

# Sailing on Solar Wind

By Nancy Lecourt

**B**ook” was the first word of my first child. Sebastian was about a year old, standing beside the sofa at the house of some friends and playing with the baby books I had brought along for the visit, stirring them back and forth over each other, almost singing, “book-a-book-a-book-a-book . . .”

“He’s saying ‘book!’” someone said.

“No he’s not,” I replied. But indeed, the evidence seemed incontrovertible, as he continued to caress the books and croon happily to them, “book-a-book-a-book . . .”

Now that he is in college, an English major with a room full of books, the importance of this moment is clear. Sebastian was a cautious child who didn’t walk until six months later; books provided both adventure and clues to the meaning of life’s mysteries—all from the safety of Mommy’s lap. He could step across oceans with Harold and his purple crayon, make mischief of one kind and another with Max and the Wild Things, enter a forbidden garden with Peter Rabbit, and be back for supper.

I, too, have followed the bread crumbs left by books as I stumble and saunter through life. I remember reading myself to sleep as a young teenager with *The Conflict of the Ages* series and *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Why did I read these conservative, old-fashioned books, instead of at least bringing home *The Outsiders* or *Harriet the Spy*?

My parents never tried to control my reading; I think perhaps these books made me feel safe in an Adventist environment (school, church, Pathfinders, Missionary Volunteers, summer camp), where I was constantly being reminded that the Time of Trouble would soon be upon us, that “the very elect” would be deceived, and that even one unconfessed sin could land me in the Lake of Fire. They guided me along what seemed to be a secure path.

But eventually even I began to feel ready for a riskier journey, to wonder what lay outside the Adventist garden wall. It was at that moment that my academy biology teacher told me I ought to read C. S. Lewis’s space trilogy. “It tells the story of the Great Controversy, without ever mentioning God!” he told me after class one day. How often do students actually read the books their teachers recommend?

I did, anyway, and then read through everything else by Lewis I could get my hands on. *Mere Christianity*, *The Screwtape Letters*, *The Great Divorce*, *Surprised by Joy*—they all helped provide something I craved: intellectual backbone for my beliefs. I think now that C. S. Lewis made it possible for me to stay in the Seventh-day Adventist Church by making clear to me the meaning and logic behind theism and the central Christian narrative.

Perhaps more important, he made me realize that I was not simply a member of my church, but of the Church Invisible, “spread out through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners”—that far more united me with Baptists and Episcopalians and Catholics than divided me from them, despite what I had been led to believe.<sup>1</sup>

Strangely enough, it wasn’t until years later that I discovered Lewis’s children’s books. I vividly remember attending a conference for writing teachers in Lexington, Kentucky, when I was about twenty-seven. I took along *The Lion, the Witch, and the*



*Wardrobe*, which a friend had told me I *must* read. On Sabbath, instead of going to the meetings, I luxuriated in my hotel room with a view of the Kentucky hills and traveled to the mountains and valleys of Narnia for the first time. Somehow Jesus-as-Lion seemed more real and personal than the man I had met in the Gospels, his sacrifice became more poignant, and heaven seemed to beckon more sweetly when it held unicorns and talking mice. Lewis made the old, old story seem new.

Then I discovered Paul Tournier. I was fascinated by the case studies of his patients, by his explanations for the way people act. Books like *Guilt and Grace*, *The Meaning of Persons*, and *The Adventure of Living* helped educate my emotional intelligence and link it up with my spiritual life. While living in Switzerland, I joyfully discovered used copies of his books not available in English while exploring the stalls along the quay in Lausanne. I even visited Tournier in his home, interviewing him for *Insight* magazine and bringing

him a jar of homemade chocolate chip cookies.<sup>2</sup>

At this time in my life I was still struggling with legalism. I distinctly remember the day I finally decided that God loved me, and that what mattered was not being right, but trusting that love. Tournier assured me that I could move forward, even if the path ahead seemed shadowy, because God would be with me on my journey. "I think [we have to] give up the idea that we must be clear, and let ourselves be led by God blindly, if I may put it so, rather than demanding that he show us clearly at each step what our road is."<sup>3</sup>

Although Tournier wrote metaphorically of blindness, Annie Dillard, with her strange and beautiful prose, taught me to begin to see in a different way. The colors and textures of this world, especially of what we call Nature, she brought to my attention. Somehow she sees into and through things, beyond the trees and the water, looking for their meanings. "God used to rage at the Israelites for frequenting sacred groves. I wish I could find one."<sup>4</sup> She is on an extended nature walk,

## What We're Reading Now

Three members of the *Spectrum* Book Advisory Committee share their reading lists

### Gary Chartier

Jean-Pierre Changeux and Paul Ricoeur. *What Makes Us Think: A Neuroscientist and a Philosopher Argue about Ethics, Human Nature, and the Brain*. Reprint ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002. 354 pages.

