# Glimpse of the holy: Notes on three spiritual writers

by Brian Doyle in the April 29, 2015 issue


tree with roots
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One of my pet peeves is the general addiction to the new book. It seems sometimes that we consider living writers only when they have emitted a fresh tome. This is understandable, I suppose, since a new book provides the natural impetus to look at previous work; but it's also unfortunate, as between new books we let terrific writers fade away.

A second peeve—I am motley with peeve this morning—is the pigeonholing of writers. I understand the urge to categorize, to use shorthand, to choose a shelf on which to file a book; I get it that often a label *does* actually hint at the essence of a writer's work and concerns; and I much enjoy finding my own books filed under a hilarious plethora of labels, from Parenting Skills (as if) to Men's Studies (of which I know nothing).

I particularly bemoan the label Nature Writers inflicted on some authors, when to me and to many other awed and moved readers they are writers of immense spiritual power and verve.

So we arrive, on a two-peeve highway, at the work of Barry Lopez, Annie Dillard, and David James Duncan, three of the finest spiritual writers in these United States, whose work should be read steadily and thoroughly by anyone interested in spiritual prose. With total respect to the wry geniuses Frederick Buechner and Mary Oliver, they may well be the most eloquent and articulate and passionate and funny and furious spiritual writers in America too.

Start with Lopez: his work is often filed under Nature, Environment, Landscape Studies, Travel, perhaps even Zoology—he did, after all, write a lyrical book about wolves (*Of Wolves and Men*). But here is a man whose 40-year career as one of the most eloquent prose writers in America has been finally about reverence and our responsibility toward the holiness of all beings. Even when he is furious—no one has written more searingly and bitterly about America as a rape culture, addicted to power and domination, to pornography, to lying, and to ignoring the horrifying truth of rape in America (one in six women, one in eight boys, by some estimations)—he finds ways and means to reach for hope and healing.

While he is a meticulous historian (read his lean, sinewy *The Rediscovery of North America*, about what actually happened when Columbus stumbled into the Caribbean) and a scholar of the relationship between landscape and human culture (the subject of his National Book Award–winning *Arctic Dreams*), his work as a whole is a long meditation on attentiveness, reverence, protecting the holy spark of life in every form, the deep thrumming joy of community, and the way that lies murder community.

"In conversations over the years with other writers and artists," he has written, "I've been struck by how often, deep down, the talk becomes a quest for the same mysterious thing . . . a source of hope."

> I believe an artist has to remind herself or himself, in other words, that when you write or paint or compose music, you draw in mysterious ways on the courtesy and genius of the community. It is this sensitivity to gifts welling up unbidden, this awareness of the fate of the community . . . that divides art from commerce. The role of the artist, in part, is to develop the conversations, the stories, the drawings, the films, the music—the expressions of awe and wonder and mystery—that remind us, especially in our worst times, of what is still possible, of what we haven't yet imagined. And it is by looking to one another, by attending to

> the responsibilities of maintaining good relations in whatever we do, that communities turn a gathering darkness into light.

Similarly with Annie Dillard, whose *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is the most eloquent and transcendent book of meditative attentiveness to the nonhuman world I have ever read, who many times herself dodged the label Nature Writer, and instead uses words like *theology* and *awe* and *mystery* and *God* to describe what she is after.

Yes, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974) can be classed with the best of Rachel Carson, Aldo Leopold, and Edward Abbey as a work that brought an epiphanic attentiveness to animals and landscape to the fore in American writing, influencing such interesting writers as Terry Tempest Williams and Scott Sanders. But Dillard is also the author of a peculiar and wonderful book called *For the Time Being*, which is either a masterpiece or a lyrical muddle or both at once; I do not know of another book that draws such divergent opinion, ranging from adoration to shrieking.

I thought it was a swirling work of brilliance; seemingly and frustratingly about clouds and clay soldiers and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and torture and horror in its opening passages, it subtly becomes a book about awe and wonder and quotidian miracles and grace under duress.

Those are, to be sure, her enduring concerns, in poetry (*Tickets for a Prayer Wheel*) and essays (*Holy the Firm*). And no writer grapples more bluntly and furiously with the question of how a world so filled with pain and horror and grief and blood can be God-infused and God-suffused, breathed into being by God, embraced and riven with a merciful loving God; how can this be, that such pain is allowed, that such loss is part of such a glorious gift? That is the central question of *Holy the Firm*; if you have never read Annie Dillard, start there, and then dive into *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, which I suspect will be read for centuries in America and elsewhere.

Finally, David James Duncan, known foremost, and rightly so, for his Northwest coming-of-age novel *The River Why* and for his epic sprawling *The Brothers K* (baseball novel, family chronicle, a soaring American novel to rival the sweeping Russian novels inflicted upon us when we were young and unwary), and sure to be even better known next year when his long-awaited massive novel *Sun House* is published. But it is Duncan the essayist who is as tart, funny, ferocious, and devout as any spiritual writer I know—and devout across all religious lines.

Duncan is soaked and conversant in Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sufism; no popular writer whom I have read is more in love with John of the Cross, Meister Eckhart, and Julian of Norwich and quotes them freely, scattering their wild wisdom in essays that seem to be about rivers and children and birds and death and baseball.

“The thread in my heart,” he writes, in an essay about waking up to the blinkered cruelty of the Seventh-day Adventist church in which he was raised, “whispered this: The only Jesus of any use to you is the one being born in the manger of your shabby heart. And who knows, He might be as eager as you to escape the scribes, pharisees, goody-goodies, and theological insurance salesmen. So go ahead. Connect Him to broken winged sparrows and baby lambs born beside the wild spring inside you. As the Gospel has it, there ‘are so many other things Jesus did that, if they should be written, every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written.’”

If you have never read Duncan, my advice is: start with his essay collection *My Story as Told by Water* (a finalist for the National Book Award), next see if you can find his hilarious and furious essay collection *God Laughs & Plays*, and then, if you are Duncaddicted, read his uncategorizable collection *River Teeth*, which is both essays and stories. By then his novel *Sun House* should have been published, and I predict that it will be something of a spiritual classic, in a category with Rumer Godden’s *In This House of Brede*, J. F. Powers’s *Lions, Harts, Leaping Does*, Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*, and . . . but the long list of superb spiritual novels is another whole essay, and I had better conclude, right here.