

Reading “News from God” in Reynolds Price’s *Good Hearts*

B. W. Jorgensen
Brigham Young University

In Reynolds Price’s novel *Good Hearts* (1988), Rosa Beavers, suddenly abandoned near the winter solstice of 1985 by her husband and childhood sweetheart Wesley after twenty-eight years of marriage, drives northeast from Raleigh, NC, back to her birthplace in Warren County for Christmas, back into a landscape where “people gave out and God took over” (16). A day or two later she writes in the diary she at first addresses to the absent Wesley:

you can come round a long curve of road through woods and slowly build up the expectation that—yonder just the instant you break out into view of that halfway hid rock up yonder—a fourteen-year-old boy, a little old for his age, is going to rise from sitting on that rock, wave you down, step up to your window, motion you to open it, and then without saying anything but your name, reach out and hand you a folded slip of paper that, when you read it, says either “You can stop now, Child. You’ve finished. And you’ve won perfect rest” or “Stop. You have failed. Step out of this car, leave your keys on the seat, head straight for those trees, and brace your face. Your punishment begins”—both in God’s handwriting, tall straight black ink. (17)

That boy, she says, would have Wesley's face as he was the day she first met him. A bit later, into the road to her homeplace in Afton, she adds that her brother Rato also "could be that boy on the road too . . . the boy that hands you news from God" (17-18).

A "boy that hands you news from God" is an angel, *angelos*, bearer of news, God's messenger-boy—or girl. *Good Hearts* is a book full of angels and angelic errands, some years before angels descended onto prime-time television. In conversation in August 1988 Price commented, "I haven't counted them. Angels are something I've been fascinated by from early childhood. . . . Yes, I imagine it is full of angels" (Interview). And we started naming them: the waitress Jo on Wesley's way to Nashville and on his way back home, Wesley for Jo on his way home, the serial rapist Wave Wilbanks as a kind of dark angel, Wilson the radiologist whom Wesley lives with for three months in her trailer outside of Nashville, the homosexual professor Stan with whom Wesley stays one chaste night, Wesley's boss Bronny, Rosa's workmate Jean and her mama Emma Mustian and her brother Rato, and likely more. Indeed, readers might wonder if there is any occasion in *Good Hearts* when the news from God is not coming in to someone or other. Price writes in "A Single Meaning" that the story we crave to hear is the one that says, "*History is the will of a just God who knows us*" (249). If one takes seriously the scriptural instruction to "confess . . . his hand in all things" (D&C 59:21), then the conclusion might be inescapable that indeed "all things" whatsoever, including free choices and acts, good and bad, are in some way or other the working-out of God's will. It looks rather daring, in 1988, to publish a novel that seems to be built on such a conception of how the world works.

Novels are, as the genre's name implies, "news." Is *Good Hearts* "news from God"? And what of Price's invitation, in the novel's fourth paragraph—"You, though, if you'd been transparent there" (3)—for the reader to bear an implicitly angelic witness to the deeds and passions of his characters?¹ Beyond naming and numbering the angels in *Good*

¹Price's "you" here invites me to remember I am not "a reader," certainly not "the reader," but "I." Occasional uses of first-person singular and plural and

Hearts, we might examine more closely how their errands work on one another, and how they may work on us.

In August 1988 Price commented on the ambiguity, for him as a translator, of the word *angelos* in the gospels—should it be rendered as *angel* or *messenger*?

