



Religious Themes in Best-Selling Novels

KENT L. JOHNSON

Luther Seminary
St. Paul, Minnesota

IN SPITE OF ALL THE COMPLAINTS THAT JOHNNY CAN'T READ AND THAT COLLEGE students can't write, people read and write a great deal these days. One or more bookstores can be found in most every shopping mall. Millions of books are sold, and some presumably read, every week. Americans have a great hunger to read, and there are not a few writers who are intent on satisfying that appetite. That reality should be of considerable interest to leaders in the church, and especially so if it should be the case that David Jasper's thesis is correct with regard to the connection between religion and literature.

Quoting a glittering array of poets, novelists, and literary critics, Jasper has made the claim that literature is basically religious. He does not claim that literature is doctrinal or that it is necessarily Christian, but that literature and religion deal with the same issues and themes, among them: good and evil, the polarities of meaning and despair, the bonding and tearing apart of human relationships, and an awareness of the transcendent.¹

Granting the validity of Jasper's claim, what is the nature of the religion that is reflected in and communicated by contemporary literature? That question gave direction to the study summarized in this article.² Not wanting to follow the example of a Mr. Casaubon, the cleric in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* who refused to

¹David Jasper, *The Study of Literature and Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 1-9.

²This article came about as the result of a research project done with Christopher Olkiewicz, a seminary intern in Manitowoc, WI.

KENT JOHNSON is a professor in pastoral theology. He recently wrote "A Literary and Theological Conversation with Dorothy Sayers," *Word & World* 13/2 (1993).

publish anything until he had researched everything, and therefore published nothing, we needed to set limits for the study.³ The first was to narrow the focus of the study to one literary form—the novel. Given the number of novels published these days, however, a second limitation was needed: we decided to concentrate on six randomly selected novels from the *New York Times* best-seller list for June 1992. They are: *Scarlett*, by Alexandra Ripley; *The Sum of All Fears*, by Tom Clancy; *The Plains of Passage*, by Jean Auel; *Needful Things*, by Stephen King; *The Kitchen God's Wife*, by Amy Tan; and *The Witching Hour*, by Anne Rice. Our question was: What are the religious themes raised in these novels, and what do the writers have to say about them?

The goal of this article is not so much that pastors and teachers should read *these* novels, but that church leaders might find in similar novels insights about contemporary American religious life.

I. *THE WITCHING HOUR*: AN INCARNATION WITH BIBLICAL OVERTONES

Anne Rice's contribution to the June 1992 best seller list is *The Witching Hour*.⁴ This novel is many things: a family epic, a vehicle for feminism, an expression of the occult, a series of erotic love relationships, and, not least, Rice's portrait of the Roman Catholic Church. Priests, nuns, and sanctuaries fill a rather large portion of the 900 pages that tell the story of the Mayfair family. The portrait is a many-textured one. Nuns, for the most part, are described as punitive and dull—never able to grasp the uniqueness of the Mayfair young women placed in their care. Priests attempt to be helpful, but lack the commitment or courage to get beyond the superficial in dealing with people or issues. (In contrast, Rice has invented an organization called the Talamasca whose motto is "We watch and we are always here," which is deeply committed to the search for the truth, especially as it relates to the mysterious. It is, for all practical purposes, a monastic order.) The Mayfair family whose story is told in the novel is one that owes its considerable fortune to witchcraft, yet "practices" its Roman Catholic faith. The setting for the novel is finally New Orleans, a city Rice depicts as enveloped in a mystical kind of Roman Catholicism that lends a surreal atmosphere to the events that transpire there. At least to the same degree that Egdon Heath was both the setting and a kind of character in Thomas Hardy's *Return of the Native*,⁵ New Orleans and the Roman Catholic Church serve as the setting and as characters in *The Witching Hour*.

Beyond that, it can be argued that Rice used the broad outline of the biblical narrative as the framework for her novel. As with Abraham, a person is chosen to establish a line through which an incarnation is to take place. For Rice's epic, that person is a woman. Suzanne by name, she is the first of the Mayfair witches. To be chosen means to be in a relationship with an ethereal presence named Lasher, a powerful and passionate presence that yearns to take on human flesh. Over thirteen generations Suzanne's heritage is passed on from mother to daughter...along

³George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (1874; reprint, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968) 304-362.

