

When did your passion for literature start?

My passion for literature started in childhood. I come from a very unsophisticated farming and Dutch immigrant background. Neither of my parents finished grade school because they were needed to work on the farm. In my early years, television had not arrived on the scene. Reading was the only entertainment, and my parents and older sister were avid readers, so I just followed their example. As for my half-century career as a college teacher of literature, I just naturally gravitated in that direction because my sister planned to be a high school English teacher. I do not remember making a conscious choice of vocation; it was simply how divine providence arranged my life.

How can a Christian profit from literature?

It is my practice to break this topic into three parts, based on the literary author's threefold task. The first task is to present or record human experience. The subject of literature is human experience, and the truth that literature imparts at this level is truthfulness to life. Literature as a whole is the human race's testimony to its own experience. One practical benefit of reading literature is that we are led to contemplate human experience, and as we look at human experience in this way, we come to see it clearly. I call this knowledge in the form of right seeing.

Secondly, literary authors not only record human experience but offer an interpretation of it. The result is that literature embodies ideas or themes. These ideas can be either true or false, so we need to assess the truth claims of a work of literature. Even when a given work of literature does not measure up to truth as the Christian faith asserts it, the very process of weighing the truth claims of a work is a catalyst to our own thinking about the ideas that are placed before us.

A third task of the writer is to create literary form, beauty, and technique for our enjoyment and admiration. God wants us to have beauty in our lives. We need to be good stewards of our leisure as well as of our work. Leisure can be a growing time for the human spirit, and reading literature offers great opportunities for it.

You are in a special way fascinated with the Puritans. Why is this so? I became a scholar of the Puritans by way of my literary career. My specialty within my profession of professor of literature is the poetry of John Milton, author of the epic poem *Paradise Lost*. Milton was a Puritan. With that as a launching pad, my career as a writer kicked in. One publication involving the Puritans led to another, and then God prompted me to think big, so I wrote a whole book on the Puritans. It was accepted for publication under the title *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as They Really Were*. Then as the circle reached completion, I turned my knowledge of the Puritans back to Milton and became a specialist in the Puritan aspects of Milton's poetry (especially his sonnets).

How did you profit from C.S. Lewis? I will lead into my answer by observing that when I compile the indexes for my books on literature in Christian perspective, I find that there are more entries for C. S. Lewis than any other author. Sometimes as I stand before a class and am about to quote from C. S. Lewis, I ask, "As **who** said?" and the stock answer

is C. S. Lewis. C. S. Lewis simply said so many good things about literature and the Christian life, and said them so well, that it is only natural to draw upon him constantly. It has been a story of providence in my life that just the right Lewis books and essays came before me at just the right times.

You wrote a biography on J.I. Packer. Why did you exactly choose him? What can the church today learn from him? The answer to your second question of what Christians can learn from Packer is the same as I what I just said about C. S. Lewis, namely, that he said the right thing on many Christian issues, and he said them with unusual clarity.

My first contact with J. I. Packer came when as a teenager I walked into a Christian bookstore in my hometown (I actually lived on a farm five miles from town) and by God's providence was prompted to buy a paperback copy of what I later learned was Packer's first published book. It was titled *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, and right to the present day I consider it one of the five most influential books in my life. Years later, when I was reaching closure on my Puritan book, I wrote to Packer asking him to write a preface to the book. To my astonishment, he agreed. Then much later I served with Packer on the translation committee of the English Standard Version, so that by the time I spent two days with Packer going over the notes he had written on my manuscript version of my biography of him, I knew him personally as well as through his writings.

What is in your eyes the main lack in the contemporary literature?

There are many difficulties with contemporary literature. Much of it is too obscure to succeed. On the other side, much of it is too propagandistic and lacking in artistry. Most contemporary literature is a sustained attack on Christian morality and Christian belief. If we include movies and the visual media and the category of popular culture, I will not hesitate to say that I consider most contemporary literature be cheap and tawdry.

Why is there so little creative literature from evangelicals available today? There is no scarcity of literature authored by evangelicals, but the publication scene is so diversified and multiple that it is difficult for individual works to rise to a position of visibility and acceptance. It is also the case that little contemporary Christian literature matches the great works of the past. That is a good reason to read literature from the past to our heart's content.