

WHAT'S A PASTOR TO DO?

SOME TIME AGO a young couple—both from Christian homes—asked me to perform their wedding ceremony. I invited them to come to my office to discuss their request. During our conversation, they made it very clear that they wanted their wedding to be totally “neutral.” If I were to officiate at their wedding, they said, I could say anything—but not use the word “Christ.” They were adamant about that fact. Their reason was simple: one of these young people was a Christian but the other had become a non-Christian.

The discussion was intense, and there was no conclusion other than for me to say that I could not function simply as a justice of the peace because as a pastor I

am dedicated to the Christian faith and its claim on all of life. Needless to say, the couple—and their parents—were upset with me. But I concluded that I had no choice. Was I wrong in my judgment? Could I possibly have left the door open for some kind of follow-up?

Scripture has always held Christians to a high standard about life issues, and it will continue to do so. But are there instances where major concerns have perhaps changed in terms of their application to the “here and now”? Issues differ in terms of priority and significance, and we often end up agreeing to disagree in such cases. Are views on marriage one such area?

Just how do we as Christians respond when a couple wishes to get married but

are very clear about their individual value systems: one being a Christian and the other having a different faith or claiming no faith at all? They love each other, of course, but differ clearly in what they believe and share in their relationship. Should you expect your pastor to perform a ceremony for a couple who are “unequally yoked” and who have compromised their life values in order to be together? It is a question of “to do or not to do”—and these circumstances become occasions for a judgment call by the pastor who is asked to perform the wedding celebration.

Marriage in Scripture

In his lengthy discourse on marriage, 1 Corinthians 7, the apostle Paul expresses his own opinions, for example in verses 6 (“I say this as a concession, not as a

command”); 12 (“If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her”); and 40 (“In my judgment, she is happier if she stays as she is”). He mixes his opinions with the basic instruction that marriage is a holy or sanctifying relationship that must reflect the union of Christ and his followers, the Body—even if one partner happens to believe something other than the Christian faith. In Ephesians 5:31-32, quoting from Genesis 2:24, Paul makes clear that the two becoming one flesh should be a powerful symbol of this union of Christ and his Church. Do such passages leave any room for a pastor to “negotiate” a wedding for a couple when they are of conflicting faiths?

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Based on such biblical teachings, I have made the decision to proceed when, for example, the couple represents two differing faiths but are willing to agree to my open presentation concerning the way of Christ. Admittedly, these situations involve a calculation of risk that could end up with non-commitment. But often the results are a growing toward and into the Christian faith as well as a happy marriage bond. As an intermediary for Christ and his cause, in such judgment calls I have witnessed the grace of our Lord become something lively and concrete, demonstrated in a healthy family life and commitment to the church. One senses potential in such cases.

What’s a Pastor to Do?

So what does a pastor do in each and every individual situation? In making any plans for a wedding ceremony I have always insisted on a time of up-front preparation to make sure the couple is fully aware of potential pitfalls and stum-

bling blocks in their marriage. This is especially true in the case of couples with different faiths or no faith at all. I always instruct them to read a form for Christian marriage in order to remind them that their marriage goes way beyond the wedding ceremony and all the excitement of the happy day. We talk about how our belonging to Christ gives concrete shape and positive expression to each other’s life “until death do us part.”

That conversation always includes open-ended questions, including the following: What do you find attractive about him/her? What do you mean when you say you love him/her, and at what cost? How can you possibly say you’ll stay together for the rest of your lives in light of so many obstacles and uncertainties? You will have disagreements and disap-

pointments: how will you work such things out positively and proactively, not reactively, thereby making healthy choices together along the way? And—so important—you may claim that one of you is “a believer” (perhaps Christian), the other not at all religious. But do you realize that everyone believes in something, regardless of what that belief is? How can these different beliefs work in your marriage? And finally: What direction-setting will you make if you are blessed with children?

