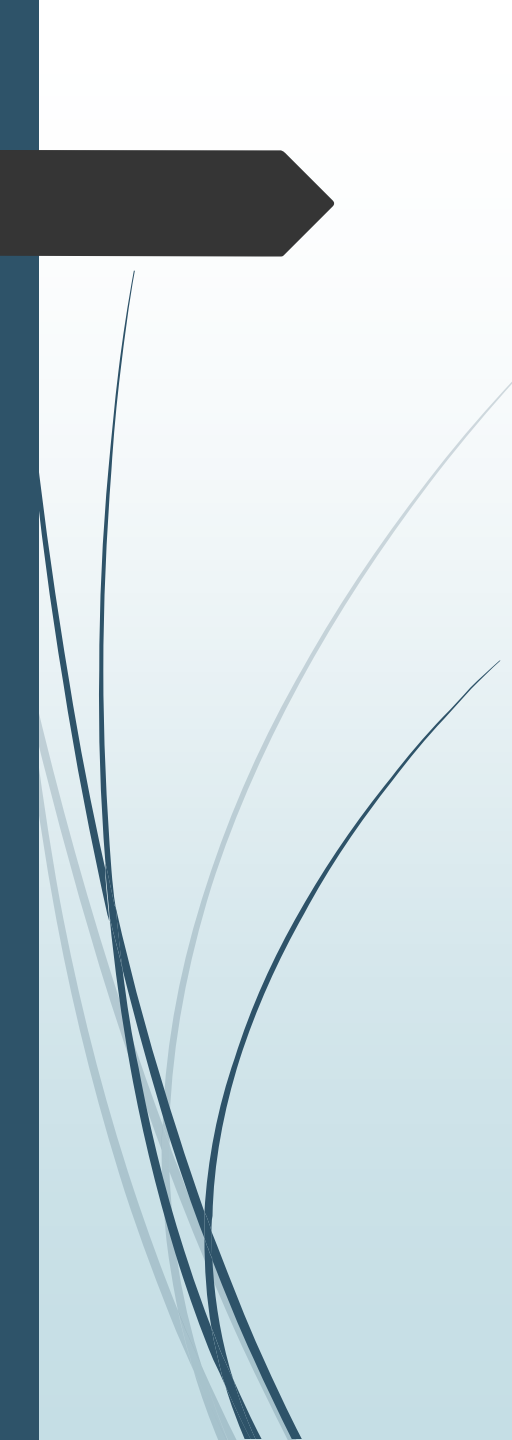




Writing Faith in Fiction with Depth and Respect

David Rodeback

August 2026—Quills



➤ 1, 4, 2, 18

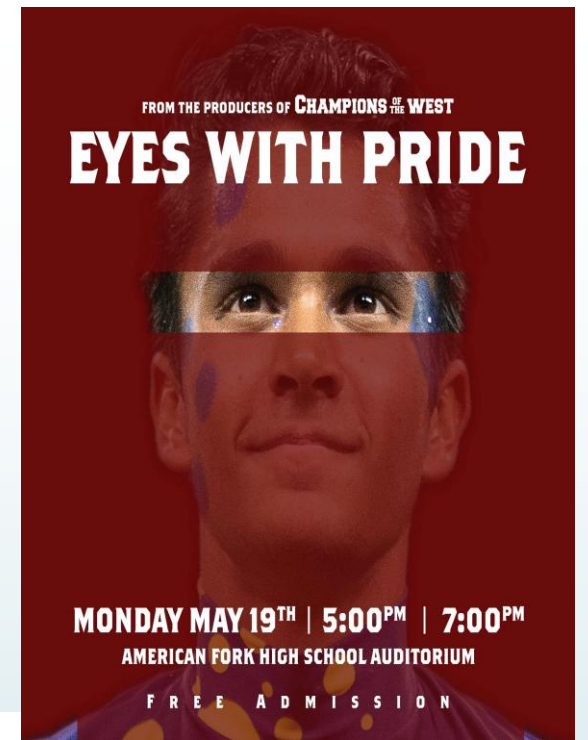
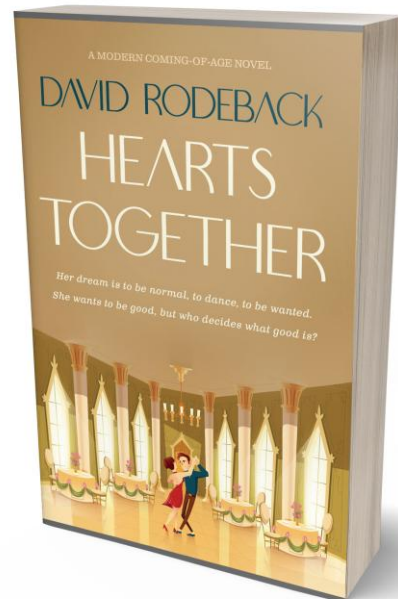
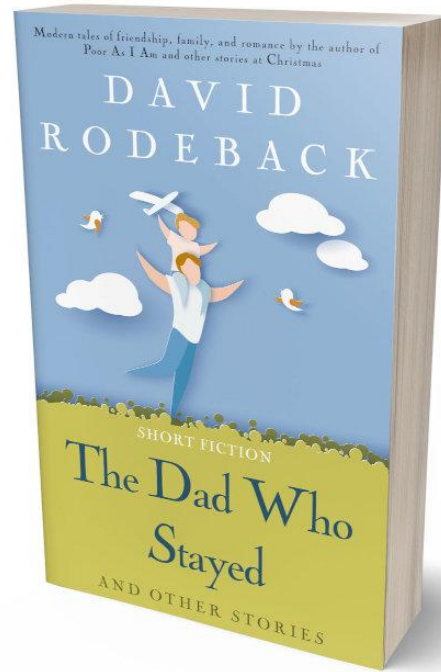
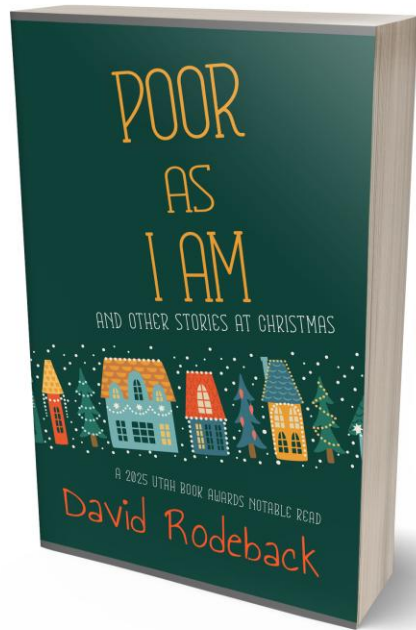
➤ American Fork, West Valley City

➤ Writing, Russian language, Russian literature

➤ Contemporary realistic fiction, short and long

➤ A book-length biographical essay

➤ 2025 LUW Writer of the Year



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OPINION

OPINION: This writer and that marching band



Published 2 months ago on June 23, 2025
By AF Citizen



OPINION

COLUMN: "The Lusty Month of May"



Published 3 months ago on May 19, 2025
By AF Citizen

OPINION

OPINION: Poke the algorithms in the eye: Read books in 2025

Published 7 months ago on January 12, 2025



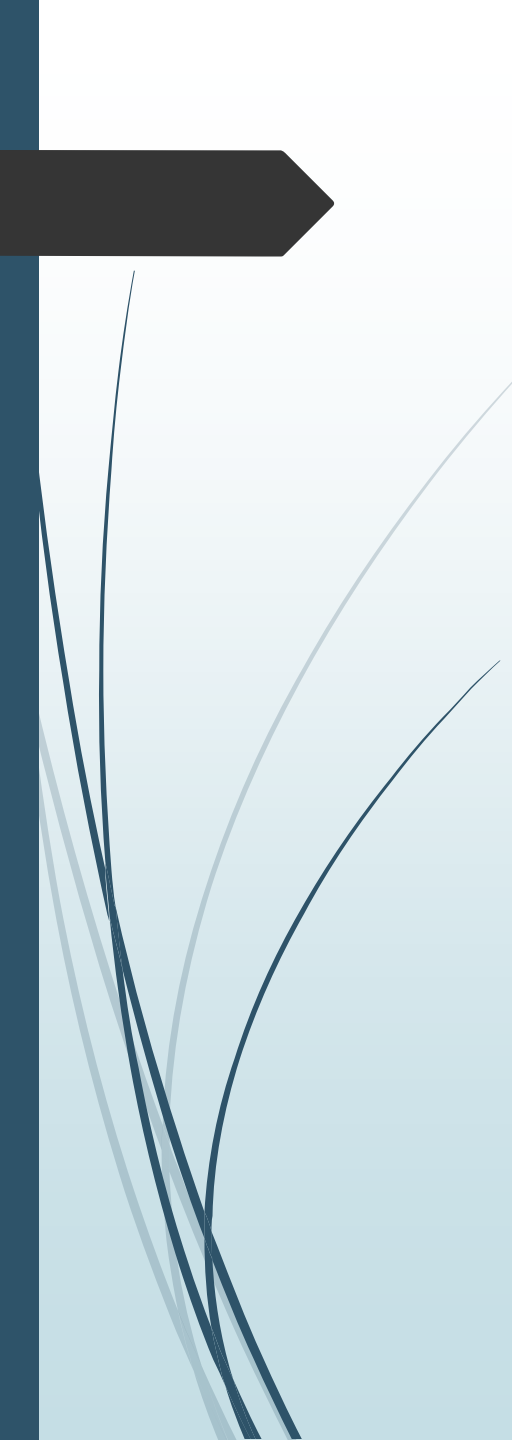
“

Blessed are they who see
beautiful things in humble places
where other people see nothing.

”

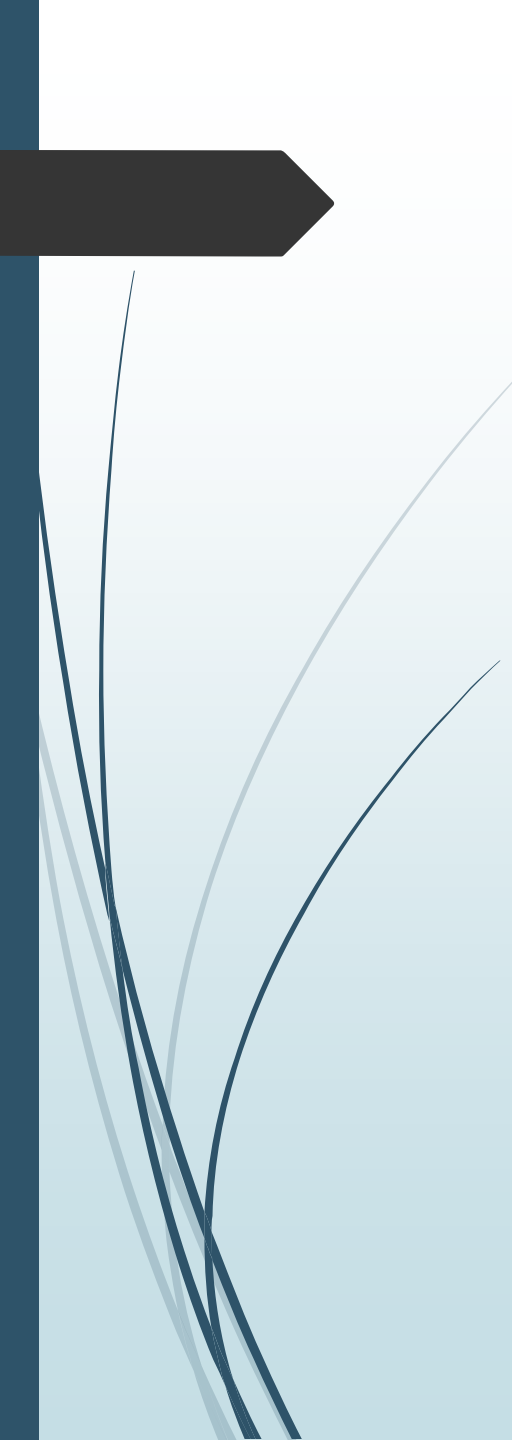
— *Camille Pissarro*





The map

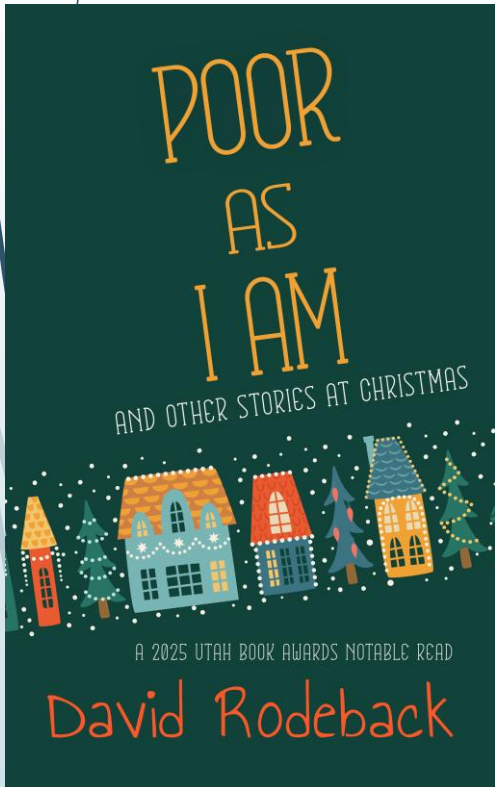
- Introduction
- Author, story, etc.
- Characters
- World-building
- Examples
- Challenges that arise
- Something's missing
- Personal: why I write faith in my fiction



More bio: why me?

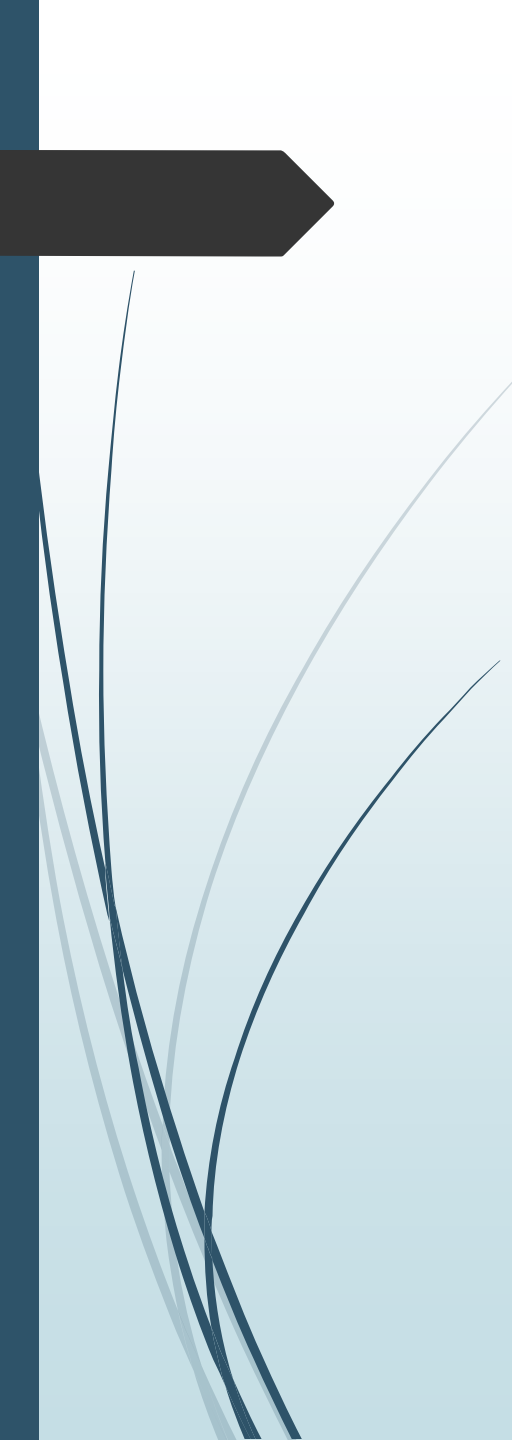
- Have taught and written about religion and scripture in academic and church settings.
- Published and presented academic papers on faith and religion in literature.
- Personal or academic acquaintance with Judaism, Islam, (mostly Russian) Orthodoxy, Catholicism, various Protestant denominations, atheism, and their adherents
- Have read the Koran and the Bhagavad Gita.
- Served as an LDS bishop in New York and Utah
- I've been studying how others portray faith in fiction for years ...
- ... And much of my fiction somehow involves faith ...

Example: four words



In “Orange Juice” (a short story)

I’d told [Mom] a hundred times, and it was true: I was happy. I enjoyed my job, and I had job security, even if I didn’t have a clear, upward career path. I went to plays and concerts, not always alone. I walked in the park and by the creek that burbled and sparkled through my little neighborhood. I volunteered at church. I sat in my favorite chair for entire evenings, reading books I loved. There hadn’t been time or energy for any of that, when I worked 16-hour days in a cube.



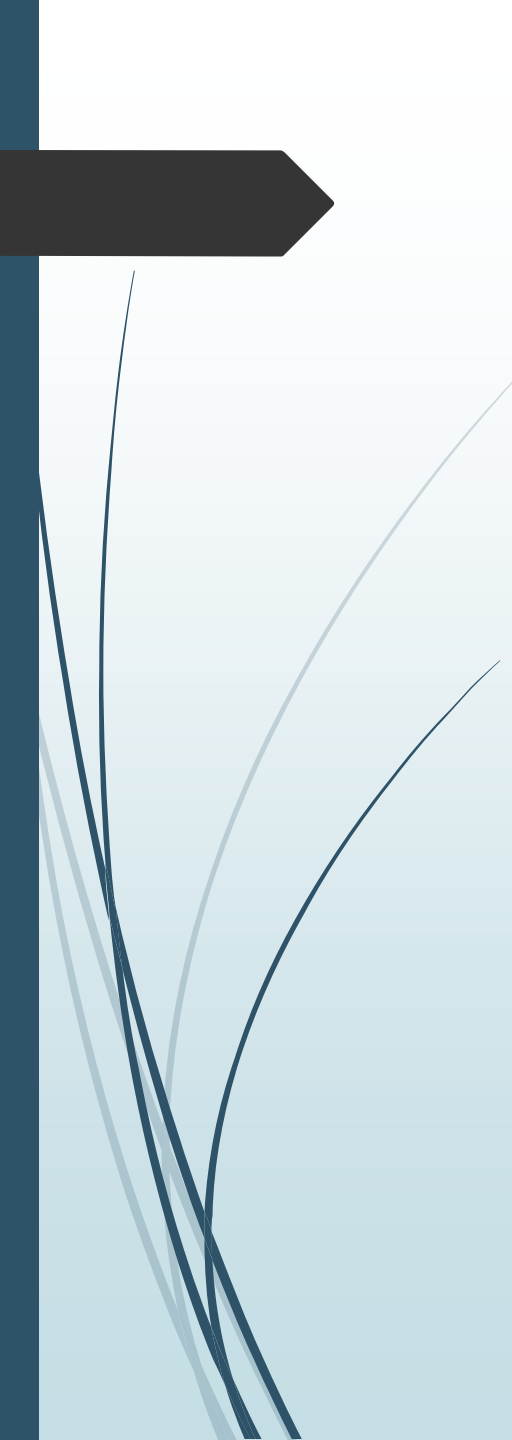
Examples: major theme

- *Hearts Together* (novel)

Two LDS teens struggle to find their places at church and at school. They believe and want to be good, but they encounter conflicting ideas of what good is. So who decides what good is? How do we treat each other when we disagree? And which of the many things they hear at church does God actually expect them to obey?

