

CultureWatch

BOOKS ART MUSIC FILM

Instruments of Grace

Graham Greene always liked the idea of damnation. His contemporary George Orwell joked that, in Greene's view, hell was little more than a "high-class nightclub" for distinguished sinners. Throughout the late English writer's long career (Greene's centennial was celebrated last year), he depicted many characters who viewed, and perhaps justified, their own sin as a vehicle for connecting to others. It was corruption that seemed to give the world a kind of identity, even a unifying principle. His characters lived and understood themselves in a fallen world where martyrdom was often the

of Dante's hell were frozen, Greene's were often damp, subtropical, and inflamed with the heat of human desire. His characters live out their purgatory in places like West Africa, Indochina, or Central America, exotic locales that offer both distraction from the pursuits of the soul and also enforced isolation with it.

BOOKS

Like the author himself, the characters often look to make deals with God that will leave them free to pursue their own passion. (A notable exception is Catherine in *The End of the Affair*, whose deal with God—to save her lover

Bendrix's life—entails the breaking off of that same affair.) The distance between the author and his characters and the theology embod-

ied in their stories has been hotly debated. Some critics, including contemporary English novelist David Lodge, see Greene appropriating the symbols and imagery of Catholicism largely for artistic ends. Others, including official biographer Norman Sherry, believe Greene wrestled with church doctrine all his life, but in the end remained, at least nominally, a Catholic.

THERE'S NO DOUBT that Greene's relation to his faith began and ended in a kind of paradox. The young writer converted to Catholicism in 1926 largely to please his future wife, but quickly began to absorb its doctrines, and by 1938 was clearly employing religious ideas in the first of his so-called "Catholic novels," *Brighton*

**Author
Graham
Greene in
1975.**

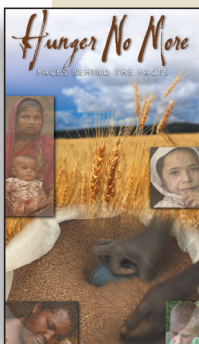
HULTON-DEUTSCH COLLECTION/CORBIS

For novelist Graham Greene and his characters, corruption could be a path to salvation. by Deryl Davis

cost of salvation. No wonder Greene took French writer (and fellow Catholic) Charles Peguy's famous observation to heart that it is sinners and saints who best understand Christianity. In the existential landscape known as "Greeneland," the two are inverses of each other, both attesting to the stricken state of creation itself.

The sinners far outnumber the saints in Greene's work, however, and even those sometimes perceived to be saints, such as the policeman Scobie in *The Heart of the Matter*, are in reality very fallible creatures. (Greene himself said that Scobie had been "corrupted by pity," a kind of misplaced compassion, that eventually led to his suicide.) Sin, for the novelist, was compelling because it was insidious and universal and had a kind of artistic appeal. If the lower depths

NEW AND NOTEWORTHY

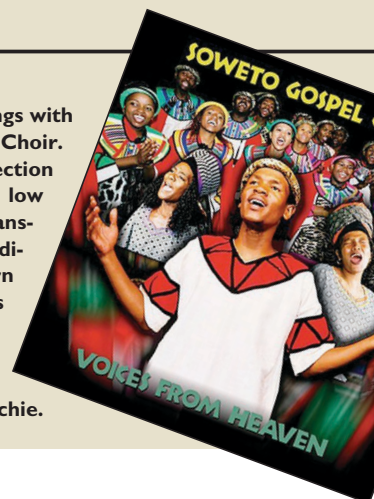


Feed the World

Need a good resource on hunger? Try *Hunger No More: Faces Behind the Facts*, an hour-long DVD that covers domestic and international hunger issues and what the church is doing to address them. Viewers new to the topic will appreciate the overview and interviews with various hunger experts, while seasoned advocates will find fresh ideas for getting church and community groups involved in feeding their local and worldwide neighbors. www.mennomedia.org.

A Joyful Noise

It would be hard to find a group that sings with more gusto than the Soweto Gospel Choir. Play *Voices From Heaven*, their new collection of 16 raise-the-roof songs, when you're low on hope, and take note of your transformed spirit. The CD combines traditional African gospel and Western Christian music—"Amazing Grace" sits alongside "Ahuna Y Tswanang Le Jesu" ("There's Nobody Like Jesus"). Choir members come from churches within South Africa's Soweto township. Shanachie.





Rock. In the decade and more that followed, Greene continued to explore themes of sin, guilt, and redemption in a series of important and successful novels including *The Power and the Glory* (1940), *The Heart of the Matter* (1948), and *The End of the Affair* (1951).

In each, corruption is a path to salvation, or at least to recovery of the soul. Characters become involved with the dirt and sweat of existence and in doing so find that it can be made holy. The hard-drinking, adulterous priest in *The Power and the Glory* is a prime example of this sinner-who-might-be-a-saint: He is neither noble nor particularly faithful, but in administering the sacraments at the risk of his own life he becomes a flawed instrument of divine grace.

