



DOUGLAS WILSON

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WRITERS

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TO

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READ

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- Nine -  
Names That  
Belong  
on Your  
Bookshelf

G. K. CHESTERTON ♦ H. L. MENCKEN ♦ P. G. WODEHOUSE ♦ T. S. ELIOT  
J. R. R. TOLKIEN ♦ C. S. LEWIS ♦ R. F. CAPON ♦ M. S. ROBINSON ♦ N. D. WILSON

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“Wilson opens the twentieth-century vault to reveal a collection of authors who lived during our memory, or our grandparents’, and are worthy companions on the shelf with Lewis and Tolkien. Refreshingly broad, Wilson connects you personally with nine authors and critiques them with the penetrating Christian perspective present in all of Wilson’s works. This is a must-read for those who, like me, appreciate a few contemporary stepping-stones between Lewis and the great books of antiquity.”

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**Tony Reinke**, Staff Writer and Researcher, Desiring God Ministries; author, *Lit!: A Christian Guide to Reading Books*

“Doug Wilson is regarded by both friends and foes as a master wordsmith. In *Writers to Read*, he introduces us to those who taught him (and still teach him) his craft. This book is like a side door into a little diner down a back alley where the nouns pop, the verbs sizzle, and the fry cooks are known only by their initials. If you want an inside look at the art of word weaving, this book is for you.”

**Joe Rigney**, Assistant Professor of Theology and Christian Worldview,  
Bethlehem College and Seminary; author, *The Things of Earth* and *Live  
Like a Narnian*

WRITERS TO READ



W R I T E R S  
TO  
R E A D

Nine Names That Belong  
on Your Bookshelf

DOUGLAS WILSON

 **CROSSWAY**  
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

*Writers to Read: Nine Names That Belong on Your Bookshelf*

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For Shadrach, and the lifetime  
of reading before you.





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# Introduction

Samuel Johnson once said that no one but a blockhead ever wrote but for money. But leaving aside such a base calumny on my possible motives, the main argument will be that if books are among our friends, we ought to apply similar standards to them that we apply to our flesh-and-blood friends. We should want to choose them wisely and well and hope that we will be the better for their companionship.

In this book I would like to introduce you to a few of my close friends, suggesting nine names that belong on your bookshelf. Some have been my friends from childhood, some for many years, and one I met just recently. The best thing about these friendships is that most of them have or had no idea that I exist.

There is one curiosity about them: a number of years ago, I noticed that I tended to gravitate toward friends who, in the form in which we meet them, are largely characterized on book covers by initials instead of their first names—C. S., P. G., G. K., J. R. R., and T. S. Be that as it may, I want to introduce you. We may not get to the point where we call anyone “Plum” or “Jack,” but that should be no barrier to this sort of friendship.

If you are already acquainted with these writers, as a number of you undoubtedly are, then perhaps we can remind one another of stories, the way friends often do in the absence of another. Then there was a time . . .

Often the friends of writers are writers themselves, and so as iron sharpens iron, a writing friend makes a fellow writer sharpen

his pencil. But it need not be that way. A writer needs friends who simply benefit from knowing him, which is another way of saying that good writers need good readers. And just as writers need to work at it to write well, so also readers should work at it in order to be able to read well.

My hope in this book of introduction is to help us all become better readers of some fine writers. Quoting Samuel Johnson again, what is written without effort is usually read without pleasure—but it goes the other way as well. What is read without honest effort is written in vain, and these are writers of a caliber that should never receive that kind of an insult.

Some emphasis here and there is placed on those writers and aspiring writers who want to have their outlook on the world, and their resultant writing, shaped by these literary friendships. Good writers never tire of seeking out ways to develop their skills, and I trust this book may prove to be a help in that regard. He who walks with the wise will be wise. He who reads good writing will come to know what good writing is. For those who wish to become better writers, I hope to explain in the course of this book why anyone who wants to write well should return to these authors again and again. They should be regular companions. The argument will be that books that pass the test that Lewis poses in *An Experiment in Criticism* should be a book that helps writers hone their craft. But this is *not* just a book for writers—though I hope writers may profit from it.

Good readers do more than just sit slack-jawed. They learn something of the craft of writing, if only to understand and appreciate what they are reading. Reading and writing constitute a conversation, and the point should always be to have an *intelligent* conversation, whether or not one of the parties intends to go off and repeat—as a writer himself—what he has heard. An intelligent conversation should be able to stand or fall on its own, whether or not it is repeated or continued somewhere else.

