



# Lost in the Good Book: Learning to Read with Thursday Next

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**W**e all know what it feels like to be “lost in a good book”—that is, so engaged by a book that we are transported to a different place and effectively “lost” to the world around us. This happened to me recently while reading a German novel in a restaurant, to the extent that I was shocked when brought out of my reverie by people at the next table speaking English. Wasn’t I “in” Germany?

Recent research may even tell us how or why this works. It appears that our neural systems track aspects of story in ways that “mirror those [brain functions] involved when people perform, imagine, or observe similar real-world activities.”<sup>1</sup> Thinking about all this led me to fantasize about that wonderful world of ideas within the books that fill my office, literally from floor to ceiling—novels, short stories, history, philosophy, theology, Bibles, commentaries, journals. What do all those ideas and insights do in there? Are they really trapped within their covers? What happens at night when I leave? Does Barth chat with Brunner, Melville with Hawthorne, C. S. Lewis with Athanasius? Do some of them fight—Wellhausen and

<sup>1</sup>Nicole K. Speer, Jeremy R. Reynolds, Khen M. Swallow, and Jeffrey M. Zacks, “Reading Stories Activates Neural Representations of Visual and Motor Experiences,” *Psychological Science* 20/8 (2009) 989.

*Learning to read is a lifelong process, producing ever new results. This applies to all literature, including the Bible. Those who want to read and teach the Bible must pay attention to its various literary characteristics, and Jasper Fforde’s novels in his Thursday Next series can help us reflect on how to do that.*

Childs, say, or Twain and Fennimore Cooper, or Elert and Wiesel, or Calvin and Luther? If I hid under the desk, could I hear the cacophony of voices as soon as the lights went off?

Those impossible notions seem possible because the ideas come so completely to life as soon as the covers are opened—so real that surely they must be bubbling and festering inside, struggling to emerge and to speak even while sitting not so quietly on the shelf.

#### LEARNING FROM JASPER FFORDE

My long-held impossible notion that the characters within books might talk with one another is now the primary plot device behind Jasper Fforde's clever and creative novels in his Thursday Next series—one of which is, in fact, entitled *Lost in a Good Book*.<sup>2</sup> As Fforde commented in several TV interviews while visiting the Twin Cities in March 2011 to promote his then latest book, he envisions the characters in books as one might understand the characters in a play: that is, while “on stage” they are bound to the written text and the nature of the character as created by the author, but “offstage” they have a life of their own. Just as Meryl Streep was not confined to her role in, say, Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* once she had left the Broadway theater, so also in the “BookWorld” (as created by Fforde), the Cheshire Cat, for example, has much more to do “offstage” than he is allowed when confined to his textual and pictorial tree in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*—including nothing less than serving as librarian of the “Great Library,” the huge expanse where everything ever published can be found, where books are constantly maintained, where unpublished material is stored in the “well of lost plots,” and where new books are constructed.<sup>3</sup>

When characters or human beings are given freedom, one result—in fiction as in life as we know it—is, alas, mischief or mayhem, which is why the BookWorld requires its own policing system (Jurisfiction), and our hero Thursday Next is a Jurisfiction agent. Suffice it to say that intriguing adventures ensue!

At one level, the Thursday Next books are simply creatively entertaining, especially for people who care about literature and language, writing and words, or allusions and illusions. At another level, they share with other good volumes of fantasy and science fiction the ability to offer a penetrating satirical critique of present culture—including, for example, the portrayal of the huge and amoral Goliath Corporation, which finally seeks nothing other than “world domination”; the ubiquitous Toad News, “proudly disseminating sensationalised rubbish since

<sup>2</sup>The series, as of now, includes in this order: *The Eyre Affair* (2002), *Lost in a Good Book* (2002), *The Well of Lost Plots* (2004), *Something Rotten* (2004), *First among Sequels* (2007), and *One of Our Thursdays Is Missing* (2011). These are the dates of the American editions, all published by Viking, New York. The seventh book of the series, *The Woman Who Died a Lot*, is scheduled to appear as this article goes to press.

