

## PIERS PAUL READ

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Most readers will recognize the title *Alive!* and others will have seen the movie made of the book, but few, I wager, will know the author's name. I do not say, remember it. Authors learn how anonymous they remain to most readers. And that is just as well, of course -- it is what is written, not who writes it, that should captivate us.

The author of *Alive!* is Piers Paul Read.

Doubtless he has grown used to being identified in this way. But *Alive!* is a non-fiction book, and Piers Paul Read is a novelist. It is because he is a Catholic novelist that he could write so powerful and empathetic book about those survivors of a plane crash in the Andes. He has recently written another non-fiction book about Chernobyl. I am sure it is an excellent book. But it is to his novels that we should go.

His *oeuvre* is odd, which means that he follows his own line, choosing not to repeat himself. One is struck by how different his books are from one another. An early novel, *Monk Dawson*, conveys the school experience of Catholics in England. A later novel, *The Professor's Daughter*, is set in the United States and attempts to convey the chaotic campus during the days when protesting the Vietnam War seemed to be the

major academic preoccupation.

Read has written historical novels, *romans fleuves*, he has tried to occupy the skin of characters from places and cultures very different from his own. *A Married Man* (1979) is billed as a novel of love, marriage and adultery, usually a promissory claim on a paperback cover. Long before one gets to the end, one knows he is far from the land of schlock.

"I find it strange," said John, "that you make vows when you marry to last until you are separated by death, and yet now that Clare is dead I feel no less married to her than I did before."

"Perhaps marriages are made in heaven after all," said Eustace.

"And yet Christ said, didn't He, that there are no husbands and wives in Heaven?"

"We can't expect to understand it all," said Eustace, shaking his head. "We have to take what we can get and make the most of it."

"And hope," said John, "that He whose understanding matters will understand."

Not the denouement the cover would have prepared you for.

*A Season in the West* (1988) tells of a Czech writer who comes to England and meets his translator. Coming from an oppressive, communist culture, he expects more from the culture of the free world than, alas, it has to offer. Read is able to appraise his own culture through the perceptive appraising eyes of Josef Birek.

*The Free Frenchman* (1986), a very large novel, tells the story of France from 1914 to 1950. The perceptive reader will detect that the author is a Roman Catholic. Often this is not simply a background assumption, but becomes thematic. Nowhere is this more the case than in *The Third Day* (1992), perhaps Read's most successful novel.

The premise of the novel is the discovery by an Israeli archeologist who comes upon a burial urn beneath the Dome of the Rock. The urn contains the body of a crucified male of the first century. On the skull are marks that could have been made by a crown of thorns. The novel is every bit as intriguing as this beginning. Read is able to explore the assumptions of some recent theology and biblical scholarship. A casualty of the apparent find is a priest who, in despair that he has dedicated his life to a myth, loses his faith, leaves the priesthood, spins out of control. His is a more honest reaction to the seeming disproof of the Resurrection than that of a cardinal who embarks on damage control and, in a vein that is unfortunately not unfamiliar, argues that belief in the Resurrection is perfectly compatible

with the discovery of the remains of Jesus.

*The Third Day* is the most overt theological drama Read has written thus far. His Catholicism has been visible from the beginning. Born in 1941, Read was brought up in Yorkshire and educated at Cambridge. He has lived out of England from time to time and has traveled widely. Married, he has four children. How does he, as a husband and father, regard the current confusion in the Church?

In 1991, Piers Paul Read contributed a pamphlet to the Claridge *Blasts* series entitled *Quo Vadis?* An earlier entry in the series had been A.N. Wilson's anti-Catholic screed. Read's contribution is a gifted Catholic layman's look at the Catholic Church in England. He recalls the tumultuous wake of Vatican II, with particular emphasis on the effect of the sexual revolution on moral theology, the devastating impact of radical feminism, the confusions of liberation theology, and the notion of an alternative magisterium of theologians. *Quo Vadis?* is a fresh look at a familiar picture, but one that has not lost its power to astonish and dismay. Read is particularly good on the confusion in catechetics and his protest is that of a parent whose children have been subjected to the nonsense he narrates.

Read wrote while the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* was still in preparation. This remarkable work is the clear remedy to the situation Piers Paul Read laments. Unfortunately, those who have been in charge of religious education are the ones to whom the dissemination of the

Catechism is being entrusted.

This suggests a direction in which the Catholic novelist might go. Once upon a time, Catholic novelists could write against the background of sound doctrine and widespread orthodox practice. No more. The Catholic writer of the future will have the sense of being a guerilla in the service of orthodoxy, with as background a waffling clergy and once Catholic institutions polemically related to the Vicar of Christ in Rome.

From a purely literary point of view, this is attractive. Catholic novelists used to worry about being thought catechetical, proselytizing under the guise of entertainment. The secular assumption now is that a self-declared Catholic novelist will attack his Church and tell stories about how awful it was to grow up Catholic.

But the assumptions of such novels are disintegrating. The supposed bad old Church is gone. In its place we have strident feminists demanding power, theologians denying the creed, bishops catering to these squeaky wheels, and churches growing emptier by the week.

The emerging situation is one in which such writers as Piers Paul Read can flourish -- much to their dismay.