

He further demonstrates their use of “floating thematic bridges” characteristic of traditional and contemporary African-American sermonizing, blackness as a contentious presence, much self-irony concerning the white designation of Africans as “primitives,” and an intriguing subversion of white Christians who will surely be cursed and destroyed as an obstinate, racist nation. Clearly these blues women preachers with their tricksterlike behaviors, conjuring, skilled performances, and systematic undermining of the commodification of black femininity, stand defiantly outside Euro-American white male ontological and epistemological systems. Particularly engaging is Douglass-Chin’s rhetorical account of their contempt for romantic reification of white and veiled resistance. In this way, Douglass-Chin argues, these women writers bring to pass a unique form of black female subjectivity through their “singing texts.”

Beginning with the Yoruban Belinda and her legal sermon of 1787 and ending the book with the women of Toni Morrison’s mythical town of Ruby in her novel *Paradise* (1997), Douglass-Chin argues eloquently that “The blues bad preacher woman has always (re)membered herself against pain. (Per)forming herself out of initial negation of her existence, she becomes—through various strategies of opposition, rememory, recursion and resistance—a figure who stands trial before a jury of her communal peers.” This sense of communal judgment of individual (per)formance is one that permeates the earliest of black women’s life writings, from Belinda’s petition to Jarena Lee’s insistence upon her own truthfulness, to Sojourner Truth’s self-fashioning, to the self-conscious performances of black women both as writers of and characters in contemporary black women’s fiction.

This book is a useful addition to scholarly endeavors in several fields, including African-American studies, autobiographical studies, rhetorical analysis, religious studies, womanist theory, contemporary literary studies, and American history. It is an intriguing, persuasive, and culturally potent study.

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David Lyle Jeffrey. *People of the Book: Christian Identity and Literary Culture*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans P, 1996, 396 pp., \$37.00.

David Lyle Jeffrey, a professor of English literature at the University of

Ottawa, is the general editor of *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (1993) and has published a number of books, including *English Spirituality in the Age of Wesley* (2000) and *Chaucer and Scriptural Tradition* (1984).

People of the Book was awarded Book of the Year honors by the Conference on Christianity and Literature. It is a long, dense, and occasionally intimidating text in which Jeffrey appears to have four main goals: first, to provide an historical overview of the rich tradition of Western literature influenced by the Bible; second, to describe the most appropriate way to read the literature of that tradition; third, to identify and critique the groups and movements which have marginalized the Christian literary tradition; and fourth, to persuade his audience to return to the books written within the shadow of the Book, and to do so not as hard-hearted but as broken-hearted readers.

In general Jeffrey achieves his goals admirably. His overview of the Christian literary tradition begins—naturally enough—with the Bible and includes sections on the Pentateuch, Isaiah, Jesus, John, and Paul. Little of what Jeffrey says here is new (his discussion of Paul's shift from *typoi* to *allegoria* is a case in point), but it is not meant to be. And "Scripture upon Scripture" is accurate, informative, and persuasive. In "Secular Scripture: The 'Beautiful Captive'" Jeffrey discusses how "the hellenized Gentiles who had become children of the covenant by 'adoption'" used allegory—a reading strategy as common to Mediterranean Gentiles as to Paul—for the redemption of profane literature. St. Jerome and St. Augustine figure prominently in the discussion. Jeffrey describes the instrumental view of reading common to both and does an admirable job of defending Jerome against the charge that he was one of the most puritanical of the church fathers. If there is a weakness in the chapter, it is that when Jeffrey reviews Jerome's allegory for the Christian use of secular literature (the ritual purification of a captive woman before she is taken to wife), he is silent concerning the misogynistic impulses that run across the surface of the text.

In "Evangelization and Literacy" Jeffrey follows the migration of Roman missionaries into (mostly) pagan England. He gives Alfred the Great his due, and the chapter includes a superior discussion of the way in which poets like Caedmon drew biblical stories "into the harp song of vernacular poetry, so that its beauties too might serve equally 'in the tabernacle of God.'" Of particular interest is the "Dream of the Rood," which both redefines the Anglo-

Saxon notion of heroism and marks the distance between Odin's bloodlust and Christ's suffering. The chapter also provides a quick overview of pre-Christian culture in Britain which is somewhat off-point but very interesting.

In the next two chapters—"The Book Without and the Book Within" and "Authorial Intent and the Willful Reader"—Jeffrey explores a pair of related questions: "How does authority lead the intelligence?" and "How does the reader resist (or not) the authority of the text?" In doing so he pays particular attention to Dante, Chaucer, and John Wyclif, with a backward glance at St. Augustine. There is much that is familiar here (interpretation through correspondence, fourfold exegesis, the "book of nature," and so forth), but Jeffrey moves through it with considerable aplomb. And his discussion of the way in which *The Canterbury Tales* dramatizes the importance of readerly intent—"For Chaucer," Jeffrey writes, "as for Wyclif, what can most usefully be established by a self-examining reading is whether, to begin with, the reader really wants to 'get it right'"—is a thing of beauty.

