

features

For her recent book, *Sue Sorensen* trawled novels, film, TV, and theatre for significant clerical figures. She found some strikingly authentic examples

ONE of my favourite literary vicars is Mr Beebe, in E. M. Forster's *A Room with a View*. Although not overly religious, Mr Beebe is an enthusiastic social mediator, and, whatever else happens to the Church, society will always be in need of reconciliation.

Another is Daniel Orton, in A. S. Byatt's quartet of novels that began in 1978 with *The Virgin in the Garden*. Orton is fierce and physical, responding to the needs of those around him with every fibre of his being.

I also cannot help but have a sneaking admiration for the notorious Arthur Dimmesdale in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* — so much passion lurking in such an unsuitable place.

In my book about clerical characters in fiction and film, *The Collar*, I examined many such examples. Literary clerics range widely: there are ambitious and arrogant ones in James Joyce and Henrik Ibsen; agonised sinners in Graham Greene; and those worldly gentlemen in Jane Austen. Clint Eastwood, in his films, has given respectful attention to clerics.

While I organised my examples (detectives, fools, martyrs, and the wonderful category of clergy wives), the integrity of some characters meant that they resisted being categorised.

This is as it should be. A good literary pastor is like an actual pastor — with multiple dimensions, imperfections, and unpredictable feelings that can be wounded and shared. Literature helps us realise how unreal our expectations of clergy are: Hawthorne's Dimmesdale — whose protestations of unworthiness are seen by his congregation as marks of holiness — is a poignant reminder of how devastating it is to achieve elevation above others.

Whether we are churchgoers or not, anyone who enjoys fiction, drama, television, or the cinema will be familiar with certain tropes about clerical characteristics.

SO, THE comedy involving Canon Chasuble in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, for example, works because the audience arrives with firm notions of clerical obtuseness.

When Jack and Algernon each clamour to be christened under the name of Ernest, Canon Chasuble is serene, untroubled about their inappropriate plunge into holy matters. Wilde uses Canon Chasuble's innocence as a platform to launch mildly rude repartee; our eyebrows raised, we hear him tell the governess, Miss Prism, that were he her pupil he would "hang upon her lips".

At the end of the play, as the young couples rush into each other's arms, Miss Prism and Canon Chasuble do the same. The audience is gratified: pompous old fool, pretending to be unfouled by earthly desires.

In his foreword to *The Collar*, the

How to read a cleric



In role: above, left: Mark Williams as Mr Beebe in ITV's *A Room with A View*; below: Daniel Brocklebank as Jack, Isha Bennisson as Miss Prism, and Richard Cordery as Canon Chasuble in *The Importance of Being Earnest* at the Rose Theatre, Kingston (2011)

American pastor and teacher William H. Willimon writes about "the truth that can be told only through fiction." Many other modes of explanation, he says, "seem simple compared to the depth and subtlety, the insight and candour of good fiction".

There are hundreds of types and portrayals of church leaders. In a way, the vicar in Wilde's play is offered up as a comedic punchbag.

When an author is rebellious, clergy stand for the establishment — they serve as effective markers of hypocrisy, since what, after all, could be more clearly hypocritical than a man of the cloth indulging in his own desires?

Particularly in the UK, clerics are used for easy laughs, while in

mainstream films in the United States there is no better shorthand for a marriage plot than a carpeted aisle with a sanctimonious, robed figure at the end of it.

Although it can appear that the cleric of fiction experienced his (definitely his) glory days in the 19th century — nearly every Austen novel has its important priest, and Anthony Trollope's novels abound with archdeacons and canons — there have been rich additions recently to the roster of fictional ministers. And not all of them are buffoons.

FOR example, those few of us in Canada fortunate to have seen the BBC comedy *Rev* have met a marvelously well-rounded character in



Adam Smallbone. His personality is both devout and irreverent, his ministry a simultaneous disaster and miracle. The weaknesses of Smallbone are grimly and hilariously realistic, but his prayers are genuine conversations with God — the likes of which I have never seen on screen before.

Marilynne Robinson's 2004 novel *Gilead*, featuring a gentle, stalwart pastor in small-town Iowa, has now been revealed as part of a trilogy, after last year's publication of the novel *Lila* (after *Home* in 2008). Although *Home* did not add a great deal to the portrait of the Revd John Ames, *Lila* certainly does; in its combined impact, the trilogy is a profound meditation on a life dedicated to the Church.

Much of the response to *Gilead* involved appreciation for the lovely humility of the ageing Congregationalist minister at the heart of the story. "I am one of those righteous for whom the rejoicing in heaven will be comparatively restrained," is how Ames describes himself.

