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I Want To Show You More (Book Review)

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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.


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 it 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
To Show You More repeatedly sets them in fresh twenty-first century contexts that help to entangle them anew. In “Caught Up,” new technology and old theology are part of the context, as the narrator and her mother tangle over terms such as “vision” versus “dream,” over what counts as “consummation” of an affair and what we hope for in “Consummation.”

“The vision started coming when I was nine” (1), the narrator begins in “Caught Up,” relating the vision before jumping into the present and outlining an affair carried out primarily via cell phone: “Three years ago —,” the narrator relates less than a page in, “seventeen years into this marriage — I fell in love with a man who lives nine hundred miles away.” More than anything, however, “Caught Up” is a story about confessing private visions and secret affairs.

To your mother.

And your mother not understanding.

And while both you and your mother tangle up vision, affair, and confession with dubious theology. As the narrator says to her mother late in the story, wishing to speak again to the man she had an affair with, “I hoped that there would be a literal Second Coming and Consummated Kingdom because then the man and I could spend eternity just talking” (3-4). This kind of statement may sound bizarre, but hang around twenty-first century Christians with sometimes dubious theology and cell phones — you might find them at a Christian college campus — and the tangles of “Caught Up” start to feel eerily real.

Most interesting in “Caught Up” is the mother-daughter tangle, which is at the same time a mother-daughter gap. The story opens with the narrator’s vision at nine years old of being caught up “belly-first” toward the heavens “as if I were a kite about to be yanked up by a string attached just below my navel.” The narrator’s mother repurposes the vision as a “dream” and readily interprets it for her in recognizable terms — recognizable because her rendering of it is predictable, reductive, even dismissive in the way parents can be toward children.

[W]e should always be ready for the Lord’s return:” — thus the mother interprets, the colon indicating that the vision is a kind of formula — “lead a clean life and stay busy with our work, keeping an eye skyward” (1).

The story’s final lines also highlight this mother-daughter gap. Regarding the affair, the narrator relates the complexity of her confession and her mother’s response in two sentences: “[W]hen I called my mother to tell her how much I missed the man, how on the one hand I wished I had gone through with our planned meeting yet at the same time regretted the phone sex, because if we hadn’t done that we might have been able to save the friendship … she said, Wait — phone sex?” Even the lack of quotation marks adds to the tangles, making us wonder where the narrator’s consciousness stops and the mother’s begins. The second sentence finishes the conversation in rapid-fire fashion: “And I said, I thought I told you, and she said, You told me you had an affair, and I said, No I didn’t, we didn’t, not in that way, and she said, I must have assumed, and I said, I can’t believe all this time you’ve been thinking I went through with it.” The final blow in the story is the mother’s last line, a doubly-damning one: “You might as well have, she said. It’s all the same in God’s eyes” (3-4). As we ping-pong back and forth in this exchange, we realize the space we readers inhabit in “Caught Up,” between sin and obedience and our cell phones, between a “spot just below [our] navel[s]” and our mother’s lessons about God.

“Caught Up,” in other words, is quite a tangled story.

I Want To Show You More is Jamie Quatro’s first collection of short stories, and it’s turning heads all the way up to The New Yorker. Interestingly enough, Quatro — whose literary pedigree includes an MA in English from William and Mary, a stint at Princeton, and an MFA from Bennington College — passed through the Dordt community when her husband taught here. (They now live in Lookout Mountain, Georgia, where Scott Quatro teaches at Covenant College). Jamie Quatro knows the reformed faith and its faith communities, and many of her stories have unmistakable connections to that Creation-Fall-Redemption-Consummation plot referenced in “Caught Up.” Quatro’s final story in the collection, “Relatives of God,” calls to mind the story of the fall in Genesis. Another story, “Imperfections,” directly references Joseph and Potiphar. Beneath the surface of “Imperfections” and several other stories, too, is Christ’s injunction on lust, that should a woman — er, man, which seems to be one of Quatro’s points, to make us all look anew at the interiority of lust — look lustfully at another, she has already committed adultery with him in her heart.

This is not to say that Quatro’s stories are primarily about the spirit of the law when it comes to desire. To the contrary, bodily desires are palpable and ever-present in Quatro’s characters, and some of their cyber-urges seem at times almost forced, intended to shock. No doubt that, for the right audience, this sexual frankness — even brazeness — will be part of the book’s power. With an eye on scripture, I Want To Show You More explores sexual frontiers for the new millennium. In doing so, it will either feel fresh and timely, or make you reach for your fig leaves.

