

Light reading in the pulpit: Texts for preaching

by [Matt Fitzgerald](#) in the [May 1, 2013](#) issue

We wondered what kind of reading ministers rely on for inspiration or help in preaching—apart from reading commentaries on scripture or other materials directly related to the task. Do they draw on certain authors of fiction or nonfiction? Are they influenced by essays, poetry, magazines or children’s literature? Here are some reflections. —Ed.

I read theology to understand myself and be reminded that I cannot ever hope to understand God. I get my deep meaning from reading dead Germans. Most everything else is entertainment. But it all affects my preaching. Whatever book is on my nightstand follows me into the pulpit. I enjoy crime novels and hope their narrative drive and sense of urgency helps keep my sermons focused and lean. Two of my favorite authors in the genre are Raymond Chandler and James Ellroy. They can both be brutal. I suspect that steady exposure to such nastiness has helped contain or corral my own impulse to preach too sweetly. When I was younger I read Raymond Carver nonstop. While his “theological anthropology” is far too bleak to be of use in the pulpit, his technique is invaluable. Not a word is wasted.

But garrulous writers are also helpful. I try to be humorous, and I’ve learned how to write a sideways joke from two of the masters. I love Charles Portis and P. G. Wodehouse. Sam Lipsyte also makes me laugh out loud. But I always come back to Portis. His deadpan ridiculousness seems tailor-made for the pulpit.

These days I’m pressed for time. Most novels ask for too much. So I’ve turned to essays. My favorite contemporary essayist is John Jeremiah Sullivan. He has a gift for using himself while keeping the focus on his subject matter. Watching him strike that balance is terrific instruction as I stand in the pulpit and try to point toward the cross. Sullivan writes with an honesty and clarity that I aspire to. James Wood calls him a “fierce noticer.” Sullivan himself says he is over his “Jesus phase,” but his essay “Upon This Rock” is the best piece of spiritual writing I’ve read in years.

Finally, poetry: I am a latecomer to poems, but I have a convert's zeal. Poems are often baffling. Even as they reveal truth they mystify. And poems do this with such economy of language. Most of my sermons could be shorter. Poetry has taught me this. The contemporary poets who move me the most are Kay Ryan and Seamus Heaney. Both of them say so much so quickly. Sometimes they are crystal clear, sometimes they are impenetrable. To me this feels like preaching. Some Sundays the electricity shows up. Some Sundays God is silent. Who knows what will happen? In this regard, the words of some poets seem to echo the Word of God. Unlike a good crime novel, good poetry isn't easy. But it is quick to read and gives so much while gesturing toward so much more.

Read [all reflections](#).