"Symbolism of the Reader" is the most interesting chapter in *People of the Book*. In it Jeffrey uses Goethe's initial description of Faust as a convenient way of introducing the chapter's topic: pictorial images of readers reading. Jeffrey examines almost two dozen visual images of men and women who are reading, writing, interpreting, or translating sacred texts. And his point here, as in the preceding chapter, centers on the question of a reader's intent. The best reader, suggests "Symbolism of the Reader," is a faithful reader of the kind depicted in the portrait of John Fletcher: "the gesture of the right hand is unmistakable for anyone familiar with paintings of the first annunciation of the Word made flesh: 'Be it unto me according to thy Word' continues . . . to be the faithful reader's response to the divine Author's invitation."

The next chapter—"Authentic Narrative"—is a competent exploration of the ways in which the basic traditions of Puritan spiritual autobiography both inform and are modified by writers like Defoe. But though Jeffrey's discussion of William Cowper and John Newton is interesting and detailed, he necessarily gives Coleridge short shrift, and the section on Arnold has a surprisingly hard edge to it. This unexpected shift in tone becomes more pronounced in "The Bible and the American Myth." There, a discussion of Melville and Hawthorne becomes the staging area for a quick assault on recent political manifestations of what Jeffrey calls the "legacy of decadent New

England Puritanism.” It is not that the analysis is wrong but rather that the tone seems oddly off, a problem which disappears as soon as Jeffrey begins discussing the work of southern writers Flannery O’Connor, Walker Percy, and Wendell Berry.

In his survey of the Christian literary tradition Jeffrey pays particular attention to the question of readerly intent. What is the most appropriate way, he asks, to read the Bible and those books which fall within its shadow? As seen, Jeffrey’s answer to that question surfaces periodically throughout *People of the Book*. But he states it most completely in “Literary Theory and the Broken-Hearted Reader,” where he argues that the best reader is one for whom texts are a means rather than an end, a reader who reads in order to learn what to *do*. “The true reader,” Jeffrey had noted in an earlier approving summary of St. Augustine, “wants to know principally what is to be done—his or her concern for understanding is not merely a matter of aesthetics or even epistemology, but is incipiently ethical” (87). Such a concern can be prompted by what Jeffrey, following Kierkegaard, calls a “dialectic of sin” (360). Narratives of repentance are a particularly good example of the textual half of this dialectic, and Jeffrey discusses several of them, observing that in Biblical repentance narratives “the text is not first and foremost an invitation to an act of criticism. Rather, the story breaks the reader’s heart to hear it” (361).

Another important part of Jeffrey’s discussion of the Christian literary tradition is an analysis of that tradition’s apparent decline (at least in academia). What has happened to it? Why is such a rich and influential cultural inheritance being relegated to the margins of the syllabus? Who is to blame? Three groups in particular draw Jeffrey’s fire: those among the new critics who practiced a “Latter-Day Idolatry of the Text” (89); politicians and speech writers who promote the legacy of decadent New England Puritanism; and postmodern critics who reject the Christian literary tradition as regressive “logocentrism.” Harold Bloom—“the romanticist and literary theorist whose transgressive impulses have so often stimulated reflection” in *People of the Book*—is Jeffrey’s representative figure for the third group. Critics like Bloom, Jeffrey argues, misconstrue the commitment to meaning in the Christian literary tradition when they call it “logocentrism.” “The tradition which the deconstructionists have dubbed for our time as ‘logocentric’

is subtly but seriously misrepresented by the term,” Jeffrey writes. “Christian theory may be Logos-centered, but it is not logocentrism.” Why? Because “Christians understand themselves as a people called to live not in a web of words but to live *imitatio Christi*. This . . . is the only pronunciation of that Word which can be regarded as authentic.” By willfully misidentifying Christian action as regressive logocentrism, Jeffrey concludes, deconstructionists like Bloom contribute to—though do not create—the phenomenon of the “hard-hearted reader.”

People of the Book, then, is equal parts historical survey, reclamation project, critique, and call to arms. Return to your roots, it pleads. Immerse yourself in the Christian literary tradition. And read and write with a broken heart:

No less than anyone else . . . our egos are susceptible to . . . rationalized self-fashioning. The corpus of our literature is severely imperfect; our ranks, too, are littered with the corpses of the fallen. Our literary history affords ample evidence of the miscreance and materialism by which instrumentality is subverted. . . . The Christian writer or critic has accordingly to recognize such misprision as the effect of sin, and to understand the personal obligation of repentance.

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Mercy

Mercy is a custard pie, the slip
Of a teardrop,

And then the freefall into the new air
That is your fear.