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Silent Passengers (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

Silent Passengers, by Larry Woiwode (Atheneum: New York, 1993). 131 pages. \$18.00 hardcover. Reviewed by David Schelhaas, Instructor of English

Larry Woiwode's latest book, *Silent Passengers*, is a collection of short stories that on first reading affects me in much the same way that the stories of Flannery O'Connor did when I read them years ago. Upon finishing O'Connor's "Revelation," I knew I had encountered something new and different. I realized that in some very explicit ways it was a Christian story, but I didn't know quite what to make of it all—pigs suffused with a supernatural light, a bridge hanging in the sky on which the redeemed marched into eternity, crickets singing a hallelujah chorus. I felt puzzled and exhilarated at the same time.

I am exhilarated as I read *Silent Passengers*. I want to accost people I meet, fellow Christians especially, and tell them they must read it. So good it is. But I'm also puzzled at times. For in story after story, the supernatural—in many cases what seems to me to be the Holy Spirit—intervenes in the lives of the characters, often in visible or palpable form—in the summer wind, in the frozen moisture crystals of the air, as a presence that moves from the fire in a wood-burning stove. Near the end of almost every story, this presence is seen or felt: "He felt that something was moving near, as if out of the woods, and although he wanted to hurry into the heat of the house . . . he felt a layer of protection, like the mist, part in him and his senses take on the exalted focus . . ." (21-22). What are we to make of this?

Let me try to answer that question by introducing you to the ten stories in this slim volume. They should probably be read in sequence, yet if you are like me you will probably dive into the middle, intrigued by a particular title, or as I was, curious why Louise Erdrich would call the title story "one of the most moving short pieces of fiction I have ever read. Its impact is so personal, its lessons so deep, that I believe I will always keep it near in heart."

However you approach *Silent Passengers*, if you are as excited and curious as I was, you will eventually go back to read these stories in order, and if you do, you will realize that the book, though it is a collection of short stories, is a single work of fiction, held together by similar characters, recurring imagery, and a preoccupation with several themes that are examined in story after story. One story sheds light on another so that taken together the pieces are more comprehensible than as separate works.

The stories are arranged in a loose chronological sequence. The protagonist in the opening story, "Wanting an Orange," is a child; the protagonist in the concluding "Black Winter" is a retired professor, and the protagonists in the other stories are at various ages in between. Often the protagonist (perhaps narrator is a better word since in so many of the stories Woiwode uses a third person limited point of view to place us inside the head of a male narrator) is a father struggling with questions of doubt, incipient old age, innate depravity, or despair.

At the heart of this book are four stories, "A Necessary Nap," "Winter Insects," "Blindness," and "Silent Passengers," in which we see a thirty-something narrator—his name changes and the names of his children change, but he remains essentially the same character—struggling with basic problems of living. In each successive story the narrator seems slightly more mature and more attuned to the working of grace in his life than he was in the previous one. Again and again the actions of his child or his interactions with his child lead him to faith or insight or hope or renewal. And of course there is that third presence as well, the Holy Spirit, prodding him, encouraging him, or enveloping him in comfort.

In "A Necessary Nap" he comes to realize that his balky, four-year-old son (appropriately named Will) is so willful and resistant to sleep because he has received from his father "something of his past." The nightmares of the father, his sins, have been passed to the child. But something more is going on in all of these stories. A birth is occurring. Or rebirth. The man must become a child again and it's painful: "A feeling of constriction (as bad as being inside a four-year-old's skin) wraps and heats his face" (12). Similar feelings are expressed in "Winter Insects": "He took her [his two-year-old daughter] in his arms, feeling her cling to him like a diminishment of himself" (22). The process seems completed in "Blindness," a brief story in which the narrator experiences temporary blindness while walking with his four-year-old daughter and needs to be led back to the house by her. As his sight gradually returns, he realizes that he was being led from his blindness into a world that was the same as the one he inhabited (branches sprang into sight, unfurling leaves, saplings), but it was another world, and with his first tentative steps over its sur-

face he understood the difference. This was the world of his daughter now (87).

Has he been born again? Has he become as a little child to enter the kingdom?

