

David Jasper and Allen Smith, eds. *Between Truth and Fiction: A Narrative Reader in Literature and Theology*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010. 192 pages. \$26.95.

What a great idea – to gather selections from various literary genre, both sacred and secular, from many centuries, and then re-read them all with your theological pince-nez firmly affixed. The noble goal of the book is to read “these texts in self-conscious exercises in interpretation and reflection on the process of reading...” (ix). It is a “textbook in ways of theological thinking and ways of thinking about what is true” (ix). “Our sole purpose in this book is to help you to become a better, a more discerning and a more self-conscious reader of the truths of fiction and the fiction of truth” (6).

The book starts with a helpful introduction to their work, placing it in the broad realm of heuristic hermeneutics. The introduction stakes their place in the overall turf of hermeneutics with an interdisciplinary approach. They also set out their operating assumptions about the work they engage in for the remaining chapters. The book contains ten sections, divided mostly by loosely defined literary genre. Each section has an introduction discussing the genre under consideration. The genres are: literary theology; fiction; autobiography; lyric, poetry and songs; drama; essays and aphorisms; sermons; post-colonial literature, feminist literature; and the postmodern text. Each section contains four to six examples drawn from secular and sacred venues and from over a wide time span. Each genre begins with a biblical selection. Further, the selections are constructed around a similar framework. Each selection’s is sub-divided into introduction, text, notes, questions for discussion, and further reading. Some selections also have a “try it out” entry, encouraging readers to become writers, working in the same vein as the selections in the section. This last piece I found a bit unrealistic, although I can imagine that the editors must surely have tried out all their suggestions in actual class settings before gathering them into this book. One would want to read each of the selections rather slowly and deliberately. This is not the sort of book one would read over a weekend and be done with it. It would serve best, I think, by reading it through once, then going back, rereading each selection again, but only tackling one selection a day in a *lectio divina* fashion so as to not tread over nuances of the passages.

The book is a great idea on paper. But the one element that slightly detracts from its potential is the brevity of most of the selections. I frequently found it a bit difficult to get sufficient traction on the example of writing under consideration.

Who might use this book? I’m not sure. And therein is a problem with the brevity of the selections. The editors hope it will be useful for “students of biblical studies, theology, literature and even philosophy in the widest sense...” (2). I suspect it would work well as an introduction to the idea of theological reflection on literature of various genre. But I would suggest an additional book for those interested in this intersection of literature and theology that might be of even more help, particularly to the preacher: *Novel Preaching: Tips from Top Writers on Crafting Creative Sermons* by Alyce M. McKenzie. Whereas Jasper and Smith look to the literary artifact, McKenzie looks to the authors themselves; what they say about writing. The books have different purposes, but I found McKenzie’s book more provocative an invitation to apply what I learned from the book. The Jasper/Smith piece works for students of literature, while the McKenzie book is for those who hope to improve their practice of preaching. Maybe an analogy is becoming more fluent in art appreciation as opposed to becoming a better artist. Both are important roles in the overall scheme of things.

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