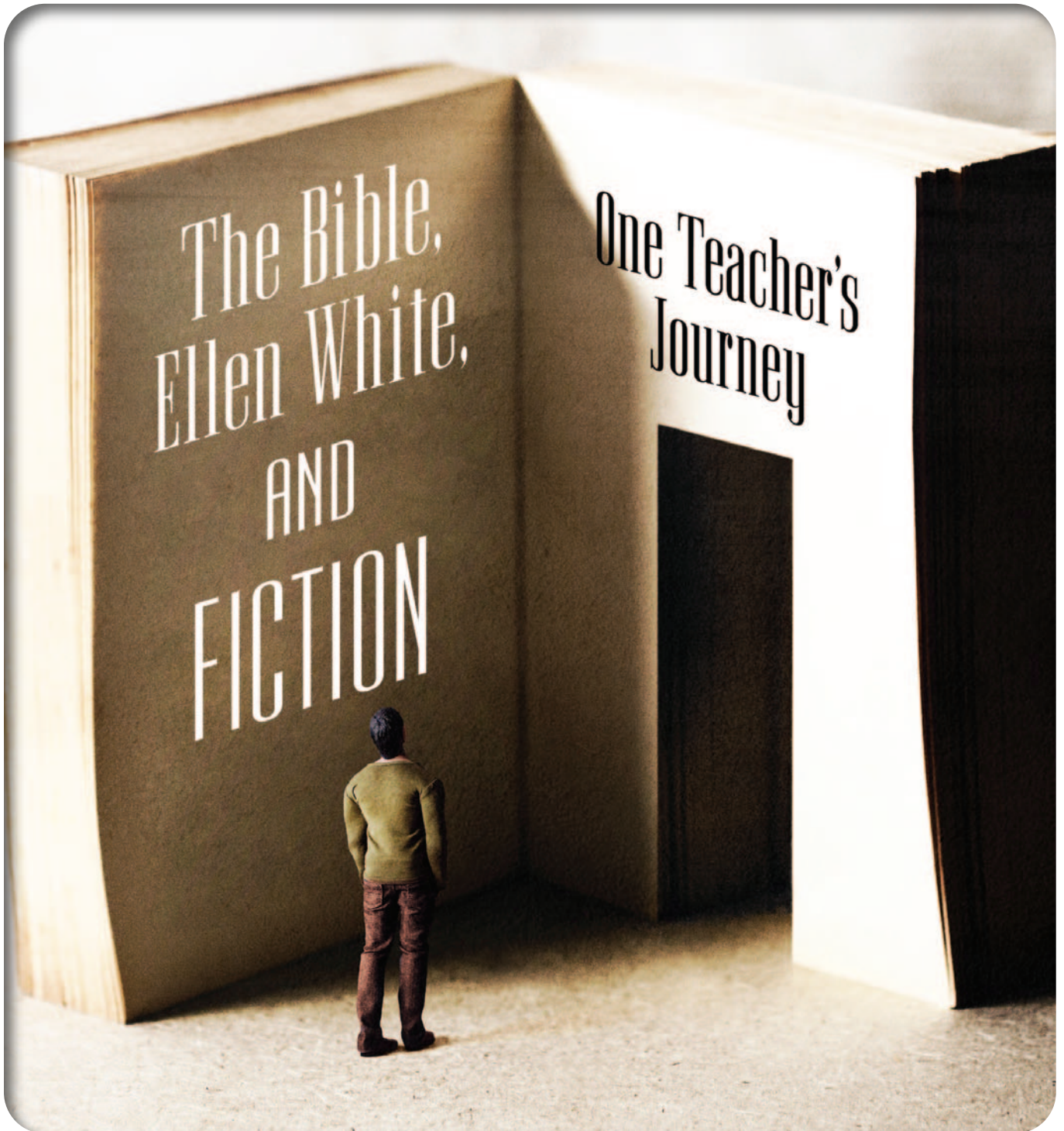




Derek C. Bowe



My journey with fiction has been a long one—stretching from the untroubled days of childhood to the tumultuous years of youth, as well as from the probing, vigorous period of young manhood to the settled, flowering stage of late adulthood. In my engagement with fiction, I have experienced joy and light, but I have also suffered unexpected sadness and endured deep darkness. My journey has been blessed with God-fearing, selfless teachers, but it also has been challenged by agnostic and career-absorbed professors. All along my Emmaus pathway, despite my foolishness and slowness of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken, Jesus has been with me, patiently prodding me to an understanding of fiction's role.

