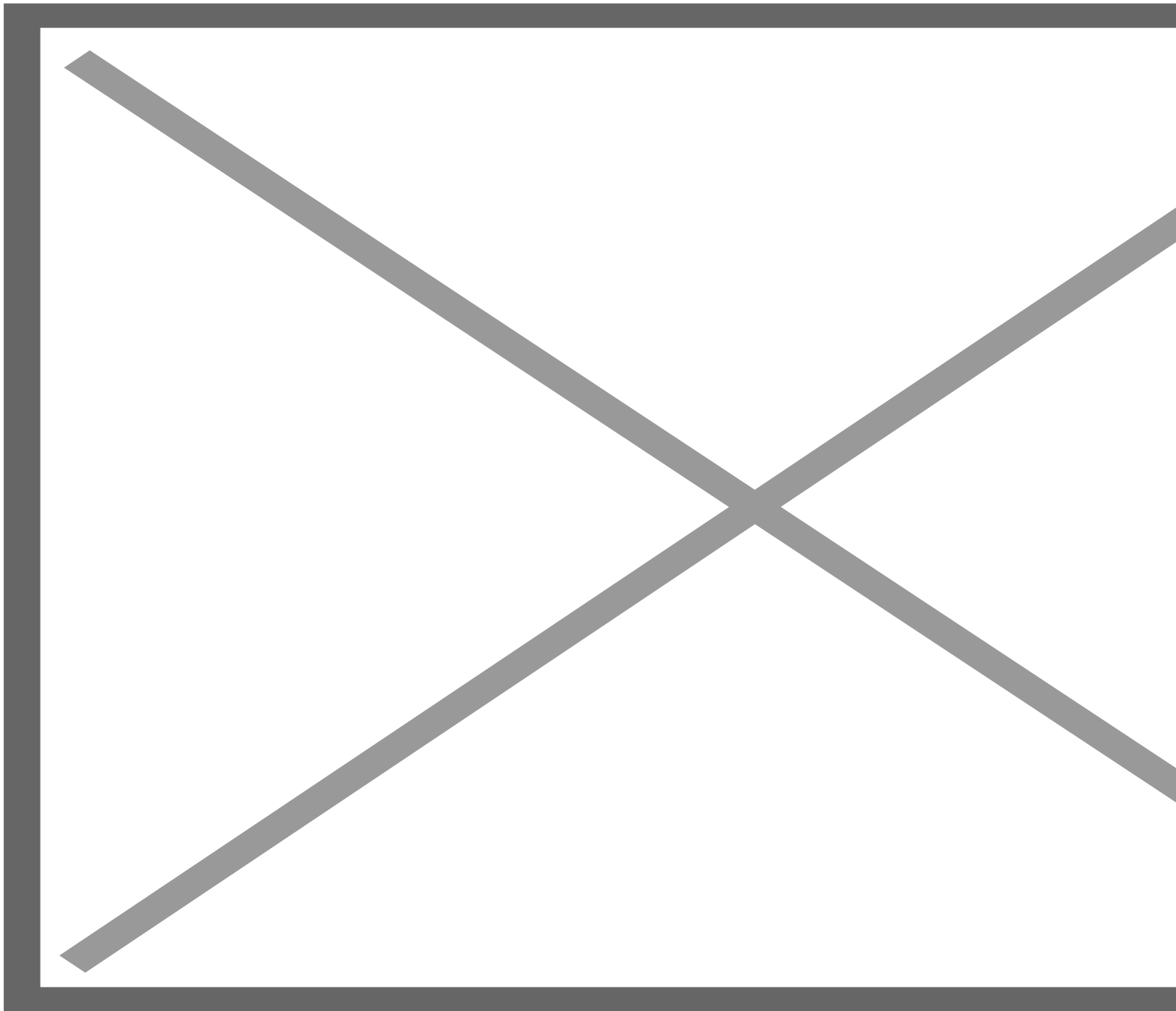


What we could not see as beautiful

When I told my reading group we'd be looking at one of Brian Staveley's dark fantasy novels alongside Hans Urs von Balthasar's theology, they balked.

by [Lyle Enright](#) in the [February 2026](#) issue
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"It's trash, frankly." So said the seasoned professor of German literature at the first Zoom meeting of the Catholic reading group I facilitated.