The stories about affairs, it should be noted, make up only one strand, albeit an important one, of the book’s vision. Throughout all the stories of I Want To Show You More, the body has a starring role: we’re constantly reminded of bodily existences and impulses, from the basic need to eat, to various sexual compulsions, several of them involving the internet; from the size of specific body parts, to the nature of the fluids produced at vari-
ous stages of bodily decay. Bodies in *I Want To Show You More* get tattooed, they defecate in ditches while running marathons, they transform under the rhythm of running, they transform quite differently under the ruin of cancer, they fall off cliffs to their deaths. No doubt in all this bodily shock and awe, Quatro follows one of her self-noted influences, Flannery O’Connor. (Others include Alice Munro, Grace Paley, and Amy Hempel).

While most of this “bodiliness” dwells primarily in a reality we recognize — at summer camp with physically- and emotionally-compromised adolescents, in the suburbs with a depressed husband and self-assured wife, at the lake home of a bereaved husband and his children — three of the collection’s best stories begin in worlds we think we recognize, before spinning us off into slightly altered realities.

One of these stories, “Demolition,” follows the bizarre path that Lookout Mountain Church takes toward what it thinks is enlightenment. A deaf man named Corbett Earnshaw comes to the church one Sunday, and as the congregation watches him being signed to, they become rapt. The signing “partook,” the narrator, an anonymous member of the congregation, tells us, “of the nature of holiness itself: one man giving himself in surrender, the other receiving in gratitude” (160). But almost immediately, two problems develop with Corbett Earnshaw. The first is that, on the third week of his visits, the stained glass of the church starts falling apart; the second is that, on the same day, in the middle of the service, Corbett Earnshaw declares that he doesn’t believe in Christianity and never will. The church responds to this dastardly admonition in two ways. Officially, “The Elders declared Corbett Earnshaw’s confession and departure either a) evidence his soul was still unregenerate, or b) an act of apostasy, but only if his soul was — and this was doubtful — regenerate to begin with.” A “faction” of the congregation, however, says “that God worked in all sorts of ways, not only through what we considered our religious aggregation, however, says “that God worked in all sorts of means, not only through what we considered our religious life... In leaving us, they said, Corbett Earnshaw was nearer to the real presence of Christ than he was before he left” (162). It’s between these two opposing statements — one of them seemingly formulaic and ancient, with its unwieldy terms “unregenerate” and “apostasy” so distasteful to the postmodern mouth, and the other formulaic in its own way, a relativist spin — that the story moves. As the stained glass crumbles around the congregation and swallows begin nesting in the beams of the church, the revelation seems clear: “Authenticity, some of us said. Our natural longing, revealed” (168).

For this reader at least, the supposed ideal of “authenticity” in the life of faith is at the heart of the collection as a whole. At times it feels like *I Want To Show You More* wants to move us toward authenticity through unabashed honesty about the habits of our minds and sexual urges. However, in “Demolition,” we get another side to this “authenticity.” In the name of authenticity, the church demolishes its sanctuaries, moves worship to “the Natural Bridge Park,” and finally turns sex into communal sacrifice. By its end, “Demolition” is a kind of dystopic parable about “bodiliness,” about “word becoming flesh” but then ceasing to be word. However, if you take the degree of bodily yearning and desperation throughout the rest of the book as somewhat accurate of the world in which we live, the extreme events of “Demolition” don’t seem that far off.

Nor is the antidote to the body-mind divide that gives “Demolition” and many of Quatro’s stories their energy: “A restlessness remains in our children,” the narrator tells us at the story’s end. “At night we hear them singing, hymnlike strains bright with major harmonies” (182). Below the contemporary confusion of many of Quatro’s characters lies an understanding of the human being as basically religiously oriented.

As a whole, *I Want To Show You More* looks certain contemporary societal fascinations right in the eye, and for this reason, some readers will want to look away. But for those who allow themselves to get “caught up,” the book’s tangles of love and lust, of sin and obedience and cyberspace, should hit you somewhere between the gut and the heart, which is exactly the bodily place that Jamie Quatro seems to be aiming.