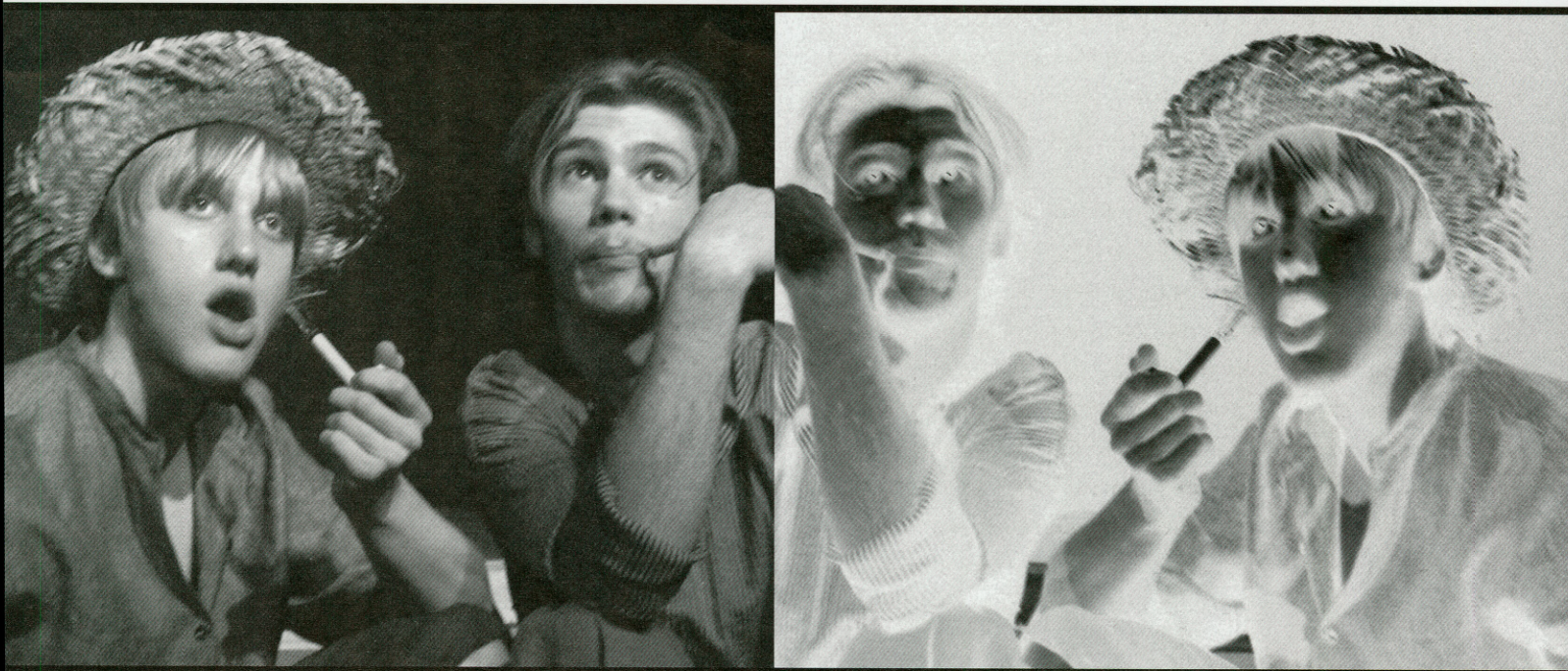


Reading Race | BY CARLYN FERRARI



I fell in love with literature as soon as I learned to read. As a child, I read everything from *Where the Wild Things Are* to *Goodnight Moon* and was fascinated by the vivid imagery created by the words on once-blank pages. In my adolescent years, my taste naturally matured, and I found myself helping Nancy Drew solve her latest mystery and bragging to my friends at school about how the latest *Goosebumps* book didn't make me flinch.