The decision to proceed with a marriage ceremony is not a simple line to be drawn, not a matter of black and white or right and wrong. Pastors must be abundantly clear of their own stance with respect to upholding Christian marriage and careful to avoid appearing to yield that stance in any particular situation. However, as Paul makes the case to the Corinthian church, the “rubbing off” of the Christian partner’s faith to the non-Christian one must be the noble aim of a marriage between a

couple that is unequally yoked—and such positive outcomes do happen. The grace of Christ often happily transfers from one partner to the other by means of love and tenderness, leading to a common Christ-like faith commitment. The pastor’s job is to clearly inform the couple of why the Christian foundation for marriage is not just an afterthought but the very foundation of and for their future. This understanding will lead them to an honest choice: instead of a “no trespassing” sign that prevents entry, the “gate” of grace is open to them.

Would I be willing to officiate at a wedding for a couple who express two different faiths? It all depends on their response to my explanation. If the couple then agrees to a genuine Christian ceremony I would proceed—but with the full intent and their permission to follow up with them after the wedding has taken place. I have experienced many good results in which the couple has become involved fully with a commitment to Christ and so to one another.

But sometimes that doesn’t happen. Recently one such couple was referred to me by people who knew I was a Christian pastor. Would I perform their ceremony, already planned to take place in a beautiful location? I responded with a conversation in which I discussed the foundations of Christian marriage and outlined what I would ask of them, that is, a Christian commitment to each other for life. I hoped that this would become an occasion for witnessing for Christ and sharing the Good News. The couple listened closely to my explanation. But some weeks later, they cancelled the arrangement since their families were not comfortable with my basic Christian stance. In this case, I needed to fully accept and respect their decision, even though I would very much have preferred a different ending.

Tough decisions? Yes. Are there easy, glib, quick answers? Never! Times have changed, but not the claim of Christ to be the center of all of our lives. ■

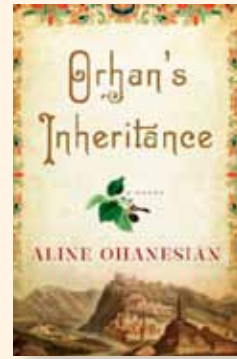
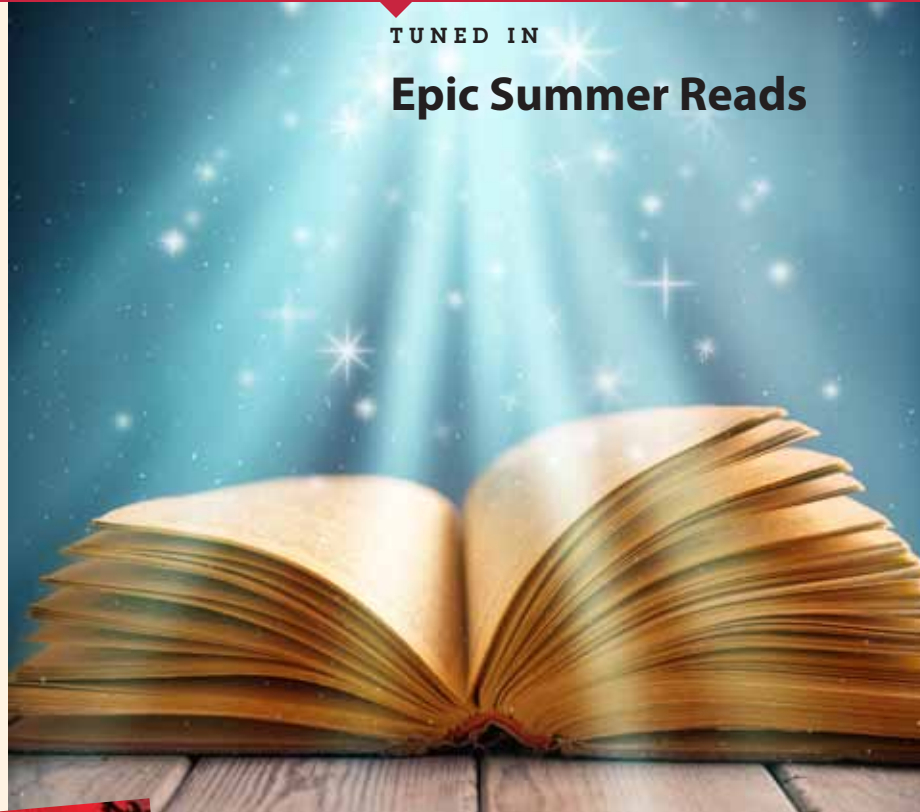
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Henry Numan is a retired pastor living in Vancouver, British Columbia.