I have adopted the very straightforward arrangement of treat-

ing all these authors in the order of their births. Treating them chronologically in this fashion will take us from G. K. Chesterton, who was born in 1874—when Jesse James was still robbing trains—to N. D. Wilson, who was born in 1978, just over a century later, long after Jesse James quit doing anything of the kind. But taking an opportunity that may not pass by this way again, I should point out that Wilson had a great-great-granduncle, Jesse James Wilson, who was named for that famous outlaw. And . . . where was I?

For the most part, these writers straddle the twentieth century. Some of them started in the latter part of the nineteenth, and at the time of my writing, we are now just fourteen years into the twenty-first. Not only do these writers straddle the twentieth century, but they represent it rather well.

It is often said that classic books, and classic authors, are measured by what is called “the test of time.” This is quite right and pretty obvious when we are dealing with the classics of three centuries ago. If books survive down to the present day, with people still reading them, then it is not foolish to presume that they probably have something going for them. Using a phrase from the Darwinists, adapted for our own purposes, there is a sense in which we are witnessing the survival of the fittest. They are classics because they are still in the curriculum. They are classics because they are still going strong.

But when we are considering books that were written in our own century, we have a completely different perspective because we do not yet know which books will stand that test of time. The classics that our generation produced emerged in the midst of a great crowd of clutter, and the clutter is just as obvious to us as the future classics are—and we don’t rightly know which ones *they* will be.

But with regard to these authors, we have some idea of the early returns. Judging from the sales in the millions and the international reputation and the fact that they are still going strong many decades into it, we are looking at a phenomenon with some clear staying

power. That is not the election itself, but it seems like significant results from the exit polls.

Future readers, a century or two out, might make the mistake of calling the twentieth century a truly Christian literary age, because the only writers from that century still being read are overwhelmingly Christian. “Ah,” they will say—“a golden age of the Christian faith, when giants walked the earth. Not like today . . .” They will know nothing of all the schlock our age produced.

When it comes to the faith commitments of these writers, there is a general but not universal consensus. We have the Anglicans—Eliot, Lewis, and Capon (Episcopalian). Wodehouse was nominally Anglican and wrote a lot about curates, so we will gladly include him there. There is one Anglican who became Roman Catholic (Chesterton), and one Roman Catholic whose mother had converted from Anglicanism (Tolkien). Mencken was an atheist. Robinson is a Congregationalist, and Nate Wilson is Presbyterian. But as we will see, there is more going on than simply that. Regardless of such details, these are all writers to read.



# G. K. Chesterton

## A WRITER'S LIFE

G. K. Chesterton was baptized as an infant in the Church of England in 1874. He died sixty-two years later, in 1936. Quite a number of wonderful books were produced in the interval.

Chesterton is usually thought of as a Victorian figure, which is certainly when he came of age—Queen Victoria died in 1901, when Chesterton was twenty-seven years old. At the same time, most of Chesterton's real contributions were in the twentieth century. His debates with men like George Bernard Shaw are justly famous, but he also debated men more closely associated with the post-Victorian era, men like Bertrand Russell.

In *Surprised by Joy* C. S. Lewis mentions the impact Chesterton had on his own return to the faith through the book *Everlasting Man*. But he usually speaks of Chesterton as though he was from another era, even though their lives overlapped considerably. Lewis was thirty-eight when Chesterton died, and he was brought back to the faith five years before Chesterton died. And *The Pilgrim's Regress*, Lewis's first Christian book, was published three years before Chesterton died.

Generations overlap, and though I find no indication that Chesterton and Lewis ever met, maybe they walked past each other in a train station once. Someone should write a one-act stage play about



that. There certainly was a meeting of the minds between the two and—I would argue—a passing of the baton. Lewis had numerous books by Chesterton in his library, all marked up. The intellectual legacy that Chesterton established was well kept and well tended by Lewis.

As mentioned earlier, Chesterton's parents had him baptized in the established Anglican church, but they themselves tended toward Unitarianism. Chesterton attended the Slade School of Fine Art and took classes in both art and literature. But true to type, he did not finish his degree. Given the times and the way things were, Chesterton spent some time slumming around in free thought before he returned to the Christian faith.

