

Bizarre Fiction on the Right-to-Life Issues

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SEVERAL YEARS AGO, my wife and I would spend our Saturday nights watching one of those feeble horror movie programs—you know, the ones which showed low-budget horror flicks, something about an evil tomato that came from outer space and conquered Earth. The show's host was Elvira, Mistress of the Dark. Elvira, Mistress of the Dark (please note that whenever one says her name, one must say her appositive in as sinister a tone of voice as possible)...anyway, Elvira, Mistress of the Dark, was thoroughly enjoyable—not so much for those features of her costume or anatomy for which she was known (she was, ah, rather, ah, buxom and had high hair). No, Elvira, Mistress of the Dark, was impressive for the tone with which she would comment about her low-budget films. Everybody—from the producers of the show to the viewers to Elvira, Mistress of the Dark, herself—everybody knew that the movies were supposed to be bad (some were quite well made). Elvira, Mistress of the Dark, however, deliberately made fun of her movies. And once, she pronounced a word in such a sarcastic tone of voice that it left a permanent impression on me. Instead of saying the word spelled b-i-z-a-r-r-e “bi-zar” as the dictionary suggests, with the accent on the second syllable, Elvira, Mistress of the Dark, said “bee-zar,” placing the accent on the first syllable and extending that syllable's pronunciation.

Beezar. Bizarre. No, beezar is a great metaphor for the fiction I encountered in preparation for this year's paper. The fictional works to be discussed represent some of the more beezar currents in abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia and are culled from my research work in right-to-life issues in American fiction of the past century. I thought that it would be helpful, however, for us to examine three representative

works from the last decade in greater detail to anticipate the trajectory that fiction concerned with the right-to-life issues might take in this twenty-first century. The three works are Kathy Acker's *Don Quixote: Which Was a Dream* (1986), David Martin's *Bring Me Children* (1992), and Ian McEwan's *Amsterdam* (1998). Instead of mere criticism of these novels, I would like to give you the opportunity to review certain passages so that the literary value of works dealing with the right-to-life issues can be better evaluated.

Kathy Acker's 1986 novel *Don Quixote: Which Was a Dream* is a fascinating piece of transgender fiction which begins with the main character having an abortion. Instead of ordinary abortion plots, where the mother undergoes the abortion and suffers delayed post-abortion syndrome, *Don Quixote* is bizarre in that the main character communicates her psychotic view of reality to the reader before she aborts. This psychotic view only becomes worse as the novel progresses.

When she was finally crazy because she was about to have an abortion, she conceived of the most insane idea that any woman can think of. Which is to love. How can a woman love? By loving someone other than herself. She would love another person. By loving another person, she would right every manner of political, social, and individual wrong: she would put herself in those situations so perilous the glory of her name would resound. The abortion was about to take place.

From her neck to her knees she wore pale or puke green paper. This was her armor. She had chosen it specially, for she knew that this world's conditions are so rough for any single person, even a rich person, that person has to make do with what she can find: this's no world for idealism. Example: the green paper would tear as soon as the abortion began.

They told her they were going to take her from the operating chair to her own bed in a wheeling chair. The wheeling chair would be her transportation. She went out to look at it. It was dying. It had once been a hack, the same as all the hacks on grub street; now, as all the hacks, was a full-time drunk, mumbled all the time about sex but now no longer not even never did it but didn't have the wherewithal or equipment to do it, and hung around with the other bums. That is, women who're having

abortions.

She decided that since she was setting out on the greatest adventure any person can take, that of the Holy Grail, she ought to have a name (identity). She had to name herself. When a doctor sticks a steel catheter into you while you're lying on your back and you do exactly what he and the nurses tell you to; finally, blessedly, you let go of your mind. (9)

The tone of these few paragraphs approximates that of the entire novel. There are non sequiturs, combinations of verb forms which confuse the reader so that it is not clear which verb controls the sentence structure, and hallucinatory episodes. Moreover, from this opening section it is apparent that Don Quixote is not merely a mother who will abort her unborn child; she considers herself a knight whose pursuit of an abortion is likened to the pursuit of the Holy Grail. This deception is necessary, of course, to persuade her that what she is doing is not only noble, but perhaps even of a religious quality. Don Quixote's companion is no human Sancho Panza, but a dog which is variously called Saint Simeon and which (or is it who?) has anthropomorphic abilities. The dog talks, is able to manifest itself as a human at times, and has quite an extensive vocabulary. After her abortion Don Quixote and her canine companion roam the country battling oppression against women.