During my junior year in high school, my English teacher announced that we would be reading a book titled the *Adventures Huckleberry Finn*. I had never read it, but I briefly recalled a Disney movie starring then-teenage heartthrob Elijah Wood. My teacher then proceeded to give a disclaimer about the "offensive racial language" in the book. I brushed this off thinking that "offensive" by academy standards was nothing to worry

about, recalling that upon transferring from the public school system I had learned that most of my clothing was, in fact, "inappropriate."

I began to read the novel, and my teacher's cautionary words resounded in my mind each time the word *nigger* appeared—more than two hundred times. Behind the seemingly innocent tale of a young boy and his runaway slave friend was, at least for me, a kind of rude awakening. As a black teenager growing up in a predominately white neighborhood and attending a predominately white academy, I had certainly encountered racist language before. However, this was my first encounter with racist language in literature.

This experience sparked my curiosity, and ever since I have had a fascination with racial depictions in literature. I am interested in and write about blackness because it resonates with me as a person of color and as

a reader, but I think all of us should examine racial representations.

One may ask why the reader should even pay attention to race in literature. Well, thanks to science, we know that race is sociological, not biological. In other words, race is a social construct. Certainly, notions of race were not constructed and perpetuated in a vacuum. As you may recall from history courses, during transatlantic excursions travel writers wrote not only about landscapes abroad, but also about their inhabitants. The depictions in these writings helped to create particular ideologies in early modern Europe.

Historically, literature has been used as a means to spread information and perpetuate views. By paying attention to racial representations in literature, we can stay abreast of how current notions of race are both challenged and maintained. We can stay "in the know," so to speak.

We also know from history that interpretations can have devastating effects on racial groups. For example, the curse of Cham in Genesis 9 was used to justify African slavery, and thus sealed the fate of slaves for centuries.

How, then, should we deal with racial representations? Herein lies a complicated question that even scholars like Henry Louis Gates, Jr., have a difficult time answering. Let's return to *Huckleberry Finn* for just a moment. If we praise *Huckleberry Finn* and call it a "great American novel," a label critics have used many times, what are we saying about the racist language?

Author Chinua Achebe describes this dilemma in his famous critique of Joseph Conrad's novella, *Heart of Darkness*: "the question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art."¹

The answer will be different for each reader, as it should be. We each bring our own level meaning to the texts we read. For me, the answer is to keep reading and to keep asking questions like, "Why is such a representation in the text?" and "What is the author doing by including such a representation?"

I do not always come up with answers on the first read, but questions like these help me move past an emotive reaction and help me engage with the text. I strongly caution against psychobiographical assertions or any accusations against the author. I find that they tend to limit one's reading, as they often lead one away from the text rather than enhance one's reading. It

would have been very easy for me to conclude that Mark Twain was a racist, but such a shallow, uninformed reading would have stopped me from questioning.

My love for literature has continued to flourish. If anything, my initial reading of *Huckleberry Finn* functioned as a catalyst for my academic career. Now as an English graduate student, I explore issues of race, paying particular attention to racial representations throughout history and noting how notions of race have fluctuated over time. In my reading, I now find that I am torn between admiration and frustration. The aspiring writer in me grudgingly tips my hat to writers like Twain and Conrad, who have clearly mastered their craft. However, the black woman in me is offended and appalled.

To be perfectly honest, I missed most of the plot of *Huckleberry Finn* upon my first read, and even though I have read this novel a total of three times now and have written an essay about it, the aspect that stands out most in my mind is the racist language.

However, I am able to look back and see how my views have changed, and I am able to move beyond a visceral reaction and ask questions. As I begin the daunting process of writing my master's thesis, I wonder how and if my perspective will continue to change. This is what reading literature is all about for me.

Because a black democratic candidate is in the U.S. presidential race, we may find it easy to think that racism is something from our distant past and that we are in an era of progress. Although I do not necessarily deny this, my hope is that in your next read you will notice something that perhaps you were not expecting—and begin to ask questions. ■

Notes and References

1. Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," in *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Paul B. Armstrong, 4th ed. (New York: Norton, 2006), 344.

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help" shelves of bookstores is an outcome of the conflicts and concatenations of the two.

