

Sue Sorensen, *The Collar: Reading Christian Ministry in Fiction, Television, and Film*. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014. Pp. 306. Softcover, \$35.00.

The Collar is a compelling book in appearance (the cover image is striking and provocative) and content. As William Willimon points out in his Foreword to the book, fiction carries a “fecund, perceptive, evocative power,” and Sorensen’s book is a fine source to guide us in tapping that kind of power to help us understand the role of the pastor and the nature of Christian ministry.

The book might be described as a bit of a hybrid work. That is, it is not primarily a monograph aimed at Sorensen’s academic peers, although it would be a mistake to think the content is ‘dumbed down’ in any way. Rather, *The Collar* seeks to reach a wider readership in an exploration of literary and filmic sources for the purpose of teaching us something real about the nature of Christian ministry. Indeed, that purpose forms the criteria for Sorensen’s evaluation of the many and varied sources which are brought into the discussion: does this source show us something real of the ministry (185, 246)? Sorensen frames her project as one which she means to be “grounded in scripture” (282), specifically in the Pastoral Epistles, excerpts of which are prominent in the prelude and conclusion of the book, serving as bookends. In addition to the scriptural grounding, theologians such as Martin Luther, Eugene Peterson, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer are used to generate discussion and provide direction.

Sorensen deals with an impressive array of sources, ranging across fiction, television, and film, with the preponderance of discussion focusing on literary fiction’s portrayal of clerical characters. To provide some way of shaping the material, Sorensen creates two kinds of organizational categories, namely topical chapters that deal with multiple sources (e.g. heroism and suffering, the collared detective, disaster), and a category she labels as ‘interlude.’ Most of the ‘interludes’ are devoted to discussion of a single author or work, material that does not fit easily into the topical chapters. However, the interludes sometimes also deal with multiple sources or authors, and, given the fact that the interludes are inserted between topical chapters makes for a bit of an unwieldy and even distracting structure. It may be the case that Sorensen simply tries to include discussions of too many sources. Her book is at its best when she takes time and space with a source, exercises patient reading, and includes lengthy quotations

for which she provides close, perceptive interpretations. To consistently pay that kind of attention would mean including fewer specific discussions of sources, which seems to me to be a more desirable approach to this kind of book, an approach which would avoid the occasional assertion of conclusions which have not been given close attention (95, 136, 175).

Far more prominent than my hesitations outlined above are the strengths of this book. The specific chapter that deals with the portrayal of clergy in Canadian literature is an important and original contribution to this field of study. Sorensen's treatment of women in this book is exemplary, in that she makes the deliberate decision not to deal with them as a separate category, but to make what is for her a theological move, working within St. Paul's declaration that in Christ there is no longer male or female. Sorensen's writing is engaging, personal, witty, and as I have indicated above, very perceptive. In my view, this book makes an important contribution in three areas; first, in literary criticism and interpretation, then in the field of theology and ministry studies, and perhaps most interestingly, the book contributes to the ongoing endeavour to think about theology and literature together. To read this kind of book suggests the possibilities of pursuing further a similar set of questions in some literary subgenre (for example, portrayal of clergy in Anabaptist/Mennonite literature).

The Collar is the kind of book to which I will return to consult for guidance in literary interpretation and analysis of texts, as well as suggestions for what to read or watch. There's another dimension of this book which I want to highlight. It's not every book that makes the reader want to engage in the same kind of work being done in the book. *The Collar* has had for me the salutary effects of drawing me to pursue many of its sources, and also of wanting to understand the reality of ministry more fully.

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