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Nourishing Narratives
The Power of Story to Shape Our Faith

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Humans make sense of the world through language and the words that compose our stories. Engaging with writers like Dante, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Flannery O'Connor, and Marilynne Robinson, this volume encourages us not only to understand how stories nourish our faith, but to discover how our stories are part of God's great story.

Complicated Narratives and Important Failures

I still have the handmade birthday card my fifth-grade teacher gave me—an enormous piece of folded yellow construction paper with a big orange bookworm (wearing a festive birthday hat, naturally) drawn on the front. Somehow that flimsy relic of forty years ago survived the many moves of my childhood and found a snug home at the bottom of the cedar box a great-uncle made me as a repository for my “treasures.”

Perhaps it's no surprise I safeguarded it so carefully: after all, it's certainly an unusual year when one is celebrated for being bookish—celebrated, more importantly, by the fabulously named Anquanita Ash. I mean, if that doesn't sound like a name straight out of some wonderfully magical story, I'm not sure what does. And Mrs. Ash was magical—one of those teachers who becomes an indispensable feature of childhood lore. Goddess of the fifth grade, she strode effortlessly through the halls of Carriage Hills Elementary School, cooler than most anyone else we had ever known.

One of the most memorable aspects of her classroom was how she handled reading. To be sure, she read aloud to us each day after lunch, and we had instruction in reading and spelling and the rest. But the great privilege was to be allowed time in the “reading tub”: an old claw-foot bathtub that sat in one corner of the room. Its sides were lined with a vibrant red faux-fur material whose only other natural habitat appeared to be the dashboards of certain very groovy cars. The tub itself was filled with seemingly endless pillows of all sizes and varieties. So when our work was done, we were encouraged to luxuriate with a book, there among the pillows: reading as pleasure and reward. It was an important lesson: to read, according to Mrs. Ash, was not a grim chore of mastering subjects and verbs, but a task to be sought and savored and enjoyed.

This was a lesson of which, even at eleven years old, I'd been an eager pupil for a long time. For one thing, I had a grandmother who was well-known for her devotion to books. Other people might have Proustian memories of the smell of their grandmothers' cookies; my Grandma Kline's house smelled exactly like a very lovely used-book shop. Most rooms in her house featured floor-to-ceiling bookcases, with volumes overflowing the shelves' bounds. In her basement, each room was filled with canning shelves so that the books could be placed two-deep on them. Many of her books were from the nineteenth or first half of the twentieth century, and on my family's visits, I would spend hours combing the shelves, discovering all manner of Victorian literature, tales of faraway missionaries and theological treatises, histories of places and events of which I had never heard, cookery books, and more: a whole library's worth of subjects. She had so many books that she kept at least one grocery sack by her front door with those she had either read or of which she had inadvertently bought doubles. Visitors to her house always spent time finding at least one volume to take with them: reading as hospitality.

As a beloved grandchild, I was not limited to choosing from this front-door stash but had the full run of her collection, though my mother always insisted that I ask my grandmother for any book I wanted to have. I was never refused: reading as love. Indeed, I learned from my Grandma Kline that books could serve as vital companions on the journey; her wise, and typically wry, advice to me: “Always have at least one book in your purse at all times.”

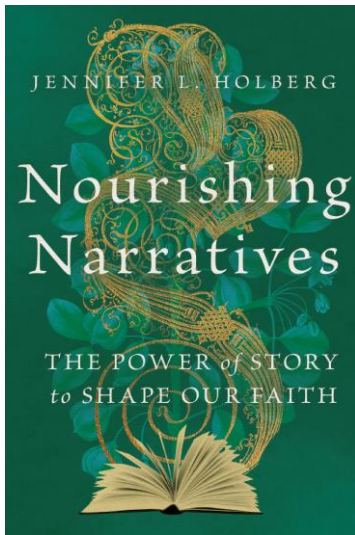
But it wasn't just my grandmother and Anquanita Ash who taught me these practices of reading; so did a family life characterized by nightly, communal novel and Bible reading, church and Sunday school experiences replete with both tale and interpretation, and scads of Bible memorization. Indeed, I had a story-shaped childhood. It is, doubtless, little wonder that I became an English professor.



