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Melanie Springer Mock

George Fox University, mmock@georgefox.edu

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REVIEW OF LETTERS AND LIFE BY BRET LOTT

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by Guest Blogger September 04, 2014

REVIEWED BY MELANIE SPRINGER MOCK

For a number of years, I've used Bret Lott's short essay "Genesis" in my first-year writing courses. "Genesis" narrates Lott's first memory of printing his name, and traces the way that initial creative act becomes Lott's "own small imitation of God." The essay is rich in its simplicity, a fine example of the old (but true!) first-year writing class bromide of showing, rather than merely telling about, an experience.

My students love "Genesis," and so do I, its meaning unfolding for me in different ways each time I teach it. Lott's essay manages to disrupt students' entrenched thinking about what a deeply spiritual essay might look like, its evidence of God's creative power—working through the artist—thrumming in every word. And, bonus: not a religious cliché to be found in the entire piece.

Lott's newly published book, *Letters and Life*, limns and amplifies the themes expressed in "Genesis." *Letters and Life* enters into a centuries-old conversation about what it means to be an artist and a Christian, relying on what has already been written about the Christian artist to expand and deepen our notions of faith and art, showing that, like the child-narrator in "Genesis," the artist in creation imitates God.

Letters and Life is separated into two parts, as the book's title suggests. In the first section, Lott unwinds his ideas about what it means to be a writer of literary fiction—and, more than that, a writer who attempts "to give God his due" through the literary fiction Lott creates. This, Lott argues, is a difficult task, and one he has yet to figure out, despite his many years at the craft.

In the five chapters that constitute "Letters," Lott considers what might be termed a theology of writing, as he contemplates what it means to be not only a Christian who believes very much in the incarnation but also an author who believes very much in a written text's ability to reflect and embody a living Christ. In constructing this theology, Lott turns for help to those we might consider the greats in Christian letters—most notably Flannery O'Connor, to whom he devotes an entire chapter.

Although the opening section of *Letters and Life* will appeal especially to those who enjoy reading literary criticism, Lott includes enough of his personal voice—and personal stories—to make these chapters more than an academic exercise. And while my attention flagged at spots during "Letters," I remained intrigued by Lott's intentional consideration of his own work, and the ways that consideration might shape my own writing as a person of faith, as well as that of the many undergraduate writers I teach.

The book's second part, "Life," embodies the principles Lott explores in "Letters," and does so beautifully. "Life" includes only one long nonfiction essay, running almost 100 pages, titled "At Some Point in the Future, What Has Not Happened Will Be in the Past." The essay ostensibly explores the death of Lott's father, but—of course—is also about so much more: life and its passing; fathers and sons; our familial, literary, and spiritual inheritances; the writing process; how language itself is sometimes an inadequate vessel to express life's experiences.

When he moves to the essay's denouement, Lott declares he cannot adequately write about his father's death: "Even now, at this end of having tried to, I understand even more deeply how I do not have the technique, or the courage, or the language to achieve the story I want to tell."

As a writer, I can resonate with Lott's frustration, his sense that words cannot always capture experience, and that "there is no way" to write about some things, except to try: to put down what we believe to be true using the insufficient resources we have.

As a reader, though, I'm grateful for Lott's willingness to persist: "At Some Point in the Future" seems, to me, one of the finest examples of creative nonfiction I've read. Lott's essay is richly detailed, moving seamlessly through time and place. His narrative straddles several countries, decades, generations; it is both sprawling and compressed. Though the topic of a parent's death could mire a writer in maudlin reverie, Lott's essay ends with powerful affirmation, and the assertion that stories about death are also undeniably about life, too.

Letters and Life would be an excellent text for an advanced writing course and, indeed, I will be using it next semester for a "Studies in Writing" course offered to English majors and minors at my university. Lott provides both a theoretical basis for how and why we write as well as a powerful example of Lott's particular theories at work. While some nascent writers may struggle to understand all of Lott's "Letters," they will have no problems immersing themselves in his "Life," and in the remarkable incarnation—the word made flesh, as it were—found in Lott's story of death and birth. The book is worth purchasing for Lott's essay alone.

[Letters and Life: On Being a Writer, On Being a Christian by Bret Lott • Crossway Books, 2013](#)

Melanie Springer Mock writes: "I am a professor of English at George Fox University, Newberg, Oregon. My essays and reviews have appeared in *The Nation*, *Christian Feminism Today*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and *Mennonite World Review*, among other places. My most recent book is *Meant to Be*, forthcoming from Chalice Press. I blog about (and deconstruct) images of women embedded in evangelical popular culture at [AintIaWomanblog.net](#). Despite my vocation, I'm not always a bookish person, and like watching bad reality television, running, eating junk food, and taking long naps, under my desk if necessary."