Books to argue with

Books in the October 16, 2007 issue

Sometimes it's the books we disagree with that make the biggest impact on us: *we find ourselves locked in argument with the author or continually returning to the book because its flaws help us clarify our own thoughts*. *We asked several people to identify a book with which they have serious*, *respectful*, *ongoing arguments*.

Thomas G. Long on *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*: *The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Christian Faith*, by Marcus J. Borg:
I have had to recognize that many thoughtful people express deep gratitude for this important book. They are relieved to find, at last, a Jesus freed from his churchly spin doctors and Sunday school bodyguards, a Jesus who is plausible, credible and reasonable. Too reasonable, I'd say. Borg weaves a strange post-Enlightenment filter from strands of overly positivist history, a vaguely Newtonian worldview and filaments of leftover Lutheran piety. The Jesus who manages to squeeze through this narrow mesh may be an inspiring figure—a dreamily compassionate spiritual sage—but even the touchy Romans probably wouldn't have wasted a cross on him. More likely, they would have given him tenure.
Thomas G. Long teaches preaching at Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta.

Ellen Charry on *Character Strengths and Virtues*: *A Handbook and Classification*, by Christopher Peterson and Martin E. P. Seligman:
This substantial handbook offers an alternative to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, which is the gold standard of contemporary psychology. Peterson and Seligman insist that psychology has so focused on pathologies that it has failed to appreciate the strengths and stamina that allow people to meet challenges effectively and recover from setbacks gracefully. They rely on the cardinal virtues—perseverance, justice, bravery and self-control—and add several that are important to Christians—forgiveness, love, gratitude and humility. The problem I have with the book is that it regards spirituality or some relationship to transcendence as a psychological strength, but since it is written from a secular perspective it has no way of helping people get to such a relationship. The book

inadvertently invites theologians into the psychological conversation.
Ellen Charry teaches theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, *Princeton*, *New Jersey*.

Garret Keizer on *Intercourse*, by Andrea Dworkin:
Dworkin's thesis is that the way babies are made inevitably subjugates women. I don't buy it. Dworkin's confusion of the corruptible with corruption is reminiscent of medieval treatises. Nevertheless, I return to this book and to others she wrote (especially *Letters from a War Zone*) to be braced by her poignant indignation. The Book of Common Prayer beseeches God for the grace to "make no peace with oppression"; Dworkin was full of that grace.
Garret Keizer is a writer from Sutton, *Vermont*. His latest book is Help: The Original Human Dilemma (*HarperOne*).

Robin Lovin on *The Naked Public Square*: *Religion and Democracy in America*, by Richard John Neuhaus:
When published in 1984, this challenge to the harmony between Christianity and liberal democracy was too easily dismissed, especially by academics. I think its stance is too confrontational for those who have to minister in a pluralistic society. A Christianity that becomes aggressive when it cannot be dominant will have difficulty maintaining any kind of public presence. But this book reminds us that theologians and ethicists need to articulate the political claims of Christian faith on their own terms and not leave it to political philosophers to do all the thinking for us.
Robin W. Lovin teaches ethics at Southern Methodist University in Dallas.

Bruce David Forbes on *Black Elk Speaks*, by John G. Neihardt:
Although popular and influential, this has always been a problematic book because it is yet another volume in which Native American spirituality is filtered through a non-Indian interpreter. Especially objectionable are the touching final sections, which offer a premature obituary for Lakota culture and contribute to questionable assumptions about "the vanishing Indian." However, recognizing that the intertwined voices of Black Elk and Neihardt are in tension but also enhance each other, I return to many passages again and again; they are more powerful than anthropological accounts of the topic.
Bruce David Forbes teaches religious studies at Morningside College in Sioux City, *Iowa*.

Carol Zaleski on *Miracles*, by C. S. Lewis:
Even the best works of apologetics have drawbacks. Lewis sets out to free us from "chronological snobbery" and other impediments to belief in miracles, maintaining that reductionistic naturalism is self-refuting and that the sovereignty of reason over nature is what makes knowledge possible. Though his vision of the harmony between mind and reality is inspiring, his avuncular tone and disregard for subtler forms of naturalism give me pause. He may stumble where philosophers fear to tread, but Lewis belongs with the angels for whom "God is love" is a tautology.
Carol Zaleski teaches world religions at Smith College, *Northampton*, *Massachusetts*.

John Wilson on *Catholics*: *A Novel*, by Brian Moore:
Published in 1972, this novella—a masterpiece—imagines a near future in which the church has taken a sharp turn away from tradition toward a soft ecumenism with a social-justice agenda. One center of resistance to this new direction is an abbey on a tiny island off the coast of Ireland, to which a Vatican envoy is sent. As the story unfolds, ironies multiply; the leader of the opposition turns out to have lost his faith many years earlier, yet he persists for the sake of his flock. Raised as a Catholic, Moore said he stopped believing as a boy, but in his fiction he never ceased to wrestle with God. This story about a terrible nullity at the heart of faith can also be read as an expression of an unbeliever's lingering doubt.
John Wilson is editor of Books & Culture.