<sup>3</sup>In Fforde's world, the cat is now “The Cat Formerly Known as Cheshire,” since a change in county boundaries in Fforde's fictional Britain has made him actually the “Unitary Authority of Warrington Cat”; see *Lost in a Good Book*, 178–179.

1645” (Is it only I who can hear “Fox”—or the whole Rupert Murdoch network—behind “Toad?”); a culture that has so damaged our attention span and ability to think that pretty much nothing remains other than “reality” TV, with shows like *Sell Your Granny* and *Celebrity Kidney Swap* at the top of the charts; or Stubbs coffee shops where no one can still afford the outrageously expensive coffee, but where people continue to come and sit over empty cups because “the ambience in the café was so good and the establishment so fashionable.”<sup>4</sup> The “real world” is a good place to visit, fictional characters come to realize, but you wouldn’t want to live there, since then you would “have to suffer the worst rigors of being real—aging, death and daytime television.”<sup>5</sup>

But at yet a third level—this one perhaps of more interest to our concern here for thinking about the relation between “word” and text—Fforde’s books offer an easy and rather comprehensive entry into aspects of literary criticism, including issues of genre, character, plot, narration, and the like, all of which must be cared for by the Council of Genres in the Great Library, and all of which, of course, must be taken into account by those who want to read and understand the Bible. As such, the books might serve pastors and teachers seeking to introduce such ideas to students and parishioners—helping them, perhaps, to get lost not merely in a good book, but in *the Good Book*.

#### THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

The Good Book *is* literature, of course—or at least that. Yes, we confess the Bible to be the word of God, but, as I note elsewhere, that word takes “flesh” both in the body of Jesus of Nazareth and in the body of texts that comprise the Bible itself, and a failure to take seriously either one—the physical and historical Jesus or the diversity, complexity, and beauty of actual biblical texts—is to sidestep the wonder of incarnation and to miss a crucial dimension of Christian faith.<sup>6</sup>

The explosion of “Bible as Literature” courses in the mid-twentieth century came about, in part at least, by the necessity—in this age and in this culture—of secular colleges and universities to move away from anything like confessional perspectives, even in the religion departments, while still desiring to examine and even treasure the place of the Bible in Western literature and religion. To some degree, that forced and artificial separation of “literature” and “word of God” might help explain the suspicion, for some, of viewing the Bible as literature, wondering if such a perspective does not inherently undermine a confessional understanding of biblical authority.<sup>7</sup> It need not do so, I think. More than that, as I have argued, the

<sup>4</sup>Fforde, *One of Our Thursdays*, 101.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>6</sup>Frederick J. Gaiser, “The Heresy of Infallibility,” *Word & World* 26/4 (2006) 355–356, and “The Heresy of Infallibility, Revisited,” *Word & World* 32/4 (2012) 323–325.

<sup>7</sup>David Robertson, for example, maintains that the literary critic must steadfastly avoid asking about “the accuracy of historical assertions” in a book like the Bible and any other questions of “truth,” at least as this has normally been understood by readers of the Bible (see Robertson’s *The Old Testament and the Literary Critic* [Phila-

Bible is authoritative precisely and only *in* its textual and literary complexity, but this case still needs to be made among many believers who resist the idea that the Bible can be read and studied in the same way one enjoys and examines any other piece of literature.

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Besides, literary issues were not just invented by or for the sake of secular religious studies. Students of the Bible—whether in secular or ecclesiastical institutions—began to employ the tools of literary criticism (in some cases, centuries ago), because they discovered that such tools helped them read, and read well, which hardly seems an alien task. Those of us who take the Bible seriously know that learning to read is a lifelong process, producing ever new results; we are happy to find help wherever it is available.

What do we mean here by literary criticism and what good will it do us? Patricia Dutcher-Walls writes,

Literary criticism refers to a wide range of methods that take seriously the literary expression and artistry of biblical texts. Use of these methods can help preachers pay attention to the passages they use for preaching and be aware of their own interpretive strategies in reading those passages. . . .

