





narrative that attains “great book” status in part because it invites multiple interpretive questions rather than transparent understanding. Great books cannot be reduced to PowerPoint bullet points; rather, they are the kinds of works that promise to deliver lively interpretive argument long after their authors are dead. We will consider an excerpt from Japanese writer Shusaku Endo and discuss it in terms of “shared inquiry,” a text-based, Socratic method of discussion promoted by the Great Books Foundation today. This method developed out of the pioneering practice of Mortimer Adler and Robert Hutchins beginning first at Columbia after World War I, and then at the University of Chicago in the decades roughly between 1930 and 1950. I want to return to the Great Books pedagogical tradition later in this presentation. For those of us involved in adult education, such a practice has useful classroom benefits, not the least of which is selecting texts that will stimulate rather than stifle classroom discussion.

## Young Adult Missionary Fiction

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Since I come from a tradition that is pietist and confessional, let me begin by way of some personal remarks. In 1963, at the susceptible age of seven, I read my first missionary story, one of the Jungle Doctor books written by Paul White. My father was a seminary student at the Mennonite Brethren seminary in Fresno, getting a master’s in missiology. I started making a regular habit of checking out books at the Butler Avenue MB Church library after the Sunday morning service was over. The Jungle Doctor books, like most action-adventure written for boys, what we might today call young adult or YA fiction, establish a triumphalist narrative of Christianity overcoming the forces of darkness. (I use the word “darkness” intentionally here.) Invariably, Jungle Doctor demonstrates the superiority of Christianity over native animistic religion, as well as the liberating benefits of western medicine over the superstitions of the local witch doctor, a villainous figure usually intent on keeping the local population enslaved. Still, I think I liked the Jungle Doctor books for other reasons. First, he had that very cool hat. [Exhibit A: Pith helmet demonstration]

Second, the Jungle Doctor showed himself daring and open-minded in his dealings with local culture. The most vivid memory I have of Jungle Doctor is how he sat down with Masai warriors and shared their favorite drink, a tasty beverage that mixed cow’s blood and milk. Edward

Said and other postcolonial theorists would call this the most blatant kind of exoticizing or “othering” of foreign cultures, but I would contend it is also perhaps the beginning of cross-cultural understanding: to meet with another culture means the sharing is not always in one direction. Sometimes one needs to drink a cup of blood. And by the same token, several anthropologists and some Brazilians I knew considered our sport of football to be among the most dehumanizing of sports; our Super Bowl may be the most lasting and elaborate shrine to barbarism invented. There is more than one message to take from *Jungle Doctor*, isn't there, and I am not sure it is an altogether harmful YA series.

A notion of missionary work as heroic, risky, swashbuckling adventure dominates the children's literature of mid-century, not only the *Jungle Doctor* books, but also the Danny Orlis and the Sugar Creek Gang books. The latter introduced me to important subject matter including alcohol addiction, bear-killing, and urban life in Chicago. These are the literary descendants of adult Christian fiction penned in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, books few of us have read, but which are nicely summarized by Jamie S. Scott in an essay titled “Missions in Fiction.” With titles like *The Sky Pilot: A Tale of the Foothills* (1899) and *The Preacher of Cedar Mountain: A Tale of the Open Country* (1917), these books, according to Scott,

all portray the missionary as a man mighty in flesh and spirit in the standard colonial and imperial romance model of fearless crusader, lone adventurer, and chaste lover. These novels proceed from action scene to action scene, exciting the sensibilities of a cloistered urban audience with descriptions of natural calamities and wild animal attacks, robberies and frontier bar brawls, tragic heroines and Roman Catholic perfidy (Scott 2008:122).

