

Beach reading: Recommendations

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [September 6, 2003](#) issue

A stretch of two weeks at the beach allows me to do something I've never able to manage during the working year: read more than one book at a time—maybe six or seven—and experience the literary and intellectual synergy that results. This year I found myself reading, more or less at the same time:

- *A History of God*, Karen Armstrong's detailed tracing of the idea of God through the lens of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. I read it to prepare for a course I will teach on the subject, and I learned a lot about the dichotomy in all three traditions between the mystics and the rationalists.
- *Beyond Belief*, Elaine Pagels's new book which, in addition to exploring the formation of the New Testament canon (and the exclusion of the *Gospel According to Thomas*), begins and ends with a personal testimony. When her young son was diagnosed with what proved to be a terminal illness, Pagels found herself standing in the back of a church and deciding she needed to be there. Despite a lifelong struggle with church doctrine, she recognized that "here was a place to weep without imposing tears upon a child, in a heterogeneous community that had gathered to sing, to celebrate, to acknowledge common needs, and to deal with what we cannot control or imagine." In a time when churches are tragically divided over issues of who can lead and which doctrines are absolutely true, how about that for a way to describe the church's true business?
- *A Serious Way of Wondering*, in which Reynolds Price writes about his fascination with the person of Jesus and particularly with Jesus' ethical teaching and behavior, which Price thinks churches pretty much ignore in their anxiety to get their dogmas and ecclesiology straight.
- *Peace Like a River*, by Leif Enger, the beach book of the year. I read it in the afternoons after spending the morning with Armstrong, Pagels and Price. It's a wonderful novel about the love between a father and three children. It's a mystical book, too, about suffering, death, resurrection and miracles—which created synergy with the other reading I was doing about mystical and rational religion.

- Walter Issacson's accessible *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life* portrays Franklin as a quintessential enlightenment rationalist who became disaffected with the church when the Presbyterians drove a progressive preacher, Samuel Hemphill, out of his pulpit for being a "free thinker." Franklin sided with Hemphill, called his tormentors "Rev. Asses" and left organized religion for good. He was a scientist, visionary and patriot. (My interest in him comes at least in part from attending a college that proudly bears his name, Franklin and Marshall.)
- And *Eleanor and Harry*, a compilation of the remarkable correspondence between Eleanor Roosevelt and Harry Truman. If you like to listen in on the personal conversation of important people, as I do, you will like this book. The two wrote to each other on every major issue of the post-World War II years, which shaped the world in which we are still living.