

Little Fish

Vancouver, BC: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018

CASEY PLETT

Casey Plett's first novel, *Little Fish*, is an excellent follow up to her Lambda Literary Award-winning 2014 short story collection *A Safe Girl to Love*. It shares characters with *Safe Girl*, most notably one of the major Mennonite characters, Sophie, but stands alone as its own narrative. *Little Fish* tells the story of Wendy Reimer, a thirty-year-old Mennonite woman from Winnipeg who discovers that her Opa Henry may have been trans like herself. Wendy's journey to recover Henry's queer self runs throughout the novel as a backdrop for its depiction of her day-to-day life.

Unfortunately, this life is rife with instances of transphobia. Wendy gets misgendered by members of her Mennonite family and customers at her job, she gets harassed by the police, and she gets rejected by potential lovers all because she is trans. Such instances are a common element of trans fiction. They serve both to pay witness to the trans community's struggles and to educate readers about the necessity of further advocacy for societal acceptance of trans people despite the increased visibility of trans issues in recent years. *Little Fish* handles this trope gracefully: while the novel is obviously activist, its social commentary fits organically into the narrative rather than reading like propaganda.

One of the novel's strengths is that, although it includes a few flashbacks, it takes place eight years after Wendy transitions. Older trans protagonists are somewhat rare in trans fiction, so it is refreshing and important to have a trans narrative that is not immediately post-transition, but instead shows trans characters struggling to define their careers and relationships just as cisgender thirtysomethings do.

Trans Mennonite narratives are also quite rare. To my knowledge, aside from Plett's work, Miriam Suzanne's novel *Riding SideSaddle** [sic] is the only other piece of trans Mennonite fiction. *Little Fish*'s portrayal of such a story is another way it succeeds. Mennonite readers will feel right at home with the book's references to Steinbach, Manitoba, Miriam Toews, and Rudy Wiebe. But what is especially powerful about the novel's Mennonite elements is that the book does not take time to explain any of them. This refusal to do any hand-holding for readers, which parallels the way *Little Fish* treats its queer

elements, asserts that the identity “queer Mennonite” exists and that it has for a long time even though the Mennonite community has refused to acknowledge it. It is a matter of course, and if readers do not realize it then they are the ones who are deficient rather than the identity itself. The novel’s publication by Arsenal Pulp Press, the premier queer literature publisher in North America, is a noteworthy achievement because it shows that narratives about this identity are marketable outside of the Mennonite community.

For Mennonite readers and other readers of faith, *Little Fish* raises hard questions about what it really means to follow Jesus’s command to care for “the least of these” in Matthew 25:40. The book’s characters are on the margins of society for a variety of reasons. Aside from transphobia, characters struggle with mental illness and alcoholism, and Wendy and Sophie both do sex work out of economic necessity. They suffer in large part because of Mennonite transphobia, because of the breakdown of healthy Mennonite community. The novel thus asks what the Mennonite community can do to make amends for its historical participation in this systemic violence.

Significantly, despite its characters’ difficulties, *Little Fish* is ultimately a hopeful book. It argues that it is possible to live a fulfilling trans (and trans Mennonite) life, which is a much-needed message. Aside from its activism it is a skilled, beautiful book aesthetically, one that any lover of reading should read.

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Believe Me: The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump

Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018

JOHN FEA

John Fea's *Believe Me* is a recent addition to the growing library of books and articles that attempt to explain why American evangelicals support conservative Republican politics. The fact that 81% of white evangelicals voted to support Donald Trump's candidacy for president in the 2016 election seems to call for some explanation. Explanations vary, but they typically begin with a sense of consternation that evangelical Christians would lend their support to a person with as many personal character flaws and problematic policies as Donald Trump. One of Trump's repeated clichés is "believe me." Why have many evangelicals chosen to believe him?

Fea is professor of history at the evangelical Messiah College (supported by the Brethren in Christ denomination) and an active member of an evangelical congregation, so he writes as an evangelical "insider." In his introduction, he begins by noting some of the apparent incongruities between historical evangelical Christian convictions and support for Trump. His analysis is organized around three major points: fear, power, and nostalgia. In chapter one, he reviews the 2016 Republican primary as an example of "The Evangelical Politics of Fear," and then in chapter three, he elaborates with "A Short History of Evangelical Fears." Fea calls fear a "staple of American politics since the founding of the republic," and gives some examples: fear of failure to be a "shining light on a hill"; fear of deism; fear of the Roman Catholic Church; fear of the various waves of immigration; fear of modernists and the social gospel; fear of Muslims; fear of Obama as a Kenyan-born secret Muslim out to re-make America into a secular, borderless, socialist society. White American evangelicals have their own additional catalog of fears: easy access to abortion; legalized same-sex marriage; loss of tax exemptions for Christian schools; and removing God from public school classrooms. Alongside these fears, an important part of the conservative agenda (reflecting dispensational eschatology) was to make Jerusalem the capital of Israel and the location of the U.S. Embassy. These things required a "strongman" president who was able and willing to accomplish evangelical goals. Fea quotes Southern Baptist Dallas mega-church

pastor and denominational leader, Robert Jeffress: “Frankly, I want the meanest, toughest son of a gun I can find. And I think that’s the feeling of a lot of evangelicals.”

