

# The Best Books in Christian Historical Fiction

A fuller version of this essay, with additional references, is available on our website at [athenaeumreview.org](http://athenaeumreview.org).

Darren J. N. Middleton

John F. Weatherly Professor of Religion  
Texas Christian University

**Johnny Cash, *Man in White: A Novel about the Apostle Paul*. HarperCollins, 226pp.**

Originally published in 1986, after spending several years in a desk drawer, this Billy Graham-endorsed novel chronicles six years in the tumultuous, internally-divided life of Saul of Tarsus (c. 10 CE - c. 65). Cash follows the conventional portrait of Saul as a tenacious and murderously destructive pursuer of Jesus's early followers, those itinerant prophets and preachers who seemed desperate to keep Jesus's memory alive in the years immediately following his death. Part of this novel's strength lies in Cash's dexterous exploration of Saul's ardent ambition. He appears larger than life, like Cash himself, and, like Cash, he fights personal demons. Cash's interest in his other characters' motives—the hopes and fears of the aforesaid wandering charismatics, the

Pharisees, High Priest Annas, as well as others in and around Jerusalem—also makes for an engaging and readable story. Life changes on the road to Damascus, however, and I think that Cash, the Man in Black, was drawn to Saul's illumination, because Saul's story stresses something Cash expressed in his life and art, certainly in *Cash: The Autobiography*, and this is the notion that even the 'worst' sinner can secure himself to heaven through Jesus of Nazareth, the Man in White.

Cash's drug-addled soul identified with the troubled Saul; and, Cash often described his own Damascene experience, which occurred in the fall of 1967 in Nickajack Cave on the Tennessee River, north of Chattanooga, in Pauline terms. This compelling novel not only delves into Saul's conversion, it draws on the theological language of Paul's later letters, showing how far and to what extent the Apostle to the Gentiles influenced (and continues to influence) Christianity's vocabulary of faith.

**Jostein Gaarder, *Vita Brevis: A Letter to St. Augustine*. Phoenix House, 164pp.**

Gaarder is a contemporary Norwegian writer, best known for *Sophie's World: A Novel About the History of Philosophy*, and in *Vita Brevis* he impishly invites the reader to ponder the authenticity of a letter that he finds and then buys from a used bookstore in Argentina's capital city, Buenos Aires. Written in Latin, the enigmatic epistle purports to be from the fourth-century pen of Flavia Aemiliathe, St. Augustine's discarded lover, yet Gaarder is initially skeptical, so he photocopies it before mailing the original to the Curia in Rome. Gaarder hopes the Catholic Church's scholars will scrutinize and then confirm the letter's contents. But the Vatican never replies. We are left, therefore, with Flavia's

story, an impassioned rewriting of her relationship with the Bishop of Hippo (354-430), perhaps the most enduring theological influence on the Western, Latin-speaking church.

Floria emerges from her work as an intellectual. Her letter references Greco-Roman myths and philosophies, for example, and she seems intensely cognizant of the *Confessions*, Augustine's account of his early life. Augustine started his memoir in 391, and this ancient story of someone who wrestled incessantly with his own limitations still has something valuable to say to modern readers. *Confessions* is an enthralling book. It tracks the journey of a man with a restless intellect traversing different thought-terrains, like Manichaeism and Neo-Platonism, and it showcases a soul gifted to grasp its own tiny tale as illustrative of creation's much bigger story—the dramatic fall into disarray, and then the radical conversion to the love of God and return to harmony.

Floria's fascinating letter attests to Augustine's personal and cosmic narrative, and she sees her ex-lover as an example of faith's alliance with reason, yet Floria never flinches from asking Augustine to explain why he rejected her, and why he appeared to think a woman's body posed problems for, and made her subordinate to, men. Floria questions the gendering of Christian doctrine, in other words, and she mistrusts the usefulness of those thinkers—like Augustine—who blended the Gospel and Greek philosophy to form ideas about reason and rationality that reflected a bias against women, principally smart women like Floria. *Vita Brevis* hints at the need for Christians to work hard to transcend gendered hierarchies in the church, and I suspect it is fair to say that it gestures toward a proto-feminist theology that carries the potential to change the way we think as well as tell the other half of an important story.

**Mary Sharratt, *Illuminations: A Novel of Hildegard von Bingen*.  
Mariner Books, 288pp.**

A girl is playing with wooden dolls in her Bermersheim backyard when an orb floats out of the sunlight and catches her eye, yet it vanishes before she grasps it, like the butterfly escaping the killing jar. Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179) is five years old. And her mother is horrified; good children do not see heavenly objects, she says, but the orbs repeatedly return, hurtling by Hildegard's head, thrumming with angelic music. God seldom spares Hildegard. The visions seldom go away. And the inventive theology as well as difficult life that proceeds out from such visions pulsates at the heart of Sharratt's celebrated story. The winner of the 2013 Nautilus Gold Award, *Illuminations* spirits us into the German mystic's troubled, twelfth-century environment and, as an example of Christian historical fiction, it invites us to take notice, not so much of the orbs but of Hildegard's full-bodied, animated faith—the same faith that caught the eye of Pope Benedict XVI in 2012, when he named her a Doctor of the Church.

