

# The Center for Lifelong Learning at Columbia Theological Seminary 701 S. Columbia Drive, Decatur, GA 30031

DATE December 4, 2007

To: Theology and Literature Study Group Members

From: Richard Blake

RE: *The Good Priest's Son* by Reynolds Price

“Layered and significant,” we said about this timely Price book. From 9/11 to smoldering southern racial divides, from a representative aging boomer facing MS to the perennial problem of fathers and sons, *The Good Priest's Son* had it all, along with unshakeable fixations on inapt sex and inept faith—a definite 21<sup>st</sup> century novel. For some, Mabry's self-absorbed nonchalance seemed untenable—particularly for one whose studio was mere blocks from the Twin Towers. As a northerner I admitted that I still don't get the southern social-tension thing, but then Audrey says Mabry's too obsessed with unwarranted culpability anyway. For some the layers were a bit too many—each a story in itself and not woven well together—none quite resolved (surely not 9/11, all racial tensions, Mabry's debilitating disease and, in the end, Father Tasker is dead and beyond face-to-face forgiveness) although Mabry and, we hope, the NYCs and Wells, NCs of this world are evolving closer towards some reconciliation as this book seems to hope we all will.

Audrey and Marcus are certainly poised for better days; good things are happening on the father-daughter front between Charlotte and Mabry; Gwyn's getting her house rehabbed and Vance, while not headed for rehab, at least knows a bit about redemption with his bizarre take on Jesus robbing and shooting him point blank to wake him up! Nobody's contemplating suicide, at least, à la Van Gogh.

The possibility of a sub-surface sketch by Vincent himself gave us our metaphor of “layering” with which we approached this story or stories. (How many stories in the World Trade Towers? How storied the oppressive history, as Tasker put it, leading up to its attack? Or, the rise, fall and aftermath of slavery, over which Mabry successively brooded? And is this tale about how the onset of MS feels? we wondered.) Besmirched on the very day of Van Gogh's own sad demise behind the very château comprising the surface-subject of the thickly layered painting by a young southern devotee expatriate, this unfinished house-scape provided its recurrent image of lucrative possibilities and ethical queries as to its ownership. In the end though, another untied thread since Mabry didn't need the money or the hassle what with his ex-wife's inheritance and his debilitating disease.

I offered another emblematic phrase from page 235 as Mabry visited Father Kincaid in hospital but found “a sort of invisible clean glass wall” stopping him as it stood between so many characters, kin, races and nations in this story. While Mabry feared he'd be called by his more beloved brother's name, *Gabe*—the good priest's son or the priest's good son?—instead, Tasker in the generational confusion of dementia names him *Alec*—the vile, repugnant grandfather (the sins of the fathers visited on subsequent generations, etc.). Common communication as much as any communion and community suffered separation, isolation as from some such invisible glass partition.

And yet, God was there undenied. Mabry hadn't completely given up on Heaven, he says, and quotes scripture knowingly. Gwyn takes communion as does Mabry, hesitantly, and a mysterious hand (a little child's?) leads him to get up in his momentary blindness in the park. Certainly, Audrey's pursuit of New Testament Ph.D. studies speaks to Price's biblical foundations in a positive way even though she'll be writing on that hard saying of Jesus' about denying one's family in order to be a true disciple. Perhaps, that's what this tale was about—losing one's familiar and familial earthly ties in order to be more tightly bound as God's forgivable and reconciled kin across all barriers, visible and invisible, to get back home again. “She. Gets. A. House.” says it all, apparently, in a world of crushed office buildings, poorly portrayed châteaux, leaky-roofed birthplaces or Cooter's place not fit for a hyena, or of single parents and broken apart families and ethnic and nationalistic divisions, and nowhere for Mabry to go to lay his head in his debilitation—her house is a place of hope, perhaps our answer once we sponge off coats of dusty neglect and societal decay, personal and depersonalized and storied history.

If only Van Gogh could have had that chance, eh? Or read this book? But such artful restoration work we leave for Heaven to sort out not through that clean glass wall darkly, but face to face—significant beyond any price.

**Up next:** *The Driftless Area* by Tom Drury (2006) ISBN: 087113943X 9780871139436. Available at major booksellers, online or from public libraries. We meet together again on January 8 same time 7:30 pm, in Harrington Center. See you then. And happy Christmas and New Year's in the meantime.

# The Center for Lifelong Learning at Columbia Theological Seminary 701 S. Columbia Drive, Decatur, GA 30030

November 6, 2007

To: Theology and Literature Study Group Members  
From: Richard Blake  
Re: *The Rapture of Canaan* by Sheri Reynolds

“Whee, Jesus!” captures the spirit of Reynolds’ touching story with its carefully textured religious exuberance interwoven with risky blasphemy to produce a tapestry of hard-won freedom at great personal cost but no real loss of faith. Ninah Huff’s tale of coming of age is not so much multi-layered as multiple-threaded weaving her own adolescent trauma and triumph with her Nana’s oft-retold tales of growing up (losing her murderous and adulterous mother, being courted by Grandpa Herman in his rakish days, being held up in his later born-again sermonizing as the consummate regenerated liar) as well as the close community ties that bind yet strain until the ultimate unraveling of the Church of Fire and Brimstone and God’s Almighty Baptizing Wind. Like Ninah’s rugs in the end, will the community ever be reunited after coming untied?

We liked Reynolds’ storytelling. We commented favorably on her humorous asides and unexpected “moving the story on” without dwelling on the gratuitous or shocking, along with letting us readers fill in the blanks, follow the threads, weave in our own strands of thought, faith and experience. Admittedly, we felt uneasy and undecided about what happens next to Ninah and Canaan and the church-family commune. Opinions ran from her leaving the “family” altogether, or remaining marginally close to be near her son, to her possible imprisonment in the pack house, perhaps even a self-inflicted confinement (the result of some understandable mental strain from her struggle to free herself from, while remaining faithful to her church-family’s control and excessive discipline?). Maybe Grandpa’s pseudo-rapture foreshadowed this conflicted outcome; suddenly naked, comically reverting to pre-pious form, yet still rapturously revered though no longer the tyrant for Truth. Is that Ninah’s ambiguous fate as well—once she snips Canaan’s hands apart, freeing him, yes, but removing any sign of his messiahship and her immaculateness? We wondered, even worried at length.