While Scott mentions these books as embodiments of muscular Christianity, he doesn't mention the original book that launched that tradition: the British boy's classic, *Tom Brown's School Days* (1857), written by Thomas Hughes and inspired by headmaster Thomas Arnold at Rugby School. The boilerplate for Tom Brown, who must face all manner of bullies and worldly temptations, is slightly updated roughly one hundred years later for Bernard Palmer's Danny Orlis books, the staple literature of midcentury American Christian boy heroes. Orlis combines physical derring-do and mental agility. Imagine Billy Graham's soul, Derek Jeter's athleticism, and the technical know-how of 1980s TV escape

artist MacGyver all welded together, and you might come close to the miracle that is Danny Orlis. This Boy Scout travels close to the Lord. The advertising copy from Moody Press in 1970 conveys it:

Adventure, mystery, suspense—these make up every Danny Orlis story. From the northern Canadian wilderness to the steaming jungles of Guatemala, Danny meets danger and mystery as well as everyday problems in the homeland. He is a capable outdoorsman, a skilled athlete—and above all a consistent Christian. Quick action, quiet courage, and level-headed thinking often save the day as Danny uses his resources to the fullest. His ability to apply biblical solutions to every situation makes him a unique personality whose experiences often provide realistic guidelines for Christian youth facing similar difficulties (Sword of the Lord Bookstore, 2014).<sup>1</sup>

An ironic smile crossed my lips as I transcribed these words from the website to the text of this paper. Then I realized that, minus the irony, this more-or-less describes my father. Not all books have to be great. Even formula fiction has its uses.

## Adult Missionary Fiction

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While my subject here today is missionary fiction, it must be granted that the apogee of missionary swashbuckling adventure was no novel, but in fact a real event during the late 1950s in the proverbial steaming jungles of Ecuador. That story is well-known to this audience: the killing of young North American evangelicals who had tried to make contact with a tribe who called themselves the Waodani and were known to their neighbors simply as the Aucas, or “enemy.” According to their tribal neighbors, the Aucas were notoriously violent killers with a high murder rate among their own kind. It was only a short time between the five missionary men’s radio silence from aboard their Piper Family Cruiser aircraft to the discovery of their speared and hacked bodies downstream from “Palm Beach,” the makeshift river landing strip where they first made face to face contact with the Aucas. The American news media went wild. *Life* magazine headlined the story in its January 30, 1956 issue, “Go Ye

and Preach the Gospel: Five Do and Die,” (1956:10) with a full-spread photo layout including shots of the widows commiserating in a kitchen, the natives standing and sitting in all their naked glory back in Ecuador, and the pillaged remains of the Piper aircraft on a strip of sand. Elisabeth Elliot, wife of murdered missionary Jim Elliot, would write a memoir, *Through Gates of Splendor* (1957), and a documentary film by the same title was produced in 1967. Elliot became a celebrity on the evangelical talk circuit.

Elliot’s bestseller probably inspired thousands of missionaries, including my parents, to hear and heed the divine call. This was one of the first “grownup” books I read as child, encouraged by my parents, especially my mother. This story, combined with the furlough visit of my father’s old seminary buddy Arlo Heinrichs, a Wycliffe Bible translator working in the Brazilian Amazon, suggested to me that the truth was far more amazing and exotic than any fiction could simulate.<sup>2</sup> Heinrichs brought back from Brazil a cured and shellacked anaconda skin, rolled up neatly in a package the diameter of a small barrel. Extended on our front lawn in Fresno it was twenty, maybe twenty-four feet long, and a couple of feet wide, a veritable runway in miniature, adorned with spectacular geometric scales. We and the neighbors were blown away. The kids all wanted to touch it, and we did. This was in 1964, and when I think about it now I have to say it was more exciting than the Beatles. A year later, my father, mother, my two brothers and I boarded a Boeing 707 at LAX, dressed in our Sunday best. We were on our way to southern Brazil where my parents would begin a year of language study before heading further south to join the faculty of the Mennonite Brethren seminary in Curitiba.

1965 was also the year that writer Peter Matthiessen published his novel *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*, a finalist for the National Book Award and one of the most effective and unrelenting debunkings of missionary work ever written (Matthiessen 1965). Matthiessen labors hard—maybe a little too hard—to show that the missionary enterprise is not so blameless as some had thought; indeed, he sketches what is by now a familiar (almost hegemonic) critique that missionary work accompanies neo-liberal capitalist and imperialist oppression, whatever gospel truths evangelical missionaries might hold dear. At certain key points it also riffs off of Elliot’s nonfiction account of the Auca tragedy. Matthiessen’s two aggressively secular characters, the soldiers-of-fortune Wolfie and the Cheyenne American Lewis Moon, advertise themselves as experts in “Small Wars & Demolition”; they understand clearly that they are instruments of mayhem and if all goes well, profit, as they do their part to clear the jungle

of its Indians so that the forces of economic development can go forward unimpeded.<sup>3</sup> As far as the two fundamentalist missionary couples depicted in the novel, Matthiessen does a good job of differentiating them as individuals; they don't merely come across as interchangeable sock puppets for Moody Bible Institute, where they received their theological training. In Matthiessen's story, both marriages will crumble under the pressure of evangelizing the Niaruna tribe from the base of Madre de Dios, a squalid frontier jungle town that seems to have been lifted straight from the pages of a Conrad novel.