Just what the title says: a surprisingly readable discussion of complex issues in philosophy and science that draws the reader into its authors' conversation.

Stephen R. L. Clark. *Biology and Christian Ethics*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 332 pages.

This examination of the intersection between religion and science (it's broader than the title might suggest) by a brilliant and idiosyncratic Christian philosopher is proof that philosophical prose can be graceful and literate—

simply put, fun to read—as well as intellectually challenging.

Peter Conradi. *Iris Murdoch: A Life*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2001. 512 pages.

A compelling intellectual biography of a first-rate novelist and philosopher that demonstrates that a flawed person can radiate love and goodness into the lives of others.

David Ray Griffin. *Unsnarling the World-Knot: Consciousness, Freedom, and the Mind-Body Problem*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. 264 pages.

A new and highly appealing take on an old conundrum that shows how an idiosyncratically Christian view, shaped by process philosophy, might help to resolve one of the most fundamental of all physical puzzles.

Daniel Lazare. *The Frozen Republic:*

*How the Constitution is Paralyzing Democracy*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1996. 393 pages.

An engaging history (and prehistory) of the U.S. Constitution and its role in American political life that argues persuasively that the sacred text of our civil religion needs to be overhauled or replaced.

J. R. R. Tolkien. *The Lord of the Rings*. Collector's ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974. 1,216 pages.

Rereading this classic (and, in its author's view, deeply Christian) work after twenty years, I find that Tolkien's prose has the power to send chills down my spine.

### James Hayward

Barbara Kingsolver. *The Poisonwood Bible*. New York: Harper Perennial Library, 1999. 566 pages.



watching intently for the secrets of existence, hoping to see them shine out when she least expects it. My favorite passage is in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. It offers better traveling instructions than I've found in any guidebook:

The secret of seeing is, then, the pearl of great price. . . . But although the pearl may be found, it may not be sought. . . . I cannot cause light; the most I can do is try to put myself in the path of its beam. . . . The secret of seeing is to sail on solar wind. Hone and spread your spirit till you yourself are a sail, whetted, translucent, broadside to the merest puff.<sup>5</sup>

This, then, is where my books have brought me: out of the small, rather claustrophobic space where I began, into a larger, more populated landscape; now it seems I am to set out into the universe for parts unknown. I hope, like Sebastian, to step across oceans, make a certain amount of mischief, enter a forbidden garden or two, and be home for supper.

A powerful novel about religion, power, abuse, and human resiliency set in the context of an American fundamentalist missionary family's experiences in Africa.

John McPhee. *Annals of the Former World*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998. 696 pages.

This magisterial, Pulitzer Prize winning volume recounts McPhee's travels back and forth across the United States with various geologists and his reflections on its topography and geology around the fortieth parallel.

Del Ratzsch. *Science and Its Limits: The Natural Sciences in Christian Perspective*. Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000. 191 pages.

A prominent philosopher of science at Calvin College, Ratzsch provides an excellent synopsis of the limitations and strengths of arguments that Christians use in regard to creation/evolution, intelligent design, postmodernism, and so forth.

Terry Tempest Williams. *Leap*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2000. 338 pages.

A strange but brilliant extended essay by a Mormon naturalist/feminist/writer about good and evil and the pleasures of life; based on Hieronymus Bosch's triptych *The Garden of Earthly Delights*.

### Nancy Lecourt

Barbara Ehrenreich. *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001. 221 pages.

A middle-aged woman writer with a Ph.D. becomes a waitress, a dishwasher, a housekeeper, and a Walmart employee to see whether it is really possible to live on minimum wage. It isn't.

Mary Rose O'Reilly. *Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Boynton Cook, 1998. 50 pages.

Reflections on life and teaching

## Notes and References

1. C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 5.
2. It wasn't easy to make chocolate chip cookies in Switzerland in 1982. I had to buy big slabs of dark chocolate and cut them into "chips" with a butcher knife. I also had to use hazelnuts instead of walnuts, not easy nuts to chop. And, of course, I used whole wheat flour, like a good Adventist. The cookies may have been quite an adventure for Tournier.
3. Paul Tournier, *The Adventure of Living*, trans. Edwin Hudson (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1965), 188.
4. Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 69.
5. Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper's Magazine Press, 1974), 33.

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that ask the question: What spaces can we create in the classroom that will allow students freedom to nourish an inner life?

Philip Pullman. *The Golden Compass*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995. 399 pages.

First in a trilogy of astounding fantasy-adventures that involve parallel universes peopled by a fascinating array of characters, which includes talking bears, witches—both good and bad—and angels. Not for the timid.

Eric Schlosser. *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000. 356 pages.

Muckraking at its best. A blistering exposé of the way fast food has altered America's environment, work, life, and health—especially of children.