Scenarios that moved us were James’ after-death appearance to say Ninah’s doing a good job, the kudzu imagery to describe Ninah’s post-partum psychological wrestling, and more delightfully, her earlier descriptions of innocent teenage hormonal arousal. Sympathies were touched, our own stories woven into Ninah’s, her feelings authenticated by our own to underscore how complexly Reynolds’ characters were drawn. Not just Ninah, but Nana Leila and Grandpa Herman who was no stereotyped cult leader. The flattest folk—Maree and, to a lesser degree, Liston (Ninah’s parents)—seemed functionally and intentionally so in order to blanch them blandly as true-believers, robotic religionists.

Blood consciousness mottled the pages. James’ first deer ceremony, Dot the mare’s breech birth hemorrhaging, visions of kissing and sucking the wound in Jesus’ side, Ninah’s initial menstruation, her slap-down, bloodletting punishment by Grandpa for her unrepentant blasphemy as the pending mother of God and her after-birth drippings onto her rug that wove in James’ suicide rope, his penitential barbed wire and her rebelliously cropped hair. We also remarked on Canaan’s slight bleeding quickly clotted once Ninah snipped apart his ceaselessly praying hands. All these countered the apocalyptic horror of blood running from faucets for those left behind after the rapture. It didn’t happen. And so, Ninah’s own birthing of Canaan curiously lacked mention of any blood nor was there any at his moment of conception or, oddly enough, after any of James and Ninah’s intercourse with Jesus and each other. Any stains or bleeding went surprisingly undepicted, seemingly intentionally blood-free, even her initial deflowering and their last intertwined coupling despite that barbed wire strand cinched around James which, at most, was “poking little holes into each of us each time he pushed”—although not without hot-blooded passion: “Harder [Ninah said] to know Jesus’ pain.” Reynolds makes their innocently sinful (or sinfully innocent) love redemptive for her, for their child, for their community (as best we could guess into their futures) but not without cost, sacrifice and painful transformation. Her fingers bled as she wove her rugs with their rough material like her stories to make something good and beautiful out of harsh realities.

Is that not our faith, too? Reynolds’ point, perhaps? Raptured not out of but rather into the everyday warp and woof of our human condition and experience? Whee, Jesus!

## Up next:

*The Good Priest’s Son* by Reynolds Price (New York: Scribner, 2005) ISBN: 0743254007 0743254015 (pbk.). Available at major booksellers, online dealers or from public libraries. We meet together again on December 4<sup>th</sup>, same time 7:30 pm, in Harrington Center 222. See you then.

# The Center for Lifelong Learning at Columbia Theological Seminary

701 S. Columbia Drive, Decatur, GA 30031

October 2, 2007

To: Theology and Literature Study Group Members

From: Richard Blake

RE: *Abide with Me* by Elizabeth Strout

Remarkable. Which about sums up our assessment of Strout's book about the 1959-ish Maine minister and his parish and family. We found it remarkable that Tyler Caskey's parishioners would even want to keep him after his unmanly, pastorally vulnerable and climatic breakdown. Climax may be too strong for Maine. This understated story captured a New England reticence and flirted with, but avoided becoming maudlin. Was it guilt on their gossipy village part for his troubles or selfishness not to have to search for another, no doubt less capable clergyman? (Yes, we had clergywomen in Maine in 1959!)

Walter Cook, my preaching professor (the very one who taught us to memorize sermons as Tyler learned at Brockmorton [my own Bangor] Seminary), once titled his memoir "Send us a minister, any one will do!" based on that remark made by an indifferent search committee. No one else would "do" for West Annett which gave the storyteller license to spin her yarn, weave her plot and fabricate, "Oh, it would be years ago now, but at one time a minister lived with his daughter . . ." It was remarkable to me how much Strout captured well-known places cryptically fictionalized (like Hollywell for Hallowell, Maine, or the for-real, boxy, modernistic seminary library, but why a Blake Hall?), and she sketched people (thinly veiled like Hilda Atwood) whom I recognized and parish troubles (universal but with a Yankee timbre) I could relate to from my days and experiences in these same regions and climes with the same regionalisms and climate. Strout's careful descriptions of New England's raw nature—ecological, economic and eccentrics—rang true, at least, to me from thudding icicles and mud rooms to embroidering gossipers and reclusive survivalists, ayuh (no hyphen!). The conflict between locals and outsiders, the poor versus not-so-poor (not to mention contempt and suspicion for any Massachusetts rich folk), and the pretentious socially elect in church snubbing any non-attending religious questionables were as apparent as the many anguished souls conflicted by loss and grief, boredom and unneighborliness that might happen anywhere, any time.

We also remarked about Tyler's pursuit of "The Feeling"—sensing God's presence, an out-of-favor nor'easter mainline pursuit of late—with its alternate sense of abandonment, not unknown to Tyler's oft-quoted Bonhoeffer, Psalmist and Job and most everyone else these days. Strout liberally peppered her story with uncited scripture in Tyler's mind and mouth which may have been over-done for a 1950's Congregationalist, although we've all been known to hum a few bars of a favorite hymn like *Abide with Me*, but not always with "Feeling." We agreed that Katherine's teachers, kinderkirkers (we never used that term in Maine!), father and grandmother, while stiffly insensitive to her grief, may not be so far off from 1959's grin-and-bear-it sensibilities. Carol Meadows and family proved the refreshing exception despite their unconventional safety-addicted household. The book ran the gamut of theological responses to life, world-events, personal problems and past traumas—Connie's fatalism, head deacon Charlie's hypocritical blasphemies, Lauren's klepto-narcissism, Doris' well-meaning, off-pitch servitude and misplaced loyalties, Margaret Caskey's residual Puritanism. All were tested, some changed, none went unaffected by the events culminating in Tyler's breakdown in the pulpit, yet not to his damnation (as with Theron Ware) but to a remarkable set of reconciliations. Tyler resolves to stay; staid West Annett learns something about love.

