Bookmarks: Summer highlights

Books in the September 22, 1999 issue

As we settle into our every-week publishing schedule, some *Century* editors review some of the books that absorbed their attention over the summer.

John Buchanan:
Summer offers a precious opportunity to turn to the books that have accumulated on my desk throughout the year. My routine is to begin in the morning with a Psalm and a poem or two, read slowly out loud. The poems this past summer were from a recently published collection, *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry*. Berry loves the stuff of human life and writes about friendship, farming, marriage, his mother and father and his wonderful observations of nature during his walks on his Kentucky farm.

Then I turn to the stack that has collected for 12 months. I began by working through Marcus Borg's *The God We Never Knew*. Borg is a Jesus scholar and a member of the Jesus Seminar. I had met Borg and his friend and colleague, N. T. Wright, this year, when they had engaged in a sharp and lively dialogue, so I was interested to know more about how he thinks about the basic issues of faith. I found Borg's early experience to be remarkably similar to my own, particularly his childhood concept of a God "out there" and of the Christian faith as a set of ideas to be believed and rules to be followed in order to get to heaven. Borg mounts a strong argument for why our personal image of God matters, and he helpfully categorizes the familiar biblical and popular images—from the concept of God as monarch to Anne Lamott's "high school principal unhappily leafing through our records."

I was intrigued by Borg's presentation of panentheism—everything is in God—as a theological model that encompasses biblical and personal experiences of the sacred. I particularly like Borg's call to the church to be in the world as the "community and leaven of compassion."

Two very different books followed: Reynold Price's small volume *Letters To a Man in the Fire: Does God Exist and Does He Care?*, and Annie Dillard's *For the Time Being*. Price's book is in the form of a letter to a young medical student terminally ill with

cancer. It was first presented as the Jacob and Lewis Rudin Lecture at Auburn Theological Seminary. Price, who has written eloquently about his own experience with cancer in *A Whole New Life*, believes "that God loves his creation, whatever his kind of love means for you and me." For Price, that love includes the mystery of suffering, which he faces with courage and honesty.

For the Time Being is one of the most unusual books I have ever read. Although it received mixed reviews, I was captivated by it. Like Price, Dillard writes about God, the church, mystery and suffering. In this book she dazzles the reader with crisp anecdotes and vignettes in the form of a "nonfiction first-person narrative"; recurring scenes from Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's paleontological work in China; the lives of the Hasidic Jews of Eastern Europe; the history of sand and cloud formations; accounts of human birth defects; and the story of modern Israel. Throughout, Dillard asks the same questions Price poses: Does God cause human suffering? Does God care? Does God exist? Dillard is a questioner, an honest seeker. I like the book so much that I am doing something I rarely do—rereading it.

As the summer ends, I'm still working my way through Miroslav Volf's *Exclusion and Embrace*. Volf, professor of theology at Yale Divinity School and a regular contributor to this magazine, tackles the urgent human dilemmas of alienation, hostility, exclusiveness and tribalism, drawing on his own experience in Croatia during the recent war.

Finally, for sheer fun, I read David Halberstam's *Playing for Keeps: Michael Jordan and the World He Made*, a world which, until last year, was a source of pride and joy for Chicagoans, now suffering the pathos of having all five of its professional teams with losing records.

Victoria Rebeck:
Thousands—me included—have found inspiration in Roberta Bondi's personal spiritual exploration as chronicled in *Memories of God* and *In Ordinary Time*. I testify that page 22 of *In Ordinary Time* changed my relationship with God. In fact, it gave me a relationship with God, whereas before we had at best a distanced acquaintance.

A Place to Pray continues in the same genre, as Bondi, professor of church history at Candler School of Theology, applies wisdom from the Desert Mothers and Fathers to her own life. This time Bondi starts not with her experience but with the Lord's

Prayer, in which she finds nourishment for her spiritual growth.

The Lord's Prayer can seem problematic. Do its terms "father" and "kingdom" establish a patriarchal deity? When one asks "thy will be done," is one ascribing capriciousness to God? Must one accept all happenstance as God's will? Using an epistolary format, Bondi converses with a "friend" struggling with these and other concerns.

Bondi's frankness and honesty make her a healing force. For example, in the section about "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us," she describes a painful conflict with her husband that occurred at a common transition point, the departure of a child to college. I found breathtaking her description of the confusion, fear and defensiveness she felt when her husband told her that he could no longer play one of his accustomed roles in their relationship. She, too, knew that their lives and relationship had changed, but was afraid that acknowledging this would destroy the familiar equilibrium of their marriage. Fortunately, they were committed to talking and listening to each other. Time proved that truth would not ruin their relationship.

Some people don't feel a need to pick apart and reintegrate the events of their lives, and such readers may react to Bondi as one of my fellow church members did: "She needs to get over herself." But many others will find her a valuable companion.

