

G. Lee Ramsey, Jr. *Preachers and Misfits, Prophets and Thieves: the Minister in Southern Fiction*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008. 164 pages. \$13.57

The readers of this journal will be quick to note that we have a plethora of anecdotal portraits of the clergy in Western literature. Even Odysseus has to contend with the priest-prophet Leodes on his return to Ithaca, allegedly preying upon the affections of poor Penelope. That confrontation didn't last long, the long-suffering King of Ithaca having "hacked the prophet square across the neck and the praying head went tumbling in the dust."

Happily, subsequent representations of priests, ministers and religious of various denominations have been quite a bit more benign in the ensuing Christian years, even if (more often than not), biting satirical. A few years back, Raymond Chapman compiled a delightful anthology entitled the *Godly and Righteous, Peevish and Perverse* (2002), which catalogued scenes from the razor sharp pens of the likes of Henry Fielding, Anthony Trollope, Oscar Wilde and a host of other devilishly wicked authors burlesquing and—it must be said—occasionally praising, those called to ordained ministry in the Christian Church. Chaucer's pilgrims, move over. G. Lee Ramsey, Jr. takes this somewhat loose association of clergy depictions caught in compromising moments a step further in *Preachers and Misfits, Prophets and Thieves: the Minister in Southern Fiction*. Ramsey frames his very accessible study of ministers precisely as a literary and regional phenomenon when he says that "as the South changes yet endures, so too does its fiction and its faith. Amid the flux, the minister remains them most visible representative of the varieties of religious experience that continue to flourish across the 'Christ-haunted' landscape that is the South. They fire the imaginations of the region's writers who creatively present them to us in multiple visions of the ministry. If we listen to them, the fictional ministers have a word for us" (138). Ramsey nicely captures just how inviting—and imperative—that word can be for at least three reasons: his text is broad in its consideration of clerical types, yet narrow enough to examine regional literature; although he covers a lot of fiction in a few pages, Ramsey is incisive in his observations; lastly, the author has a keen sense of the pastoral, cultural and theological dialogue that runs through the novels and short stories he deals with.

Examining southern fiction over the last hundred years, Ramsey covers authors who in one way or the other lay claim to a southern heritage. The chapters concern the minister as preacher, evangelist, pastor, priest, con man and thief, church politician, prophet, mystic, misfit and, finally, community person. While a monograph could probably be written on each of these portraits, Ramsey gives us just enough to whet the appetite. Moreover, one of the virtues of the book is that it exposes the staggering range of ministers that the south itself has produced; no small claim, to be sure. I was especially appreciative of the inclusion of a diverse representation of clergy, including the few Roman Catholic priests that dot the south now and again, such as those who show up in Walker Percy's novels. As Ramsey points out, "Catholic or Protestant, the priest signals the loving "yes" of god to the people and places who are otherwise ruled by destruction."

In each of these little investigations of the minister in southern fiction, where "preacher watching" is a "regular pastime," Ramsey has something to offer us by way of close reading. Ramsey rightly points out that the Christian minister as pastor is too often neglected, but does a fine job exploring those authors who take the pastoral side of Christian ministry seriously. Anne Tyler's *Saint Maybe* is a solid reading of a novel that brings to light who heals but also "makes us squirm." The chapter on the minister as "Con Man, Seducer and Thief" provides some nice

comparisons with Tennessee Williams and William Faulkner. Ramsey is both well read and insightful about an enormous spectrum of literature.

One of the clear advantages of *Preachers and Misfits, Prophets and Thieves* is the author's familiarity not only with literature but with theological praxis. I would not hesitate to recommend this book to any ministerial student, Southerner or Yankee, because Ramsey brings his pastoral vision as a lens for the entire work. In fact, the first chapter is entitled "Whose Voice is That?" a useful interrogation into the vocation of the minister's call. Each of the chapters has a pastoral and theological trajectory. In the chapter on the "preacher as evangelist," Ramsey looks at Flannery O'Connor's devastating portrait of life and death in baptism portrayed in "The River." He appropriately asks, "what is Christian evangelism in early-twenty-first century North America anyway? Does the 'river-wading Bevel Summers' remind us of what it really means "to call persons to commitment to Jesus Christ because most of us belong to congregations and denominations where so little is required and nothing is at stake?"

Amen to that. If Ramsey is right about the pastoral insights southern fiction offers—and I think he is—then why not consider a required course on American fiction for ministry students in the seminary curricula? "Whether the lives of these fictional ministers, the way that they inhabit the offices of ministry, their struggles with faith and doubt, their character strengths and weaknesses, and their response to God and the communities that they serve—whether all these can be instructive in terms of real ministry is finally up to us as readers."

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