His description of this in *Orthodoxy* is quite amusing. He developed his own philosophy from scratch, and when he was done, he discovered that it was orthodoxy. It was like a great explorer sailing the briny deep in order to discover a new land, and when he had found one, he planted the flag on the beach, and he discovered that his newfound land was a place full of Englishmen.

Chesterton married Frances Bogg in 1901. He was wildly, desperately in love with her, and he stayed that way throughout all their years together. Their chief sorrow was their inability to have children, which was particularly difficult as they both loved children. The closeness of their relationship might seem to be belied by Frances's absence from his autobiography, but she is missing there at *her* request. Perhaps she knew that if he were allowed to write about her at all, he would write about nothing else.

He was sympathetic to the Roman communion through his many years in the Church of England and was eventually brought into the Roman Catholic Church in 1922. He took that step apart from Frances, who stayed in the Anglican communion a few years before she eventually joined him there.

Chesterton made his living as a writer, and it was the lash of journalism that made him write for deadlines. He was a scattered genius, pieces of him everywhere. He once telegraphed his wife,

“Am in Market Harborough. Where ought I to be?” But I think that it can be fairly said that his absentmindedness was due to his great presence of mind. He was all in.

He was a jolly contrarian though not at all irascible. But nevertheless he found himself, again and again, standing against the popular tide. Sometimes it involved literary taste, like his appreciation of Dickens after Dickens had gone out of style. People can be forgiven their foibles and quirks on literary appreciation. But Chesterton also had the ability to oppose the establishment on things that mattered a great deal, as with his opposition to the Boer War, or his valiant opposition to eugenics, or his economic views (called “distributism”).

Standing at six feet four inches and weighing almost 290 pounds, Chesterton was renowned for his size. P. G. Wodehouse, in one of his epic expressions, once referred to a large noise as when G. K. Chesterton falls on a sheet of tin.

He was a big man in every sense of the word.

## DIGGING DEEPER

Chesterton once said that a paradox is truth standing on its head to get attention. He was a master of paradox in this sense, having an adept way of turning everything upside down so that we might be able to see it right-side up. Chesterton’s great gift is that of *seeing*, and being able to get others to *see* it the same way also. In a world gone mad, a dose of bracing sanity is just what many of God’s children need to get them through yet another round of the evening news. He bends what is bent so that we may see it straight.

When Chesterton writes about anything, each thought is like a living cell, containing all the DNA that could, if called upon, reproduce the rest of the body. Everything is somehow contained in anything. This is why you can be reading Chesterton on Dickens and learn something crucial about marriage, or streetlights, or something else.

The world is not made up of disparate parts; the world is an

integrated whole. God sees it all together and united. When *men* see glimpses of it as all together and united, we say they are prophetic. We call them seers and poets. Chesterton was this kind of man. Not one of us can see it all, but a handful have been gifted to act as though the “all” is actually present there.

It is tempting to call this kind of thing a “worldview,” but that seems too structured and tidy somehow. It smells of the classroom, of the right answers checked on a multiple-choice test. A worldview is a good thing, but it is too narrow a word to describe what is happening with Chesterton. When worldview thinking came into vogue in evangelical circles a few decades ago, it has to be admitted that this was a lot better than what had come before that, which was the odd juxtaposition of various inconsistent ideas rattling around in a multitude of Christian heads. Worldview thinking is better than jumbled thinking, but worldview thinking is not the high-water mark.

In church history, occasionally, like a blue comet on holiday with no schedule to keep, a lonely figure will appear who appears to function fluidly in all three realms [those of prophet, priest, and king], making it look easy. Chesterton was like that. Worldview thinking radiated from him like heat from a stove. This is what systematic thinking should look like, but it hardly ever does.<sup>1</sup>

The problem is not with the word *worldview*. The problem is with what we naturally tend to think of as our eyes. Of course, blindness is not a worldview, and it is an improvement if we move from that blindness to coherent thoughts that we think. A brain-view is better than blindness. But the real organ that we must view the world with is the imagination.

Imagination, as Napoleon once remarked, rules the world. One of our great problems is that we have relegated imagination to various artsy ghettos, there to let it play. But imagination, including—especially including—artistic imagination, has to be understood as a practical science. It must govern everything, and if it is detached

from the praxis of life and then uprooted, it goes off to the art museums to die.