The bottom line in Bondi's theology is love. Reason, tradition, scripture and experience all lead her to conclude that love is the most important aspect of God's identity and therefore the most important aspect of the Christian life. She persuasively demonstrates that love is the center of the Lord's Prayer. In my summer, which was dominated by reading for a class in Methodist history, *A Place to Pray* reminded me of the central value of theological exploration: the opportunity to rediscover God's love.

Trudy Bush:
Browsing through a Seattle bookstore late last spring, I happened upon a display of novels that had won 1998's main literary prizes. I picked out three. The book that looked the most enticing was the one I haven't yet finished: Michael Cunningham's Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Hours*. Beautifully written, Cunningham's novel intertwines the stories of three women—Virginia Woolf as she begins to write her great novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, in 1923; Clarissa Vaughan in contemporary New York City as she

prepares to give a party for a friend who has won a literary prize; and Louise Brown, an unhappy young mother in 1949 Los Angeles who tries to stop reading *Mrs. Dalloway* and force herself to focus on her husband and child. The book performs the difficult feat of both lyrically echoing Woolf and being original. I was so struck by its connection to Woolf's novel and by the way writers are inspired by, react to and move beyond each other's work that I decided I should reread *Mrs. Dalloway* before finishing *The Hours*.

Ian McEwan's *Amsterdam* is a suspenseful, fast-paced morality tale. Without a superfluous word, McEwan tells a devastating story of self-deception and of poisoned friendship. Two longtime friends, the editor-in-chief of a major London newspaper and a well-known composer, attend the funeral of a woman who was once the lover of each. Horrified by her swift descent into helplessness, they agree that should either of them ever become similarly helpless and demented, the other will kill him. Each soon faces a moral dilemma which reveals his selfishness and self-delusion, and each blames the other as his life falls apart. The novel presents a dark view of human nature, yet I found it bracing rather than depressing. McEwan tells his story with wit and irony, allowing the reader to draw her own moral conclusions.

The novel I liked best was Alice McDermott's *Charming Billy*, winner of the National Book Award. This story also begins with a funeral. Billy, lovable, charming and a hopeless alcoholic, has finally succeeded in drinking himself to death, and his large extended Irish family and friends gather at a funeral dinner to discuss his character and life. Was he pathetic, a man helplessly in the grip of a genetic disease, or was he somehow heroic, a man who refused to compromise with life and who loyally clung to his first, lost love? A true romantic, Billy has never stopped longing for the Irish girl to whom he was briefly engaged when he was young, and who, he thinks, died of pneumonia shortly before she could return to the U.S. to marry him.

We soon discover that Billy's lifelong obsession and his anger at God were based on an illusion, a well-meant lie told him by his cousin, Dennis, to shield Billy from the pain of the girl's betrayal of him.

In telling the story of the two cousins and of the close-knit Irish Catholic community in which they are embedded, McDermott explores commitment both to love and to religion—two faiths, for these people, "no less keen than their suspicion that in the end they might be proven wrong. And their certainty that they would continue to believe anyway."

Dean Peerman:
"El Corte," the cutting, it was called—a euphemism akin to "ethnic cleansing." It was one of the worst massacres of modern times, though most of the world seems to have forgotten about it. It took place in the Dominican Republic in 1937. Raphael Trujillo, a military leader and former sugar plantation guard (and former hoodlum) who had been trained by U.S. marines during the 1916-1924 U.S. occupation of his country, managed to get himself elected president in 1930 (there were more votes than eligible voters). Seven years into his rule, Trujillo secretly ordered the killing of thousands of immigrants—most of them sugarcane cutters—from Haiti, the country with which the DR shares the island of Hispaniola. In his view, the Haitians, whom he considered inferior beings, had simply become too numerous. The military police were instructed to use machetes in their murdering, in the hope of putting the blame on civilians. Some Haitians were given a choice, however, of jumping off a high cliff rather than being hacked to death.

The novel *The Farming of Bones*, by Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat, is set in that terrible time, but while politics, race and class are among its subjects, it is far from being an ideological tract. Danticat writes a poetic, evocative prose that is replete with vivid human details, and her characters are distinctive, fully realized individuals. In this work, history and fiction are interwoven in a seamless and compelling fashion.

Amabelle Desír, the novel's Haitian-born narrator, is a servant in the home of a prominent Dominican family—a family that has raised her since the age of eight, following her parents' death by drowning (an event she observed helplessly from the riverbank). When Señora Valencia, the mistress of the house, is about to give birth, Amabelle unexpectedly has to serve as midwife. The señora has twins—a boy, who shortly dies, and a dark-skinned daughter. At one point she says to Amabelle—in words she no doubt thinks are inoffensive: "Do you think my daughter will always be the color she is now? My poor love, what if she's mistaken for one of your people?" Señor Pico, the twins' father, a colonel in service to "the Generalissimo" (as Trujillo is referred to throughout), cannot bear even to look at his swarthy daughter after her twin brother dies.