My initial engagement with fiction was biblical in nature. It was graced with childhood's peace and buttressed by life-forming principles. As though it were not decades ago, I remember my younger sister and myself as preschoolers sitting together enveloped in our mother's arms, one on the left and the other on the right. There we lisped the songs of Zion, memorized the Beatitudes and other Scriptures, and wonderingly heard the parable of the prodigal son and other stories—all narrated in our mother's inimitable style. This was later fleshed out in my elementary school years by Naomi Blatch, my public school teacher.¹ Even now I can see each of us toddling to the front of the class, taking turns to read stories from *Bible Firsts*. To my recep-

tive mind, it was thus natural to see the Bible stories and heroes as most fascinating.

All of that changed, however, as I continued my journey. In middle school, I encountered the worlds of the Brothers Grimm, a landscape peopled by Hansel and Gretel and darkened by witches and evil stepmothers. There I learned to relish folk tales of Jack and the Beanstalk, ogres and dwarfs, and waifs and fairy godmothers. It was a strange world, but while its darkness and suspense caused my heart to pound and breath to stop, it destroyed my peace, moving Jesus to the outskirts of my thoughts. High school's fictional world next loomed on the horizon, appealing to, and in some ways creating, my growing rebelliousness, with its introduction of apparent sexual freedom in the works of authors like D. H. Lawrence and John Updike, of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and *Couples* fame, respectively. As I became immersed in fiction, using it as a hub for my life and writing my own stories and plays, one of which was award-winning, peace deserted me, and Jesus became a faint echo. Still, mesmerized by fiction's strange pull, I perceived myself as sophisticated, avant-garde, and liberated.

While a partial return to the first works of my childhood provided some steadiness and satisfaction during my Adventist college years, my journey with fiction even then was sometimes puzzling. In my undergraduate years, a warm and unquestionably competent English professor kept immoral fiction from entering his courses, while retaining works that focused on epics and hinted at the fanciful and magical. However, he faithfully correlated them to life and

counter-balanced them with the Bible. A new way of seeing fiction thus opened to me, but something was still missing. Unfortunately, the vacuum was not filled by my graduate school program's paying its obligatory homage to Shakespeare and other luminaries of fiction. In fact, my uneasiness deepened with a professor's focus on Geoffrey Chaucer's fabliaux, naughty tales of cuckolded husbands and straying wives, narrated in a stream of unchecked description and salaciousness. Revolted by the place given the raunchy tales in this Adventist institution, I penned a more than 20-page analysis titled "Chaucer's Reeve's and Miller's Tales: Medieval Pornography?" I found the writing of this project paper cathartic, and became convinced that fiction's roles were not only to entertain its readers cleverly and to appeal to their appreciation of beauty skillfully, but also to petition their higher selves wisely and uplift them morally.

My journey with fiction afterwards took a momentous turn. After graduate school, I myself became a teacher of fiction. Newly minted and enthusiastic, I faced a quandary at my undergraduate alma mater. Would I now teach fiction with the sometimes distasteful content of my educational past? Would I instead teach it in a kind of synthesis, mimicking my undergraduate professor's lead of sifting out overtly harmful works, but keeping ones that I regarded as innocuous, though questionable? Or would I terminate it altogether? Over the years, a nagging conscience and increased interaction with my students

helped me to answer these questions.

Surprisingly, one of the students inadvertently helping me along the way was a freshman in a composition course. Taking issue with one of the course's assigned stories, he objected to a jaded Hemingway character's apparent disparagement of God when, in his reflections, he mocked religion and The Lord's Prayer in such phrases as "Our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name" ("A Clean, Well-Lighted Place").² However, to me the charac-

Jesus employed an arsenal of literary devices to captivate His audience's attention and grace His stories with the same commitment to beauty and perfection that He lavished on His created works.

ter's outburst was born of disillusionment and in no way obscene or irrelevant; it was merely factual, revealing his confusion and despair.

The student, on the other hand, saw it as dangerous and sacrilegious, demonstrating one of many opinions why fiction should not be taught in the Christian school. I countered, exclaiming that Jesus Himself used fiction, employing it effectively in many of His parables. While I later honored the student's desire not to read

any fiction by assigning him factual substitutes, privately I was troubled. His brave and unqualified dedication to his beliefs simmered in my mind. Could he, a freshman, be right, and could I, an instructor taught by luminaries in my field, be wrong? Most importantly, was he being used to bring me back to what I myself had objected to when reading Chaucer's fabliaux in graduate school?