Among conservative Christians, it took a while to baptize popular psychology and make it seem safe from worldliness, but by the 1970s Tim LaHaye's *Spirit-Filled Temperament*, Dobson's "Focus on the Family," and kindred efforts ministered to the need for psychological ideas and programs that seemed plausibly "Christian" and thus, broadly, "safe" for the American Evangelical subculture.

This inward psychological turn among Evangelicals is important for Adventists because it sheds light on the spurt of popular Seventh-day Adventist interest in the perfectionist "harvest principle" theology during the 1970s. This is the theology that makes the individual's inner spiritual achievement the hinge of cosmic history.

Rather than look to actions of the Catholic Church or apostate Protestants on a stealth march to establish Sunday laws as evidence to support our faith, we could look within to elicit, develop, hope for, work for, the perfection of individual character, a perfection that if reproduced in a critical mass of faithful Adventists would move Christ to leave the Heavenly Sanctuary and come to receive his own.

This inward turn spared us the embarrassments of certain paranoid and apocalyptic habits of mind. It gave us instead an invitation to a great and heavy meaning of interior life, but also, for some of us, to cycles of unbearable psychological self-inflation and deflation.

This theology was also a fateful move in that it placed ever-heavier weight on the inspiration and authority of Ellen White exactly at the time that Adventist professionalism would produce a series critical literary and historical analyses of her writings. Adventists had been going off to get advanced degrees for some time, but it was an indicator of a new critical mass of Adventist professionals that the Association of Adventist Forums and *Spectrum* got started in 1969 and were only about ten years old when The Crash happened.

Being Adventist and professional, especially in certain academic areas, led to some serious tensions:

Career vs. Calling: Is my work a pursuit of mere worldly success or can it also be an instance of the service to God and humanity that my Seventh-day Adventist upbringing told me it must be?

Professional reference groups vs. Seventh-day Adventist community: Do I adhere to the standards of truth and good practice that I have learned in my profession and follow them wherever they lead, or do I limit what I am willing believe, teach, and do by way of the prior commitments of my religious community? Can my professional training actually help renew or reform my community's faith and practice?

In the midst of these conflicting demands, where does the sincere, believing Seventh-day Adventist professional find himself or herself?

For some of us, this question of professional and religious identity was profoundly complicated by the Ellen of the Pedestal, the Ellen who forbade all challenges to her authority, reducing them to expressions of human pride, or worse, insinuations of the Devil. This was the Ellen who insisted that every idea of ours be vetted through her writings.

She was the one who had long told us to guard the avenues to our physical bodies, denying ourselves all those sensations that might rouse passion and thus distract the soul from its heavenly calling. That was starvation enough, but what many of us felt was much broader, deeper, and more complex.

Indeed, any of several metaphors of bodily privation might serve to convey the problem: we were dying of thirst, we were suffocating. We had read of a Savior who promised life and life abundantly, but we could not taste, smell, hear, see, or feel it. The Ellen White we served was guardian of the boundaries. She told us to guard the avenues of our souls and the edges of the Sabbath.

So vigilant, so obsessive became our guarding of the boundaries that we knew better what we were not than what we were. Notions of sanctification, that work of a lifetime's garnering of imparted righteousness, came to suggest a patrolling of the boundaries so perfect as to render the physical body and the metaphorical bodies of the soul and of the Church perfectly impermeable. But no human body, literal or metaphorical, can survive that way, much less thrive.

Still in the grip of such boundary thinking while I wrote my senior honors thesis in theology, I produced a

wildly out-of-context and misguided assemblage of quotes from Ellen White matched up with quotes from Walter Rauschenbusch's *Theology for the Social Gospel*. In sixty dense typewritten pages, I demonstrated to my satisfaction, and apparently to the satisfaction of my religion professors, that Ellen White was, in fact, a proponent of the Social Gospel, this in a subculture where the phrase "social gospel" was still an epithet. Even as I finished the project,

Desmond Ford meant his message to repair and renew the Adventist faith, based on his diagnosis of a people paralyzed by salvation anxiety. It is not clear to me how well he sensed the mental, emotional, and bodily privation I knew from growing up Adventist in America. Regardless, Ford ran into a maelstrom of social and cultural forces that made the outcome of his ministry in the United States something rather different from his intentions.



