# The reach of grace: The power of old stories

by John Buchanan in the August 12, 2008 issue

Students of Shakespeare know that the bard didn't create his material solely out of his own imagination, but instead masterfully recrafted stories that were centuries old. And Shakespeare's own dramas have been repeatedly reimagined in contemporary settings. Two novels receiving critical attention these days are both based on *Hamlet*: Lin Enger's *Undiscovered Country* is set in small-town Minnesota, and David Wroblewski's *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle* takes place on a Wisconsin farm. When an NPR book reviewer asked the two authors why novelists keep returning to these old stories, the two agreed that it's because the stories are so good. Enger added, "Shakespeare is particularly adaptable because the conflicts he chronicles—between vengeance and justice, and vengeance and forgiveness—are . . . the oldest moral dilemmas that human beings face."

I was reminded of the power of old stories in another way recently when I read the Shakespearean tragedy/comedy/ morality tale found in the book of Genesis. The lectionary directs the church to the saga of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob, Esau, Rachel and Leah once every three years, in the summertime, when at least half the preachers of the land are fishing or sitting on the beach, having handed their pulpits over to guest preachers. Too bad. Here is a story of betrayal, revenge, forgiveness and (possible) reconciliation. There is romance, deception, theft and, if you read between the lines, eros. And, not unlike a Shakespeare play, all this happens in one family.

Every time I read a portion of the Jacob-Esau saga, I end up reading the whole drama. Esau is so good, straightforward and innocent; Isaac so vulnerable, trusting and human; Jacob so opportunistic, devious and dreadful; Rebekah so committed to the success of her favorite son, Jacob, and so efficient in her choreography of one of history's greatest scams.

And in and through it all, God uses Jacob for God’s ultimately good purposes. You simply cannot read this story without being stunned by the mysterious reach of grace. If God can use Jacob, then there is hope for all of us.

The story turns finally on the outsider’s magnanimity and graciousness. When Esau and Jacob meet at last, Esau does not kill his brother as he vowed, but runs to meet him, reminding the reader of that aggrieved father in the New Testament who runs down the road to welcome a wayward child home. Esau, not Jacob, represents the radical notion at the heart of Judaism and Christianity that the justice God requires is not revenge but forgiveness. The story ends, as good stories do, with some ambiguity: it is quite possible that Jacob is still misrepresenting the truth, still scheming to save his skin. You can’t find a more accurate description of the human condition than that.