Greene rarely returned to such obviously religious themes or characters in his later novels. Instead, they focus almost exclusively on political intrigue and social or revolutionary movements, such as the period prior to American involvement in Vietnam depicted in *The Quiet American*. The thematic change is reflected in Greene's own relationship to his faith. After years of adulterous affairs (some hardly secret, like that loosely depicted in *The End of the Affair*), the writer seems to have come to an impasse in his ability to reconcile his faith with his own personal failings.

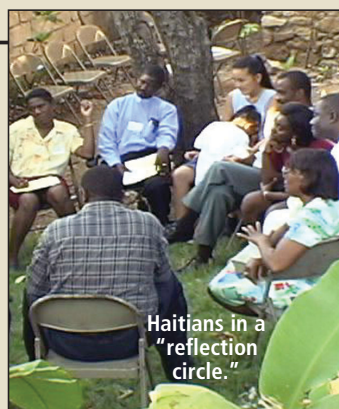
He apparently chose appetite over devotion, and stopped going to confession altogether in the 1950s as his affair with Catherine Walston, herself a Catholic convert, intensified. (Greene once told her that he was able to love God more because she loved God so much.) Later in life, Greene related an

Continued on Page 41



Building Spiritual Muscles

The Renovaré intra-church movement has put out a study Bible that aims to help us live “with-God” lives—lives that are infused with knowing God is among us. Edited by Richard Foster, Dallas Willard, Walter Brueggemann, and Eugene Peterson, *The Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible* contains 15 essays on select books from the Bible, profiles of biblical characters, and several exercises for the spiritually hungry. HarperSanFrancisco.



Haitians in a “reflection circle.”

Empowered Leadership

The DVD *Circles of Change: A Quiet Revolution in Haiti* looks briefly (it’s 20 minutes) at an encouraging grassroots model for leadership and community organizing taking root in Haiti. John Engle started “open space” and “reflection circles,” programs through the organization Beyond Borders, which are designed to get people talking, listening, and making decisions together to help foster peace and self-determination—a far cry from the traditional “command-and-control” leadership style. www.beyondborders.net.

EYES & EARS

by Danny Duncan Collum

Blood, Soil, and the Blues

There are two axioms in life of which I am sure. One is derived from the gospel of John and the other from the late member of Congress Thomas “Tip” O’Neill. They are as follows: Truth is incarnate. And all politics are local. Applied to the arts, these lead to a corollary. Art that aspires to be universal must be supremely specific, detailed, and rooted in a particular place and time.

And that brings me to the art that speaks the universe from the particular red dirt of the North Mississippi hills. I’m not talking about Faulkner (though I could be). I’m talking about the North Mississippi Allstars, the center of a blues-rock cult that started down here in the late 1990s and is, like kudzu, slowly headed your way.

The particular truth of the North Mississippi Allstars

Kudzu, for my more provincial and ill-informed readers, is the Japanese vine that was imported to the Southern hill country for erosion control and proceeded to take over everything in its path—trees, abandoned houses, and, legend has it, slow-moving cows. It actually can grow up to a foot per day. It is a wild, hardy, hot-weather plant, and, as such, it has become an emblem of the Southern hills.

If you’ve never seen kudzu, but you still want to feel the particular truth of this particular place and learn what it can teach you, you can always read Faulkner. But you can also purchase the North Mississippi Allstars 2004 live album, *North Mississippi Hill Country Revue*.

The North Mississippi Allstars are a pair of white brothers, guitarist Luther and drummer Cody Dickinson, and bass player Chris Chew, their African-American high school buddy. The Dickinson boys are the sons of Memphis producer, session musician, and sometimes-recording artist Jim Dickinson. The elder Dickinson played piano with the Rolling Stones, produced punk-rock legends The Replacements, and, early in his career, helped spearhead a Memphis country blues revival that led to the late-life recording careers of such artists as Furry Lewis and Fred McDowell.

SOMETIME BACK IN the 1980s, when his boys were very young, Dickinson left Memphis city life for the North Mississippi countryside. There, Cody and Luther grew up surrounded by their parents’ musical legacy and attended predominantly black public schools. Otha Turner, the fife-and-drum bandleader (and subject of the opening

episode of the PBS series *The Blues*), was a neighbor and family friend. The children of Turner, and of guitarist R. L. Burnside, were classmates and contemporaries.

So it was that, after passing through teenage punk and hip-hop bands, they formed the Allstars and began fashioning a thoroughly contemporary sound from the indigenous materials of Mississippi hill country culture. You can hear the result on their very first recording, *Shake Hands With Shorty*, which, in its very first moments, combines hip-hop sampling and traditional hill country fife and drum, which some blues scholars maintain is the truest surviving cultural element passed on from West Africa to the United States.