Readers also noticed the contemporary variations on biblical narratives such as the Prodigal Son. Mentioned less frequently, but also fundamental, is the passionate intellectual labour in which the modest Ames is involved. In *Gilead*, theologies of salvation are argued on nearly every page, and the characters' struggle with them is not at all academic.

In *Lila*, where the story is experienced from the viewpoint of Ames's unusual and recalcitrant wife, the argument that recurs with life-or-death insistence involves baptism. The surprise of *Lila* is that redemption is viewed with such misgiving by the main character, a once indigent and always stubbornly individual woman.

Feeling burdened by her recent baptism, Lila actually strives to wash it away without letting her husband know. There is more intense contemplation of the function of baptism in this novel than I have ever seen in any one place; it is a beautiful and troubling thing.

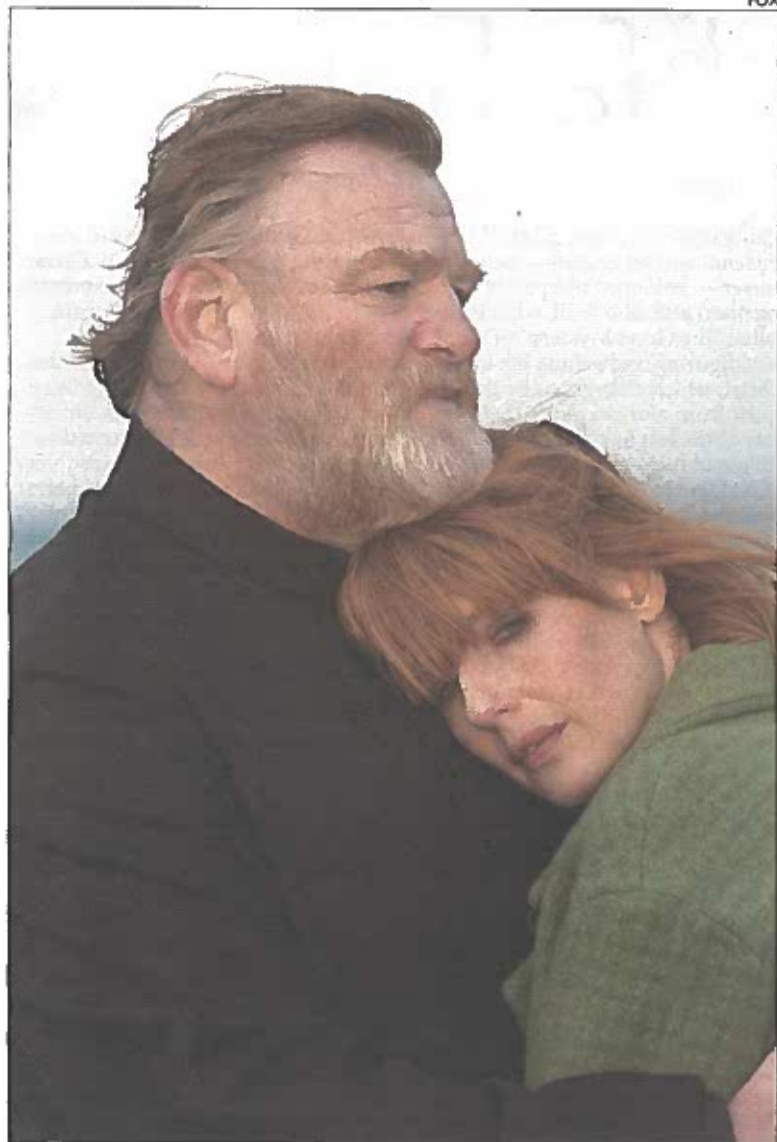
Robinson's fiction happens where profound appreciation for merely being in the world intersects with rigorous theological engagement. Ames delights in his young son's red shirt, and the taste of a biscuit once given him by his father, but at the same time he frets about his responsibility to expound sound doctrine.

The wholeness of the experience of Robinson's fiction about Christian ministry is without parallel. The pain and joy of living within and for the Church shines on every page.

JUST as stubborn as Lila Ames is Fr James in the 2014 film *Calvary* (Arts, 11 April). John Michael McDonagh's creation is an uncompromising account of one week in the life of a Roman Catholic priest who embodies forgiveness, even while all around him seem oblivious of his message.

As played, gruffly and evocatively, by Brendan Gleeson, a priest must be devoted to his people, even if this lot look spectacularly irredeemable. Fornicators, liars, and murderers abound in his tiny parish.

When the priest provides moral direction, people jeer at him, and disparage his work. Given the rough comedy of the film's early scenes, only at the conclusion (spoiler alert)



Collared: left: Brendan Gleeson as Fr James with Kelly Reilly in *Calvary*; above: John Franklyn-Robbins as Henry Carwardine and Maurice Denham as Fr Baddeley in *The Black Tower*; below: Tom Hollander as Adam Smallbone in *Rev*

will startled viewers be aware how appropriate the film's title is.

