

The literary pastor

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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In my tradition, candidates for ordination are examined on the floor of our governing body. It's one of the most dreaded things. In seminary, professors often begin lessons by saying, "Now, if you're being examined on the floor of Presbytery..."

The actual examination can consist of no questions, or you'll be interrogated for two hours. There's no telling. I was examined in South Louisiana and one pastor asked me, "Do dogs and cats go to heaven?" I was horrified at the time. Even Karl Barth in his voluminous work did not cover that topic. What was I to say?

I answered, "I don't know."

Now, I think it was probably a more useful question than what I thought about double predestination. It certainly had more practical implications for what we do in the parish. (And—if you're wondering—I would answer with a hearty "yes" today, because of my understanding of Colossians 1:19-20.)

One pastor in New Orleans would end every examination by asking, "What is your favorite work of fiction?" The other ministers collectively groaned. But I applauded the question. To be in South Louisiana meant being in a land of stories. As this [NYT article](#) observed, South Louisiana is "a place that produces writers the way that France produces cheese—prodigiously, and with world-class excellence."

Tennessee Williams, Kate Chopin, Walker Percy, Ernest Gaines, John Kennedy Toole, and Truman Capote—you could hardly pastor while ignoring their words. You could not disregard how the folk tales of briar rabbit reverberated from the slave quarters. You could not ignore the local mythology that William Faulkner shot rubber bands at the nuns in the convent across from their lodgings. And why would you want to?

Maybe it's because I began my work in Louisiana, where tiny Cajun restaurants would invite authors to write their names on the columns in Sharpie marker, in the same way that other restaurants framed actor headshots, but I think reading fiction is an important part of being a pastor. Entering another worldview, gaining empathy,

speculating where our present choices might lead us—these are all important aspects of pastoring. Then there is the development of our craft as we learn how to tell a good story and resonate on an emotional level.

But then there's the question of what to read. C. Christopher Smith is coming out with a book on reading in community, so you will want to watch out for that. Also, he has great recommendations on [Englewood Review of Books](#). Let me answer that ordination question, not with my all-time favorites, but with a couple of favorite books from the last few months. They deal with issues of fate and free will in interesting ways.

[Fates and Furies](#) is written in two parts. As a woman who grew up in Florida in the seventies and eighties, I had much to relate to. In the first half, Lauren Groff relates a simple beach story with mythical resonance. The language is so beautiful, it's like listening to Queen. It should be a pop song, but you know there are all of these layers of over-the-top excellence and you just can't unravel them all. In the second half, Groff lifts up a lovely log so we can watch the cockroaches scurry. Then we see all the sacrifices people make for the ache of privilege, art and idealism. On one side of the coin, a man's magical life seems fated. On the other side, we realize how much people have given for his easy success.

[A Man Called Ove](#) was the most beautiful love story I've ever read. There is so much love here. While Calvinists talk about predestination, I've always imagined it as a series of events. But Fredrik Backman describes Ove as destined for a person, and then people. Each page contained the full spectrum of emotions, until I was bursting with the realization that each simple life is filled with heartbreak and wonder. It also reminded me of why I'm so committed to intergenerational ministry. The book doesn't take place in a church, yet Ove's sense of duty and moral commitment will remind you of all those cantankerous elders that you cannot help but love.

Thanks to [Andrew William Smith](#), I recently saw Margaret Atwood. She was lecturing on the anniversary of *Handmaid's Tale*. So I had to pick up [The Heart Goes Last](#). Atwood explained the nature of her speculative fiction. She said, "If there's a pothole coming up in the road, then I need to warn you about it." And so she does. Margaret Atwood takes some of the most important issues of our time—mass incarceration, homelessness slave labor, and genetic engineering (or is it brain altering?)--and creates a trajectory into the future. She particularly deals with the loss of will. *The Heart Goes Last* is a comic look at some of our deepest, darkest potholes.

Do I need to put an advisory on these? If so, *Fates and Furies* and *Heart Goes Last* have sexual content.