On subsequent recordings, the Dickinsons and Chew were joined by Duwayne Burnside (R.L.’s son). He gave the band a twin-guitar attack that could only be compared to those patron saints of Southern rock, the Allman Brothers Band. Burnside left the band rather than tour Europe, but he is still a frequent guest artist and collaborator.

Hill Country Revue, recorded at last year’s Bonnaroo Festival in Tennessee, is both a summary of the band’s work so far and the best introduction to it. As Jim Dickinson states in the liner notes, it includes three generations of Dickinsons, Burnside, and Turners. “Two races...” he writes, “met in brotherhood to rob the train.” The music includes fife and drum, Cody Dickinson’s extended washboard solo, a guest spot by vocalist Chris Robinson (late of The Black Crowes), and rap from Cody Burnside (R.L.’s grandson).

Through it all, the common thread is the ancient and blessed backbeat, the timeless cry of the bottleneck guitar, and R.L. Burnside’s frequently voiced benediction, “Well, well, well....”

It’s music that does what the blues have always done. It looks the pain of living in the face and meets it with a party. That’s a stance toward life that is very much rooted in the tragedy of Southern history. But it is a philosophy in sound that will work for anyone. ■

Danny Duncan Collum, a Sojourners contributing editor, teaches writing at Rust College in Holly Springs, Mississippi.



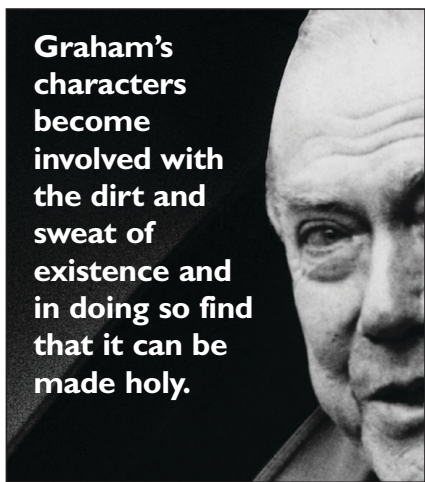
The North Mississippi Allstars: brothers Luther and Cody Dickinson and Chris Chew.

CULTURE

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incident in which the two attended an early morning mass in Italy presided over by Padre Pio, the Capuchin monk who bore the signs of the stigmata. Greene described the power of that visit, but also his reluctance to meet personally with Pio. "I didn't want to change my life by meeting a saint," Greene said. "I felt there was a good chance that he was one."

LIKE MANY OF his characters, Greene lived in a state of psychological and emotional extremity. (He was forever marked by an experience of psychoanalysis as a teenager and contemplated suicide as a young man.) Haunted by a sense of sin and a constant anxiety, Greene's nearly incessant world travel and murky espionage activities—he worked at various times



Graham's characters become involved with the dirt and sweat of existence and in doing so find that it can be made holy.

for British secret intelligence—could, perhaps, be read as attempts to escape the pursuit of grace. Biographer Sherry, in his third and final volume of *The Life of Graham Greene*, published last year, likens Greene's paradoxical relationship to Catholicism to that of "a fox to a furrier": always quizzical, even adversarial, and yet inextricably linked.

In his review of that same biography, David Lodge called into question aspects of Greene's Catholicism near the end of his life, a time when the older writer identified himself as "a Catholic agnostic." (Greene had always disliked being called a Catholic writer, even in the early years.) Of particular interest is whether Greene requested and received the final sacrament of his own accord. Sherry contends he did, as does Jesuit schol-

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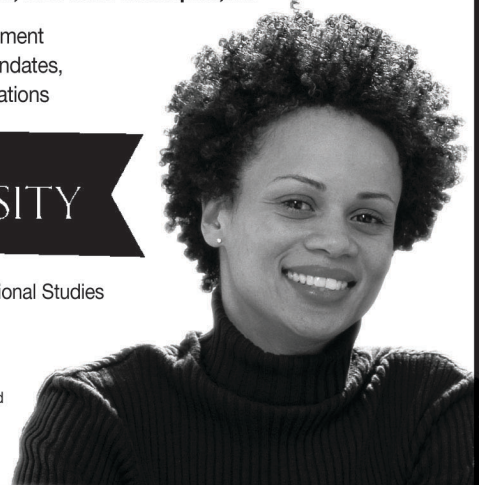
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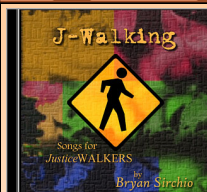
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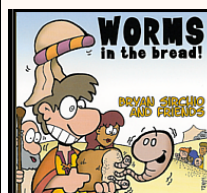
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ar Mark Bosco in his new book, *Graham Greene's Catholic Imagination*.