Especially as one gets into the Book of Acts and gets to a passage, for instance, such as that one in which there seems to be a kind of earthquake and St. Peter is rescued from prison by an *angelos*. Is he rescued by a divine figure, or is he rescued simply by someone on the prison staff or whatever, who is simply a messenger of freedom to him? It's very difficult to know there whether one is supposed to say *angel* or *messenger* in the translation. . . . In the resurrection accounts, certainly in Luke and Matthew, the women who first come on Easter morning and find the tomb empty of Christ but containing radiant creatures—I believe it's true to say that neither gospel uses the word *angel* though it does say young man or men dressed in white. It's an interesting ambiguity; and certainly my own sense of the angelic potential of human beings in our own lives at various times is a very rich sense. I've been very aware at numerous dark or intense moments of my life that particular human beings have come toward me with a kind of help or sometimes even with a kind of warning or enforcement that seemed posi-

second-person invitations to “the reader,” that is, to “you.” “We” and “us” and “you” invite the “reader,” that is, you, to join Price's narrator (whom it might be appropriate to call simply Reynolds Price). This is consistent with Price's own literary aesthetic: he regards literary works as having “kinetic intent”; they mean to change us (“Dodging” 185–86). Speaking decades ago of teaching Milton to undergraduates, he said that “the final problem, the destination” of studying a great poem like *Samson Agonistes* (1671), is “discovering the design, what Milton's design upon your life and the life of the world is. What *Samson Agonistes* says to you about your life. Then, if you find out what it says to you, you've got to go home and decide what you're going to do about what it says” (qtd. in Humphries 48). The destination of reading a

tively angelic. It was certainly like rescue, soul-saving. (Interview)

Instances of “help” or “warning or enforcement” in *Good Hearts* readily come to mind. Wesley leaves Rosa suddenly because at work one December afternoon, twenty-eight years to the day since they married, he

reached for a metric tool from his bench when his hard right hand stopped in midair. Those clear five fingers seemed no more his than the car he was tuning. . . . [I]n another minute a voice in his head said “Death is what you just reached for.” He laughed out loud, then realized the voice was not his. Wesley had no truck with brands of religion that deal in voices and unknown tongues. Still he couldn’t shake the certainty that what he’d heard was a version of God’s word, a true special message. (57)

Wesley heeds that news and runs for his life, not stopping “till five hours later on the far outskirts of Asheville in chill black mountains,” where his first human *angelos*, the waitress in a diner, tells him, “‘You look like a man that’s been cut at the bone,’” and after she’s served him, “‘Then streak it to Nashville. Don’t stop till you’re safe in a chain-locked room.’” Wesley “obeyed her to the T” (56).

Three months later on his equally fast run back home after receiving the news in Rosa’s Spring Equinox letter that she was raped in their bed on New Year’s Eve, Wesley learns this woman’s name, Joretta Robbins, Jo for short, and each of them gives a message to the other. When he tells her he is headed back to Raleigh and his wife, and that leaving was his idea, Jo says “‘She’s waiting then’” (156). Then, she tells Wesley her own story, how she left her husband Cliff five years earlier after their baby girl suffered and died of leukemia, “‘a sight worse than World War III, let me tell you.’” He asks her, “‘What would make you go back?’” and she says, “‘A sign . . . big enough to read at least. Like the sign I gave you to Nashville back when.’” So after thinking a moment till “yes, he was sure,” Wesley tells her, “‘Go call Cliff up right now’” (156). Wesley drinks his coffee and plays songs on the jukebox, and when he steps to the regis-

ter to pay, Jo tells him she did call Cliff just now—“Didn’t take but two rings’”—but declines his offer of a ride as far as Raleigh: “‘You’ve done enough for now. . . . I’ll keep you posted. I’ll also put you in my famous prayers’”—famous because “‘They work. I don’t burden God more than once or twice a year, so He responds by giving what I ask’” (157). Watching “his lights till they joined the highway and melted into a fast swarm of red, all headed east,” Jo “wondered if he’d saved her life or ruined it. For that matter, what had she done to him?” (158).

