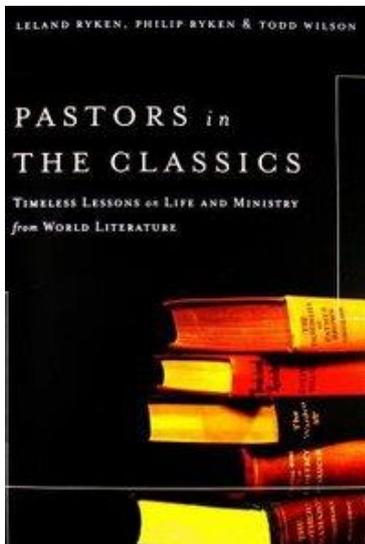


Leyland Ryken, Philip Ryken & Todd Wilson. *Pastors in the Classics: Timeless Lessons on Life and Ministry from World Literature* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2012)

Three groups of readers can be identified for the book: (1) ministry leaders of all kinds (regardless of whether they are long-term or newcomers to Christian ministry), (2) those who are tasked with training and the spiritual oversight of priests and pastors, and (3) anyone with a literary interest in the way Christians are depicted in literature, society and the media. The style of writing is engaging, and stylised to reflect the language and mannerisms of the various authors whose works are discussed throughout the book.



Most of us have, at the back of our mind, some awareness of the ways in which Christians in general and ministry leaders in particular, are represented in literature, society and the media. Perhaps this is especially true at a time when the Royal Commission into Childhood Sexual Abuse is currently under way in Australia. Although the scope of that enquiry is into all those institutions that make up Australian society—often the media commentary pays special interest to the Christian churches and the typology of the predatory priest. In a post-Christian era, Christian institutions and Christian leaders are under greater scrutiny than ever before. This is one important reason why we ought to be reading books like *Pastors in the Classics*. For one thing, we discover that holiness is not an immediate post-baptismal state, but something which is fought towards over time, and often “arises” out of some significant sin in the past. For another thing, we discover that “Grace is all around,” which was the discovery of the young priest in Georges Bernanos’ classic novel *The Diary of a Country Priest* (first

published in 1937).

The primary focus of this intriguing book is to draw the reader’s attention to the ways in which priests, pastors and ministry leaders of all kinds are represented in *works of fictional literature*. If “art mimics reality”—then the stories and fictional accounts of the lives of saintly and not-so-saintly figures in these novels give us a clear picture of the kinds of tensions and possibilities, temptations and pitfalls, failings and feelings, glories and ecstasies of all those who serve in positions of Christian ministry, of whatever era. And of course beyond priests and padres, pastors and evangelists, missionaries and monks—there is the more generic application to all human beings who find themselves in the presence of God.

The book is broken into two sections. The first part being an in-depth discussion of 12 well-recognised novels, known not only to readers of the classics, but to people more broadly. Examples are Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (circa 1400); Graham Greene’s *The Power and the Glory* (1940); and Alan Paton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948). The second part of the book is a vignette of 58 further well-known literary sources whose primary concern is to introduce to the reader a well-chosen selection of novels whose plots are primarily concerned with the lives of those who serve Christ in Christian ministry. Well-known examples from this much more abbreviated summary of works are GK Chesterton’s *Father*

Brown series (commencing from circa 1911); Victor Hugo's *Les Miserable* (first published in 1862); and Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* (first published in 1766).

The beauty of the fictional accounts provided in each case by the original authors, with insightful comments by the Ryken brothers and their co-conspirator Todd Wilson ... goes beyond the specific nature of each narrative story and its particular plot-lines, to become generalizable to all those ministers—men and women—who hear God's call to ministry, and face the particular temptations of hatred, rage, greed, self-aggrandisement, lust, pride and fear; along with the 'graces' that are the particular experience of those whose sanctified lives are accompanied by love, joy, peace, fulfilment, a growing spiritual life, and an increasing effectiveness in their ministries.

One of the themes which recurs throughout many of the plot-lines is the unrealistic expectations on the part of young ministers who enter ministry for other-than-proper reasons, and must face the challenges of evil, unyielding religious structures, or arising out of their own heart, and—through their own or others' suffering—must find the resources in God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, the truth of the Bible, the reality of the kingdom of God, and the power of faith made perfect in peoples' holy lives, to continue as ministry. Often times, writers and their commentators make much of the failings of the ministers, such as Hawthorn's story of hidden sexual sin and hypocrisy in the life of Ps. Arthur Dimmesdale (page 24); Greene's "whiskey priest" (page 73); or Endo's compelling story of the priest Rodrigues' apostasy in the face of persecution (page 99); in each case these "failings of the flesh" give way to spiritual struggle, discovery through encounter, and either reconciliation or restoration—or leaving the ministry and even walking away from the Christian faith altogether.

There is no sense in which the main faults of Christianity are celebrated here, i.e., triumphalism, shallowness, the rewarding of sin and self-aggrandisement, or the "fiddling" with metaphysical themes. What we find here is a full-on engagement was real-life issues which are the "main game" for anyone who finds themselves in situations of Christian ministry, regardless whether that is in 14th century France, or 21st century Australia. Many of the issues of the same. This means there are many great quotations to be found throughout the book, and there are many preaching illustrations to be found as well. Perhaps the two greatest benefits of reading the book are; firstly, that we are given entree into the world of classical literature which discusses Christian ministry and its foremost concern. The reader needs to be aware that this book is not a "shortcut"; all it does is introduce the material, not to do your work for you. Be warned—if you begin the process of reading here, you will want to go on and read other material, such is the quality of the work passing before you. And secondly, the plotlines of failure and redemption, restoration and grace, salvation and sorrow, despair and delight—are provocations which invite the reader's reflection on the state of their own spiritual life. As we discover from Eugene Peterson's frequent appeals to the Classics to stimulate his own prayer life, awareness of the great issues that affect humanity and which have a direct bearing on the spiritual life; delving into this book will invite you to reflect further upon your own walk with Christ, and give you a "window" into your own soul which is likely to provide you with the measure of the health of your own soul and preparedness for ministry—your growth towards maturity in Christ.