While the entire novel is a good read (if you like sheer verbal play and not coherency in your fiction), one extremely disturbing feature permeates the novel: virulent *ad hominem* attacks against Catholics. Don Quixote tells the dog "Go along muttering, as all Catholics do" (23). Catholics "kidnap young women not cause [sic] they're women but cause [sic] they look like boys" (24). Don Quixote further asserts that "I know Catholicism is really a secret order of assassins" (24).

Often, the *ad hominem* attacks are blended with non sequiturs. In one instance the bruises which are on Don Quixote's body are blamed on Catholics. The dog states that "These aren't the marks of heterosexual love, but of Catholics. Catholics, since they're celibate, throw stones" (31). The educated reader will perceive the double non sequitur

immediately. Celibacy is neither a direct nor an approximate cause for “throwing stones,” whether the phrase is to be taken literally or figuratively. The second non sequitur compounded within these few words obscures the origin of the marks and blames Catholics without justifiable cause.ⁱ

Don Quixote’s attitude towards the Virgin Mary especially shows how strident is her hatred of life and established religion. She thinks the Virgin Mary is a captive of white men: “Religious white men hate women,” she says, “and so they make women into the image of the Virgin Mary” (178). This idea, that the Virgin Mary was somehow the result of male power over women, is most elaborately explained by the Chicana lesbian feminist writer Gloria Anzaldua in an essay which is frequently anthologized in college readers, titled “Entering into the Serpent.” Anzaldua tries to account for the change in the perception of pagan deities by declaring that

After the Conquest, the Spaniards and their Church continued to split *Tonantsi/Guadalupe*. They desexed *Guadalupe*, taking *Coatlalopeuh*, the serpent/sexuality, out of her. They completed the split begun by the Nahuas by making *la Virgen de Guadalupe/Virgen Maria* into chaste virgins and *Tlazolteotl/Coatllicue/la Chingada* into *putas*; into the Beauties and the Beasts. They went even further; they made all Indian deities and religious practices the work of the devil.

Thus *Tonantsi* became *Guadalupe*, the chaste protective mother, the defender of the Mexican people. (25)

While Anzaldua is clearly wrong about the cause and effect relationship by which she hopes to establish to advance her lesbian viewpoint, one must admire the semantic gymnastics she uses to ignore one of the most miraculous and life-affirming events in human history. But then, the effort to return to pagan roots is an effort which has wide currency in certain anti-life sectors. Although pro-life pagans would disagree with such an estimation, ten years ago Ginette Paris stated that paganism was a suitable alternative to patriarchal monotheism.ⁱⁱ

Moreover, since abortion is a sacred act, Paris suggests that the goddess Artemis can help people understand “a new allocation of life and death powers” (27) and that abortion is not only “a kind of sacrifice” (34) but also one which was most suitable “as a sacrifice to Artemis” (107).ⁱⁱⁱ

Perhaps the antagonism of the narrator and various characters in the novel can be attributed to a deeper ideology. The narrator states that women drove a “stake through the red Heart of Jesus Christ...women don’t want anything to do with love” (28). This vampiristic approach is a Marxist and feminist critic’s literary playground. Not only are the women in this novel repudiating the spiritual love of the God-Man; they are also defining themselves out of the province of the most powerful, constructive, and life-affirming emotion in the world. Instead, the characters believe in a “love” which is defined at one point as “the unity of friendship and desire” (46). The sophisticated reader would be able to find many flaws in this definition, most notably what is missing: a spiritual connection; and an adequate placement of the erotic as a means instead of an end to love. The explicit sex scenes in the novel indicate that the characters have bought into the concept that love and sexual activity are necessarily devoid of moral values.

If the beginning of the novel seemed tame, once Don Quixote has her abortion, things immediately degenerate into fantasy. At the beginning the narrator states that abortion brings about insanity. Don Quixote is sixty-six-years-old. The reader may ask at this point: What? Could a mother be so old and have an abortion? Possibly, but still.... The text quickly becomes polyvocal, mixing strands of conversation which seem to have no relationship with what has just been said. The reader must recall the subtitle of the novel: *Which Was a Dream*. An insert which breaks the flow of the novel recommends Prince as United States president.^{iv} Another insert regards Arabs as liars. These two unrelated inserts are eventually followed by Don Quixote addressing her aborted son in her will with an admonition to marry rich. Don Quixote is renamed, avatar-like, as Lulu, a Pygmalion-type character, who considers

herself an abortion. Lulu becomes Don Quixote again as she dreams about abortions. Even the dog dreams of abortion.