I knew at some subconscious level that this vetting of ideas I was hungry for through the Ellen White test taste left me starving still.

Such hunger pushed me to head off to the University of Chicago Divinity School for graduate work in fields unconstrained by Ellen. At the same time, I was never more assiduous in my reading of Ellen White than when I was in graduate school. Picture a clean-cut child of the Adventist ghetto huddled over his copy of *Ministry of Healing* or *Christ's Object Lessons*, sitting early mornings in a quiet corner of a university building, taking in his daily inoculation of Adventist truth before the worldlings arrive, get their coffee, and start another day at the great bastion of liberalism and atheism.

I would go join them, of course, opening one compartment of my mind while sealing off another. I resolved to learn what I could from these people and sort out the contradictions later. I was determined to prove those Adventist leaders wrong who predicted I would lose my faith. I was even more determined to find the ways my learning could repair and renew the Adventist vehicle of salvation, this wonderful one-horse shay driven by Ellen White that was supposed to carry us all safely into and beyond the Time of Trouble.

Here's my effort to sort out the vectors of the storm we sailed into together at the end of the 1970s.

First, I think it likely that the cultural transformations and upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s having to do with sex and gender helped to undo decisively Adventism's nineteenth-century perfectionist synthesis of piety, health, diet, recreation, dress, and family all aimed at the control of sexuality. The practice of perfectionist spirituality as sexual restraint came to seem ever more implausible to wider and wider swathes of Adventist people. This change, as Bull and Lockhart have noted in their chapter on "The Science of Happiness," resulted in a "pick and choose" approach to Adventist lifestyle.

Such change did not come easily, however. I think it created a pervasive anxiety in American Adventism over boundaries and identity. This Adventist version of "cafeteria Christianity" was experienced as a promise of liberation by some, as a threat to the integrity of self, church, and cosmos by others. For most, it was likely strange mixtures of both.

Second, into the midst of this mostly subliminal stress, came the much more explicit disillusionment caused by historical-critical discoveries about Ellen White's sources,

including especially Ronald Numbers's deconstruction of Ellen White as prophet of the health message. From the perspective of the historians, what they were doing was their jobs. They were following the standards and practices of their profession, hoping to serve the Church by promoting deeper understanding its history. For many others in the Church, however, their works were an invasion and a betrayal—history as Trojan horse containing not Greeks, but Trojans who were traitors.

If "pick-and-choose" Adventism carried some vague sense of threat for many Adventists, the historians' work represented a direct attack. The target was Ellen, the idealized culture hero in whom the wholeness Adventist self and society held together—or so it seemed to many. The lifestyle of piety and probity supported by the ritual quoting of her writings became even more implausible after reading Numbers. Claims to attention and status by means of the mastery of Ellen White were invalidated. Even those who did not care much about strict piety and probity could feel attacked.

I remember my father, a firmly antivegetarian autocrat of the family dining table who also rejected Ellen G. White on sex, though he was less vocal about that, at least around the children. He was also a pragmatic agent of Adventist institutional life—local elder, Sabbath School teacher, chair of assorted building committees, conference committee member. He loved the Church and had a certain reverence for Ellen G. White as symbol of the Church, the mother to be looked up to, respected, and protected, but not necessarily obeyed. When the scholarly work on Ellen White came to public notice in the 1970s, my dad's antipathy for her health message on diet or sexuality was irrelevant. It was as if his mother were under attack, and no man worth his salt was going to stand for that.

Third, Ford was right that salvation anxiety pervaded many Adventist circles. No doubt it was fueled by the culture currents I mention above, but one should not dismiss it as "nothing but" a reaction to social forces. Messages of righteousness by faith were numerous in those days, and the cassette tape was a universal medium from bringing such sources of hope to the spiritually hungry. This pervasive salvation anxiety was the most obvious reason why Ford drew those standing-room-only crowds to Sabbath School in 1977 and 1978.