Of the several questions raised about the story's remarkable characters and themes, the most puzzling stumper was, "Why did Strout write the book?" What was it about this hinge moment of 1959 that a small town, ordained New Englander represented? The Cold War politics of the day? The religion/science marriage openly unraveling? Sexual mores anticipating their 60's revolt? Freudian interpretations ascending? Churches still well-attended and civically esteemed yet becoming freer to ignore, its incivilities a growing turn off to a rising generation?

Yes, but why tell this tale today? What's it telling us now? At the very least, Strout seemed most anxious for Tyler and West Annett and her readership to reclaim an attitude of wonderment about the world and its people and those everyday things around them and us. Her characters often paused in mid-crisis to watch a sunset, to see the moon following them, to hear the snow crunch beneath boots, a bird flash by the window, bumps on the lake ice beneath skate blades, or to sense a soulful connection through another's eyes that might still give credence to The Feeling available to us her readers. "[W]e must not squander the gift of life," she said in her recent Bangor Seminary Convocation lecture, "there is much we do not understand, and . . . there is always the potential for love." And, so, the book's last word, a one word sentence. "Remarkable."

**Up next:**

*The Rapture of Canaan* by Sheri Reynolds. Available at major booksellers, online or from public libraries. We meet together again on November 6, same time 7:30 pm, in Harrington Center. See you then. (For December we're reading, *The Good Priest's Son* by Reynolds Price. Other books being considered are Salmon Rushdie's *Shame* and Bret Lott's *A Song I Knew by Heart* among others.)

# The Center for Lifelong Learning at Columbia Theological Seminary

701 S. Columbia Drive, Decatur, GA 30031

September 4, 2007

To: Theology and Literature Study Group Members

From: Richard Blake

RE: *A Crime in the Neighborhood* by Suzanne Berne

**Pamela Cooper-White** is professor of pastoral theology at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, and recipient of the American Association of Pastoral Counselors' 2005 national "Distinguished Achievement in Research and Writing" award, and the Samaritan Counseling Center of Philadelphia's 2007 "Spirit Award" for community service. She holds two Ph.D.s, from Harvard University and from the Institute for Clinical Social Work in Chicago, and is the author of four books, *Many Voices: Pastoral Psychotherapy and Theology in Relational Perspective* (Fortress, 2006), *Shared Wisdom: Use of the Self in Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Fortress, 2004); *The Cry of Tamar: Violence Against Women and the Church's Response* (Fortress, 1995) which won the 1995 Top Ten Books award from the Academy of Parish Clergy; and *Schoenberg and the God-Idea: The Opera Moses und Aron* (UMI Research Press, 1985). She also has authored a small group resource book titled *Women Healing and Empowering*, commissioned by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 2000, as well as numerous chapters and articles on pastoral theology, women's development, and pastoral care of post-traumatic stress. Previously, she served as director of the Center of Women and Religion at the Graduate Theological Union. An Episcopal priest and pastoral psychotherapist, Dr. Cooper-White is a clinical Fellow in the American Association of Pastoral Counselors, a National Board Certified Counselor (NBCC), and a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor (LCPC, Illinois). She is also co-chair of the Person, Culture, and Religion Group of the American Academy of Religion, and co-editor of the *Journal of Pastoral Theology*.

What was the crime, we asked, and whose neighborhood? And did we forget to ask "who is my neighbor?"

There was murder, stealing, adultery, false witnessing and covetousness, although Berne never blatantly ticked through the second tablet of the Decalogue. She crafted her plot and her characters' plottings quite familiarly—screened porches twanging "like frogs in a pond" and rogue children we all knew, bewildered parents from the 70's we vaguely remember (or remember being) against a thinly veiled background of suburban D.C. or anywhere USA happenings and habits—encroaching malls, The Watergate, mushrooming Department of Defense buildings and bunkers, an Iranian couple scoping out property, newly-locked doors—that changed history and our sense of everyday security.

While mothers and fathers (the Night Watch) were "honored," we weren't so sure that parents reciprocated towards children who fended for themselves, learned sexual precociousness or simply wandered to the mall fairly unsupervised while Marsha's father absconded with her mother's sister Ada, and the Sperling baby gets awkwardly mothered. Marsha and her mother strike out at each other out of the blue—a face slap, the diary hurled. We found no idolatry per se except the false sense of the old neighborhood as idyllic or ideal. To round out the broken commandments, as far as we could, there was an absence of Sabbath keeping save for emotionally-warped, foul mouth Luan's pending week at her reverend uncle's Vacation Bible School. Mr. Green kept Sabbath by staying at home mowing, barbecue brick-laying or relaxing alone ineptly unneighborly and consequently unneighborhood. He plans his abortive block party for a Sunday when no one comes save Lois who alone invokes God, and only once, when she says to Marsha, "My God. Stop it. Just stop it." But her daughter reports that she cannot and does not stop.

I suggested this was a "confession" according to genre. The middle-aged narrator (and lawyer) remembers the sin(s) of her youth in the context of her equally fallen, yet naturally imperfect neighborhood where anything vile and evil could happen and did. The one ambiguously religious creature—a praying mantis eerily central to the book and eerily embodying its central crime—was tortured by Boyd Ellison who was himself similarly undone. The female mantis, of course, is equally rapacious despite her seeming piety and Boyd was particularly unliked by many for good reasons. "I wanted to kick him, smash his square face, and knock him down"—much the way the boy was killed: "I wished I had a rock to throw at him . . ."

Yet, Marsha also recognizes herself as a kindred spirit to Boyd—“an asker, a beggar . . . hoping to see something disgusting . . . pain that didn’t have to happen.”

Young Marsha witnessed it all, noted and annotated it in her confessional diary (our book of the month thrown at us adroitly for a ten year old); she felt drawn to the lure of inflicting pain, feeling something between revulsion and desire, just as she trespassed on her siblings’ privacy, spied and eavesdropped on her mother and aunts, and accused Mr. Green of murder and child molestation on circumstantial evidence and a psychologically troubled imagination due in part to her missing father-figure. Most of us found Marsha unlikable and empathized more with her mother, and not at all with her father—“romantics are usually bastards.” Yet, as Augustine might pray: may we be absolved not only from sins committed but from the base desire he and she and we cannot shake that attracts us to sin itself, and books (or reality TV shows) about it.

