
Pro Rege

Volume 45 | Number 3

Article 8


March 2017

Perfume River (Book Review)

Howard Schaap

Dordt College, howard.schaap@dordt.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege

 Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Schaap, Howard (2017) "Perfume River (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 45: No. 3, 36 - 38.
Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol45/iss3/8

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the College Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.



A quarterly faculty publication of
Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa

truth and the idea of science and religion as truth-seeking (13-16). The authors are careful in their description of the work of the scientist as the search for truth, noting that absolute truth is never achieved via the methods of science. Yet, they hold out truth as the ultimate goal of science (49). However, truth is a tricky notion, especially in a postmodern context. Sometimes the authors confuse truth with facts (99). At other times, truth is conflated with beliefs (97). Elsewhere, truth is the scientific theory that is no longer questioned (131). What is missing is the distinction between scientific theories as human constructs and the reality of a creation that behaves in a lawful manner. So a young Christian scientist could walk away from this reading, confused about what he or she should think about what truth is.

I think this book has value as an encouragement to a new scientist who is wondering if it is possible to be both a Christian and a scientist. It helps to raise a wealth of important issues that the Christian scientist needs to consider. The emphasis on community is valuable, especially with the advice to be humble in one's interactions. But it should not be viewed as a source for a solid foundation upon which to build a substantial understanding of how to be both a Christian and a scientist. The references will help, and if the new scientist has a mentor to help sort out the issues, this book can be a good starting point. In a sentence, this book is a good place to begin this intellectual and faith journey, but it should not be the place to finish it.

Perfume River. Butler, Robert Olen. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2016. 273pp. ISBN: 978-0-8021-2575-0. Reviewed by Howard Schaap, Associate Professor of English, Dordt College.

The term “politics” no doubt means different things for different families. In my own extended family, you simply don't bring it up, don't even breathe a word like “election” for fear of what might happen. I know we're not alone. These days, when it comes to politics, family dissension seems pretty widespread. Whatever “politics” means in each of our family contexts, it's tempting to boil down the divides to some soundbite like, “We are more polarized than we have ever been in America.”

Except, of course, that's not true.

Among other things, Robert Olen Butler's latest novel, *Perfume River*, is a reminder that we didn't suddenly arrive at the political polarization that seems to define America right down to our immediate families. No, America has a proud history of brother divided against brother, and *Perfume River* is a kind of tracer on family polarization, extending back through the Vietnam War era.

Dredging up Vietnam is arguably a risky move for Butler. Vietnam predates many of us, including this reader, and for millennials, communism and Southeast Asia must seem like ancient history in an irrelevant geography. But Butler has always been one for imaginative risk—his 1992 National Book Award-winning *Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* employs all first-person Vietnamese nar-

rators—and he won't let us be that naïve: we have not invented polarization, and we can learn a thing or two by revisiting the last time many American families actually did split apart over politics and “American greatness.”

Perfume River follows multiple characters in the William Quinlan family, a family divided for over fifty years by the Vietnam conflict. Our primary insight into the story comes through the eyes of Robert Quinlan, a 70-year-old history prof at Florida State University and a Vietnam vet. Robert and his younger brother Jimmy are the only children of William Quinlan, a World War II vet whose ideas about war and patriotism are still firmly enshrined in his mind at 90 years old: for William, war is what defines your life. It's this attitude that drove Jimmy to the arms of the “Free Love” crowd and eventually to Canada, where, at the book's beginning, he remains cut off from the rest of the family. However, Robert, too, though closer in proximity to William, remains distant from him in ideals.

Butler's forte is taking us deeply into the minds of his characters, revealing each character's inner thoughts and even subconsciousness, and this is also the best feature of *Perfume River*. As we circle through the minds of both the Quinlan men and women (most notably Darla Quinlan, Robert's

wife, and Peggy Quinlan, his mother), we discover that there are profound separations between all of the characters, even within the loving marriage of Robert and Darla.

Into this mix of Quinlans, Butler introduces one wild-card character named Bob Weber, a homeless schizophrenic. Vietnam even plays a role in Bob's life, for though he is not the Vietnam vet that Robert first mistakes him for, Bob's mind is still misshapen by that war because of his father's experience in it and subsequent abuse of Bob. In Bob's life, too, war is a legacy.

The divides that Butler shows us between all of these characters are at once profound and close to home. William Quinlan has ruminated on war for his entire life. Because William is the son of a soldier himself, his war story is carefully constructed to frighten his young sons, though we as readers find that this story is somewhat fictionalized. Even after the war, it's the war and the company of men that shape William's life; for years, Peggy is worried that William is carrying on an affair when he deserts her every afternoon, when really he's spending his private time with fellow vets.

William's adult sons are equally removed from him. William's sense that Robert shirked his duty in Vietnam has grown into an immeasurable distance between them, one that is not crossed once William breaks his hip and must face his own mortality. If this is the case for Robert, younger son Jimmy, who does return from Canada in a feeble attempt to reconnect with the family, is certainly unable to bridge the gap between them. In *Perfume River*, time doesn't heal all wounds or even any wounds. Distances remain and are real.

The separations between lovers also remain, even if they are navigated differently. Robert and Darla, though intellectually attune to the forces at work in shaping each of their lives, are never wholly present for the other in their needs. Jimmy's open relationship to his wife, meanwhile, seems to dissolve before his eyes just at the moment when he thinks he can count on it.

