

Graced occasions

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [August 29, 2001](#) issue

A Stay Against Confusion: Essays on Faith and Fiction. By Ron Hansen. HarperCollins, 267 pp., \$25.00.

I am never quite prepared when someone wants to know what I have been reading lately. I have always wished I were the sort of person who could say, "Well, there's Brevard Child's new commentary on Isaiah, of course, and then I'm rereading the complete works of Kierkegaard just for fun." Instead, I close my eyes so that I can visualize the titles of the novels lying beside my bed and choose one that will not embarrass me.

The truth is that I have always reached for fiction or poetry before theology. When I was little, my parents did not take me to church but to the public library. Every Saturday, I walked through the doors of that cool, quiet place and felt reverence settle over me. The whole world was available to me there, as well as worlds beyond this one. All I had to do was reach up to slide a volume off the shelf, and I could go to China with Pearl Buck, or visit the lonely planet of the Little Prince.

Although I did not yet know the word, it was my first experience of transcendence. Through the power of the written word, my budding imagination hitched rides with truly inspired imaginations, delivering me into lives far larger than my own. Before I ever heard a Bible story, my character was shaped by *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Before I ever asked who Jesus was, I met him in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Even after I formally became a Christian, I learned far more about the faith from the poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins and the novels of Charles Williams than I did from the age-appropriate materials I was given in Sunday school.

I have always feared that this was a sign of intellectual weakness on my part, the theological equivalent of preferring *People* magazine to *U.S. News & World Report*. Now Ron Hansen has written a book that helps me feel normal (if not downright discerning) for having found so much consolation in fiction all these years. The author of *Atticus*, *Hitler's Niece* and *Mariette in Ecstasy*, Hansen is a respected

novelist, a university professor and a practicing Roman Catholic--a "daily," he calls himself, whose regular meals each day include the food for his heart that he finds at mass.

The story of his religious education is unusual, if only because it worked. Under the care of "holy nuns" and an "Irish grand lion" of a priest named Monsignor Patrick Aloysius Flanagan, Hansen and his twin brother, Rob, were raised at Holy Angels Church in Omaha, where they learned an unsentimental reverence for Christ and Christ's church. "Everything for me," he writes, "was the mystery of the Holy Being as it was, and is, incarnated in human life. Everything for me, to go even further, was the feeling that Christianity is difficult, but that Christianity is worth it."

Rob Hansen became a Jesuit priest. Ron Hansen became a fiction writer, but this book makes clear that both brothers are serving the same mystery. While Hansen the priest celebrates the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist, Hansen the writer celebrates the sacrament of writing--which, he says, can be viewed as such "insofar as it provides graced occasions of encounter between humanity and God."

The 14 essays in this book provide many such occasions. Whether the subject is Hansen's colorful Grampa Salvador, wearing a purple necktie "that looks like the cosmos just after the Big Bang," or the six Jesuit priests murdered by Salvadoran soldiers in 1989, his clean prose aims to reveal the "mysterious coherence" that abides deep down in our disorderly existence. His extended meditations on stigmata, Eucharist and prayer all support the title of his book, which comes from the preface of Robert Frost's *Collected Poems*.

Frost wrote that a poem begins in delight "and ends in a clarification of life--not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion." Hansen's essays provide similar moments of clarity--especially the first three, in which he writes plainly about the synergy between faith and fiction.

This is a very Catholic book, thoroughly at home with saints, Latin masses and the Real Presence of Christ. It is also a very catholic book, which addresses the universal human longing for meaning through stories that "make the chaos bearable." In his second essay, "Faith and Fiction," Hansen offers a stinging critique of some so-called Christian fiction as sermonizing-in-disguise, "providing first-century, Pauline

solutions to oversimplified problems . . . or offering as Christianity conservative politics."

Instead, he writes, "A faith-inspired fiction squarely faces the imponderables of life, and in the fiction writer's radical self-confrontation may even confess to desolation and doubt. Such fiction is instinctive rather than conformist, intuitive rather than calculated; it features vital characters rather than comforting types, offers freedom and anomaly rather than foregone conclusions, invites thoughtfulness not through rational argument, but through asking the right questions."

Hansen's testimony to his craft is all the justification a fiction lover needs. The love of stories bears witness not to a weak intellect but to the strong pull of the incarnation. Some of us are more able to grasp the truth when it comes to us in the flesh. Meanwhile, to be lost in a good book is not unlike being lost in worship. In both cases, we become forgetful of ourselves, as we discover our kinship with lives larger than our own.

When he is assisting with communion at his church in Santa Clara, Hansen says, "it's the glorious feeling I have when I am writing as well as I can, when I feel I am, in ways I have no control of, an instrument of the Holy Being . . ." Anyone who knows what he means will enjoy his book.