- “Abolishing Christmas” (short story)

A Baptist, a Catholic, an atheist, a Muslim, a Jew, and two Latter-day Saints comprise the city council of a fictional city in Utah County when a religiously-charged issue arises. The Jewish MC navigates that and considers his personal faith.



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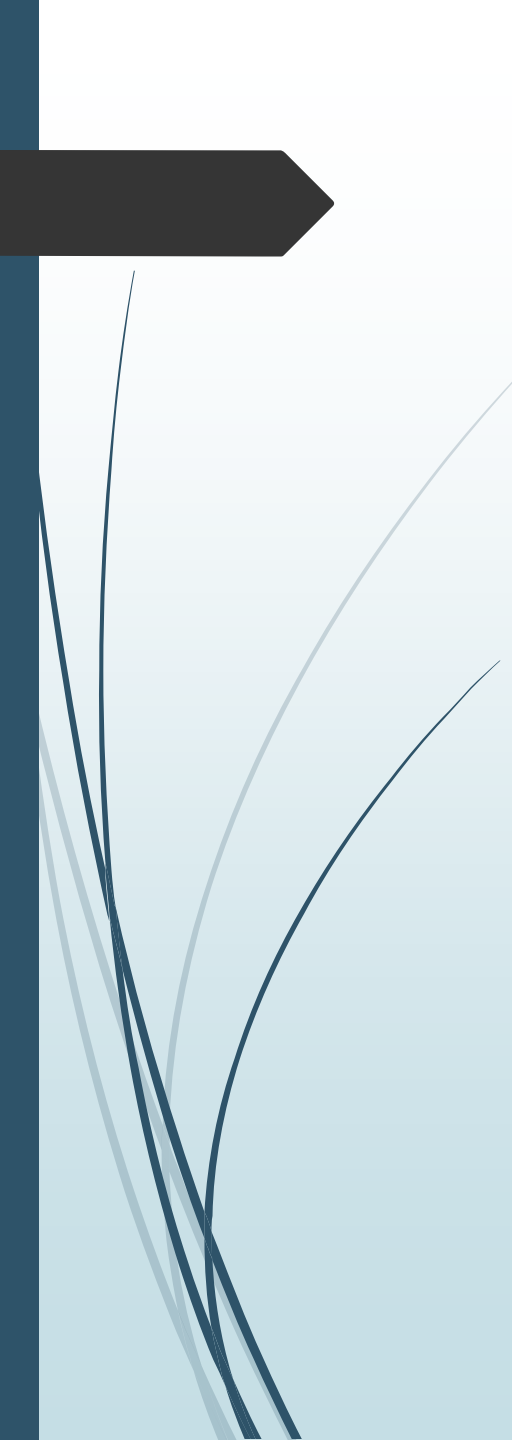
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Maybe . . .

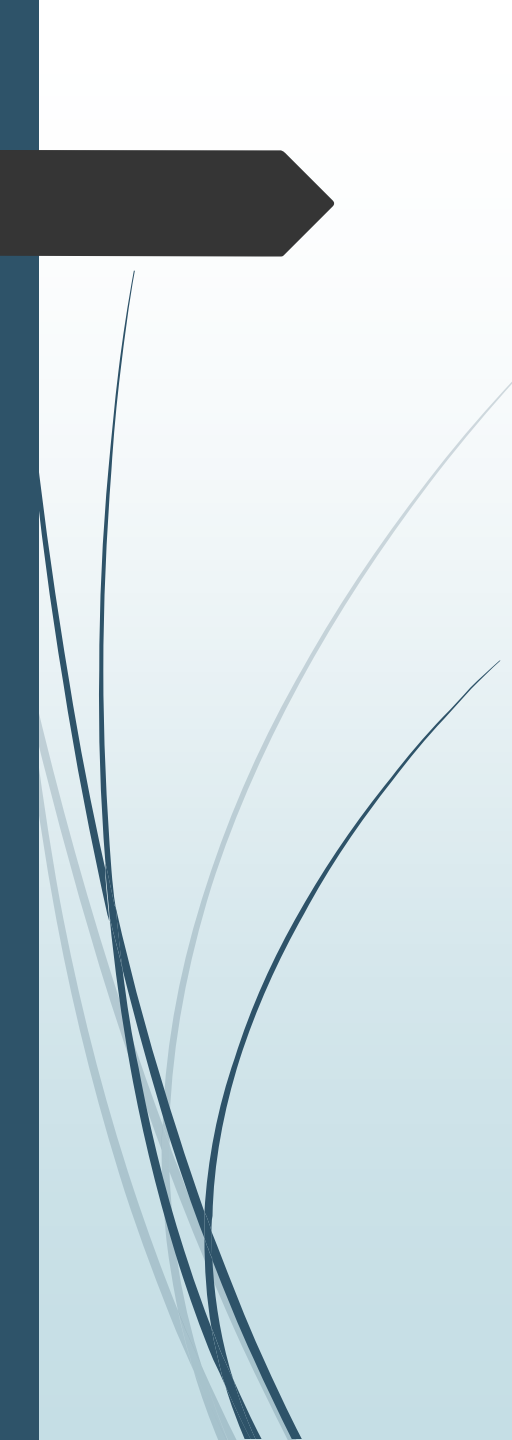
Writing Faith in Fiction with
Depth and Respect **and**
Confidence



Faith: a broad net

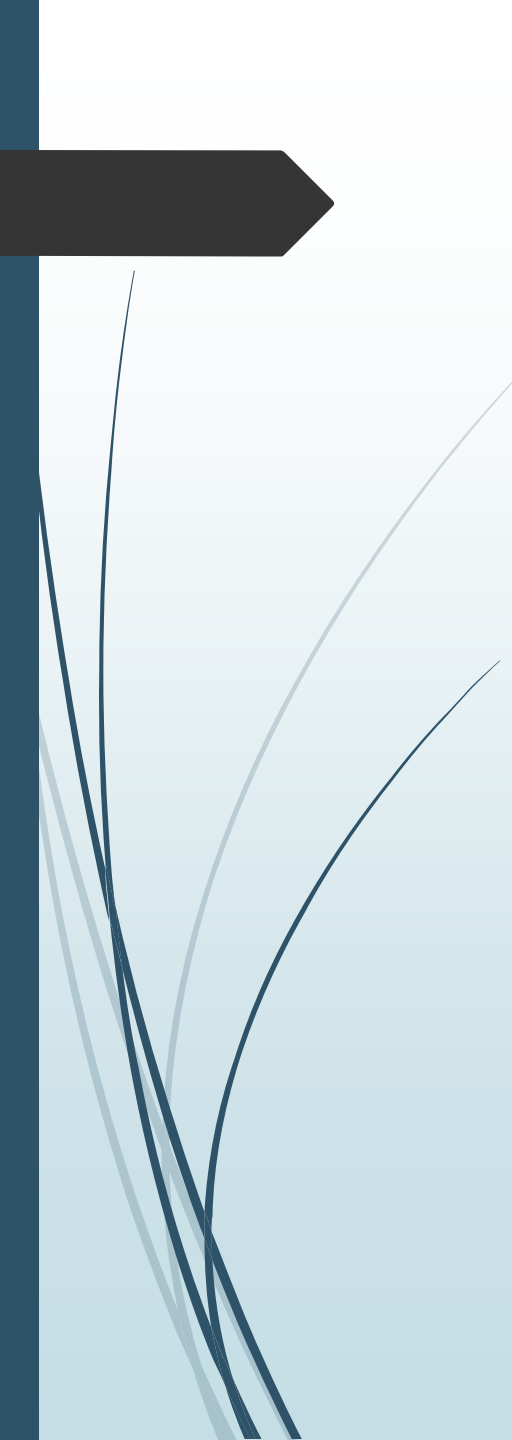
- Religious culture/society
- Church rites, history, and official doctrine
- What people actually believe
- **Ordinary daily life of believers**
- **How individual believers feel, believe, think, speak, and act under pressure**
- **How believers evaluate their own present and past thoughts, words, actions, and identity.**

Note: Secular ideologies too.



Respect

- For faith itself
- For particular faiths (real and fictional) and their believers
- For characters' belief, unbelief, and mixes of both
- For readers and their belief, unbelief—and intelligence



Depth

- Beyond stereotypes and superficial explanations of faith or of a character's relationship to faith
- Not everyone of a particular faith is, believes, thinks, or behaves alike.
- Not just what characters believe, should believe, or think they should believe, but also how that informs and affects what they do, say, think, and feel.
- Gospel According to David: Write about more than just people finding their ways into and out of faith; also people whose faith (or unbelief) is more constant.

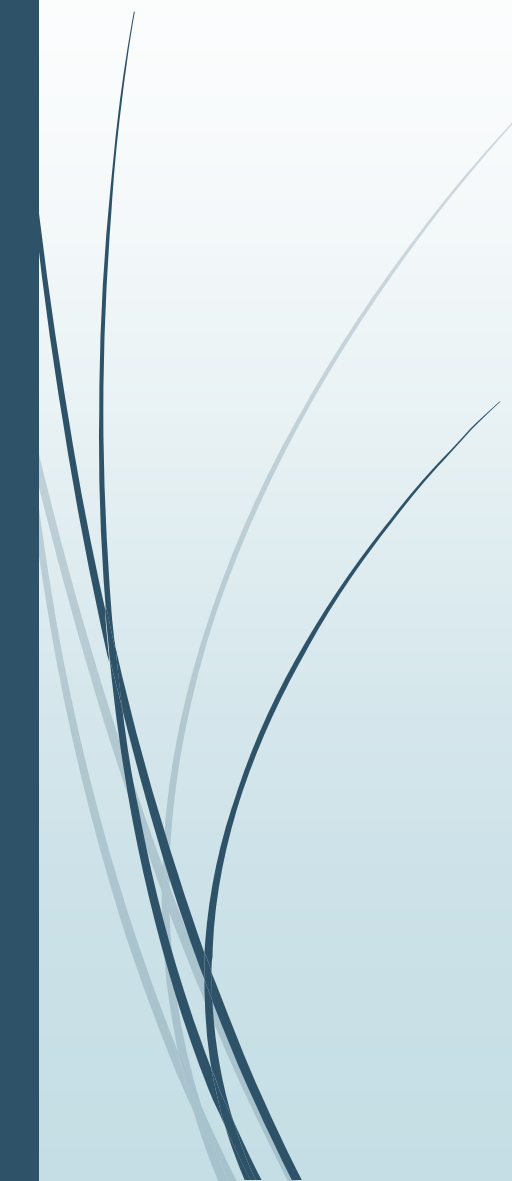


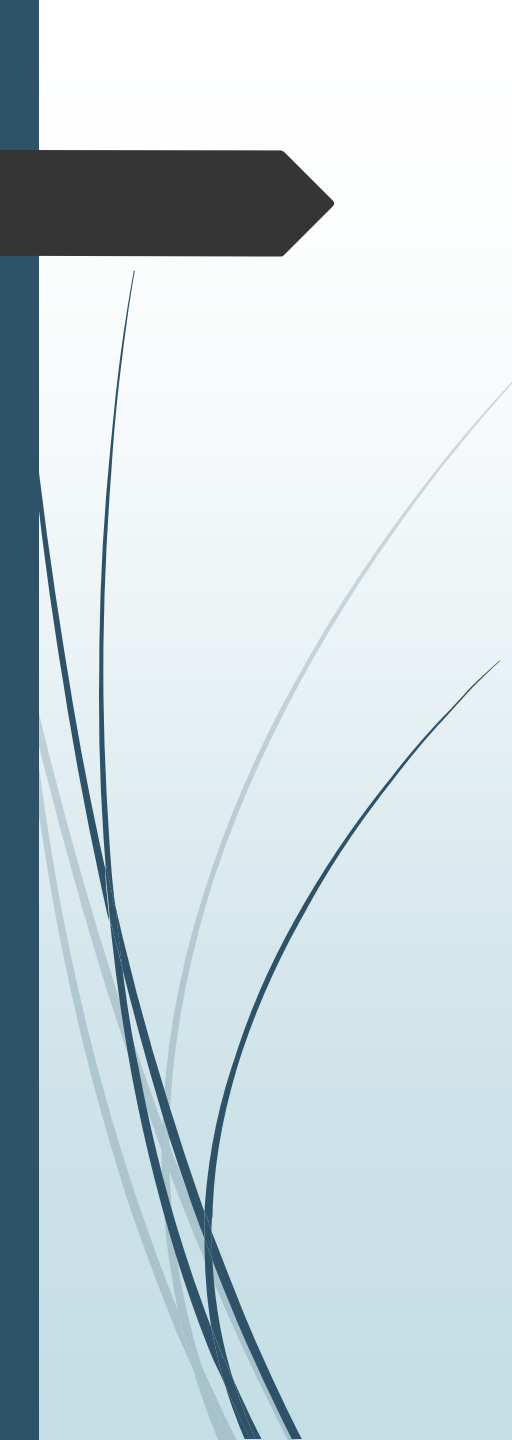
More dimensions

Instinctive is fine; intentional is better.



Big and small roles for faith

- Scenery (figurative or literal)
 - Local or historical flavor
 - A minor attribute of a character
 - Important to plot and character arcs
 - Major or secondary theme
 - (other)
- 

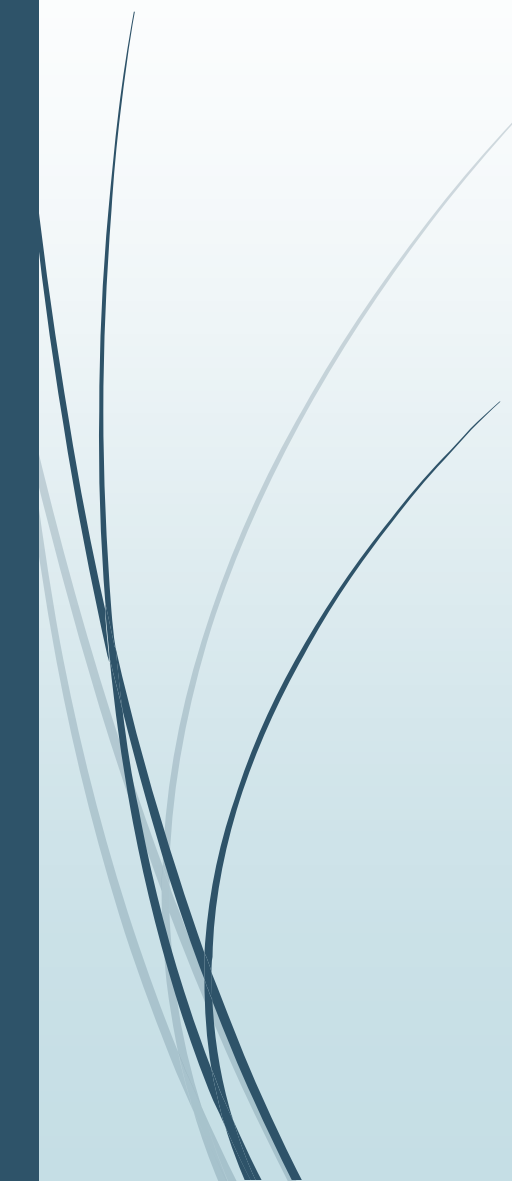


Conflict

- Conflict between faiths, or between believers and unbelievers (lots of different kinds and levels of conflict)
- Conflict within a faith.
- Conflict inside individual minds and hearts
 - Dmitri Karamazov: “God and the devil are fighting there, and the battlefield is the heart of man.”
 - Struggling with what to believe, whether to believe at all, how to make sense of the world and themselves
 - Struggling with the meanings and (perhaps conflicting) implications of what they believe.
 - Firm in some beliefs, shaky in others: “Lord, I believe. Help thou mine unbelief.” (Mark 9:24)
 - Struggling between good choices, or bad choices, or good and bad choices.

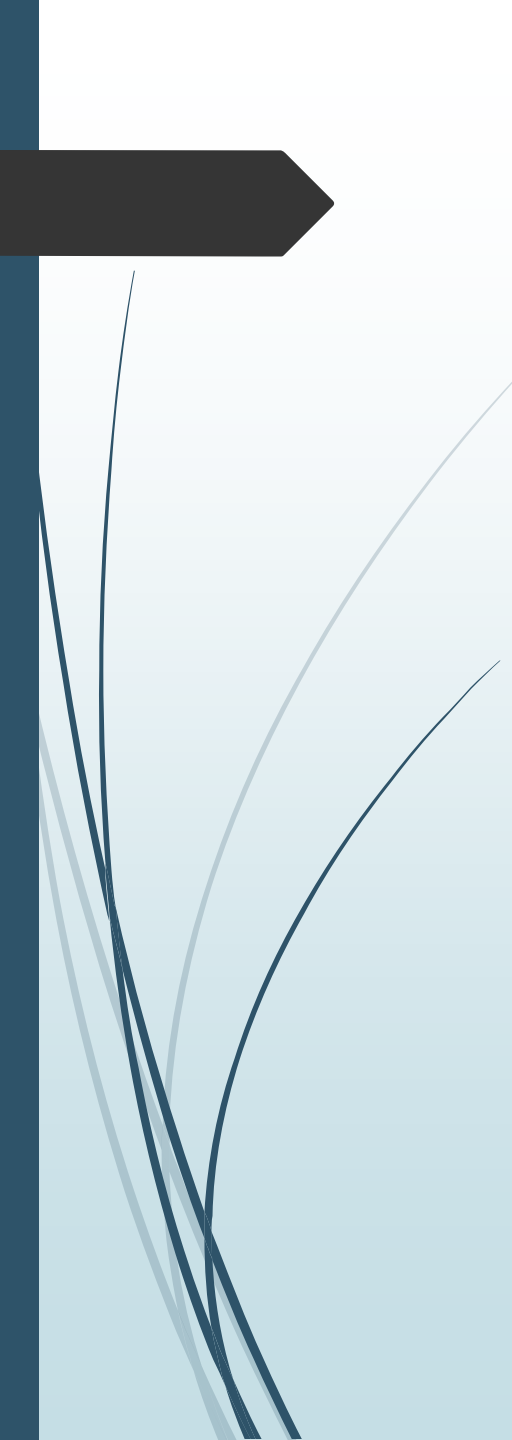


Stakes

- Self-image
 - Social acceptance
 - Marriage
 - Political or professional success
 - Peace (or victory in war)
 - The soul's salvation
- 



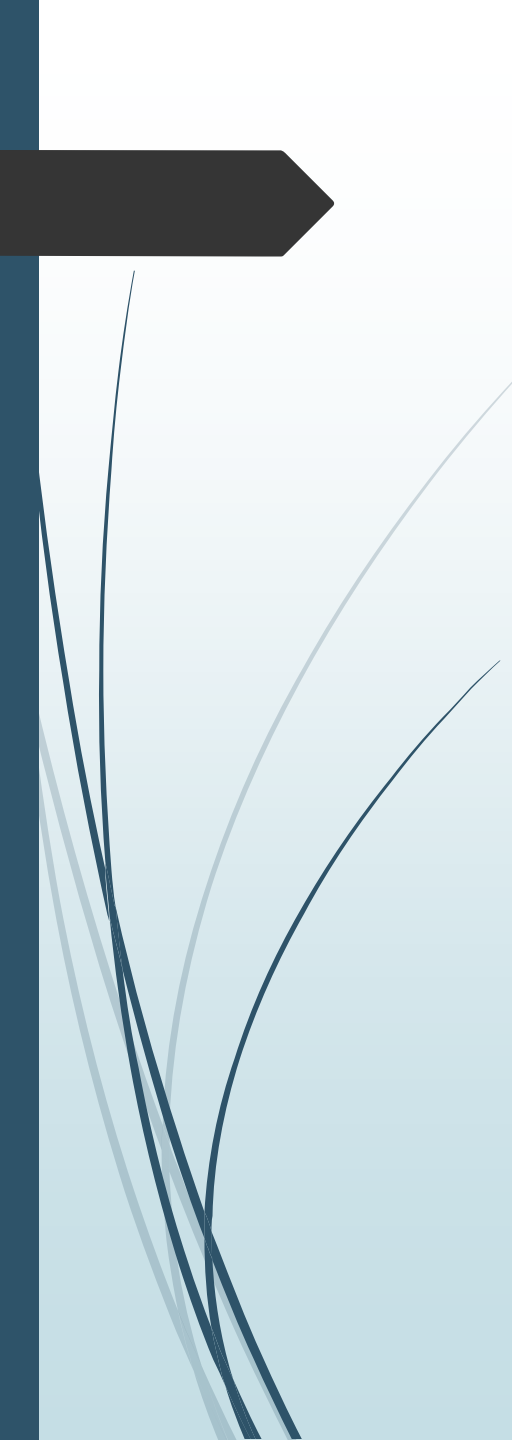
How to . . . (author)



Author's (and narrator's) viewpoint

Be conscious of your viewpoint; it will help.

