

The Power of Imagination



John Houghton, author of both fiction and non-fiction works, presents a stimulating argument for Christian fiction.

The Bible makes it clear that imagination is far from neutral. There is such a thing as vain, or futile, imagination. Romans 1:21 teaches idols, whether they be of stone or steel, of sex or superstition or science, originate in futile minds that have perverted the gift of God to serve lesser causes.

Since the world is given over to vanity, it is hardly surprising that much of what it produces, unless moderated by something better, consists of negative and cynical images. One need only to note the obsession with violence, death and eroticism in the film and television industries. Nowadays, even good plots have to contain obligatory blasphemy, killing, and sex scenes. Why do they not contain an obligatory prayer, a gift to the poor, and assistance to someone in need? Because life is not like that? But it

is! Millions of people, and not just Christians, pray, give, and assist others as part of their everyday lifestyle, but most television producers work with a different agenda.

Christians cannot just blame the producers of mainline commercial media. The Internet is replete with pornographic and violent images. Likewise, much contemporary literature has followed the same cynical trends and, in so doing, debases human worth and experience.

When it comes to media directed towards children there is considerably more restraint. Yet, even here violence and quasi-sexual imagery are rampant, witchcraft and sorcery are commonplace, and ghosts and ghouls provide the entertainment and excitement rather than anything better. The world operates on a value system very different from that of Christians. In the world, the word "imaginative," like the word "art," is a justification for almost anything.

Imagination and God's creation

Humans are the product of God's own imagination. Also, they are a living image of what God is like; they evidence divine characteristics.

These include the capacity for ideas, the use of language, the virtue of love—and imagination.

Being made in the image of the Imaginer, human beings have been granted the unique and amazing ability to form pictures, or images, in their minds. By arts and crafts, and especially by words, they can convey those pictures to others.

Creating characters and their roles takes human beings beyond amusement. Stories and images facilitate moral and spiritual reflection. The arts—painting, music, drama, architecture, sculpture and storytelling—are evidence that human beings are made in the image of God.

Humans cannot live without stories, whether real or imaginary. Every society has its folklore, complete with heroes and villains, adventures and exploits, laws and lessons—and the more vivid and stirring, the better. In Western culture, old favorites like *Robin Hood* teach that government should be challenged if it becomes tyrannical, that the rich have responsibilities to the poor, and that the church should not be the indulgent lackey of the state.

Cinderella reminds the down-trodden that miracles do happen and dreams can come true. How many girls hope for their Prince Charming as a result! Or, think of Shakespeare's plays, or the Grimm brothers' fairy tales, or of Aesop's fables, with their moral instruction and cautions. *Huckleberry Finn* reflects the uncertain transition of the American people into a nation. Dickens' *Oliver Twist* and *A Christmas Carol* both affirm the processes of social reform initiated by the mid-nineteenth-century Christian revival. Without stories and images humans have neither civilization nor society.

The power of myth

No stories have greater power on the imagination than those built around a mythic structure, where a central character overcomes various tests and trials and is transformed in the process. Such stories may or may not be based on historical truth, but they contain profound truths about human existence, and therein lies their power. Every human being is on a journey called life; from the ordinariness of birth and childhood, each person must face the trials and uncertainties of growing up. Along the way each person makes some friends, faces some enemies, masters some skills, and faces shadowy fears. At some point a decisive challenge arises. Whatever the test and however the test is framed, those who succeed are rewarded.

Mythic tales help readers live out the journey vicariously; that is, they see themselves, and learn, through someone else's experience. In the success of the hero they find hope for their own uncertain path. Readers of *The Lord of the Rings* desperately want Frodo Baggins to cast the ring into the cracks of doom, because if he fails, what hope is there for anyone else? If Frodo cannot defeat evil, will evil prove to be the strongest force after all?

Thus, myth helps readers face their inner terrors and dream dreams. If a tale is doing its job, it will inspire higher ideals and teach

