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Book of Buechner (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

Brown, Dale. *The Book of Buechner*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006, 394pp. ISBN 978-0-664-23113-2. Reviewed by Elaine R. Hannink, English literature student at Dordt College, Iowa.

“Magnificent!” I thought as I perused the opening pages of Dale Brown’s *Book of Buechner*. The rest of the pages did not disappoint either, keeping me in their thrall until the cover thudded shut. Even then, I could not keep the book closed for long but continued pawing through it, keen on unearthing those surprises Brown presents.

Dale Brown has held a position as Professor of English for 20 years at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and in the fall of 2007 will become the Director of the Buechner Institute at King College in Bristol, Tennessee. His fascination with current authors who do not settle easily under “secular” or “religious” labeling has prompted him to invite some of these authors to Calvin College’s Festival of Faith & Writing.

Frederick Buechner in particular has captivated Brown’s interest because his approach to his faith and his literary work is quizzically profound. Buechner is an ordained minister in the Presbyterian church and an author. Wholly accepted in neither the clerical world nor the literary circle, Buechner has faced his label as a “Christian author” for years. Buechner explains the connection between his preaching and writing: “Both are designed to illuminate what life is all about, to get people to stop and listen a little to the mystery of their own lives. The process of telling a story is something like religion if only in the sense of having a plot leading to a conclusion that makes some kind of sense” (8). He does not see his novels as sermons, and Brown affirms this view in his scrutiny of Buechner’s stories.

The Book of Buechner is Brown’s endeavor to make Buechner accessible to anyone, whether or not that reader has a long history with him. I came to this book as a newly hatched Buechner fan with hardly any background knowledge and only a few of his books under my belt. Brown introduces him for the newcomer and the oldtimer both. Readers just getting to know Buechner will find Brown’s book a goldmine of plot and theme clarifications. However, if they like to be surprised by the books themselves, they should save Brown’s commentary until they have finished the novel because Brown is not squeamish about giving away the ending. Readers who keep their Buechner novels around like a lovingly worn-out pair of favorite shoes will also enjoy *The Book of Buechner*, as it rejuvenates the old stories with bright new shoelaces and a dab of shoe polish, giving their beloved Buechner books a few more miles yet.

In his introductory chapter, Brown says that “what

follows here will be an attempt to open up Buechner’s words in the way that teachers of English often do such business, always with the chastening awareness that readers can read for themselves. Perhaps I can help deepen the encounter; that would be enough” (6). He does. Brown maneuvers us through eleven of Buechner’s works of fiction and his biography, tying unexpected strings between them and pulling out exquisite pearls of truth. Each chapter looks at a single Buechner work. In his overview of the novels, Brown pulls apart the plot summaries, character development, biographical significance, and underlying themes and manages to reassemble them back into a coherent mess before moving on. Skillful, straightforward, and lucid, Brown’s narrative and his analysis do not butt heads but rather complement and clarify each other.

Buechner is a Christian (indeed, he is a minister), but he writes his strongest and most searching stories about the tensions between belief and doubt, between truth and falseness, between sin and saintliness, between comedy and tragedy. Always the dichotomy is there; Buechner cannot help but acknowledge the darkness in the world as well as the light, since both are true. As Brown explains, “His notion of truth, then, is always poised against the possibility of error; such is the fragile balance beam on which he constantly teeters” (11). Disconcerting, yes, especially if one expects to find only the “Yes,” and never the “Maybe not,” or even the “No.” But Buechner sees both and is compelled to give us both, honestly, fairly, agonizingly.

The novels of Buechner have a distinct real-ness about them. His characters, says Annie Dillard, “are souls” (372). They are genuine. One character from Buechner’s first book Brown describes as “not a particularly bad man or a particularly good one. Sometimes sophomoric, sometimes manipulative, sometimes spontaneous—just a man” (25). And that is how Buechner shapes them all: real sinners, with familiar doubts, crushing struggles, joyous discoveries, lamentable failures, absurd lovers. We know these people, and Brown shows us how we are these people.

Throughout Buechner’s fifty years of writing, he has not fractured and splintered his themes but has remained consistent. Although he has developed stylistically, Buechner continually draws out what Brown calls the “search for the presence of God in the human experience” (157). This too resonates deep within our guts, because it is what we know and seek as well. Brown offers us a glimpse of Rooney, a character from *The Final Beast*, who asks our question too: “There’s one reason, you know, why I come

dragging in there every Sunday. I just want to find out if the whole thing's true. Just *true*. . . Either it is or it isn't, and that's the one question you avoid like death" (qtd. 123). Brown shows us that when we peer into these characters, we find ourselves gazing right back from inside them, beset with the old questions that come out in new ways.