And yet, even this novel, which seems to delight in verbal play around abortion and masochistic lesbianism, sends out signals which indicate that not all is well with the anti-life view of the world. The reader, however, must bring not only traditional rhetorical skills to uncover some meaning from the psychotic ramblings but also a skill at correcting logical fallacies. Perhaps deconstruction would help readers elucidate the novel, for, if deconstruction aims to demonstrate how a text subverts itself from within, then the wild statements of the various characters can be corrupted not from without—by, for example, a pro-life reader—but from within, by the speakers themselves. Thus, the cry “let me be alive!” (77) spoken by the prince character shows what priority life has over death. Don Quixote acknowledges abortions are “unnatural means [to regain] the proper balance of human power” (178).^v Don Quixote rejects suicide as a solution to her own problems because her mother committed suicide and left “a legacy of anger and fear” (190). Thinking that she is beyond love, and therefore beyond being human, implies that Don Quixote must have an idea of what true love is as well as an idea of what it means to be human.

Similar rhetorical and logical approaches could be used to explicate the religious positions of the main character. Don Quixote considers the prayers of religious persons as no communication. What is left out in this traditional negation is what Don Quixote does consider the prayers of religious persons to be. Finally, quite oddly, like a *deus ex machina* in traditional drama, God tells Don Quixote that He is imperfect and that she should believe in herself; the novel ends soon after this “revelation.” Even here, with this final comment (or attack?) on a believing world, the reader could ask if Don Quixote will become intelligent enough to discern whether this is a true revelation from the Almighty or not. But that is a step beyond what the author may have intended. After all, what is most significant is that Don Quixote received a divine message at all.

This presumes that even Don Quixote, the mother who suffers through the psychosis surrounding her abortion, has not yet gone beyond God's reach.

The next novel to be considered as most representative of bizarre infanticide fiction certainly must be David Martin's 1992 book, *Bring Me Children*. Set in contemporary West Virginia, the novel begins with a gripping narrative of infanticide.^{vi}

Although Martin's book lacks the comprehensive anti-Catholic bigotry of Acker's novel, most evident here is the anti-religious bias of the main character, Dr. Mason Quindell.^{vii} Quindell's opposite is John Lyon, a steeled television anchor who sobs uncontrollably when he reads a news story about the numbers of children who are murdered each year. It is this intense compassion which motivates a catalyst character in the beginning of the novel, Claire Cept, to contact him with her suspicions about who is responsible for the infanticides. Quindell is called "Doctor Death" and a "monster," and the narrator assures the reader that this is "not a figure of speech" (26).^{viii} On first seeing Quindell, Lyon's reaction is that he sees a "monstrous form" that "nature is supposed to ensure it is aborted before it can be carried to term" (68).

What makes this novel especially unique is the barbaric delight which Quindell takes in satisfying inordinate sexual desires. Quindell, who is blind, is the epitome of the eugenicist: he thinks his quality of life is more important than a bum's and he blames God for his blindness. With the cooperation of a policeman, Quindell regularly has vagabonds brought to his house where, after having the individuals tied to a gurney, he delights in amputating various body parts with "Mr. Gigli," a surgical wire that Quindell uses so that his victims suffer excruciating pain before they die. The sadism which Quindell inflicts is necessary for his sexual abuse of his secretary, whom he regularly sodomizes.

Even this novel, however, poses some interesting religious questions. When Quindell asks "Well?" after depositing the newborn

on the precarious subterranean ledge, he may be illustrating a late twentieth-century effort to determine whether God exists. A direct challenge like this presented to the Almighty may merely be the secular person's effort to, so to speak, smoke God out of the cave. Would God Himself tolerate an evil happening to a purely innocent human being? If Quindell succeeds in having God reveal Himself to right this obvious wrong, then perhaps he could ask God why he, a brilliant doctor, suffers from blindness. Although he is a "monster," as we are assured by the narrator, perhaps this infanticide novel is Quindell qua Jacob, wrestling with the divine.

The winner for the most bizarre euthanasia novel may not seem all that bizarre. Ian McEwan's 1998 novel *Amsterdam* concerns events in the lives of two main characters, Clive Linley and Vernon Halliday, both of whom not only were lovers of a deceased woman named Molly, but are now best friends. Set in Britain in 1996, Clive is a composer who has been commissioned to write a symphony for the millennium. Vernon is the editor of a newspaper called *Judge*. Both of the men are political opponents of the foreign secretary, Julian Garmony. Vernon's ability to dehumanize is evident when he compares Garmony to a "cancer from the organs of the body politic" (121).^{ix} Vernon thinks that exposing Garmony's secret fantasies of dressing in women's clothes will help defeat his bid for prime minister. Garmony's wife defuses the embarrassing situation surrounding her husband by going public with the photos in a televised interview, thus affirming the Christian principle that "love was a greater force than spite" (135).

