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North of Hope (Book Review)

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Book Review

North of Hope, by Jon Hassler (New York: Ballantine) 1991. 448 pages, \$5.99. Reviewed by David Schelhaas, Assistant Professor of English.

Jon Hassler is a novelist from Minnesota, a Catholic, who has enjoyed a solid reputation in the upper midwest for years but has gradually been gaining a much larger reading audience. I frequently read his name on a Christianity and Literature internet list I subscribe to, and I notice that Ballantine recently released all of his major novels in paperback. I am, in fact, writing this review of a Hassler book that came out five years ago because I believe that Christians who are looking for good fiction, fiction that deals honestly with both despair and hope, the fall and redemption, man as made just a "little lower than the angels" and man as "this quintessence of dust," will find it in Hassler's fiction.

In the past year I have read five of Hassler's novels and I found every one of them engaging. Hassler's fiction is, to put it bluntly, an easy read. If you like fiction, you will find that you can consume a Hassler novel in no time at all. Now usually when that happens, you recognize that the book you are reading is superficial, a John Grisham thriller or a Dick Francis mystery—engaging, but once finished, like a punctured balloon, insubstantial. In contrast, Hassler's novels read easy but digest hard. You can't get free of them right away.

I have chosen to write in some detail about *North of Hope* because I think it is the best of the Hassler novels, but I want to recommend in passing the other four I have read. *Staggerford*, his first, is the story of a high school English teacher in the small Minnesota town of Staggerford. Here we are introduced to the fictional territory of all of Hassler's novels—small town and rural Northern Minnesota where the Badbattler River flows, the farmland isn't good for much, and almost every town has a Catholic Church. In *Staggerford* we are also introduced to Agatha McGee, perhaps the most sharply drawn of all Hassler's characters. Agatha is an elderly teacher in a Catholic grade school in Staggerford. She is strong willed, judgmental, compassionate and absolutely convinced that the Catholic Church started on the road to destruction with Vatican II.

A minor character in *Staggerford*, Agatha becomes the central character in *The Green Journey* and *Dear*

James, both of which chronicle the joys and sorrows of her platonic love affair with an Irish priest. *Simon's Night* is another novel that deals with old people and most poignantly addresses the way that the elderly are so often put on the shelf and treated as useless. In fact, this is an important theme in many of Hassler's novels. For him there are no throwaway people. Again and again Hassler shows us old people, severely handicapped people, Native Americans, people or groups of people that society has judged as unable to function suddenly turning that notion upside down and developing self-respect and confidence because of their revolt against society's expectation.

North of Hope is a love story of sorts, the story of the love between Father Frank Healy and the thrice-married Libby Pearsall. It is a love story that begins when the two of them are students at Linden Falls High School, Frank, a shy boy whose path toward the priesthood had been set since his mother's deathbed wish put him on that road when he was ten, and Libby, a vivacious beauty who believes that human beings were created primarily to fall in love, get married and have babies—in spite of the fact that she sees her own father abuse her mother almost weekly. While Libby dates the older, more aggressive boys of the school, she and Frank share dreams and fears in their daily walks to and from school. Eventually Libby marries the farm boy who gets her pregnant and Frank goes off to college and seminary. Twenty-five years later Frank returns to serve in St. Ann's parish in Linden Falls and also supervise the parish ministry to the Indians at the Basswood reservation church. There he becomes reacquainted with Libby who is now with her third husband, Dr. Tom Pearsall, the reservation doctor. Libby's life has been one tragedy after another. Her daughter Verna is a nymphomaniac who sleeps with just about anyone. Libby's husband, Dr. Tom, an almost totally evil character, supplies drugs to the reservation Indians, getting them addicted for his profit. Also, unbeknownst to Libby, he frequently has sex with his stepdaughter Verna. Into this squalid situation Father Healy, though wrestling with a great emptiness in his own soul, brings himself, God's

instrument of love and grace in this terribly broken world.

In Hassler's bleak winter landscape, brokenness is everywhere. In fact, one must look hard to find a happy family in any of Hassler's novels. His perception of human beings as conceived and born in sin runs deep. But with Hassler there is always hope. Near the end of the novel Libby asks Father Healy if he had ever felt like killing himself. When he says "no," she replies, "Neither had I until this winter. It's like hope doesn't reach this far north."

"But it does, Libby. Hope goes wherever you want it to."

"For you it does, but not me. Not this winter. That's why I need you."

In this brief exchange we hear expressed the hopelessness of someone whose life has been one painful experience after another. But we also see Hassler's rendition of how hope (and the grace and love of God) comes to these broken people. It is through other people. Anyone looking for stirring sermons about Christ's love or hoping to see a mystical transformation because of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit will not find them in Hassler. Oh, to be sure, Christ comes to the broken people through the sacrament; in fact, Father Healy will brave the severest weather conditions to make sure that confessions are heard and the Mass is celebrated. But hope and faith are most often ignited through the actions of people. Christ comes to people through other people. And so, Father Healy, with his soft words and gentle actions, is always available to Libby and her daughter, risking the loose talk of the community as he ministers to them day or night, and risking as well his own celibacy, for Libby is still beautiful and he still loves her. At the same time he is available to the whining and tiresome old people of his parish and visits them regularly throughout the long winter. As we might expect, Father Healy, as he reaches out to others, is gradually healed of his emptiness.

Another Minnesota writer, Garrison Keillor has written:

Gentleness is everywhere in daily life, a sign that faith rules through ordinary things: through cooking and small talk, through storytelling, making love, fishing, tending animals and sweet

corn and flowers, through sports, music and books, raising kids—all the places where the gravy soaks in and grace shines through.

North of Hope is a story of broken people, but it is also a story of grace shining through ordinary things and people: Ceasar Pipe, leader of the Basswood band of Ojibway Indians, helps Father Healy restore the reservation church. Father Healy helps Ceasar restore Ceasar's grandson Billy Annunciation by giving him a job at the rectory. Billy, a delightful teenage boy, who restores everyone's hope with his delight in life, gives Monsignor Lawrence, the befuddled superior of Father Healy, gifts of walleye filets. Nosy, judgmental Mrs. Tatsig, the rectory housekeeper, becomes an instrument of grace as she takes the libidinous Verna under her wing. And she has a special compassion for Father Lawrence, who has taken it upon himself to pray daily for 705 departed souls but thinks perhaps Rome's teaching on prayers is flawed and that it is time for the Church to impose a sunset law on prayers for the dead.

This last item reminds me of another constant in the fiction of Jon Hassler—humor. In every novel you will encounter a couple of scenes so hilarious you will laugh aloud as you read. I am quite sure that in addition to indulging in the sheer fun of creating humorous episodes, Hassler is also showing us the restorative qualities of laughter—for his characters but also for the readers who enter his (often wintry) world.

In a recent *Des Moines Register* is a story about a Father Hans of Glendale, Iowa, who in the seventies took four unwanted juvenile delinquents into his home and his life and—according to their testimony twenty-five years later—saved their lives. One of them says, "Father did something you rarely find in clergy or secular life. He put his money where his mouth was." Another says, "We worried he would try to convert us. But he never did." They were, however, converted. This is the kind of religion Hassler shows us. A religion, not of talk, but of deeds. As a Reformed Christian, I know, of course, that our deeds don't save us. But then neither do our words. Yet too often our religion is a religion of words. Hassler reminds us that what we do is often a far more eloquent testimony than what we say.