TUNED IN

Epic Summer Reads



Orhan's Inheritance

by **Aline Ohanesian**

reviewed by **Kristy Quist**

On the death of his grandfather, Kemal, in 1990, Orhan inherits the family business in Turkey. But the family home is bequeathed to an unknown woman named Seda who lives in the United States. Orhan sets out to find out who this woman is and why his grandfather has given her this gift. Weaving together the Turks' horrific treatment of Armenians at the end of the Ottoman Empire and the history of Orhan's family, Ohanesian builds an unflinching novel that is both heartbreaking and riveting. (Algonquin)

The Jaguar's Children

by **John Vaillant**

reviewed by **Sonya VanderVeen Feddema**

Young friends Héctor and César flee dire circumstances in Mexico by being smuggled into the U.S. by "coyotes"—human traffickers. Abandoned in the desert, they descend into a hell of thirst, hunger, fear, brutality, and spiritual confusion. Trying to retain his sanity, Hector tells stories to an unknown contact on his friend's phone—stories about his Zapotec grandparents, about Cesar's moral conflict with a Mexican agricultural company, and about himself, including

his thoughts on gods, the Roman Catholic Church, and Jesus. The novel, which includes profanity and vulgarity, reveals the horrors of human trafficking and the power of story to inspire courage in humanity's darkest hour. (Knopf Canada)

The Hardest Peace: Expecting Grace in the Midst of Life's Hard

by **Kara Tippetts**

reviewed by **Kristy Quist**

Kara Tippetts spent the last few years fighting cancer as it showed up in ever more frightening places. In her book she witnesses openly and honestly to what God did in her life before and after her diagnosis. Tippetts expresses her sadness that the end will come, her joy in the moments she has with her husband and young children, and her faith in the grace of Christ that will carry her and her family in the coming days. Especially poignant as she passed away in March, Tippetts's story is heartbreaking, beautiful, and full of hope. (David C. Cook)



Ordinary: Sustainable Faith in a Radical, Restless World

by **Michael S. Horton**

reviewed by **Robert N. Hosack**

In a culture constantly looking for what's new, radical, epic, innovative, emergent, and revolutionary, Michael S. Horton returns his readers to the ordinary means of grace. "No one wants to be ordinary," contends Horton. Yet the radical mentality that dominates contemporary evangelicalism causes everyday Christians to become anxious about their spiritual lives. *Ordinary* counters with a sustainable discipleship for a long obedience in the same direction. (Zondervan)



No Parking at the End Times

by Bryan Bliss

reviewed by Adele Gallogly



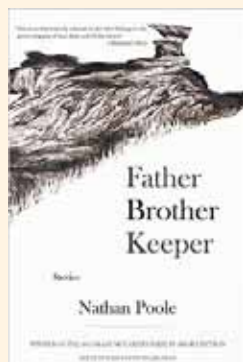
Since 16-year-old Abigail's family sold everything and moved across the country in anticipation of the end times, they are effectively homeless. Abigail is torn between relying on the judgment of her parents—who still trust the

preacher whose prophecies came to nothing—or following her twin brother's call to strike out on their own. As Bliss explores the tenuous ties of family loyalty and the hard work of staying hopeful, he gives Abigail an authentically restless voice filled with questions as well as expressions of love for her family. This excellent novel will be a worthwhile and poignant read for young adults, parents, and anyone who gives guidance to youth. Ages 13 and up. (HarperCollins)