While the political side of the novel is thus resolved, the more important theme is the attitude towards euthanasia conveyed by the characters. Both main characters have interesting definitions of what it means to be human.

Clive cannot tolerate the ordinariness of human life. His attitude is based on his religious principle that there was something "wrong with the

world for which neither God nor His absence could be blamed” (5). When talking about the debilitating effects of Alzheimer’s on Molly, Clive does not merely state that he would have killed her had he been her husband. He also specifies the process by which he would have killed her—with an overdose of sleeping pills. Clive is an aesthetic person. Clive loves abstract beauty more than ordinary life and considers an appreciation of music a special quality of humanness. For Clive, being fully alive is experiencing the outdoors. In fact, while walking through England’s Lake District, Clive is so delighted in the beauty surrounding him that he thinks he “heard the music he had been looking for” to complete his millennial symphony (90). However, on the same walk Clive may be a witness to a man attacking a woman, but he doesn’t interfere. Later in the novel, when he is called upon by the police to identify a possible rape suspect, Clive is unable to face the human reality brought into the police station. The paragraph which follows this episode, written in the best Dickensian tradition, shows Clive’s revulsion toward ordinary humanity.^x

Given such a revulsion toward ordinary humans, when he develops a pain in his left hand, as Molly did when she first began to deteriorate from Alzheimer’s, Clive thinks that he may suffer the same end. He asks Vernon to kill him if he becomes debilitated. (Vernon later writes Clive that he would kill him if necessary.) Eventually, Clive’s nervousness about his own physical health persuades him to consider suicide. Clive enumerates his symptoms: “unpredictable, bizarre, and extremely antisocial behavior, a complete loss of reason. Destructive tendencies, delusions of omnipotence. A disintegrated personality” (169). What the reader should note significantly is that there is really no justification for such an enumeration. Unpredictable? Possibly. But then aren’t all artsy people supposed to be unpredictable, especially when the various muses inspire them? Bizarre? No previous action on Clive’s part could possibly be construed as bizarre. The most bizarre act in the entire novel leading up to this enumeration of symptoms is Garmony’s wearing

women's dresses. Clive may be a loner, but he is not antisocial. His desire to write the "Nessun dorma" for the new century is a noble ambition and therefore could neither be a delusion nor a symptom of omnipotence. As far as having a disintegrated personality, Vernon seems to fit that criterion better. Although his view on human life is not as elaborated as Clive's, Vernon's definition of humanness is, if not neurotic, then certainly unique. Because so many people depend on him for answers in his publishing office, Vernon sometimes thinks that he himself does not exist and that he is fragmented among other people. However, while Clive strives for the fantastic and the abstract, Vernon feels alive from the thrill of the reality around him.

Since life is so unbearable for Clive and since he is so angry at his friend for wanting to publish the Garmony pictures, Clive goes to Amsterdam, ostensibly to oversee the performance of his millennial symphony, but also to arrange that he and Vernon would be killed together. Clive laces Vernon's drink with poison. In the hotel where they are staying, a willing Dutch doctor and his nurse kill both of them after they are drugged.

These two euthanasia episodes are pathos-inspiring; the reader sees the hopes and potential of the two protagonists dashed as the needles are thrust into their arms. Even though euthanasia is legal in Holland, their deaths are called mutual murders. While the euthanasia situation in the Netherlands is only casually mentioned throughout the novel, the negative connotation of the practice comes through clearly. The first mention of Dutch euthanasia is denoted as doctors in Holland "exploiting the suicide laws" (40). "The Dutch medical scandal" is mentioned several times throughout the novel, but only as an ancillary motif until the final murders of Clive and Vernon. After his arrival at Schiphol airport, Clive exclaims in epideictic of praise:

what a calm and civilized city Amsterdam was.... Such a tolerant, openminded, grown-up sort of place: the beautiful brick and carved timber warehouses converted into tasteful apartments, the modest van Gogh bridges, the under-

stated street furniture, the intelligent, unstuffy-looking Dutch on their bikes with their level-headed children sitting behind. Even the shopkeepers looked like professors, the street sweepers like jazz musicians. There was never a city more rationally ordered. (168)