This leads to the quest for power that is the second point in Fea’s explanation for evangelical support for Trump. Chapter two follows the contest between Hillary Clinton and Trump to illustrate “The Playbook” that evangelical leaders have long followed in their attempt to achieve their fear-induced defense of their special interests. The strategy called for mobilizing evangelical voters to support conservative candidates who will rescue America from its perceived long-term slide into moral decay. Electing a “strongman” president who would appoint conservative Supreme Court justices was one of the ultimate goals. Evangelical leaders were disappointed when they exercised their political power in support of Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and the Bush presidents, who all failed to deliver.

In chapter four, Fea introduces the group of “Court Evangelicals” who currently have ready access to the White House, people such as Jerry Falwell Jr., James Dobson, Franklin Graham, Ralph Reed, Paula White, and others. This current contingent, Fea says, represents three constituencies: the Religious Right; the Prosperity Gospel; and the less-recognized Independent Network Charismatic (INC) Christianity. Billy Graham, who for many years was the chief of the court evangelicals, eventually realized that he had been used and betrayed by Nixon and other presidents. Similarly, Fea says, these court evangelicals are “playing politics and getting burned.”

In chapter five, Fea makes the case that nostalgia is a third motivator of evangelical support for Trump. “Make America Great *Again*” implies that there was some specific time in the past when America was once great. Nostalgia rather than honesty about history, Fea says, is one response to fear. But African Americans and others, Fea notes, have no nostalgia at all for any previous American era. Whether America was founded as, or has ever been, a “Christian nation” depends entirely on how one defines what that might mean. The goal of the evangelical quest to restore religious liberty is mainly to protect their own interests. It includes no clear vision for what that might mean in a culturally and religiously diverse society. Nostalgia for an imaginary past when America was “great” has been used as a political tool.

In his conclusion, Fea asks what the 19% of evangelicals who did not support Trump should do during the duration of his presidency. First, he notes, it must be recognized that Trump's evangelical supporters are overwhelmingly white, male, and aging. The younger generations are leaving their churches in large numbers, partly in response to the fear-induced, reactionary politics of their elders. More positively, Fea cites Martin Luther King Jr. and other Civil Rights leaders as examples of a different Christian approach to politics, an approach that was hopeful rather than fearful; acted in humility rather than in a quest for power; and was clear-eyed and forward-looking rather than nostalgic in its understanding of the American past.

Fea also makes approving reference to the work of James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (2010). Hunter and Fea both call the church to a new posture that they label "faithful presence," although they do not provide a clear definition of what that might mean in practice.

In the final words of the book, Fea concludes: "It is time to take a long, hard look at what we have become. Believe me, we have a lot of work to do. Believe me." I believe John Fea.

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Civil Religion and American Christianity

Mountain Home, AR: BorderStone Press, 2018

EDITED BY LIAM J. ATCHISON, KEITH BATES, AND DARIN D. LENZ

Essentially a festschrift, *Civil Religion and American Christianity* is an interesting, varied collection of ten essays of history written in honor of Robert Dean Linder, an evangelical Distinguished Professor of history at Kansas State University. Linder is widely considered to be an expert in the study of civil religion, and he contributed an essay to this book.

The book is divided into three parts. The first covers the key role of presidents in civil religion. The second section deals with the influence of civil religion on various American Christian groups. The final section consists of three essays that provide historical examples of how politics and religion have interacted in American history. This range of subjects is what makes this unique book especially interesting since it covers topics such as presidential religious leadership, patriotism, pacifism, the role of the American flag in churches and Christian schools, denominational religious leaders' and theologians' views of civil religion, and more.

Most of the essays contain a definition of civil religion that draws on or resembles in part Linder's definition, but the introduction offers the book's main definition: "Civil religion is a national faith built upon mutual beliefs leading to a maximum inclusivity deemed essential to the success and welfare of the state, and expressed through myths, symbols, and rituals." Robert Bellah, the earliest and most prominent interpreter of American civil religion, presents a definition in his landmark article, "Civil Religion in America", that also includes "myths, symbols, and rituals".

However, it is striking that the book's definition does not incorporate what Bellah thought was "the central tradition of the American civil religion"—that is, "the subordination of the nation to ethical principles that transcend it in terms of which it should be judged." What makes the book's limited definition odd is that one of the book's essays concerns an examination of Jerry Falwell's brand of civil religion, which is about Falwell's emphasis that America was founded on and should abide by "biblical principles", even as he paradoxically and awkwardly worked to draw in people of several non-Christian faith traditions.