It was a strange retrospective book that excited a good deal of discussion about the 70’s versus today—childhood freedoms then and now, children these days perhaps overly-sheltered from yet necessarily wary of sex offenders and offenses and of being victims or potential victimizers, and about watershed politics at the Watergate and its rippling effects and disaffections, and of neighborhood nostalgia and those odd neighbors we have all known. Berne’s little book hit us hard in our safe little group of good neighbors and it was no crime to “enjoy” it.

**Up next:**

*Abide With Me* by Elizabeth Strout. New York : Random House, ; ISBN: 140006207 or ISBN: 9780812971828 (pbk.) Available at book distributors, online booksellers or your local public library. We meet together again on October 2, same time 7:30 pm, in Harrington Center. See you then.

# The Center for Lifelong Learning at Columbia Theological Seminary

701 S. Columbia Drive, Decatur, GA 30031

August 16, 2007

To: Theology and Literature Study Group Members

From: Richard Blake

RE: *Everyman* by Philip Roth

“You probably think your lying is in the nature of a virtue,” Phoebe, the spurned second wife, rants at the nameless “Everyman.” She says “lying is cheap, contemptible control over the other person. It’s watching the other person acting on incomplete information.” Was this Roth’s own embedded clue as to how to read this gloomy (but humorous and humanitarian) novella as it spiraled down from boyhood traumas, career success, marriage failures, aging’s ailments to the inevitable nothingness of a godless death? For one thing, we never know the protagonist’s (or antagonist or anti-hero’s [?]) name. For another, each negative had its positives and pluses—a unique upbringing as a diamond courier, shamelessly untamed adult sex, artistic cobbling, altruistic brotherly love, and, like Lear, one out of three children devoted to him.

The book itself mocks the medieval morality play not only in title but by theme and plot. As the ur-Everyman moves towards death his associates fall away from him, all except “Good Deeds.” En route he severs ties with old fellowships. Gluttony, avarice and lust fade to insignificance, and he receives penance after a confession along with ultimate Knowledge. It’s a lie to say Roth’s character woodenly follows suit. Roth is too smooth a writer for allegory. Yet, in a series of phone calls, his Everyman bids adieu to three close associates whom death or depression take away, lying to or about each one (or to a widow) about keeping in touch, beating the odds, and surviving.

It’s a book of counterpoints and contrariness to the morality play. Of the deadly sins, gluttony and avarice are not big players—his older brother has the golden touch and robust health and genuine brotherly love that Everyman comes to hate. Lust plays the major role, typical for Roth, until he finally loses “the game” (but not interest) when he fails to connect with the young jogger.

His encounter with the gravedigger echoes Hamlet and produces Knowledge along with an epiphany from the solid “bones” of his dead parents despite their loss of flesh and being. There may be no soul in the medieval mythic sense, but Roth belies his disclaimer about utter nothingness by this lingering communicative trans-mortal memory with hints of an ethic, “Look back and atone for what you can atone for, and make the best of what you have left.”

If without a doubt God is a fiction, as Roth’s Everyman supposes, why let tenderness go out of control, as he also says? Why let his daughter Nancy remain steadfast as his “Good Deeds” companion to the end echoing the original *Everyman*’s redemption? Why does this work of fiction use an omniscient, omnipresent narrator that teased out our empathy for this schlemiel of a main character? If this were an amoral, non-morality play, why tell it in such rich and troublingly identifiable detail that taught us something, we all agreed, about death and dying and living and God? And why expend such potent prose as on the last pages with the memory of the boy body-surfing (“Oh, the abandon of it...)? These were virtuous lies, profound and affirming, nothing cheaply written, which betray Roth’s “incomplete information” as Truth.

## Up next:

*A Crime in the Neighborhood* by Suzanne Berne (1997)

ISBN: 9781565121652 (hardcover), 0805055800 or 9780805055801 (paperback)

We meet together again on September 4th, same time 7:30 pm, in Harrington Center.

See you then.

# The Center for Lifelong Learning at Columbia Theological Seminary

701 S. Columbia Drive, Decatur, GA 30030

June 5, 2007

To: Theology and Literature Study Group Members

From: Richard Blake

RE: *The History of Love* by Nicole Krauss

How did we ever find God in the confusion of no less than three love stories stimulated, teased and star-crossed by at least three books within our book all purporting to be THE history of love? We questioned how contrived the plot seemed once the confusion cleared and the chronologies were settled, I think.

The central romance of an undying (though somewhat tainted) ideal love as narrated by Leo Gursky was all about his devotion to his Alma. Set against the unloving World War II genocide of Jews in Poland, his is a tale of love's labors lost yet his resilient pledge to honor Alma and their love-child son, the writer Isaac Moritz (who will also masquerade as Jacob Marcus, a character from his own book *Remedy*). Leo's Yiddish-written version of a book about the history of his love was partly mailed to Alma in a series of unrequited love letters, only to be discovered by Isaac late (too late?) in life, but also given earlier by Leo in complete manuscript form to his literary rival and questionable friend and, perhaps, one-time competitor for Alma's attentions, Zvi Litvinoff who had escaped to South American and who translated and plagiarized the *History* into Spanish to impress his wife Rosa (who loved him unconditionally to the point of destroying the original Yiddish once she figured out its true father/author).

The newly translated edition gets fortuitously picked up by the Israeli wanderer, David Singer, who is so moved by the contents—both its pining for Alma and its philosophizing about the Ages of Glass, Silence, String, etc., as were some of us in its beautiful and thoughtful turns of phrase—that he gifts it to his bride, Charlotte, as “the book I would have written, if . . .” So, they name their first child Alma, who subsequently becomes the second major narrator of *The History*. Why? Because her widowed mother, rightly demoralized by the untimely loss of her storybook husband, is asked to translate the Spanish version of the book into English for none other than the mother-Alma and Leo Gursky's son Isaac who (as Jacob Marcus) suspects, just before his death, that there's a parental connection between this *History* he happened to find the girl-Alma's mother's passing reference to and the echo of those Yiddish letters sent to mother-Alma from Slonin by Leo. Isaac seeks to know an unknown father as much as Alma Singer seeks to know more about her own lost parent and at the same time arrange a new partner for her distraught mother. (All clear? Tap once.)