The other student challenging my perspective on fiction was a junior in a colleague's upper-division literature course. Where his younger counterpart was zealous and boisterous in proclaiming his views, he was calm and analytical in objecting to an Ernest Gaines novel. Armed with actual passages from the novel, he sat in my office (I now served as chair of the English Department), explaining his discomfort with its offensive language, immoral situations, and ultimate effect. His approach invited me to consider whether God supported such works being taught at His school—and to young people being prepared for service on earth and citizenship in heaven. I was moved by the tact and obvious truth of his remonstrance—so moved, in fact, that I encouraged my colleagues to avoid teaching such works.

That was not the end, for the young man reignited the simmering flame occasioned by the first student. Painstakingly, I evaluated my own courses, removing from them everything that ran counter to the Bible's counsel on imagination and truth. No longer could I try to massage them into sanitary fare for student consumption. No longer would I subject students, in the name of artistry and relevance, to the unabashed filth, raunchiness, violence, and graphic sexuality of such works as Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman*, Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*.

The Scriptures guiding my reassessment assumed a clarity and dimension that I had somehow overlooked. I found King David helpful

when he wrote, "I will set no base thing before mine eyes; I hate the works of them that turn aside; it shall not cleave unto me" and "A perverse heart shall depart from me; I will know no evil thing" and (Psalm 101:4; 101:3, ASV).³ Paul was helpful, advising, "Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers" (Ephesians 4:29, KJV). To me, the apostle clarified the whole matter when he implored, "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things" (Philippians 4:8, KJV).

I also found Jesus' own use of stories most instructive. As the Master Teacher, He always told them with a clear purpose—people's restoration to the joy, health, and fulfillment that they knew at the beginning of time. He came, He emphasized, "that they could have life—indeed, so that they could live life to the fullest" (John 10:10, CEB).⁴ This dedication did not prevent Him from arming His tales from an arsenal of literary devices, but He employed them to captivate His audience's attention and grace His stories with the same commitment to beauty and perfection that He lavished on His created works. His stories brim with such literary features as personification, metaphor, simile, hyperbole, irony, soliloquy, and allusion, and run the gamut from comedy and tragedy to allegory and faction—the use of actual events for storytelling purposes. Thus, the parable of the sower dazzles not only with Jesus' brilliance in using a well-known activity to illustrate a point about the gospel's reception, but it also plumbs the multi-layered, beleaguered nature of the human mind.

“We are to extol neither idolatry nor men who did not choose to serve God. Years ago, reproof was given our editors in regard to advocating the reading of even such books as ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin,’ ‘Aesop’s Fables,’ and ‘Robinson Crusoe.’ Those who begin to read such works usually desire to continue to read novels.”

Certainly, the parable of the prodigal son poignantly captures the infectious joy of a loving father as he welcomes home his life-bruised son but, in a stroke of genius, Jesus leaves the story’s ending in His audience’s hands: How are they going to treat the prodigal sons and daughters of their own circles? Are they going to stand sulking and judgmental outside the welcoming parties, or are they going to join the fun and embrace them since they were “dead and [have] come back to life” and “lost, but now . . . found”? (Luke 15:32, NLT).⁵ All of this shows that when fiction is used as Jesus used it, it is an engaging, instructive tool for illuminating and helping the human condition. When it is not, it cheapens and even degrades this God-given gift, shortchanging its audience.

I have found that Ellen White,⁶ who said her writings are a lesser light leading readers to the Bible’s greater light, underscored and amplified its position on fiction. When I speak with respected, knowledgeable colleagues my concerns about fiction, I encounter several objections. First, they maintain that when Mrs. White spoke against fiction, she was protesting the dime novels of late 19th-century America, not fiction in general. Second, if fiction were to be weeded out of our curriculum, we would cripple our students’ chances of entering secular graduate schools and relegate

our own institutions to Bible college status.

Respectfully, I have not found evidence to support the first objection. Indeed, statement after statement from the Spirit of Prophecy maintains the opposite. Perhaps just a few would suffice here, however. In *The Adventist Home*, Mrs. White wrote about the harmful effects of story tales, classical myths, and infidel authors. She lamented:

“The world is deluged with books that might better be consumed than circulated. Books on sensational topics, published and circulated as a money-making scheme, might better never be read by the youth. . . . The practice of story reading is one of the means employed by Satan to destroy souls. It produces a false, unhealthy excitement, fevers the imagination, unfits the mind for usefulness, and disqualifies it for any spiritual exercise. It weans the soul from prayer and from the love of spiritual things.

