Dawn Ruth Nelson. *A Mennonite Woman: Exploring Spiritual Life and Identity*. Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2010.

"Mennonites have a problem" writes Dawn Ruth Nelson as she sifts through the past and present of her own Mennonite heritage, all the while asking the question, What is Mennonite spirituality? Through an interview with her ninety-plus-year-old grandmother, Nelson appreciatively tells the story of Mennonite spirituality in America at a time when Mennonites were rural, agrarian, and essentially communal. Against this earlier spirituality, the author examines her own cosmopolitan life, formed on the fringes of the Mennonite community and through researching the development of a spiritual formation curriculum in the 1980s at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary.

A pivotal event in the author's life was a spiritual-emotional burnout in Ireland, while on a peace mission, that led her to realize the inadequacy of an overemphasis on ethics at the expense of inner piety – and to approach the brink of the Mennonite "problem." The problem is that "many are not recognizing that we have a new spiritual situation: The communities many of our forebears, and often we ourselves grew up in, no longer exist in the same way" (86). In this book the author allows us to join her search for what is central to the Christian life and what will sustain that life.

The first two chapters tell Grandmother Ruth's story and identify the significant themes that informed and sustained her spirituality. Fifteen areas are identified, including the ordinary, daily functions of eating, family interaction, farm work, gender roles, rhythms of nature, and the German language. Other things such as music, *Gelassenheit* (interpreted here as "letting go"), church discipline, baptism, Bible reading, plain clothes, daily discipleship, self-sacrifice, community, and mutual aid are also recognized. This was an earthy spirituality of place mediated in large part by community life.

Chapters three and four briefly name the influences on the author's spiritual life, including her introduction to monastic spirituality, and conclude that Mennonite formation today no longer happens in close-knit communities through everyday activities. This is where the need for

intentional contemplative and communal practices are identified.

The next two chapters introduce some important terms and outline the development of spiritual formation at the Mennonite seminary in the 1980s. The last chapter is the most constructive, identifying six key elements of an intentional spirituality for Mennonite community today, including "an everyday, embodied sacramentality; nonconformity; community; service; Gelassenheit or meekness; and the person of Jesus and the Bible" (126).

This book has helped me identify spiritual strengths of an earlier Mennonite community that was similar to the conservative Mennonite church in which I grew up and that today continues to reject the theological and sociological modernization of the progressive Mennonite church. At times, however, the narrative may be overly optimistic in its assessment of the theology and spirituality of this earlier American Mennonite way that was distinctively influenced and shaped by Protestant-evangelical theology while retaining its unique Mennonite ethos.

There is no discussion of earlier Mennonite transitions in North America, and this brings into question what the authentically Mennonite spiritual traits really are. Although this story is geographically restricted to a few specific communities, I suspect its relevance will be understood by many other North American and even European Mennonite communities.

The book's focus is pastoral; however, a more theological and historical analysis would help give depth and breadth to the proposed spirituality. Readers interested in more reflection on some critical issues, such as Mennonites and Pietism, will want to consult the author's dissertation: "How Do We Become Like Christ? American Mennonite Spiritual Formation Through One Woman's Life and One Seminary, 1909-2003" (Lancaster Theological Seminary, 2004).

I recommend *A Mennonite Woman* for anyone interested in recent developments in Mennonite spirituality or anyone desiring Christian formation. This book will assist pastors and congregations in facilitating conversations and group discussions. Dawn Ruth Nelson brings us back to the heart of Anabaptist spirituality and Christian ethics, a relationship with God mediated through Christ. "Mennonite spirituality is something we do (ethics), together (community) . . . . It is a way of life in a group, an everyday sacramentality, based on Jesus' life, death, and resurrection" (148). I trust

that themes identified in this book will lead to much reflection, discussion, and deepening of spiritual life.

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John Howard Yoder. *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution*. Edited by Theodore J. Koontz and Andy Alexis-Baker. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009.