Father Brother Keeper

by Nathan Poole

reviewed by Adele Gallogly



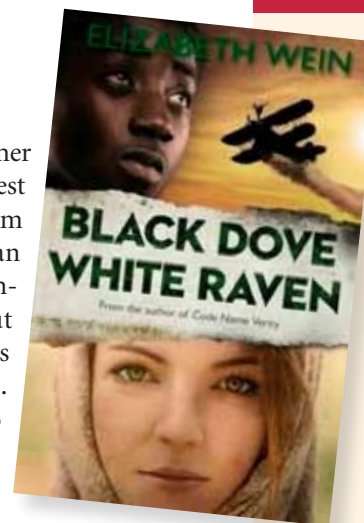
Nathan Poole's collection of symbol-rich, superbly crafted short stories is set in the harsh landscape of the southern U.S. His characters suffer, and their personal hardships—sickness, suicide, dementia, violence, poverty—affect their family relationships. Like the mounds, fields, and tributaries that surround them, they have mysterious inner lives that other people do not necessarily see or understand. The tranquil intensity of these stories deserves to be savored on a peaceful stretch of grass or to be read aloud to listeners who long to be swept up by an evocatively poetic work. (Sarabande)

Black Dove, White Raven

by Elizabeth Wein

reviewed by Francene Lewis

Teo and Emilia's lives are forever changed the day Teo's mother is killed while flying her stunt plane. Their mothers were best friends, and Emilia's mother follows through on their dream to take the children to Ethiopia where they—one African American and one Italian American—could grow up without fear or harm because of the color of their skin. But Ethiopia is not the haven they originally envisioned. Evils from the past and the present arise to threaten their lives. Author Wein once again uses the framework of flying to explore unexpected corners of history and the human spirit. Ages 12 and up. (Disney-Hyperion)



The Joy of Missing Out: Finding Balance in a Wired World

by Christina Crook

reviewed by Jenny deGroot

"Beware the barrenness of a busy life." Author Christina Crook reaches back 2,000 years to quote Socrates in the introduction to a book that speaks into a twenty-first-century reality. A journalist with three young children and an often-traveling husband, Crook decides to go offline for a month. She invites the reader to consider the effects of living a "wired" life, the challenge of setting personal, family, and work boundaries, and the rewards of living into alternative choices.



Atlas Girl: Finding Home in the Last Place I Thought to Look

by Emily T. Wierenga

reviewed by Sonya VanderVeen Feddema

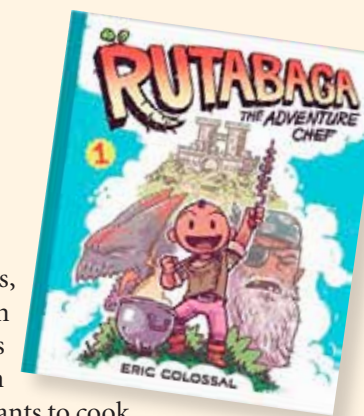
In her late teens, Wierenga wanted to leave her family behind, unaware of how much they loved her and how much she really needed them. With vulnerability and a keen eye for detail, she relates her childhood battle with anorexia and its recurrence in her adult life. As she traveled the world, married, nursed her ailing mother, and had two children, Wierenga learned that "no matter how many flights I take, no matter how many countries I visit, if God's will and heart are not my ultimate destination then I am to be more pitied than anyone." (Baker)

Rutabaga the Adventure Chef: Book 1

by Eric Colossal

reviewed by Francene Lewis

Bored with regular ingredients, Rutabaga decides to become an adventure chef. From a dragon's egg to mushrooms plucked from a legendary sword, Rutabaga wants to cook exciting new dishes. The bold lines of the comic illustrations and the enjoyable story engage the reader in the ongoing quest for adventure and cooking. Follow Rutabaga, his trusty cooking pot, and his portable kitchen as he searches for the next great unexpected dish. Ages 8-12. (Amulet)