She wasn't the only one, either. Others were nicer about it, but it was clear that even the most open-minded of those who had assembled were being open-minded about a book they thought was pretty bad.

This was our first meeting as part of Loyola University Chicago's Reading the Catholic Imagination seminar, which would last us six weeks over the summer of 2023. For my unit, I'd chosen a dark fantasy novel called *Skullsworn* by award-winning author Brian Staveley. *Skullsworn* follows the story of a woman named Pyrre, an acolyte of Ananshael, the god of death in Staveley's secondary world. To become a full priestess of Ananshael—a Skullsworn—Pyrre must murder seven people in 14 days, each under very specific conditions. If she doesn't, her own life will be forfeit.

The only part of this that is a problem for her is the final required task: She must kill the person "who makes her mind and body sing with love / Who will not come again." Pyrre has never been in love before, nor is she even sure what love is—let alone how she'll sacrifice it to her god when she finds it.

Staveley came to our reading group for a session. "This is a book about getting inside the heads of serial killers," he told us. It's a work of complicated empathy, an earnest attempt at understanding religious extremism and a depth of belief that expresses itself in violence. The result is a hard book, full of blood and profanity and not a lot of redemption. I admitted all this (along with the fact that Staveley isn't even Catholic) to my group when I proposed reading it together. But for all this, I'd also experienced something like a spiritual epiphany while reading it the first time. And I have long wondered what to do with those rare, transcendent experiences that sometimes surprise us from within the grotesque.

The others in my group struggled with the idea of redemptive scavenging in what they saw as trash. Most of them, wholly uninitiated in fantasy literature aside from Tolkien, balked at the novel's disturbing premise and lines like, "I'm not sure who's going around sizing up the erections of the hanged, but I can promise you, it's not me." Before we continued, we had to ask the complex question of whether a text like this was worthy of mediating theological meaning—and on what grounds we made that call.

I argued that we might have gotten similarly lurid content—but none of the upset—from a straightforwardly Catholic novel like Walker Percy's *Lancelot*. Catholic literature, like Christian art more broadly, is no stranger to the saltier aspects of earthly living. There was definitely a double standard at work, one that genre fiction seems perpetually trapped in. Fantasy novels are often unfairly dismissed as a mere imaginative escape for readers who crave immersion in other worlds but aren't necessarily demanding much else from the reading experience.

But this argument was only ever going to get me so far. Taste is not merely subjective idiosyncrasy waving its own flag; it is the larval form of value. When carefully deployed, taste becomes judgment. Good and bad, there is continuity between our tastes and our judgments about how the world ought to be. If these readers were going to see what I, as the facilitator of this group, wanted them to see, I realized I was going to have to help them—not by inducting them into my own tastes but by making them more aware of their own.

This meant acknowledging that *Skullsworn* is not in the same league as something like Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*; its violence is not so carefully orchestrated to ask and answer questions about the depth of human depravity and the possibility of grace in a blood-soaked world. Nor does Staveley enjoy the validation of long-lived literary reception and acclaim that signals the brutality of his book as worth enduring and contemplating. I had to admit I was asking these readers to wade through bloody, profane content with no assurance that it would be worth the effort, as well as to imagine whether Staveley might be asking theological questions, perhaps in spite of himself. I was asking them to take a risk on art and being.

The same risk animates the work of Jesuit theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, and it is central to theologian Anne Carpenter's reading of him in her book *Theo-Poetics*, a secondary source for our reading group. When

read alongside Carpenter's meditations, I found that *Skullsworn*, in all its gory drama, helped me to understand some of Balthasar's core concerns about religion and art and how they continue to shape Christian spirituality. The great scandal of art, in Balthasar's estimation, is that art always represents something passing away: Beauty "is everywhere and appears as if clothed in death." This makes art a kind of elegy, signaling, even if negatively, that finitude longs for something beyond itself, and that art is one way of reaching for it. But given that art will never achieve the transcendence we reach for, what are we finally to do with the longing that drives us to create?

According to Carpenter, Balthasar sees only two answers to this question. The first answer is Christianity, whose God perpetually outpaces art's "temptation towards tragedy" as it contemplates the fleeting world. In this reading, art is always caught up in a "struggle between real creativity and nihilism." To be truly alive, the creative impulse must face its own limits, and then allow itself to be called even further. It must recognize itself as intending and desiring more than the immanent world—and then also recognize that this intention is itself meaningful, the very clumsiness of our reach a kind of proof of the eternity we're made for. At these limits, creative "surrender" mirrors the surrendering God, by whom all material things are given their own contours. "This revelation happens in fleshly finitude," Carpenter writes, "not against it, nor destroying it." Our fleshly finitude itself implies the divine "more" that art itself can never quite capture.