From 1966 to 1997, John Howard Yoder taught a course surveying the history of Christian ethical stances toward war, peace, and revolutionary insurrection at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS) and at the University of Notre Dame. In the early 1970s his lectures were recorded and made available to students in written form; by 1983 a refined version of these extensive course notes became available for purchase at the AMBS bookstore. Now, thanks to the efforts of Theodore J. Koontz and Andy Alexis-Baker, these writings are available to a much broader audience in edited, highly readable form with a title reflecting the name of Yoder's course: "Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution."

In its original format Yoder referred to his compilation of lecture notes as an "unbook book," to signal that the volume was not intended to be as tight, seamless, and systematically documented as a traditional book. Nonetheless, the contents are richly descriptive, thought provoking and well developed.

Although the volume does not seek to provide a unified narrative advancing a formally stated thesis, it manifests coherence through thematic consistency and chronological progression as well as through the probing, intellectually nimble manner in which the author approaches the subject matter. The book's 417 pages of text and 40 pages of supplemental study guides provide a fascinating window into the breadth and depth of Yoder's scholarship, while also enabling the reader to more vividly imagine a classroom experience with one of the defining Mennonite thinkers of the 20th century.

Yoder's survey of eras, leading thinkers, and ethical positions is sweeping but far from superficial. His disquisition on the just war tradition offers a sophisticated treatment of a wide range of developments, including the Constantinian shift, medieval just war principles, the secularization of just war thinking in modern international law, and recent debates over nuclear pacifism, selective conscientious objection, and liberation theology. Even when making a case for pacifism vis-à-vis just war doctrine, Yoder is consistently disciplined and at times generous toward other readings of the Christian ethic, from Ambrose to Reinhold Niebuhr. Appreciating potential applications of justifiable war thinking to restrain and not merely enable leaders, he observes that strict just war reasoning often has a "radicalizing" effect on those who pursue it, by drawing to their attention to the consistency with which war degrades rather than improves the human condition.

With respect to pacifism, Yoder identifies powerful resonances across epochs, linking early church traditions to practices of the Middle Ages, reformation currents, and more recent revival experiences. Tying together diverse threads from Franciscans, Mennonites, and Quakers to the Czech reformation's Unity of Brethren, 19th-century American revival movements, and the Berrigan brothers, he crafts a case for the claim that whenever Christians return to scripture and particularly to Jesus' teachings, potential for affirming nonviolence emerges. In Yoder's words, "pacifism tends to arise wherever there is church renewal" (269).

Though some readers may be inclined to argue for a more nuanced position, particularly in light of contemporary North American renewal movements that embrace a millennialist vision and make little attempt to differentiate between religious and national attachments, Yoder ably demonstrates the vitality of pacifism as an expression of Christian faith commitment, and illuminates a wide range of resources upon which Christians can draw – not only in scripture, but in historical experience and its many localized expressions and movements. In his treatment of nonviolence, he calls for close study of modern nonviolent movements, engagement with leading practitioners and strategists (including Gene Sharp and other protagonists of strategic nonviolent action), and active exploration of how Christians can be both faithful and relevant.

There are many ways in which a new generation of theologians and

ethicists can build upon Yoder's legacy and extend its boundaries. The post-9/11 era bears many comparisons to the Vietnam experience that powerfully shaped the context within which Yoder wrote and taught, yet there is arguably a new urgency to engage more substantially not only with "neo-Constantinian" currents in contemporary Christianity but with the spectre of hostile inter-religious encounter as a theme in current international conflict dynamics.

On the whole, *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution* is an enlightening, timely, and invigorating read. Accessible to the layperson, it is also sure to prove valuable to the specialist for its unique presentation of material and for its combination of substantive historical exposition with perceptive commentary informed by Anabaptist-Mennonite faith commitment.

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Charles K. Bellinger. *The Trinitarian Self: The Key to the Puzzle of Violence*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2008.