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But no matter what one's childhood—even if one was not or is not really much of a reader—we are *all* profoundly story-shaped people. We live in a world that, for better and worse, most often seems to process through narrative, not facts.

Think about it: from the time we are children, we use stories to imagine the possibilities life may offer us. Consider the stories you have told yourself over the years about what you would like to be or hope to do, what job you would have, where you might travel, what your wedding would look like, how many children or grandchildren you would have. Right now, I'd wager, you could tell me a story about what you think this next year will bring. We know the reverse is true as well: we can probably all think of examples of people whose lives get stuck because they can't imagine a different narrative for their lives, can't imagine living out a different storyline. Think how many times you've heard someone say, particularly after a disappointment or a sudden tragedy or in the middle of a midlife crisis, "That's not what was supposed to happen." Without dismissing the shock and sadness of these situations, I suggest it is telling that such a comment implies the existence of a story we all narrate to ourselves constantly—and how strongly it shapes our own responses. I still think about an example from many years ago: how Elizabeth Edwards, wife of the disgraced presidential candidate John Edwards, framed her answer when she was recovering from her husband's infidelity. In an interview she explained: "It's an ongoing process of finding your feet again, retelling your story to yourself. You thought you were living in one novel, and it turns out you were living in another" (Andrew Malcolm, "Elizabeth Edwards Speaks, Gently, on Her Cancer, Husband's Affair," *Los Angeles Times*).

And it's not just the stories we tell—it's the ones we listen to, it's the ones we value, it's the ones we engage with and spend time interpreting. Through stories we come to understand the expectations and norms of others around us—our family, community, church, and larger culture. Indeed, stories define those expectations and norms—and signal to us whether our lives are successful or not (at least according to those doing the telling). That's no surprise—from at least the British Romantic poets, like Percy Shelley, we've been explicitly told that poets, storytellers, and people who control the imagination are the "unacknowledged legislators of the world" ("Defense of Poetry," in *Essays, Letters from Abroad, Translations and Fragments*). Such a claim wouldn't have surprised Socrates, who saw the power of poets and, unlike Shelley, warned of their pernicious influence way back in the fifth century BCE. And of course, thinking through narrative is Jesus' primary pedagogical mode: a man goes on a journey, a woman searches for a coin, a son goes astray, a servant makes a bad investment. Whatever the perspective, there is ample evidence that societal attitudes—on whatever issue, whether toward smoking or politics, war or sexuality—are affected more by story than by law. Thus, stories both encourage and constrain us, depending on our ability to critically interpret and respond to these narratives.

This book, then, is not just for bookworms like me: it is for everyone hoping to think more deeply about what it means to be fundamentally story-shaped people, people hungry for narratives that are life-giving. Many wonderful books exist already to persuade you of the merits of reading certain books (often the "classics," for example) or journeying with certain writers. All good. But though the coming pages will invite you into a conversation with the work of many writers, this is not a book so much meant to prescribe *what* or *who* to read, but more about *how* and *why*. I am not going to claim that reading makes you somehow "better," but rather that becoming a better reader—more attuned to narrative assumptions and strategies and expectations—is critical.

And for people of faith, for people of the Book, this book considers how the larger story to which we give allegiance, the gospel—the overarching story of God's good creation; humanity's fall; and our redemption through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ—interacts with the smaller stories in which we participate. Not only because, as critic Henry Zylstra has argued, the discernment of stories should generally give us "more to be Christian with" but because the old, old story must be fundamental to our very understanding of the world (*Testament of Vision*).

—Taken from chapter one, "Complicated Narratives and Important Failures"



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