For Chesterton, an indispensable aspect of the divine imagination is the inclusion of fun. Play, laughter, joy, and mirth are necessary not only for good art but for human well being in all its dimensions. G. K. once said that “in anything that does cover the whole of your life—in your philosophy and your religion—you must have mirth. If you do not have mirth you will certainly have madness.”<sup>2</sup>

One of the reasons why Chesterton is such an encouragement to us is that he understands the role of imagination. This is not the same thing as comprehending imagination itself, for no man gets that, but Chesterton does understand the important role that imagination must play. He truly *gets* it, and he practices what he understands.

So when Napoleon said that imagination rules the world—a great aphorism if ever there was one—he was simply giving us some material to work with. In what sense might this be true? In what sense might we get all tangled up in what we falsely think of as imagination?

We should see a distinction between the throne of imagination—the human heart and mind—and the realm of imagination—made up of everything else. One of the central reasons we are languishing in our public life is that we have allowed a divorce between the throne and the realm. Artists are assumed to be the custodians of the imagination, but because of their insistence upon autonomy, they have become like a mad king who has the run of the throne room and nothing else. And out in the mundane realm of ho-hum-mery, imagination is assumed to be irrelevant.

What this means—when Christians finally wake up to the real state of affairs—is that we are actually besieging a city with no walls and no defenses. If imagination rules the world, perhaps we should focus on getting ourselves some.

Chesterton is famous for paradox, as noted above, but this is an imaginative exercise. Aristotle noted that the use of metaphor was a mark of genius, and I would argue that Chesterton's odd inversions and juxtapositions should be grouped under the broad heading of metaphor.

Chesterton knew that loving and fighting go together. Loving something while being unwilling to fight for it would be better categorized as lust. And at the same time, a man who sees the world in wisdom knows that loving the world means that he must be willing to fight the world. Loving the world means fighting for the world, and loving the world also means fighting the world.

His wisdom made Chesterton a true fighter who rejected the silliness of today's philosophers who want to separate loving and fighting, putting them into separate camps. This attitude is well represented by the glib placard of the sixties, urging us all to make love, not war. This false juxtaposition is trying to hide the fact that it is always both.

Either you make love indiscriminately and make war on the resultant offspring, or you make love to one woman for life and fight to protect her and the children you have fathered. If you determine that it is too militant to fight in the latter way, then the love you have chosen in the former way is simply lust.

We can see that this is how it is unfolding in the West. Lunatic wars and lunatic lusts go together. So do chivalric wars and chivalric romances. The pacifist who doesn't want to fight the dragon for the sake of the lady is actually in the process of becoming a dragon himself. This reality is sometimes obscured by the missing nostril flame and hidden claws, but there is a ready explanation. Pacifists are just passive-aggressive dragons.

Near the end of *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis said this about originality, and it is striking how well it describes Chesterton:

Even in literature and art, no man who bothers about originality will ever be original: whereas if you simply try to tell the truth (without caring twopence how often it has been told before)

you will, nine times out of ten, become original without ever having noticed it.<sup>3</sup>

Chesterton was a fierce defender of the common man and common things. He defended this so well and ably, and in the way that Lewis describes above, that this made him singularly uncommon. His defense of mundane things was out of this world. His apologetic for the supernatural was the most natural thing in the world.

He once said, speaking of those who like to accommodate themselves to the trends of the times, that “at its worst it consists of many millions of frightened creatures all accommodating themselves to a trend that is not there.”<sup>4</sup> It is not that hard to spook a herd. The trend apparently is that things are trending. The buffalos set up a self-authenticating feedback loop, and the plan of action seems obvious to them all and remains such, right over the cliff.

But there are contrarians who don’t think matters through any more than the stampeder do, and it doesn’t much matter what the fad in question is. It might be iPhones, or N. T. Wright fan clubs, or the election of a welterweight like Obama, or a Taylor Swift concert. Some contrarians are accidentally right when the herd is accidentally wrong, or accidentally wrong when the herd is accidentally right. That’s no good either. We need *thoughtful* contrarians—when the house of immovability is built on the foundation of pigheadedness, that house is filled with endless quarrels. When the house is built on the foundation of well-spoken conviction, the home is filled with laughter and joy, though storms may rage outside.

