

A-TUMBLIN' DOWN: A NOVEL, by Sarah Hinlicky Wilson. No place: Thornbush Press, 2022. 490 pages. \$29.99.

Sarah Hinlicky Wilson has many gifts: a theologian and pastor, a blogger, an expert chef who ventures into off beat international cuisines, and a writer of memoirs and novels. The novel *A-Tumbling Down* is a gripping narrative of the life of an American Lutheran pastor in upstate New York in the 1980s. The pastor Donald Abney, and his wife, Carmichael, with their three children, experience many of the angsts of the parish, vividly told and lovingly detailed. If any of our readers are longing to read about

a Lutheran pastor and parsonage life in living memory, this book will fill that need. Almost anything I write about the story will be a spoiler, so in lieu of giving away the plot, I will place the book in greater context.

Once I had a conversation with a good pastor who had recently suffered similar issues as the family in this book, and we both agreed there needed to be some place where pastors who had gone through these crises, could debrief and receive emotional support. No one could help, he said. He realized this when his bishop came and simply triangulated the parties, so everyone was left wounded and bleeding. The pastor recognized he would have to go through it on his own. He did so bravely but had to leave his congregation. He needed some sort of process to begin healing. Sometimes there is no solution except fiction. Aristotle in his *Poetics* argues that a great drama or story can heal, by helping us identify with the characters in the drama and thus experience their story. The experience will be cathartic and may set us right again.

Hinlicky Wilson writes in the great tradition of parsonage literature. The authors in this tradition are often pastors' daughters and is a significant part of the Western literary treasury. The English have Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters, and Anthony Trollope whose Barchester Towers series deals with issues in the English manse as does the contemporary author Susan Howatch in her Starbridge novels. Americans have Harriet Beecher Stowe, especially *The Minister's Wooing*, (1859) to say nothing of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*. Lutherans in more recent America have Conrad Richter's novel *A Simple Honorable Man* (1962), based on his father's ministry in Pennsylvania. The list is far too long to more than suggest a few.

A-Tumblin' Down, novel, set during the years 1988–1990, involves a pastor, his wife, and their three children. The wife is an English professor in a nearby college. Her thesis on *Letters from an American Farmer* by St. John de Crèvecoeur, is oddly apropos for this novel set in upstate New York. The oldest daughter, Kitty, is especially worked up about what is happening to her father. Everything seems to conspire against them as they get ensnared in trivial battles that become Titanic slugfests between good and evil, a morass from which only God can deliver them. Rarely has a church council meeting been so well portrayed as here. After one of them, Pastor Abney is "running over and over in his mind the council meeting that had not ended in something sweet, only a tense cessation of hostilities until the battle could be resumed" (344). And one council member "ticking off point by point his recent failures, both homiletic and evangelistic, all but stating outright that he was single-handedly driving the church to extinction" (344). Another member prompts him, "politely but firmly, to tender

his resignation sooner rather than later so as to give them time to find a replacement.” (345) Those of us who have heard late night reports on council meetings from the pastor in our family could write these scripts in our sleep, hurtful as they are. They are especially enraging for the families who love the pastor in their midst but are powerless to do anything but listen. Nobody can help, there is no one to go to except watch it grind inexorably down, usually, to an awful ending. There are surprises here in the ending, but you will have to read it yourselves to be surprised.

A-Tumblin’ Down is a fitting addition to Hinlicky Wilson’s repertoire of genres. She has previously published theological reflections on baptism, short stories on eschatology and a memoir on her time as a teenager living in Slovakia shortly after Slovakian independence. Each of these books creatively encounters the problems of ministry and the foibles of Christian life and are wonderful alternative entries to thinking about serious pastoral problems.

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