Hildegard was the tenth child born to a noble family, and tradition obliged her parents to offer Hildegard as a tithe to the church at an early age. *Illuminations* captures the heartbreak and loneliness that followed from this decision to render her an anchorite. Jutta von Sponheim, another religious recluse, shares a cell with Hildegard for thirty or so years, during which time Hildegard sharpens the skills that eventually set her apart as a polymath. Sharratt's heroine is never more herself than when she is at play in the fields of botany, theology, music, poetry, pharmacology, prayer, drama, vinification, financial management, and anti-patriarchal activism. The unusual visions of luminous

substances continue, with each occurrence becoming more intense than its antecedent, and Sharratt's provocative as well as descriptive prose renders Hildegard's ecstatic experience in ways both mysterious and terrifying, even if one senses that such revelations emphasize those dimensions of the divine character that should be brought into contemporary theological discussion.

Hildegard's revelations of the Feminine Divine, where God is imaged as a mother, together with multiple and different visions of divine immanence in the natural world, receive considerable coverage in this novel and, in the end, they empower Sharratt to compellingly recover and then reassert the link between God, creation care, and maternal kind-heartedness for those pushed out to life's edges. One finishes this story, then, and one senses that a future hope for women religious lies in mining the motherlode of the Christian past.

**Douglas Bond, *Luther in Love*.  
Inkblots Press, 300pp.**

Historical fiction often serves as an educational as well as imaginative point of entry into a particular period. *Luther in Love* is all this and more. Written in adroit prose and moving at a rapid, appealing pace, Bond's latest novel uses the ingenious device of a private memoir, penned by Martin Luther's wife, Katharina von Bora, as a way to engage our theological sensibilities and push them past dates, Diets, and papal Bulls. Flesh-and-blood characterization is Bond's specialty, and he has published at least six other novels in this genre, so it will come as no surprise that he never once flinches from a balanced or rounded portrait of the Reformation's principal architect. A former Augustinian friar and a professor of Holy Scripture at

the University of Wittenberg, Luther (1483-1546) was an obdurate yet assiduous man, at war with his emotions before finding peace, like Augustine before him, in the apostle Paul's letter to the Romans. Luther took from Paul the idea that salvation is free gift, not an effort, and that good works are not a requirement for redemption, but the result of loving God because God first loved humankind. Bond mines the many-layered details of Luther's troubled inner life, and he shows how Luther's battle cry—the demand for reform in head and number of the Roman Catholic Church—is inextricably tied to the story of how Paul's insight into God's saving grace reformed Luther's own soul.

Bond highlights some of the other characters who come to blows in the wider arena of church change at the sixteenth century's outset. Archbishop Albert of Mainz serves as Luther's main opponent, for example, and the Elector Frederick of Saxony, with whom Bond sympathizes, protects Luther, because Frederick frowns on Italian incursion into German matters. In the end, though, it is the tale of Katharina von Bora's marriage to Luther, set against the backdrop of continent-wide turmoil, that remains with this novel's readers. Marriage is a school of character, for Luther, and his marriage to Katharina also appears designed to highlight a higher love—Luther's love for Jesus. It is no small thing that Bond's novel features a link to a downloadable study guide for church ministers to use during premarital counseling sessions. Protestant Christians gathered late last October to mark the 500th anniversary of the year Luther made his ninety-five theses known, and this novel's 2017 publication was a timely one, even if Bond's novel repays close attention at any time. A

**Paul Hourihan, *The Death of Thomas Merton: A Novel. Vedantic*  
Shores Press, 168pp.**

Hourihan's stimulating story exemplifies a point I often make in my literature and theology classes at Texas Christian University: Novels seldom function as neutral territory on which reasonable people stand and then agree to disagree; instead, novels frequently declare a war of the spirit on the battleground of ideas. Favorable accounts of Hourihan's tale led to a Northern California Publishing Award for Best Spiritual Book (2004), for example, and yet, perhaps representing others, Donald Grayston's review eviscerates the text: "This is a diatribe, a character assassination, a polemic, an angry screed, a pathetic exercise in projection, and an assault on the general consensus in the community of Merton scholars and readers about who Merton was and what he was about."

Thomas Merton (1915-1968) was one of the most celebrated Catholic Christian monks of the last century. He was a Trappist whose prolific writings on everything from racial equality to social activism, from contemplative studies to literary criticism, have had an immense influence on the lives of his readers. After visiting Asia and then stopping off in Bangkok to participate in an interfaith council, Merton was accidentally electrocuted on December 10, 1968, in his cottage at the Red Cross Conference Center, close to Thailand's capital. Such details are

crucial to the "general consensus" in the community of Merton readers, as they are in the imagination of the late Hourihan, and yet Hourihan, a onetime teacher of Indian Vedantic philosophy, offers a radical re-appraisal of Merton's premature end. His electrocution was no accident; it was made to look like one.

Hourihan characterizes Merton as something of a Hamlet-figure, wavering between Trappist austerity and Vedantic nondualism. Journeying through Asia fosters Merton's alienation from the Catholic Church, Hourihan's narrator reveals, and Merton struggles to conceal his self-disgust. Indian spirituality helps, we are told, even if Hourihan's Merton laments Vedanta's late appearance in his soul's formation. In this context, Bangkok becomes a crossroads moment: Should Merton return to his hermitage at the Abbey of Gethsemani, just outside Bardstown in Kentucky, and there resume his writerly duties, or should he leave the Catholic Church behind and commit to Vedanta? Hourihan's challenging novel insists that Merton would have been useless to himself if he had returned to the monastery, and useless to his Christian readers if he had become some kind of *sadhu*, so a staged suicide seemed to be the only solution to his existential problem. *The Death of Thomas Merton* is an ambitious historical novel, like the others mentioned in this survey, and while it amazes some folk, and vexes still more, it rarely leaves its readers unmoved. ◻