

Masterplots II: Christian Literature

John K. Roth, ed. *Masterplots II: Christian Literature*. Pasadena, CA: Salem Press, 2008. 4 vols: 2125 pp. \$385.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 9781587653797 (set).

The Masterplots and Masterplots II series are known to library professionals for providing brief summaries and critical discussions of selected works of fiction (including poetry, drama, and other genres) and nonfiction. *Masterplots II: Christian Literature*, the latest title in these series, performs a similar function for fiction and nonfiction works which the editor and publisher have categorized as Christian literature. This four-volume set ranges widely, particularly in terms of types of material (besides novels, poetry, drama, it includes autobiographies, philosophical and theological treatises, scriptural texts, papal encyclicals, and so on), diversity of authorship (writers from Africa to Wales), and dates of coverage (works from the tenth century B.C.E. through 2006). A list of reviewers and their affiliations appears at the beginning of the first volume; most are from colleges or universities in the United States. The set's intended audience, "general readers and secondary and college-level students in a variety of courses, from literature to the history of religion" (xi), suggests that these volumes might be mostly of interest to theological libraries in colleges and universities with undergraduate religious studies departments (though perhaps not as much to seminary libraries, unless one lumps them under "general readers").

The volumes consist of short articles, usually 3-5 pages in length, in alphabetical order by the title of the work. Each article begins with bibliographic information about the work; classification into a genre and subgenres; a list of "core issues" (subjects) about which the work is said to deal; and a brief summary of the work, including a list of characters if it is fiction. The bulk of the article is divided into an overview of the work, which can range from detailed summaries to critical analyses, and a section on "Christian themes." Articles conclude with short bibliographies of items related to the specific work or intended to illuminate its themes. The set begins with a publisher's note, an editor's introduction, and a brief essay on "The Bible in History." It ends with a number of appendices (a brief bibliography of "secondary works important to the study of Christian and inspirational literature" (xii); a list of relevant electronic resources; and a chronological list of titles) and indices (core issues, genre, geographical, title, and author).

Strengths include the set's already-mentioned generic, geographic, and chronological range, as well as its inclusion of a large number of recent works, many of a popular nature. In fact, about 75% of the works were published since 1900, with almost 20% (90 of the total 502 titles) appearing between 2000 and 2006 (the same number of titles represents the time period from the chronological beginning of coverage to 1700). Indeed, the preponderance and diversity of recent works almost ensures that readers will not have heard of many of them, thus making the set into something of a reader's guide to Christian literature, a place from which to go out and explore more fully items about which it has created awareness.

There are, however, at least two questions about *Masterplots II: Christian Literature* that I do not find that the volumes answer in a convincing fashion: What is Christian literature? and, Why these specific examples of the

genre? To begin, then, with the definitional question: Both “Christian” and “literature” are contested terms, and the difficulty of defining the phrase is acknowledged in the publisher’s note that opens the first volume. The publisher illustrates this difficulty with quotations from books by Barbara J. Walker and John Mort, each of whom has written a guide to the genre of Christian fiction and has noted in those guides that “Christian fiction” appears to be very much in the eye of the beholder. (Both, however, are able to come up with definitions for it, despite the attendant complexities.) Suggesting that the definitional task is that much more complicated for those who would add non-fiction to the mix, the publisher nevertheless manages to settle on the kinds of work that will be included in this collection. All titles will be “the greatest and most representative works identified with the genre”; a core will be “classics”; though “several of the titles were not written exclusively for a Christian audience, all works covered in these volumes have been consulted, examined, taught, or analyzed from a Christian perspective”; and “[m]any of the titles . . . overtly emphasize the Christian experience, and often these works were written expressly for the purpose of addressing Christian concerns or simply providing a good ‘Christian read’” (x). Besides failing to define “literature” explicitly, potentially confusing readers who assume that literature has qualities that separate it from “mere” popular fiction and other non-literary materials, the publisher tries to be as inclusive as possible and thereby almost completely dilutes the category “Christian literature.” Considering that many works of all kinds have been “consulted, examined, taught, or analyzed from a Christian perspective,” one is left to conclude that any selection will be purely arbitrary.

