Novel idea: Good novels can nourish the work of preaching

by John Buchanan in the May 31, 2003 issue

I am mostly a utilitarian reader. For 40 years I have been writing and preaching sermons weekly, and I have come to rely on the almost exact relationship between the quality and quantity of my reading and my ability to create a sermon that has some life and energy to it. Good reading—of Bible commentaries, books on theology and culture, essays, journals—stimulates whatever it is in me that produces sermons.

What I don't read enough of are novels—books that don't immediately commend themselves as aids in sermon writing. As a New Year's resolution I determined to read a few books just for the pleasure of reading. It has been great fun, and I have found that these books do nourish the work of preaching.

I can commend Louis Begley's *About Schmidt* and Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*. Begley's short novel was rewritten for the film version. I loved the book, which is about profound loneliness and our capacity to hurt those people we most deeply cherish. And I couldn't put Franzen's novel down. It's about a midwestern American family, and I felt as if I knew personally each of its amazing characters.

The Spooky Art: *Some Thoughts on Writing*, by Norman Mailer, is not a novel, but it is outrageous, funny, irreverent and beautifully crafted. I learned more than I wanted to know about the trials and tribulations of trying to earn a living by marketing one's art. And I confirmed a growing sense, suggested by Mailer's *The Gospel According to the Son*, that there is a spirituality here, mostly unnamed and unclaimed by the author.

The unlikeliest and in many ways best of the novels I encountered is *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, by Dai Sijic. The author was born in China in 1954 and was "reeducated" during the cultural revolution of the 1970s. The book is about two boys who are sent from the city to a rural village for reeducation—their convoluted and sometimes hilarious life working as laborers, their friendship with a seamstress

and their theft of a suitcase full of forbidden material (classic French novels in Chinese translation). It’s a wonderful story about the way art liberates the human spirit.

John Updike has chronicled and critiqued American life more than any other writer, and I savored his 20th novel, *Seek My Face*, which presents a daylong conversation between a 78-year-old painter—the widow of a Jackson Pollock–like figure—and a New York interviewer. I learned a lot about postwar American art, and found myself rereading Updike’s exquisite descriptions. Updike, by the way, takes faith seriously, has read and understands Karl Barth, and actually goes to church.