Somehow the book itself endured Holocaust, willful and unintentional destruction, going in and out of print and our own confusions over twists in plot and which character did what and when. And with the book also survived Love. We found God there, we said. In the smallest expressions of kindness in an otherwise cruel history to the larger acts of interpersonal devotion as well as the touching romance between not-the-most-handsome or prettiest, love fathered its own story. There was also a revelatory love of life expressed in the *History's* expositions on primitive “ages” of social intercourse and inter-human communication, and, as was adroitly pointed out, Alma, the girls' name, of course, means Soul which also pointed us to a deeper reading of this storied history as more than, but not apart from, the erotic and romantic. (Leo's awkward modeling and Alma's kissing lessons kept things real enough.) We also noted that these characters were all *artistes*—mainly writers, but also painting connoisseurs and, in Alma's first boyfriend Misha's case, a music lover (I'm sure the accordion has its place). The search for and grasp of and thriving by the Soul made human life human, humane and alone worth the living. But does it work for those who may not write or paint or play so well? Or, is it enough to read about *alma* and love and feel more alive, less confused?

To this end we remembered Leo's rescue of his odd friend Bruno after an attempted suicide, “*You have to wake up!*,” but we remained puzzled by Bruno's seemingly fictive character and failure in the end to respond to the

tapped code on the radiator pipe (two means I'm alive) once Leo dismissed him as a fool while recalling yet another old rivalry for Alma. And what of Bruno's accusation that Leo stole parts of the *History* (or was it Alma) from him?

It was left to the messianic brother Bird (Emanuel by birthright and a self-appointed savior/Noah figure) and his obsession at being a Lamed Vovnik—one of 36 specially chosen to save the world to pull the unraveling threads of this plot together for us and Leo and Alma. The oddest of all the loving acts (God with us/Emanuel?) in this *History of Love* came as a last minute mailing of the manuscript (in English) to a confused Leo (and me) and Bird's forged notes to Leo and Bird's sister Alma as though one from the other ("I think you know who I am" although Bird really didn't know that Leo was not Alma's father). So, out of confusion comes the ordering of love, but little love for order, neither chronological nor theological exactness. Leo finds an Alma; Alma a new (grand-) father figure; Bird his good and godly deed. However contrived, we felt the story was well conceived with the highest compliment of deserving a second or third reading to flesh out all the humor, cleverness, pathos, insight and love in this history as it comments on all human history redeemed by *alma*. Tap two times if you agree, once if you're still confused.

**Up next:**

*The Road* by Cormac McCarthy available in paperback from Vintage Books ISBN: 0307387895.

Since *Chapter 11* is going out of business, we encouraged each other to use public libraries, Amazon.com, or other local book dealers like Borders or Barnes & Noble. We meet together again on July 10<sup>th</sup> (A WEEK LATER THAN USUAL), same time 7:30 pm, in Harrington Center. See you then.

# The Center for Lifelong Learning at Columbia Theological Seminary

701 S. Columbia Drive, Decatur, GA 30031

May 1, 2007

To: Theology and Literature Study Group Members

From: Richard Blake

RE: *The Known World* by Edward P. Jones

Mapping *The Known World* proved a challenge to us. It was unknown territory for most folks, although we kept finding signs along the way that seemed familiar—our several Marches of late with Doctorow and Alcott, for instance, or our knowledge of African American literary genres and cultural arte-facts and the history of “chattel slavery vs. economic enslavements.” But, the very theme of Black slaves owned by other Blacks in Antebellum America might be an unknown arena even for many African Americans. We agreed that in any regard it’s a sorry bit of history, an additional blight on our past, and yet intriguingly novelized by Edward P. Jones.

We were particularly taken by his narrative technique of historical trajectories. Future “Facts” about a character or the Faulknerian, fictive Manchester County would suddenly break in to the storyline otherwise rooted in the distant past to tell what’s to come. It felt reassuring, in some cases, we said. Fern’s interview with the Canadian pamphleteer in her old age, or the doll Elias carved for his daughter Tessie cradled again at her death in her 90’s, or a 415 page University of Virginia 1993 publication “by a white woman, Marcia H. Shia, documenting that every ninety-seventh person in the Commonwealth of Virginia was kin . . . [to] Celeste and Elias Freeman.” [352]. All exquisitely fictitious, but telling in its exacting detail and impact on readers to transport us spirit-like and provide omniscient hindsight and a sense of studied insight that we’re all somehow connected to these characters.

Who was the main character, I asked. We reviewed the dramatis personae (helpfully listed in the paperback edition) and commented on several. Henry Townsend and his negative counterpart and mentor William Robbins—slave owners black and white, respectively, but fraught with “contrary instincts” (as Alice Walker would say) on the institution of and certain individuals ensnared by slavery. Love interests and friendships blurred the lines of (im-) pure business interests and slaveholding. Even the free Black widowed Caldonia worried over miscegenation in her trysts with Moses her overseer slave. Moses, with whom the book begins and ends, seemed a likely candidate for protagonist and rather typified the anguished existence of the bulk of the characters. Caught between servitude, with some big-house privileges including romancing his owner’s widow, and a disoriented instinct to escape, Moses fails in every aspect, hobbled and finely humiliated. He who once led the slaves into the field proved no biblical Moses leading no one, let alone himself, anywhere. His propensity to taste the earth, eat dirt, to lie self-indulgently naked thereon, grounded him inescapably to his only known world—the Townsend plantation. On the other hand, there was Alice Night. Night prowler, sanely lunatic, with her subterfuge of a kick in the head by a mule whose owner owned no mules, Alice mapped out her path to freedom with a freedom of expression in her sass, chants and ultimate artistry after her escape to D.C.—her “Creation” overviews of Manchester County and the Townsend Plantation as “what God sees when He looks down.”