It was also the reason why he was so deeply convicted of the necessity of his message to the Church. On

the weekends he was not teaching Sabbath School, it was likely he was out in the churches somewhere in the Pacific Union or further afield, taking the gospel to people in the pew.

Paradoxically, because it is hard to imagine a less psychological person than Ford, his theology served as a kind of psychic solvent that dissolved the deep cognitive and emotional ties that many Seventh-day Adventists felt to a God and to a prophet who demanded an impossible cosmic rectitude in inner life and in bodily existence. This promise of freedom, to a certain segment of Seventh-day Adventists, was the pragmatic meaning of his message.

Before Ford ever delivered his invited lecture on Daniel 8:14, then, the maelstrom was upon us. The subversion of Adventism's nineteenth-century perfectionism by the newly permissive broader culture, the direct threat to perfectionist doctrines of Atonement and Incarnation coming from Ford his growing following, and the disintegration of Ellen White as idealized Adventist culture hero led to an emotional storm.

It was not just ideas at stake, it was our deep sense of Adventist selfhood. Ellen White provided a coherent set of ideals for Adventists to strive for, and in looking up to her we felt lifted up. This sense of uplift was one of the motives that made her nineteenth-century, antisexual "science of happiness" seem a worthy struggle. A complementary motive was the energy derived from the sense that we Adventists were the special focus of the attention of all the watching worlds of God's unfallen creation. Ellen White in vision was the sign and assurance of this attention—we were the people who kept the Commandments and had the Spirit of Prophecy.

The attention and respect won in ordinary church life through the ritual quoting of her sayings was a tangible echo of the Divine attention for all who were faithful to our heavenly calling. We were energized to move forward by this sense of God's special regard, to exercise persistently our disciplines of cognitive, emotional, bodily restraint in hopes of realizing the goal God had set before us. The disillusionment of finding the Prophet to be all too human disintegrated the self we had built upon her and left us desolate, dissipated, exposed to ridicule, including our own self-ridicule. Such blows to the inner self led to explosions of energy that had been bound to our now battered ideal, explosions of fear and rage.

Sometimes the object of rage was the church and its

prophet, seen most notably in reactions like Walter Rea's *The White Lie*, and its proponents. Sometimes the objects of rage were the academics who did or promoted the historical critical work. More often than either of these, the object of rage was Ford the heretic and all who seemed in some way tainted by association with him.

Ford, his message, and his association with Australian aliens Geoffrey Paxton, Anglican "outsider," and Robert Brinsmead, chronic heretic, were experienced as an invasive violation by defenders of the Adventist body of perfectionist doctrine and prophetic guidance. They became theological warriors analogous to the family values culture warriors like Jerry Falwell and James Dobson in the wider Evangelical world.

The fury with which they carried out their warfare, however, is traceable not only to theological disagreements about the fallen human nature of Christ, but also to the above-mentioned subliminal anxiety and to the threatened loss of Ellen White as an idealized culture hero and guardian of Adventist boundaries and identity.

Ford's message of Reformation righteousness by faith came across to these warriors as an effort to disintegrate the coherent, lifelong striving of body and spirit that Adventist perfectionism promised would result in personal salvation and in the ultimate cleansing of the cosmos. This alien righteousness promised not gospel liberation to them, it threatened worldly libertinism and demonic chaos instead.

In the end, Ford was accused of mental illness and demon possession in and around the Pacific Union College rumor mill and he was implied to be the "Omega of heresy" in Lewis Walton's scurrilous and dishonest best-selling polemic. The campus was rumored to be engulfed in rampant sexual immorality, drunkenness, and drug use—all as a consequence of the college administration's decision to harbor the heretic.