Of course, as with most epideictic, the hyperbole should become evident for the reader.^{xi} After the murders, Garmony exclaims in the opposing form of epideictic, that of censure. On their mission to return the bodies to Britain, Garmony says to George (Molly's husband) quite simply: "Turns out there are these rogue doctors here, pushing the euthanasia laws to limits. Mostly they get paid for bumping off people's elderly relatives" (191). It seems a fitting counterpoint when Garmony balances Clive's praise for the rational Dutch with a comment of his own about their rationality:

"Ah," he [George] sighed at last. "The Dutch and their reasonable laws."
 "Quite," Garmony said, "When it comes to being reasonable, they rather go over the top." (192)

Even the narrator can't seem to restrain from implying that not all is well in the Dutch paradise. Before the above snippet of conversation between George and Garmony, the narrator reports that "On the corner was a spruce little coffeehouse, probably selling drugs" (192).

What can be said about these novels that may indicate the trajectory that twenty-first century fiction on the right-to-life issues may take? At least three factors can be located on a calculus of increasing disrespect for life.

A first prophecy for future fiction would be that we must prepare ourselves to see more fiction as bizarre as Acker's novel. Note that, since abortion is a common item in the culture, the traditional storyline of a young mother in anguish over what to do regarding an untimely pregnancy has been supplanted by newer fictional representations. Acker's book is an instance of the fictional extremes which an author

would take trying to establish a new perspective on abortion fiction. Inject some lesbianism here, some polyvocal characterizations there, add a healthy dose of masochism, and thus we have a new recipe for abortion fiction.

Note also that the extremes are only now being reached in infanticide fiction. Infanticide is still a reprehensible matter in the popular culture; that is, few people except Peter Singer and assorted other intellectuals have bought the philosophy that handicapped newborns should have their lives killed on the scale of unborn children through abortion. Infanticide fiction still follows the traditional plot that abortion had two decades ago—either the plot line of a family struggling with what to do with someone who does not meet the standard of American perfection regarding human life or the plot line that a health care professional has decided to take matters into his or her own hands, killing the infant who is deemed as less than perfect. There are exceptions, however, and David Martin's novel is one indication that ordinary infanticide may not hold the reading public's attention as much as a novel with bizarre means of killing infants as well as varied masochistic and sexually explicit content.

A second prophecy is that twenty-first century fiction will continue to be devoid of ethical values, either by making no overt reference to values outside the world of fiction or by having characters who do not argue the ethical merits of the right-to-life issues at all. All of the novels discussed here do not address the ethical foundations of the right-to-life issues. No fictional character cares about how Judaism's view on abortion differs from Roman Catholic Christianity's, just as no character cares that there are some in the culture who advocate that handicapped newborns should not have their right to life legally recognized. In fact, what is noteworthy is the attack against religion in the abortion novel. Acker's characters are similar to standard American bigots who, if they cannot attack the beliefs of Roman Catholics and evangelical Christians, do the next best thing and attack the religious people themselves.

I predict that the ad hominem attacks will become worse. If Catholics can tolerate being victims—even if only in fiction, which really doesn't mean anything, anyway (right?)—then fundamentalist Christians can be picked on next. Maybe even Orthodox Jews after them; maybe even.... The list of future targets of abuse in fiction can expand as long as one group suffers silently.

Third, the works discussed herein do not allow for good old-fashioned catharsis. Don Quixote ends in a limbo regarding her spiritual welfare. Though Quindell is killed at novel's end, the lives of the handicapped newborns are not properly mourned because they were, after all, "defective" anyway. Vernon is killed by his best friend and unfortunately will have his reputation tainted as one who was involved in a double murder—a euthanasia murder at that, in the Netherlands of all places, the euthanasia capital of the world.

What are the emotional benefits to be derived from such fiction? Why should I read novels which make me depressed about the life-denying state of society? What do I get out of reading about a post-abortion mother who is delusional, or reading about babies falling into a chasm, or reading about a paranoid man who would take the slightest symptom of being human and convert it into a justification to end his own life? What satisfaction possibly accrues from reading novels with these plots?

Perhaps this is the ultimate rhetorical point of such life-denying fiction. The meaning of Horace's famous dictum "aut prodesse aut delectare" is often obscured by the Latinized correlative conjunctions. Literature has two purposes: to teach and to delight. Perhaps these novels can entertain me in some way, but, more importantly, they can teach me something about the value of human life. Perhaps I can use these novels as a barometer against which the social pressure for killing various other classes of human beings can be measured. Perhaps their warped views of human life can challenge me to be a prophet to this twenty-first century, to warn the world. Perhaps, finally, what these

novels can teach is that I should do my best to see that real life never becomes so bizarre.

