

## Reading List

### Spiritual themes

The following novels, in one manner or another, attempt to address some of the central questions of the Christian faith --- the nature of God, the problem of evil and suffering, the search for love and a meaningful life. These books, granted, are limited to the 'so-called' Western Canon. But nonetheless they were written by writers with differing backgrounds and points of view and they have withstood the test of time. It should be noted, as a nod to the pace and pressures of modern life, they are generally under 200 pages in length.

### Dates and books

The following are the proposed dates for the book club. Noted, that except for October, we will meet the first Sunday of the month, at our home, from 6:00 – 8:30 PM.

October 14	Go Tell It On the Mountain – James Baldwin
November 3	Godric – Fredrick Buechner
December 1	The Second Coming – Walker Percy
January 5	Wise Blood – Flanner O'Connor
February 2	Bridge of San Luis Rey – Thornton Wilder
March 2	Death Comes to the Archbishop – Will Cather
April 6	The Power the Glory – Graham Greene
May 4	Manalive – G. K. Chesterton
June 1	Jayber Crow – Wendell Berry

### 'Go Tell It On the Mountain' by James Baldwin

Baldwin's autobiographical novel centers on a 14 year old African-American teen-ager growing up in Harlem, the step-son of a tyrannical, brutal Pentecostal preacher, and explores themes of sexual identity and self-invention, racial oppression, and the positive (source of inspiration and cohesion) – as well as the negative (source of hypocrisy and repression) -- influence of the church on the black community. Baldwin weaves language of the King James Bible and references stories of the Old Testament in the narrative.

In an interview with Studs Terkel about why it took ten years to write the novel, Baldwin stated, "I was ashamed of the life of the Negro church, ashamed of my father, ashamed of the Blues, ashamed of Jazz' and this wrestling and ambivalence and ultimate, at least momentary rejection of his roots is evident in his first major novel.

### 'Godric' by Fredrick Buechner

In this fictional re-telling of the life of St Godric of Finchale, Buechner portrays a man whose life transitions from wanderer and peddler, a life characterized by a weakness for temptation, a life of lust and greed and sloth, to a life transformed, as a hermit, pursuing holiness without losing his humility and gaining wisdom by way of struggle, error, and pain.

'The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.'

### **'The Second Coming' by Walker Percy**

The protagonist of this novel, Will Barrett, is a lonely and depressed widower on the verge of profound despair and hopelessness who meets another lost soul, Allison, an insane asylum escapee who takes up residence in an abandoned greenhouse. Will decides to test God's existence, providence and love by retreating in a cave, and the book becomes both a depiction of every human's struggle of faith as well a critique of modern society, the materialism, the vulgarity, and the underlying vanity and emptiness of most pursuits.

'Despite great scientific and technological advances, man has not the faintest idea of who is or what he is doing.'

### **'Wise Blood' by Flannery O'Connor**

O'Connor's first novel is about a young nihilist, Hazel Motes, a shell-shocked veteran of WW II who attempts to expunge any hint or vestige of Christ or Christianity from his life, to the point of establishing 'The Church Without Christ.' Like so many of O'Connor's Southern gothic works, there is brutality and humor, acts of depravity and of kindness, damnation and salvation, of Taulkinham, TN. O'Connor introduces us to array of complex, compelling characters: the flim-flam man, the village dim-wit, the under-age floozy and the fire and brimstone preacher.

'Anyone who has survived his childhood has enough information about life to last him the rest of his days.'

### **'The Bridge of San Luis Rey' by Thornton Wilder**

In this novel, believed to be inspired by the line from the Gospel of Luke asking, 'of the eighteen killed when the tower of Siloam fell,' are they any worse offenders (in the eyes of God) than any citizen of Jerusalem, Wilder meditates on the question whether the universe is indifferent and pitiless, and our fates are random, or whether there is indeed a Divine plan and a loving God.

'Many who have spent a lifetime in it can tell us less of love than a child who lost a dog yesterday.'

### **'Death Comes for the Archbishop' by Willa Cather**

Partially based on the adventures of bishop John Baptist Lamy, who journeyed to New Mexico soon after it was annexed as a state in order to reprimand profligate priests and bring the Christianity to the Navajo and Pueblo Indians, this novel follows Bishop LaTour through a series of vignettes as he attempts to enact reforms and enforce Catholic dogma. During the bishop's tenure, he must wrestle with loneliness and with doubt, with the veracity of miracles and the sinfulness of man,. Among the cast of characters is the landscape of the desert Southwest, hostile and beautiful, enigmatic and a source of enlightenment.

'When kindness have left people, even for a few moments, we become afraid of them as if their reason had left them.'

### **'The Power and the Glory' by Graham Greene**

The setting for this novel of redemption is the state of Tabasco in Mexico in the 1930's, where the secular government is abolishing and eradicating all things Catholic, to the point of

even assassinating Catholic priests who do not disavow their faith. The central character, only referred to as the 'whiskey priest,' is depicted as a deeply flawed man, 'a sinner' who is yet a man of God, willing to risk his life in order to administer the sacraments and serve the poor, oppressed peasants.