Rightly noting that the president has historically been the nation's religious leader, the first three essays employ Linder and his co-author Pierard's "priest and prophet" categories to assess the quality of three recent presidents' religious leadership. This analysis is particularly difficult because although one can observe political behavior, accurately uncovering a president's motives is challenging. Fortunately, the authors draw heavily on strong presidential biographies, likely avoiding misrepresentation or claiming more than they can verify. However, in a few instances they make weak causal claims about how a particular presidential religious style did or did not achieve some political goal of a president.

Several essays examine how particular denominations were affected by civil religion. For instance, one essay describes the internecine conflict among Southern Baptists as they developed in distinct stages their understanding of the relationship between their national and religious commitments. Another particularly revealing, essay disabuses the reader of the notion that the Assemblies of God has been a thorough-going pacifist denomination despite its official pacifist doctrinal position. Yet another essay represents an excellent discussion of the competing interpretations of Romans 13 in response to the impending American Revolution. Spoiler alert: the winning conclusion is that civil disobedience against King George III was justified because, due to "a long train of abuses", the King had no legitimate authority over the colonists.

Even the Mennonites, a branch of pacifist Anabaptists, have been challenged by civil religion, as two of the book's essays demonstrate. One of them centers on the Anabaptists and their suspicion of and opposition to civil religion, condemning it because it is foreign to the gospel, it violates the universal nature of Christianity, and it undercuts the "church's prophetic voice". The other essay discusses the widespread disagreement among Mennonites over the meaning of the nation's bicentennial celebrations some five-hundred years after their own faith movement's birth. As the author rightly points out, Americanization had clearly affected (some would say "infected") their faith tradition.

This is a wonderful collection of essays, and for those who want to understand the meaning and purpose of the nation's "myths, symbols, and rituals" or how civil religion has influenced much of American Christianity, this book is well worth the read.

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Sing, Unburied, Sing
New York, NY: Scribner, 2017

JESMYN WARD

Jesmyn Ward's novel is a portrayal of the South where the truth does not set anyone free and people don't get what they deserve, and the potential for violence is only matched by the capacity for love.

Ward weaves three intergenerational stories, each haunted by the reckoning past, where the spectres draw immediacy to the persistent patterns in America's history of racism. She alternates between three voices; the ghost Richie, Lonnie, and her son Jojo. Richie, simultaneously young and old, innocent and vengeful, illustrates the novel's temporality, "a vast ocean ... happening all at once." This expansive view of time allows Ward to draw direct connections between early slave plantations and modern prison systems: "I watched chained men clear the land and lay the first logs for the first barracks for gunman and trusty shooters." Richie knew Jojo's grandfather, River, when he was incarcerated at Parchman. He follows him home when Jojo travels to the prison to pick up his father. This act of following summons secrets of the past into the present.

Lonnie, her best friend Misty, and her children Jojo and Kayla, drive from the fictional saltwater Bois Sauvage to Parchman Prison to pick up her newly released boyfriend. This journey, where Kayla becomes sick, and Misty and Lonnie traffic drugs, serves as the impetus of the novel. However, the road trip does not move the novel forward, because the characters, pressed together in a hot car, are trapped in what feels like an inevitable circuitous path that has been travelled by many people, many times: the road to Parchman traps both the living and the dead.

There are many instances throughout the novel that Ward is in conversation with the racial tensions of the South, and the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement. Perhaps what she adds to the conversation, in a drawn-out careful exploration of this family's reverberating trauma, is that Black people do not need to be saints or martyrs in order for their pain to be mournable. Jojo, Lonnie's thirteen-year-old son, presents the novel's most poignant and realistic voice. Ward's treatment of his character is filled with tenderness, innocence, and dignity. As such, when he is unjustly handcuffed at gunpoint by a police

officer during a routine traffic stop we are shocked to be reminded that Jojo, a young Black male, could be seen as expendable from another perspective.

Lonnie, Jojo's mother, is too preoccupied with drugs, the ghost of her brother Given who appears when she is high, and her obsession with her White boyfriend, to bear the capacity for motherhood. Lonnie is sometimes aware that her children have turned to each other in her absence but her jealous feelings are expressed in lateral violence toward the only ones within her reach more disempowered than herself: "another part of me wants to shake Jojo and Michaela awake, to lean down and yell so they startle and sit up so I don't have to see the way they turn to each other like plants following the sun across the sky." The only consolation that Ward offers Lonnie is meager, the moment she eases her mother's transition into death by conjuring Maman Brigitte, the spirit mother of the dead.

Ward's portrayal of pain is unsentimental and unflinchingly truthful but her poetic imagination and lyrical writing cradles her characters' lives with gentleness: "They undid his hands and led him to the shack, to his bunk, and he lay down in the dark next to me and I knew he was still crying because his little shoulders had curved in like a bird's wings when it's landed but they still fluttering, but he still ain't make no noise." Jesmyn Ward's novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is an invocation of complexity, pain, and trauma, with a riptide of compassion coursing beneath the surface.

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