Joretta seems rather conscious of her *angelos* role, while Wesley accepts his momentary errand here with a little hesitation. Rato Mustian, a lifelong bachelor who stays with his sister Rosa during much of Wesley’s absence, sounds a bit ambiguous about his *angelos* role. In their middle-aged sibling debate on marriage vs. single life or solitude vs. love he tells Rosa, “‘You need to know what I’ve known all my life—how to live by yourself’” (96). Later in their discussion, he tells her, “‘Somehow I knew it [love] was all popsicles, cold sugar and water and then a dry stick,’” and when she asks, “‘Who told you that?’” he tells her, “‘Maybe Jesus in the night’” (99). However diffident he sounds here, Rosa and Wesley both put a lot of stock in Rato’s words (though they have not chosen and will not choose single life), because he is “a true bystander” who speaks “true judgment” (215), and both have loved him as long as they’ve known him. Rato, who was a messenger boy in the army, is privately conscious that “God or his mind had just helped him know . . . [h]is secret of happiness for all mankind,” and that “his mission was to pass that knowledge on—to men if they’d listen (which they’d seldom do) but mainly to women”: “He could let them know what men thought of them, what men truly wanted from women in their private minds” (181).

The serial rapist Wave Wilbanks, who has watched his chance to assault Rosa in her house, and who later befriends Rato, also believes himself in possession of a secret and a mission to give women “this gift . . . this permanent pleasure, the actual worship that all women dream of”; he thinks himself “the one man alive who knew that secret in pure perfection and longed to give it night after night to

willing women, every woman on earth, and no trace of harm” (188). He is borderline psychotically wrong, of course, and seems not to have a clue what his actions mean to his victims, the recipients of his “gift” of “worship,” until Rosa fights him off, “the only one who cried out and stopped him,” so he “hadn’t really finished” and “[h]is mind couldn’t leave her” and “[h]e suspected . . . he might be crazy” (187–88). That might be the news from God that Rosa’s resistance delivered to him.

Yet even after Wave meets Rosa in broad daylight in her and Wesley’s house at the farewell dinner they give Rato, begins to grasp that he hurt her mind, and even says the word “sorry” and hears her thanks (237), still to the end of the novel he believes himself to be God’s servant, using “harmless gifts that would bring such joy” (270). Obscurely planning to “finish the business that Rosa had balked on New Year’s night” (270), he prowls Wesley and Rosa’s house while they are on their way home from driving Rato back to Afton, wanting to find a way to show Rosa “his inmost meaning, his hope to ease her” (272). Finally, he prays, sitting on their bed,

Dear Lord and God, I was here once before. . . . I made some mistake and hurt her badly. You’ve let her give me a real second chance. . . . Let me bless her now, once for all in her life, by resting in the place where I tried to touch her and begging your strength to leave her for good unless she needs me.

He hears “a voice clear as anything on FM broadcasts [say] in a deep tone ‘Thank you, son. Now do the right thing.’” He stretches out on the bed, promises, “‘I’ll never be back here again, not of my own will,’” and “wave[s] both long arms beside him like wings, the angel wings he saw so often in the night in dreams or awake above him in the dark overhead.” The voice says, “‘Get up now and go. You’ve got three minutes. You were right. Amen’” (274); and Wave leaves barely before Wesley and Rosa come back into the house, carefully composing the bed so that “even Rosa herself could never guess he and God the Judge had been present there and done great deeds” (275). There is indeed about

Wave, as Price remarked in 1988, “a strange, dark angelic quality, fallen angel quality”; though he also said, “I just wouldn’t want him to ever get into *my* house after dark.” Still, while Price “doubt[s] he joins the Peace Corps and tries to make direct amends,” in his daylight encounter with Rosa and his response to it, Wave has “at least permitted a shaft of real light to shine into this world of black light that he has been living by till now” (Interview).

