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Happily Ever After: The Last Chapter of the Best Story



David Schelhaas

When I was a sophomore in high school, the pastor of my church accepted a call to another congregation a long distance away. Because he was moving, he decided to thin out his library, and because he knew I liked to read, he brought over an apple box full of novels. The box contained a number of romantic girl-meets-young-theology-student-and-falls-in-love stories, almost, apparently, a genre in itself in the forties and fifties. But the box also contained a number of classics, many of them Armed Services editions: Tolstoi's *Anna Karenina*, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Stendahl's

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The Red and the Black, a Dickens, a Hawthorne, a Twain, and most memorable, perhaps because I was tasting forbidden fruit, perhaps because I was encountering a new kind of writing, Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

As I have recalled that gift over the years, I have felt delight and wonder at it. I am pleased at the thoughtfulness of it; I am mildly surprised that this rather conservative pastor would give me Hemingway. Most of all I am encouraged by the idea that a man of God can also be a man of letters. Only now does it occur to me that in giving me, a boy, this box of fiction, my pastor might have thought he was putting away childish things. Perhaps his library in the new parsonage contained only solid theological stuff. No fiction. But I prefer to believe the opposite: That this man of God wanted to encourage me in my moral and aesthetic education, that he realized that there was knowledge about human beings that could be discovered in that part of natural revelation we call imaginative literature or fiction.

Dr. Henry Zylstra has said this about the knowledge that is communicated through literature:

The point, that fiction is a form of knowledge, seems worth making. Something has happened to the integrity of mind in our time. The time was when the analytical and speculative resources of reason, expressing themselves in science and philosophy, were allied with the intuitive and imaginative resources of reason, expressing themselves in art; all of them together were engaged in the single endeavor of mind to understand reality. Since then . . . much of the modern mind has so defined reality that it is

something which can be known only by the analytical reason of scientific method. The implication of this, too, is that the intuition and imagination are not rational at all, but extra-rational, or subrational, or irrational. Presumably, you and I with our solid sense of what the nature of man is ought to be proof against this crumbling integrity of mind. . . . We will, in short, go to it [literature] for an illuminating interpretation of life as well as for diversion. (59)

Perhaps Christians are not as likely to buy into the post-enlightenment scientific rationalism of our time as are others in our culture. We are, after all, devoted to the truth contained in the inspired Word of God. It is, however, quite possible that in addition to the Bible, Christians—and especially Christian men—will read only the practical, or technical, or financial stuff that seems so useful to our daily lives. Many adults are like young Eustace Scrubb in C. S. Lewis's *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*: "Eustace had read only the wrong books. They had a lot to say about exports and imports and governments and drains, but they were weak on dragons" (71).

Robert Coles, psychiatrist, researcher, and Harvard professor, recognizes the knowledge-giving power of fiction. The Pulitzer prize winning author of the five volume series, *Children of Crisis*, uses great literature as his textbook when he teaches courses in the medical school, law school and business school. Why? "The novelists are not interested in theory. . . . Instead they evoke and render complexity, irony, ambiguity, paradox. They discover, and acknowledge, that each person is a separate, finite mystery, not something that can be contained in one category or another" (Yancey 19).

Walter Wangerin emphasizes a slightly different aspect of the mystery of fiction when he says, a story is always more than information that some poor kid must labor to understand. A story is a world . . . both radiant and real—a world into which a child is invited, and she enters.

And it is the telling of the tale that causes the world to be.

The telling encourages the child to believe its being.

The telling calls her into it so that she more than knows: she actually experiences. (30)

Clearly, novels are radically different from

sociological studies or sermons or databanks or reports. And it is precisely because of these differences that they ought to be important to us with our "solid sense of the nature of man." Most Christians need to be reminded of that these days.

We ought to read fiction. We ought to be as aware as Christ was of the power of stories to communicate truth. We ought to go to our bookshelves and our public libraries from time to time to read some of the timeless literature of the past and the timely literature of the present.