Since 1965, influenced by the study of literary method in other fields, literary criticism in biblical scholarship has developed methods that investigate the narrative and poetic artistry of texts, examining such things as plot, character, imagery, emotion, genre, effect, and the like.<sup>8</sup>

There is nothing new in any of this, but Jasper Fforde’s creative play with these aspects of literature might help us appreciate them anew, and might serve as teaching devices in our parishes and classrooms.

### *Genre*

When Netflix asks us whether we prefer horror movies or romantic comedies, it is asking a genre question. Literature, including movies, comes in different categories (or genres), each with its own conventions and expectations. (Trying to describe in a sermon the significance of genre, I once noted that if you find yourself in a horror movie, you should *never* go to the basement—especially if you are a teenage girl in your underwear!) The Bible, too, includes a great variety of genres.

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delphia: Fortress, 1977] 11–13). Such a rigid understanding of “literary criticism” is not what I have in mind in this essay.

<sup>8</sup>Patricia Dutcher-Walls, “Literary Criticism,” in *The New Interpreter’s Handbook of Preaching*, ed. Paul Scott Wilson et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008) 51. Earlier on, the term “literary criticism” was applied to what later became known as “source criticism” (JEPD, etc.), but that is not the sense in which it is now used.

We know that an epistle is not a gospel, that parables are not beatitudes, that Proverbs and Deuteronomy are somehow different, and that these differences have something to do with how we must read and understand these portions of Scripture. True, there are times and places in which context and genre are overlooked in citing a text, perhaps in preliterate cultures or in order to make a rhetorical point (“The Bible says...”). Used appropriately, that can have its own validity (just as, for example, we might cite Shakespeare or Socrates without necessarily noting chapter and verse). But we also know that out-of-context citations can be used carelessly or even destructively, so most of us now, at least in our preaching and teaching, need to examine and expound texts in their literary and historical integrity.

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Broadly speaking, poetry and narrative, for example, are different genres (each of course with a myriad of subgenres), and they, too, must be read differently. As I continue to discover in adult forums and elsewhere, people of faith often have difficulty coming to terms with the fact that much of the Bible is poetry, perhaps because of the influence of adages like “more truth than poetry,” which assume that poetry is somehow less “true” than story or history. How can the Bible be true if it is poetry? Yet, the fact remains that the majority of the direct discourse between God and humans in the Bible—in both directions—is poetry. What does this mean? I sometimes tell my students that it is almost impossible to overstate the theological (not just literary) significance of that observation.

Probably exaggerating the difference, Thursday Next tells us, when a mission requires her to enter Longfellow’s poem “The Wreck of the Hesperus”:

I’d visited enough Poetry to know that it’s an emotionally draining place and on a completely different level. Whereas story is processed in the mind in a straightforward manner, poetry bypasses rational thought and goes straight to the limbic system and lights it up like a brushfire. It’s the crack cocaine of the literary world.<sup>9</sup>

Poetry was an emotional roller coaster of a form that could heighten the senses almost beyond straining. The sun was always brighter, the skies bluer, and forests steamed six times as much after a summer shower and felt twelve times earthier. Love was ten times stronger, and happiness, hope, and charity rose to a level that made your head spin with giddy well-being. On the other side of the coin, it also made the darker side of existence twenty times worse—tragedy and despair were bleaker, more malevolent.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Fforde, *First among Sequels*, 304–305.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 313.

Even if this distinction is too sharp, poetry and narrative are not the same. We know that we need not envision God literally riding across the heavens in a chariot in order to appreciate the wonder and mystery of the psalmist's depiction of God's divine majesty (Ps 104:3). This perception is possible only because we know something about what poetry is and how it works (even intuitively, perhaps, for those who have not given much thought to this). Sometimes, though, believers can fail to appreciate the gift of poetry and other literary artistry and attempt to flatten all Scripture into a single genre, thereby boiling it down, and ridding it of all metaphor and dramatic irony, which, as Thursday's Commander Bradshaw warns, can render "once-fine novels mere husks suitable only for scrapping."<sup>11</sup> But the fact remains that the prophets, too, speak in poetry—almost always—and readers, forgetting this, can get bogged down in trying to figure out the "historical" moment of something like "the new heavens and the new earth" (Isa 66:22), thereby committing, at the very least, a genre error and distorting the plain sense of Scripture in the process (because here the plain sense is, in fact, its poetic sense).