- Outside a faith (or any faith), looking in.
- Inside a faith (looking around, perhaps looking out).
- Believer, skeptic, opponent/enemy (of all faith or a particular faith)
- The author should never wear rose-colored glasses.
- Whether or not the faith in your story makes sense to you, how does it make sense to your characters? How does it make sense to your readers?



What reader experience do you intend?

- Entertainment/just telling a story (about something else)
- Simply portraying faith
- Normalizing a life of faith
- Move reader to reflect more deeply.
- Trying to destroy faith
- Trying to build faith
- Dostoevsky's high-stakes gamble: guide the reader into and out of a crisis of faith, to a greater, stronger, truer faith.
 - Epigraph: "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit." (John 12:24)

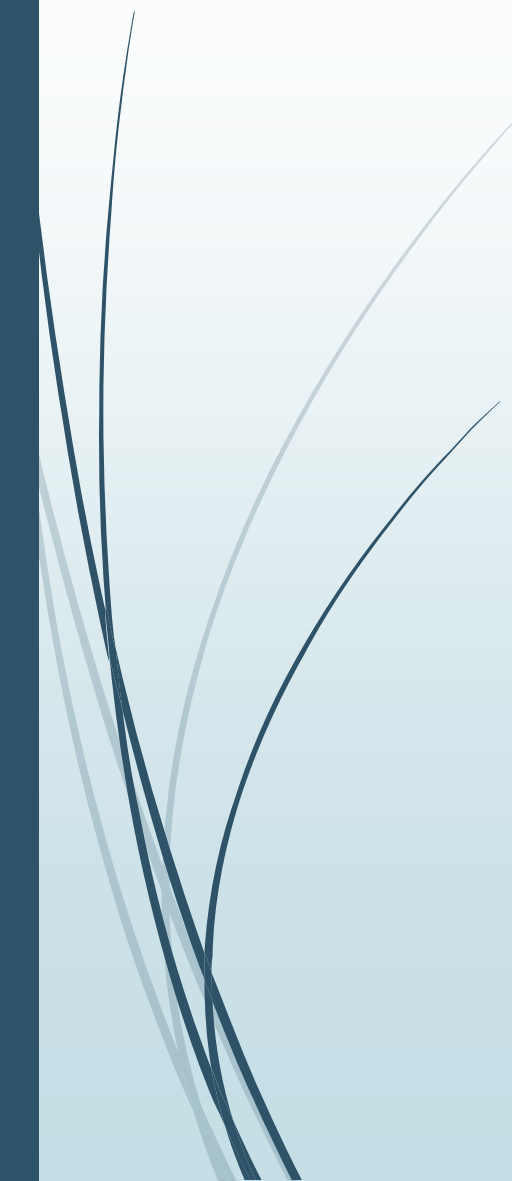


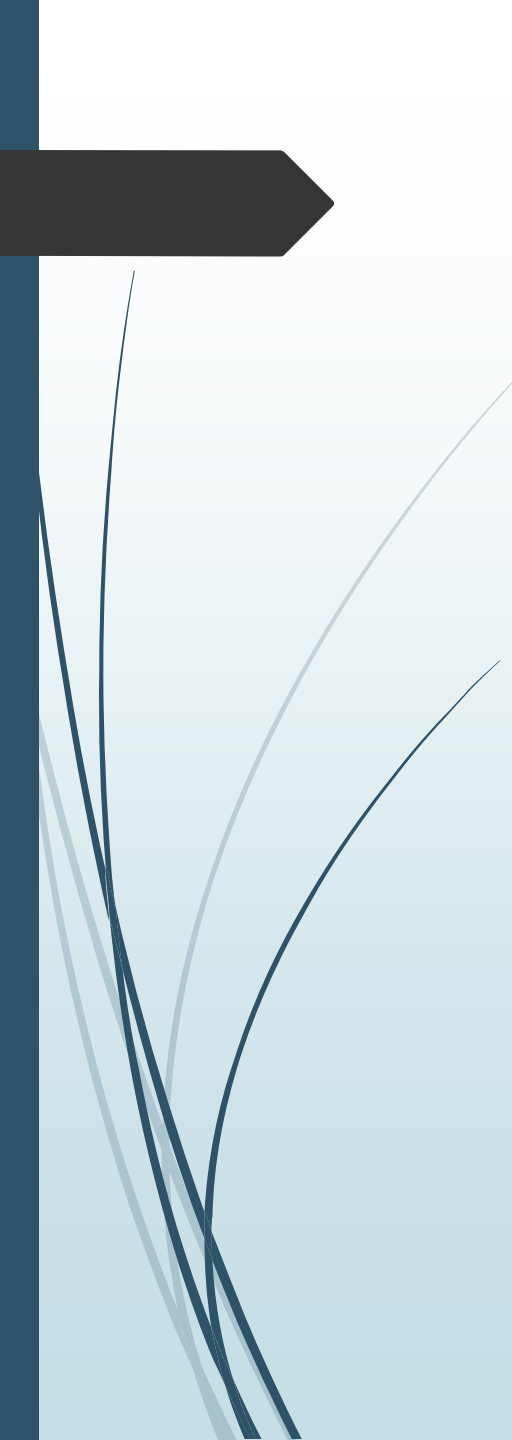
The story should be about more than faith

- ... So it doesn't feel like a parable or a Sunday school lesson.
- ... So it's accessible to readers outside the author's or characters' faith, or with different views of that faith.
- ... Because breadth can give depth. Lorraine Murphy:
“If a story encourages us to pay careful, respectful attention to the world around us, that's going to tend to cultivate a sense of reverence.”



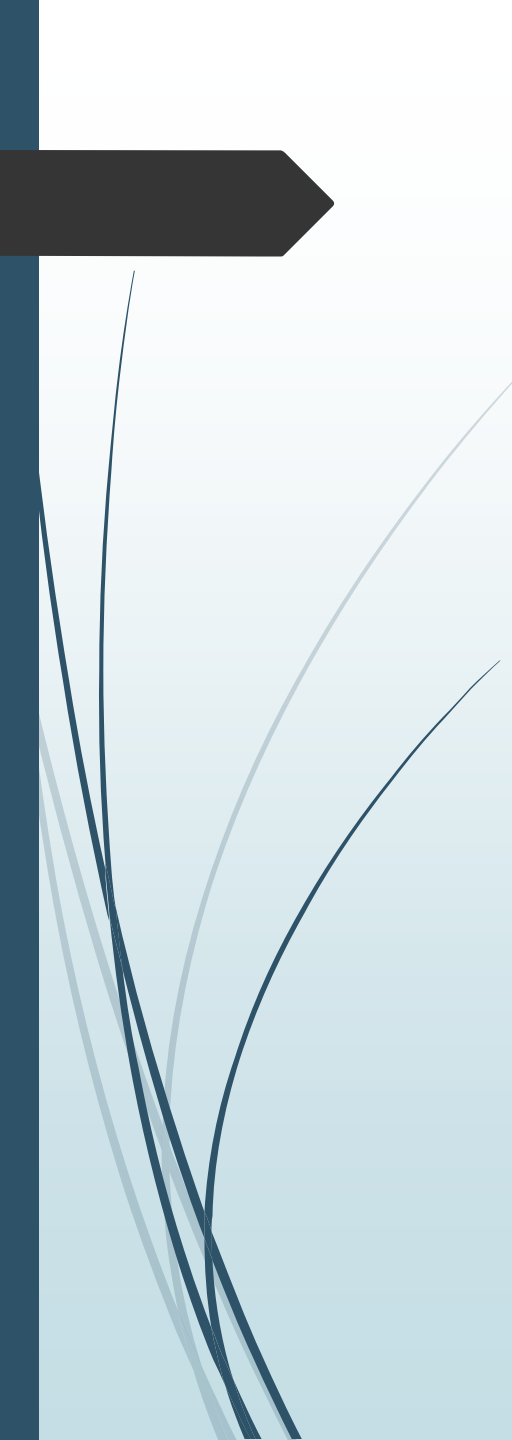
Write with

- humility
 - a sense that there is something greater than ourselves
 - a sense that the hero/heroine is not the biggest or most important thing in the story.
- 



Light, darkness, honesty

- In fiction, light only works if there is enough darkness. Darkness only works if there is at least a flicker of light. Be sure to have enough of both.
 - In comedy, often more light than darkness
 - In tragedy, more darkness than light
- Not saying your agenda should be neutral. Mine isn't. But the "right" voice can't be the only major voice.
- Neither light nor darkness should ever win a total victory among humans* (probably).
- Even if your ultimate objective is light, one of the things you must be honest about is darkness (and vice versa).



Light, darkness, honesty (cont.)

Lorraine Murphy:

“Sin is real, death is real, we hurt one another, we hurt the creation . . .

Any story that tries to say, if we know God everything is great is not paying respectful attention to reality. There has to be a kind of honesty about the difficulties we face within ourselves and around us.”

“There is also light, something in the human spirit or the resilience of creation, something in the mystery of our place in this world that can be affirmed and even celebrated. The beautiful thing is that [the reader] can trust that kind of hopeful insight when it comes **against the backdrop of a willingness to be honest and truthful about all that is discouraging, all that isn't hopeful.**”

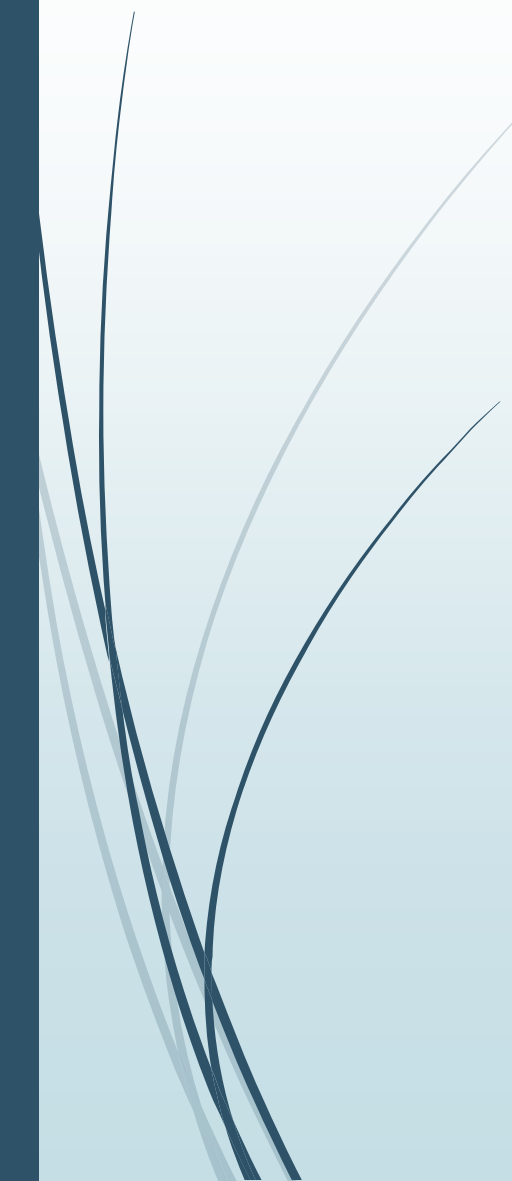


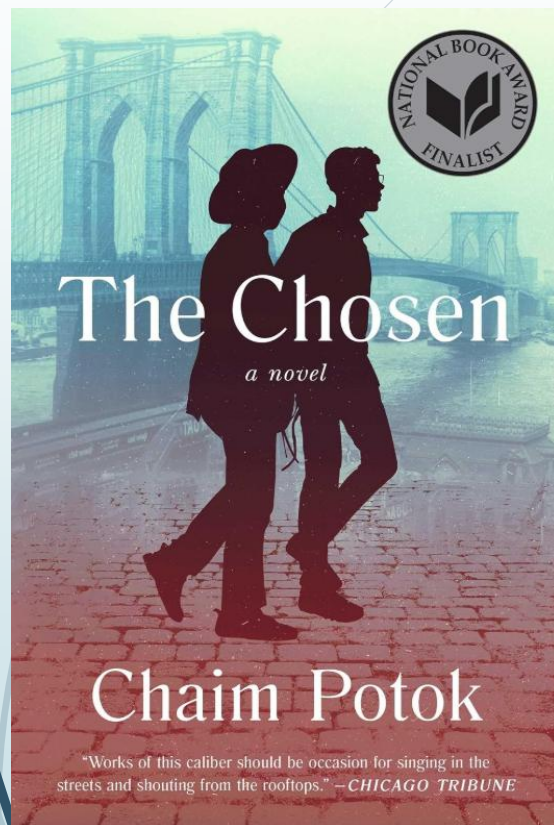
Maybe . . .

Writing Faith in Fiction with
Depth and Respect **and**
Confidence and Honesty



Authentic detail

- Don't be generic.
 - A Catholic memoir
 - A short story
 - Trust the reader.
- 

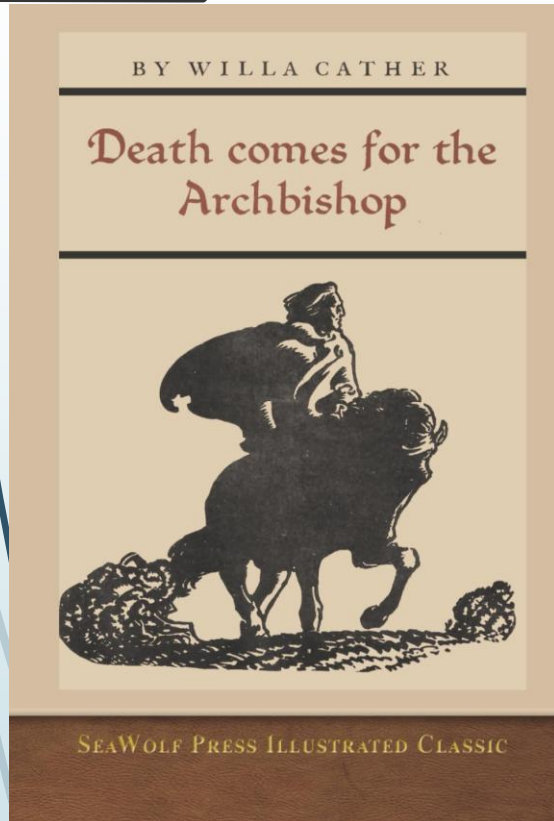


FOR THE FIRST FIFTEEN YEARS of our lives, Danny and I lived within five blocks of each other and neither of us knew of the other's existence.

Danny's block was heavily populated by the followers of his father, Russian Hasidic Jews in somber garb, whose habits and frames of reference were born on the soil of the land they had abandoned. They drank tea from samovars, sipping it slowly through cubes of sugar held between their teeth; they ate the foods of their homeland, talked loudly, occasionally in Russian, most often in a Russian Yiddish, and were fierce in their loyalty to Danny's father.

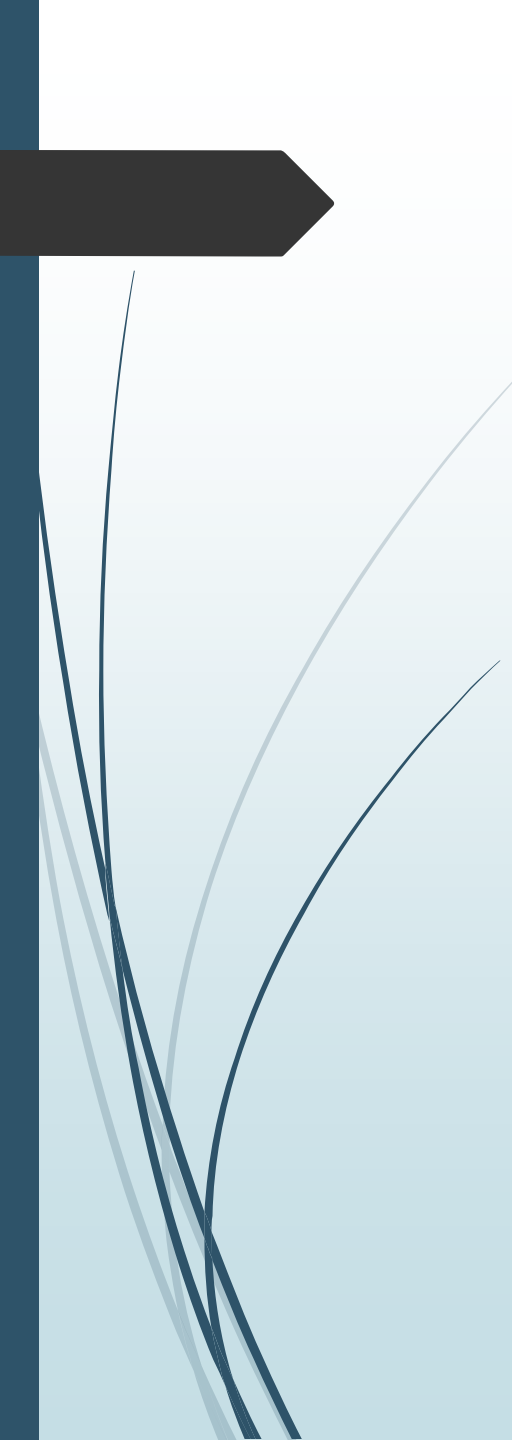
A block away lived another Hasidic sect, Jews from southern Poland, who walked the Brooklyn streets like specters, with their black hats, long black coats, black beards, and earlocks. These Jews had their own rabbi, their own dynastic ruler, who could trace his family's position of rabbinic leadership back to the time of the Ba'al Shem Tov, the eighteenth-century founder of Hasidism, whom they all regarded as a God-invested personality.