Rato and especially Wave are conscious messengers, Wave even a consciously (if madly) dedicated one, while Rosa seems quite unaware of the godly news she has handed on to Wave, the “real light” she sheds. The younger woman Wesley first meets on New Year’s Eve in Nashville, the almost-divorced radiologist Joyce Wilson Hunsucker—“Just call me Wilson now” (65)—is the novel’s other principal unlikely and mostly unconscious *angelos*. At work on the first day of spring, the day she has refused sex with Wesley and given him a sort of ultimatum—“let’s end the crime” (120)—Wilson is first surprised by “the closest thing to a vision in her life,” a vision of “the young Wesley” behind the “threatened and nearly transparent skin” of a twelve-year-old boy with leukemia and a broken arm, Wesley as Rosa had first seen him at that same age: “The simple condensation on earth of God’s love of things, sent for all to see and honor as they could” (122). The vision makes “her think she would be a big fool to lose Wesley now”—“the present man who asked for her body—her steady companionship—[and who] was as good a soul as she’d ever get, the only one so far to promise to use her” (123). Wesley is a sort of *angelos* to Wilson, too, shining “like a torch on a dark hill at midnight” (123); but he will not be in her trailer when she goes home this night, and in a couple of days, when she gives him Rosa’s letter with its late news about the rape, he will leave Nashville and Wilson for good.

But Wilson’s second surprise at work is that, as the hurt boy leaves the room, “She offered hope. She said ‘You’ll live to be a strong old man.’ No sooner had it passed her lips than she thought ‘Damn. That’s a lie.’ But as quick again she knew the whole truth. She had been shown the future and licensed to tell him. So she sent him a big smile—‘I know I’m right.’” The boy stops and “turn[s] her promise over in his mind, one more claim in the thousand he’d heard since

learning of his affliction. Then quick as Wilson said it Travis knew to believe her. Never having met an angel before, he nonetheless accepted the message" (123–24).

As a preface to his first collection of poems, *Vital Provisions* (1982), Price set a short poem, titled "Angel," which begins

*Every angel from its height
Sheds a pure though blinding light,
Intermittent noon and night. [2]*

We can take at least some images of light in *Good Hearts* as signs of angelic transaction (though absence of such images will not signify an absence of angels). Thus, on New Year's Eve at the same moment when his "sudden doubt" of his love for Rosa has "set free" Wave Wilbanks to assault her in her now unprotected home (68), the first time Wesley makes love with Wilson, "a big tunnel opened in the black dark above him" (69); and on January 20, when Wesley has written to Rosa, sending her half of his first paycheck from a car-repair job he has gotten in Nashville and telling her that he is staying with Wilson, and then candidly told Wilson about the letter, Wilson makes love to Wesley "to say . . . that no one man of all she'd known . . . had come anywhere near matching the way he made her know she mattered on the ground like a rare snow leopard or the shining dove," and "Wesley lay flat and let her speak. . . . Dark as it was, he knew he was climbing again and upward in her strong light" (76). Wilson equally sheds some of her "strong light" on Wesley when, two months later, she will not make love with him; and although "sex ha[s] stayed so important in Wesley's mind" as "the last line he kept to the secret world where angels spoke in silence and brought their gifts back and forth in relays" (64), he takes her seriously enough not to try to make love with her again, though they do spend one more night together in her trailer. Wilson's angelic errand in Wesley's life has been help, warning, and enforcement, all three, but his stay with her is temporary, "for now" (76); his time with her is a stage on his way, and when she hands him Rosa's letter, its news, as much from God as from Rosa

herself, will send him on. He will later conclude his parting from Wilson, “his last arrangement to stay” with Rosa (226), in a telephone call from Raleigh, telling Wilson “‘there’ll be whole sets of minutes every day when I think of you as one real blessing in my sad life’” and receiving her thanks (227).