As the novel progresses, Matthiessen's missionaries reveal themselves in distinctly individual ways as all too human. Leslie Huben, the former basketball star and missionary overachiever, shows himself incapable of loving his beautiful wife. It's as if Matthiessen wants to say Leslie might be a pretty boy and successful evangelist, but he's not a real man. Leslie also holds patently contemptuous views of the natives he is trying to convert; at one point in the action, we are told that he "prayed almost daily for barbed wire to fence the mission hut so that the Indians, with their lice and smoky smell and dirty fingers, would give them a little privacy (Matthiessen 1965:136)."

Martin and Hazel Quarrier, patterned after the grotesques of a Flannery O'Connor short story, lose their ten-year-old son Billy to fever (mind you, in a stroke of sick poetic justice, the Niarunas are going to be infected and decimated by the flu conveyed from Andy to Lewis Moon.) When Billy dies, Hazel goes insane. She has to be put on a plane and flown back to North Dakota. Martin Quarrier is Matthiessen's most sympathetic missionary because he is capable of doubt. This includes misgivings about certain missionary tactics, including the use of bartered goods to entice the Indian population. As Elliot told us about the five martyrs to the Aucas, their attempts to reach the tribespeople began with drops of gifts including cooking pots, colored buttons, and ribbons. Similarly in *At Play*, the missionaries leave gifts out on a makeshift rack for the Indians to take, and Quarrier develops a bad conscience about these mercenary tactics, especially when the Niaruna try to exchange a young Indian woman for the missionary goods. We should note that Matthiessen didn't have to invent this sordid occurrence; in the Auca adventure as chronicled in *Life* magazine, a young woman of fourteen or fifteen years of age was offered by the Indians as part of their barter, and the five missionary men nicknamed her "Jezebel" (*Life* magazine 1956:14).

Martin commands more reader sympathy than the pious hypocrite Leslie because he also recognizes his own flaws, including a wandering eye for other women—both Indian and white. He is deeply attracted to Andy. (Hector Babenco’s casting of Darryl Hannah as Andy in the 1991 film was a stroke of genius. Tom Berenger as Moon and John Lithgow as Martin weren’t too bad, either.) In the end, though, Matthiessen’s real interest in the novel is Lewis Moon, the Cheyenne American who in his youth converted to Christianity in the States, became a poster-boy for tribal missions, and then backslid into his current soldier-of-fortune nihilism. By the end of the novel, it is clear that Moon represents reawakened native pride; there is a certain irony in the original North American native “going native” in South America and joining the Niaruna as a kind of honorary member; in this sense Matthiessen’s novel anticipates his nonfiction work *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse* (1983), about the American Indian Movement uprising in North Dakota, as well as his commitment to ecological preservation as conveyed in *The Snow Leopard* (1978).

Multitudes of fictional debunkings of the missionary effort have percolated through the literary culture since the 1960s, too many for us to detail here. Some of these include notable works of science fiction, a genre perpetually caught up in first encounters between *Homo sapiens* and other sentient species.<sup>4</sup> As far as literary fiction goes, I would mention just one other work. Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998), shows the spirit of Matthiessen but little comparable skill; Kingsolver’s villain, Baptist missionary Nathan Price, never excites much reader antipathy because he displays all the personality of a cardboard cutout, and his daughters’ and wife’s voices do not differentiate much from Kingsolver’s own flat-footed polemic on the evils that missionaries do.<sup>5</sup> She has not written a novel so much as a tract. Still, surprisingly, in spite of its imaginative failure, her novel attracted many sympathetic critics.