About three or four such Hasidic sects populated the area in which Danny and I grew up, each with its own rabbi, its own little synagogue, its own customs, its own fierce loyalties. On a Shabbat or festival morning, the members of each sect could be seen walking to their respective synagogues, dressed in their particular garb, eager to pray with their particular rabbi and forget the tumult of the week and the hungry grabbing for money which they needed to feed their large families during the seemingly endless Depression.



One summer evening in the year 1848, three Cardinals and a missionary Bishop from America were dining together in the gardens of a villa in the Sabine hills, overlooking Rome. . . .

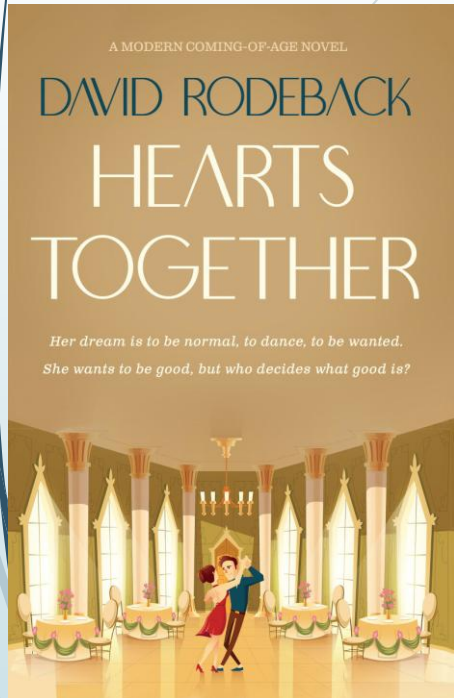
. . . The sun was still good for an hour of supreme splendour, and across the shining folds of country the low profile of the city barely fretted the skyline—indistinct except for the dome of St. Peter's.



Authentic detail

- You can help the outside reader a little.
- Sprinkle (not dump) explanations as needed.
- My Irish Catholic alpha reader

Don't blur the details

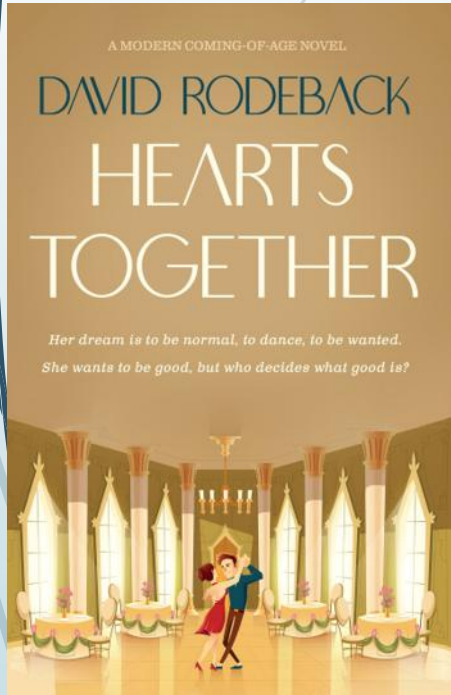


My phone vibrated. I checked the caller ID and sat up.
“Excuse me. I should get this.”

My caller was Bishop Savage. He'd been the leader of our congregation—ward—for years. He'd been a family friend even longer. I grinned mischievously at Troy. “This will be fun.” (From *Hearts Together*)

Don't blur the details (cont.)

[Much later]



I thought I was making small talk later on Skype, when I asked how his interview went, but his smile faded.

“Sucked. Made me angry.”

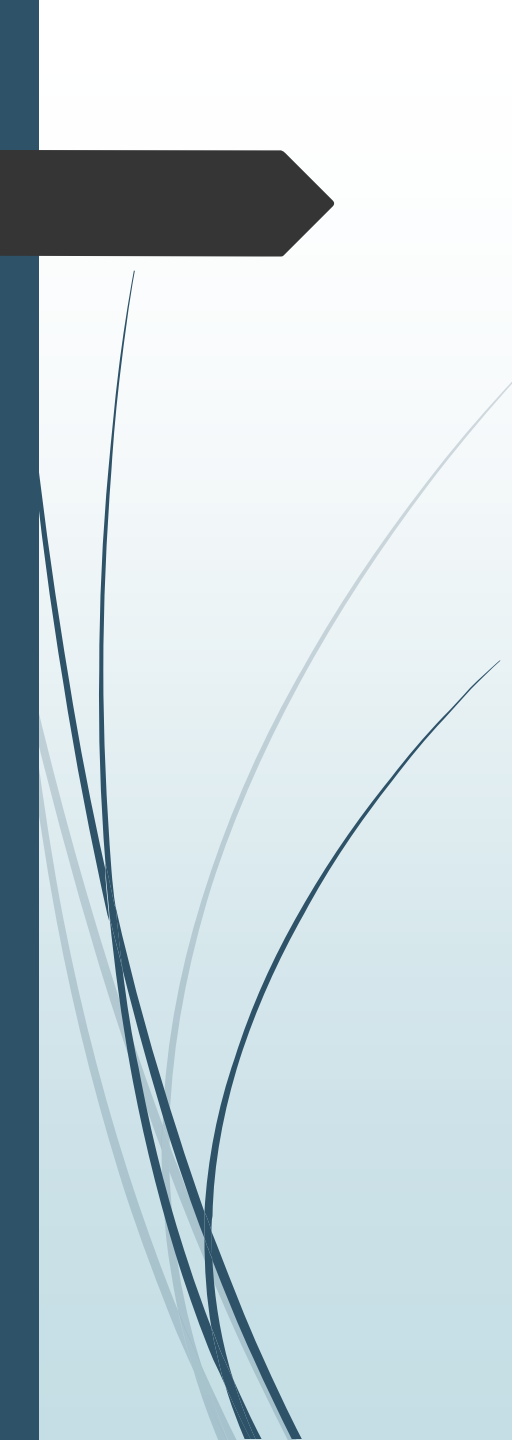
“Uh-oh. Something you can tell your girlfriend?”

“Tell you the whole thing. No secrets.”

I’d had similar interviews every six months since I turned twelve, with my bishop or one of his counselors—every bishop had two assistants called counselors—but every interview was different. Bishops were different too, and I already had my doubts about Troy’s.

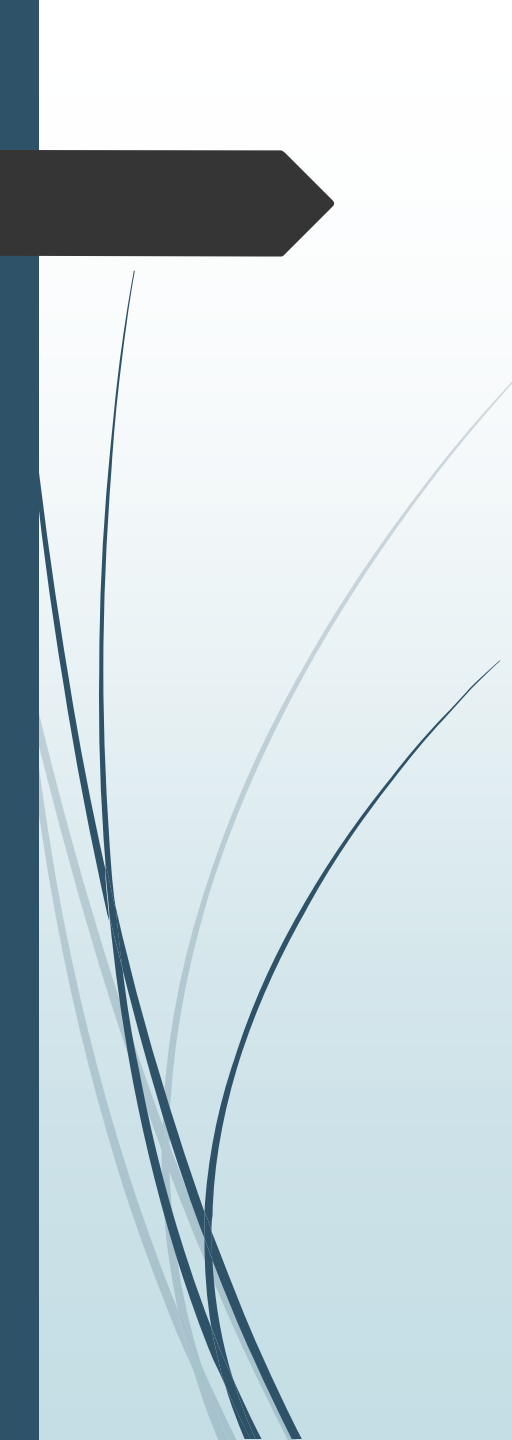


How to . . . (characters)



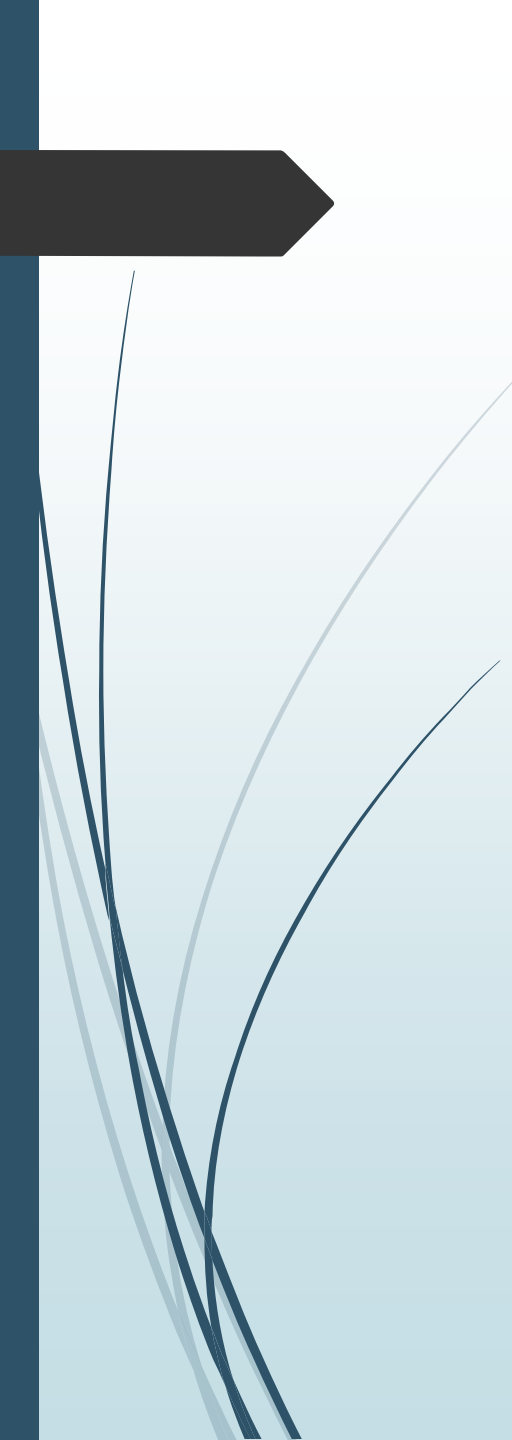
Three dimensions, please

- Believer, skeptic, opponent, enemy
- Degree of religious belief and commitment (these can vary)
- Attitude toward people of own and others' faiths
- Personal or family struggles and tensions involving faith
- Family tradition of faith: how powerful?
- How does faith affect a character's life? What is there about this character's faith that answers this character's needs and aspirations? (Or doesn't?)
- *Famous question: What would it take to get a good character to do that unthinkable bad thing, or vice versa?*



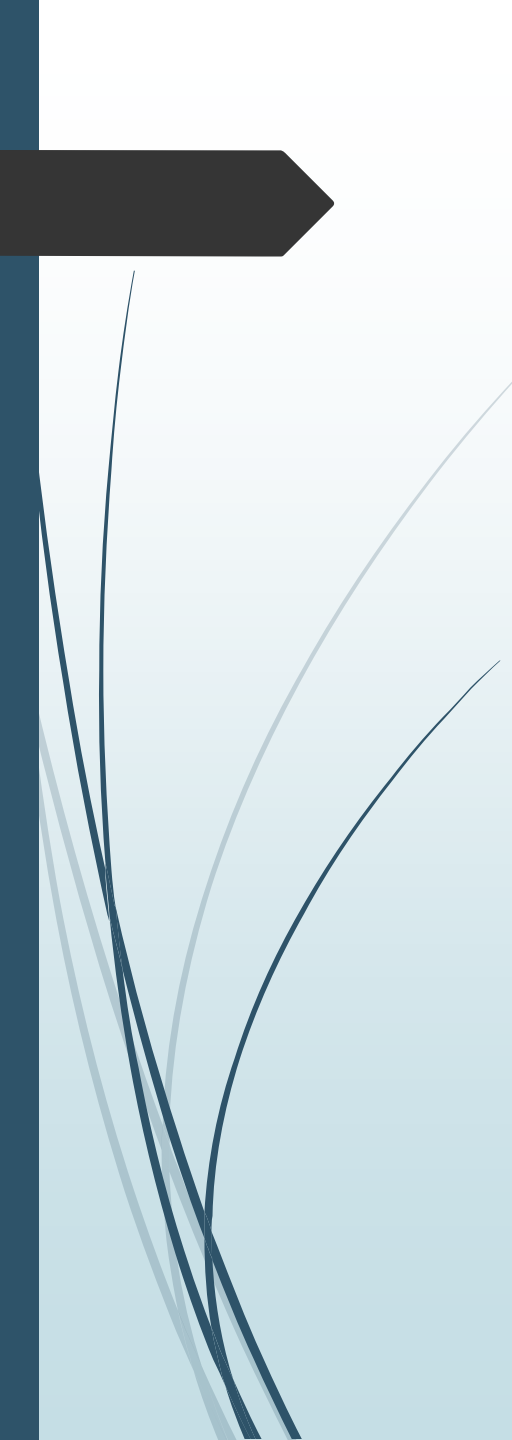
Shades of gray

- Don't go anywhere near perfectly good or perfectly evil (human) characters. Realistic nuance is no great threat to faith.
- Even characters hostile to faith need an explanation for their hostility.
 - Discovering it can be part of a plot or character arc.
 - Shouldn't always be their misunderstanding, sin, or character flaw.
- The "right" voice shouldn't always be right.
 - When it's right it shouldn't always be completely right.
 - It shouldn't be the only dominant voice in the story.
 - The "wrong" voice shouldn't always be completely wrong.
 - If we fail . . . socialist realism
- If a character wears rose-colored glasses with respect to faith, you need another character to be a foil.



I am more than my faith

- People are more than their views, more than their faith, more than their intolerance for faith or other faiths.
- Faith touches on a character's identity, moral sense, reasoning, behavior—but it's not the only thing that does so.
- We want the reader to sense not only that (good and bad) characters resemble us, but that we are part of a shared story.
 - What does the character care about?
 - Engaging voice
 - Strengths we can admire
 - Weaknesses we can relate to.
 - Character learns something during the story.



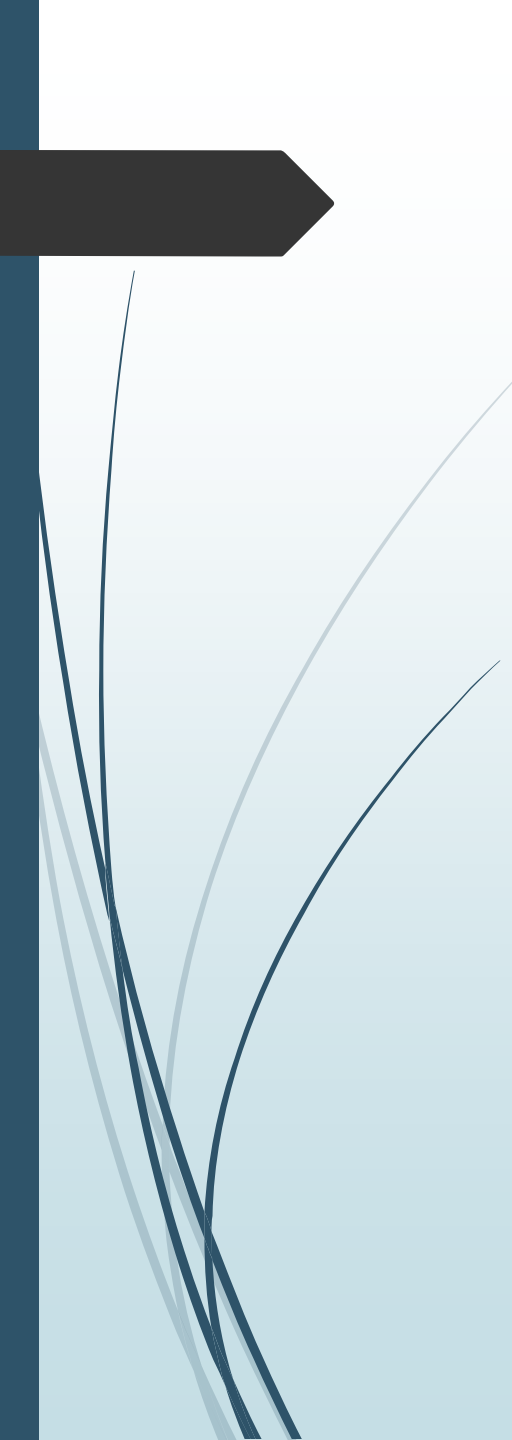
Excommunicate stereotypes

Stereotype:

Attend church services regularly, you are faithful and good, one of the believers. If you don't, you're not really a believer, and it's probably because you sin and enjoy it, and going to church would make you feel guilty.

Better:

Ask why might a faithful, righteous believer be chronically absent from services? Why might an unbeliever attend church *faithfully*? People wrestle with different things in different ways. Believers wander for a wide range of reasons and often struggle when they don't wander.



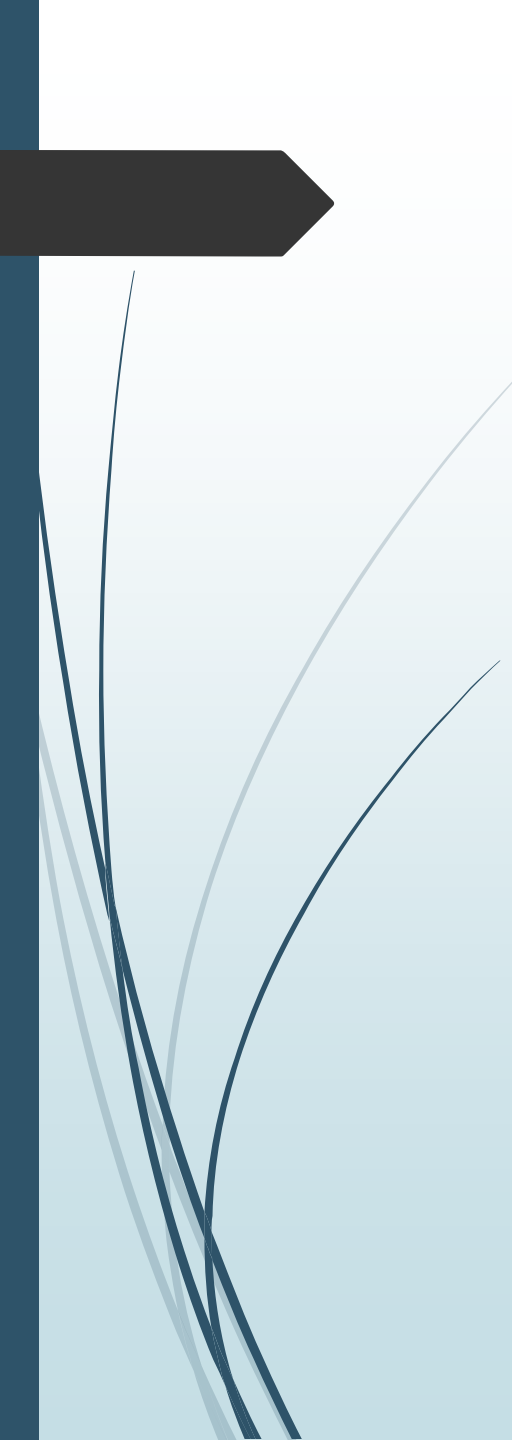
Excommunicate stereotypes

Stereotype:

People of faith are hypocrites. They're always judging others. They're only pretending because they want something from you.

