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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 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*

Bret Lott. *Letters and Life: On Being a Writer, On Being a Christian*. Chicago: Crossway, 2013. 191 pages. ISBN 978-1-4335-3783-7. Reviewed by James Calvin Schaap, emeritus professor of English, Dordt College.

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

Baldwin should scare off those who were looking for an ordinary “how to.” *Letters and Life* is not a how-to. In fact, strangely enough, it’s anything but.

For starters, consider the opening line of the very first essay: “My name is Bret Lott, and I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.” And he doesn’t stop there. The entire first paragraph of the book is the Apostles’ Creed. It’s not some kind of prelude or writer’s preface. It doesn’t sit there in italic script, centered poetically between margins. The Apostles’ Creed — *the* Apostles’ Creed — is the first paragraph of the book. I’m not making this up.

Soon enough, however, the paradox count begins. Writing as a Christian is as insubstantial as a ghost, he says. You’ll never quite figure it out, he says; but that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t try.

This is not a how-to book.

Lott is fair game for his own hunt. After all, in *Letters and Life*, Lott lambasts writing teachers even though he is one.

Few Christian writers hold such high aspirations for art from a Christian perspective as Bret Lott does in this book of essays. How can one achieve such aspirations? Humbly and bravely. That’s right, by way of humility *and* bravery, the pattern by which, he says, Paul approaches the idea of salvation as something that has to be worked out “with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12), *and* by drawing “near to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy.” Appears not to make sense. And yet it does. Paradox.

The book’s crowning essay is a memoir Lott narrates about the death of his father, a lengthy recital of events and impressions that comprises half the pages of the book. Countless times, as he tells his father’s story, he upbraids himself for even attempting write it, given how many such memoirs already exist. Furthermore, he considers the sheer impossibility of doing it well: “There is no way to write this,” he says at the end of the fourth section, just ten pages into a story that is nearly one hundred long. There is no way to write this, he tells himself, but that truth, paradoxically, doesn’t stop him.

Here’s another. Lott tells the reader that humility may well be the single most important character trait a writer can have, even though most writers — even those who don’t publish — can be obsessed, and should be, with telling the world the truth as they know it. How can one be humble and still believe that the story they tell is of interest to all the world?

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.

Quatro, Jamie. *I Want To Show You More*. New York: Grove Press, 2013. 204 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8021-2075-5. Reviewed by Howard Schaap, Assistant Professor of English, Dordt College.

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 its 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*