

# Preachers and Misfits, Prophets and Thieves: The Minister in Southern Fiction

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## In Review



## Preachers and Misfits, Prophets and Thieves: The Minister in Southern Fiction

G. Lee Ramsey Jr.

## Westminster John Knox

In Martin Clark's novel *Plain Heathen Mischief*, the Reverend Joel King has a problem that is endemic not only to southern preachers but to pastors in general: "The trick, Joel came to realize, was how to differentiate between heaven-sent persuasion and his own wish list, how to separate holy marching orders from the vanities and narcissistic wants that cluttered his brain."

Southern writers have zeroed in on the sins and shenanigans of ministers. In the tradition of Mark Twain, they have exposed the chicanery of miscreant clergy who have been caught enjoying forbidden fruit. The high-profile escapades of Jimmy Swaggart, Jim Bakker and Ted Haggard remind us of the stories of Twain, William Faulkner, James Baldwin and a host of others—except for the fact that they really happened.

G. Lee Ramsey Jr. has read all the stories, and he brings together a company of unforgettable, recognizable human beings who have been called to preach the gospel yet possess all the weaknesses of the flesh. A preacher who has any self-awareness at all knows Joel King's dilemma. The Reformers Calvin, Luther and Zwingli all affirmed that preaching the word of God *is* the word of God. That should give any preacher pause. "If any moment in the church's weekly rhythm promises transcendence," Ramsey declares, "surely the preaching moment is it." Who is worthy of the task to which the preacher is called?

Ministers navigate a razor-thin theological edge when they preach. As Frederick Buechner says, "People who preach sermons without realizing that they're heading straight for Scylla and Charybdis ought to try a safer, more productive line of work." John Chrysostom's advice is timely: preachers need two basic attributes: "contempt of praise and force of eloquence."

Ramsey not only is interested in the minister as preacher but also writes eloquently about the minister as evangelist, pastor and priest. Of course, because he is parsing the fiction of Zora Neale Hurston, Will Campbell and Flannery O'Connor (among many others), he also reminds us of the minister as misfit and mystic, as church politician and company manager. The usual categories of con artist, seducer and thief are not ignored, but Ramsey paints a more humane picture. He sympathetically examines the "broken man and defeated prophet" who on behalf of the people is always "ready to get the first blow" while dealing with his own past and moral

failures.

Ramsey also considers the problems that most ministers face on a day-to-day basis. Church administration is the plague of those called to the ministry of “word, sacrament, and order.” Someone must organize the various ministries of the congregation, and there is always the danger that the pastor will become captive to church politics. In this regard, he examines *The Convention*, Campbell’s roman à clef about national struggles among the fundamentalists, and *The Sunday Wife*, Cassandra King’s equally acerbic study of ambition among the Methodists.

It would be easy for Ramsey to select only novels that caricature ministers, but he transcends that temptation, examining in depth both Anne Tyler’s *Saint Maybe* and Hurston’s *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*. As a human being as well as the resident holy person, a minister acts out personal struggles with faith and doubt on the public stage of church and community, and the public scrutinizes almost every facet of the pastor’s life. No matter how grounded in the faith or how secure in self-understanding, the minister lives under the shadow of sin just like every other human being and yet is expected to be the parson—the public person—and to bear the standard of morality.

The South has changed in so many ways, yet the minister remains the most visible representative of the varieties of religious experience in the region. The beauty of Ramsey’s book is that it illuminates the Christian ministry not only throughout the South but beyond it. It moves past sarcasm and sanctimoniousness into strikingly sensitive portrayals. *Preachers and Misfits* can help all clergy to examine their lives as well as the paradigm in which they serve God.