant travel books, this perhaps the most brilliant—a funny and fascinating account of the Aboriginal songlines. Invisible to Western eyes, the songlines crisscross Australia, charting every rock and hollow. They are songs of creation, handed down from the Dreamtime, mythic maps of lands that white settlers have taken away. When the Aborigines walk and sing them, they re-create the world.

Chatwin knew from his experience as an appraiser for Sotheby's that possessions weigh down the soul. He preferred to travel light. Nomads such as the Aborigines resonated with him. So in the shadow of AIDS he carried out a spiritual quest in cheeky prose as good as Truman Capote's. *The Songlines* is by turns fiction and nonfiction, hilarious and profound. A good third of it is given over to Chatwin's notes about nomads, drawn from a lifetime of reading:

> When I rest my feet my mind also ceases to function. (J. G. Hamann)
>
> The song still remains which names the land over which it sings. (Martin Heidegger)

Here was a man determined to pare his life down to its essence, and he did it with the insights of other writers. Chatwin went to Australia and brought back entertaining firsthand anecdotes, yet there is nothing in the book more personal than what he took from Herodotus, Thomas Carlyle and Sun Tzu. Reading about Chatwin's reading is like seeing with a thousand eyes.

I can hardly wait to get back to this strange book, but it will have to wait. First there's the men's prayer breakfast, then the worship planning and staff meetings, and soon the morning will give way to an afternoon filled with papers, reports, bulletins to proof, mass e-mails that senders thought cute and faxes that advertise

trips to Orlando (“Dear Mr. and Mrs. Church”). Underneath all these words piled on my desk, Chatwin’s book shines like a diamond.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was Dr. Seuss, Robert McCloskey, Beverly Cleary, Robert Louis Stevenson, Roald Dahl, E. B. White; then Eudora Welty, John Updike, Alice Munro. Nominally one might be a Christian from the cradle, but I was definitely a reader before I was a Christian.

It now seems that I found God just as naturally as I enjoyed stories, because literature raises spiritual issues. The Christian stories drew out my own stories and spun them together into one thread. You don’t have to be Aboriginal to think of God as a storyteller. Once God had my attention, there was no getting away.

C. S. Lewis followed the same songlines to faith. As a boy he eagerly read and reread *Treasure Island* and *The Secret Garden*. Only as a grown man, a professor of literature at Oxford, did he surmise that his reading had always been a religious experience. In one of his last books he explored that delight:

> The first reading of some literary work is often, to the literary, an experience so momentous that only experiences of love, religion, or bereavement can furnish a standard of comparison. Their whole consciousness is changed. They have become what they were not before. But there is no sign of anything like this among the other sort of readers. When they have finished the story or the novel, nothing much, or nothing at all, seems to have happened to them.

To this day, unlikely sources bring me back to spiritual issues. Each week’s sermon preparation presents another opportunity to learn about the 1914 Christmas truce, say, or a medieval English traveler in China, and to connect these stories to sacred stories. Frankly, I should be paying churches for the privilege.

We pastors have so little time for reading that we often confine ourselves to what we think is expected of us. But books sing to us only when we read them with genuine curiosity. Then they take us outside of ourselves. Books exercise our inner eyes and encourage us to wander mentally, to go walkabout.

I suppose I should admit what I haven’t read: Calvin’s *Institutes*, Barth’s *Dogmatics*, Tillich’s *Systematic Theology*. So far no layperson has discovered these yawning

holes in my education. Somebody will, however, find out that I'm probably the only pastor in North America who hasn't read *The Purpose Driven Life*. (It's not about me, Rick Warren says, and I believe him.) Tim LaHaye's books I have happily left behind. And even though Jan Karon has tried to make her fiction cozy, I've never really felt at home in Mitford.

There are things a pastor *has* to read—such as the local newspaper, even if it's really small. Page one of the news in my own Lake Wobegon this week carries a breathless report about a four-year-old boy at the tractor supply store who tried to talk his father into purchasing a duckling: "Word on the decision was not available at press time."

Of course every day brings more junk mail—advertisements for church furniture, stained glass repair, conferences at Willow Creek. I don't even bother to open some of it, and live in dread of tossing out something important.

Truth be told, the reading life of a pastor can be deadly dull. We are supposed to read what's edifying and practical, but the vast ocean of human experience that really prepares us for preaching and pastoral care lies elsewhere. Barbara Brown Taylor says she reads fiction mostly. Maurice Boyd, an artist in the pulpit, says the greatest religious journal of the age is the *New Yorker*. And Eugene Peterson has long encouraged pastors to find inspiration in novels and poetry. "Spiritual reading refers not to the content of what is read but to the way in which a book is read," he says. "Spiritual reading does not mean reading on spiritual or religious subjects, but reading any book that comes to hand in a spiritual way, which is to say, listening to the Spirit, alert to intimations of God."

I share some of these attitudes. My taste is for books that are secular—or rather, secular until I read them. (Everything filtered through the mind of a pastor ultimately comes out as preaching.) Maybe I should be studying *How to Grow a Church* or *Better Stewardship Now*!, but I am a wanderer, a nomad, what Robertson Davies called "a rake at reading."