Better:

How would you write a believable, imperfect religious character who isn't a judgmental hypocrite? (It's fine with me if you write a judgmental hypocrite too, as a foil.)

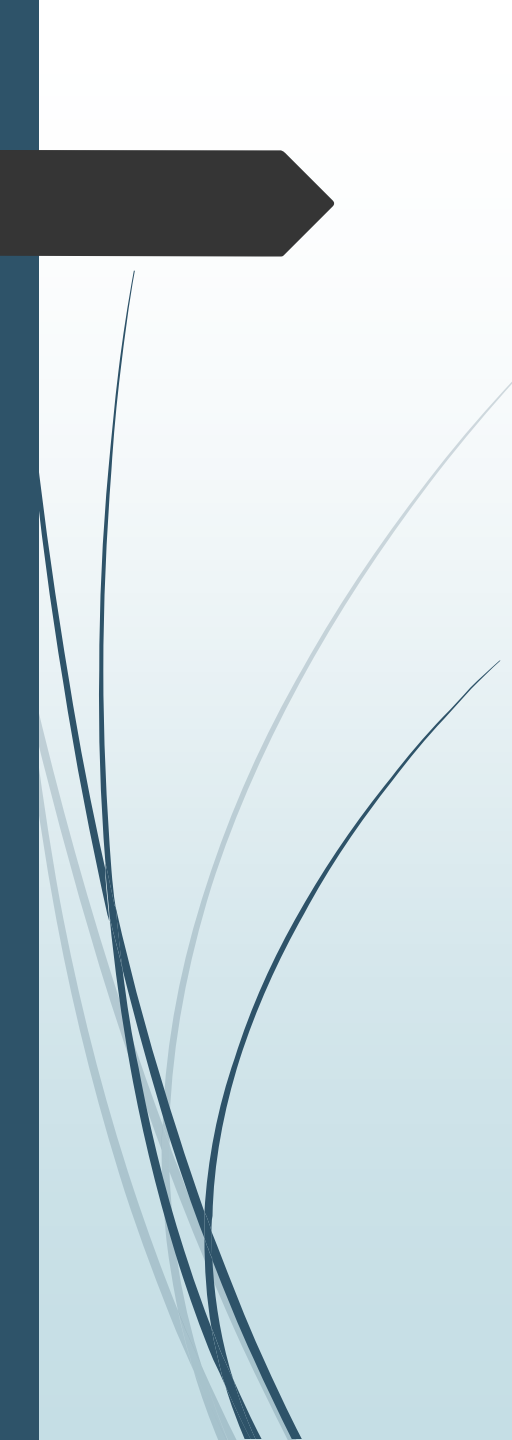


Complexity vs. stereotypes

Most actual people are more complex than stereotypes. Build your characters likewise.

Do people ever do things they know are wrong? Or do they only sin because they don't know better, or because they don't believe?

In real life, does the wife and mother who teaches Sunday school *faithfully* every week ever face and finally succumb to the temptation to leave her husband and family and run away with the church organist?



More stereotypes

Stereotype (see *Law and Order*):

God told me to kill that person or starve my child or let her die without medical care.

Less tiresome:

What if God tells a character to do good things? (See *Joan of Arcadia*.)



More stereotypes

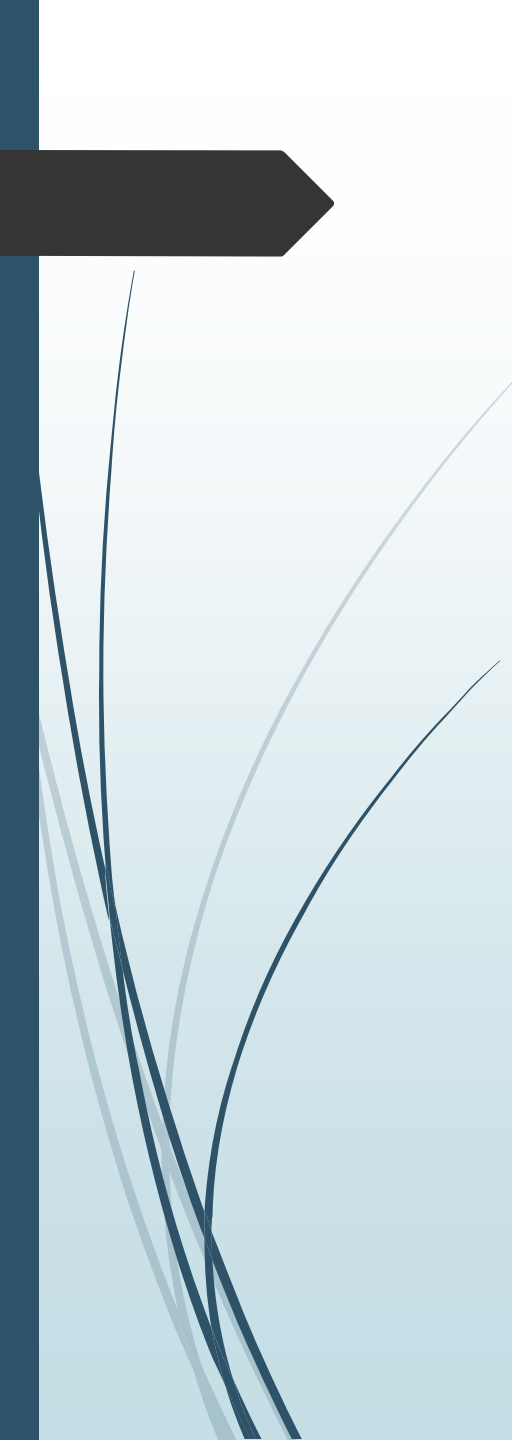
Stereotype:

Religious people are blindly obedient and refuse to think (or cannot think) for themselves.

Less tiresome:

Have a character who does think for herself but obeys anyway.

Have a character who is blindly obedient in some context other than faith.



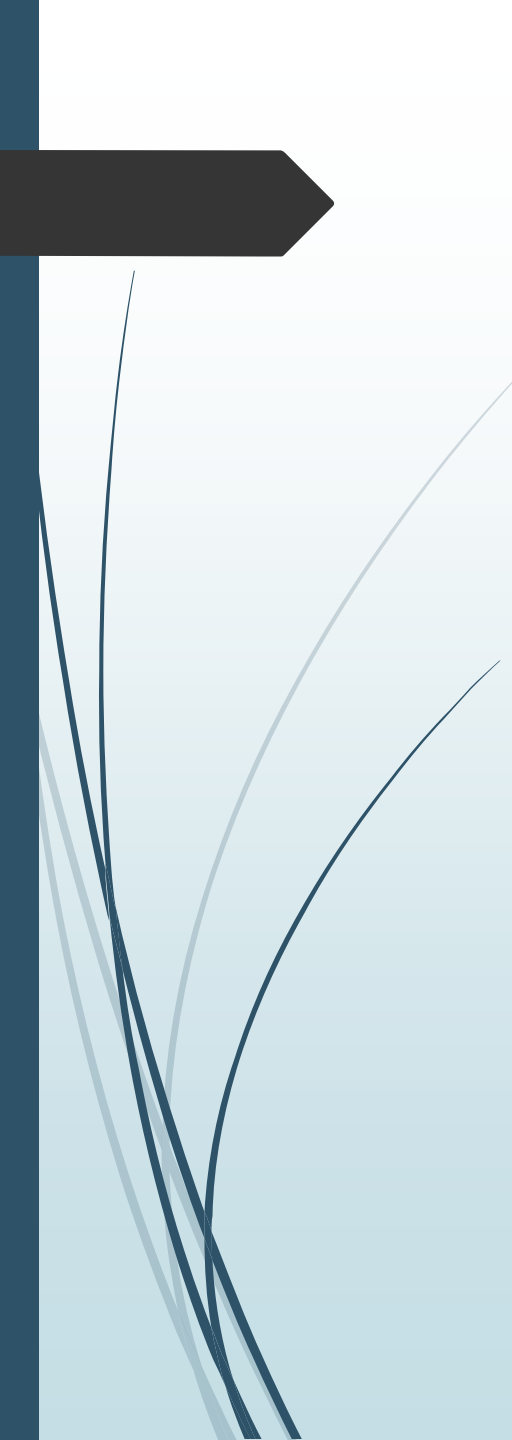
Ivan Karamazov

Ivan Karamazov argues (and perhaps he believes) that because there is no immortality of the soul and therefore no final judgment, everything is morally permitted on earth.

It follows that an atheist should be absolutely amoral, or in religious terms wicked, right?

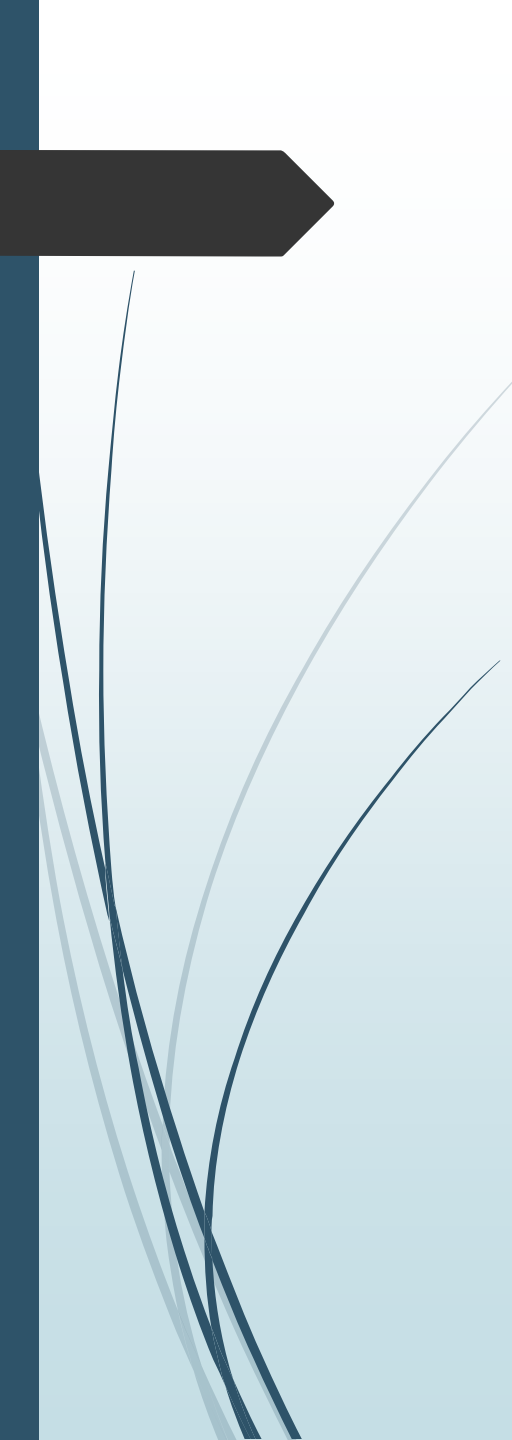
Ivan should be the prime suspect in his father's murder, right?

Oops, that's a stereotype. My real-life, atheist friends and acquaintances are quite moral. Your atheist characters don't have to be villains. (Nor do your religious characters.)



Characters conversing about religion

- Everything you know about characterization and dialogue is needed here.
- A neutral location can help. (Pivotal chapters in *The Brothers Karamazov* are a long conversation in a tavern.)
- They have to be three-dimensional characters having a realistic conversation. Don't make it a thinly veiled sermon or a religious info dump.



Avoid mouthpiece characters

Willa Cather:

- The moment a reader catches the author “talking through” a character to prove an intellectual point, the illusion of reality is shattered. (“Joseph and His Brothers”)
- An author who tries to use characters to fix society or lecture the reader is a “manufactured” entertainer, not a true artist. (“On the Art of Fiction”)

Flannery O’Connor:

- When a writer creates a character simply to be a mouthpiece for a political or theological position, you don’t get a real person. You get “an animated corpse.” The narrative feels fake, engineered. (“Nature and the Aim of Fiction”)

Exercise

Whichever side you're on (or lean toward), how would you write the opposite character? Make her compelling. Don't be sarcastic or dismissive. Avoid stereotypes.

An intelligent, educated woman who sincerely believes having a large family is morally wrong or selfish because:

The planet cannot sustain more population.

OR

They'll grow up in a terrible world.

OR

She's surrendering her own will to the patriarchy.

OR

Parents of large families can't give each child enough attention.

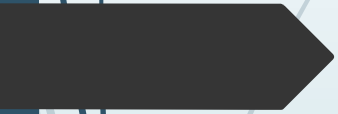
OR

Children will limit her freedom, her fun, her time with her spouse.

An intelligent, educated woman who sincerely believes each child is a blessing from God and will welcome as many children as God sends and be grateful for each one.

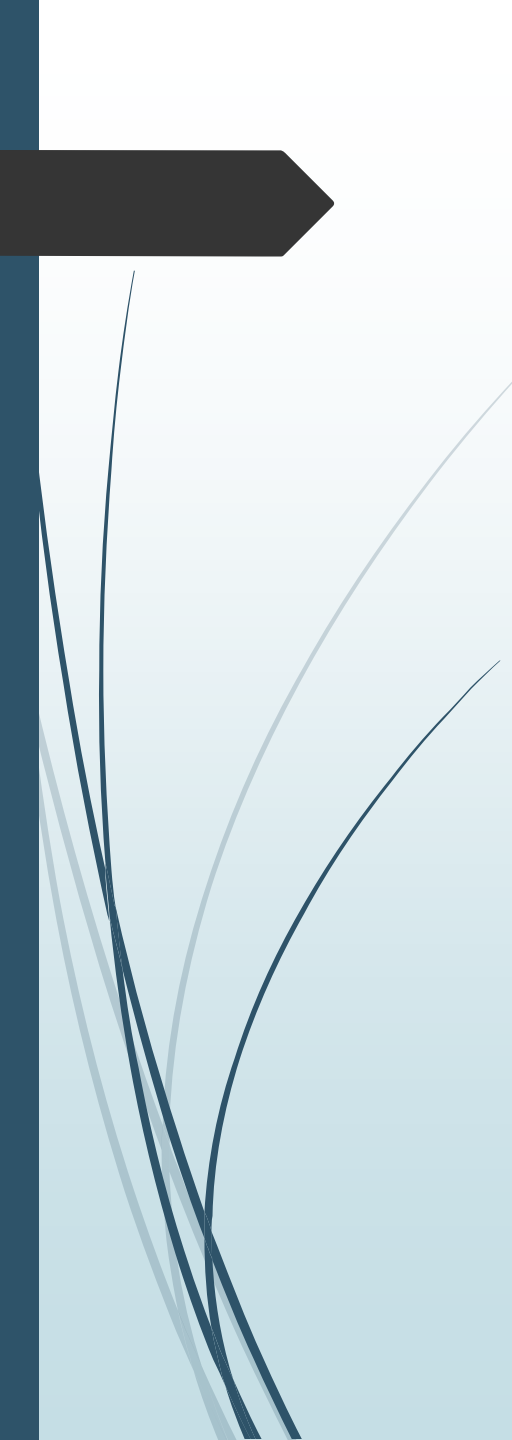
She thinks motherhood is one of the things for which God created her. If possible, she would rather be at home raising children than at work raising money. She's content to eat out a lot less often and go on fewer, shorter, less expensive vacations.

She expects it to be difficult, but God will provide.



Writing faith requires world-building

And, often enough, vice versa.



Why do we world-build?

Why do we need world-building in fantasy and science fiction?

What about other genres?

We world-build when writing faith for the same reasons.

- Our characters' world may be strange to some readers.
- We may want to defamiliarize the world for readers who share our faith, to help them see it differently—or just see it again.
- We may want to paint our world clearly and carefully.

In any case: The reader must see you trying to show the world as it is, trying to write truth. (Alison Randall)

Inventing a religion (for your book)



Eric Falden



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substack

The quickest acid test of whether or not a fantasy-world religion is realistic or just didactic set-dressing is whether or not it places constraints upon its supposed believers.

And I mean real constraints.

Not "women cover their lefts hands for Reasons," or "they have chapels that no one goes to."

More like: How do people spend their money? What marriages are licit and illicit (is concubinage okay? What about polygamy?))? What actions aside from worship are considered a must-do for a decent person and which ones are evil? How does belief restrict this person's actions and make their actions different from mere self-interest, or different from a non-believer? How does religion form people's conscience?

What are the constraints?

not all of these things would need to be *on-page*, in a given story, but a realistic-feeling religion will be one that is totalitizing for human life. Not necessarily *totalitarian*, but it will have some impact on all the major behaviors of human society.



Eric Falden

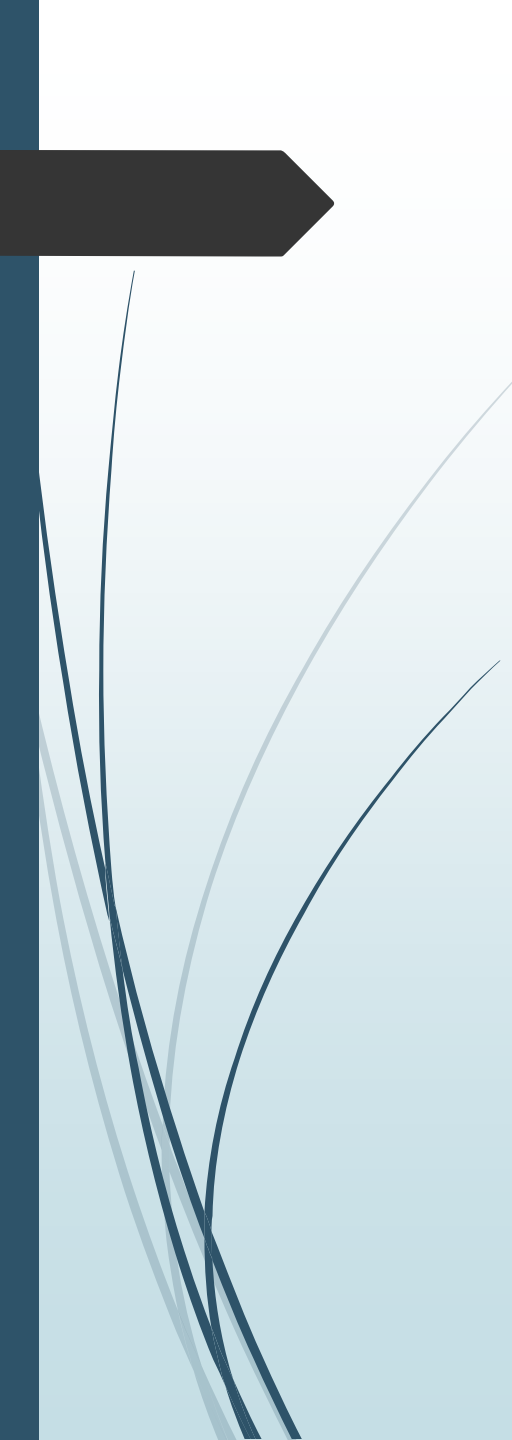


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Btw this "religion must be follow-able" worldbuilding rule does not exclude the possibility of

- hypocritical characters
- Internal religious tension
- Odd taboos, like covering women's left hands
- Religious zealotry
- Atheistic characters
- Social/cultural commentary about religion



In the world you're building . . .