⁴Anne Rice, *The Witching Hour* (New York: Ballantine, 1990).

⁵Thomas Hardy, *The Return of the Native* (1895; reprint, New York: Random House, 1959) 3-7.

with a necklace, a symbol, marking the Mayfair who is in relationship with Lasher. Sometimes that relationship is “faithful” – characterized by mutual erotic enjoyment; in some generations it is distant, but the relationship is always sustained. There are generations, especially at the beginning, when the Mayfair witches are hunted down and burned. At other times they are forced to flee into exile. Always, in some fashion, the family prospers because of the one’s relationship with Lasher. By the close of the novel, readers are given the impression that the Mayfair family is as numerous as the stars in the sky, and as rich as one family can possibly be. All of this has been faithfully chronicled by members of the Talamasca who have followed the events surrounding the Mayfair witches from the beginning.

The present events of the novel involve the twelfth generation of the Mayfair witches, Deirdre. When Rice first introduces her, she is in a vegetative state, spending her days on a screened porch in a deteriorating mansion in the old section of New Orleans. She is wearing the necklace. People passing on the street have seen her and, upon occasion, have seen what looks like a man standing over her. Though comatose now, Deirdre has done, and is doing, what Lasher has required of her as the twelfth witch. As a young woman she gave birth to an illegitimate child, a girl, who is growing up in San Francisco with her adoptive parents. Though she doesn’t know it, she, Rowan by name, is the thirteenth generation Mayfair witch. Rice also tells us that however Deirdre appears to others, at night she and Lasher experience the same kind of erotic lovemaking that characterized the relationship of so many witches before her.

It is in Rowan that Rice brings her readers to the “fullness of time.” It becomes clear that Lasher has the power to create events that lead to the accomplishment of his purposes. While sailing in San Francisco harbor, Rowan rescues one Michael Curry from drowning. Raised in New Orleans, Michael knows about the Mayfair family and has seen “the man,” though he doesn’t know who he is. In short order, Rowan and Michael fall in love, have unprotected sex, and like so many of her ancestors before her Rowan becomes pregnant outside of marriage. While all this is going on, she learns the identity of her mother, and that Deirdre is dying. Rowan decides to go to New Orleans to see Deirdre, but arrives too late. Before she even leaves for New Orleans, Lasher makes himself known to her.

Once back in New Orleans, after Deirdre’s death, Lasher pursues a relationship with Rowan. Planning to marry Michael, and confident of her ability to resist Lasher, she allows herself to become vulnerable to him. All comes to a conclusion on Christmas Eve, the witching hour, when Lasher enters Rowan’s womb and takes over the child she is carrying (a corrupted version of the adoptionist view of the incarnation?). Immediately after its birth, the baby matures to adulthood – and it is Lasher. Before anyone sees them, Rowan and Lasher leave for Europe. The only remaining contact comes through Rowan’s bankers in the form of requests for enormous amounts of money. The novel concludes with Michael, now living in the old Mayfair mansion and aging rapidly, remembering that it was at a Christmas Eve Mass when he was a child that he had looked up and had seen the eyes of “the man” upon him, marking him for his role in Lasher’s incarnation.

The Witching Hour demonstrates the complexity of Jasper's thesis. God has no place in the novel except when one or more of the characters admit that they no longer believe in God. Instead, there is an institutional church that is ineffective in communicating its faith to the present generation; a church that may, with its ritual and mystery, be a spawning ground for witchcraft; and a church so blind that it cannot see the witchcraft absorbed within it.

There is no gospel in this novel, no Immanuel God who becomes flesh to save Israel from its sin. Instead there is Lasher, a powerful ephemeral presence neither spirit nor human, yearning to take on flesh—the worship of self-realization elevated beyond the mortal. To be sure, this is fiction. But what does Rice offer her readers through her novel: A critique of the church and contemporary religious life? A new religion that is the old religion dressed up in modern clothes? Or just an intriguing story that has more than a vague similarity to the framework of the biblical narrative? For this reader, it is all three. It just might be the same for the millions of others who devour everything Rice writes. Certainly the novel confirms Jasper's thesis. It deals with religious themes, and appeals to a religious consciousness. Therein lies the problem. It is not only religious—it is also blasphemous and diabolical. Those who read it learn a good bit about both.