To understand violence is to understand our complicity in it. To overcome it, or to find alternatives, it is important to understand the roots of violence. This is Charles K. Bellinger's task in *The Trinitarian Self: The Key to the Puzzle of Violence*. In his attempt to develop a paradigm that helps us understand the roots of violence, Bellinger enlists the help of Søren Kierkegaard, Eric Voegelin, and René Girard. Although it may be a stretch to depict this paradigm as a New Copernican Revolution, which Bellinger does, the paradigm does demonstrate the delicate balance needed in order for peace to reign.

The paradigm mirrors the triune God and consists of three dimensions of existence: the vertical axis, which depicts the hierarchy of being (nature below, God above); (2) the horizontal plane, which encompasses the social; and (3) the temporal trajectory of the self, which represents the life lived in a given time encompassing the past the self comes from to the future the

self moves towards. Violence, argues the author, occurs when one of these dimensions outweighs or is given priority over the others. Such is the case in three examples offered: fundamentalism, with its focus on the vertical axis; political utopianism, which is horizontally centred; and individualism, with its focus on the self.

In developing this paradigm, Bellinger uses Kierkegaard to demonstrate the temporal trajectory of the self. Kierkegaard reasons that the self has the ability to turn away from rebellion against God, which exists within human sociality in its corrupted form ("the crowd"), by becoming an individual who through faith in God moves into a positive sociality characterized by love of God, self, and neighbor (20). It is through practice and training (*askesis*) that one can become an individual and embody true selfhood before God as one models him/herself after the prototype of true selfhood, Christ.

Bellinger uses Voegelin as the representative of the vertical axis. Voegelin suggests there are two forms of theophany through which to learn about God: revelation and philosophy. These two forms provide the means through which humans can learn about the accumulative truth of God; through these forms we become aware of and can learn from the wisdom of the past, interact constructively and ethically with fellow humans, and respond to the "pull of the divine" (34) in order to enter the genuine life of the spirit. *Anamnesis* (recollection, remembrance, recovery of what was lost) allows us to learn more about the vertical nature of God while we are led towards a renewed experience of God.

Bellinger turns to Girard as the representative of the horizontal plane. Humans have a tendency toward *mimetic desire*, the propensity to imitate and mimic others, believing they are models, in the pursuit of success and greater fullness of being. Mimetic desire, however, is at the root of our social systems falling away from God as we fail to look at God revealed in Christ as the one whom we should mimic. As we fall away from God, we seek someone or something that will act as society's scapegoat and draw attention away from the actual problem. The Holy Spirit – the paraclete (*parakletos*) – is the power that helps overcome mimetic violence and the need for a scapegoat. Through the Holy Spirit's defense (the principal meaning of *parakletos*), we are able to live with one another in peace and harmony, knowing that Christ,

the one scapegoat that makes all other scapegoats superfluous, has already been sacrificed. Through the continual presence of the Holy Spirit, we are reminded that Christ is the model we should be mimicking.

After creating and explaining the threefold paradigm, Bellinger projects it onto different scenarios to show how it helps us understand violence in different realities. However, the reader is left wanting to know how to engage and respond to the different scenarios in specific ways.

Although the direction and argument are not always clear, and more in-depth analysis into some of the very broad topics would be helpful, Bellinger's overall argument does help us realize and understand the complexity within violence and how, in order to achieve lasting peace, we must seek balance among the three dimensions of reality.

Andrew Suderman, Director of the Anabaptist Network in South Africa

J. Gerald Janzen. *At the Scent of Water: The Ground of Hope in the Book of Job*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009.

There once was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job . . . . To read these first words of the Book of Job, especially to read them aloud and taste their cadence on the tongue, is to evoke memories of other great stories that begin in like manner: "Once upon a time . . . " or "In the beginning . . . " or even "A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away . . . ." Such words are invitations to open a door, cross a threshold, and embark on a journey beyond familiar times and places, though, as often happens with great stories, the journey sometimes wends its way very close to home. So it is, J. Gerald Janzen reminds us, with the great and terrible journey of Job.

