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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 im-
migration” 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 bi-
ography of the passionate life of Edward Curtis, I know I’d
have loved to be there on that bridge.

Edward Curtis, A Zuni Governor


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 dis-
cover rather quickly in it is the infrastructure of paradox
— to wit, that while this book is meant to teach read-
ers (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 bless-
ing.

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 charac-
ter 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 understa-
ment, but then potential writers aren’t at a premium ei-
ther. 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 fic-
tion) 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 mat-
ters of technique.” If readers were expecting “ten ways to
make a setting marvelous,” Lott’s tip of the hat to James
I Want To Show You More

Review

Jamie Quatro

Dozens of times through the long narrative of his father’s dying, Lott, frustrated and fatigued by the events surrounding that death, tells us he doesn’t even like to write. If there are 50,000 sites to visit online for writing advice, even if there are 50 million, I can’t help but think that Bret Lott is the only New York Times Bestseller List novelist to tell his readers that he doesn’t like to write. Not only that, but at one point when he reads an essay of his in front of his family, he repeats a line that’s not likely to be seen in any other essay about writing: “There are more important things than a book.”

While that may be true — and I think it is — Letters and Life is his thirteenth book.

Here he is at the end of the long essay concerning his father’s death, which is also the very end of book itself:

There is no way to write this.

Even now, at this end of having tried to, I understand even more deeply how I do not have the technique, or the courage, or the language to achieve the story I want to tell.

But I am trying to write it, all the same. I am trying to tell a story, one that is as true as I can make it. A story I cannot make up. Nothing other than that.

So what do we make of a writer who has written more than a dozen books, yet claims he can’t do what he does, won’t do what books like his promise, and really doesn’t believe that what he does in spite of himself is all that important?

Perhaps we should ask what we do with a being who claims to be something no one ever was or could be — both God and man? What do we do with human character, which is, by every measure, prone to selfishness and sin, yet carries indubitably the very image of the Creator of all things? What do we do with truth that’s so often ambiguous or multi-faceted, truth that’s paradox?

An old preacher and thoughtful Christian I once knew told me he thought that the nature of truth was a good thing to keep in mind. The geometry of truth was that it was always elliptical — always two-centered — and never only circular, one-centered. There are always two foci, twin foci, to truth because truth is always elliptical, he told me. I bought that idea years and years ago, and because I did, I really loved Bret Lott’s Letters and Life. It’s full of paradox. It’s built on paradox. It’s about far more than writing — and yet it isn’t.

In truth, Bret Lott’s Letters and Life is all about letters, and it’s all about life.