God apparently wants us to get lost in God's own divine poetry. We can only do that if we let it *be* poetry, and then read it in the same way one reads good poetry—that is, not only metaphorically, but intensively, repetitively, rhythmically. We need to work with our musicians to figure out how to do this with Psalms in worship. We need to practice the poetic repetition and rhythms in our sermons to help people to get it, to get lost in it. We might, on occasion, even mirror the poetic or lyrical genre of a text in a sermon. That will take more work, but it might make a text come to life in a new way.

### *Narration*

It might be more difficult for some of us to recognize that the narrative portions of the Bible are also "literature."<sup>12</sup> We have been taught—rightly, I think—that the biblical narrators are trustworthy, but we must remember that they are not, in the modern sense of the term, historians, nor are they omniscient (even in the biblical texts). They speak from within their own worldview, and they do not tell us everything we might want to know. Where *was* Thomas the first time Jesus showed up, and what did he do in the intervening week? And their reports, even if true, cannot take us back in history to experience firsthand the complete wonder of the resurrection or the magnitude of the exodus. (And in the latter instance, is what we see in our minds when we hear "exodus" more Cecil B. DeMille than it is Bible?<sup>13</sup>)

<sup>11</sup>Fforde, *One of Our Thursdays*, 56.

<sup>12</sup>In fact, Pickwick (Thursday's cloned dodo) argues with some validity, "Poetry is prose in another form, and prose is simply poetry waiting to happen"; *ibid.*, 95.

<sup>13</sup>What readers see or hear in their own imaginations is so powerful that it actually projects back into Fforde's BookWorld and changes things there. The written Harry Potter, for example, became "seriously pissed off that he'd have to spend the rest of his life looking like Daniel Radcliffe"; *One of Our Thursdays*, 69. Things go in the other direction as well: recognizing the power of language, Jurisdiction is seeking ways to hold real-world authors accountable for the effect on others of their overuse of violence (*ibid.*, 273). One might think such sanctions could be

Thursday Next speaks often, for example, of the difference between the BookWorld and the Outland (Fforde's term for the real world). Adrift in a boat within fiction, for example, Thursday (a "real" character in the novels) notes,

By fixing my eyes on a random part of the ocean, I could see the same wave would come around again like a loop in a film. Most of the BookWorld was like that. Fictional forests had only eight different trees, a beach five different pebbles, a sky twelve different clouds. It was what made the real world so rich by comparison.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, though biblical narrators are trustworthy, they and other biblical characters (including Jesus) may employ irony, overstatement, metaphor, or satire to make a point. The reader will be left to try to figure out when and how this happens, with no absolute guideline for getting it right. How in the world, for example, does the narrator want us to hear his report that "Solomon loved the LORD, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places" (1 Kings 3:3)? But that "only" is the big one for the Deuteronomic theology that informs this narrator: one God, one altar! Is this irony on the part of the narrator? A preview of "simul iustus et peccator"? We are invited to wonder how it is that God loves this apostate idolater and how the divine promise will work itself out with Solomon at the helm. The outcome remains unsure at this point, which is part of the narrative artistry of the text (1 Kings 3:14).

Or, as some have asked, how should we read the centurion's statement at the cross, "Truly this man was God's son!" (Mark 15:39)? Is this a straightforward (if surprising) confession, as it has usually been understood, or is it a sarcastic and unwitting announcement of a theology of the cross: "Truly *this* man was the Son of God?" It depends on the performance of the narrative (for which there are no notes in the text), and we are left with ambiguity. Not necessarily a bad thing, as Gerhard von Rad has noted, since the Hebrew speaker "is in general far less concerned with linguistic precision and the avoidance of ambiguity than we often assume"; indeed, "if a phrase or a word could have several possible references, so much the better, for the saying was thereby enriched."<sup>15</sup>

And what of attempts to alter the narrative to suit our own tastes? Thomas Jefferson did just that when he created his own cut-and-paste Bible (devoid of miracle),<sup>16</sup> and so do the various Bowdlerizers and wielders of paraphrase, who continue to make texts come out "better" than they actually are. Such folks show up in the Thursday Next books as well—the Bowdlerizers, for example, seeking to excise

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usefully applied to real-world politicians, campaign marketers, and commentators as well, who regularly argue that their irresponsible violent and biased rhetoric is, after all, "only words."