Janzen has proven himself to be a trustworthy guide for this journey. For several decades he has engaged this text in rigorous study, publishing in 1985 a detailed commentary on Job for the Westminster John Knox Press *Interpretation* series. In his more recent book, Janzen enters the story world of Job with a different orientation. While retaining the critical methods of a biblical scholar, he adds rich insights from such diverse sources as the poetry of Robert Frost, theories of developmental psychology, the philosophical

musings of Alfred North Whitehead, and Janzen's own experiences and encounters with Joban suffering.

Rather than a chapter-by-chapter treatment of the text, Janzen takes a thematic approach, with the title revealing the book's ultimate trajectory: toward hope. He suggests that the story of Job reflects the theological struggle experienced by the Israelites during the Babylonian exile. This was partly a struggle between different understandings of God as reflected in the two great covenants – the covenant with Abraham and Sara, and the covenant with Moses and the people at Sinai. Janzen describes the two covenants as reflecting different theological "default positions," with the Abrahamic covenant representing a "personal clan God" and the Mosaic covenant representing a "cosmic high God."

While the Mosaic covenant would have been the more functional mindset for the people prior to the exile, Janzen suggests that the experience of suffering during the exilic period undermined the reward-punishment foundations of that covenant. To find meaning in the midst of their struggle, the people turned to the theological heart of the much older Abrahamic covenant because it offered a God who remained steadfastly present in the face of suffering. According to Janzen, the story of Job reflects this very pattern and search for hope. "It is as though God is inviting Job to take his place in a world whose dynamism, in all its potential for vibrant life and, yes, danger, bursts through human concerns for 'security first,' concerns that help to fuel the human preoccupation with order and laws and reward-punishment logics," writes Janzen. "It is as though God is inviting Job to give up the logic of reward-punishment for a life-affirming strategy of risk-reward, in which affirmation of life in the face of all its vulnerabilities is the path to true participation in the mystery of existence" (109).

The book would be incomplete without the personal reflections offered in the epilogue. Here, the author's tone becomes more pastoral than scholarly, and the reader is reminded that Job's struggle to affirm life is not only a mirror held up to the journey of the ancient Israelites, it is a very human journey that we all must travel. The tale of Job wends very close to home indeed, as each of us longs for even the scent of water in the arid moments of our lives.

In this relatively slim volume Janzen covers much ground, and at

times one might wonder if he is traveling too many directions. However, the patient reader will be rewarded by the forays into seemingly disparate disciplines, because with each one Janzen manages to masterfully guide us along a side trail to a unique overlook on the expanse of the Joban narrative. Thus, this book will likely appeal to a wide range of readers, and it would lend itself as much to a seminary classroom as to an adult book study in a congregational setting.

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Paul G. Doerksen. *Beyond Suspicion: Post-Christendom Protestant Political Theology in John Howard Yoder and Oliver O'Donovan*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009.

In a time when John Howard Yoder's work is receiving unprecedented interest in a wide range of scholarly and ecclesial circles, it should not be surprising to find a study of his thought in conversation with the British Anglican theologian Oliver O'Donovan. What might be surprising is the common ground that Paul Doerksen finds between Yoder and this so-called state-church defender of Christendom.

Although the book ostensibly intends to demonstrate the otherwise elementary claim that Yoder and O'Donovan represent two different articulations of protestant political theology in a liberal, post-Christendom context, the structure of Doerksen`s comparative analysis suggests his more interesting argumentative direction. The author proceeds by treating Yoder and O'Donovan together on various theological themes and sub-themes. The result is an account of differences that derive not from disparate commitments to good theology but from a common rooting in the Christ event and its decisive importance for Christian political life. This is significant, because caricatured critiques of O'Donovan's work often paint his interest in reclaiming the resources of Christendom as a Constantinian capitulation to worldly realism that finally fails to take Jesus seriously. This

is an area in which Doerksen tries to move 'beyond suspicion' to open up a more charitable space for conversation in political theology.