What God sees, from the narrator’s historically broad ranging literary technique, must include some judgment against slavers and slavery tempered with grace, we concluded, that we intractable “slaves to inhumanity” cannot manufacture for ourselves, by ourselves alone. The gout-ridden and adulterous preacher Valtims Moffett gave little evidence of that hope despite his good intentions to preach spiritual salvation to the slaves while maintaining their bodily debasement and dining with their owners, whenever his own debilitated body felt up to it. Sherriff Skiffington with even greater intentions proved the greater hypocrite—unnecessarily killing Mildred “according to the Law” after belittling her as would befit his racist cousin Counsel (anti-Job), not to mention his growing lust for his African American “servant”/“daughter” Minerva. A nagging toothache brings out the worst in us.

The vision of “otherness” came perhaps in the mystical near- or at-death journeys, in African griot style, above and beyond the known world and back to where the heart made its home—the dead Augustus walking home to Mildred high above Georgia, South and North Carolina and back to Virginia in a matter of minutes; Mildred freshly slain going upstairs to bed with Augustus after seeing once again Henry and Caldonia safely tucked in no longer worried that Augustus left the front door open, “we have good neighbors”; ‘Blueberry’ Stamford transformed from lecher by a close lightning strike to become a caretaker of orphaned children from his vision of a cabin in the sky. “It don’t matter how long he had wandered (says Stamford) in the wilderness, how long they had kept him in chains, how long he had helped them and kept himself in his own chains (which sums up the Townsend legacy and this book); none of that mattered now.” Not while he held another child on his shoulder—the future. And even Moses remembered to keep Celeste and her children and grandchildren in his prayers (his own son was lost to freedom) as he and she and Edward P. Jones’ book limped to its and their farewell finale, but hardly to the end of this important story, or theirs or ours, I pray.

**Up next:**

We meet together again on June 5th, same time 7:30 pm, in Harrington Center.  
See you then. (For June we’re reading, *The History of Love* by Nicole Krauss.)  
Available now at Chapter 11 (2091 North Decatur Rd. Decatur, GA).

# The Center for Lifelong Learning at Columbia Theological Seminary

701 S. Columbia Drive, Decatur, GA 30031

April 3, 2007

To: Theology and Literature Study Group Members

From: Richard Blake

RE: *The Kitchen God's Wife* by Amy Tan

We related, oddly enough, to Tan's conflicted mother-daughter characters despite the obvious cultural and geographic dislocations. Their understated Asiatic affection for each other (more than filial piety, less than hearty confidantes) seemed understandable, and sympathetically so. So, was that understanding a result of Tan's ability to spin a long and complex and (auto-)biographical yarn? Or, is it in the nature of mother-daughter relations generally, east or west, that caught our sympathies?

A good deal of our discussion focused on disputing Christopher Lehman-Haupt's NY Times criticism that *The Kitchen God's Wife* proved little more than pop-fiction, because of the caricature of Wen Fu's utter malevolence. While my spouse assures me that not all Asian gentlemen are this bad, it's also not impossible. It also accentuated and underscored the "Rape of Nanking" as both a central metaphor and gruesome reality—the personal is historically cogent and vice versa. (This is the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that horrific massacre which may be why Tan's second novel was reproduced last year.) Certainly, I had reservations about Winnie's long, long tea and sympathy narrative allegedly told in one sitting to Pearl, but the group dismissed my concern as a tempest in a big tea pot and that a story like Weili's required one sitting, one continuous telling even if it took all day and all night.

Generically, it was fictionalized biography and history vicariously reported, and not without a dash of theology. Winnie's life story eerily, and apparently quite intentionally, related Tan's own mother's hardscrabble life, marriage and escape from Mainland China, and toned down at that! While that was hard to relate to, we admitted—the brutality of a bad husband, the paternalistic no-win-for-women culture, infanticide and self-induced abortions, plus the political turmoil of Japanese invasion and Mao's revolution—yet her Baptist husband #2, kindly but too soon deceased, gave a religious toehold to get us into the text.

These personae dramatis were ostensibly all-American church folk after all: hymn-singing, Jesus-invoking, spiritually aware and as critical of fellow congregants as any of us. A syncretistic Buddhist, Confucian, Christian confusion of faiths supported the overall thrust of forgiveness and reconciliation, and above all, hope, not to mention outright humor throughout. Winnie's (and Helen's and eventually Pearl's) stubborn steadfastness against tremendous odds gave us pause to applaud these respective woman/wives, once they exorcized their "kitchen god" demons and secrets. The goddess Lady Sorrowfree poignantly captured their moment of triumph with incense and laughter, and we excused this idol worship of "a goddess nobody knows" as parallel to Paul's sermon at the Areopagus about Athenians worshipping "an unknown god." Either deity serves the higher divine purpose of reconciling cross-culturally those that were once estranged ("Of course, it's only superstition, just for fun") but that anyone might relate to.

The other significant theological discussion, for Calvinists especially, treated the Asian idea of "luck." I couldn't get Sandy to explain it as opposed to western sensibilities, just as Winnie and Jimmie Louie didn't reach common understanding on the differences between "fate" and "destiny." We were convinced Tan's luck was more than being randomly fortunate by sheer chance or roll of the dice. It read more like "blessing"—not exactly manipulative but able to be influenced, drawn closer (or lost by poor life choices, or outright superstition) under the stern yet benevolent eye of the Jade Emperor, which art in heaven. Luckily, we related comfortably with the deep spirituality incarnate in the humblest of life situations, and we agreed it was a good read, as Josephine Humphreys in the *Chicago Tribune* wrote, it "can be read and reread with enormous pleasure" and proves the "usefulness of story-telling as a way of thinking, a way of evaluating the human experience" especially in light of the final preachable words of the last chapter: "But see how fast the smoke rises—oh, even faster when we laugh, lifting our hopes, higher and higher."

**Up next:** *The Known World* by Edward Jones Available now at Chapter 11 (2091 North Decatur Rd. Decatur, GA). We meet together again on Date, same time 7:30 pm, in Harrington Center. See you then. (For June we're unsure what we're reading, e-mail suggestions: [blaker@ctsnet.edu](mailto:blaker@ctsnet.edu) .)