As relationships fray in *Perfume River*, characters are left to confront themselves. The way Butler gets his characters to face the personal philosophy by which they've lived their lives is one of the most fascinating aspects of *Perfume River*. Robert's ma-

terially comfortable, plugged-in life is not able to erase his deep yearnings for Lien, his lover from Vietnam, or his sense of guilt at Bob Weber's condition. Meanwhile, Jimmy can't help but feel betrayed by his wife's tour with another lover, even though her choice fits with his free love ideals.

Butler also uses Bob Weber to question Christianity's response to our current debate about mental illness and gun violence. Bob sleeps in an outbuilding of Blood of the Lamb Full Gospel Church, where the pastor has been kindly to him. However, the cheap sayings on the church's marquee (e.g., "God Answers Knee-Mail") and the Pastor's NRA activism actually compound Bob's psychological problems and play into the violence of the book's end.

It's not the answers that have a starring role in *Perfume River*; it's the questions. All kinds of contemporary questions swirl around the characters: questions about Stand Your Ground laws and Trayvon Martin; questions about gun violence and civil religion; questions about mental illness and fathers and sons and wives and lovers.

While Bob Weber's role as catalyst is the most suspect in the book—at times he feels more like a plot device than a fully fleshed-out character—his role is also the most symbolic. Clearly, Bob's homelessness disturbs Robert's carefully balanced material comfort.

On the other hand, Robert and Darla's love for each other is perhaps the book's most profound note. There's something distant about their relationship: as both characters attend to their own inner specters of past relationships, they necessarily miss the profound, soul-mate connections that we believe love relationships give us. However, both partners—and their marriage is a partnership—respect that the other's thought life strays from them in ways that, if they knew about it, might make each of them uncomfortable. This is the nature of their love: it's based in a realistic trust and respect that doesn't demand more from each other than each other's humanity.

That the basis of their relationship is this kind of profound trust is important to have in mind as the book ends. *Perfume River*'s plot ends dramatically, with gun violence and Bob's undiagnosed condition playing a starring, tragic role. The end-

ing feels like something taken right from newspaper headlines. However, after this cataclysm, Robert's final thoughts are not about William or Jimmy or even Darla. Even as he makes love to Darla, his thoughts drift back to Lien and Perfume River. Is this the height of infidelity, suggesting that Robert and Darla live a sort of romantic lie? I don't think it is. Butler's vision is bigger than that, approaching Wendell Berry's suggestion that individual love between two people must be integrated into the community—in this case, into a community that, through the tangle of international politics and plot twists of history, literally extends across the world to races and cultures far different from our own, but

whose very otherness affirms both our humanity and our individual loves.

In *Perfume River*, what lie underneath all the violence and drama of our contemporary world are far greater forces: memory and history and our subconscious lives, threatening to surface in all of us, but truer and bigger and more real if we bring them into the open and manage them together.

Perfume River, then, is a story about politics or polarization in the place it hits us most intimately: in our relationships to fathers and lovers. As such, it couldn't be more pertinent to many of our families, especially those of us who can feel the fracture of those families as it happens.

The Mind of Terror. Saada, Tass, with Dean Merrill. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2016. 240pp. ISBN: 978-1496411877. Reviewed by Charles Veenstra, Emeritus Professor of Communication, Dordt College.

Perhaps the best way to understand terrorism, particularly in the Middle East, is to listen to someone who once called himself a terrorist and practiced indiscriminate violence against those who, he believed, took Palestinian land. Well-known for his earlier book, *Once an Arafat Man*, in which he describes his former actions against Israelis, Tass Saada now wrestles with the question of how to deal with terrorists. After fighting with Arafat in the Palestinian struggle against the Israelis, Saada moved to the United States and later became a Christian. In *The Mind of Terror*, which has the subtitle "A Former Muslim Sniper Explores What Motivates ISIS and Other Extremist Groups," Saada wishes to use his experience to provide insight into the minds of members of extremist groups in the Middle East. He is a former Muslim who founded *Hope for Ishmael*, a nonprofit organization that works to reconcile Arabs and Jews. He also developed the Seeds of Hope Christian School in Jericho.

After describing the various extremist organizations in the Middle East, Saada explains how the thinking of the members of these groups is different from that of people in Western culture. For example, the notion of *honor*, tied to membership in a group, is much more important than *individual* responsibility. Because Saada left his family and apologized for the sins he had committed, his father responded by affirming that code of honor; address-

ing Saada, he tells him, "as long as you live, we will have nothing to do with you." (23). Honor is a key principle for Middle Eastern groups, and if one violates anything a family considers honorable, there is no forgiveness. Given that perspective, Saada cautions Christians to avoid shaming any Muslim.

Saada explains that there are two hurdles that are very difficult for Muslims. "The first is *accepting the offer of free grace and forgiveness through Jesus Christ*." (29): No grace exists in Islam. "The second hurdle for a Muslim mind to get over is *the value of democracy*." (32). He explains why these are barriers by exploring the mindset of Muslims. He knows that Americans will have a difficult time thinking in a very different way because we believe in individualism. Muslims, on the other hand, do not separate the state from their religion.

"What makes a terrorist?" is the title of the third chapter. Saada here claims that six motivations drive various groups: you are in anguish over the violent loss of an innocent loved one, friend, or group member (38); you firmly believe your opponent's faith is wrong or at least corrupted (41); you are sickened and disgusted by western society's decadence (45); you want your homeland back (47); you grow weary of day-in, day-out discrimination and maltreatment (51); and you can't stomach the United States' rock-solid backing of Modern Israel (57). Combining his own experience with that of