By this point in the novel, Wesley has come back fully to Rosa, and she has welcomed him. Each of them, from their first attentive mutual sight, has been God’s news to the other. That has been, as Rosa has recognized in her diary, a large part of their problem. To put it most succinctly: angels are not of this world; they neither marry nor are given in marriage (Matt. 22:30; Mark 12:25). Marriage, after getting the news from God, is a human task: Wesley’s task steadily to love Rosa, hers to love him. On Christmas Eve, writing in the diary she started the day after Wesley left, still addressing him and trying not to let her “busy imagination jack this private trouble way past its true size” (13), Rosa says, “I don’t want to matter as much as church says I do. Reminds me too much of me as a girl, me gazing at you like you were the Holy Ghost in blue jeans with tongues aflame and angels behind you stretched east and west towards dawn and dark. Idolatry” (13–14). She later admits she has “seen God’s image in” Wesley (52); and still later, having given up second-person address to him, she writes, “The real problem was, I worshiped Wesley—didn’t I?” (111). Men and women in this world may be, momentarily, *angeli* for one another, may shine and flash God’s news like beacons. But, Rosa is telling herself (and Wesley should he ever read her diary), they are fallible mortal men and women and do great damage if they fall into idolatry. The moment after she names it, she says she quit her idolatry “some years ago now,” one evening when Wesley “dropped a raw egg on the stove, right down in the eye, and left [her] to scrounge out the awful glue.” She said, “‘Goddamnit! You’re a permanent mess.’ In an instant [she] was ready to beg [his] pardon.” But Wesley “laughed hard and said ‘Exactly. I was hoping you’d learn’” (14).

Wesley over the course of their marriage may have come to know himself “a permanent mess,” but as his dream during the novel’s first night suggests, he may have too much idolized his own possibilities, his sense that he was meant to be one of God’s gifts to the world. He aban-

dons Rosa because, after years of “benign neglect” (4), he has become “afraid of being dead at heart now, of having been dead the past twenty years,” no longer “a boy [who] had dreamed of a world in which his own life meant a good deal” (60), having lost his early “faith that he—this one lean boy—would soon do something that the world would love, and discover it had always yearned for” (61). Marrying Rosa (pregnant by him at age twenty), he had thought “maybe their strengths could join together. Together they could amount to something, which was more than you could say for anybody else in either of their families since man left the caves” (61). What happened instead was that after two years in Norfolk where he fixed motorcycles, “they came with the baby to Raleigh and dug in there. Dug bottomless graves” (62). Wesley reflects that “It was a dream [he] had made from the sight of his own good face in mirrors and the things riled women said about his soul and body. Surely God didn’t build such towers to burn? Surely they were meant to be true lighthouses, guiding others to joy—or safety at least.” What Wesley concludes, staying up nights alone in his room in the Parthenon Motel in Nashville and reading the Gideon Bible, is that “he had never lit the fire” (62). Though he does not excuse himself, he does, in his mind, blame Rosa because “She’d fed him the main lie—how grand he was” (63).

Failed and fallen angels then, or fallen idols, dreams gone bust in what is after all just ordinary late twentieth-century American working-class life—what do Wesley and Rosa have to go on? Mainly two ordinary human capacities: for giving up on misplaced transcendence (another name, perhaps, for idolatry) and just getting on living a human life; and for friendship—do the angels have that, do they need it? Writing in her diary late that winter when she has largely given up hope of Wesley, Rosa tells herself, “Join the human race, Rosa. Be a normal cold uncomplaining zombie” (113). She ought to be—we hope she will be—more than a zombie, one of the ravenous walking dead. At this low point she can “understand perfectly well and agree” with Wesley’s talk “about feeling dead” (113). But then she reminds herself, “It will after all be the first day of spring in no time now, if the world lasts till spring and Rosa’s here to greet it. Some little cell hid deep down in

me may still be breathing, may still sprout green if daylight strikes it"; and she says to that, or to daylight itself, "Do. Amaze me. Sprout and thrive" (114). The very next day, March 22, 1986, after a two-month hiatus (started when she received Wesley's letter about Wilson), she writes and sends her "backdated news" to Wesley, whom she addresses as "*about the only friend I've had since I grew up*" (148), in a letter that declares, "*I can't help believing we were each other's oldest closest friends,*" and that ends, "*Want to be pen pals? You know my address. An old friend, Rosa*" (1 5 0).

