

Nourishing Faith Through Fiction, by John R. May

reviewed by [Roy M. Anker](#) in the [March 27, 2002](#) issue

Faith is a meaning-seeking venture, and believers are simply those who sense the grace-full Mystery afoot in this world, says John May. The church's tasks are to clarify as best it can the mysteries of an unfathomable God and to make clear the "implications of those mysteries . . . for us." Theology tries hard to couch Mystery in words, but "reasoned discourse" rarely reaches the depths of the "whole person." For that, the arts often work better, especially narrative arts like literature and film that wrestle with the shapes and meanings of human lives. The clearest exemplar of this is Jesus' own penchant for explaining with stories the riddles of God's care for the world.

Appropriately, then, May sets about exploring stories that illumine one historic locus of faith, the Apostles' Creed. And an invigorating tour it is, made so by the depth of May's insight into theology and fiction. May, a Roman Catholic, treats each part of the creed--Creator, Savior and Lifegiver--offering a concise, even terse theological primer on the central mysteries of Christian belief. From these he extracts fetching real-world experiential themes that he then deftly illustrates with "fiction"--poems, short stories, novels and films.

That's where the fun starts, for May is acute in choosing telling stories, and winsome in his treatment of their riches. Here the bent is decidedly Roman Catholic, but then much of the best art has come from Roman Catholics: Walker Percy and Flannery O'Connor in fiction, and John Ford, Frank Capra and Martin Scorsese in the movies. Over all, though, May's references are diverse and wide-ranging, from Robert Benton to Clint Eastwood.

What separates this book from others that link religion and film is May's relish for film as art. His references are something more than arty prooftexts for dignifying a theological point. This will not surprise film scholars, since May has long led in the academic study of religion and film. In *Nourishing Faith*, he has wonderfully distilled decades of study into an enticing and hugely rewarding reflection for use by the

church.