Oddly, I feel restless with even the most admirable religious novelists. Flannery O'Connor is supposed to be a Christian novelist, but amid all her black humor and scathing artistry I find little grace. Instead I encounter a horror of human nature, a hair-trigger sensitivity to the base, crass or selfish. Maybe this makes her a prophet. As for J. F. Powers, though he allows for the occasional worldly saint, the air in his

stories feels fairly cloistered.

Maybe for me the songlines run elsewhere. I prefer to read fiction that is not obviously religious—or at least not orthodox. It is often more forgiving and humane. The work of Ian McEwan is a good example. Despite its title his novel *Atonement* avoids heavy-handedness in its exquisitely drawn character studies. An old-fashioned novel in many ways, it abounds with revelations of wrongs that flawed people try to put right. Some of their attempts—the production of a play, for example—become almost ceremonial. And when a woman marries a man with whom she has a troubled history, we wonder if she has invested the ceremony with too much hope. This deeply moving novel is a good example of how the secular can validate the sacred.

The poet Billy Collins is not especially religious, but he sure is stand-up funny, and his work has delightful philosophical depths. *Sailing Alone Around the Room*, a sort of greatest-hits album by this former U.S. poet laureate, shows off the dazzling effects of his verse. In “Introduction to Poetry,” Collins encourages his students to “water-ski / across the surface of a poem / waving at the author’s name on the shore. / But all they want to do / is tie the poem to a chair with rope / and torture a confession out of it.”

Collins puts me in mind of Andrei Codrescu, whose essays can be heard on National Public Radio’s *All Things Considered*. In fact, even though Collins has won fame by reading his poems aloud, in my mind I always hear them in Codrescu’s Romanian accent, for like all good poems they apprehend the familiar with immigrant eyes. In “Dharma,” Collins considers his dog’s world as an example of a life without encumbrance: “If only she were not so eager / for a rub behind the ears, / so acrobatic in her welcomes, / if only I were not her god.”

Collins has not styled these as religious poems. And yet they are—if only because my eyes and ears have made them so.

Every once in a while I have the pleasure of appropriating for religous ends a nonreligious book by a Christian.

Millions of readers have acclaimed C. S. Lewis as a Protestant saint (with allowances made for his pipe smoking and sherry drinking). At several stages in my reading life, too, he has left a deep impression. As a boy I loved his Narnia books as adventure stories; the Christian symbolism was lost on me. In college a Campus Crusader

named Bob, very lanky, very earnest, pressed into my hands a copy of *Mere Christianity*—one of the turning points in my spiritual awakening. Later on I deeply appreciated Lewis's *A Grief Observed*, his incomparably eloquent, naked account of losing his wife and, almost, his faith. Lewis is one of those rare writers who grow with you.

But my current favorite comes from his academic life and has no obvious religious theme. For that reason it is one of his least read books, and yet it may be his finest. In *An Experiment in Criticism*, Lewis considers why different readers respond to books in different ways. He avoids judging either the books or the readers and instead proposes that different readers want different things. Some want the familiar, some seek something new, even out of books they have read before. Lewis describes himself as passionately curious:

> My own eyes are not enough for me, I will see through those of others. Reality, even seen through the eyes of many, is not enough. I will see what others have invented. Even the eyes of all humanity are not enough. I regret that the brutes cannot write books. Very gladly would I learn what face things present to a mouse or a bee; more gladly still would I perceive the olfactory world charged with all the information and emotion it carries for a dog.

I think this has a lot to suggest about the religious imagination and why people come to faith in the first place, and why some gravitate to expressions of it that are not literal or cut-and-dried. The final paragraph is a beautiful celebration of reading:

> Literary experience heals the wound, without undermining the privilege, of individuality. There are mass emotions which heal the wound; but they destroy the privilege. In them our separate selves are pooled and we sink back into sub-individuality. But in reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in the Greek poem, I see with a myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action and in knowing, I transcend myself, and am never more myself than when I do.

And then there is the Bible. No amount of other reading does me much good as a preacher unless I regularly read the Bible. It is different from any other book. We can

talk all day about its authority, yet its other qualities—its life, wit, anger, passion, questions, answers—are what really amaze me. I will never get to the bottom of it. To make the Bible an object of study or even reverence misses the point. It is a glass, a lens for looking at the world, and also a mirror for looking at ourselves.

Rarely do I sit down to read some defined portion of the Bible straight through. Instead my eyes meander through the pages about a wandering Aramean and his wayward children, about the roaming in the desert for 40 years. I take in the psalms of believers in exile. “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests,” says Jesus, “but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” And here is Paul, traveling light, pointing a way out of the material world.

It is here that stories find their fullest resonance. We all have our own stories, and some of them remain locked up until the Bible brings them out of us. The Bible is made up not of chunks of theology that can be sliced like rings from a sausage, but of these sinewy, evocative, wonderfully personal tales. All they ask is that I pull up stakes, allow myself to be carried away, transported to another realm entirely, or at least into another chapter. Lewis is entirely right: Reading is seeing with a thousand eyes.