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i. Of course, Catholics are not the only ones who suffer at the hands of anti-life lesbians in Acker's novel. Fundamentalist Christians are persecuted primarily because of their stance on abortion. The characters mix religious faith with racism freely, as when Don Quixote says that such fundamentalist Christians are "Born-Agains who were murdering women who tried to get abortions in the United States" (177; capitalization in original).

ii. See, for example, Jeannine Parvati Baker's online essay "The Sword Was Not with the Goddess: a Spiritual Midwife Addresses the Need to Heal Abortion". Baker states: "I have had pagans and yogis alike tell me that motherhood archetypically contains both the loving as well as the rejecting mother and to be "whole" we need to express both. Abortion seen in that light is but an extension of the natural "weaning mother." This argument is absurd.... The source of confusion is calling killing "weaning" or a "natural process"—dying is a natural process, killing other humans is not part of a natural religious path.

iii. The circumstances of the abortion in Acker's novel are clearly pagan and devoid of any traditional Judaeo-Christian ethics. Another mother who will abort, described as "Irish," prays to the Moon. This is significant if only because the adjective "Irish" resonates with the religion most vociferously identified with the pro-life position, Roman Catholicism. Moreover, perhaps this is Acker's way of helping the reader understand

that the mothers who are aborting are pagan. Just as Paris promotes worship of Artemis, Acker is indicating here that the Irish mother has abandoned her traditional religious roots and has gone over not necessarily to Goddess, but to Artemis worship (the moon is, after all, symbolic of Artemis, or, in the ancient Roman deity, Diana).

iv. For some reason, although the characters are vicious towards the Catholic Church, Prince is described as “a good Catholic” (22).

v. This is in opposition to Paris’s thinking that the goddess Artemis can help people understand “a new allocation of life and death powers” (27) and that abortion is merely “*another way of choosing death over life*” (51; italics in original).

vi. As with the Acker title, since permission from the publisher to use an excerpt from the book had not arrived in time before the deadline for submissions to this edition of *The Lakeland Forum*, I encourage the reader to read pages four through six of Martin’s novel him- or herself.

vii. In fact, several characters demonstrate various degrees of devotion to Catholicism. A woman who first directs the protagonist, John Lyon, to the infanticides is an African-American Catholic named Claire Cept, whose granddaughter of the same name will assist the protagonist in solving the crimes. This granddaughter, who had an abortion and thinks she cannot have normal relationships with men, is found moaning before a statue of the Virgin Mary from which the Jesus figure has been chipped away. Claire is found praying before the statue, saying “I’m sorry” (200-02). At novel’s end, however, Lyon is happily married with Claire, and they have children.

viii. As with the Acker novel, parenthetical citations will only include page numbers to the text of Martin’s novel as listed in the Works Cited.

ix. As with the Martin novel, parenthetical citations will only include page numbers to the text of McEwan’s novel as listed in the Works Cited.

x. As with the Martin title, since permission from the publisher to use an excerpt from the book had not arrived in time before the deadline for submissions to this edition of *The Lakeland Forum*, I encourage the reader to read pages 165-166 of McEwan’s novel him- or herself.

xi. Helping readers discover this hyperbole may be a task for the academy. One of the benefits of presenting papers at University Faculty for Life conferences is that we academics can learn suitable terminology to best express trends in literature and other sciences which may help not only us as we read difficult or politically-challenging texts but also our students as they struggle to negotiate the value of a text on a first reading. Thus, besides calling this passage an exercise in hyperbole or misplaced epideictic of praise, I can also label it as an instance of “disordered sentiment” which Dr. Frank Zapatka identified as a central concern of Walker Percy, that great twentieth-century writer whose works are more prophetic than they are humorous or philosophical. Dr. Zapatka summarized Percy’s impressions that the Germans were the “nicest” people in the 1930s—the same decade when they attacked the civil rights of Jews and when they began thinking of the killing efforts which would occur in the next decade. Similarly, Percy chastised Americans for being so generous and, well, golly, just the “nicest” people around—this, even while they have abortion legal throughout the nine months of pregnancy, and while their respect for the handicapped and the elderly is comparable to Quindell’s and Clive’s. The superlative form of the adjective used to describe both the Nazi German of the 1930s and 1940s and the American of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first century is, as Zapatka identified in his paper presentation, striking.