What fiction should one read to experience the kind of knowledge these men describe? To answer that question I might recommend some of the classics of the nineteenth century, works by writers such as George Eliot or Charles Dickens or Leo Tolstoy or Nathaniel Hawthorne. I might also recommend some of the realists of the latter half of the twentieth century. For example, to get some sense of the emptiness and sterility of the lives of many working class Americans, read the short stories of Raymond Carver or Bobbie Ann Mason. Read Walker Percy's *The Thanatos Syndrome* for a compelling depiction of what happens when bad things (abortion, mind-control) are done for good reasons (the reduction of social problems). Read Flannery O'Connor to see the power of grace in sin-hardened individuals. Read James Schaaap's short story collection, *The Privacy of Storm*, for perceptive and moving depictions of such problems as teen pregnancy ("Paternity") and separation and divorce ("Harmony").

But in this paper I want to recommend and argue for fantasy literature—especially, Christian fantasy. When I say Christian fantasy, I am thinking especially of twentieth century classics such as C. S. Lewis's *Space Trilogy* and his *Chronicles of Narnia*; J. R. R. Tolkien's great trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*; and the beast fables of Walter Wangerin, *The Book of the Dun Cow* and *The Book of Sorrows*.

I suspect that except for a few fantasy fans here and there, most adults have the kind of attitude toward fantasy that I used to have. Until about fifteen years ago, I felt that all this business of furry-footed hobbits, talking lions and mice and trees, magicians and elves and giants was just kids' stuff. Gradually my resistance was eroded. I listened to my wife read *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* to the children while we drove across Texas and New Mexico. I picked from my book shelves

Richard Adams' *Watership Down*, a book about rabbits, and was captivated by it. From a former high school student who had discovered Tolkien at college I received an impassioned letter urging me to taste and see. So I started the great Tolkien trilogy, and for a couple of weeks in the bleak mid-winter of western Michigan I was transported to Middle Earth, and it was a wonderful vacation.

But it was much more than just a vacation; it was like a sabbatical leave that put me in contact with life and truth—but seen from a different angle. The charge that fantasy literature is kids' stuff is simply not true. Even the beast fables of Walter Wangerin deal with such universal themes as temptation, disobedience, pride, guilt, confession—all issues that a Christian encounters in his daily living. When Chauntecleer, the rooster who is the leader of the farmyard realizes that the despicable dog Mundo Cani has sacrificed his life to save everyone including Chauntecleer, he at first pretends it didn't happen, then wrestles with his pride, which will not let him admit to being rescued by the miserable dog, then struggles to confess how he has despised Mundo Cani. His wife Pertelote tells him:

It is that scrubbing of the past which you want so much, because it is confession. It is the new birth of the present, which you want so much, because it prepares for deliverance. The one is separated from the other by forgiveness. It is the honoring, Chauntecleer, of the worth in his life. Penance. You can tell him you are sorry. He will forgive you. (*Dun Cow* 238)

These are wise and useful words for adults as well as children.

Or take Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. Again and again, Frodo and the Fellowship of the Ring see how their choices are really ordained by providence. Of course, the relationship between man's will and God's controlling providence remains a mystery, but by the end of the trilogy, one's understanding of the mystery has been enlarged. In an essay in *Christianity Today*, Cheryl Forbes effectively analyzes this tension between providence and free will. "Reading *The Lord of the Rings*," says Forbes, "brings a feeling of freshness to the fact of God's rule. And in discouraging days it can remind us who controls history" (11):

"I wish it [the return of the dark lord] need not have happened in my time," [says Frodo].

"So do I," Gandalf answers, "and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."

(*Fellowship* 82)

Here the tension between providence and will is obvious. Providence controls the times but individuals must decide what they will do in the time they have been given.

Tolkien brilliantly depicts the paradoxical nature of this tension. When Frodo says he can't go on, he somehow finds the will to go on. Conversely, when the thoughts of free will, of having it "my way" are strongest, then the characters are least free

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and God's controlling power is most apparent. The best of many examples of this occurs at the very climax of the trilogy when Frodo suddenly turns from the completion of the task he has been striving toward for the entire story and says, "I do not choose to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The ring is mine" (*Return* 274). But then, in one of the most dramatic and imaginative scenes of the entire trilogy, the task is, of course, completed, completed in spite of Frodo's willful rebellion.