In that same place (speaking of those sociologists who wanted to accommodate themselves to the trend of the time), he noted that in any given moment, the trend of the time at its best consists of those who will not accommodate themselves to anything. Athanasius had to stand *contra mundum*, and it is *he* who is the representative man from that era and not the whole world he had to contend against. *Transit gloria mundi*, with the exception of that courageous glory that is willing to stand up against the glory of all the

regnant poobahs. Take Chesterton himself: he hated the insufferable self-importance that lusts to dictate to others what they must do in all the ordinary choices of life. He shows us the path we must take if we want to accomplish the crucifixion of all such coercion.

Pessimism is not in being tired of evil but in being tired of good. Despair does not lie in being weary of suffering, but in being weary of joy. It is when for some reason or other the good things in a society no longer work that the society begins to decline; when its food does not feed, when its cures do not cure, when its blessings refuse to bless.<sup>5</sup>

The writer Rene Girard calls this kind of social condition a time of sacrificial crisis. Nothing coheres, nothing *tastes*. One of the reasons societies in this state (as we very much are) start to disintegrate is that while drumbeat demands for deeper and greater sacrifice come more rapidly and are insistently louder, the law of diminishing returns has kicked in. It doesn't work anymore.

Generally the resultant hue and cry that sets up calling for shared sacrifice or increased sacrifice or deeper sacrifice is a cry that is lifted up by someone clever enough to want to get out in front of the mob. When crowds are calling for sacrifice, you can depend upon it: they are looking for the sacrifice of somebody *else*. Get in the right position early, man.

This is why, for Christians, all coercion is such a big deal. Simple coercion, absent direct instruction from Scripture, is a big sin; and manipulative coercion, absent clear instruction from Scripture, is also a big sin. The way of vicarious substitution, what Jesus did on the cross, is how he overthrew the coercive principalities and powers. That way of ungodly coercion is doomed forever, and the sooner Christians learn to be done with it, the better.

But the carnal heart turns naturally to making other people do things. This is why we must see the levy, or the referendum, or the law, or the conscription, or whatever it is, and follow it all the way out to the end of the process. When you don't do what they say,

men with guns show up at your house. Now this is quite proper when it is the house of a murderer or a rapist or an IRS man from Cincinnati. But suppose it is just a regular guy trying to make a living who had a duck land in a puddle enough times for his land to be declared a wetland? They still show up with guns.

This conclusion has to be developed more, but this is why the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ is so important. If Christ died in our place, then this central fact of human history is sheer gift. If we follow the folly of Abelard and say that the death of Christ was mere example, what we have is a way of the cross with no power of grace. And when grace is not center stage, coercion is always standing in the wings.

This is not to deny that Christ died as an example—the apostle Peter absolutely affirms this. But I said *mere* example. Do you see? If Christ died as a substitute, *that* is our example to follow. If he did not, then it isn't. This is why Paul tells husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her (Eph. 5:25). Without this glorious principle of substitution, the way of the cross turns into scolding and hectoring people, and the end of the story is always men with guns. But we should want the men who come to your door to be men with good news of a staggering substitution with lives that match.

How does this relate to Chesterton? On any number of issues, Chesterton was a voice in the wilderness. He stood against the popular coercions. One good example is his opposition to the Boer War in South Africa. Another good example is his stand against those who were bringing in the new “gospel” of eugenics. The Second World War and the Nazi outrages have subsequently made the idea of eugenics a pariah, but we have to understand that before the war, all the cool kids were arguing for “scientific” eugenics. But Chesterton was appropriately dismissive. He said in his book *Eugenics and Other Evils* that he was willing to pay the scientist for what the scientist knew, but that he drew the line at paying scientists for what they didn't know. “Chesterton was particularly



concerned with eugenicists' use of state power to achieve their goals."<sup>6</sup> Chesterton was the archetypal underdog, standing up for underdogs.

Modern man, progressive man, has an insatiable lust to interfere with the ordinary things. He strives to become superman and only succeeds in erasing ordinary men. Superman aspirants only become submen. But Chesterton was delighted with common men, the men who work with their hands, have a pint at a pub on the way, and then go home to the wife. What could be more extraordinary?