The phrase the author takes for his title is borrowed from an early chapter of *The Desire of the Nations,* O'Donovan's landmark study in political theology. It indicates for O'Donovan an interest in overcoming the purely critical suspicion of modern thought with regard to theology and politics that insists on separating each so as to avoid the corruptions of the other. According to Doerksen, this is a project in which Yoder is also engaged, particularly in his insistence on reading the church as a fully public and political community. For O'Donovan, however, thinkers like Yoder remain trapped in just this kind of modern suspicion to the extent that their work fails to move beyond critique or pastoral insularity into fully constructive engagements with contemporary political realities.

Doerksen traces the contours of these two attempts at navigating beyond the pitfalls of modern dualisms still at work in liberal, post-Christendom social orders. But he is also engaged in negotiating the mutual suspicion with which each side views the other's theological tendencies. Quite often, this means blunting sharp critiques by demonstrating that their objects are at some remove from the position actually espoused by the other. For instance, Doerksen argues convincingly that the Constantinian shift which Yoder never tires of criticizing is not fairly equated with the Christendom tradition from which O'Donovan wishes to draw. O'Donovan's positive assessment of Christendom, he claims, is built on a rigorous exegesis of God's rule in scripture and a commitment to follow through the meaning of Christ's victory in cross and resurrection. But Doerksen also frequently takes to task O'Donovan`s facile complaints about Yoder's supposedly modern impulses, particularly his ascription to Yoder of a liberal voluntareity and a purely critical (and so apolitical) stance. Doerksen offers a much more nuanced reading of Yoder that highlights both the latter`s fully Christological ecclesiology and his efforts at constructive engagement.

One of the great virtues of *Beyond Suspicion* is its wealth of references to the texts of Yoder and O'Donovan, helpfully synthesized and topically organized. Anyone interested in Yoder's reading of political authority and the state, for instance, will be quickly directed to a multitude of passages, including many from early or lesser-known publications. Of more ambiguous

virtue are Doerksen's suggestive hints at a dialogical openness cultivated in reading Yoder and O'Donovan together. The book's title begs the question of what is to be found on the far side of suspicion, though if Doerksen intends a reply it is only by way of gestures. It is worth noting that *Beyond Suspicion* concludes with a nod to Yoder as more clearly embodying a stance of vulnerability in his engagement with the world. Yet for an Anabaptist readership particularly, Doerksen's book becomes a space in which the unreceptive edges of Yoder's thought are opened to contestation. At its best, O'Donovan's Augustinian recognition of the hiddenness of God's work in the world pushes Yoder's tendency to an ecclesial triumphalism that collapses divine agency into the visible church. And at its best, *Beyond Suspicion* makes room for this to happen.

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John Nugent, ed. *Radical Ecumenicity: Pursuing Unity and Discontinuity after John Howard Yoder*. Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2010.

Radical Ecumenicity brings together several essays from those in the Stone-Campbell movement (Churches of Christ, Independent Christian Churches, and Disciples of Christ – hereafter called SCM), essays from three non-SCM Yoder scholars (Mark Thiessen Nation, Gayle Gerber Koontz, and Craig Carter), and two previously published essays from Yoder on ecumenical dialogue.

Church of Christ scholar Lee Camp argues that Yoder provides resources for SCM churches to redefine restoration not as a "patternistic emulation of the New Testament, but as a return to the gospel of reconciliation" (27). He thus reframes traditional SCM thinking on restoration to center on reconciliation and "participating in the peaceable kingdom of God." In this way, reconciliation is a concept that demands the Churches of Christ

recognize Christians in other traditions while at the same time embodying NT Christianity. This would be in line with what Yoder himself outlines in the two essays at the end of the book. One of the more important points he makes is that such unity in conversation will not come from human works or institutions, but from the Holy Spirit. Yoder's lifelong commitment to dialogue and reflection on church unity, Gayle Gerber Koontz observes, not only affirms with SCM churches that the local congregation is the primary locus of discipleship and unity but also allows room for change based in the NT itself.