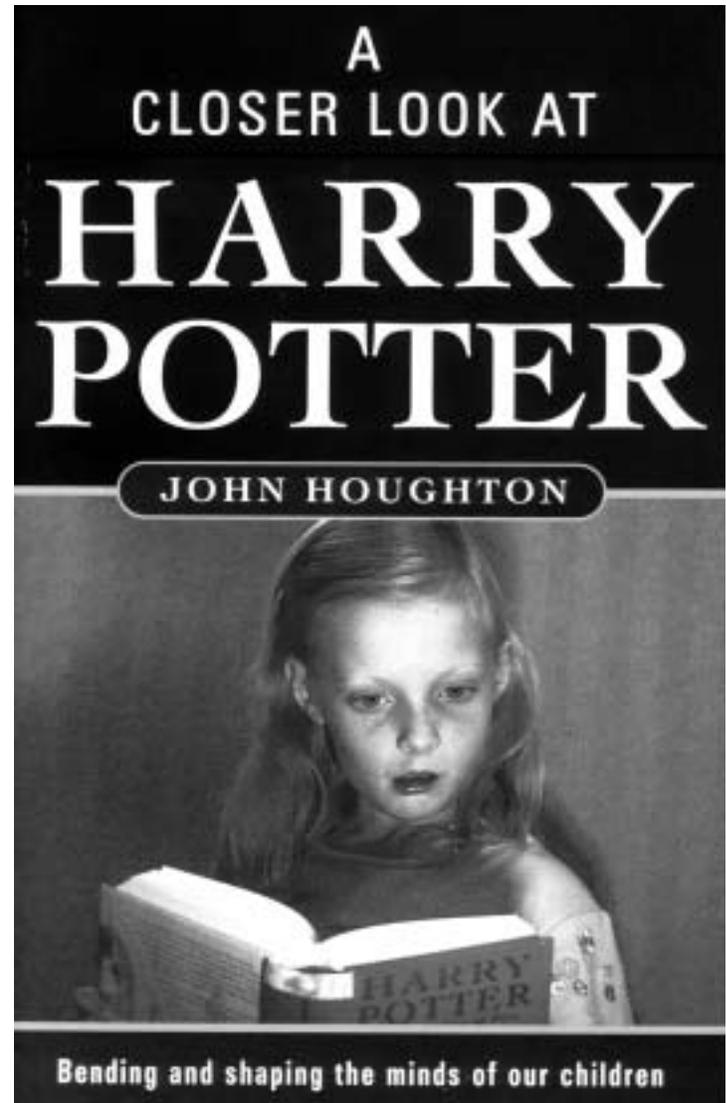
morals. Its characters touch readers deep inside; the metaphors and symbols fire the imagination, so much so that they become the unconscious foundations of life.

Stories with mythic structures include the legends of King Arthur, *Odysseus*, and the voyages of Sinbad. Modern examples that follow the same pattern are *The Wizard of Oz* and *Star Wars*. Science fiction and fantasy are particularly powerful forms of literature since they invoke entire worlds of the imagination quite unlike our own. Myths, stories, and narratives shape readers' value systems and world-views, and shape who they will become.

Stories and the Bible

The Bible itself is a narrative that is largely based on a mythic structure, since God's word is truth and must relate to the realities of human experience. It also contains the mythic (not mythical, i.e., fictitious) exploits of characters like Joseph and, above all, the life of Christ. The Gospels contain all the key elements of myth portrayed in the greatest story ever told. Little wonder it should be such a captivating and compelling story. The Holy Spirit himself has inspired the form as well as the words!

It is vital to clarify this point: the mythic form of the Scriptures does not mean they are make-believe, folk legend or fictitious. Scriptural events really happened in the space-time continuum. They are historically true and culminated in the Word becoming flesh and "dwelling among us ... full of grace and truth" (John 1:13, NIV). Bible writers are careful to clarify "we did not follow cleverly invented stories



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when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty" (2 Pet. 1:16).

The point of the incarnation and of all the rest of the Bible narrative is that God reveals himself through the story of people's lives.

Christians do well to remember this, because much of their failure to communicate the Gospel effectively in the postmodern world is a failure to recognize the importance of telling the story.

The Bible story does not begin with sin, rebellion and evil; it begins with a God of love who made a beautiful world that was full of goodness. Nor did the Fall spoil it all; God seriously limited the effects of evil and ensured that beauty would still remain and that humans would aspire to find it. When history ends, it will do so with the return of the best, most wonderful person who ever lived and who will inaugurate a splendid new creation in which all evil is banished. Imagine that!

The Bible is not merely a set of *theological* propositions and proof texts. The Bible is a story book, a true story book, but nonetheless a narrative form through which God reveals himself and his will for the human race. All proof texts must be seen in the wider context of the narrative. Those truly steeped in the Bible allow its images and stories to shape their minds into seeing as God sees. They will not simply quote chapter and verse but rather, guided by the Holy Spirit and in loving fellowship with others, they develop the art of true *discernment*.

The Church needs to proclaim the greatest story ever told. The divine drama is not only full of great tales in their own right, but the impact of those stories on the imagination helps shape a healthy worldview and provide the moral inspiration needed to discern between good and evil. Christians need to learn the true wisdom that comes from above, and they need to learn it in the narrative form that

parallels the way in which they have to live their own lives.

Is fiction necessary?

Accepting that the Bible is a mythic narrative, should Christians stick to it alone? At least they can trust the Word of God! While they should certainly steep themselves and their children in the Scriptures, they should also recognize two scriptural truths.

