

Being Hauerwas

by [Martin B. Copenhaver](#) in the [August 24, 2010](#) issue

In Review



Hannah's Child

Stanley Hauerwas
Eerdmans

The subtitle of Stanley Hauerwas's new book raises a question: Why would anyone want to read a theologian's memoir? The answer is not immediately self-evident. One can admire a thinker or an artist and still not be drawn to the person's life story. I once began reading a biography of Ella Fitzgerald, whose artistry I greatly admire, but I gave up about halfway through because I concluded that the most interesting part of Fitzgerald's life is found in her music.

Something similar could be said of many theologians, including important ones: what we really want to know about them is in their body of work. A memoir or biography of just about any theologian other than Dietrich

Bonhoeffer would hardly be riveting. I imagine one titled *Memoir of a Theologian: Tenured Professor, Department Chair, Expert in the Arcane*.

But *Hannah's Child* is one theologian's memoir that clearly is worth reading, and for reasons that go beyond the fact that Hauerwas is a theologian of great influence. One reason to read this book is that Hauerwas's thought and his person have always been inseparable, and in ways that are not the case with many theologians. In his theological essays, he has always seemed comfortable writing in the first person and making reference to his own life. This is not narcissism as much as it is an invitation to be held accountable: Hauerwas contends that you cannot rightly consider someone's thought apart from that person's life; as he often puts it, "Only ad hominem arguments are interesting." Obviously, to write a memoir is to invite just that kind of argument.

Hauerwas has frequently stated, "I have tried to live a life I hope is unintelligible if the God we Christians worship does not exist." He has repeated that statement so often that it is not surprising when others eventually respond, "OK, let's consider your life, then." So now, at the age of 70, Hauerwas has turned to memoir.

Writing a memoir requires a particular form of vulnerability. We all have narratives that we tell about our lives, but most people rarely have to share those narratives with others. We simply carry them around in our minds to explain our lives to ourselves. To write a memoir is to go public with one's narrative and to expose one's self-understandings to scrutiny. As Hauerwas puts it, "What so often makes us liars is not what we do, but the justification we offer for what we do."

In wedding homilies, I used to be fond of quoting Hauerwas's assessment that "everyone marries the wrong person"—until a good friend in the midst of a hellish divorce came back with, "Yes, everyone marries the wrong person, but I *really* married the wrong person." So it was particularly moving to read of Hauerwas's 20-year marriage to his first wife, Anne, who exhibited symptoms of severe mental illness during much of that time. He also writes poignantly of the way he and his son, Adam, formed an unusually close bond as they forged a life together within the uncertainty and pain of their family. He tells the story evenly, seemingly without self-pity or self-justification.

That Hauerwas stayed in his marriage longer than most people would have should not be surprising. As he writes elsewhere in the memoir, he believes that "wherever Christians exist they are constituted by words and actions that should—but may not—make their lives difficult." This is a moving account of a Christian simply—and powerfully—living out the implications of his convictions.

Hauerwas's theology does not always provide an adequate explanation for the foundations of marriage, however. He has long said that he does not believe in love as the basis for a decision to marry. And yet after his divorce from Anne, according to his own account, he fell so "drunk with love" for Paula Gilbert that he could not help himself from declaring, very early on, that they should marry. I find that inconsistency about the role of love in marriage understandable, even winsome, particularly given the experience of his first marriage. A man in love needs to be given considerable leeway for inconsistency.

Hauerwas's response to a dean who, in his view, treated his new wife unfairly in a job process seems like quite a different matter. Even as he writes about the incident 20 years after it happened, he seems to be cultivating his own bitterness and settling scores. How can Hauerwas, who for decades was able to forebear the actions of an abusive wife and write about it without blame, be unable to let go of a feud with a dean that occurred two decades ago? As Hauerwas himself would grant, that is the kind of question that the writer of a memoir must endure, particularly when he is an advocate for ad hominem arguments.

One would not wish for Hauerwas to be free of inconsistencies, however, because that is part of what makes him so interesting. He has described himself as a high-church Mennonite. He is a debater who seems to relish

eviscerating an opponent, yet he counts people of very divergent viewpoints as friends. In William Cavanaugh's delightful description, he is the one pacifist you would most want on your side in a bar fight. He sees himself as the perpetual outsider, and yet he is the consummate insider, holding a prestigious endowed chair at a major university.

Hauerwas says that he never wanted to cultivate a following, but he has nonetheless; he is like a teacher Kierkegaard described, who was so persuasive in his teaching that no one should have disciples that he gained many disciples. It is telling that Hauerwas is fond of Oscar Wilde's contention that we are never more true to ourselves than when we are inconsistent. In his inconsistency, then, Hauerwas is consistently true to himself.

It is interesting to know that the one *Time* magazine dubbed the "Best Theologian in America" in 2001 grew up poor as the son of a bricklayer in the small town of Pleasant Mound, Texas. But that story easily could be rendered in such a way that it becomes the conventional tale of a small-town boy who makes good. Instead he reveals the interesting ways in which, as he moved from one prestigious academic post to another, he was determined to bring something of Pleasant Mound with him—in his accent and his cussing, to be sure, but also in his reflection of his father's gentleness and work ethic and of his mother's perpetual movement. It is a complicated legacy. He writes, with wistful irony, "I have spent my life in buildings built by people like my father, buildings in which the builders have felt they do not belong."

What makes this memoir so engaging is not the story of Hauerwas's life, but Hauerwas himself. People who know Hauerwas all seem to have their favorite stories about him, some of which are told repeatedly, as if they are part of some canon. Often they are tales about how he tweaked the nose of some academic or social pretense. Usually people tell these stories with an approximation of his Texas twang, laced—no, that is too delicate a word—*larded* with his famous profanity and punctuated by an imitation of his too-loud, cackling laugh. Without Hauerwas and the stories about him, we might need to be reminded more often that theology can be fun.

It is probably a good thing that most of those stories have not made it into his memoir, because there is nothing more tiresome than a memoirist who sets himself up as the hero of his own stories. But the memoir is laced (now just the right word) with some of his *bons mots*. He tells his students on the first day of class, "You don't yet have minds worth making up." He pokes fun at his adopted tradition: "Episcopalians are people who refuse to let any pretension go unused." He captures a stunning insight in just three words: "War is impatience."

Hauerwas has always been a master of one-liners, but this is his best writing to date. In other writings of his, he often is so insistent in making his points that the reader can feel a bit like an unfortunate fellow who has been held upside down until every last coin has fallen out of his pockets. By contrast, in *Hannah's Child* Hauerwas does not try to persuade. The writing seems to have no designs on the reader.

Also, when reading books written by academics, often I get the impression that I am listening to one end of a conversation, that what I am reading is a response to other, often unnamed, academic conversation partners. And that is certainly true of much of Hauerwas's writing. In this book, however, he simply carries on a conversation with himself and with the reader. Of all of his books, this one follows the longest narrative thread. Here a theologian who has written extensively about the important role of narrative seems finally content just to tell the story.

As I read the last pages of this engrossing memoir, I found myself thinking of Samuel Johnson, another prodigious thinker whose brilliant essays are well worth reading but whose contribution to the intellectual life of his time was not fully captured in those essays. The power of his thought ultimately resided not in his essays but in the person of Johnson himself, which awaited a James Boswell to capture. Obviously Stanley Hauerwas is not Samuel Johnson. Even more surely, in this memoir he cannot be both Johnson and Boswell. But I think it can be said that the power of Hauerwas's thought resides in his person rather than in his essays. So by writing a memoir that traces the contours of both his life and his thought, he has given us not only something new, but something

more than he has given us before. And for that, we are in his debt.