

horror she has created, Sarah wants to die.

Raphael, using the name Azarias and disguised as a guide, becomes involved in Tobit's troubles. Tobias, Tobit's only son, a rather bumbling if lovable creature, is to go in search of a fortune his father long ago left in the hands of a friend. Thus Tobias meets Sarah with Raphael's help, and the two stories come together.

Through these ancient characters, Buechner raises the ever-relevant questions of belief and unbelief. Almost everyone in the novel has completely misunderstood God's nature. As Raphael travels between the two households, he often laughs at the misguided conceptions on which human creatures have built their lives. But Raphael's laughter is marked by pathos. He wishes these creatures knew the Holy One better. Raphael knows "that by and large the world believes in [God] for all the wrong reasons." It turns out that the world "disbelieves him for all the wrong reasons too."

Although Raphael and the reader are consistently aware of the Holy One's attentive compassion, mercy and grace, Tobit thinks of God as a scorekeeper, one who metes out justice in the same way that Tobit used to stalk house flies and squash them with his shoe. Occasionally, through some whimsy, Tobit would let a fly live. He hopes only for a similar whimsy from his God. Raphael understands that these folks see about as much of the Holy One as a child can hold of the sea. But it is enough. Just like us, they struggle through to a sort of faith.

Buechner's characteristic humor is here, along with the pithy insights that may become gems in sermons. And the real-life questions that trouble Buechner turn up again: the emptiness of a household after the children have grown up, the poverty and pain of so many, the honesty of unbelief, and the terror of faith. Finally, this novel asks whether or not there really is a Holy One who looks after the

world. Answering no is understandable enough, Buechner knows. But for those with eyes to see, maybe yes is the last word after all.

Hints of His Mortality.

By David Borofka. University of Iowa Press, 235 pp., \$22.95.

WINNER OF the 1995 Iowa Short Fiction Award, David Borofka's collection of short stories *Hints of His Mortality* juxtaposes the glorious vision of its epigraph, from Wordsworth's "Ode, Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," with 14 tales of decidedly earthbound men. Borofka suggests that our lives rarely match our ideals. He titles the sections of his book with phrases from the "Ode": "A Sleep and a Forgetting," "Trailing Clouds of Glory," and "Shades of the Prison-house." The overall theme of the collection can be summed up by Wordsworth's final couplet: "At length Man perceives [the vision splendid] die away / And fade into the light of common day."

In the book's "Prologue," a wife makes a comment that could apply to all of Borofka's male characters: "Men. You guys can't get anything right, can you?" Despite their inevitable failures, Borofka's men persevere. They continue to work at careers that have gone downhill. They guiltily engage in affairs, then break them off to try to reconcile with their wives. One character looks for

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a deeper meaning in the inexplicable fluttering black wings he sees on the highway. His wife prosaically explains that they're the incinerated remnants of California raisin trays. The young man in "Strays" wants to believe in some sort of Providence, but concludes that the constellations he observes are "nothing but dot-to-dot pictures for adult children wishing to find order where there is none."

Borofka's characters have experienced religious culture, but don't quite know what to make of it. In "The Children's Crusade," parents enter their sixth-grade daughter in an Episcopal day school because they are concerned about the cynical attitude she brings home from her public school. They worry even more when she suddenly becomes obedient and ascetic, singing songs about becoming a "saint of the Lord." In "The Girl on the Highway," a struggling youth minister falls off a roof and begins having visions of being snubbed by Jesus, who is dressed in a John Travolta suit from *Saturday Night Fever*. Occasionally, characters undergo an almost physical experience of grace, as in the "Epilogue," when a man who inhales a sausage is saved by a drunk who does the Heimlich maneuver, and "grace caroms around the room with the velocity of hockey pucks."

Borofka's writing is both taut and exuberant. He lulls us into a stylistic pattern, then adds a twist that makes us reread and rethink: "What can I say but repeat the usual clichés: that life is indeed a garden of pain, that men and women are born for trouble and heartache, and that the lyricism of experience is nothing but a chimera of our most fraudulent desires?"

Though Borofka's characters are often overwhelmed by their moral failings, these stories are not bleak or hopeless. Acknowledging his characters as "projections of my own failure, my own pain," the author-narrator imagines the book as a "catechism" in which the "dream" of others "may school the dreamer." Finally, he hopes—and this is the essential hope of literature—"that the character that is my own . . . may find within that dream the breath that will let him live."



Encountering Jesus

I AM AN ADMIRER of Will Willimon, but his critique of Marcus Borg and the Jesus Seminar is disappointingly defensive ("Encountering Jesus: An exchange," Nov. 5). If one reads Borg and his colleagues (particularly Robert W. Funk and John D. Crossan) openly but carefully, Willimon's defensiveness becomes all the more difficult to understand.

For many who encounter Jesus with the aid of tools that Borg et al. are providing, it is like a light turning on; as a preacher and teacher, I am finding this consistently to be so for open-minded but critical seekers of truth. I can't be sure what Willimon means by being "changed by Jesus," but I've witnessed change through encounter with the Jesus whom Borg reveals.

Willimon says that "Borg worries far too much about what modern people can or cannot believe about Jesus." Is this a criticism? At a minimum, caring enough to believe anything at all about Jesus is a starting point for a Christian critique of modernity. Borg's work can evoke such caring. In other words, it preaches.

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Though the exchange between William Willimon and Marcus Borg on Jesus was wonderful, I found myself wishing they would come to some resolution. They have voiced differences many of us have debated internally as we try to relate our seminary biblical training to the needs of parish ministry.

The articles reminded me of a story Langdon Gilkey related about Paul Tillich. The British New Testament scholar D. W. Davies visited Tillich one evening. The conversation turned to their respective views on Jesus and faith. After two bottles of sherry, the difference came down to this: Davies felt two leaps of faith were necessary,

one from the canonical Jesus to the historical Jesus, and another from this historical Jesus' ideas about God to accepting this as the truth about God. Tillich preferred to make a single leap, from the teachings and person of Jesus in the scriptures as the symbol of God to the truth of God. Personally, I side with Tillich—one leap is enough!

*Kent A. Meyer
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Acting on global warming . . .

IF IT WERE not for TV ads warning us not to take any action on global warming, most of us would hardly be aware that some very important decisions are to be made in Kyoto, Japan—decisions that are likely to be more important over a longer period of time than any others made anywhere in the world this year. But one would never guess this from the general press, and I had feared that the Christian press was little better.

Thanks for proving me wrong with "Sustaining creation," James Wall's splendid editorial (Nov. 5). Sadly, the national climate of concern (among both liberals and conservatives) has turned inward and focused on the immediate future. Those who care about the earth and the long-term future of humanity are on the defensive and have grown quiescent. We do not provide the support Clinton wants if he is to follow the leadership of other heads of state at Kyoto. Unfortunately, his political courage is limited: for him this is but one issue, subordinate in importance to many others.

If there is to be a renewal of committed energy directed to changing the disastrous course on which our society finds itself, it will stem from the religious community. The patriarch of Istanbul has called the Orthodox to lead us. I rejoice that there is also a voice in the Protestant community.

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