The second answer, though, is the one Balthasar spent most of his prodigious career puzzling out. Despairing of beauty's fleetingness, art often gives in to the temptation toward tragedy. It stops focusing on the "more," on the meaning of its transcendent intentions, and instead becomes fixated on their failure, turning back to the world brokenhearted. "The very imperfection of the world is absolutized," Carpenter writes, and art's achievements amount to the "divinization of death . . . finitude at its most radical exaltation." Balthasar finds this divinization in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, who understands all of being as anticipating death. "Death totalizes me," Carpenter summarizes, "for it imposes upon me the one and only experience that is inescapably mine." Where art tends toward post-Christian tragedy, death becomes the presupposition of life, and beauty and terror therefore become one.

In poet Rainer Maria Rilke, Balthasar found an ultimate metaphor for this tragic view on life and beauty: music. Carpenter describes Rilke as calling the mythical figure of Orpheus into his poetry, where the god "lives according to the 'law' of music [which], in order to be *musical*, must always persist by always dying. . . . Only together, in the whole dialogue between notes and silence—life and death—do we have song . . . a type of eternity."

The specter of Orpheus also stalks the pages of *Skullsworn*, recognizable in Pyrre's god, Ananshael. In Staveley's mythology, Ananshael (god of death) rivals Meshkent (god of pain), who, alongside Ciena (goddess of pleasure) sets human beings apart from their unfeeling progenitors, the angelic Csestriim. As the great unmaker, Ananshael rescues humans from the eternal paralysis of Ciena and the torturous play of Meshkent; he brings an end to pleasure and pain. And like Orpheus, Ananshael is also the god of music, because "a song, like a life, is all in the letting go, in the knowing, the moment you begin, that it will end." He is the coda that defines human life and gives it meaning.

The life of a Skullsworn is spent contemplating Ananshael's mysteries by "giving" others to their god. They give quickly, painlessly, for Ananshael abjures pain and fear. A Skullsworn acts as a kind of grim bodhisattva, speeding others on to an enlightenment they themselves anticipate but barely comprehend. "Now, I see him as an old man, patient and slow," Pyrre muses of her god: "He holds spring's wet dirt in his hands, lifts it up to the light so that we can see, repeats the same words over and over, endlessly patient—You are this. You are this. You are this.—until we understand."

But the book is more than just the story of Pyrre's worship of death or an apology for her perspective. It is also about love, or rather, the struggle of making room for love within that transcendent horizon of absolute

endings—knowing that love, like music, will inevitably pass away.

Balthasar observed Rilke struggling to articulate the meaning of love within the circumscriptions of human finitude. Where his poetry broaches the topic, Carpenter writes, “a beloved in the end withers beneath the pull of much stronger longing . . . whose tidal forces are cause for fear. Beauty is thus still associated with terror . . . and love—at least, this kind of love—is not enough to rise to its heights.” Balthasar noted in modernity a pervasive doubt that love could provide any real or sustainable comfort within the profound loneliness of existence.

It’s this link between love and loneliness that Staveley both wrestles with and tries to narrate differently. Ela, Pyrre’s mentor, regularly reminds the acolyte assassin that love is part of the religious truth hidden in the contours of the fleshy finitude they are in the business of unraveling. As such, it needs to be experienced rather than theorized:

It’s not something you can figure out by watching others. . . . I could tell you everything about my life, every kiss, every woman’s hips . . . and it wouldn’t mean anything. . . . People use the phrase falling in love as though love is a mud puddle that you just tumble into when you’re not paying attention. I find the opposite: love requires a deliberate act of attention.

One must, in other words, love on purpose.

The leading candidate for Pyrre’s love is Ruc Lan Lac, a soldier and old flame she tries to fan into something more. As they investigate a conspiracy in Ruc’s city, Pyrre tries to win his trust and affection while also weighing the reality that, once her heart opens to him, she will need to kill him. Things do not go as planned. Pyrre struggles mightily—not with drawing Ruc’s eye but with appropriating her own feelings. While most of us struggle to make sense of how death cuts love short, Pyrre struggles to make room for love within her religious devotion to death—a fit she exultantly achieves in the end. “Love is not some eternal state,” she concludes, embracing tragedy in the very terms Balthasar found so spiritually dangerous, “but a delight in the paradise of the imperfect. The holding of a thing is inextricable from the letting go, and to love, you must learn both. The world was still beautiful without [my lover] in it.”

