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My Pulitzer Project: A Personal Reflection on the Benefits of Reading Fiction for Ministry Leaders

Adam Groza
Gateway Seminary

Introduction to the Pulitzer Project

These days I love to read fiction, but it hasn't always been that way.

Like many pastors and theological educators, for many years my bookshelf was filled primarily with non-fiction books. Shelves in my home and office were lined with exactly what you'd expect to find: commentaries, biographies, monographs, and other scholarly books related to philosophy of religion (my area of specialization). It saddens me to admit that for many years I didn't see the value of fiction. I read only what had been required in the genre during high school and college, and thought that fiction was (quite frankly) a waste of time.

I'm not sure when my thinking began to change, but at some point, it dawned on me that I should read more works of fiction. Reading fiction initially was a means to talk with people in my California community, most of whom were not reading about theology, ministry, and philosophy. As my kids got older, I wanted to be a good example of someone with a balanced diet of reading. If I was going to encourage my kids to read fiction and engage them in conversation about the genre, I was going to need to develop a taste for it.

Once committed, I faced an initial obstacle: Where to start? Walking into a bookstore and choosing a work of fiction is daunting. It's usually the largest section in the store. Since you're not supposed to judge a book by its cover, I didn't have much to go on. But then I noticed that on certain book covers was a gold star indicating that the book had won the Pulitzer Prize. Literary experts had already judged the book to be worthy of reading!

And that's how it started.

For the past ten years, I have been reading every book awarded the Pulitzer Prize in fiction. I don't read the winners chronologically but vary books by theme, author (there are a few repeat winners), and page length. Candidly, some of these books are very, very long. Unlike other awards,

a Pulitzer is not given every year. The Pulitzer is only given to a work of fiction believed to meet the standards of the award.

In this way the Pulitzer Award is unlike the Oscar for Best Picture. The best film on any given year gets the Oscar. It might not be a great film, but if it's the best film *that year*, it gets the Oscar. The Pulitzer doesn't get awarded if no book is believed to meet the prize standards by the judges. As a result, reading Pulitzer winners for fiction has been a reliable guide to great books. Not all winners are equally enjoyable and in very rare cases you celebrate when the book ends. But on balance I find the gold star a better indicator of artistic excellence than say Oscar, or Tony, or even MTV's Space Man.

My Pulitzer project is a work in progress, but its far enough along that I'm convinced that ministry leaders should read more (good) fiction. In this essay, I hope to expound upon the value of fiction, its role in spiritual formation, and practical benefits for ministry leaders. Many readers will have discovered the joys and benefits of reading fiction. Others may possess my earlier skepticism of the genre and be persuaded to find a gold star on the cover at their local bookstore. I am shamelessly hopeful that other ministry leaders will join me on the Pulitzer project and fulfill my initial goal in reading fiction, which was good conversation with good people about good books.

The Value of Fiction

In the Broadway Musical Hadestown, the poet Orpheus toasts the goddess Persephone saying, "to the world we dream about, and to the world in which we live."[1] My view is that fiction serves to bridge these worlds. In fiction there is a blend of reality to which the reader can relate and ideal to which the reader can aspire, both of which are hidden in complex characters, varying levels of description, and surprising plot developments.

As Christians, we can approach fiction through the lens of *imago Dei*. Human beings are created in God's image and because of his image we create. The creation of fiction is the creation of worlds on paper. Our make-believe worlds invariably follow the patterns of our Creator. Stories of fiction can be understood as an artistic attempt to make sense of the greater human story; to connect the dots of human experience. Reading fiction by authors of different backgrounds and lived experiences reminds the Christian reader of our common origin and image. Fiction resonates because it relates. All stories wrestle with similar themes of brokenness

[1] Anaïs Mitchell, *Working on a Song: The Lyrics of* Hadestown (Penguin, 2020), 61, 66.

and invite the reader to long or reach for understanding and redemption.

To question the value of fiction is to ask what specifically fiction does for the Christian. I would answer that question by saying good fiction affirms the basic metaphysical, epistemological, and moral construct of reality as understood by Christians. The world of great fiction is generally comprised of the kinds and categories of things we understand to exist. It mirrors reality. It is not abstract or chaotic. It is intentional, purposeful, and ordered.

Just as God has created a world in which humans can possess knowledge but never possess knowledge exhaustively, human authors create paper worlds where some things are revealed and others are hidden. The reader is given enough information to understand, to navigate, and to follow. The reader only knows what the author reveals, either in direct prose or narration or by description.

The moral world of fiction is similarly structured. Human authors who often take every opportunity to dismiss the idea of God inevitably end up mirroring his image in their paper worlds. There are no stories without sin, without judgment, and without pain and suffering. The Christian reader will recognize the stain of original sin and of total depravity in every single work of fiction.

The Bible inherently affirms the value of fiction. Jesus tells stories in parables. The parables of Jesus contain fictional people and places by which some truth is communicated. When Nathan confronts Daniel, he does so by telling a story.

Christian opposition to fiction has tended to misunderstand the nature of fiction. The fundamentalist backlash over Harry Potter, for instance, misunderstood stories about fictional magic to be an endorsement of real magic of the kind prohibited by Scripture rather than an elaboration of the themes presented in Scripture such as love, sacrifice, moral duty, and friendship.