Not only is this extraordinary; it is also biblical. Those who exalt themselves are humbled, and those who humble themselves are exalted (Matt. 23:12). Chesterton loved to lift up the humble, and he delighted to apply the deft pinprick to those who are puffed up enough that they have begun to float over our heads.

Chesterton could readily speak with inversions because he *was* an inversion. He saw ordinary men as extraordinary, and he was their champion. Extraordinary men, the ones with the bulging foreheads, had plans and schemes and organization and social engineering, and every project they touched became a ruin, uninhabitable by human beings.

The issues that confront us today are just the same as they were in the time of Chesterton, only now they are in front of us in much starker relief. The reason we have trouble seeing them—as Chesterton would have noted for us—is that they are out in plain sight. The more his prophecies are fulfilled, the more difficulty we have in seeing that it is so.

We have gotten to that stage in the battle where the forces have fully joined, and there is no longer—properly speaking—a front. We do not have a distinguishable line anymore. It is more like a melee, with different-colored uniforms everywhere. And this is why every topic has been swept up into the conflict.

Where can you go where the ruling elites will agree to leave you alone? Can you change a lightbulb? Can you fry up some bacon? Can you decline joining in the mandatory celebrations of a same-

sex mirage? Can you keep your doctor? Are you allowed to use plastic bags?

Chesterton said in *Orthodoxy* that our task is to fly the flag of the world—and we should know that this is something certain to bring us into conflict with the world. We affirm a fundamental creational loyalty to the world and constantly thwart the world's desire to become disloyal to itself. This is why it is good to be earthy and bad to be worldly. Worldliness is just a clever way of deserting the world. This is the explanation of why worldliness is so consistently weary of the world.

And this is also why a battle in a philosophy class over the correspondence view of truth is connected to the marriage debates, which in turn is connected to the environment, which in turn is connected to just-war theory, which in turn is connected to the correspondence view of truth.

Everything is connected. Everything matters. Nonsense tolerated anywhere will metastasize, and the results are always ugly. “When the people have got used to unreason they can no longer be startled at injustice.”<sup>7</sup>

In the broken-windows theory of law enforcement, disregard of the law in petty things signals an unwillingness to deal with *anything*, and so the situation rapidly deteriorates. Some broken windows tolerated will lead to many more broken windows, and it just gets worse from there.

It is the same thing with nonsense. When we refuse to police the boundaries between sense and nonsense in our daily affairs, it is not long before that boundary is ignored everywhere. The death of common sense in ordinary affairs signals the death of common decency everywhere. If you cannot run with men, how can you run with horses (Jer. 12:5)? If you are unwilling to make the right call when it comes to a trifle, what makes you think you will be able to make the right call when the stakes are genuinely high?

This is just one more instance of the centrality of peripherals. And by “centrality of peripherals” I do not mean to veer into my

own weird form of zen Presbyterianism—my variation on Chesterton’s zen Romanism. This does not mean favoring the peripherals instead of the center. That would be the sin of majoring on minors, swallowing camels, and all the rest of it. But remember, the fruit—which Christ required for identifying the nature of a tree—is way out on the edges of the tree and is at the farthest point away from the root. We must recover the understanding that peripherals are central because the center is important. The root is the most important, and is central, and we test what is central by tasting what is at the edges.

This is one of the reasons why Chesterton is so good at discussing the ordinary issues of life. He can pluck any fruit from any branch and, without changing the subject, trace the life of that fruit back to the root. Take manners, for example. Manners can be described as love in trifles, love at the periphery. The collapse of manners in our society—a peripheral thing, surely!—represents a true downgrade. But here is Chesterton: “Love of humanity is the commonest and most natural of the feelings of a fresh nature, and almost everyone has felt it alight capriciously upon him when looking at a crowded park or on a room full of dancers.”<sup>8</sup> Those activities are out at the edges, but by looking at the edges we can see the center.

You give the last piece of pie to God, who doesn’t eat pie, by giving it to your neighbor, who does. That is the point of courtesy, manners, and etiquette (consider Rom. 12:10; 13:7; Eph. 6:2; 1 Tim. 5:17; 6:1; 1 Pet. 2:17; 3:7).

The same thing is true in the realm of aesthetics. Relativism has compromised us here as nowhere else. A clearheaded man will want to say that some music, paintings, sculpture, etc., are just plain dumb and stupid. But we immediately hear the retort, “Who is to say . . . ?” Our inability to identify rotten fruit on the branches means that we are especially unable to identify a problem at the root.