Mature for her 25 years and remarkably confident despite her servant status, Amabelle allows herself to show a more tender and vulnerable side only in the presence of her lover, a canecutter named Sebastien Onius. When the crackdown comes and Amabelle and Sebastien realize they must flee for their lives,

circumstances separate the two, and Sebastien is arrested (by Señor Pico, we learn much later) along with Father Romain, a liberal priest who had arranged to smuggle a group to Haiti. Eventually Amabelle finds out that Sebastien has been executed. She and Sebastien's friend Yves do manage to escape, and after a harrowing odyssey (including a near-fatal ordeal that leaves Amabelle disfigured) they finally reach Haiti. Amabelle survives, working as a seamstress, but she never marries, and she remains troubled by her painful memories. At age 50—after the Generalissimo has been assassinated—she returns to visit the señora, but communication is awkward and difficult between them after so many years. The señora tries to apologize—and make excuses—for her husband's role in "El Corte."

Danticat's semiautobiographical first novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, was an impressive debut, but The Farming of Bones is a richer work, haunting and heartwrenching.

Tensions continue between the Dominican Republic and its much poorer and culturally different neighbor. Just last year, for example, at least 14,000 Haitians were repatriated—in many cases minus possessions and paycheck. One faint sign of hope: also last year, direct mail service was established between the two countries; previously mail between them had to be routed by way of Miami.

James M. Wall:
Oscar Hijuelos's novel *Mr. Ives*' *Christmas* is a quiet and provocative meditation on the meaning of the Christmas season told through the life story of Edward Ives, a foundling who was adopted and raised by a widower. There was nothing really special about Ives, other than his remarkable insistence on remaining a Christian in spite of the death of his teenage son, killed a few days before the young man was to enter seminary to study for the priesthood.

Ives earns a respectable living as an illustrator for an advertising agency. Because his future wife models for art classes, he sees her naked before he is introduced to her. That chance meeting is significant because much of Ives's interior dialogue dwells on his sense of loneliness, which he continually, and futilely, anticipates will be addressed through erotic encounters.

Hijuelos, a Cuban-American, received a Pulitzer Prize for *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* (1989), a stylistically quite different novel. Both books clearly reflect Hijuelos's Cuban connection and his deep nostalgia for, and ambivalence toward,

Cuban culture. Mr. Ives does not know his birth parents, but he assumes he has a Latin background and feels most at home within New York City's Cuban-American community.

In *Mambo Kings*, a story that focuses on two brothers who moved from Cuba to New York, Hijuelos describes the immigrants' longing for home through "songs written to take the listeners back to the plazas of small towns in Cuba, to Havana, to past moments of courtship and love, passion, and a way of life that was fading from existence." Songs written and played by the brothers were "about flirtation, magic, blushing brides, cheating husbands, cuckolds, and the cuckolded, flirtatious beauties, humiliation. Happy, sad, fast and slow."

In a phrase that anticipates the mood of *Mr. Ives*' *Christmas*, Hijuelos adds, "and there were songs about torment beyond all sorrow." Torment permeates Ives's life, starting with his motherless childhood and reaching a defining moment when his son is killed. Hijuelos describes a sense of melancholy in Ives, a feeling that hovers just beneath the surface of all that he does, a sadness that never takes full control of his life because it is countered by his strong Christian faith. In the aftermath of his son's death, Ives is forced to accept the cruelty of this meaningless and shocking moment in his life with an equanimity that testifies to his conviction that faith is the power to remain at peace in spite of "torment beyond all sorrow."

Hijuelos relates Ives's loneliness to his annual anticipation of Christmas as both a time of dread—a reminder of his son's death—and of hope, enhanced by the smells, sights and feelings of his Catholic tradition.

It is rare to encounter a novelist with Hijuelos's awareness of the power of belief in God's gift of the Christ child, delivered as a mystery, which reminds us of the connection between the joyfulness of Bethlehem and the torment of Calvary. There is an element of saintliness about Ives as he retains his belief in the overarching love and power of God in spite of the shattering impact of his son's murder. Ives knows his experience is not unique—suffering is the human lot—a reality that is confirmed when he begins to attend a Protestant evangelical church where he listens to "hundreds of stories of heartache and tragedy, and conclude[s] that the only way to deal with suffering [is] to trust in God and cling to the path of righteousness." Still, although Ives has his doubts, he pushes onward "with the conviction that sooner or later there would be some kind of payoff, some sense that goodness, in and of itself, was its own reward, that events, even cruel ones, happened for reasons that, in one

way or another, would benefit the community of man."

The reader closes this novel realizing the people in Ives's life do not understand either the burden he carries or the strength with which he refuses to let his suffering define his life. And, in truth, I don't believe Hijuelos wants Ives himself to understand fully what he has experienced until that moment when "Jesus would be coming out of His resting place and the world would be filled with miracles. He would be dressed in great white flowing robes, a beautiful light filling the church. With pained but transcendent eyes, bearded and regal, He would come down the central aisle toward Ives and placing His wounded hands upon Ives' brow, give His blessing before taking him away . . . off into His heaven."