“Works of romance, frivolous, exciting tales, are, in hardly less degree, a curse to the reader. The author may profess to teach a moral lesson; throughout his work he may interweave religious sentiments, but often these serve only to veil the folly and worthlessness beneath.”⁷

Her opposition to fiction was clear, broad, and firm, even taking to task

writers like William Shakespeare and Harriet Beecher Stowe. In *Manuscript Releases*, volume 6, she stated:

“Brethren, let us come to our senses. In more ways than one are we departing from God. Oh how ashamed I was of a recent number of the ‘Signs of the Times!’ On the first page is an article on Shakespeare, a man who died a few days after a drunken carousal, losing his life through indulgence of perverted appetite. In this article it is stated that he did many good works. Man is extolled. The good and the evil are placed on the same level, and published in a paper that our people use to give the third angel’s message to many of those who cannot be reached by the preached Word. . . .

“When we give the message in its purity, we shall have no use for pictures illustrating the birthplace of Shakespeare, or for pictures similar to the illustration of heathen goddesses that was used to fill the space on the first page of a recent number of the ‘Review and Herald.’ *We are not to educate others along these lines.* God pronounces against such articles and illustrations. I have a straightforward testimony to bear in regard to them. We are to extol neither idolatry nor men who did not choose to serve God. Years ago, reproof was given our editors in regard to advocating the reading of even such books as ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin,’ ‘Aesop’s Fables,’ and ‘Robinson Crusoe.’ Those who begin to read such works usually desire to continue to read novels. Through the reading of enticing stories they rapidly lose their spirituality. This is one of the principal causes of the weak, uncertain spirituality of many of our youth.”⁸

Concerning the second objection about fiction’s importance and its removal weakening our academic program, Mrs. White had a dream in which Jesus Himself gave valuable advice to Adventist educators. They were avidly supporting the use of books by infidel authors, seeing them as necessary to the curriculum. How-

ever, Jesus differed, thoroughly explaining His position:

“One who is, and has long been, our Instructor, stepped forward, and taking in his hand the books which had been earnestly advocated as essential to a higher education, he said, Do you find in these authors sentiments and principles which make it altogether safe to place them in the hands of students? Human minds are

easily charmed by Satan’s lies; and these works produce in the mind a distaste for the contemplation of the word of God, which, if received and appreciated, insures eternal life to the receiver. You are creatures of habit, and if you had never read one word in these books, you would today be far better able to comprehend that Book which above all other books, is worthy to be studied, and which


gives the only correct ideas regarding higher education.

“Because it has been customary to include these authors among your lesson books, and because this custom is hoary with age, is no argument in its favor. This does not necessarily recommend them as safe or essential books. These books have led thousands where Satan led Adam and Eve, to eat of the tree of knowledge which God has forbidden. They lead students to forsake the study of the Scriptures for a line of education that is not essential. The words of men who give evidence that they know not Christ are not to find a place in our schools.”⁹

In a searing conclusion that brought the debate to an unquestionable conclusion, Mrs. White reported Jesus’ final words: “The Messenger of God took books from the hands of several teachers, and laid them aside, saying, *There never has been a time in your lives when a study of these books was for your present good and advancement, or for your future eternal good.*”¹⁰

My lifelong journey of navigating fiction’s turbulent waters, guided by such biblical and Spirit of Prophecy counsel, has come to an end. I no longer embrace fiction, viewing it as instructive, entertaining, innocuous, or necessary. Instead, I now see it as subtly dangerous, beneficial only when strictly used in the ways Jesus modeled. I understand Harry Emerson Fosdick’s inveighing against much of modern fiction in his book *Twelve Tests of Character*:

“Our fathers used to witness the public execution of criminals. The theory was that the sight of violent death in punishment for crime would teach the people a lesson. But it did no such thing. The penologists learned that after public executions murders and crimes of violence increased. They discovered that brutality begets brutality. In consequence, we keep our executions behind closed doors.



As lights of the world and salt of the earth, we are to be about endorsing and proclaiming literature that enlightens and purifies; we are, in short, to be about our Father’s business of doing all we can to help heal a hurting, broken world—all of which starts in our personal lives and the classroom.