In "Silent Passengers" the narrator seems older, more settled; his oldest child is now nine. The entire story is told as the narrator pulls into the driveway and watches his wife and children get out of the car and run to see the horses. The story moves back and forth from this present moment to different times in the past to tell of how this nine-year-old boy, James, was kicked in the head by a horse, struggled for his life, underwent therapy, and finally has been allowed to come home. But he is still unable to talk and move normally. It is a beautifully told story, the past events woven with the present moments so seamlessly that one hardly notices Woiwode's marvelous talent for transition. At the end of the story, as he watches his son moving awkwardly in a sort of harness held by his mother, the father experiences an epiphany. As the boy comes up to the horses and begins to hug and nuzzle them, the father momentarily fears the battering hooves but then feels a gust of wind stand his hair up, and "he saw James's and Jen's and the twins' hair climb the air also, the girls' high above their heads, streaming back like banners against the sky" (104). It is surely the presence of the Spirit of God that he feels, and "the sensation of that moment" kept returning to him in the days and months of healing that followed.

"Silent Passengers" is an immensely satisfying story—especially to any parent who has anguished over the injury or death of a child and the sense of guilt or failure that so often accompanies such an occurrence. It ends in restoration and like "Blindness" and "Winter Insects" leaves one with a feeling that all is well because something—angels, the Holy Spirit—is always present to comfort, protect and sustain.

"Owen's Father" does not end in restoration but in death. It is immensely disturbing. It contains many of the same images and motifs found in the four "father" stories, but these images seem somehow reversed. This story is narrated by the child rather than the father, and the child becomes the father rather than the father becoming the child. The unnatural presence that is warm and comforting in the other stories is eerie and chilling here.

Owen was eight years old when his father, apparently suffering from depression, committed suicide. Now 23, Owen struggles to recreate his father from past memories and artifacts, and thereby come to grips with the suicide. But he finds only despair, and the story's enigmatic last sentence leads us to believe that he, like his father, will seek freedom in

suicide. If that sounds rather conventional, let me assure you, it isn't. The story is permeated with mystery. What is wrong with Owen's father? Is it significant that he constantly plays childish games and tricks and that in his "going away" note he blames his "childness"? Who or what is the "third person" that shows up so frequently in this story? I must confess I am unable to give clear and definitive answers to these questions.

Three of the stories, "Wanting an Orange," "Summer Storms," and "Confessionals" though they have a character, a first person narrator, seem more like essays than stories. Like the other stories, however, they are permeated with a sense of the transcendent. Near the end of "Wanting an Orange," for example, which is a hymn to the beauty and delight that this exotic fruit can bring to a boy living on the prairie in the bleak midwinter, Woiwode constructs this marvelous "double edged" sentence: "Oh, oranges, solid Os, light from afar in midst of the freeze, and not unlike that unspherical fruit that first passed from Eve to Adam and from there (to abbreviate matters) to my brother and me" (4-5). In a single sentence we get, on one hand, original sin and the accompanying idea of the father's sins visited on the children (an important theme in several later stories), and at the same time, symbolically, the hope of redemption, of "light from afar in the midst of the freeze" that sin has visited on the world. The final words of the story announce the setting for most of the collection: "this hard-edged yet insubstantial, incomplete, cold, wintry world" (5).

"Confessionals" is a wonderful meandering journey through a Catholic boyhood of confessionals and altar boy experiences that eventually leads the narrator to an awareness that his whole life was on a trajectory toward God, "as predictable as a parabola." As I read the concluding paragraphs of "Confessional" (the most explicit statement of faith in the entire volume), I was reminded of the answer I heard Woiwode give a few years ago when one of my students asked him when he was saved: "I believe I was God's child before the foundations of the world were laid." The belief that God's all-controlling providence operates in lives of individuals is at the heart of this story (and this collection) but as is always the case with good stories, so much more awaits the perceptive reader: physical infrastructure as a metaphor for the communion of the saints, a Hopkins-like wonder at the beauty of mundane things (a rusty nail, a cross-grain knot in a two-by-four), a brief meditation on the evils of prejudice as it is passed from generation to generation.

