

Bookish: Reading and the pastoral vocation

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [October 9, 2002](#) issue

I grew up with books. My parents valued books and taught me to treat books with respect and affection. One of the unexpected pleasures of college was going to the bookstore to purchase the texts I needed and could afford, and carrying them back to my room—my own books. I still have some of them. And I still love the feel of a newly purchased book in my hands.

In divinity school I got the idea that part of the pastoral vocation is to read—to keep up with what the biblical scholars and theologians are saying, and to stay in touch with the culture by reading novels, biographies, histories, journals, magazines and newspapers. I recall an anecdote from one of Joseph Sittler's lectures, which he later included in a 1959 *Century* essay, "The Maceration of the Minister." It was a poignant portrait of the overworked, hassled minister who had been determined to sustain a discipline of lifelong scholarship, but whose desk was cluttered not with open texts but with a set of blueprints for the new education wing and a sample of linoleum floor tile.

I've tried to keep faith with Sittler's hopes for us and I read as much as I can. I was delighted to discover in a recent survey that 25 percent of *Century* readers have purchased ten to 14 books in the past 12 months, and 35 percent have purchased more than 14.

I was further pleased to learn that the *Century* plays a supportive role in our subscribers' reading lives: 65 percent said they had purchased a book because of a *Christian Century* advertisement, and 71 percent have purchased a book based on one of our reviews.

When we asked our readers what types of books they had purchased in the past 12 months, we learned that "theology" was far and away the most popular category, with 75 percent checking this box. Other top interests (in order): spirituality, fiction, history, biography and pastoral care. I find all of that encouraging.

My wife and I were browsing recently in an art shop in Wilmington, North Carolina, that specializes in ceramic pop art. We found a few pieces we liked. I bought a square ceramic plaque with the primitive figures of two children and overhead the bold, red inscription, "READ BOOKS." I do. And so do most of you.