'In a mad world it always seems simpler to obey'

### **'Manalive' by G.K. Chesterton**

In this novel, a parable attacking the sin of spiritual *acedia* and written in the tradition of the 'Holy Fool' archetype, Mr. Innocent Smith burst onto a North London boarding house, a larger-than-life character, disrupting the other 'dry-as-dust, stick-in-the mud' boarders with his seemingly juvenile antics and joviality. But he is soon accused of a catalog of crimes – polygamy, thievery, and murder – and then defends himself in what seems to be, at first, an absurd fashion, but leads to a celebration of joyful living.

'The traveler sees what he sees, the tourist what he has come to see.'

### **'Jayber Crow' by Wendell Berry**

Berry's novel is a portrait of a seminary dropout who returns to the village his childhood as an orphan, Port William, Kentucky. Initially, working as a carefree, happy-go-lucky barber, Jayber desires to be independent, avoidant of deep attachments and indifferent to small town life. But after coming to an abrupt realization of his own moral turpitude and loneliness, he begins to tentatively explore the nature and importance of fidelity in human relations, both great and small, and of sacrificing one's selfish motives and primal drives for the greater good of the community.

'Nature is party to all our deals and decisions, and she has more votes, a longer memory, and a sterner sense of justice than we do.'

Below you will find brief biographical information, some questions to consider while reading the narrative, and some background on the author and his struggles with identity, faith, and race.

*Go Tell It on the Mountain* is semi-autobiographical, for like 'John' in the novel, James was born of an unwed mother who married a tyrannical Baptist preacher. He grew up in Harlem during the Depression and was a gifted student with early literary aspirations; one of his poetry teachers was Countee Cullen, a leading figure of the Harlem Renaissance. As student, Baldwin served as a literary editor on his high school magazine, a publication which also featured the work of photographer Richard Avedon.

During the ten year process of writing his first novel, "*Go Tell It on the Mountain*," he wrote essays and short stories for such respected periodicals as '*Commentary*,' '*The Nation*,' and the "*The Partisan Review*.' It was during a fellowship in Paris that Baldwin began to reflect on racism in America and his own homosexuality, and spoke and wrote openly about the subjects, in books such as '*Giovanni's Room*' and '*Notes of a Native Son*.'

He remained in voluntary exile for most of his life, and his apartment in France became a 'salon' for such luminaries as Miles Davis, Richard Wright, Marlon Brando and Jean-Paul Sartre. Baldwin was a much read, much interviewed, much quoted, public intellectual and social critic, and his eminence in popular culture was evident when he was featured on the cover of 'Time' magazine in 1963 during the turbulent civil rights era and declared 'there is not another writer who expresses with such poignancy and abrasiveness the dark realities of the racial ferment in North and South.'

There are many images and descriptions of 'filth' and 'dirt', and in fact, the family's name is 'Grimes.' Is there any relevance to the Old Testament distinctions between the sacred and the profane, the 'acceptable' and the 'forbidden,' and the 'clean' and the 'unclean?'

This is a coming-of-age novel, an adolescent's search for identity, spiritual and racial and sexual. How do characters such as Gabriel and Elisha and Roy and well as the environment, such as 'home' and 'street' and 'church' play roles in shaping John's sense of self-hood.

Through the eyes of John, the church's influence and impact on the lives of the black community in 1935 Harlem was complicated, serving both as a cohesive force and as a source of oppression, serving to justify or cover-up vice as well as inspire virtue. Can comparisons be made with your church, serving a different demographic, in a different region, in a different era?

Some interviews and film that might be of interest concerning James Baldwin's life and views.

'I'm Not Your Negro' directed by Raoul Peck It is available on Amazon Prime. There is also an video interview with the director at a forum under the auspices of Vanderbilt University.  
<https://www.amazon.com/I-Am-Not-Your-Negro/dp/B01N6Q00JM>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GBmZ68pxJiU>

'Perspectives: Negro and the American Promise' on WGBH 'Open Vault'  
[http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V\\_C03ED1927DCF46B5A8C82275DF4239F9](http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V_C03ED1927DCF46B5A8C82275DF4239F9)

Printed transcript of Esquire's interview of James Baldwin on race relations 'James Baldwin: How To Cool It' after the assigation of Martin L. King in 1968  
[http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V\\_C03ED1927DCF46B5A8C82275DF4239F9](http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V_C03ED1927DCF46B5A8C82275DF4239F9)

An essay published in the New Yorker about his adolescent and his faith.  
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1962/11/17/letter-from-a-region-in-my-mind>

Please e-mail me by September if you intend to participate in the club and attend the first meeting on October 15, so we can have an rough estimate in order to provide a light supper and beverages. Whereas I am glad to 'kick start' the discussion of the first novel and first meeting, thereafter it is hoped the group will determine how best to approach the subsequent discussions.

Good reading,

Robert