First, God bestows common grace on all humanity. So passionate is God about reconciling the world to himself that he accustoms human beings to his character through the many blessings of creation and culture alike. Indeed, the world is littered with clues that point unerringly in the direction of Christ: "Great are the works of the Lord; they are pondered by all who delight in them" (Psalm 111:2).

Second, God uses unbelievers in his purposes, be they Baalam's ass, the pagan king Cyrus, "my anointed," or the writers that Paul quotes on Mars Hill. This has led Christians like C.S. Lewis and many others to

acknowledge that non-Christian writings can and do contain elements of truth that help readers in their journey towards salvation. *Lord of the Flies*, for example, is a powerful exposition of the reality of the fall and of the corruption of sin. *Terminator 2* is a vivid portrayal of the relentlessness of sin, the need for a Savior and the necessity of a sacrifice to destroy evil, with much of its plotline reflecting the symbolism of Revelation 12.

Christians do well to remember that not everything is bad. Since "every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights" (Jas. 1:17), non-believers are well capable of producing works of great moral and spiritual worth. Indeed, some of the greatest artistic and imaginative achievements have come from professing unbelievers. In the West, nonetheless, much of that has arisen from a culture that has been profoundly shaped by a Christian worldview. Delivering people from the superstitions of idolatry, the Christian faith has enabled the creative gift to explore beauty without fear and to reflect upon human nature without explaining behavior simply in terms of the caprice of the gods or the activity of demons. It is a legacy that Christians neglect at their peril.

What do readers need?

Mythic stories provide insights into the mystery of human existence and also have common grace potential to guide readers in their search for reality. Accepting the power and place of stories, then, it is evident that Christian and non-Christian readers alike need access to books that inspire the imagination and encourage a positive lifestyle.

Why recommend books in an age of television, film, computer games and Web surfing? Good books, like radio stories, stimulate the imagination far, far better than film or television can ever do.



Words create images in the mind, whereas televisual and cinematic media merely give someone else's picture. Who has not been disappointed with a film rendition of a favorite book simply because the images projected on the screen are nowhere near as good as the imagined ones? Despite reports to the contrary, more people than ever are curling up with a bit of processed tree and printer's ink and loving every minute of it. The book is far from dead!

The apostle Paul advised: "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things" (Phil. 4:8). This is no invitation to hide away from the harsh realities of life and even less to daub everything with crosses and doves; nor does it mean believers must never listen to secular music, or read non-Christian books, or watch a Hollywood film. What it does urge, however, is that Christians look at life from a positive and redemptive perspective. Christians must encourage the positive use of the imagination. There is a place for Christian stories, Christian narratives, Christian fiction.

These do not have to be just *nice* stories. Indeed, more harm than good may be done by restricting reading to books that fail to do justice to the realities of life. The Bible is never like that! Readers need to know about hatred and injustice, about suffering and disease, about conflict and victory, about hope and despair, about life and death. They do not, however, need literature that is selfish and cynical at heart, or books that encourage a pathological gloom about life.

In a world saturated not only with images but with a vast number of stories that spark the picture house of the mind, it is essential that Christians engage positively and creatively in the imaginative arts. Those who do so, follow in the great tradition of those who produced illuminated manuscripts, invented musical notation,

designed the Sistine Chapel, built gorgeous cathedrals, painted the Dutch masters, wrote *Pilgrim's Progress*, and produced the Authorized Version of the Bible. They include in their ranks all the great names—Bede, Erasmus, Haydn, Bach, Handel, Rembrandt, Tolstoy and many hundred more, too numerous to mention—let alone the countless godly craftsmen and women who did and still do their work for the glory of God.

Imagination is one of the finest gifts that God has bestowed upon human beings. All major scientific discoveries, all social and political reforms come about because of its use. Reverend Martin Luther King's famous words say it all: "I have a dream ..." Christians should nurture and encourage readers to dream, to imagine a better world. With God's help, they may just go on to produce it.v

myth

Christians are often uncomfortable with the word *myth*. What does it mean? English-language dictionaries usually list several definitions of this word.

The primary meaning is that of a traditional story with characters or events that illustrate the world view of a people or explain a practice, belief, or natural occurrence. Such a story may be based on actual historical events.

A secondary meaning has to do with a popular belief or tradition around something or someone. The belief or tradition may be based on real events, or on fact, but most often is not. Therefore, sometimes the word *myth* is used to say something is an unfounded or false notion.

Mythic, as in Houghton's term *mythic structure*, usually refers to something that has the qualities of myths, or traditional stories, which delineate the psychology, customs, or ideals of a society.

Mythical generally signifies something is fictitious or wholly imaginary, with no basis in history or fact.

—Editor