II. ISSUES OF WAR, PEACE, AND THE LAND

In the last decade of the second millennium since the coming of Jesus, a decade that finds the world still thrashing around in the agonies of war, a last decade in a century that began with "the war to end all wars," three novels on the best seller list for June 1992 dealt, more or less, with the themes of war, peace, and the land. While World War II is the larger background for Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife*, war, peace, and the land as they relate to the church and religious faith are at the center of the novels by Ripley and Clancy. Both novelists present their readers with the enigma of religious wars—wars that, at least since the time of Joshua, have been associated with a (the) land.

The Sum of All Fears – a novel about the land of Israel⁶

This novel is centered around the struggle between Israelis and Palestinians to find peace in a land claimed by both. With uncanny foresight, Clancy weaves his novel around the disastrous potential that lurks behind those efforts for peace, efforts that are coming to fruition in the signing of peace accords as the novel begins. The accords described in the novel have come about through the efforts of a Roman Catholic layman, Dr. John Ryan, working through the Vatican, bringing Israelis and Palestinians together in such a way that will allow them to live amicably in Palestine. Dependent upon American armed forces to guarantee the peace, and firmly supported by the President of the United States, the church and its emissaries have a prominent role to play in bringing it about. As the peace be-

⁶Tom Clancy, *The Sum of all Fears* (New York: G. P. Putnam's, 1991).

comes jeopardized in Israel and then around the world, it is Dr. Ryan who is finally able to salvage it.

Clancy begins the novel by rehearsing the enmity among Jews, Muslims, and Christians. His comments could lead to the conclusion that he sees religious convictions as among the primary causes of war. As the novel unfolds, Clancy presents several characters that lend credence to that charge. It is a charge, however, that will be tempered by the close of the novel.

It is the government, in its role as potential peacemaker, for which Clancy holds the greatest disdain in this novel. His president is a good enough man, but he is absorbed in himself and in securing a place for himself in history. Visions of greatness dance in his head as he makes his way to Rome to sign the accords, accompanied by a woman who is to become the director of the CIA. Equally absorbed in herself, with the added character flaws of pettiness and revenge, she and the president nearly plunge the world into nuclear holocaust. Clancy seems to be saying: do not put your trust in princes, or in princesses.

If there is no help to be found in government, and if the religious have often been the source of war, where then is peace to be sought and found? For Clancy, at least in this novel, hope is deeply rooted in the convictions of the three religions who have a claim in Palestine/Israel.

In the novel as in life, not everyone is happy with the signing of peace accords. Some will do all that they can to sabotage them because they do not give full control of the land to their group. In *The Sum of all Fears*, these are Arab terrorists. Just as the accords are signed, a nuclear warhead dropped by an Israeli pilot in the 1973 war is discovered by Arabs—a warhead that had burrowed under the ground, unexploded, waiting to be discovered at an opportune time. Once discovered and in the hands of terrorists, the help of a disgruntled German physicist is enlisted to help in the development of an explosive device. Then, with the further assistance of an angry and violent Native American, the terrorists smuggle the bomb into the football stadium in Denver where the superbowl is to be played. On the way, the terrorists leave a trail of dead victims—including the German scientist and the Native American. The bomb is detonated during the football game with great loss of life. Since the president is a football fan, and expected to be at the game, he and his CIA director come to the conclusion that *he* was the target of the bomb. Immediately, leaders in both the Soviet Union (how quickly the world changes) and the United States suspect that the other is behind the carnage. It is only through the tireless efforts of Dr. Ryan that the president is prevented from unleashing the rockets that will bring on World War III, precisely the intent of the terrorists. Eventually the terrorists are captured and interrogated by Ryan. Qati, their leader, is reminded by Ryan of a line from the Koran: “If a man shall enter your tent and eat your salt, even though he be an infidel, you will protect him.” Qati responded, “You quote poorly—and what do you care for the Koran?”⁷ But Ryan, and perhaps Clancy, has made his point. He does care for the Koran, and for

⁷Ibid., 786.

the Old and New Testaments as well. At the core of each there is a great commitment to peace. That commitment has been obscured by a pre-occupation—the occupation of the land. However, when the possession of a land is perceived to be an historical necessity, and the possession of *the* land is part and parcel of religious convictions, Jews in particular seem to be left with few choices—to fight, to become extinct, to surrender something basic to their faith, or some combination of all three. Clancy not only illustrates Jasper’s argument that literature is religious, but that to the religious politics and land are related as well. The possibilities for peace can’t be great unless, and until, all three religions are recognized as participants in realizing the “accords.”