One of the few literary novels in recent years to portray missionaries with sympathy and complexity is Robert Stone’s *A Flag for Sunrise* (1981). This is Stone’s best novel in a long and distinguished writing career. Like Matthiessen, Stone also bears the Conradian imprimatur. Set in Central America during a revolution pitting Marxist-inspired guerrillas against right-wing army thugs, *A Flag for Sunrise* has as its most compelling character a young American nun, aptly named Justin, who will be tortured to death by a Central American comandante who naturally believes she is part of a leftist plot to overthrow his country. Before her death, she will have a sexual encounter with the American operative Holliwell, a CIA spook who, like the soldier-of-fortune Wolfie in *At Play* is a lonely skeptic and

survivor who sees through every illusion but in the end cannot articulate what is worth living for. Stone, like Matthiessen, seems more sympathetic to Catholic missionaries than to Protestants; the Catholics convey more anthropological sensitivity and political awareness. It also makes sense to read *A Flag for Sunrise* against the backdrop of the revolution in El Salvador. The four Catholic women missionaries raped and murdered by paramilitary forces in El Salvador in December 1980<sup>6</sup> did not get quite as much attention that the five martyred evangelical men received in *Life* magazine in 1956. Still, Stone's narrative makes little sense without some understanding of the bloody crossroads of theology and politics tearing Central America apart in the 1970s and 1980s. Stone's Catholics, like Matthiessen's, at least have the wherewithal to recognize that an apolitical theology is probably an illusion.

## Missionary Fiction Which Qualifies as Great Books

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There are missionary fictions, which I believe qualify as great books. Not many, but a few. And here I want to offer a definition of what a great book is. In order to do that, let me take a step back and briefly recap how the Great Books movement began in the twentieth century and what it has become.

Most of us make a connection to the Great Books by way of a dusty set of books ("Great Books of the Western World") in grandma's attic. This publishing project, one of Mortimer Adler's many ventures, had its heyday in the 1950s. Less well known but carrying greater consequence is the pedagogical revolution that the Great Books movement helped to launch. John Erskine, a professor at Columbia University, originated this with his "War Studies" course for American soldiers in Europe during World War I. The course was so popular that Erskine taught it back on the home campus after the war, renaming it "General Honors." Distinguished by Socratic discussion based on close reading of seminal texts, the Erskine approach traded in boring scholarly lectures for seminar-wide discussion; participation by all class members was encouraged. We might consider the method a forerunner to "active learning." To this day

a couple of courses based in the Great Books method are required of all Columbia undergraduates: “Literature Humanities” and “Contemporary Civilization.”<sup>7</sup>

Mortimer Adler was a young teaching assistant at Columbia who caught the Great Books fever from Erskine. When Hutchins hired Adler to come to the University of Chicago, Adler quickly put his imprimatur on the undergraduate curriculum; he engineered an entire undergraduate liberal arts program in the Great Books. Versions of this curriculum are still taught at St. John’s College and Shimer College in Chicago, although Adler and Hutchins’ ambitious program at the University of Chicago was largely dismantled after Hutchins’ retirement there as chancellor in 1951. Meanwhile, Adler and Hutchins launched the Great Books Foundation in 1947, an adult education network of book groups devoted to discussing the great works of Western literature. In the 1960s, the Foundation expanded its efforts to K-12 education in the form of Junior Great Books.

The novelty of the Great Books approach was to make discussion participants truly participate. Typically, the discussion leader does not lecture, but asks questions meant to stir dialogue. With that in mind, let’s turn our attention to the reading that has been distributed to you prior to this morning’s session. It is a selection from Shusaku Endo’s novel *Silence* (1966; transl. 1969), and it has received considerable attention from scholars and writers including Philip Yancey, William Cavanaugh, and David J. Bosch (Yancey 1996; Cavanaugh 1998; Bosch 1994). But rather than summarize the critics, which is what our scholarly impulse would lead us to do at this moment, let us proceed in Great Books discussion fashion. What I would ask you to do at your table is put the excerpt in front of you and then write down these two questions:

- (1) Is Ferreira telling the truth when he says “there is something more important than the Church, more important than missionary work” (258)?
- (2) Does Christ speak to Rodriguez? (259)

Reread the excerpt. Write your answers to these two questions, referring specifically to supporting passages in this text. When you are finished, briefly discuss your answers with those at your table, and after about ten minutes, we will convene our entire gathering here for general discussion. Finally, in closing, I will say a few words about interpretive questions in shared inquiry, and not only how these questions can open

up a text to conversation, but indeed help us figure out what a great book is. [Exhibit B Discussion: What is Shared Inquiry, and how can I use interpretive questions as a classroom strategy?]