Pacific Union College administrators and faculty who were my mentors, main conversation partners, or both lost their jobs outright, or were given strong reasons to move on. Fred Veltman, veteran survivor of Seventh-day Adventist turmoil, ended his career in the long denouement of the *Desire of Ages* project, only to see his years-long effort refracted, deflected, and buried by church administrators. Many young theology majors judged too close to Ford found themselves without prospects, and many pastors in various local conferences found themselves isolated, stigmatized, and ultimately driven from the ministry. And

that's just the story near where I lived at the time. This was atmosphere in which I ducked.

A lot of Adventist baby boomers like me, weary of subjecting ourselves to the Ellen White of the Pedestal, just gave up in mixed resentment and relief the effort to make her work in our lives. The cohort of younger college-educated Adventists who witnessed the theological acrimony concluded that Ellen White was too toxic to be dealt with and anyway did not speak to the lives they were living. The loss of Ellen White was, by the early 1980s, a widely accomplished fact and an ongoing process.

In closing, a few words about the recovery of Ellen White: "Every woman should have a red dress..." (Scene 4).

I hear that line, and I immediately react: What! and arouse the animal passions of the men her life?! But Scenes 3 and 4 in *Red Books* are intended to present a winsome, human Ellen White, one whom religion has not yet repressed. This is a woman, the writers and our interviewees are saying, who enjoyed the ordinary pleasures of childish mischief and practical jokes.

She was a woman who knew that women dress for women and who had empathy and compassion for those who maybe came out second best in the competition to look good. She had empathy because she herself liked to look good, and didn't mind standing out every now and then with the red dress. I should add that this humanizing message has been very popular with our audiences at talkback. People warm to the playful prophet without the pedestal.

I think the red dress scene is really the key suggestion the play has to make about the recovery of Ellen White, a suggestion that undoes the sexual suppression of the nineteenth century. I think the implications of this undoing are condensed in another line: "You may be tired of this world we're living in, but I haven't even had a taste of it yet" (Scene 6).

My last word on recovery stems from the frustrated rant of the young man whose caring but clueless father I play in Scene 6. The father is completely absorbed in end-time events, and not a day goes by that he does not rehearse end-time scenarios and outlooks to his son. To the son, it seems his father is tired of life. I think the father wants to avoid death. But to put so much energy into the denial of death is, as the existentialist philosophers and theologians

have long told us, to deny life as well.

The young man underscores his fear of this denial when he voices one of the jokes written into the play that has not gotten very many laughs. After listing some things he wants to do in life that he has not yet had the chance to do, he confesses, "And I don't want to go to heaven a virgin." I don't know if the lack of laughter is due to audiences thinking it too crude a line, or too poignant.


What I am sure of is that it underscores basic existential realities that Adventists, as a community of faith, need to come to terms with. The living know that they shall die, but the dead know nothing—until the trumpet sounds and the Lord calls forth his own. Birth, copulation, and death are realities that our hope in the coming of the Lord cannot and, in this life, ought not to deliver us from. They are rather the conditions that create the sequence of generations, the length of our days upon the earth that the Lord has given us.

Blessed are they who die in the Lord, from henceforth, says the Spirit. But blessed also are they who marry and make love in the Lord, blessed are they who are born in the Lord, and again, blessed are they who die in the Lord from henceforth, that they rest now from their labors and that their works follow after them.

Adventists have for a long time now been building a blessed community in which people are born, live, love, and die in the Lord. This community may not be the hinge of cosmic history in quite the way our forefathers and foremothers thought. But it is special—something worth holding on to, renewing, and handing on. We have had a habit of trying to recruit people to Adventism by telling them they should join or stay because we alone have the Spirit of Prophecy; we have Ellen White. But an event like *Red Books* impresses upon us that now our community is the reason to belong.

We study Ellen White because she is the foundation our own little earthen vessel, with its particular, peculiar treasure—an oil of idiosyncratic flavor and aroma, which still sheds light for us and for those whom the Spirit is adding to our numbers. In a sense, then, we do not have Ellen White, she has us, and we need to understand the ways in which she has sometimes vexed, but also blessed our living, loving, and dying. ■

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