Scarlett—a novel about the land of Ireland⁸

Like *Gone with the Wind*, *Scarlett* is a love story. It is the story of a tempestuous woman who, in spite of herself, finally finds love with Rhett Butler. Like its predecessor, however, the novel is dominated by war and struggle for the land. For *Gone with the Wind* it was the war between the American north and south. *Scarlett* is set against the background of the war in Ireland in the second half of the nineteenth century. It was a bitter war, made even more so because it pitted Christians of one persuasion against those of another. It was a war not only for the minds and hearts of people, but for the land as well. *Scarlett* takes up where *Gone with the Wind* ended—at least the film version of the story. Scarlett makes her way back to Tara, to the land. She soon discovers that there is nothing there for her. Unable to get her relationship with Rhett on track, and unable to be at peace with herself in Georgia, she decides to return to Ireland and to the original Tara from which her father had taken the name for his plantation. She arrives, a rich young woman, to find her relatives living in poverty. At the same time, a relative who is a priest sees in her someone he can use for the cause of the Irish rebellion. Presenting himself to Scarlett as one fashioned in the mold of a Bing Crosby in *Going My Way*, the priest is in reality a manipulator of the worst order. He is consumed by hatred for the English and driven by the dream to claim Ireland for the Irish. In that cause he travels back and forth to the United States, raising funds and buying guns for the great day of battle. Without her knowledge, Scarlett’s money is used to help purchase these weapons, and her warehouses become arsenals stocked with them.

Unaware of the part she is playing in the conflict, Scarlett makes friends with the local English gentry and attends their social events. Because of her generosity to her family, she is forgiven this indiscretion without knowing she has committed it—until the conflict actually breaks out in fighting. Then, members of her own family search for her, bent on her death. At Scarlett’s most desperate moment Rhett Butler arrives on the scene to rescue her. As they escape the Irish countryside and the conflict there, Scarlett asks Rhett where they can go. She couldn’t be at Tara, either in Georgia or Ireland. He responds that she and he are among the first of a new breed of people: people who don’t belong anywhere, to any particular or sin-

⁸Alexandra Ripley, *Scarlett* (New York: Warner, 1991).

gular land, and yet at the same time people who belong everywhere. Scarlett was raised by a devout Roman Catholic mother to practice her faith; she petulantly attending mass while staying with anti-Catholic relatives following the Civil War; but at the close of the novel Ripley has Scarlett moving away from her roots both in the faith and in the land.

Peace is a central dimension in all the major religions of the world. When Ripley and Clancy put that theme at the center of their novels, they support Jasper's notion that literature has close connections with religion. The writers offer different lessons to their readers, however, on that theme. Clancy finds hope for peace in a deeper understanding and commitment to the very core of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. That commitment holds the promise of peace within a land promised to all. Ripley seems prepared to let religious traditions go, and the land with it, as Rhett and Scarlett take upon themselves the end of finding peace, hope, and meaning in their lives. These novels illustrate two trends that characterize religion in America today: a striving for greater commitment to religious convictions; and a willingness to surrender traditional religious views in favor of those that are personally constructed.

III. A POTPOURRI OF NOTIONS RELIGIOUS

No less than the novels already discussed, those written by Amy Tan, Stephen King, and Jean Auel afford more than adequate evidence to substantiate Jasper's claim with respect to the connection between literature and religion. Hopefully, what is offered here will whet the appetite of readers to get into the novels themselves.

*The Kitchen God's Wife*⁹

Amy Tan's novel is brimming with issues that concern the church in general and women in particular. Winnie, a Chinese woman and the principal character, is forced to deal with her own abandonment by her mother and the fear of being abandoned again by her daughter. She struggles with the abuse her husband, Wen Fu, visits upon her and with a culture that justifies that abuse. She wrestles with the notion that in her culture a woman is expected to sacrifice her happiness for the happiness of others. Having attended a missionary school, she also challenges herself to forgive her abusing husband, but finds the cost too great. It has all been too terrible.