At the end of her first month of diary entries, Rosa had plainly and movingly addressed Wesley: "Be alive, old friend. Sleep deep. Come home" (53). This might be the same day, about January 20, 1986, maybe the same night, the same moment, when Wesley in Wilson's trailer outside Nashville was not yet sleeping deep but felt himself "climbing again and upward in [Wilson's] strong light" (76). He did not know his direction then, but even so he was coming home. His first night in Nashville he had prayed, "'Merciful Lord I am one scared man. . . . [S]till lead me back home and show me how to act'" (59). By way of Wilson (and others) and finally Rosa, the Lord does lead and show. The day Wesley gets home and begins to talk with Rosa, both of them admitting their faults, she once again calls him "'my last friend on earth'" (171), and when he asks, "'You want me to stay?'" she says, "'Please sir, till I'm dead anyhow.'" They both wonder "what on earth they meant. Had they only told two more kind lies after decades of kindness that had brought them to this?" (172). They eat out together, and Wesley tells her the whole story of his months with Wilson, trying to give Rosa "every fair opportunity to get real honest and turn against the son of a bitch that left [her] Christmas week to sink or swim"; but Rosa thanks him again and laughs and finally says, "'Believe me, I've tried. It's not in my heart. At least I can't find it. Let's go home to sleep'" (173).

Later this same night, they do go to bed together but do not make love, and Price again explicitly invites a reader's angelic witness: "To have watched them undress would have looked like always, from the outside" (175), reminding us how, "if [we]'d been transparent there"

in this same room, the novel's first night, we might have watched them lie down together at "ease in one another's nearness, the benign neglect which permits two bodies so warm and fine to resist quick union" (3-4). Rose and Wesley have no full "ease" now, not yet; it is far too soon, though "their fear was of something deeper than sex—maybe of finding that one or the other had changed in an unexpected secret way that only their coming nearness would trigger now fiercely, some bawling mouth of hunger or rage" (175). Rosa, coming from the bathroom, feels "suddenly and for the first time precisely like a bride" and cannot "help meeting Wesley's eyes and smiling" (176). When she lies down beside him, "sooner than she'd planned, her hand had to touch him in the center of his chest" (176); and he does kiss her "lightly once" but feels, given what he knows and has done, that she is "a possible victim . . . and fragile"—"once more a virgin" (177).

They "do not make love" in a sexual sense; but of course "making love" is exactly what they do in this scene, hardly touching at all, talking and listening a good while, starting to pardon one another and learn how to go on, to "start off innocent again . . . [b]ut also knowing what [they] both want and need, both knowing each other and paying attention" (178), before they join "in quick black sleep" (179). They can still make human love after all. Yet not for another month, the last week in April, when they have planned to drive Rato back home to Afton on Sunday, do they "make love" in anything approaching the sense we have narrowly given that phrase. Then, although confessing "what they'd had was not just imperfect but less than sufficient" (218), Wesley tells her his hope that he "can trim [his] sails and live like a human, not an angel on fire gazing off toward God" (218). Rosa, too, has "'felt on fire a lot'" and "'burned, third degree'"; but they "'won't swap scars'" because "'It won't make sense.'"

Rosa touched him then—not thinking and never again knowing why. She'd been on her back; and when she turned, her left hand was uppermost. It went to his right shoulder and stroked him gently there.

At first he was startled, but then he lay still and waited for her gesture to clarify. In a minute he'd calmed to the point where he dreamed he had a fine tattoo under her palm, a sizable tiger

stretched on the ground of Wesley's still-taut white hide. For so many years it had felt alone and not realized the danger in that. Now it roused and met Rosa and welcomed her notice.

Then for the first time in all his years with women, Wesley lay on quiet and let Rosa work her own slow will—partly because he started so tired but also because he was gambling there might be something to learn.

Rosa didn't share the hope. She'd learned all this, every move and sound, in her bedtime thoughts and dreams long ago. These were the ways she'd always loved Wesley, in her mind at least. The main thing she made was slow circles, small circles with her hand and (though she could only see a little) the syllables of tranquil comment and assurance that are most men's favorite of the sounds on earth.

She didn't assume he would somehow ignite and take over from her. She just kept going and he kept lying there. They'd got to a place that amazed them both, of mutual trust and precise alignment—lovely harmony, perfect rhythm.