I have only touched on this marvelous theme couched in this wonderful story to demonstrate that fantasy is not kids' stuff. Neither is it escapist, though that is the most serious and frequent charge leveled against it. After all, say its critics, fantasy indulges in happy endings when, of course, all of us know that life is pretty grim and "They lived happily ever after" only happens in fairy tales.

But these critics are wrong. Fantasy literature is not escapist—at least not as we usually use that term—and "happily ever after," while it is idealistic, is the only ending not only for fantasy literature but also for our best and truest story.

Let me explain, starting again with a personal example and moving on to the ideas of J. R. R. Tolkien.

I grew up in a home with parents who never fought. They loved each other, laughed together,

treated one another kindly, and enjoyed one another's company and that of their children. Occasionally my mother would complain to my father about things like leaky faucets which he had promised to repair but never gotten around to. Occasionally she might shake her head over his easy-going way of disciplining us kids. But they did not fight. And though we kids fought as siblings will do, our home was a happy one. As happy, if not as exciting, as that of Ward and June Cleaver.

So according to what I hear and read these days, I ought to be severely scarred psychologically. It's a wonder I am able to function at all, growing up as I did in such a wholesome, happy atmosphere. After all, in the real world there is fighting and conflict, so to grow up in such a pleasant environment should have left me unfit for life's harsh realities.

I have heard a TV psychologist say that stories with happy endings can be downright damaging to children because they lead to false expectations about reality. I have heard a Christian psychologist say that the Hallmark Card "happy family" celebrating and enjoying Christmas together was a myth. By that he meant that it did not exist except in the fantasies of some card artist. I have heard a Christian pastor assert that we should choose to watch "The Simpsons" rather than "The Cosby Show" because "The Simpsons" reveal painful realities about ourselves, show us the twisted theology we sometimes endorse. He assumes, apparently, that by observing these painful realities, these human flaws, we will recognize them in ourselves and endeavor to correct them.

That seems unlikely to me. It seems more likely that we will use the bad behavior of the Simpsons to justify our own bad behavior; we will assume that it's normal, that everybody behaves that way. Sometimes, in fact, life imitates art. Rotten behavior, twisted theology, bad manners can be learned by imitation.

Certainly painful realities exist, but I do not think I need the Simpsons to show them to me. I do need, I believe, to have certain unrealistic (as they are called) ideals held before me. I need to see the Good Samaritan's behavior even though the behavior of the priests and Levites is more typical. I need to be exposed sometimes to literature and music that holds up the noble and the beautiful.

How ironic that we warn against excessive idealism, against happy endings, against unrealistic

depictions, just when our culture is drenched in the most squalid and painful and often unnatural realities. C. S. Lewis has noted that it is typical of an age to warn against the vice that it is least likely to succumb to. So it is in our time. At a recent Cannes Film Festival, the films, according to *Newsweek*, reeked of dread and violence. Eleven movies had vomiting scenes. Incidents of rape, cannibalism and political torture were nearly as frequent. Yet we hear warnings about the dangers of happy families and happy endings. Our children listen to music and view movies that depict in exquisite detail all kinds of violence and sexual mutilation. This is real, we are told, as if reality meant the sordid and grimy. People come from the city to a rural village and say, "It's not natural, all this quiet. I need car horns and sirens and factory noises." As if car horns are natural and birdsong is not, as if an auto salvage lot had more to do with real life than a herd of Holsteins grazing in a green pasture.

I don't want to deny the existence of terribly painful realities in our lives and times. I don't want to advocate some sort of escapist, world-flight mentality. But I do want to say hurrah for happy families and happy endings. And I want to ask why we can't strike some sort of balance between realism and idealism. Or at least acknowledge that what is pleasant, uplifting and beautiful is not necessarily escapist and might also be real.