<sup>14</sup>Fforde, *First among Sequels*, 304. *One of Our Thursdays* contains a much fuller description of the differences between the BookWorld and the real world as experienced by the written Thursday when she ventures into the Outland; see esp. 182–237.

<sup>15</sup>Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 2, *The Theology of Israel's Prophetic Traditions*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper & Row, 1965) 84.

<sup>16</sup>Jefferson's work is available in many versions, titled either *The Jefferson Bible* or (in Jefferson's own words) *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*.

unseemly language, or the beastly Verbisoids and Adjectivores, who seek out and devour whole classes of words, thereby destroying the meaning or the richness of texts. They are a major target of Jurisdiction agents like Thursday, since the very integrity of literature is at stake.

We wouldn't do such a thing, of course, and certainly not with the Bible! Except that we do, as we cut our own pericopes, do our own edited readings, and make choices about including *this* verse, but not *that* one, in our sermon texts. Narration is a tricky exercise—and discerning readers of the Bible must think carefully about how it works.

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Here, too, of course, our task as teachers and preachers will not be limited to understanding *how* narrative works; we must actually *make* it work—telling and retelling the biblical stories in ways that invite people into them. Increasingly, especially in a time of diminished biblical literacy, sermons and lectures must be *in* the biblical story rather than merely talking *about* the biblical story. Sometimes, in fact, a rich story—not a mere anecdote—might be able to retell the biblical story with little or no reference to the latter, though most often the preacher will want to cash this in by making clear how the sermonic story points to what God is up to in the Bible.

#### *Characterization*

Fforde plays everywhere with the characters of fiction (and sometimes history), allowing them to be quite different people out of script than they are as we meet them in the texts. And characters are complex. In *First among Sequels*, the “real” Thursday meets her fictional counterparts who are characters in the Thursday Next novels *within* the storyline of Jasper Fforde’s Thursday Next novels (it gets complicated!). Thursday1–4 (from the first four novels within the novels) turns out to be engaged always in “violence and gratuitous sex” (for which the readers love her), while Thursday5 is the “nice” Thursday (whom the “real” Thursday prefers but whose book the readers—that is, the “readers” within the novels—reject). Yet, both of these characters derive from the “real” Thursday. Eventually, she must come to terms with the fact that both reflect aspects of her character, and she comes better to understand who she is.<sup>17</sup>

Good characterization does that. It helps us know the character (in the book

<sup>17</sup>As one hopes might occur in our own lives, the character of the “written Thursday” develops as she grows and matures. She becomes a much more fully developed character in *One of Our Thursdays*, where she is the main narrator of the book.



or in the Bible), but it also helps us know ourselves. But even in the Bible “characters” are a literary device. They might be real (Jesus, Paul), or they might be fictional (the Good Samaritan), or we might not be certain (Jonah? Job?), but as we meet them in the Bible, they all exist as literary characters. And they are complex (one might say, the better the literature, the more complex the characters). Why is the Paul of the Letters not exactly the same as the Paul of Acts? Why is the Jesus of Mark not exactly the same as the Jesus of John? Different authors have developed the literary character of these real people to make different, yet equally valid points. And the reader is thereby enriched, recognizing in a different way the breadth of possibility and meaning in the texts (and in the reality behind the texts). Here, too, a sermon on, say, the character of God’s “messenger” as described in Malachi should not be identical to a sermon on the character of John the Baptist in one of the Gospels. The texts and narratives are different, and the preacher should work with the character at hand—without, of course, precluding the possibility of moving then to how the characters are related intertextually and theologically.