And somehow they both moved on into sleep. In both their cases, it was sleep so profound their minds heard nothing from the house or street. Neither one knew a single thought or dream. (218-19)

"[B]locks away" at this same moment the dark angel Wave Wilbanks "woke suddenly," "sat bolt upright in hot stale sheets and said their full names in one short prayer . . . for their life together hereafter, and"—the narrator witnesses—"it served to deepen the rest they'd earned tonight and enjoyed" (219). Wave is one of the novel's two *angeli* who seem fully conscious, deliberate, even self-elected to their roles. But Wave, in possession of the big "secret [he knows] in pure perfection and long[s] to give" (188), is not quite human; he suspects "he might be crazy" (187-88), and after a conversation with Rato about Rosa, before he ever meets her in daylight, he stands outside the Beaverses' house past midnight and wonders, "Was his whole life wrong?" (206). Earlier that same evening, walking home after that conversation with his new friend Wave in a bowling alley, Rato, the novel's other conscious *angelos* with a big "secret of happiness for all mankind" (181),

ponders how “[s]omething someway scared” people off whenever he “tried to open up” or “got anywhere near serious”; even “letting folks know the last thing Rato needed was human help . . . they still ran from him” (204). He concludes, “He was not a real human, not yet in this world”; and when Wesley accosts him on the street a moment later, asks him to “‘Guess where I belong. Please guess hard now. Help any way you can. It’s got that bad’” (205), and says, “‘Take over, Ace. You lead from here,’” Rato offers no guidance, no human nor angelic help, and only says, “‘Then Jesus, we’re blind in the night’” (205).

The inhuman or not-quite-human *angeli*, aflame and gazing toward God, sometimes cannot give the help we need. In Genesis, God shaped Eve as “help” to Adam (2:18), the creature of earth. The help that Rato, loved dearly by both Rosa and Wesley, can give them is now to leave their house: after he tells them he is going and leaves their room, Wesley tells Rosa, “‘I think this is home’” (217). This is that same night when Rosa turns and touches Wesley, gives him a hand, and they get to that “place . . . of mutual trust and precise alignment—lovely harmony, perfect rhythm” (219). Both creatures of earth, flawed and fallible, dark-hearted and mortal, they are one another’s best help and not less but more than angelic help. Bound to earth and time, they will change unpredictably; yet, as Rosa recognizes again this night, Wesley “was a promise and had evermore been” (212), and she has witnessed, as we have, that though he wanders far, Wesley comes back to his promise. Driving back from Afton on the novel’s last day, their last full scene in it, Rosa knows Wesley “was built to change. And finally surely, it was what she loved deep down in her dark heart”; and she says “‘All right’—meaning *All right*, change. *I can try to watch.*’” So when Wesley tells her, “‘You choose’”—that is, whether they will now stay “[t]ogether or apart” and, if together, where choose their place of rest—she says “‘Well, Raleigh. The same warm house. Us same two old dogs, the same basket’” (268).²

²Milton’s final sentence in *Paradise Lost* (1667) begins, “The world was all before them, where to choose / Their place of rest” (12.646–47). Price wrote his Oxford master’s thesis on *Samson Agonistes*, has taught Milton once a year since joining the Duke University faculty in 1958, and regards

In the novel's final lines, as Rosa and Wesley arrive at their house, which Wave has just left, the narrator says:

Whatever the sky was—at least the cause of birth and death (all hardness and ease)—it had secretly honored the unlikely choice of two normal creatures to work again at a careful life. They could not know they were safe till their endings, which would be hard and slow a long way off. This modest house would be home till then. It had room enough for the small calm pleasures that would not be rare. They would live here till death. Death would find them with ease. (275)

That is the last word of this novel's news offered to us, as its witnesses, to bear how and where we will. Sixteen years after its publication, it is still some of the better news most of us have read in a long time. Is it news from God? To read is to choose. You choose.

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Milton as one of his great masters. If he writes about "wedded Love" (*Paradise* 4.750), he likely has Milton in mind.