Winnie escapes China and her husband through divorce and marriage to an American-born Chinese Baptist missionary serving in China. Coming to San Francisco, she becomes a faithful pastor's wife. After his death, it becomes evident that Christianity has not seeped deeply into Winnie's faith and thought patterns. Her roots in Buddhism continue to nourish her, and it is out of those roots that the title of the book comes.

Winnie's daughter by Wen Fu, who thinks herself to be the child of the pas-

⁹Amy Tan, *The Kitchen God's Wife* (New York: G. P. Putnam's, 1991).

tor, seems to have little, if any, connection with the church. She, like her mother, is a character in transition. Economically and educationally, she has arrived. But does she know who she is? That is more than an existential question. Throughout the novel Winnie wrestles with whether or not to tell her daughter that in her were the genes of a man she hates, the blood of one who was not a Baptist pastor. Would her daughter forgive her? Would their relationship continue in the face of such knowledge? She doesn't know, and until she is forced to reveal the truth, she will not. Tan's characters are caught between cultures and faiths. In one generation they have moved out of a feudal-like society with its Buddhist heritage into a modern world where, outside Chinatown, the landscape is punctuated by the steeples of Christian congregations. As readers follow Tan's characters through this transition, they cannot help but be confronted with questions of good and evil, hope and despair, religiously informed social expectations, forgiveness, and meaning. It is to find meaning that Winnie returns to her earliest heritage. No matter what she has suffered from it, she finds refuge in Buddhism and the image of the Kitchen God's Wife. Tan sees Winnie's daughter, committed to neither Buddhism nor Christianity, cut loose from traditional religion—a modern woman absorbed in her relationship with her husband, children, job, and mother.

*Needful Things*¹⁰

How many sermons have been preached contrasting what people want with what they need? Stephen King writes a novel on that theme—wants that became needs, and needs that became passions to the degree that, in order to possess them, a town is turned destructively against itself.

Mr. Gaunt—alias the devil, the tempter, the deceiver, the father of all lies, satan—comes to a New England town and sets up his antique shop. Once he gets people into his shop he provides them with their greatest need (want). The price is minimal: tell a lie about another, start a rumor, throw garbage on a neighbor's porch, write an accusatory anonymous letter, or puncture the tires of another's car. Almost everyone in the village harbors a passionate need, and for each Mr. Gaunt has an assignment. In a mounting grotesque fashion King peels off the veneer of the characters in his novel and exposes them as the sinners they are. In the struggle between good and evil, goodness hardly has a chance. Taking a cue from the evangelist's words of Jesus, King writes that Mr. Gaunt looks upon the people as sheep without a shepherd—all waiting to be fleeced. More specifically he writes: "Times changed; methods changed; faces, too. But when the faces were needful they were always the same, the faces of sheep without a shepherd, and it was with this sort of commerce that he (Mr. Gaunt) felt most at home."¹¹

In King's estimation, the church, far from being a source of peace and enlightenment, is the principal antagonist. The novel begins with a town divided between fundamentalist Protestants and Roman Catholics. The latter are sponsoring a gam-

¹⁰Stephen King, *Needful Things* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1991).

¹¹*Ibid.*, 547-548.

bling event of sorts, and the local Baptist minister is leading a campaign to outlaw it. The penultimate event of the book finds these factions joined on the streets in mortal combat – shooting, beating, and knifing each other with deadly effect. Only when the local police chief, King’s version of the modern day savior, realizes that Mr. Gaunt is behind it all, are ways found to defuse the battle, allowing peace to descend again upon the village. Having done what he has come to do, Mr. Gaunt moves on – looking for his next opportunity to set up shop.

Needful Things is a tale of Armageddon. Better than most preachers of fire and brimstone, King sketches out a terrible struggle between good and evil, and the susceptibility of all to the inveigling methods of the evil one. His portrayal of the church can be seen as either judgmental or biblically consistent.