The final story in the collection, "Black Winter," is the longest and perhaps most ambitious in the collection. Blackness and winter have been recurring im-

ages in story after story and here they are together in a snowless Manitoba setting. Kiner is a retired philosophy professor who has returned to live on the family farm, his parents being dead, and has become the manager of a machine shop through a strange set of circumstances. Bored, self-absorbed, he is nowhere near the state of grace of the father in "Silent Passengers." Philosophy, which had been not only his ruler and king but his god, seems inconsequential when measured against the concrete work of his grandfather. The machine shop he is managing has recently been damaged in a fire, and he and his employee, Sweeny, have been working side by side to clean it up. At the same time he has been haggling with the insurance adjuster. At noon, as Sweeny and Kiner, black with soot and grime, have their lunch of liverwurst sandwiches, donuts and pickle, the meal becomes a sort of communion supper:

Kiner picked up a sandwich, trembling, and remembered his grandfather bowing over his food in silent prayer, then saw streaks of black from his fingers across the white slab of bread. *Good*, he thought, and was startled, expecting his mind to form "God." He felt cornered, in a worse retreat than any philosophy had caused. (125)

I have mentioned the theme of the sins of the father being visited upon the children, but in this story we see the faith of the father and grandfather visited upon Kiner. In other words, Woiwode shows us that on the back side of the doctrine of original sin is the covenant promise to Abraham—"I will be a God to you and to your seed after you."

That evening, as Kiner drops Sweeny off at his home, Sweeny says, "Partner, I love you," continuing the working of grace in his life. Later that evening, as Kiner sits at the desk where his philosophy papers lie and the heat from the wood-burning stove warms his back, "a presence as powerful as his father, though smaller, smaller than Sweeny, came from the direction of the stove. . . and settled in Kiner's lap. . . and he thought, *Oh, my God. Save me from death.*"

This is how the story ends, and again it seems to me that this presence can only be the Holy Ghost. In some ways this story seems a sort of tribute to the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. A direct allusion is made to his "Felix Randall," but the whole story suggests the more familiar—"God's Grandeur." Here, as in that poem, "all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;/ And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil/ Is bare now, nor can foot feel being shod." Yet "there lives the dearest freshness deep down things" because "the Holy Ghost over the bent world broods with warm breath and with ah! bright

wings." The Spirit flames out to Kiner not only in the "love ya" of Kiner but in a presence, the warm breath that seems to come from the wood burning stove. Kiner, "aware that he had subverted the child he'd been when he grew up here" calls on God to save him from death. Significantly, the black winter, with this day's snowstorm, has become white.

In a speech given a few years back, Woiwode said that for the first ten years that he wrote, he tried to refute his own internal evidence that the supernatural was present in the cosmos. Since then, his books have been a testimony to the felt presence of God in daily life, but none so clearly and explicitly as *Silent Passengers*. Yet here's the marvelous thing: Woiwode handles this supernatural motif so adroitly, so quietly and subtly, that it never obtrudes, never becomes preachy, never elicits questions of verisimilitude, never drifts into an eerie, Stephen King-like spook drama (although several scenes in "Owen's Father" almost cross the line into the ghost story genre). Using the natural elements that have always heralded the presence of the Spirit (wind and fire), Woiwode creates moments of divine intervention that most mature Christians will recognize. All of us have the testimonies of fellow believers: "I felt like I was wrapped in a blanket of peace after my husband died," or "That night, alone on the beach, I experienced the presence of God in a special way."

Perhaps I have dwelt too long on this theme of the supernatural. If I have, consider it an error of excess due to my own delight in finding stories that are at once marvelously crafted and at the same time saturated with a sense of a God active in the affairs of men. Let me hasten to assert that these are *stories* first of all, with characters that perform tasks, have relationships, experience emotions. They are characters that we come to care about. If there is something missing in the book, it may be the absence of any fully developed women. Women appear in many of the stories, but always as adjuncts. Except for the mother in "Owen's Father," they are warm, supportive, and nurturing. But we don't really see them and they don't do much more than hover near the man. Even the woman in "Sleeping Over" is wraith-like, less tangible than her bicycle or the wash on the line. She is a vehicle, like her bike, to carry the male narrator a few steps away from total self-centeredness.