Mark Thiessen Nation provides a helpful overview and introduction to Yoder's theology that counters a trend to reduce Yoder to a "Rauschenbusch-type social gospeler." Yoder could hold together both traditional Christian faith and peacemaking, Nation persuasively argues. Craig Carter writes on the same theme but unpersuasively. In order to "save" Yoder from liberal misappropriation, Carter advocates that Yoder's readers "accept Karl Barth's 'practical pacifism' in place of 'absolute pacifism' so as to leave the door open a crack for the possibility of God commanding Christians to exercise lethal force in extreme situations" (99), that they "incorporate a vocational pacifism into a church that also allows for participation in just war for those not called to vocational pacifism," and that they admit that "Reinhold Niebuhr was basically right in affirming vocational but not absolute pacifism" (100, 103). So, in order to save Yoder from liberalism, we have to accept Niebuhrian liberalism.

John Nugent and Branson Parler indirectly address some of Carter's concerns. Nugent's essay addresses the issue of vocation. For Yoder, despite the diversity of occupations Christians may hold, they have "received a single, all-encompassing vocation, which is to announce and bear witness to Christ's reign in the context of Christian community to all creation" (165). This would rule out Carter's reading strategy that boxes Christians into Niebuhrian vocational pacifism.

Parler's essay responds to Paul Martens's claim elsewhere that by the end of his life Yoder was "merely presenting a form of Christianity that is but a stepping stone to assimilation into secularism." Against this misreading, Parler convincingly argues that Yoder did not reduce theology to sociology. In fact, for Yoder theology, liturgy, and ethics are not separate but different

aspects of the same thing.

Joe Jones's persuasive essay uses Yoder as a medium through which to challenge SCM churches to take trinitarian thought seriously. Although Yoder used trinitarian language and was thus not anti-trinitarian, Jones argues, Yoder's concern was not to elaborate or apply the doctrine in any deep way. If he had done so, we would clearly see that Christology necessarily entails trinitarian doctrine to keep from falling into polytheism. Moreover, Jones argues, if Yoder had reflected more deeply on the Trinity, he might have challenged SCM churches to reform themselves based on their identity as radical disciples of the triune God. Absent truthful language about God, the church will inevitably creep into chaplaincy for the reigning politics and economics of the world.

Paul Kissling uses Yoder's "macrolevel" reading of the Old Testament to correct SCM readings that dismiss the OT and also to help SCM churches "see that the narrative trajectory of the Old Testament leads us to reject violence and trust in the Lord to secure our future" (133). In the process Kissling offers insightful, up-to-date corrections to some of Yoder's readings, particularly regarding Ezra-Nehemiah.

What unites these essays into a single book, Nugent remarks, is that they "address two prominent themes in the Stone-Campbell tradition, unity and continuity, albeit in a Yoderian key" (12). This volume represents a growing interest in Yoder from those outside the Mennonite faith who have in the last few years produced an expanding library of secondary literature. Not only do these essays challenge the SCM tradition, they will also challenge Mennonites.

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Leonard Engel, ed. *A Violent Conscience: Essays on the Fiction of James Lee Burke*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010.

The mystery novel genre slowly gains theological credibility. One anecdote reveals our frequent ambivalence. A seminary instructor once told me about his world-famous theology professor. After studying with the man for some time, he was permitted into the fellow's attic, where the illustrious scholar discretely and inaccessibly stored treasured tomes. The student was stunned to see shelves upon shelves of mysteries.

