

Up for review: Ventures into popular culture

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [June 1, 2004](#) issue

Like many ministers, I used the popularity of Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* to focus attention in the church on what we believe about Jesus Christ. But I declined to tell people whether or not they should buy a ticket to see the film.

At the end of my series of sermons related to it, a friend pushed back gently by suggesting that I was wrong to say that the world is divided between people who love *The Passion* and those who hate it. "There's a third group," she said. "We may be bigger than the other two, and we're feeling a little marginalized. We're the ones who aren't going to see the movie, who won't go to any violent movies because we think violence in the media contributes to the violence all around us. We don't care about the movie, and we think you are paying entirely too much attention to it." She went on: "There are two kinds of people: those who think there are two kinds of people and those who know there are many kinds."

Chastened by this critique and feeling a little defensive, I set to thinking again about how we relate popular culture to our faith, and how we use it in our preaching and writing, our thinking and theologizing. What's the appropriate level of engagement with the culture around us?

At the risk of dichotomizing once more, I'd say there are two risks. The first is to turn our backs on the world, retreating to our sanctuaries and studies. This is, of course, an old and persistent temptation. The other risk is that we will pay too much attention to popular culture and, with the aim of being relevant and timely, simply mirror the culture's idolatries and preoccupations.

It is not easy to find the balance, but finding it is important. At this magazine, we talk a lot about finding that balance. We have some reservations about the culture and the agenda it sets, and about many movies and books that occupy center stage. But we also want to be timely and helpful. So we do venture into the arena of popular culture with articles on Oprah Winfrey, *The Simpsons* and *The Da Vinci Code*

—not to mention *The Passion* (our articles on that film generated more mail than did any other topic in years).

Here is another venture into popular culture: If you are wondering what to read this summer, I recommend Stuart Dybek's *The Coast of Chicago*, a collection of short stories about growing up on Chicago's gritty streets. I know I'm enjoying a book when I slow down in order to savor each page. The book is this year's choice for the "One Book—One Chicago" program, selected by the mayor's office and the Public Library Board to encourage citywide reading.

In one of the stories, two irreverent, tough young men stand outside the prison complex on California Avenue yelling to their friend Pancho, who is somewhere inside. They know he's going to disappear into that vast, demonic system, and they remember how Pancho used to drag them along to visit seven parish churches on Good Friday because it was his favorite holiday. You'll like this book.