In spite of this, *Silent Passengers* is a major event for all readers of good fiction, especially Christians. Woiwode is surely one of the great stylists writing fiction today. He reminds one of Updike (though he's less showy than Updike) in his ability to evoke a mood. His sentences unfold with the effortlessness that is the

mark of a superb craftsman, and there is a quietness in his prose that makes O'Connor's stories seem noisy in comparison. Yet like O'Connor's stories, Woiwode's reveal the intrusion of grace in the lives

of his characters. O'Connor, as she has said, shouts to the hard of hearing in her audience. Woiwode speaks *sotto voce* most of the time. But the message reaches the back rows just the same.

Rock Bottom: An American Heartland Farm-Town and Family From Settlement Through the Great Depression, by John M. Wilkinson (Privately printed, 1993). 226 pages, paperback, \$14.50. Reviewed by Louis Y. Van Dyke, Professor of History.

John Wilkinson received a B.A. degree in economics from the University of Minnesota and a graduate degree in public administration from Harvard University. After concluding a varied career which included being a U.S. Army officer, an economist in both the private and public sector, and an author on various topics on economics and public policy, Wilkinson decided to write the history of his home town, Rock Falls, Iowa, (population 140) from its founding in 1855 through 1940. When he related to an acquaintance the story of his town and its slow but inevitable decline, the rejoinder was that perhaps the town should have been named "Rock Bottom." Hence the title.

The book is really part history, part memoir, and part polemic. The history of the village's first sixty-five years is compressed into eighty-one pages. Wilkinson's tale is the familiar story of many mid-Western towns. There is a promising beginning as the local economy is sustained by the developing farm economy. Eventually, technology in the form of improved transportation and communication causes the village to lose out to the neighboring town, in this case Mason City. Businesses close, people move away in search of opportunities elsewhere, and the village fades into obscurity. Indeed, as a young man, Wilkinson himself leaves never to return.

The bulk of Wilkinson's narrative is devoted to his first twenty years in Rock Falls between the wars. We

do get acquainted with the young Wilkinson, his life, loves, hopes, dreams and frustrations, and his father appears as a character of the first magnitude. However, the rest of his family as well as other citizens of Rock Falls remain two-dimensional. We need to know more about the characters who ran the businesses in Rock Falls and the farmers who were their customers if the book is to be truly a history of Rock Falls.

In the last few pages, Wilkinson proposes a unique solution to the problem of lack of basic services to the rural elderly in villages such as Rock Falls. These small towns should be designated "open retirement homes" composed of clusters of twenty-five or more homes with a center which would provide basic services such as citizens in urban areas enjoy. He argues that a rural hamlet should be a "retirement home without walls."

While Wilkinson might have been inspired to propose a solution to rural poverty by his Rock Falls experience, his argument is really not part of the story of "Rock Bottom" and is rather the material for a separate article in an appropriate journal. The manuscript could use some close editing as typographical errors abound.

The book is written in a chatty, informal style, and those who have grown up in a mid-Western village would have no trouble relating to the story of "Rock Bottom," substituting the name of their own town and reliving John Wilkinson's experiences.

Contemporary Literary Theory: A Christian Appraisal, Clarence Walhout and Leland Ryken, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991). 314 pages. \$19.99 paperback. Reviewed by Dr. John Van Rys, Assistant Professor of English.

Five or six years ago, before I became a semi-respectable professor, I was a doctoral student in English literature at a Canadian university, struggling not just with a dissertation but also with theoretical debates "raging" (as debates always do, it seems) in the esoteric ivory towers of English departments from Alaska to Zanzibar. During this time I had also (due to my under 30 innocence) been drafted, by default I think, into the eldership of the small congregation I called home. Again by default (my schedule was flexible, while other elders had real work), I ended up going to a classis meeting or two. During a meal break

at one such meeting, I stood in line politely listening to an elderly elder of the greased head decade. Referring to debates over evolution, women, and the age of the universe (and the relationship between the three), he remarked something to this effect, either assuming my agreement or daring me to disagree: "If the Bible says it, then that's what it says and that's what we've got to believe." I think he was referring to either 24 hour periods or wearing hats, but I can't remember. However, being an intellectual coward as well as a meek debater, and sensing that my orthodoxy was at stake (as was my meal), I kept my mouth shut.