### *Reader Response*

The reader inevitably plays a significant role in the meaning of texts.<sup>18</sup> In Fforde’s *Something Rotten*, Hamlet, the character from Shakespeare’s play, is given leave to enter the Outland to see why people in the “real” world regard him as something of a “ditherer.” On seeing that world for the first time, Hamlet says, “Tis very strange!...It would take a rhapsody of wild and whirling words to do justice to all that I witness!” Warned by Thursday to use something other than Shakespearean English “out here,” Hamlet continues, “All this [namely, a “fairly innocuous” street scene] would take millions of words to describe correctly!”

“You’re right. It would,” [says Thursday]....That’s the magic of the book imagino-transference technology....A few dozen words conjure up an entire picture. But in all honesty the reader does most of the work.”

“The reader? What’s it got to do with him?”

“Well, each interpretation of an event, setting or character is unique to each of those who read it because they clothe the author’s description with the memory of their own experience. Every character they read is actually a complex amalgam of people that they’ve met, read or seen before—far more real than it can be just from the text on the page. Because every reader’s experiences are different, each book is unique for each reader.”

“So,” replied the Dane, thinking hard, “what you’re saying is that the more

<sup>18</sup>A rigorously exercised “literary criticism” would have as little interest in the reader’s response as in the author’s intent. Only the text matters. But such separation is artificial and finally silly, since no text ever penned itself, and no text was written without some reader in view (even if that reader is only the author herself). For a balanced view of reading “behind,” “in,” “around,” and “in front of” the text, see David Lose, “What Does This Mean? A Four-Part Exercise in Reading Mark 9:2–9,” *Word & World* 23/1 (2003) 85–93. Note also Annabel Patterson’s confession of “our secret, guilty knowledge that every lyric voice had an original owner,” in her “Lyric and Society in Johnson’s ‘Underwood,’” in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, ed. C. Hošek and P. Parker (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985) 151; cited by Donald K. Berry, *The Psalms and Their Readers: Interpretive Strategies for Psalm 18* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic, 1993) 146.

complex and apparently contradictory the character, the greater the possible interpretations?”

“Yes. In fact, I’d argue that every time a book is read by the same person it is different again—because the reader’s experiences have changed, or he is in a different frame of mind.”<sup>19</sup>

Many will find this a slippery slope, wondering now whether anything means anything. And we are to apply this to the Bible? But is this not as good an explanation as any for why, as every preacher knows, there is more than one sermon on a given text—even more than one perfectly *good* sermon? And is it not confirmed every time the pastor reads the sermon notes from the kids in the confirmation class? How did they possibly hear *that*? Some may simply not be paying attention, of course, but would the responses from the adults be all that different? People hear differently because people are different. Pastors preach differently—in response to the same text—because pastors are different; and they are more different still three years from now when the text turns up again. True, it may be that sometimes we just get it wrong, but careful and well-intentioned readers hear differently too. To move into dangerous territory, does not how we respond to biblical texts about, say, “homosexuality” (a word the Bible doesn’t know) have at least something to do with who we are and what we have experienced?

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This does not and cannot mean, I hasten to add, that nothing means anything or that texts mean whatever we choose them to mean. A reader’s response that has integrity must be a response to the actual text, something that exists, something that can be debated and discussed. We can’t just make it up. But this difference among faithful readers does mean that biblical interpretation must be a communal effort, where all our diverse experiences (and all our careful exegetical analyses) are brought to bear for the sake of common understanding—or at least for the sake of respectful disagreement.

Within a discussion of reader response fall the various “hermeneutics of suspicion” that more or less argue with the biblical text or the biblical narrators from the perspective of a present philosophical, cultural, theological, political, or ideological position, which the biblical authors and characters are assumed not to share or of which they might simply have been unaware.