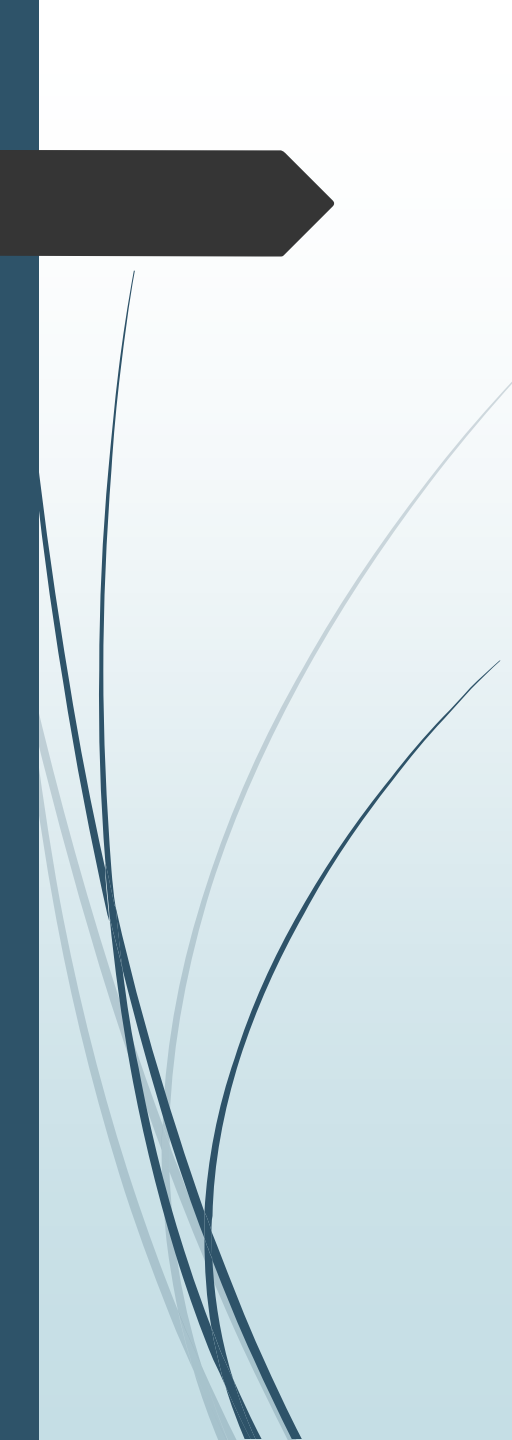
- What does your characters' faith (or other ideology) teach them about human* nature?
- What do other voices tell them about human* nature?
- What do they actually believe?
- Will their belief or understanding of human* nature evolve in the story?

* Substitute a different life forms as appropriate



By human* nature I mean . . .

- Free will vs. chemical, biological, social, or other determinism
- When does human* life begin? When does it end, if it does?
- If something came before or will come after life on earth*, what is it?
- Are humans* basically good, basically evil, a dynamic mix of both?
- Is there some built-in purpose to human* life, or must each find purpose individually? If there is purpose, what is its source? God? Necessity? Economics? Something else?

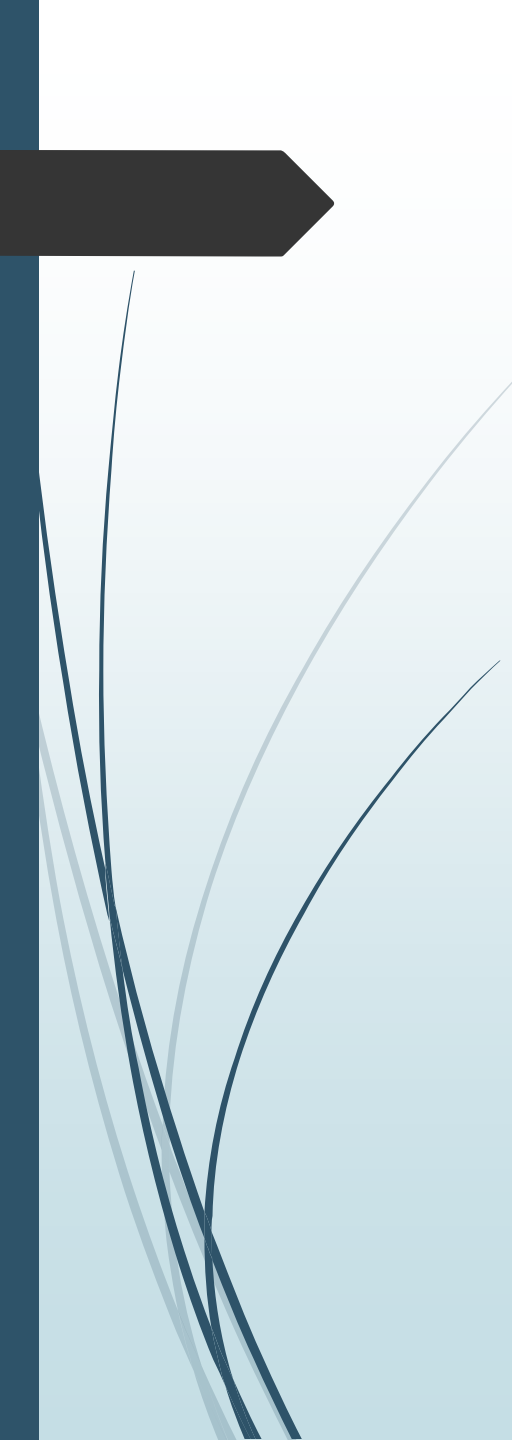


World-building: some guidance

- Plunge readers into your world with just enough context. (*The Chosen*: Judaism and baseball)
- Sprinkle, not dump, explanations.
- Ursula LeGuin: “Crafty writers in any genre don't allow exposition to form lumps. They break up the information, grind it fine.”
- Self-check:
 1. What will readers need to know?
 2. When will they need to know it?
 3. Where and how will you show readers you trust them, by letting them figure out some things themselves?



Selected Challenges



Experiencing deity

How does a given character experience the divine? (Many possibilities.)

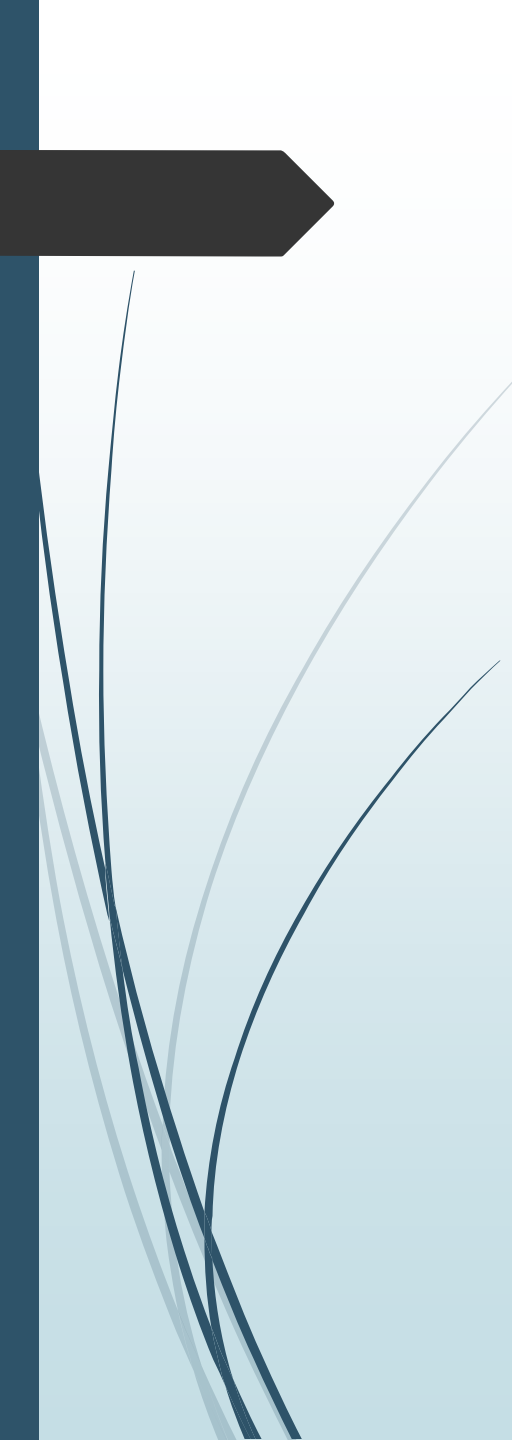
How does she **expect** to experience the divine?

Does she think she should be experiencing but isn't? ("The heavens are as brass.")

Might she experience it without realizing it? Do you leave the reader to discover this or somehow explain?

Might she mistake some other kind of experience for an encounter with the divine?

"hormonal revelations".

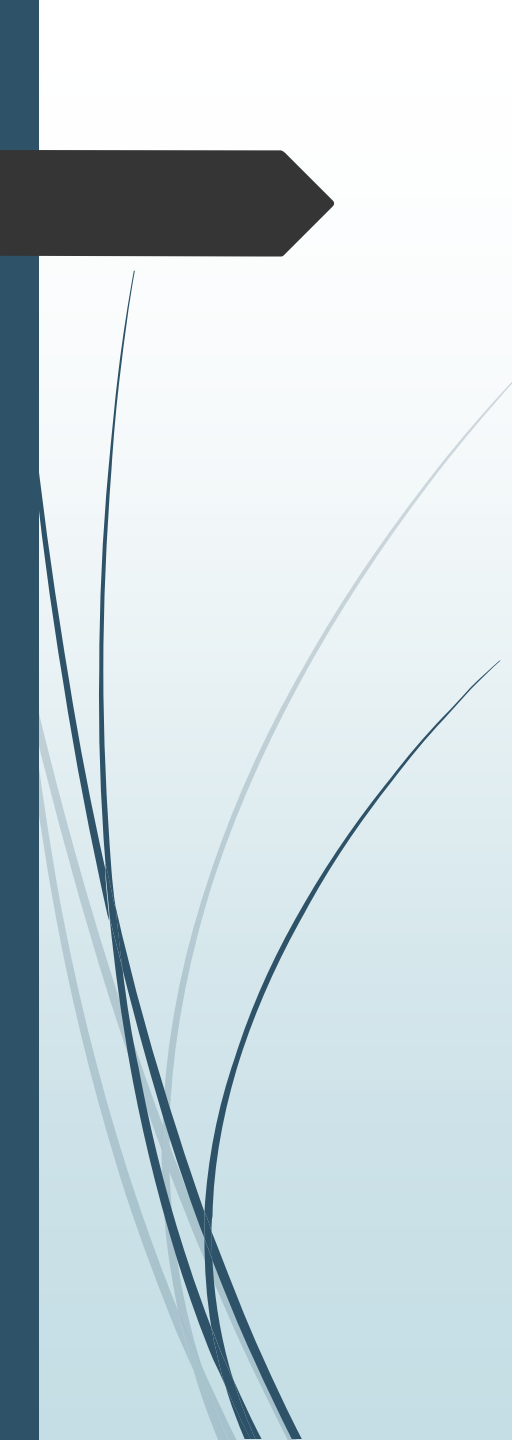


Experiencing deity

What does a given character (or the narrator) think?

- Is everyone's claim of divine influence/communication believable? Is it always (or usually) a lie or a mistake?
- Does the narrator pass judgment or let the reader decide (or discover).

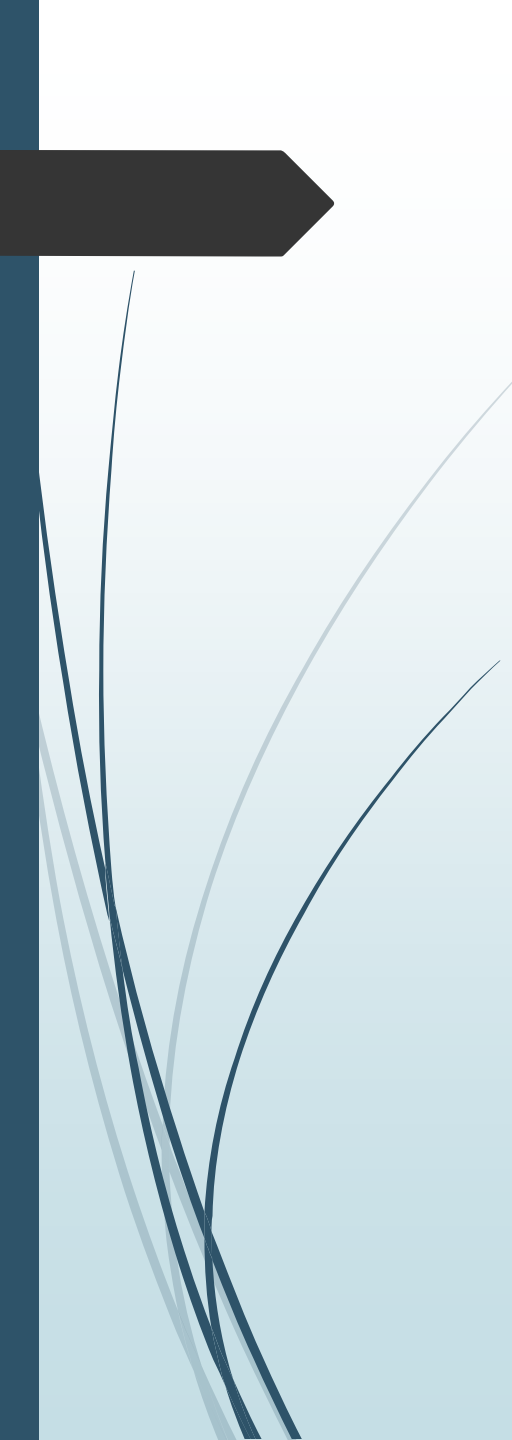
Disclaimer: As a person, it's not my job to judge the validity or meaning of anyone else's religious experiences or lack thereof. As an author, I'll take some liberties with my fictional characters.



Writing moments of transcendence

(a character connects with something higher/unseen)

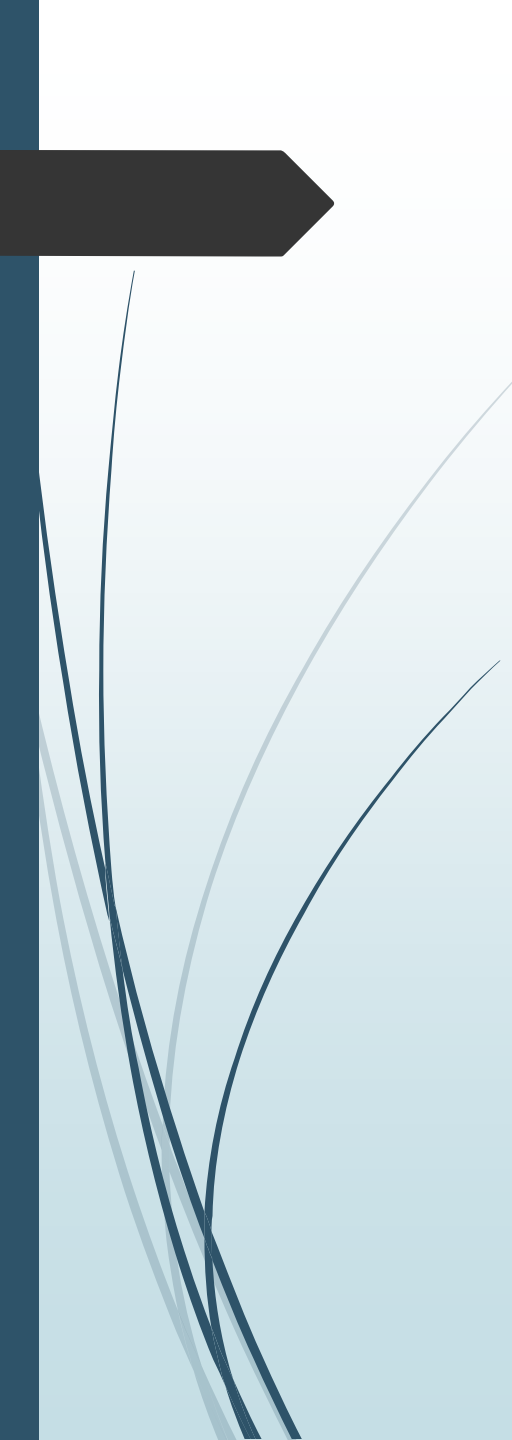
- Telling isn't enough. Showing may not be enough. Probably have to do both.
- Might require your best use of every tool you know.
- Take your time setting it (us) up. Take your time in the moment.
- Describe feelings, perceptions, thoughts, responses, changes—the characters' experience, the character trying to make sense of it—perhaps without too much explanatory discourse from a narrator or other character who is outside the moment. (That can come later.)
- The darkness must already be convincing if the light is to be convincing when it appears, and vice versa.



Writing moments of transcendence (cont.)

James Goldberg:

- Avoid *deus ex machina* at all costs
- It can help to put make the spiritual/transcendent experience the inciting incident instead of the climax.
- God isn't solving the character's problem; the character is the problem. Make it less about the spiritual event than about what the character learns from it.
- Have the supernatural event give character(s) a problem to face; let it add momentum to the story.
- A spiritual/transcendent experience shouldn't relieve characters of the obligation to engage with reality.
- It probably shouldn't fix everything. It should be just enough to keep going.



Miracles

Can we portray miracles, large or small, in our fiction without slipping into *deus ex machina* or pushing an even slightly skeptical reader out of the story? How?

Is it like portraying magic in fantasy? Is it different?