“So, too, it is arrant imbecility for us to suppose that our unashamed and vociferous sex interest, our sex dramas, sex novels, sex films, sex lectures, and sex caricatures of psychoanalysis, with all their information, are helping to cleanse the life of our youth. Their effect is not cleansing but coarsening. They do not waken the aspiration for purity; they accustom the mind to impurity. We cannot wash our linen clean in dirty water.”¹¹

Why should we subject ourselves and our impressionable students to the works of writers who often were themselves debauched and searching, incapable of piloting their own courses? Why should we not heed the later repentance of several, who, Like Chaucer¹² and Boccaccio,¹³ rejected their works’ immoral content? Instead of embracing fiction, should we not heed the Bible’s assessment when it asserts, “Look to God’s instructions and teachings! People who contradict his word are completely in the dark” (Isaiah 8:20, NLT)? Although there never was a safe time when Christian teachers could dabble in fiction in their classroom and private lives, it is now doubly unsafe for us “upon whom the ends of the world are come” (1 Corinthians 10:11, KJV). We are God’s “letters of recommendation . . . to be known and read by all” (2 Corinthians 3:1,2, NRSV).¹⁴ Thus, we cannot afford to taint any part of our lives with scribbles of satanic origin. As lights of the world and salt of the earth, we are to be about endorsing and proclaiming literature that enlightens and purifies; we are, in short, to be about our Father’s business of doing all we can to help heal a hurting, broken world—all of which starts in our personal lives and the classroom. ✍

This article has been peer reviewed.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Prior to United States Supreme Court rulings in 1962, prayer and Bible reading were common practices in American public schools. See Frank McGee, “Supreme Court Rules Against Requiring Prayer in Public Schools,” *NBC Learn K-12* (June 17, 1963): <https://archives.nbclearn.com/portal/site/k-12/flatview?cuecard=3006>.

2. Ernest Hemingway, “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” (1933): <https://pdf4pro.com/view/a-clean-well-lighted-place-1933-url-der-org-2e7a74.html>.

3. *American Standard Version*, 1901. Section Headings Courtesy BereanBible.com © 2013, 2014 Used by Permission.

4. Quoted from *Common English Bible* (CEB) Copyright © 2011 by Common English Bible.

5. Quoted from *Holy Bible, New Living Translation*, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

6. Ellen White’s writings on fiction have many contexts. Some of her letters on the subject were written during the period when Adventist colleges were forging curricula that did not rely on the classic tradition of Greek and Latin studies. Other letters were written in the 19th century to Adventist printing presses such as Pacific Press in California and the Review and Herald in Battle Creek, both of which were accepting fictional materials for printing. For more on Ellen White’s statements on fiction see Keith Clouten, “Ellen White and Fiction: A Closer Look,” *The Journal of Adventist Education* 76:4 (April/May 2014): 10-14: <http://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/en/jae201476041005.pdf>.

For more on the curricula in early Adventist colleges, see Floyd Greenleaf, *In Passion for the Word* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2005), 80-103.

7. Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1952), 412, 413.

8. _____, *Manuscript Releases 1897* (Silver Spring, Md.: Ellen G. White Estate, 1990), 6:279, 280. Italics supplied.

9. _____, “The Bible in Our Schools,” *ibid.*, 263, 264.

10. *ibid.*, 265. Italics supplied.

11. Harry Emerson Fosdick, *Twelve Tests of Character* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1923), 44. See also recent comparative research showing murder rates in death-penalty states as higher than in non-death-penalty states, which, it is said, supports Fosdick’s observation: Death Penalty Information Center (updated 2020): <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/facts-and-research/murder-rates/murder-rate-of-death-penalty-states-compared-to-non-death-penalty-states>. Fosdick’s point, though, is that widespread viewing of sexual immorality creates further degradation, just as deliberate exposure to public hangings unwittingly leads to more brutality.

12. At the end of *The Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey Chaucer makes a stunning confession, apparently written sometime after the poem’s original publication date. In it, he seeks “for the mercy of God” and the prayers of his readers for his “translations and compositions of worldly vanities” like Troilus and Criseyde, *The Canterbury Tales* (specifically “those that tend toward sin”), and *Parliament of Fowls*. He thanks Jesus, Mary, and “all the saints of heaven” for his works of nonfiction like “the translation of Boethius’s Consolation of Philosophy, and other books of legends of saints, and homilies, and morality, and devotion.” (See Harvard University, Geoffrey Chaucer Website, “10.2 Chaucer’s Retraction” [2018]: <https://chaucer.fas.harvard.edu/pages/chaucers-retraction-0.>)

13. Becoming more and more religious in his older years, Giovanni Boccaccio had to be persuaded by his friend Petrarch “from burning his own works and selling his library.” (See Umberto Bosco, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, “Giovanni Boccaccio: Italian Poet and Scholar” (modified in January 2020): <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Giovanni-Boccaccio>.)

14. 2 Corinthians 3:1-2. *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV). *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.