I reeled out of the cinema feeling as if I had seen *Oedipus Rex*, or some other ancient tale of cruelty. The audience exiting alongside me — older people who looked like sturdy churchgoers — seemed stunned. Perhaps hoping for an uplifting story, they had instead witnessed their Church at its worst.

That we had also witnessed the priesthood at its best did not, for the moment, provide much comfort. I carried the weight of McDonagh's film with me for days, uncertain whether it demanded respect, argument, or reverence. Fr James finds the will to do as Christ would have done; but I still felt terrible.

In his blog "Word on Fire", Fr Robert Barron wrote last autumn that "*Calvary* shows, with extraordinary vividness, what authentic spiritual shepherding looks like, and how it feels for a priest to have a shepherd's heart."

In case there is any danger of slipping into sentimentalism about shepherding, Fr Barron reminds us that "real shepherding was, and is, a dirty and hard-edged business." Fr James takes the sins of his parish into his own body, offering himself wholly.

That *Calvary* deals with ultimate things is both its strength and limitation. I cannot help but wonder which is more devastating for a pastor: coming face to face with evil, or coping with the daily deadliness of exasperation and sloth. Still, *Calvary's* insistence that we really look into a shepherd's heart is an amazing experience.

IN THE weeks after the death of the admired crime writer P. D. James, readers surely turned back to their favourites among her Inspector Dalgliesh titles, and encountered again the fascinating clerics and church matters she delineated so carefully.

A Taste for Death and *Death in Holy Orders* make significant use of religious settings and characters, but what is more intriguing is how the



'Calvary shows us new ways into a shepherd's heart'

detective Adam Dalgliesh, himself the son of an Anglican priest, can be seen to replicate aspects of his father's ministry.

Upright, sensitive, and ethical, the policeman serves as a kind of hound of heaven. As Hilary Mantel noted in a 1990 *New York Review of Books* piece about James, Dalgliesh is so moral he can seem "too finely spiritual". Dalgliesh feels called, like a priest, to speak for goodness, even as he is made despondent by human wickedness.

James's *The Black Tower* (1975) sets Dalgliesh among the members of an eccentric lay religious community, and is one of her most satisfying explorations of good and evil. Although Fr Baddeley, the character who served as chaplain to the community, dies at the start, his moral presence is strong throughout. An Anglican priest, whom Dalgliesh loved as a child, Fr Baddeley has called for the Inspector's help. Arriving too late to save his friend, Dalgliesh tries to complete the semi-ecclesiastical tasks that, he feels, have been passed down to him.

The chaplain had an unerring instinct for evil, and was murdered because of his ability to read the sins of others accurately. Dalgliesh knows that, even as a specialist in violent crime, he may understand less about hellishness than Fr Baddeley, who had seldom become involved professionally with the more spectacular sins; but that did not mean that they were outside his comprehension, or, for that matter, his compassion.

It was arguable, anyway, that those were the sins that did least damage. Of the more corrosive, petty, mean-minded delinquencies in all their sad but limited variety, he, like any other parish priest, would have had his fill.

Just as Fr Brown in G. K. Chesterton's detective stories knows all wickedness without stirring from his country parish, evil did not escape the good chaplain of *The Black Tower*.

At its conclusion, Dalgliesh must literally wrestle evil on a cliff-top, and his apprenticeship as Fr Baddeley's heir is accomplished. The priest-like detective has diligently

observed human sin, and attempted to restore order.

Many people have noticed how well the realms of religion and detection overlap; examples are the Brother Cadfael mysteries by Ellis Peters, and Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. W. H. Auden, a keen fan of detection, noted in his 1948 essay "The Guilty Vicarage" that the "typical reader of detective stories is, like myself, a person who suffers from a sense of sin".

More than that, the detective may also be struggling with sinfulness; and, although Auden says that the "job of detective is to restore the state of grace in which the aesthetic and the ethical are as one", I would add that the detective (or priest-detective) needs this restoration as much as anyone.

It is still too rare that literary and cinematic portraits take the Church and its leaders seriously. That *Calvary* has shown us new ways into a shepherd's heart is no small thing. But more important than serious examination is an attitude of generous (even amused) acceptance, so that the foibles of the clergy are not turned into signs of Christianity's failure.

It is unfortunate that *Rev* has such uneven availability in North America, because the forgiveness that Smallbone requires is the forgiveness that he extends. This transaction is too precious to ignore, whether in fiction or in real life.

Sue Sorensen is Associate Professor of English Literature at Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg. Her book *The Collar: Reading Christian ministry in fiction, television, and film* is published by Cascade at £21.

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