Perhaps the wisest words about escapism, happy endings and idealism were written by that master of fantasy, J. R. R. Tolkien. To those who charge fantasy with being escapist, Tolkien replies:

Why should a man be scorned, if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison walls? The world outside has not become less real because the person cannot see it. In using *Escape* in this way the critics have chosen the wrong word, and, what is more, they are confusing, not always by sincere error, the *Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter*. ("Fairy" 76)

The most distinctive aspect of fantasy, according to Tolkien, is the happy ending or, to put it more accurately, the joy of the happy ending. Tolkien calls this *eucatastrophe*, the good catastrophe which "denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will)

universal final defeat . . . giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief" ("Fairy" 81).

No story, according to Tolkien, better illustrates this good catastrophe than the story of the gospels: "The birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of man's history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation" ("Fairy" 83). But the presence of this greatest of all stories! should not prevent us from writing and reading our lesser tales, for, as Tolkien says, "Story, fantasy, still go on, and should go on. The Evangelium has not abrogated legends, it has hallowed them, especially the 'happy ending'" ("Fairy" 84).

Is it possible for readers of today to experience the kind of joy that Tolkien describes? I know that I have experienced it, not only when reading the Tolkien trilogy, but also when reading the Narnia tales of Lewis. From talking to students in my Fantasy Literature class, I know that several of them have thrilled to that same joy.

Is it of any value? I asked my students what, if anything, they had recovered, carried back with them, from their visit to Tolkien's Middle Earth. Sam wrote, "I have recovered from my readings of *Lord of the Rings* a love of plants and particularly trees Another element I have brought back is love of the simple things of life; singing, story-telling, walking, feeling the grass between my toes." Tim said, "My journey into Middle Earth has enabled me to see more clearly the importance of sharing the burden of others." Christine wrote, "Sam Gamgee was just an ordinary fellow filled with a ton of courage and given the chance to be great. That is hopeful to the rest of us ordinary people." For me the most powerful message of the books is the example of persistence demonstrated in the lives of characters like Sam Gamgee and Frodo Baggins. Again and again, seemingly over-whelming obstacles are set in their way by the forces of evil. Frequently these obstacles seem to stop them so that Frodo and Sam seem to fail and to fail and to fail again. But they never despair so completely that they give up. They persist in the work they have been called to do. And ultimately, they succeed.

When I read of their trials, I think of all the men and women engaged in work that seems monotonous or futile. I know a bright factory worker who, because of economic circumstances, labors daily at a mind-numbing job. I know of pastors and teachers whose words, as far as they can see, strike no fire. I know of churches with neighborhood evangelism programs that drift along from year to year with lit-

tle evidence of success. I have a friend who is the director of a large social agency in the inner city. He used to be an optimist, but as he looks at poverty, racism, AIDS, sexual abuse, drugs, the absence of low-income housing, and the host of related problems, he sometimes throws up his hands and says, "Why bother?"

To such as these Tolkien gives hope. To such as these our Savior says, "Be faithful. Let me worry about results. I don't measure success the way the world does." Happy endings do not deny that problems and evil exist in our world, but they do deny that the problems and evil in the world will triumph. And this can encourage us, give us heart. Sometimes, in fact, the only thing that enables us to plod along faithfully without experiencing what the world calls success is this hope for ultimate joy with God in the new heaven and earth. This does not mean we ignore the problems that beset us here and live for heaven. Rather, it is the hope of Christ's return and the completion of his kingdom that gives us the courage to battle injustice and evil in our little corners of the world.

Christian fantasy literature can nourish that hope, acting as an antidote against the nihilism of our age. We in the Christian community must be careful not to buy into the despair and disillusionment characteristic of so many writers and thinkers today. If any religion can be called the religion of happy endings, it is Christianity. But it is even more accurate to call Christianity the religion of "happily ever after," of eternal life with God who will wipe away every tear from our eyes and then continue the story with "and then, and then," and "and then."

END NOTES

- 1 To call the gospel account of Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection a story does not diminish its historicity, for, as Tolkien says, "this story is supreme; and it is true. Art has been verified Legend and History have met and fused" ("Fairy" 84).

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