

Foreword

The more I wander in the rather abstract and ethereal realm of theology and philosophy, reading required of me by my professions, clerical and academic, the greater my appreciation for the truth that can be told only through fiction. In an age of thin descriptions and reductionistic assessments, fiction portrays human life as complex and mysterious as God means it to be. Our conventional, socially acceptable, governmentally sanctioned modes of explanation—sociology, psychology, economics—seem simple compared to the depth and subtlety, the insight and candor of good fiction. In seeking discernment about who we are and why we live as we do, I have found Flaubert always to be a more trustworthy guide than Freud, Mann better than Kant.

As a Christian clergyman it is understandable why I have such high regard for the narrative arts. The faith of Jews and Christians is generated by and accountable to story. Scripture is first a story of how we came to be, a rendition of God as author of life, a long saga of a God who gratuitously, in love, became entangled with the triumphs and tragedies of Israel. And something there was in the nature of Jesus Christ that demanded to be handled by story. We think that sometime in the late first century Mark invented a literary device that was previously unknown—the gospel—in order to tell the truth about Jesus. The gospel itself is a story about God before it is propositions or principles about God.

My generalizations about the fecund, perceptive, evocative power of fiction are particularly true when one sets out to understand us clergy. Clergy are interesting to the world as those who dare to stand at that fateful intersection between God and humanity. Called to the task of pointing humanity upward toward the sacred, we notably have our feet stuck in the muck and mire of earth. The clerical collar around our necks both reveals and conceals who we really are or wish to God we were. Those of us who are yoked in service to God and to our congregations in this very political, public role can be adept at hiding the truth about ourselves. Therefore some of our very best novelists and dramatists have attempted to pry into the recesses of our clergy souls, investigating what lies beneath

our collars and, in the process have produced some of our most engaging—and truthful—narrative art.

Professor Sue Sorensen offers lively, compelling evidence that fiction about clergy is one of the best ways to discover who clergy are and what clergy are for. Even if you are uninterested in the realm of the spirit, you are sure to be engaged by her astute depiction of human, all-too-human clergy. In her fast-paced, wide-ranging sweep of novels, plays, movies, and television shows about those of us who wear the collar, fresh insights abound on nearly every page. She is judicious in her judgments, gentle in her criticism, and so very insightful. Sorensen is not only a wonderful reader of fiction but she also reveals herself to be someone who knows us clergy quite well, down deep, collar on or off.

By interweaving her engaging, perceptive reading of these works of art with surprisingly appropriate biblical citations she reminds us that scripture itself is art in service of divine truth. Something about the truth of the God of Israel and the church could not be told without the use of poetry, saga, myth, and parable. Sorensen shows how fictional depictions of us clergy have dismissed us, ridiculed us, idealized us, idolized us, and also told truth about us that could be revealed in no other way.

Throughout the years of my own vocation I have been an avid consumer of novels, short stories, and movies about clergy. I have even ventured into the writing of fiction myself. Clergy have been an enduring theme in British fiction and film. Douglas Alan Walrath (in *Displacing the Divine*) shows how novels about clergy can be said to be an obsession of American writers from the very first. (Sorensen's reading of Hawthorne is wonderful.) And now Sorensen adds to the clergy fiction canon the Canadians—as well as contemporary movies and television—greatly increasing our appreciation for the fictional representation of women and men of God.

I've read close to a hundred clergy novels and yet Sue Sorensen introduced me to some new ones I had missed. Her discussion of Canadian clergy fiction is delightful and, I expect, unprecedented.

Anyone who wears the collar or who must put up with those who do, or anyone who loves novels, television, or film is sure to enjoy this quite wonderful book.

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the Practice of Christian Ministry, Duke University; and author of
Incorporation, a novel about a church and its clergy