March 2014

**Letters and Life: On Being a Writer, On Being a Christian (Book Review)**

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lines either. He was, more than once, fired. He was as good a trader with the Zuni and the Navajo as he was a missionary. When his colleagues disagreed with him and his wild ways, he went quite offensively on the offensive. He could be a dirty rotten stinker, and I may be unduly sweet to use such cute language.

But both absolutely loved their respective callings. Both were passionate about what they did. Both were given to sacrificing everything for what they felt called to do. They were, in some ways, partners in both crime and redemption.

As Egan points out, no one appreciates the work of Edward Curtis today more than Native people because his work — whether or not it was staged or posed — does exactly what he wanted it to do: it tells a story that ended when what some Native folks I know call the “illegal immigration” of white people to North America became a flood.

Fiction can go where history can’t, of course. And the mere idea of a meeting, on that bridge, between Brother Andrew and Edward Curtis, right there in Zuni pueblo, circa 1910 or so, beckons me to take a shot at the story. Curtis hated missionaries; Brother Andrew never met a man — white or Native — he didn’t try to strong-arm to the Lord. But what linked them in an ironic way was a love for the people in that pueblo.

I don’t know if I’m a good enough writer to put that story on paper, but after reading Timothy Egan’s fine biography of the passionate life of Edward Curtis, I know I’d have loved to be there on that bridge.

Edward Curtis, A Zuni Governor

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By the logic that permeates this book of essays on writing, Bret Lott should not have written it, nor should Crossway have published it. What most readers will discover rather quickly in it is the infrastructure of paradox — to wit, that while this book is meant to teach readers (and writers) something about the art and function of writing, Lott rather clearly insists that that job simply can’t be done.

But he does it. He’s written what he’s written, and Crossway has published it anyway, and the book is a blessing.

For the record, just google “writing fiction” sometime and you’ll discover, as I just have, about 266,000 entries, not all of which are of equal value, of course. No one on earth has time to sift through all of them to establish a best-of-show list; but it’s fair to say, I’m sure, that some of the sites offer really fine advice about creating character and setting, about generating plot and playing with themes. Adjust the wording a bit, and Google tells me (or did just now) that roughly 53 million sites respond to “how to write dialogue.”

To say that advice for writers isn’t rare is understatement, but then potential writers aren’t at a premium either. Not long ago, some researchers determined that fully 81 percent of the American people believe they have a book in them. Even though believing that we have a story is continents away from actually writing a book, the math still says that 200 million Americans have at least thought about putting their own stories (memoir or fiction) between covers. Thank goodness for e-books; every last library in the nation would have to remodel.

Two hundred million would-be writers may be stretching it, but with the changes technology has wrought in the business of publishing, it’s altogether possible that someday every last one of us will have his or her name on the spine of a book up there on our own library shelf. Every bookseller and publisher in the nation knows the plain-and-simple facts: there are more would-be writers in North America than there are actual readers. The truth is, publishing books these days, in the traditional way, is incredibly difficult because publishing books these days, in new ways, is incredibly easy.

There’s a paradox for you, a statement that would appear totally absurd if it weren’t so obviously true. Bret Lott’s Letters and Life, a book of advice for writers, is full of such paradoxes.

In one of the opening essays, Lott, whose dozen or so novels have created a presence for him in this country’s most esteemed literary circles, remembers taking a writing class from James Baldwin, who was determined not to give his students what they were expecting “because he was a writer [emphasis Lott’s] and not a trafficker in matters of technique.” If readers were expecting “ten ways to make a setting marvelous,” Lott’s tip of the hat to James...

It may be enough of a teaser for Jamie Quatro’s collection of short stories, I Want To Show You More, to say that the title of the first story is “Caught Up,” and that it references being caught up both in a spiritual vision and in a sexual affair. Then again, that description may give an entirely wrong sense of the story. That sexuality and spirituality can get tangled up with each other is nothing new under the sun, especially in literature, but I Want