*The*  
**LAY INSTITUTE**  
*of FAITH and LIFE of Columbia Theological Seminary*

March 6, 2007

**To:** Theology and Literature Study Group Members  
**From:** Richard Blake  
**RE:** *Quarantine* by Jim Crace

Bald fiction. Fast and loose with tradition yet a withering, detailed focus on desert survival, or not. “. . . the forty days of fasting described in religious texts would not be achievable—except with divine help, of course.” Even that superscription is suspect (entirely made up, text, book and author—a lie) while ripe with ironic truth. Crace’s take on Jesus’ quarantine in the wilderness (yes, the dictionary says it literally means, as we guessed, 40 days) only makes it to 30 and raises questions about divine help altogether—and yet this avowed atheist’s book envisions a transcendence and spiritedness and companionable help in the harsh, but animate scrub land as well as in the not-untraditional triumph of the awkwardly mystic but suicidal Galilean with his “village view of god.” It’s not the story as we know it, nor the Jesus we know and love, but in many ways, we felt, it’s the same hopeful message: goodness trumps evil ultimately (OK, maybe only penultimately—Musa’s still on the loose and who knows what he’ll preach about regarding his vision of a risen healer, Gally).

This obvious slam against orthodoxy is hardly a slam-dunk of utter refutation. As Crace himself confesses, the book takes on its own agenda apart from his initial intent to debunk Christendom. I, for one, will never sing the Lenten hymns or read the temptation texts ever again with the same old picture of Jesus alone in the wilderness, stone-faced, chin-up, blithely defying the Devil and just a bit hungry afterwards. No. Crace nails down the degenerative physical and mental rigors of such a quarantine not just with the extreme his Jesus took it to, but more thoroughly through the Galilean’s unlikely companions, Shim the Greek *sophia*-seeker, Aphas the cancered aging Jew, barren Marta, the deaf but plucky Badu and Musa the miraculously healed, deviously corpulent merchant and Miri his pregnantly abused wife. Jesus was not so all alone, nor the only one led into temptations.

Crace knows his Bedouin mores of hospitality and everyday survival skills. Arab and Jewish fasts are broken at sundown (how else can you make it through the quarantine?). A sip, just a sip, of water cannot be denied the stranger. The caravaner’s loom is a complicated but utilitarian device in the hands of an accomplished craftswoman. Such authoritative details otherwise belie Crace’s authorial lying—especially about all the non-existent scriptural references to unnamed prophets and writings, the misplaced village “priest” in the Galilee, a fictive Yehoch on the temple roof, Achim “the Task of Not” psalmist. However, Crace toys with enough accurate and traditional biblical citation, particularly of Musa as devilishly tempting and of Marta’s contrary optimism of Davidic prophecy come-true, and of Miri and Marta obviously becoming “sisters” Mary and Martha (although in Sawiya not Bethany) enough to convince us that the book’s intention in fact echoes the old, old story—to somewhat praise and not to totally bury Jesus, albeit in a backhanded way.

Each quarantined character leaves the confines of the caves and, as well as Musa and Miri their flattened tent strangely changed by the Galilean’s elusive presence. No, not without struggle and even gruesome encounters with the worst of human ravaging and nature’s rages, and Musa is still Musa—but Aphas has a spring in his step, Shim is less pie-in-the-sky, more social, Miri liberates herself from Musa, Marta raped and pregnant is equally empowered, emboldened Musa himself was healed and remains disturbed by this Jesus (though still a threat) and the poor Badu is enriched with and gets Musa’s goat(s). No, none of it is overtly ideal nor any paradise (we can’t recommend Jesus’ escapism and the wilderness world remains a desert)—but Crace’s Jesus only ever hoped to get a “brief view of god’s kingdom” (81) as an “award” for his quarantine.

I think we thought we were awarded such at the very least, even if Crace’s Jesus wasn’t in this world as it is. A brief glimpse of new life in the barren desert, a fulfillment of prophetic expectations, the lingering promise of better living (*shalom/salaam*) for the marginal, the infirm, the muddled-thinker and for oppressed and abused womankind as well as for a just comeuppance for those whose god is the belly. That reality can’t happen fast enough! We also agreed that Crace spins a fine story with well-rounded characters (however gaunt Jesus became) in a suspenseful narrative woven as meticulously as Miri’s birth mat and embroidered as expansively as Musa’s best storytelling—mostly lies but pregnant with truth, by god.

Up next will be *The Kitchen God’s Wife* by Amy Tan available now at *Chapter 11* (2091 North Decatur Rd. Decatur, GA). We meet together again on **April 3rd**, same time **7:30 pm**, in **Harrington Center**. See you then. (For May we’re reading, *The Known World* by Edward P. Jones.)

*The*  
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February 6, 2007

**To:** Theology and Literature Study Group Members  
**From:** Richard Blake  
**Re:** *The March* by E. L. Doctorow

We agreed: war is bad, the Civil War uncivilly bad and that Doctorow's depiction of it was horribly good. The march of scenarios and succession of characters in *The March* well represented the pathos and gore yet with glimpses of saving grace—humaneness amidst the carnage of inhumanity—which may witness to God's presence in the watchfires of the hundred circling camps. To be sure, Arly Wilcox, escapee from Milledgeville prison, not without its Georgian innuendo for nut cases (Doctorow may not have known about that any more than lilacs should not be a-blooming in Fayetteville, NC), does converse with God and sees God's plan unfolding in the march of opportunistic circumstances he manipulates for himself and Will. Of course, it bleeds Will of his life (one of several lost Wills and Willies oddly emphasized in the book), and ultimately Arly's seemly ordained assassination attempt is foiled by the freeman and apprentice Calvin. (John Calvin was big on total human depravity and a saving grace that cannot be manipulated, save by God's providential unkillable Will.)

Doctorow certainly did his homework. The events rang true to history to the point that it's unclear where the fiction became and the factual left off. Clearly, Gen'l Sherman's diaries spoke loudly, if not verbatim. The lack of quotation marks, we pointed out, suggested the ongoing, interiorized and rambling annotation of sporadic events affirming Doctorow's overall layout of the novel—a march of chance but intentionally significant intersections and interactions en route.