The church can be viewed in this novel as closed, militant to the point of ugliness, and hateful. What kind of people fill the pews on a Sunday morning? Reading this book, one could learn they are the absolute opposite of what Paul commends in Romans 12 and elsewhere.

On the other hand, the church has consistently reminded itself that, as the people of God, it is also the primary target of the evil one – it is the one that will be attacked with all the subtlety and savagery that the evil one can muster. From that perspective, readers could learn to be watchful, for the devil is about, seeking those whom he can devour.

It is worth noting here that Rice, Clancy, Ripley, Tan and King give the church, if not God, a prominent place in their novels. As the saying goes, “With friends like these, who needs enemies?” Still, these novels provide clear evidence of the pervasive presence of the church in the United States, even in a culture that is rapidly becoming more pluralistic.

*The Plains of Passage*¹²

Taking as the setting for her novel the close of the ice age 27,000 years ago, Jean Auel is the only one from the selected list of novelists who does not deal directly with the church – or does she? In fact, a sense of the religious pervades this novel. Auel’s detailed and cosmic descriptions are beautiful and fascinating. She endows her characters, primarily Ayla and Jondalar, with a profound sense of the holy as they attempt to understand themselves within the creation. In the evolutionary transition from Neanderthals to Cro-Magnons, the latter are gaining in their capacity for moral judgment and ritually religious expression. Tolerance, justice, and the negative consequences of a morality based on an “eye for an eye” all find a place in the novel. Love-making takes on the form of ritual in *The Plains of Passage*, as does cleansing.

Symbolic washing, a means of cleansing the heart and soul, is among the oldest of religious rites. Auel intends us to see it practiced 25,000 years before the birth of John the Baptist. One of her characters is ravaged by cruel men. As a result, she withdraws into herself. She is a person, writes Auel, bearing shame and a deep sense of uncleanness. She is finally set free when a shaman takes her into a cave with a pool carved out of rock into which warm waters flow, and ritualistically

¹²Jean M. Auel, *The Plains of Passage* (New York: Crown, 1990).

dips her in the pool; she is washed by the waters and words of the shaman. At the close of the rite a wooden plug is pulled from the bottom of the pool. As the water drains away, the evil that has marred the young woman is understood to drain away with it. She emerges from the rite a different woman. The long shadows over her life have been removed, and she can be free again to relate to men – both sexually and socially. She has been reborn.

Although Auel sets her novel in a prehistorical context, she is unable to refrain from dealing with moral and religious issues that are of great concern today. This may well have been her intent. In any case, those who read her novels will be forced to explore the nature of the relationship between men and women, will find material to reflect on the doctrine of creation, and will find another witness to the transforming power of ritual.

IV. SOME CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Thirty years ago it was fashionable to talk about the demise of religion in America. God was dead and the secular city was projected as the abode of the future. The accuracy of that projection is now under scrutiny. While Timothy Lull took for granted the growth of secularism in a 1991 article for this journal,¹³ a recent article in *Time* takes a different perspective. The writer argues that baby boomers are re-discovering religion. Not all making that discovery have an interest in the church; but those who do are having such an impact, the writer continues, that “the church will never be the same.”¹⁴

Limited as this study is, it does confirm Jasper’s thesis about the connection between literature and religion, and challenges the projections of thirty years ago about the demise of religion in America. Less Christian, perhaps, but hardly less religious. The distinction is important. As the church engages in its mission to the world, this study illustrates that the world has varied and highly charged religious views. Its portrait of the church, in terms of both doctrine and structure, is often inconsistent with the church’s self-portrait. Nevertheless, this is the world in which the church is called to serve.

“Reading the Audiences” is a new course offered in the Luther Seminary curriculum. It exists because of the conviction that pastors and teachers need to know the persons they would serve and the context in which they live. Reading the novels that many in that audience are reading can be a very helpful tool toward that end – novels which in their own way reflect, critique, and shape the religious consciousness of those who read them. Pastors and church leaders should consider choosing a novel or two from the current best-seller list to delve into the world created by their writers. These books may not be great literature, but the exercise can prove interesting and enlightening.

¹³Timothy Lull, “Confirmation: The Theological Issues for Lutherans,” *Word & World* 11/4 (1991) 366.

¹⁴Richard N. Ostling, “The Church Search,” *Time* (April 5, 1993) 44-49.