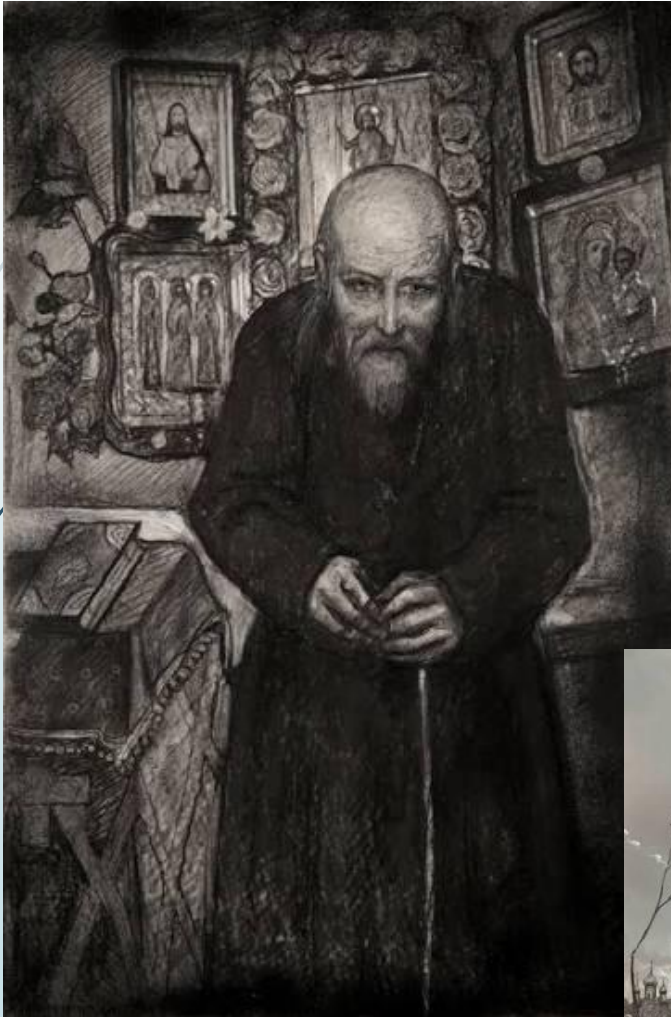
Miracles



BK, Book 1, Chapter 5 “Elders” (narrator)

“Alyosha was even more of a realist than the rest of us. Oh, of course, in the monastery he believed absolutely in miracles, but in my opinion miracles will never confound a realist. . . . A true realist, if he is not a believer, will always find in himself the strength and ability not to believe in miracles as well, and if a miracle stands before him as an irrefutable fact, he will sooner doubt his own senses than admit the fact. And even if he does admit the fact, he will admit it as a fact of nature that was previously unknown to him. . . . Once the realist comes to believe, then, precisely because of his realism, he must also allow for miracles.” (pp. 25-26)

Miracles

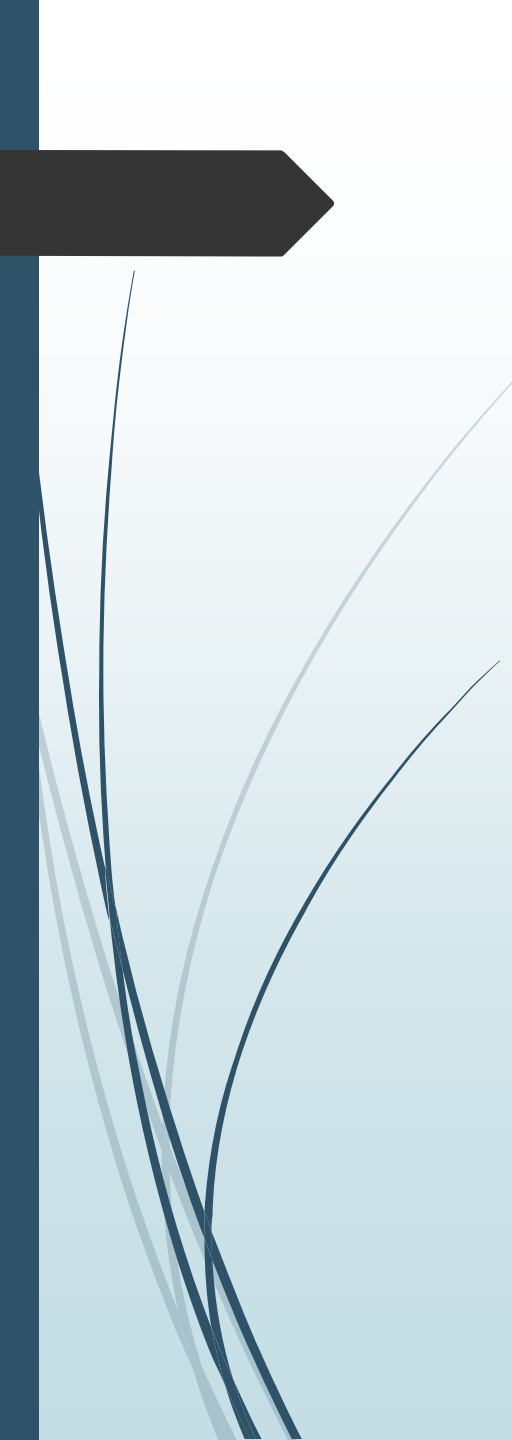


BK, Book 1, Chapter 5 “Elders” (narrator, speaking of Alyosha)

“Many of those who came with sick children or adult relatives and implored the elder to lay his hands on them and say a prayer over them, he saw return soon, some even the next day, and, falling in tears before the elder, thank him for healing their sick. Whether it was a real healing or simply a natural improvement in the course of the disease was a question that did not exist for Alyosha, for he already believed in the spiritual power of his teacher. (p. 30)

(art by Ilya Glazunov)





Miracles: One way to do it

(A healing in “Unseen,” a short story)

He stood but signaled with his hand that she should remain seated. He moved quietly to her side and put one hand atop her head, saying nothing.

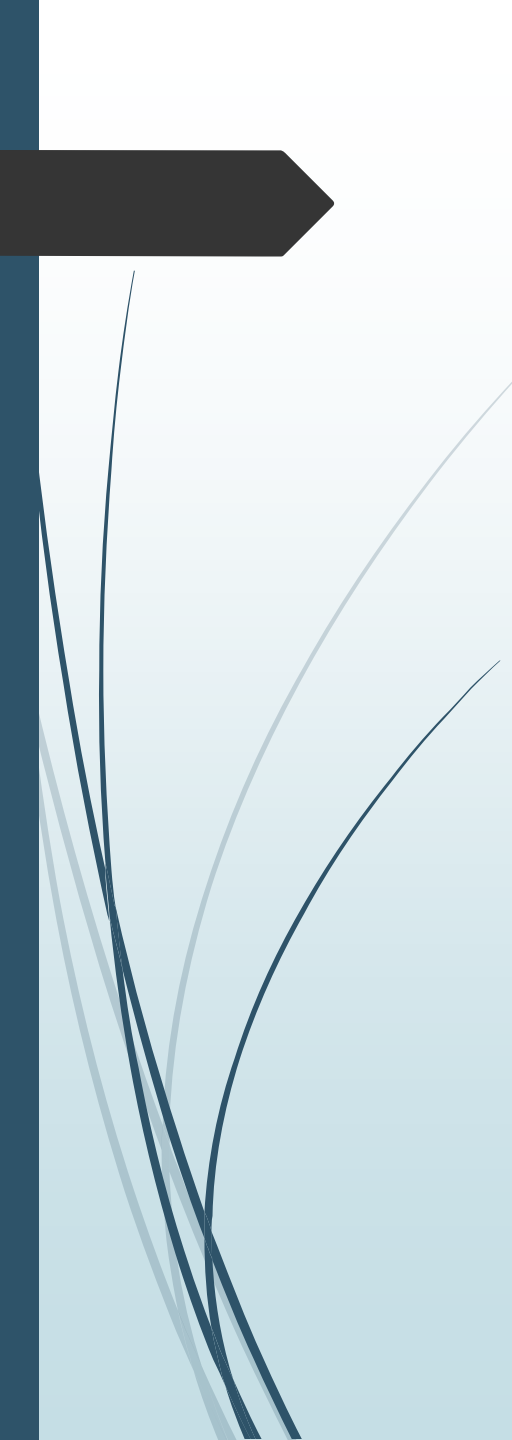
Something changed inside her—or left her or righted itself. She could scarcely have said which, but her relief was immediate and complete.

After a moment Morak removed his hand and returned to his seat, moving slowly as if exhausted. Still he did not speak.

Tears blurred her view of his sober countenance. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“It is gone?”

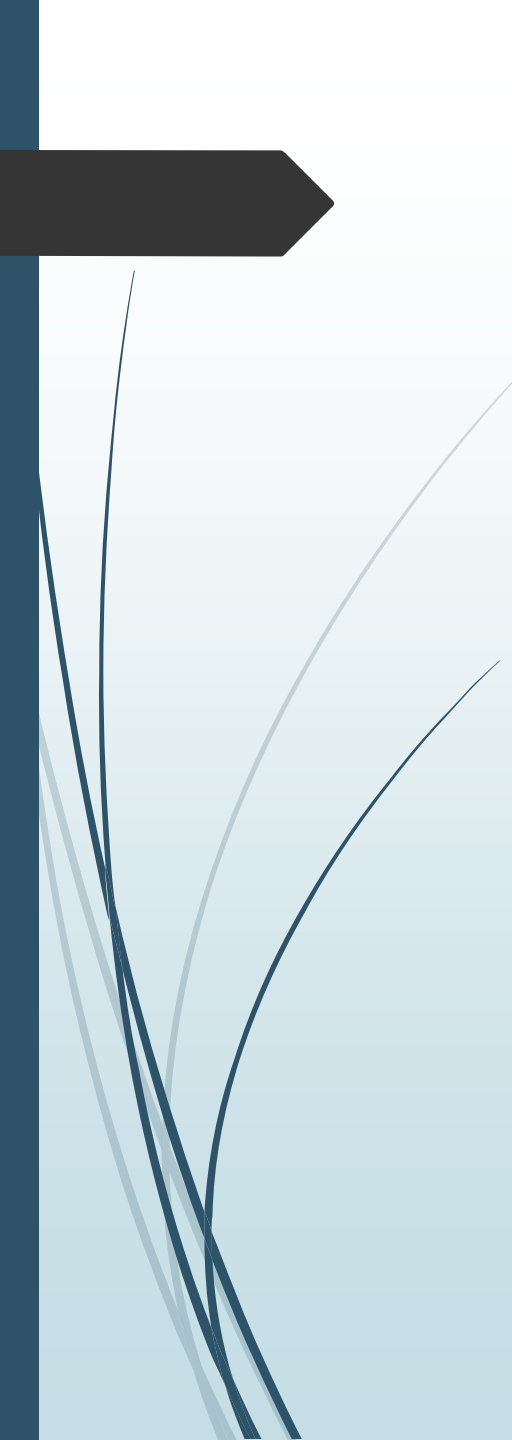
“It is gone.”



Portraying evil without celebrating or advocating it

To tell our stories convincingly, we have to contemplate both light and darkness—as honestly as we can. So we'll have to portray them too.

Risk: Some readers will assume we approve of whatever we portray, and that our characters' words and thoughts are our own. (Sorry, that's their problem.)

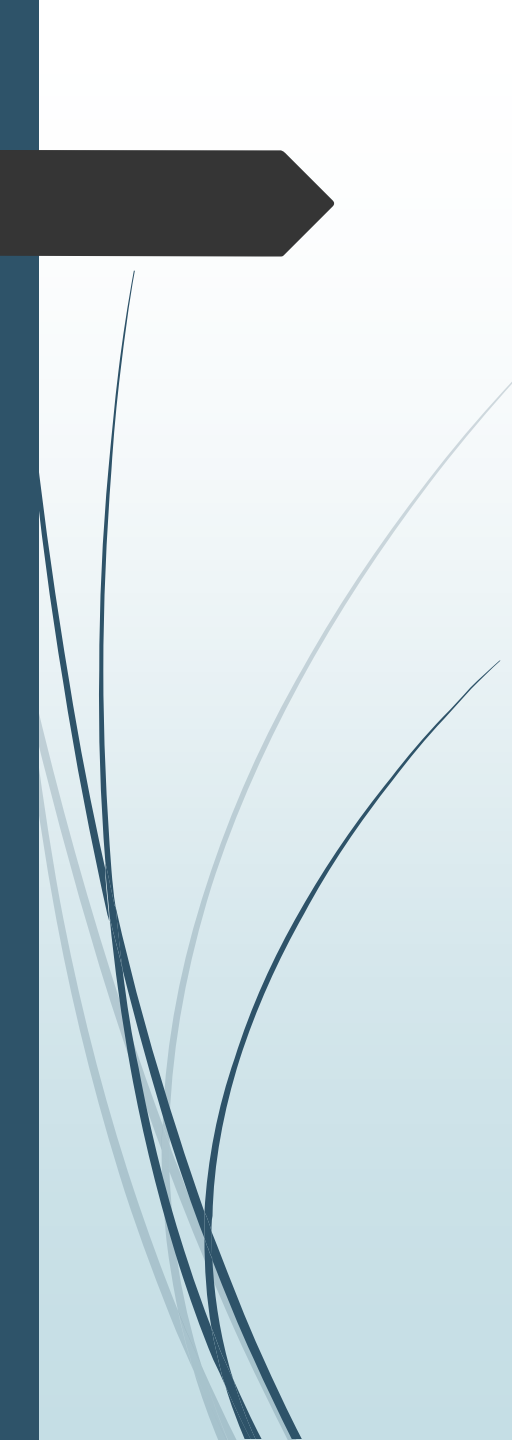


Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*

I wrote to a friend:

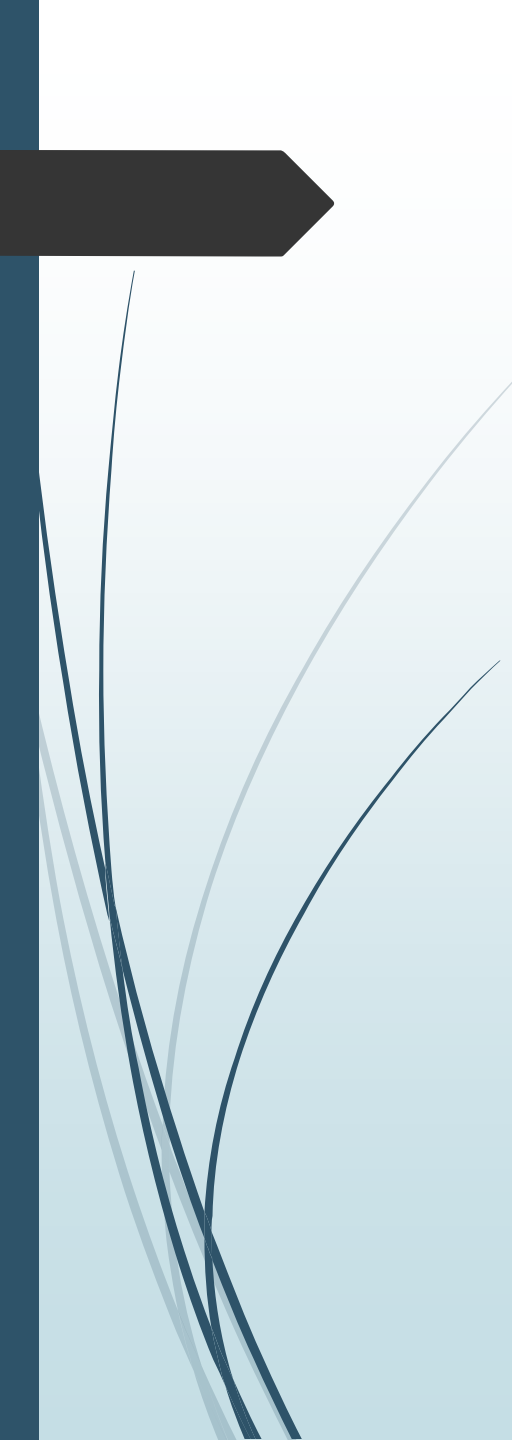
“Some say it’s the greatest American novel. It may be the most darkly violent book I ever read, more than war histories, Holocaust literature, and Dostoevsky. . . .

“I saw as I read that McCarthy’s novel is loosely based on some history I’m glad I wasn’t present to witness. To a degree he reports, not invents, the violence in his tale. Nor, I think, does he celebrate violence, though he is at pains to portray his characters celebrating it. Scattered throughout are moments of generosity, sacrifice, and charity, reported in passing and without fanfare. Whether these moments are enough to redeem the novel is a question for each reader.”



Writing a conversion arc (cf. rehabilitating a villain)

- The villainy (or the beginning state, prior to conversion) has to be convincing.
- Even during villainy, show a few hints of potential. Before conversion, show that something's missing or disordered.
- Change over time (even if some parts of change are sudden)
- Change must be plausible: sufficient cause, struggles, relapses, maybe an ascending spiral of resisting, then being moved/changed, then resisting . . .
- Helps if others start to notice, suspect, wonder, struggle to accept the change.
- Characters (at least some) start to believe in the change so the reader can.
- Things should still be messy after conversion; it shouldn't resolve all challenges.



Important!

- There can be some preaching in fiction.
- **It should not be the author preaching to the reader.
Probably not the narrator either.**
- Maybe it will help to remember: Reading fiction (or poetry) should be an experience, not simply a transfer of information/ideas/a moral.

Humor: Why Can't Mormons Send Flowers?

**Sorry, no
time. Find it
on YouTube.**

Difficult, but possible . . .

Usually, it's safer to laugh
at (us) than at (them).





Examples of religion in fiction



My list: Films, TV shows

Law and Order (TV series): religious people are kooks, fanatics, perverts
(if you want to be hostile to religion but not completely deranged about it)

Joan of Arcadia (TV series): teenage girl encounters God, starts doing things for him, and learns to appreciate how things are connected

The Brothers McMullen (film): Catholics struggling to reconcile faith with life in the modern world

Gandhi, Fiddler on the Roof, Yentl, Shadowlands

Groundhog Day: not religious, but often called deeply spiritual



My list: Books

David Lodge, *Souls and Bodies*: deep exploration of various Catholic responses to dogma and Vatican II specifically—people trying to figure out what a modern life of faith looks like.

Mesu Andrews, *Isaiah's Daughter*: epic historical fiction in the time of Isaiah, Hezekiah, Ahaz, and Hepzibah (treats faith with depth and subtlety)

Jodi Picoult, *Plain Truth*: an Amish murder mystery (Amish fiction: a lot of moving in and out)

Anything by Chaim Potok (*The Chosen*, *My Name Is Asher Lev*, etc.)—my role model, in a sense—quintessentially Jewish but accessible to others.