Buechner's style is new, of course. He has a way of not just gilding the old stuff but remolding the questions into blinding paradoxes. Brown mentions his striking stylistic moves for particular novels. The cadence in *Godric*, for instance, lilts along in iambic pentameter with solid Saxon

words, whereas *Brendan*, another novel about a saint, relies less on diction and more on syntax and adjective placement. Buechner's language is quite often earthy, ready and able to point out the impish surprises of life.

Brown's journey through Buechner's life and writings will captivate and inspire a deep respect for the man and his words. Buechner peeks through the mystery of grace and offers us all comfort as we fall back on the old cry, "Lord, I believe! Help me with my unbelief." In the end, that is all we have, and that is all we need.

Winner, Lauren F. *Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005. 175 pp. ISBN 9781587431975. Reviewed by Roger Henderson, Associate Professor of Philosophy at Dordt College.

A non-patronizing, non-moralizing book about chastity: is that possible? Although not caring much for this book's title, *Real Sex*, I find the point of the book compelling: chastity is a practical and (the) attainable norm. Much of what goes on today in our sexually over-stimulated society is insincere, mistaken, or just plain fake (i.e., unreal "sex") and hence the title *Real Sex*. Honoring chastity will help lead to the *real* thing. The silhouette of the book is the author's own experience, a movement from an unchaste youth and college life to a Christian conversion and phased awakening(s) to chastity, its meaning and necessity. The case is made for a continent life-style within the framework of Christian community, discipline, and discipleship. Chastity is argued for, provocatively explained, and its difficulties (and objections to it) illustrated. The real topic of the book is chastity, not "sex."

In terms of language and style, the book is well crafted. It speaks a very contemporary idiom, using a diverse and sometimes trendy diction. It is thought out and well-organized in scope and treatment of its topic. The author's goal is both to instruct and to give practical suggestions on how to achieve a chaste way of life. It is evidently written by a well-read, serious-minded person with an excellent feel for contemporary American language and cultural trends. Lauren Winner is a writer and journalist and author of *Girl Meets God* (her conversion story), which received various prizes. Her grasp of the issues surrounding chastity is extensive and suggests a Christian approach with an uncommonly broad and deep Biblical perspective. Perhaps the most surprising feature of this book is that although its advice is at odds with current Western attitudes and practices concerning sexuality, its form of expression is in tune with these attitudes and practices. In fact, I found the book's language and style so much in tune with urban trendy speech that I kept wondering if it would eventually lapse into something other than Christianity and other than chastity as usually defined. It never did.

The book's author makes few if any compromises with our contemporary secular consensus in struggling for a

Biblical approach to all of reality. She clearly goes against the grain of our contemporary sexual trend without becoming wild-eyed, obnoxious, or dismissive of the claims and problems of other-minded people. For example, she gives voice to contrary approaches and then attempts to answer them, having struggled with chastity and with the shallow advice she found in numerous inauthentic "Christian" books on the subject. The book tells many short stories to make its points and draws on insight gleaned from each of the major Christian traditions. Winner gives a balance of explanation and advice written in a personal style without catering to the appetite developed in most of us for voyeuristic tell-all writing on "sex." Winner is theologically engaging and responsible in her handling of Scripture. She makes profuse use of quotations and stories drawn from a diversity of authors, counselors, theologians, preachers, popular commentators, and scholars. While making clear that contemporary practices are wrong and destructive, she never falls into mere condemnation.

The book is worthwhile for young and old alike but a bit graphic or explicit for very young or sheltered teenagers. It is well-rounded in its treatment of the issues; for example, it contains good sections on men's clothing and women's fashion, money and budgeting, monastic and ascetic practices, fasting, virginity, discipline, and ancient spiritual disciplines. It also contains worthwhile discussions on marriage, being unmarried, sexual experience, the potentially positive and often factually negative role of the Church in working with or ordering sexuality, and setting parameters for pre-marital "sexual" contact.

As I read, however, I kept wondering what Winner would say is wrong with un-chastity or promiscuous sexual relations—especially since she had experienced them herself. Was she secretly just preaching dogmas which she really did not understand and of which she had no experiential sense of what made the actions in question wrong? It appears from her story that she became convicted that pre-marital sex is wrong during a time of confession of sin when challenged about what she had