In *The Eyre Affair*, for example, readers (within Fforde’s novel) who want a “happy end” are deeply upset with the “original” ending of *Jane Eyre* (not the *Jane*

<sup>19</sup>Fforde, *Something Rotten*, 21–22. Alberto Manguel makes the same point in a more “academic” setting in *A Reader on Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010) 4: “A book becomes a different book every time we read it.”

*Eyre* perhaps sitting on your shelf—that is, Bronte’s actual *Jane Eyre*), since it never provides a “strong resolution” that finishes the tale and allows Jane and Mr. Rochester finally to marry.<sup>20</sup> Thus, given their “happy end” hermeneutic of suspicion, they are much more pleased with Thursday’s altered ending (which *does* make the book the one sitting on your shelf) than with Fforde’s fictional “original.” In our “real world,” Jefferson’s Renaissance humanism is one hermeneutic of suspicion (and he, too, tries to “fix” the original), as is feminism’s dis-ease with the male-dominated world of the biblical age; for that matter, so is the notion of “iner-rancy”—at least as used under the influence of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century rationalism—which I would say is equally a form of “suspicion” (though it is rarely named as such), inventing an ideal Bible that is quite unlike the real one.

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Given all these responses to the biblical message that are inevitably floating around in the pews and the classroom whenever we preach or teach, we need to find ways to harness their energy. Most often, I want simply to sit back and let the preacher’s words and ideas wash over me, carry me away, take me to a new place, and move my heart, mind, and soul. But I never go to church without my pen and notebook, because I inevitably respond. Sometimes, I think, we should find creative ways to draw out that response—to bring the interaction into the worship service (as we are more likely to do in the classroom). What *are* people thinking, hearing, believing—and how might we help each other find our way more deeply into the text? We do not want to turn the gospel message into something up for debate—the genre of proclamation means to *do* something to, for, and in the hearer, not just announce something “interesting.” If someone runs in during worship and yells, “The church is on fire,” we don’t debate that—we flee! A sermon wants to be that kind of “literature.” Yet, the gospel, too, warrants interaction and commentary, and sometimes we might provide space for that even within the worship service (or, perhaps better, in my opinion, in a forum immediately following).

#### *Plot*

Plot refers to how events and characters in a narrative are put together so things go somewhere—providing tension, interaction, direction, continuity, and interest.

Interestingly, Fforde and his novels finally have to give up the notion of time travel (which does exist earlier on in the stories), because the primary characters discover that it destroys story and meaning and direction. Nothing is really going anywhere at all—at least, not at all predictably—and the result is not story but

<sup>20</sup>Fforde, *The Eyre Affair*, esp. 64–65.

chaos. The ChronoGuard, that agency that attempts to keep the time stream in order, finally has to be put out of business, because time travel itself, as Thursday notes, is “technically, logically, and theoretically...*impossible*.”

“Good thing, too,” replied Landen [Thursday’s husband]. “It has always made my head ache. In fact, I was thinking of doing a self-help book for SF novelists eager to write about time travel. It would consist of a single word: *Don’t*.”<sup>21</sup>

One problem in time travel, or in entering the BookWorld at all, is the possibility of inadvertently or deliberately altering (forever!) the text of an established book. This is a most serious offense, as Thursday learns in *The Eyre Affair*. As we have noted, she *does* alter the ending of *Jane Eyre*, and despite the good and absolutely necessary reasons for this, she faces serious consequences. You can’t mess with plot—it’s what makes story work.

In the sense we are using it here, plot may be what makes sermons work as well. There are many “rules” or suggestions about effective sermon outlines and structures. In my own seminary homiletics course, we learned that a good sermon had three parts, each one deriving from a provocative title. That worked, often quite well. In my classes now, though, there is generally just one rule: a sermon should start somewhere, go somewhere, and know why and how. That is, it needs direction and continuity—a plot.

And what of the Bible? Is there a plot? Is it going somewhere? Is it about anything? Or is it merely a series of spiritual meditations or moral tales? I tell my students that if they urge people to read the Bible, they should be prepared with a hundred-word answer to the perfectly reasonable question, “Oh? What’s it about?” The students’ paragraphs attempting to work that out always provide interesting discussion.

