

Stacked up: Reading good writers

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [May 18, 2004](#) issue

Martin Marty once noted that there comes a time when you confront the depressing reality that you're probably not going to read all the books you hoped and planned to read. Your stack of books-to-be-read will outlast you.

My stack grows out of a longtime practice of clipping reviews. I look at the *New York Times Book Review* section every week and place interesting articles in the hands of family members who might be wondering what to give me for Christmas, my birthday or Father's Day. I also read the reviews in *Theology Today* and skim the publishing houses' catalogs. And, since long before I was associated with this magazine, I read all the reviews in the *Christian Century*.

I read because it is closely related to my work of preparing sermons. I am convinced that one can become a better communicator by reading good writers, especially short story writers. The short story is a demanding literary form that in some ways resembles the sermon.

I'm working my way now through John Updike's *Early Stories* not only for the fun of it but also to observe Updike's uncanny ability to convey complex ideas with simple elegance and power. I keep returning to Ernest Hemingway's short stories, and am still learning from him about the value of concise sentences, carefully chosen words, more verbs, fewer adjectives—helpful guidelines for any communicator.

I have a well-worn volume of Hemingway stories dating from college days which I purchased for less than \$5.00. These days, books seem like a more serious investment. The collection of Updike's stories set me back \$35.00. I know about inflation and the declining value of the dollar. Nevertheless, if one is going to pay \$35.00 for a book, it can't be a whimsical decision. With that concern in mind, we offer in this issue a survey of some of the best recent books in three important areas— theology, ethics and Old Testament.

A recent book companion, which I used throughout Lent, was William Sloane Coffin's *Credo*, which is full of treasures. I offer you two of his memorable Easter affirmations: "The abyss of God's love is deeper than the abyss of death." And: "If

death, then, is no threat to our relationship to God it should be no threat to anything. If we don't know what is beyond the grave, we do know who is beyond the grave."