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In Defense of Halloween: The Fuller Story

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Howard Schaap

“The scariest stories are true.” My eighth grade son and I hear this on an internet ad, and I can tell he’s intrigued. We’ve had a few run-ins with our kids over the years when they watched scary things they were sure they could handle and then afterward ended up in our bed.

Despite these times, they look forward to Halloween every year, mainly for the dressing up, as a way to try on other lives. I know we’re supposed to sell them on Reformation Day. I dared my daughter to wear a monk’s robe and cut her hair in a tonsure, but she didn’t take me up on it. Halloween just produces such interesting characters and stories.

Of course, that’s not fair or exactly true. Yes, the institutional overreach and theological propositions at the heart of Martin Luther’s story seem to be no match for Halloween. But there are plenty of good stories to the Reformation—a “kidnapping” of Luther by Prince Frederick the Wise, and Luther throwing an inkwell at an apparition of the devil while he translated the Bible, to name just two.

This last story, apocryphal or not, makes me think that our problem all along has not been raising up Reformation Day and leaving Halloween behind but in not realizing they’re the same story.

We live by story. I don’t just mean that we tell them all the time, which we do, around the water cooler and the kitchen table, at the bar and on our Facebook page. I mean we live by them, cast ourselves as characters (the rebel, the class clown, the underdog, the goody two-shoes, whatever) and live through and sometimes thrive off the conflict

(with our bosses or a parent or Donald Trump) in a way that gives meaning to our lives.

Many of us tend to think our stories are unique, but by and large they fall into rather predictable patterns, most often some version of the American McDream, which sucks up so many of our individual stories.

Enter literature. Film. Drama.

There are a million stories out there. Go to Barnes and Noble and you will find the great publishing houses of the world at war to lure you in with their stories.

I recently found a story in the Christian Fiction section of my library that did something I didn’t expect it to do.

It scared—to emphasize the “Christian Fiction” irony here—the bejesus out of me.

In this story I met a woman named Sylvie—Sylvia Fisher—one of the strangest people I’ve ever come across. At first I thought she was just spacey, maybe simple. Then, when she insisted on there being wild children in the woods that would come out if you were very still, I thought she was actually straight up certifiable. Nuts.

But there were other aspects of Sylvie’s life and manner than I almost admired—the way she could discipline herself to endure hunger and cold in order that she might admire the beauty around the lake where she lived, a small mountain town called Fingerbone. The way she could resist confinements, ignore or put in their proper context worries about fashion, expectations, even schedules.

At a certain point I became afraid that Sylvie was a truer self than I was, more awake and alert to the world—maybe even more alive—than I am.

The book I'm referring to is Marilyn Robinson's *Housekeeping*, and in it Robinson frightened and fascinated me. The spookiness of Sylvie's mind and her detachment from things made me feel as if I had met a ghost—and thus made me feel what it means once again to be alive. The world of Fingerbone felt strange in a wonderful, slightly terrifying way. I'm afraid that Fingerbone might really exist in the town I live in, in the house I keep or fail to keep.

Literary types say that the point of the reading stories like this is self-knowledge. As I read *Housekeeping*, you might say I came to some self-knowledge. Looking at Sylvie Fisher as a character disturbed me, made me wonder what all is under the placid surface of this very soul of mine, one often shrouded under the day-to-day demands of life. I'm not sure I really want to know.

Except now I do. Stories like *Housekeeping* stop us cold, make us wonder about all we think we know and take for granted.

But I don't trust "reading as self-knowledge" as a reason to read or as a guide to the stories that we might really need to shake us out of ourselves in a good way.

Christians especially.

Once we find ourselves in the fold of God, it certainly make sense to never want to leave again. However, pretend for too long that there isn't life outside that fold, and our stories and lives become, well, sheepish.

Sure, stories do work by allusion and analogy (we find ourselves in the stories we hear and grow by the experience), and there are plenty of tame if helpful stories out there which affirm and grow our own sheepish existence. But stories also work by imagination and exploration, as we wander into utterly foreign territory, into valleys of shadows, in which we must make sense of new worlds in which we've never before wandered—worlds that aren't at all about our sheepish selves.

Wandering in these worlds is also important for our character growth. It's then that we connect to humanity—and, I would argue, to our truest, warty, Halloweeny selves.

Granted, not all disturbing stories are for everyone. I once recommended *Gone Girl* to a couple of friends of ours who didn't particularly care to wander in that valley. At Dordt's recent performance of *A Wrinkle in Time*, a friend commented

that she was opting for the play over the upcoming movie, since there were certain scenes from the book that still so moved her that she wasn't sure she could handle them cinematically. We certainly have different capacities for story to disturb us, but I stand by the claim that it's when a story splashes through the placid water of our lives that truth gets in.

Consider Scripture itself. There's a section near the end of *Housekeeping* where Marilyn Robinson's narrator riffs, for lack of a better word, on some of the stories of Scripture. In "Cain killed Abel," she writes,

and the blood cried out from the ground—a story so sad that even God took notice of it. Maybe it was not the sadness of the story, since worse things have happened every minute since that day, but its novelty that He found striking. In the newness of the world God was a young man, and grew indignant over the slightest things. In the newness of the world God had perhaps not Himself realized the ramifications of certain of His laws, for example, that shock will spend itself in waves (192-193).

In this passage and throughout *Housekeeping*, Robinson illustrates what story should do, or what the difficult stories do for us: make the familiar strange.

It's this strangeness that we often need to re-discover in reading Scripture itself. For those of us who have grown up in the fold, we have often by repetition made the strangeness of Scripture—dry bones living, virgin births—familiar so that it must actually be made strange for us again in order for it to disturb us again. Robinson's narrator makes us see God as a young man. Sure, it doesn't make sense theologically, yet the passage reimagines God in a way that stretches imagination, an imagination that's doomed at the start not to be able to take God in.

And that's a good thing. That's what reading of stories—that's what the reading of Scripture—should do.

Too often, it seems to me, we take our stories tame, we take to the stories we already know because we are afraid to know ourselves in our own wild depths as we come to know characters in stories, like Sylvie in Marilyn Robinson's *Housekeeping*. We want to believe ourselves better than we are, smart enough to have found our way to church to worship the true God, rather than

acknowledge the wildness of our own characters and stories.

And so, too, grace gets flattened for us. We need the whole story, darkness and light.

So, in “this world with devils filled,” I choose to widen my tent of story and invite in Halloween.

I give reign to the imagination, the creative tool by which we must all approach an infinite God. I revel in *Housekeeping*, a book that disturbed me.

So, in this Reformation-Halloween season, what are you reading or watching? Does it disturb you?