More important for Bosco, however, is recognizing the thread of Catholicism that runs throughout the extent of Greene's work. Rather than dividing his novels into Catholic and post-Catholic groupings, Bosco argues that Greene's entire work should be viewed through the lens of his changing, though never concluded, relationship to his faith. Thus as Vatican II gave way to liberation theology and a new pluralism, it should come as no surprise that Greene was writing about dictatorships and banana republics and reading Hans Küng. For Greene, as for many Vatican II Catholics, theology, politics, and economics were tightly bound together.

In the later years, there were also things to be regretted. Although Greene finally found a measure of peace, settling down with one mistress in Antibes, on the French Riviera, he was never reconciled to his wife and they never obtained a divorce. His late ventures into international politics were often ill-advised, such as the speech he gave before a cultural congress in Moscow in 1987, likening Catholicism to communism. Less than four years later, Soviet communism would crumble—its demise hastened, in part, by a pope (John Paul II) whom Greene castigated for his conservatism. What, one wonders, would the writer say about Benedict XVI? And then there was Greene's brief flirtation with Panamanian dictator Omar Torrijos, an outgrowth of his interest in and perhaps naive understanding of Latin American affairs. These are things that, like Greene's illicit liaisons, remain to be forgiven. If his life and novels teach us anything, it is that the need for grace is abundant.

As Bosco notes, Greene strongly felt the loss of what he called a religious sensibility in the modern novel, the notion that powers of good and evil do exist and are at war in the world and in the human soul. While he was in many ways a deeply flawed individual, Greene did leave us this particular gift: He restored a measure of that lost sensibility through characters whose struggle between flesh and spirit is, in the end, so much like our own. ■

Deryl Davis is a writer living in Washington, D.C.

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Marks of a Christian

School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism, edited by The Rutba House. Cascade Books.

Reviewed by William O'Brien

Many people of faith sense that these are trying times. But some are recklessly hopeful enough to believe that God's Spirit may be breaking in on our society in ways both new and ancient.

That is the witness of *School(s) for Conversion*. Its genesis lies in a web of relationships among various Christians around the United States, most of whom are involved in some kind of intentional faith community experiment. Some are grizzled veterans of the Christian counterculture; others are newer and younger voices. Through gatherings and conversations about their struggles for faithfulness and community life in the midst of a fragmented society, they have developed what they call (using good biblical numerology) 12 marks of a new monasticism.

This book is about these 12 marks. But the result is much richer than a simple collection of essays. *School(s) for Conversion* is a repository of collective experiential wisdom, reflecting lives of engaged, committed discipleship.

The first mark, described eloquently by Sister Margaret McKenna, sets the tone: the call for Christians to relocate to places abandoned by empire. Drawing on biblical and early church notions of desert spirituality, McKenna and her fellow new monastics believe that God's Spirit will speak to us from the margins and there show us "new possibilities of faithfulness."

All the chapters, each covering one of the marks, reflect a holistic understanding of Christian faith that is historically situated and seeks to respond to the crises of our times. All the writers ground their reflections in scripture and church history, complemented by personal testimonies or portraits of communities seeking to incarnate the particular mark of new monasticism.

Some chapters cover familiar ter-

rain for Christians who have sought a progressive social application of faith—racial justice, peacemaking, economic sharing, the environment. Even here, the authors frequently offer fresh and provocative insights. Chris Rice's chapter on race, for instance, exudes honest struggle with painful issues as he calls the church to lamentation for racial divisions and commitment to just reconciliation.

The new "marks" stress the centrality of prayer and intentional spiritual formation.

Fred Bahnsen's explication of the mark of peacemaking seeks to connect global peacemaking with conflict resolution within communities, along the lines of Matthew 18.

Other marks of the new monasticism are more surprising and perhaps more challenging to many readers. Ivan Kauffman urges even "radical" and countercultural Christians to commit to "humble submission to Christ's body, the church." David Jansen calls for new monastic communities to provide intentional spiritual formation, similar to the traditional novitiate. Jana

Discovery

"The Bible is the fullest expression we have of God's mind and heart."

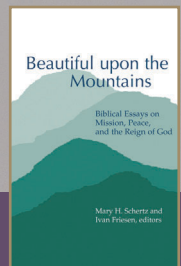
Mary Schertz helps students discover what God is telling us through the Bible not only in its original setting, but also in today's world.

She's still discovering that herself. "If I'm not pushing myself toward discovery about the Bible, if I'm not looking deeply and letting it resonate with me, then I have nothing to offer students."

Mary also

- is co-editor of *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology*;
- co-edited *Beautiful Upon the Mountains: Biblical Essays on Mission, Peace, and the Reign of God* (IMS and Herald Press, 2003);
- is working on a commentary on Luke; one focus of her study is the connection between Jesus' renunciation of violence and his prayer before the crucifixion.

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