There must always be a rich moral soil for any great aesthetic growth. The principle of art for art’s sake is a very good principle if it means that there is a vital distinction between the earth

and the tree that has its root in the earth; but it is a very bad principle if it means that the tree could grow just as well with its roots in the air.<sup>9</sup>

Some men are prodigies of learning—take Newton, for example, or Pascal—and their towering intellect is about all we can see. Their intelligence is overwhelming. But other men are prodigies of learning, and the more you learn from them, the more ordinary they seem. Chesterton is in this latter category. He is not a man even capable of putting on airs, and yet it seems to me that he could come back to us in our generation almost a hundred years after his death and pick up the conversation right where he left off.

How is this possible? Fads and fashions change, but the permanent things do not change—and Chesterton had through long practice learned to distinguish these things at a glance. The Christian faith is permanently sane and is therefore always a bit out of fashion. Fads and fashions are mild insanities, Chesterton taught, and that is why the church always seems behind the times. It is actually *beyond* the times.

Chesterton has a kind of knowledge that knows what it ought to know, knows what it cannot know, and knows how to delight in the difference:

A turkey is more occult and awful than all the angels and archangels. In so far as God has partly revealed to us an angelic world, he has partly told us what an angel means. But God has never told us what a turkey means. And if you go and stare at a live turkey for an hour or two, you will find by the end of it that the enigma has rather increased than diminished.<sup>10</sup>

If you have been taught by Chesterton, you will come to see that every unexpected wonder in your life should have been expected. The expected and ordinary things are treasured up as marvels, and you see how they are actually the key to everything. “If you can prove your philosophy from pigs and umbrellas, you have proved that it is a serious philosophy.”<sup>11</sup>

So far from it being irreverent to use silly metaphors on serious questions, it is one's duty to use silly metaphors on serious questions. It is the test of one's seriousness. It is the test of a responsible religion or theory whether it can take examples from pots and pans and boots and butter-tubs.<sup>12</sup>

Chesterton knows serious thought takes the world as it actually is. This is quite different from taking it as "serious" thinkers do, locked up as they are in the back recesses of their brainy parts. Taking things seriously in the wrong way is simply a roundabout way of taking yourself seriously, which is actually, come to think of it, the root of all our troubles.

Chesterton was the kind of man who would never take himself seriously, but his lightness about things had nothing to do with the spirit of flippancy. His arguments had weight, and his spirit made them soar. We credit the Wright brothers with inventing an airplane, something that was heavier than air, that could fly. But Chesterton did something very similar first. All his arguments were weighty—heavier than air—and he could make them do hammer-heads in the sky.

## IF YOU READ NOTHING ELSE

If you are an average reader, you will soon realize that you will not be able to read everything Chesterton wrote. He was prolific in ways that stagger the imagination. Not only was he a prodigy of output, but he was simultaneously a prodigy of scattered disorganization. One hesitates to wonder what he could have done if he had only been organized. What would have happened if he'd had a top-of-the-line laptop and an assistant from tech support to keep explaining it to him? But we hesitate with this thought experiment because we know that if he were here, he would tell us that if he were organized in the ways we propose, he wouldn't have had anything to say. So following is the short list.

When it comes to his writing about the faith, I would recommend *Orthodoxy* and *Everlasting Man*. In the related fields of cul-

tural analysis and engagement, I would also recommend *Brave New Family* and *What's Wrong With the World?*

With regard to his fiction, you should pick up *The Man Who Was Thursday* and some of his Father Brown stories. In terms of structural discipline, his fiction sometimes slouches in the saddle a bit, but it is still engaging and worthwhile.

His collected poems are very worthwhile, and his epic account of King Alfred's heroism, *The Ballad of the White Horse*, should be on your required reading list.







## IF BOOKS ARE AMONG OUR FRIENDS, WE OUGHT TO CHOOSE THEM WISELY.

But sometimes it's hard to know where to start. In *Writers to Read*, Doug Wilson—someone who's spent a lifetime writing, reading, and teaching others to do the same—introduces us to nine of his favorite authors from the last 150 years, exploring their interesting lives, key works, and enduring legacies. In doing so, Wilson opens our eyes to literary mentors who not only teach us what good writing looks like, but also help us become better readers in the process.

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