The Bible is the story of God, to be sure—a particular God, Israel’s God—and, apart from that, it is “only” religious literature of archival interest. It is, however, a rich and complex collection, so its plot line requires some constructive work; it is nowhere given as such, though the confession of Deut 26:5–11 provides a starting point (“A wandering Aramean was my ancestor...”)—with creation accounts stuck on the front (and retaining their effect throughout) to tell us where this all began and why we are not what God meant us to be. And the story goes on to tell us how God works through Israel (and then through Jesus, who might be seen as “Israel” writ large) to redeem and restore all humankind and all the earth. The story is going somewhere, and time matters absolutely (even more than in Fforde’s fiction, for in the Bible, time is not just necessary for plot, it is an essential theological reality). And we cannot just start with Jesus. God has been up to this saving business since the beginning, and we cannot know what God is doing in Jesus of Nazareth without knowing the “backstory” of the Old Testament.

As Thursday Next knows, without a backstory, the present story is bereft of

<sup>21</sup>Fforde, *First among Sequels*, 350.

its depth and meaning. (Even if that backstory is not known to the present reader, it is what gives the characters their interest and complexity). Thus, in order to bribe a TransGenre Taxi driver to take her into a dangerous literary landscape within the BookWorld, Thursday first promises that she will buy him a fleet of new cabs, but, even more enticing, she notes that “MasterBackstoryist Grnksghty is a personal friend of mine, he’ll spin you a backstory of your choice.”<sup>22</sup> Now, who could resist that?!

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*Would Jesus have chosen the Old Testament “backstory” for his life and work? Is it not, as Bultmann claimed, a history of failure or a miscarriage and therefore dispensable?*

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An interesting question for us to entertain (as some have): Would Jesus have chosen the Old Testament “backstory” for his life and work? Is it not, as Bultmann claimed, a history of failure or a miscarriage and therefore dispensable? Apparently not—not at least for Jesus and Holy Scripture; it is rather the complex “real world” within which God is working out God’s promises for Israel and all humankind. Neither the Bible nor Jesus could think of giving it up. This, of course, is why that backstory (the Old Testament) is itself canon and Holy Scripture for Christians (not just valuable background information).

#### ON TEXT AND TRUTH

Ah, but is it true? The question will not and cannot go away for people of faith. A half-century ago, Gerhard von Rad recognized that while we absolutely could not get along without the picture of Israel unveiled through the methods of historical criticism, those methods on their own could not “really do justice to the Old Testament scriptures’ claim to truth.”<sup>23</sup> Neither, of course, can the methods of literary criticism. Those too are indispensable for those who want to continue to learn to read—indeed, for those who seek truth—but neither they nor any other tool will lead us ineluctably to the truth that “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor 5:19 RSV).

Such truth is a gift of faith. It does not come apart from work and study, from reading and prayer, from worship and meditation—and it will be given to different people in different ways. In no case, however, can it finally dispense with words and texts, stories and poetry, song and narrative, wisdom and law; for the Bible’s truth is a particular truth, tied to a particular history and to a particular people (and a particular Person). That particularity is why we do all the “criticisms” that literary, historical, and archaeological science can come up with. We want to know—not because to know is to believe, but because to believe is to want to

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 308.

<sup>23</sup>Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 2, 417.

know. It is *this* God to whom we give allegiance: the God of the Bible, the God of Israel, the God of Jesus Christ. In his novels, Fforde invents a conglomerate “Global Standard Deity,” of which church Thursday’s brother Joffy is a minister. That God, as the fictional Professor Blessington tells us, has “very little to do with all the fluff and muddle down here on the material plain”; the church of the GSD, Blessington continues, “enjoyed moderate success, but what God actually thought of it no one ever really knew.”<sup>24</sup> Surprisingly, the biblical God does have to do with the “fluff and muddle” of the world, and *that* God, the one who entered history and who inspired texts, will never be undermined by a few questions about genre and plot. All such elements contribute, in fact, to making that Good Book a good read. ⊕

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<sup>24</sup>Fforde, *Lost in a Good Book*, 223.