The book was clearly metaphoric but not woodenly symbolic. The characters were written fulsomely, while obviously representative of proverbial Old South planters and wives (Emily, Mattie), tricky rebs (Arly and Will) noble, industrious slaves (Wilma and Coalhouse), the socially confused mulatto (Pearl), up and coming Northern immigrants (Walsh, Brasil, Sartorius) and the unexpectedly snuffed, proto-protagonists (Officers Clark and Morrison, Hugh Pryce), as if to say any and all are expendable so long as the march goes on. Indeed, Doctorow's March itself was the real and only main "character" with a life and direction, crisis, climax and dénouement all its own. We suspected that its metaphoric tramp, tramp and plodding still goes on "a war after a war, a war before a war." There was also the odd character connection between *The March* and *Ragtime* (Coalhouse Walker) and *The Waterworks* (Dr. Wrede Sartorius)—Doctorow's other works—further blurring the lines of fictive and factual while underscoring the march of personae dramatis. Then, again, we found Albion Simms impaled with a metal spike in his head to illustrate a life without memory or future, simply and "always now"—freed from further combat manoeuvres yet bundled along on the march for scientific observation until he ends his going nowhere existence emblematically, perhaps, at the hands of the rescued slave child David who will be taken north to enjoy (?) a new life.

Lincoln's depiction was notably impressive: his physical description, the assessment of Sartorius on Lincoln's demeanor and nobility, and Sherman's obvious attachment to the man. I myself confessed to the poignant and telling vignette of Lt. Oakey (300-301)—"a grade-school teacher before the war and hoped to study for the ministry after the war was over." A non-combatant courier trapped mistakenly in a skirmish and faced with killing versus being killed in hand-to-hand combat, feeling "the fury of a nonhuman intention . . . acting according to the demands of . . . animal nature," what would any of us do? He killed and "prayed for God's forgiveness," and significantly made no further attempt to clean his mud-smearred glasses, then, looked for his horse to move on, re-join the march.

So we "enjoyed" the book, we agreed, maybe more so than Brooks' *March* of the same events but with its different perspective. The focus on the gruesome medical aspects and the significant water crossings-under-fire in both books caught our attention, but Doctorow's more believable characterizations won the day, if not the march.

Up next will be *Quarantine* by Jim Crace available now at *Chapter 11* (2091 North Decatur Rd. Decatur, GA). We meet together again on **March 6th**, same time **7:30 pm**, in **Harrington Center**. See you then.

*The*  
**LAY INSTITUTE**  
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January 9, 2007

**To:** Theology and Literature Study Group Members  
**From:** Richard Blake  
**RE:** *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho

A fable that changes lives? Or, in our case, simply our minds once we dissected and digested *The Alchemist*. We may not have been “all-chemically” transfigured by Coelho’s tale of the ex-seminarian, shepherd, dreamer and omen-reading, treasure seeking, archetypal wandering hero, who gets back to the girl in the end, we hope. But the chemistry of our conversation, at times critical of the dross and simplicity of the Personal Legend, took on a sheen of acceptance as we found elements—golden nuggets—in the book that we ultimately confessed we enjoyed (sort of). Such as, the stories within the story—the Roman centurion in particular. The first chapter especially was very promising, with its sycamore tree in the ruined church sacristy. And shearing sheep from back to front. Or, that a thicker book lasts longer and makes a more comfortable pillow. What was Coelho saying about his own thin little tome—a throw pillow—easily tossed off?

Wise voices reminded us that not all good reads are ponderously overloaded with pathos. A breezy fable after the manner of *The Little Prince* or (gasp) *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* have their place to remind us of the simpler truths we live by and universally share—the Language of the Soul of the World and its mundane challenges that can be touched by inspiration even in the humblest lives, to which we could all personally testify, we mostly agreed. Isn’t it in the nature of fables to sound shallow and child-like (but Santiago was no child if he left seminary at 16 and shepherded for a couple of years, at least, before traipsing across North Africa for months after also working in the crystal merchant’s shop for yet another year?) and with an element of the fabulous—alchemists (however questionably a flim-flam artist), visions, the legend of the “boy” who turned himself into the wind—but like most good miracles this sign was never explained or precisely seen.

There were Biblical references aplenty despite the ruined church and running away from seminary. Santiago does pray the “Our Father” and finds assurance that the gypsy woman has the Jesus of the Sacred Heart. There was no shortage of God being invoked as Allah, Jesus, God, the Soul of the World, etc., as if to say we should all strive to be a part of the greater One whose Hand has Written All—not necessarily a reformed concept (sin and evil were far less present than “positioning for power” as with tribal warfare and untrustworthy charlatans). The Divine-human separation is what our catechisms say keeps us from ever deifying ourselves or striving to become God over against “[the boy who] saw that the soul of God was his own soul.” A house built on shifting sands, desert temptations that. But, it’s only a fable not to be taken too seriously, right? We get out of it whatever we bring to it? Or, maybe just a little bit more.

In the end, I believe, we were happy to have joined the millions who have read this in translation from the original Portuguese, certainly as an easy read over the busy holiday time. If enough Personal Legends could only emerge and merge for the good from this little book, and if folks would join in a basic quest for God (“where their heart is, there shall there treasure be also”), then, Coelho’s work and our reading will not have been in vain. It struck me at the end of the evening that the tone of our mutual engagement with one another was somewhat more sparkling—the book lends itself to a sharing of dreams and goals and testimony of personal legends. It may well be better suited for a more intentionally interactive, spiritual growth group than an arm’s-length, intellectualizing theological book discussion gathering—but a little inspiration now and then—like this little book—doesn’t hurt and may go a long way. *Maktub!*

Up next will be *The March* by E. L. Doctorow available now at *Chapter 11* (2091 North Decatur Rd. Decatur, GA). We meet together again on **February 6th**, same time **7:30 pm**, in **Harrington Center**. See you then. For March we’re considering *Quarantine* by Jim Crace.