So, while the set includes titles that would generally be considered Christian literature—books like John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* and Thomas à Kempis’s *The Imitation of Christ*—other titles appear only, it would seem, because Christianity plays some role in the work itself or its reception, even if that theme is incidental to the work or the author does not view him- or herself as a Christian with a Christian purpose in mind in the work’s production. Some examples: Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, which deals with Protestantism and Catholicism but does so to advance an economic and sociological argument, not for religious reasons; Plotinus’s *The Enneads*, apparently included in this set because it had “a significant influence on later thinkers, both pagan and Christian” (542) despite the fact that Plotinus was not a Christian (under this criterion, works by Plato and Aristotle should also be included); William Butler Yeats’s “A Dialogue of Self and Soul,” in which, the reviewer admits, “Yeats turns the Christian message almost upon its head in order to affirm our human life as it is lived rather than as it should be lived” (458); and Sinclair Lewis’s *Elmer Gantry*, which the reviewer sees as a critique not simply of ministers but of religion itself as something best left behind in a technologically advanced society.

Even in cases where the works selected “emphasize the Christian experience” and were written for Christian purposes, the choice of the specific titles in question (and the absence of other titles) can sometimes be baffling. Why include Robert Schuller’s recent book *Don’t Throw Away Tomorrow* when other works by him (such as the *Be Happy Attitudes*) are surely better known and more likely to be the objects of reader interest? Why Richard John Neuhaus’s *Death on a Friday Afternoon*, a set of meditations on Jesus’s last words, instead of *The Naked Public Square? Out of My Life and Thought*, Albert Schweitzer’s autobiography, appears, but his *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* does not. Karl Barth’s *Epistle to the Romans* is here, but *Church Dogmatics* is not. Completely missing are works like Eusebius’s *Church History*, Boethius’s *The Consolation of Philosophy*, other titles by early Latin and Greek Christian writers, as well as relatively well-known items mentioned in the bibliographies of other works (Brother Lawrence’s *Practice of the Presence of God* and Richard Foster’s *The Celebration of Discipline* are a couple of

examples). Instead, the reader finds many recent science fiction, romance, and mystery novels, and quite a lot of poetry, some probably known to certain readers but quite a lot of it new to many readers, with much of it unlikely ever to end up on a high school or college syllabus.

Of course, as the publishers acknowledge, “any list defined as the ‘best’ and most representative of the vast number of works now appropriated as Christian literature will be highly selective—and subjective” (xi), and I agree that selectivity and subjectivity are unavoidable. And yet, I wonder if a narrower definition of “Christian literature” (perhaps a complete replacement of the term in favor of “Christian writings”), coupled with a greater balance between what might be called “classic Christian literature” and more recent works, might make the selectivity a bit less arbitrary and the subjectivity a bit less pronounced. This is *not* to say that recent material—some of it, like the Left Behind series, also highly popular—be excluded from this set. It is laudable to take these titles into account; such inclusivity shows that Christian literature is living and growing. But no set is limitless in size, and selection decisions are always made. Thus, a better sense of *what* the genre of Christian literature is and *why* particular books are included in the set would have been welcomed.

Other criticisms might be made; the occasional article that does something other than summarize the work (e.g., the treatment of *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *Dark Night of the Soul*, which sounds more like an appreciation than a summary, and the article on Jong Chun Park’s *Crawl with God, Dance in the Spirit*, which reads like a book review). But my overall evaluation is based on my lengthier criticisms above, and that evaluation is somewhat mixed. For institutions (and individuals) that want a solid collection that summarizes the “classic works” of Christian literature from the beginnings to the present, this set is, as I have indicated, problematic. Institutions that offer Christian (or religious) literature courses *might* find the set helpful, particularly for the short bibliographies that accompany the entries; but such courses would probably have to be as eclectic in their reading selections as these volumes to find them very useful. But for those institutions which do not mind the eclecticism of these volumes, and which have a clientele interested in discovering more recent, perhaps lesser-known writings that might broadly be construed as Christian, this set may be appealing.

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