

Books that linger

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [April 29, 2015](#) issue



One of the many blessings of being retired from pastoral ministry is that I get to read more books for sheer pleasure. Here are a few that I thoroughly enjoyed.

The Boys in the Boat: Nine Americans and Their Epic Quest for Gold at the 1936 Berlin Olympics, by Daniel James Brown, has been on the *New York Times* best-seller list for 43 weeks. It's the story of the University of Washington rowing team that competed in the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin. The author tells the story from the perspective of Joe Rantz, a raw, unsophisticated teenager with no family to speak of and no resources beyond his own determination and strength. In the sport of rowing, which demands the maximum in self-discipline by and sacrifice, Joe finds a route to self-confidence and redemption.

George Yeoman Pocock, who builds the best racing boats in the world, is a mentor to Joe. He sounds like a skilled chaplain when he counsels:

What mattered more than how hard a man rowed was how well everything he did in the boat harmonized with what the other fellows were doing. And a man couldn't harmonize with his crewmates unless he opened his heart to them. . . . It wasn't just the rowing but his crewmates that he had to give himself up to.

As host of the 1936 Olympic Games, Germany was eager to demonstrate the superiority of Hitler's Aryan culture to the world—which makes the final race between the German and American national teams a tense and riveting read.

Lila, the third book in Marilynne Robinson's trilogy, is a tender story of grace and love grounded in Christian faith. The book focuses on the childhood of Pastor John Ames's wife, Lila, and on their relationship in courtship and marriage.

Robinson has a deep appreciation for Reformed Christian doctrine and theology. Lila recalls when John baptized her in a field of wildflowers, with water from the river. "His voice broke. 'I baptize you in the name of the Father. And of the Son. And of the Holy Spirit.' Resting his hand three times on her hair. That was what made her cry. Just the touch of his hand." Anyone who's presided at the sacrament of baptism understands this passage.

Birds Without Wings, by Louis de Bernières, takes the reader through the final days of the Ottoman Empire and the emergence of modern Turkey as experienced by characters in a small town. In this time of religious and ethnic violence in the Middle East, *Birds Without Wings* reminds us that Muslims, Jews, and Christians once coexisted peacefully in this region.

In *All the Light We Cannot See*, Anthony Doerr deftly weaves together the stories of two youngsters caught up in World War II: Marie-Laure, a blind French girl who lives with her father in Paris, and Werner, an orphan living in a German mining town. As the war unravels lives, their two stories slowly converge. Although they are miles apart, each experiences the paradoxical human capacity for selfless goodness but also demonic evil. The power of the book lingered with me for days.