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Fierce Convictions

by **Karen Swallow Prior**
 reviewed by **Adele Gallogly**

Hannah More was an accomplished author and philanthropist best known for opposing the slave trade and promoting education for women in 18th-century British society. *Fierce Convictions* is a crisply written, rigorously researched biography that charts More's "extraordinary life" through the events, works, and relationships that established her legacy. This is no glossy, idealized portrait; Prior embraces the complexities of More's personality. This book will likely reinvigorate readers in their own faith-led journeys by showing that our "facts and our wishes can produce great stories when serving things much grander than ourselves. And that the stories we tell ourselves and others matter." (Thomas Nelson)



At the Water's Edge

by **Sara Gruen**
 reviewed by **Jim Romahn**

From the author of *Water for Elephants* comes this elegant tale of American debutante Maddie and her wealthy, ne'er-do-well new husband on a trip to Scotland during the last weeks of World War II to try to film the Loch Ness Monster. Maddie is a spoiled rich kid who has never worked or even made her bed or cooked a meal. The initial, somewhat critical portrayal slowly evolves into heartfelt sympathy for Maddie. Gruen is a wonderful storyteller whose writing keeps the reader pursuing the next surprising turn of events. (Spiegel & Grau)

Monty's Magnificent Mane

by **Gemma O'Neill**
 reviewed by **Sonya VanderVeen Feddema**

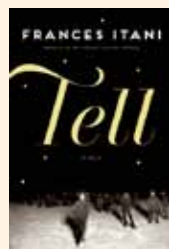
Monty loves to hear the meerkats praise his gloriously beautiful mane, so he allows them to play in it. But he gets irritated when they tug on it and tickle him. When he angrily shakes them off, he falls and damages his mane. Now Monty is really angry, and his vanity leads to danger for the meerkats. Unselfishly, Monty intervenes to save his friends. O'Neill's vibrant illustrations enhance her humorous tale in this picture book with the serious yet subtle message that the love of friends trumps vanity. Ages 3 and up. (Candlewick)



Finding Me

by **Kathryn Cushman**
 reviewed by **Kristy Quist**

In successful Christian writer Cushman's latest novel, Kelli is grieving the recent death of her father and stepmother when she discovers that her life has been shrouded in lies. She embarks on a journey from her unraveling life in California to small-town Shoal Creek, Tenn., to discover her true history and find out who she really is. Fans of inspirational fiction will find this page-turner moving and satisfying as Kelli learns more about her place in the world and in God's love. (Bethany)



Tell

by **Frances Itani**
 reviewed by **Sonya VanderVeen Feddema**

A young soldier named Kenan returns home from World War I. His wife, Tress, agonizes about his refusal to talk about the war. As they drift apart, Kenan is befriended by Am, Tress's uncle. Am is also one of the "walking wounded," as is his wife, Maggie, though their sorrows are of a different nature. When the mysterious Lukas comes to town and starts a choral society, Maggie joins. She sets in motion a series of events that changes all their lives. Itani's thoughtful novel reveals the power and freedom of truth-telling in the context of a loving community and the corrosive nature of secrets that wear down the human spirit. (HarperCollins)



My Battle Against Hitler

by **Dietrich Von Hildebrand**
 reviewed by **Jim Romahn**

Dietrich Von Hildebrand was an outspoken critic of National Socialists long before Hitler and his henchmen seized control of Germany. A Catholic philosopher, he skewered the fundamental principles underlying both National Socialism and Bolshevism, clearly articulating how they are at odds with Christianity. Much of what he wrote before and during the war is informative in today's circumstances of an aggressive Russian nationalism and radical zealots in places like Iraq, Syria, and Nigeria. In particular, his perspective on the Roman Catholic Church and Christianity is a welcome call to sound thinking and gracious living. (Image)