In the novel’s last pages, Staveley succeeds in a stunning eversion of a deeply interior drama: The reader does indeed get inside the head of a serial killer, and what they find there is a deeply human get-to-grips with death that’s unsettlingly authentic: “Love is not something you can keep. It is something you do, every day, every moment, regardless of who is dying. . . . It means you listen. It means you play.” Pyrre must finally find out who she is in relation to one special other, and only after losing that other can she truly unravel into the wholeness of things which Ananshael graciously embraces, the temporality he transforms into a gift.

I wept when I first read the end of *Skullsworn*. I cried at the loss and at the beauty Pyrre had wrestled out of a world so against her from the beginning. I cried at the meaning she managed to make of it. But I also cried with a kind of fear. The rapture Pyrre experiences is ambivalent. Is it a true religious epiphany, or something more tragic? A zealous frenzy squeezing a surd of pain until it pops, oozing the illusion of wholeness like so much blood?

To what degree does that frenzied meaning-making in the face of despair describe *our* religious experiences? Do we run needfully to the God who, through his own death and resurrection, has turned death into a strange gift that still takes all our faith to face? Or do we invoke the name of God to avoid asking the question altogether? To go around the mystery rather than facing it, our lopsided certainty a poor disguise for how afraid we still are, living in the gulf between our fleshy finitude and the “more” of our deepest desires?

As Pyrre negotiated her understanding of love-in-death as the ultimate mediator of meaning, the readers in our group gradually recognized the novel eerily dramatizing the same aesthetic debates Balthasar considered central to the spiritual problems of modernity. For Balthasar, humanity's aesthetic coping with its own finitude vitiated religion; in the inevitability of death, we found a sublime horizon that both cut off and replaced the horizon of true transcendence.

Balthasar observes all these movements finding their traction about 200 years ago, in what's often called the Romantic period. Staveley's dark fantasy adventure provides an astoundingly complete primer on what was at stake in those conversations and remains so today. And these stakes, with which my Catholic audience felt familiar, finally helped the novel "click," despite their initial resistance. Despite a plot that somehow toes the line between *The Lord of the Rings* and *John Wick*, the waves of Staveley's writing continually lap against theological shores that he himself says he rarely walks. Staveley may not be a Catholic, but he asks questions in the same terms. Firmly situated in that tragic view of life and art which so perplexed Balthasar, he can lead readers through a kind of apophasis to more precisely recognize and affirm their own desires for transcendence. Amid the blood, guts, swearing, and sex, we recognize intimate, human images that our imaginations can scavenge and redeem.

Often, literary status acts as a kind of halo, distancing us from the content of a work that society has pedestaled. That sliver of transcendence can help us dissociate from the most gut-churning scenes in McCarthy or Vladimir Nabokov. *Skullsworn* does not have that halo, and I think it's all the better an object lesson for it. Its mess is felt *as messy*, even as unnecessary or gratuitous. Even Christ's death was experienced this way by those who knew him: the attendant doubt, the uncertainty of whether anything like resurrection was on the horizon. This is how we face life and death.

Many in my reading group never exactly enjoyed the novel. But they stuck with it, and they did come to enjoy their own recognition of an author struggling—in a style far removed from their own taste—with their own questions about beauty and meaning. A struggle which, despite its sometimes negative affirmation of their values, they were able to see as authentic. And I was delighted by that, because I don't think we can truly develop our taste for beauty without such experiences. According to Carpenter, if we wonder whether the art we find difficult or ugly can still call us out of ourselves, we need look no further than the "wounds in glory's feet."

Opening to this insight, the members of our group allowed their theological imaginations to take on new dimensions: going beneath taste, beneath judgments of value, to freshly see the inner human workings of art. What we could not see as beautiful we still saw as aspiring to wholeness. Where we felt dissonance between a work's vision and our own longings, we developed more careful names for the gaps and shortfalls. Our tastes did not change, but I think we became more generous. I hope we became more ourselves, and ever more willing to see the whole world as beautiful and worth saving.