The Role of Fiction in Spiritual Formation

Reading fiction is of great value simply for the appreciation and enjoyment of literature as art. Beyond that, however, it is a window into the worldview of a culture and a reflection of biblical truth by authors who usually do not acknowledge the truth of the Bible. Much like the apostle Paul observed an altar to an unknown god in Athens, fiction is a window into the worship and belief of a culture.

American Pastoral by Tim Roth, for instance, chronicles the dissolution of post-World War American idealism and the cultural dissonance resulting from disenchantment with conformism, materialism, and hypocrisy. Much like Salinger in *Catcher in the Rye*, Roth is exposing the phoniness

and incoherence of modern life. These books provide readers with texture to the themes of angst and generational isolation evident in popular culture of Generation X in the 1980s and resurgence of nihilism in the '90s.

Pulitzer winning books such as those in the *Rabbit* series by John Updike are an exploration of what would become terms decades later as the crisis of masculinity or toxic masculinity. The books protagonist, Harry Angstrom, is an average middle-class American stuck and miserable in the modern secular life. Updike's novels read like an illustration of Solomon's declaration that life for life's sake is vanity.

In my opinion, the greatest Pulitzer novel is *Lonesome Dove*, published in 1985 by author Larry McMurtry. This book represents respite from the existential crisis of mid to late twentieth century fiction to more traditional themes of friendship and resilience set in the late nineteenth century. To think that Americans in 1985—amidst neon spandex, cola wars, and hair metal—would gravitate towards more simple times and more traditional themes, perhaps foreshadows the more recent trends of tiny houses, van life, and homesteading.

So how do these examples serve the purpose of spiritual formation? As with Peter in John 6 ("to whom else shall we go?") spiritual formation is often a matter of contentment in Christ and thanksgiving for a life built upon the rock. Pulitzer novels often reveal the alternative; life built upon sand in a thunderstorm. In the words of Pulitzer winning Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*.

Many characters in Pulitzer winners read like cautionary tales of obsession (Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch*), mortality (Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge*), and avoidance (Andrew Sean Greer's *Less*). Others remind us that no sin is common to man, as with slavery and brutality in *The Known World*. Modern fiction seems like parables in two ways: they can point to moral truths agreed upon by all regardless of the reader's worldview (*Tinkers*); or they can challenge the norms and values that are generally agreed upon (*The Road*).

Part of the spiritual formation of reading Pulitzer fiction is found in the simple fact that reading well-written books just makes you a better reader, writer, and overall communicator. A person may appreciate Taco Bell until they've eaten more elevated Latin cuisine or McDonald's until they've had In-N-Out Burger in California. Once elevated, tastes refine in regard not only to what you enjoy but also what you produce. My contention is that reading good fiction will make you a better Bible reader, Bible teacher, and Bible follower.

Practical Benefits for Ministry Leaders

Donald Whitney reminds us in *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* of the value of Christian conversation in which we seek truth and see truth as truth and lies as lies. Pulitzer fiction is a wonderful source of Christian conversation where truth and lies are artistically illustrated and philosophically elucidated. Moral courage, human resilience, and the vast consequences of evil against the backdrop of slavery are evident in *The Underground Railroad* and *Beloved*.

Pulitzer reading in fiction expands your horizons to the literary world and, therefore, the real world. Reading a book on the identity crisis of Jewish immigrants in *The Amazing Adventures of Cavalier and Klay* or about the life of a modern homosexual man in *Less* helps ministry leaders to understand the very people they're seeking to reach—a kind of understanding which results in empathy without compromise. Remember the well where Jesus interacted with the Samaritan women in order to call her to repentance and faith? I see good fiction as a kind of well where we meet characters that help us to understand the hopes, fears, sins, and struggles of real people.

The books I've mentioned above are not likely to have been widely read in your circle of friends. That is certainly the case for me. However, one of the ways we function as salt and light is to point people to what is better and, ultimately, to what is best in Christ. It is generally a loving thing to point someone to something that is better. Saying to someone "you should try X" where X is better for them than whatever they are currently consuming or enjoying is a loving thing to do. The project of evangelism and apologetics is often a matter of advocacy and awareness of that which is better.

Pulitzer winning fiction, I would argue, is better than whatever most people are reading in the space of fiction. Asking someone to read a better work of fiction *with* you will invite observations about the beauty of writing as an artform, the themes of good and evil in the book, and the truths found therein.

Sermon and other teaching illustrations benefit from references to good fiction. A speaker can, with ease, introduce the context needed to illustrate a point. In doing so, you direct your audience to a source of quality and depth. Like Paul referencing the unnamed Athenian poet in Acts 17:28, a speaker can bridge the truth of God to a culture by referencing a regarded work of art from within that culture.

For instance, take the 2014 Pulitzer prize winning *All the Light We Cannot See* by Anthony Doerr. The book details the flight of a young blind girl from Nazi invasion. On her journey, the famished young heroine comes across a kindly couple on a farm that feed the girl scrambled eggs. Doerr

describes the scrambled eggs as tasting to the hungry girl like "clouds" and "spun gold"—a moving illustration of common things taken for granted.

Paul commends in Philippians 4:8 whatever is right, pure, lovely, and admirable. Pulitzer fiction is an elevated artform containing the very things of which we are to think. Flannery O'Connor says in *Mystery and Manners* that "fiction is about everything human."[2] To grow in your love of fiction is to grow in your love of others, and that in itself is worthy of our pursuit.

[2] Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), 68.