Yet, from time to time, we glimpse connections. Numinous experience is called *mysterium tremendum*, and *c*hallenging doctrines are named "mysteries." In medieval days, scripture stories were popularly portrayed in mystery plays. Christian thinkers write mysteries – consider Dorothy Sayers and G. K. Chesterton. P. D. James's volumes are literary works; their author is informed by Anglicanism.

I am particularly taken by James Lee Burke, a southern US novelist who produces a blockbuster almost every year. While not every single one is equally great, all are inevitably rewarding. I eagerly await each new volume from this best-selling author. English professor Leonard Engel shares my fascination, and pulls together in *A Violent Conscience* a diverse range of academic pieces by various scholars. His book helps plumb what is admirable in Burke's writing, but also introduces the subject of why mystery novels are no longer necessarily "pulp fiction."

Engel tellingly names Burke's way of "casting a hard, critical eye on both past and present, the myth and reality of each" (13). Burke loves actual places where he's lived and their history – Montana and Louisiana especially – and is forthright about what has been lost along the way and past injustices: "The combination of Southern pride, the guilt and shame of slavery, the resentment of Northern intervention, and the ongoing specter of racist practices inform Burke's characters as they attempt to come to terms with the South's troubled past" (19).

Several authors examine Burke's transforming of the genre. Linda Holland-Toll notes that each of Burke's hard-boiled investigators is "on the fringes of urban society" and "hunts down and captures criminals, often in opposition to … institutions of power" (74-5). Yet the protagonists wrestle

with the DTs (or demons?) and sometimes even ghosts (or a troubled conscience?). Sam Coale marvels that "Burke's vision threatens to capsize and deconstruct the typical narrative mystery trajectory":

Burke raises eternal questions that the mystery formula evades and avoids. Exactly what is the nature of good and evil in such a realm? Is resolution ultimately possible? Can historical solutions encompass mythic visions? (129)

Burke's central character is often a troubled police officer or lawyer who struggles with a violent past (usually Viet Nam), alcoholism, and anger. The protagonist confronts unspeakable evil – environmental destruction, child abuse, government corruption – and untangles a sordid network of deceptions.

Two elements invariably unsettle me: Burke's matter-of-fact acceptance and lavishly detailed description of the necessity of violence, and his portrayal of irredeemably corrupt villains. Ironically, Burke is informed by a left-leaning Roman Catholicism of such diehard pacifists as Dorothy Day, Ammon Hennacy, and Daniel Berrigan.

Burke's nuanced Catholicism is refreshing when so few authors today write well about Christians, either caricaturing or lampooning them. Burke mentions Catholic Workers, Maryknoll missionaries, and even Mennonites. One character even cites Augustine. Josiane Peltier insightfully analyzes the complexities of Burke's "Christian value framework including the recognition of the incomprehensibility of destiny and evil" (126).

Burke writes vividly and viscerally about poverty, government corruption and ineptitude, environmental catastrophe, race and class issues, and misguided militarism. He denounces the oppressive School of the Americas and admires the International Workers of the World (the "Wobblies" of the early decades of the 20th century). I learned more from him about Hurricane Katrina than from most news accounts. He'll have a lot to say about the Gulf of Mexico BP oil spill.

This reflects yet another gift of Burke: his love for the environment, shown in lushly detailed descriptions of places and habitats. His portrayal of hot weather, sunsets and storms, bayou swamps, fishing, deserts, and mountain hiking could easily be collected in the finest nature writing anthologies. Yet even these are tragic. Thomas Easterling observes how

"the apparent serenity" of one beautiful location masks "the blights of its history" (142).

One does not read Burke for ideological clarity. He often portrays violent fury as the only resolution and complains that the criminal justice system is too weak. Yet I appreciate his reading reality as tragedy – where good-hearted efforts often go awry and often no one comes out with clean hands or pure hearts. Brad Klypchak notes that while strong-minded pursuit of Christian justice is often framed as well-meaning, nevertheless "there rarely is a singular or simplistic choice" (35).

Burke's work can be summed up as a search for redemption. I do not hide his books in the attic.

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