## Notes

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1. This promotional blurb copy can be found everywhere from Sword of the Lord Bookstore ([swordbooks.com/dannyorlissseries.aspx](http://swordbooks.com/dannyorlissseries.aspx)) to Goodreads online, with interesting variations. The Sword of the Lord online bookstore replaces “steaming jungles of Guatemala” with “the rugged mission field of Mexico.” The link between heroic action-adventure and Christian formation is fully laid out at the conclusion of *Tom Brown’s School Days* roughly a century earlier: “Such stages have to be gone through, I believe, by all young and brave souls, who must win their way through hero-worship, to the worship of Him who is the King and Lord of heroes. For it is only through our mysterious human relationships, through the love and tenderness and purity of mothers, and sisters, and wives, through the strength and courage and wisdom of fathers, and brothers, and teachers, that we can come to the knowledge of Him . . .” (Hughes, 357).
2. Heinrich’s thoughts about translation work with the Piraha Indians are discussed by John Colapinto in his article about former missionary and now linguistic theorist Dan Everett, “The Interpreter,” *The New Yorker*, 16 Apr. 2007.
3. It is worth noting here that Hector Babenco’s screen adaptation of Matthiessen’s novel was also an influence on James Cameron’s cinematic hit, *Avatar*. A summary of Cameron’s comments to this effect are summarized at the online site *Morning Spoilers* (<http://io9.com/5338570/james-cameron-admits-avatar-is-dances-with-wolves-in-space>).
4. I discuss some of these narratives about interplanetary and interstellar missionaries in “Character as Perception: Science Fiction and the Christian Man of Faith,” *Extrapolation* 24.3 (Fall 1983), 251-271. Narratives on the debunking end of the spectrum would have to include Arthur C. Clarke’s “The Star” (1955) and Michael Moorcock’s *Behold the Man* (1966). Other narratives conveying a more ambiguous message include James Blish’s *A Case of Conscience* (1958) and Harry Harrison’s “The Streets of

Ashkelon” (1962). Walter M. Miller, Jr.’s *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959) celebrates the church as the necessary cradle of civilization in a nuclear post-apocalyptic landscape anticipating that of Mel Gibson’s Mad Max movies.

5. I am partial to my brother Brad Born’s review of Kingsolver in *Mennonite Life*, 56.1 (March 2001), “Kingsolver’s Gospel for Africa: (Western White Female) Heart of Goodness.” He writes, “The ideological clumsiness that threatens the novel’s artistry appears in the opening pages. Immediately one encounters Kingsolver’s heavy hand at work, hammering out the fearful symmetry of the abusive white male, the fundamentalist Christian zealot, and the ugly American, all incarnated in Nathan Price, the arch missionary villain” (1). Brad argues that the novel can be criticized on the same grounds that Chinua Achebe attacked Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, except that in Kingsolver’s case, “only... American female heroines are granted the dignity of complexity, of inner struggle. If you pay attention to Kingsolver’s writing, she’s interested in characters like herself, women who domesticate and assimilate distant tragedies into a personal, feminine American self” (5). At <http://archive.bethelks.edu/ml/issue/vol-56-no-1/article/kingsolvers-gospel-for-africa-western-white-female/>
6. See Milt Freudenheim and Barbara Slavin, “Guerrillas Regroup as Carter Switches On Salvador Arms,” *New York Times*, 25 January 1981. According to the Carter administration, the El Salvadoran junta had taken “positive steps” in its investigation of the rape and murder of the four Catholic missionaries.
7. See David Denby, *Great Books: My Adventures with Homer, Rousseau, Woolf, and Other Indestructible Writers of the Western World* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), especially his introduction, pp. 11-19. I have written previously about the Great Books movement, especially focused on the contributions of Mortimer Adler and Robert Hutchins, in “Utopian Civic-Mindedness: Robert Maynard Hutchins, Mortimer Adler, and the Great Books Enterprise,” in *Reading Communities from Salons to Cyberspace*, ed. DeNel Rehberg Sedo (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 81-100.

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