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*



21st century novels I haven't read

featuring religious themes and characters

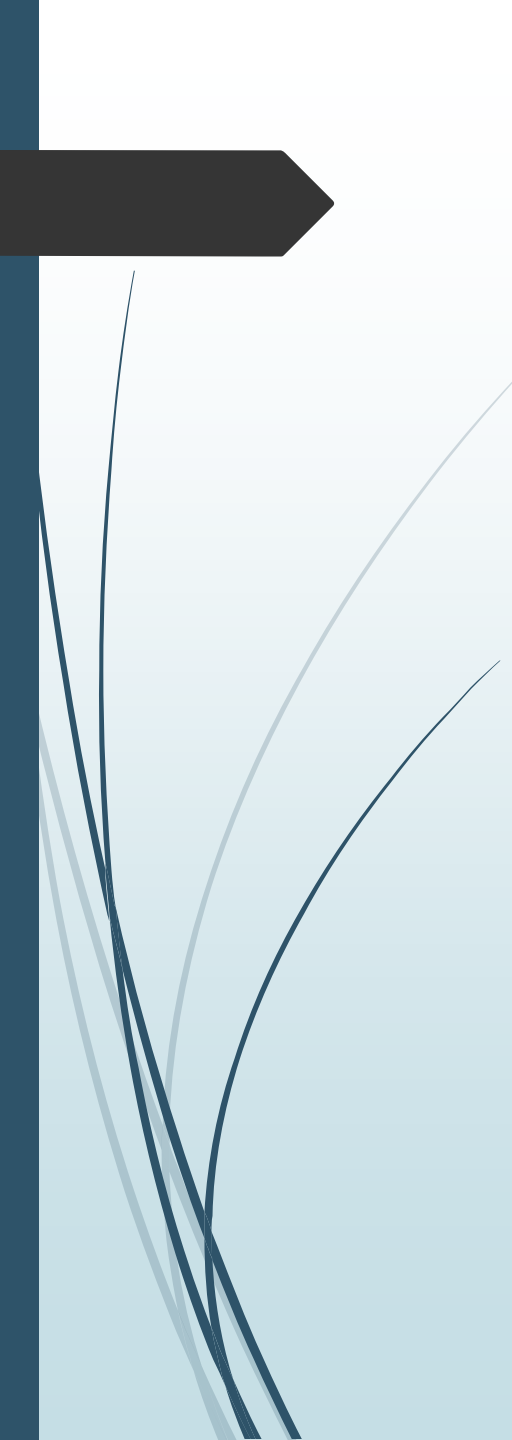
Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (2006): Post-apocalyptic, centers on a father and his son who journey through a desolate world. Religion, faith, and spirituality are subtle, pervasive themes, especially in the father's reflections and the boy's potential for hope.

Joanna Brooks, *The Book of Mormon Girl* (2012): A fictional memoir about the (fictional) author's experience growing up LDS, challenges of living a faithful life in the modern world.

Yann Martel, *Life of Pi* (2001): MC practices Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam. Themes include faith and the nature of belief.

Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* (2003): Guilt, redemption, forgiveness; Muslims encountering moral dilemmas.

Arundhati Roy, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017): Set in contemporary India; Muslim and Hindu characters.



Returning to where we began

- *Confidence* (at least a little) is required, or we won't even do it.
- *Respect* pushes us to understand our characters and do justice to their faith even when it differs from the author's.
- *Depth* requires us to consider possibilities—including differences, even subtle differences, between characters professing the same faith, and how those differences affect the story.
- *Honesty* in the author's voice is essential to reaching the reader—including honesty about the author's views, beliefs, doubts, struggles, searches.
- *Art* depends on a human-to-human connection between author and reader. Any errors or obfuscation on the author's part about what a human* is impede that connection. (No pressure!)

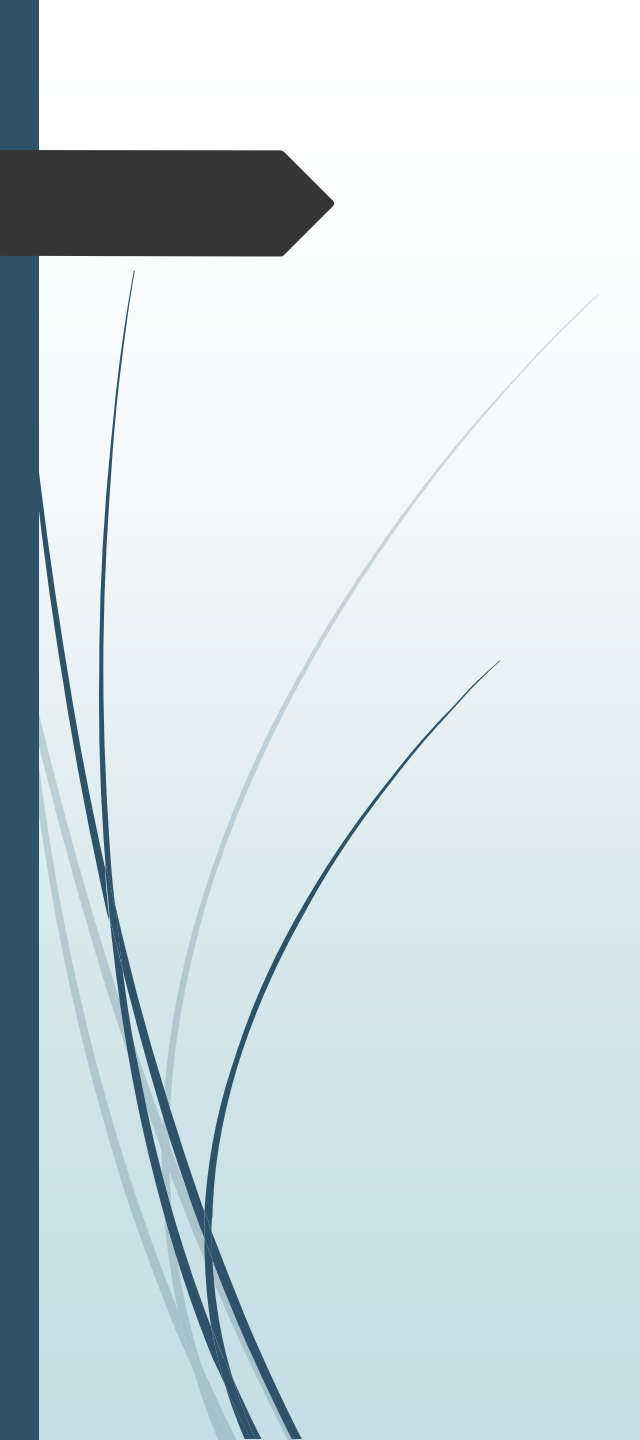


Something's missing



Maybe . . .

Writing Faith in Fiction with
Depth, Respect, **Confidence,**
Honesty, and Power



After all we can do

But what if we're writing this character?

From "It Happened Again: A Modern Sequel to the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor"

Scene: an interrogation room in a modern prison. The interrogator is District Crown Prosecutor William Garth IV, dressed impeccably in a suit. The prisoner, who remains silent, is Jesus Christ, dressed in somewhat rumpled business casual attire.



But what if we're writing this character?

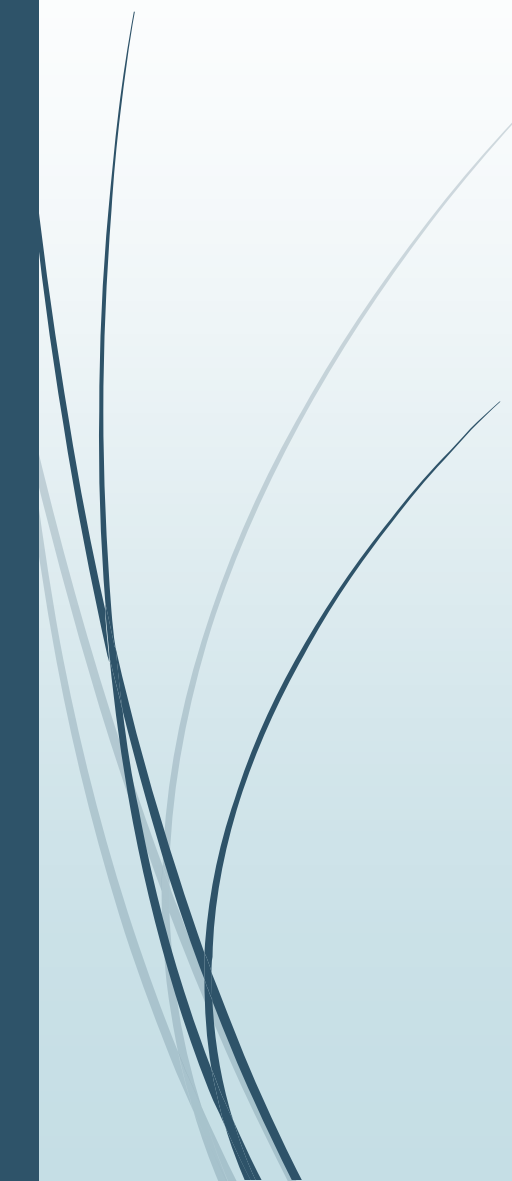
The prosecutor stood suddenly. He put both hands flat on the metal table and leaned toward the prisoner. Now he spoke with the greatest passion, as if his words had waited for many years to pour forth.

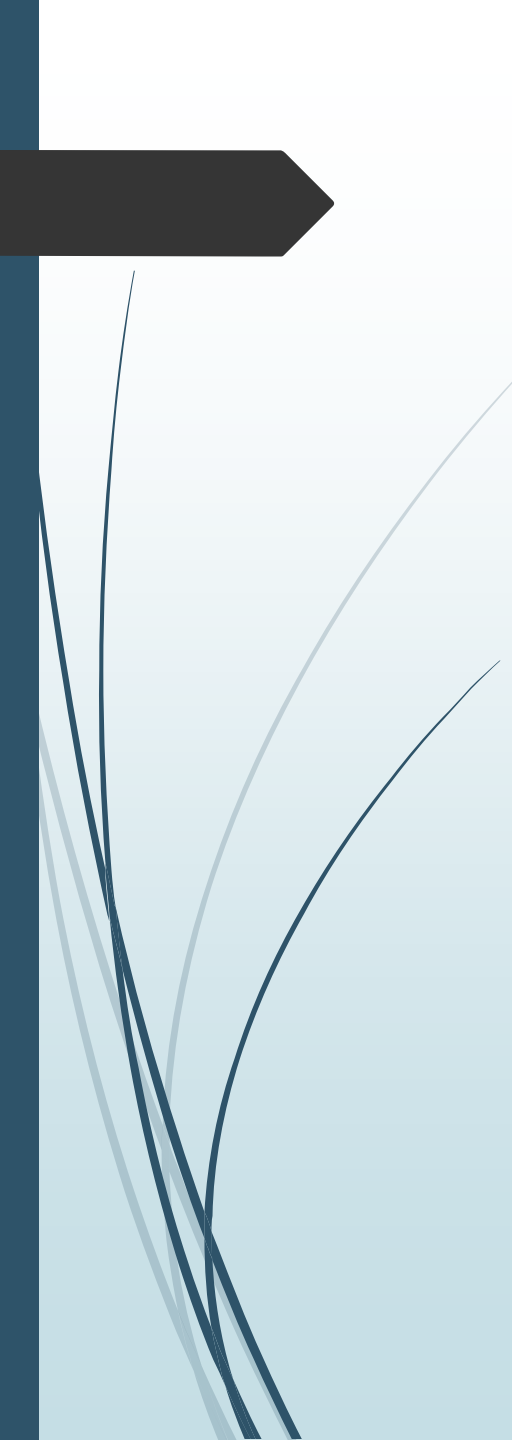
“I was as devout as any in our seminary. *Your* seminary, we thought. I pored over your scripture. Day and night I immersed myself in your gospel. I denied myself all worldly pleasures. I preached. I testified. Then I came to my senses. I saw the folly, the vanity, the divine cruelty of requiring debased humans to be better than they can be. That is divine hatred, not divine love. So I left the seminary and read law. For their own good I chose to serve the one god who can compel their obedience, who can save all people everywhere from themselves and each other.”





Where **on earth**?

- Dig deep
 - Honest
 - Brave
 - Vulnerable
- 



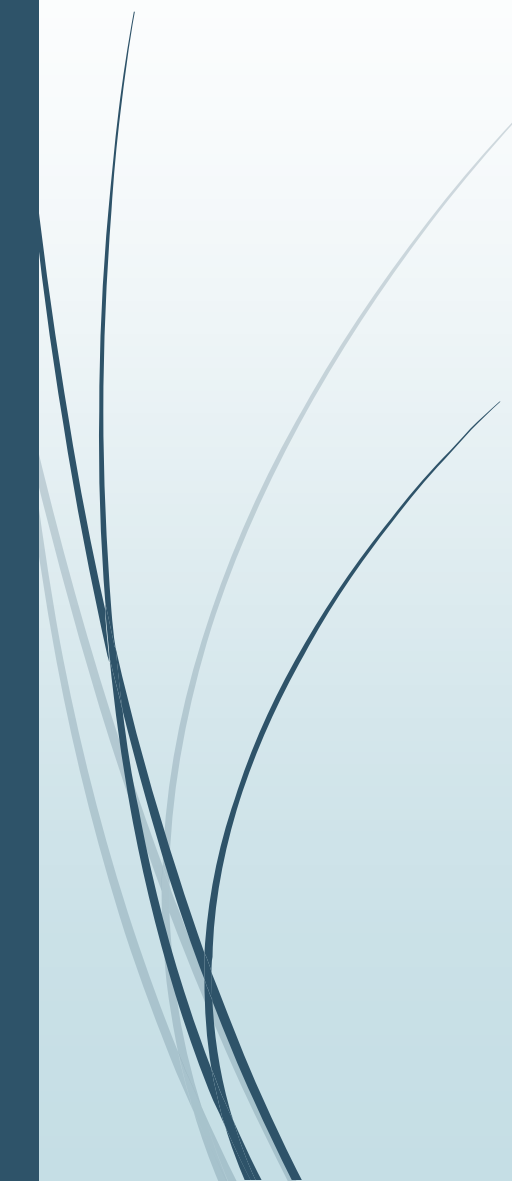
Where **on earth**?

- Dig deep
- Honest
- Brave
- Vulnerable
- Weep (and rage and laugh and . . .)



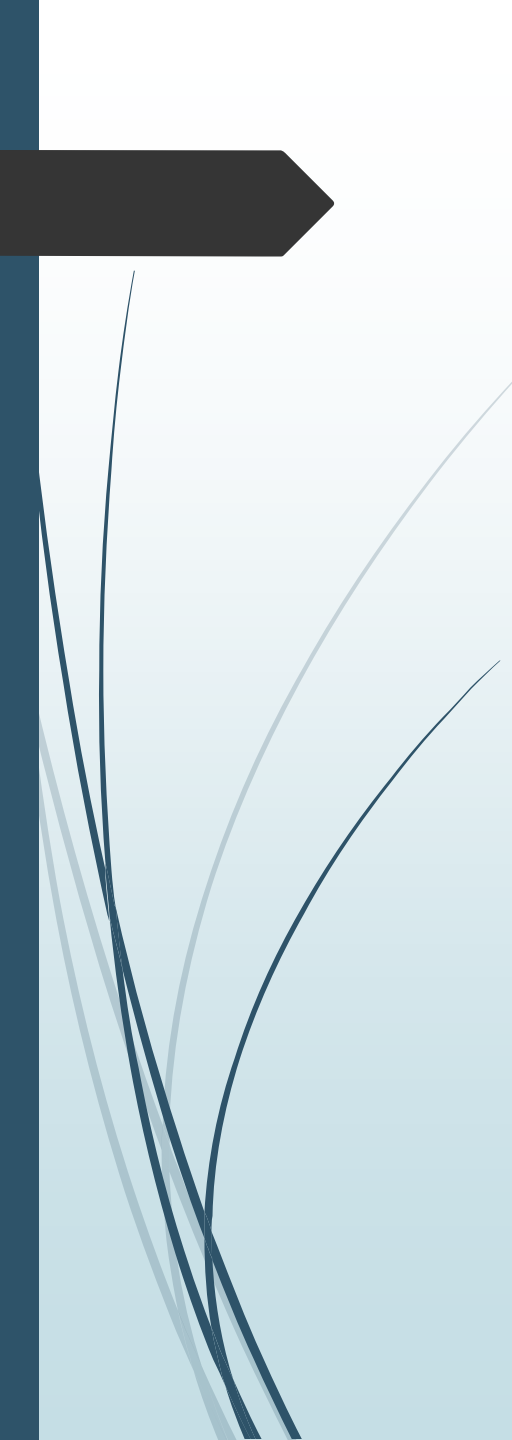
From the Gospel According to David

If we don't feel it in our writing and revision, our readers probably won't feel it in their reading.



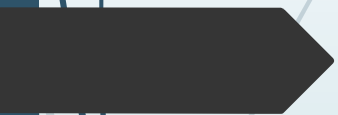


Personally . . .



How and why I include faith in my own fiction

- It's part of who I am.
- It's part of the people around us and the world in which we live.
- I do the small-scale stuff in part because I'm trying to re-normalize a life of faith.
- Where my novel started: In our religious communities we can make it very difficult for good people to be good. Lot of rules we can use to show people they're not good, even when they are.
- Fiction is a well-traveled road to truth . . .
- . . . and some of the most important truth is religious truth . . .
- . . . and I think some of our stories should wrestle with that.



~~Q&A~~ ASK ME **ANYTHING**



Thank you!

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1.4th edition
Other formats: Paperback



Quick look

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Quick look

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1.4th edition
Other formats: Paperback



Quick look

Utah's Best Poetry & Prose 2023
Part of: Utah's Best Poetry & Prose (3 loaded)
★★★★☆ 1
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1.4th edition
Other formats: Paperback



Quick look

Poor As I Am: and other stories at Christmas
Short Stories
★★★★☆ 2
Kindle edition
1.4th edition
Other formats: Paperback



Quick look

Lost and Found: Second Chance Romance
Short Stories
★★★★☆ 2
Kindle edition
1.3th edition
Other formats: Paperback



Quick look

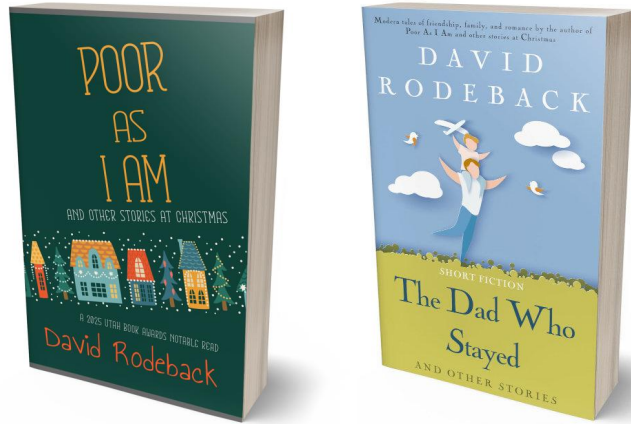
Shadowed Hourglass: A Collection of Poetry and Prose
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Other formats: Paperback



Quick look

Metamorphosis: A Collection of Poetry & Prose
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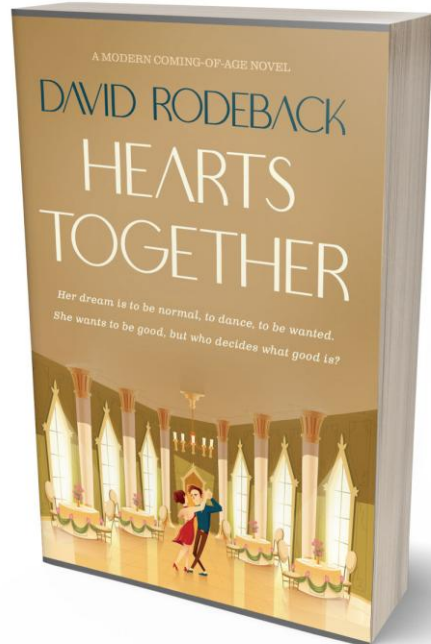


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