

Foreword by
TIM KELLER



THE
Stories
WE TELL

HOW TV AND MOVIES LONG FOR AND ECHO THE TRUTH

MIKE COSPER

THE STORIES WE TELL

How TV and Movies Long for and Echo the Truth

MIKE COSPER

Edited by Timothy J. Keller and Collin Hansen

Foreword by Timothy J. Keller

 CROSSWAY

WHEATON, ILLINOIS

The Stories We Tell: How TV and Movies Long for and Echo the Truth

Copyright © 2014 by Mike Cospers

Published by Crossway
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law.

Cover design: Bryan Patrick Todd

First printing 2014

Printed in the United States of America

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (*The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway. 2011 Text Edition. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture references marked NIV are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-3708-0

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-3711-0

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-3709-7

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-3710-3

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Cosper, Mike, 1980–

The stories we tell : how TV and movies long for and echo the truth / Mike Cosper ; edited by Timothy J. Keller and Collin Hansen ; foreword by Timothy J. Keller.

pages cm. — (Cultural renewal)

Includes index.

ISBN 978-1-4335-3708-0 (tp)

1. Storytelling—Religious aspects—Christianity.
 2. Popular culture—Religious aspects—Christianity.
- I. Title.

BT83.78.C67 2014

261.57—dc23

2014002412

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

VP 24 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For my Dad: Thanks for buying the big TV.

And

For Sarah, who has endured my television addiction
for all these years. Thanks for watching with me.

CONTENTS

Foreword by Timothy J. Keller	11
An Important Word before We Begin	13
Introduction: A World Full of Stories	15
1 The Stories We Tell	27
2 How Far Is Too Far?	39
3 The Ghosts of Eden	57
4 The Search for Love	77
5 O, How the Mighty Have Fallen	91
6 Frustration	115
7 Shadows and Darkness	133
8 Redemptive Violence	149
9 Heroes and Messiahs	171
10 Honey Boo Boo and the Weight of Glory	193
Epilogue (And a Word to Christian Filmmakers)	212
Works Cited	220
Notes	225
General Index	229
Scripture Index	235

AN IMPORTANT WORD BEFORE WE BEGIN

This is a book about TV and movies. My goal here is to trace out the ways these stories intersect with the truth. I believe the Big Story of the Bible—creation, fall, redemption, and consummation—is so pervasive, so all-encompassing of our world, that we can’t help but echo it (or movements within it) when we’re telling other stories.

With that in mind, understand that I chose to discuss the particular stories in this book because they help make my point and/or I happen to like them.

Some are rated R. Some aren’t, but should be. Some I found encouraging and redemptive. Some are downright devotional. Some I wouldn’t recommend. Others I never want to see again.

I mention this up front because I want to be clear that the inclusion of a film or story is *not necessarily a commendation*. The issues about what we should and shouldn’t watch are multilayered and complex. (See chap. 2 for more detailed discussion of this issue.) Use wisdom in exploring movies and TV shows that you’re unfamiliar with.

I should also say that my tastes and preferences are eclectic, and this book contains references to content old, new, and occasionally obscure. You may not like anything I discuss here, and for that, I apologize. Who can account for individual taste—particularly the sometimes-low-brow taste of this author?

An Important Word before We Begin

Similarly, you may have very different interpretations of the stories I explore. That's a good thing. Stories have a three-dimensional quality, and your perspective might be different than mine, enabling you to see angles I don't.

You also might think it ridiculous that I didn't mention your favorite show or film. You might think my examples could be better. I will say you're probably right, but I'm glad you've read enough of the book to discover my error.

Regardless, I will say this: the method I use to examine these particular stories and connect them to the bigger story is easily applied to different films, TV shows, and books, and you'll hopefully find something to take away with you.

Finally, and very importantly, *consider this your spoiler alert*. I discuss a lot of plots in this book, and will ruin the endings to most of them. You have been warned.

O, HOW THE MIGHTY HAVE FALLEN

We're flawed because we want so much more. We're ruined because we get these things and wish for what we had.

Don Draper, *Mad Men*

You don't have to look far to see that the world is full of tragic stories. One half-hour's worth of evening news should be enough to convince us that, indeed, the world can be a frightful and terrible place. Even as I write, Moore, Oklahoma, is picking up the aftermath of a devastating series of storms and tornadoes. You can't see the image of a father looking for a child in the flattened wreckage of an elementary school without thinking, "This isn't the way the world was meant to be."

And that's the truth. The world wasn't meant for death and decay. It wasn't intended for destruction and chaos. It wasn't meant to be full of stories of tragedy and hardship. It was meant to be a place of life and harmony, where God and mankind lived in deep fellowship and community.

I think some flicker of that knowledge remains inside all of our hearts. We know that the world was meant to be different, and when tragedy strikes, we can't help but wonder why. Why did this happen? How did we find ourselves here?

The Stories We Tell

The biblical answer to that question is clear. In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve violate the one prohibition they'd been given by God, dining with the Devil at the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and in the aftermath, all hell—quite literally—breaks loose on the world. The creation is cursed and lashes out against us with thorns and thistles. The elements that we lived with in harmony are now hostile.

For Adam and Eve, the depths of sin's consequences are immediate and far-reaching. Not only must they endure exile from the garden, but also soon after, they see the seeds of their sin bear fruit in their own son, who murders his brother out of envy and spite.

For us, those consequences are all too familiar, as well. We see them on the evening news, and we see them in our lives. We feel the tragic impact of sin in our own sense of loneliness and in the wounds and scars inflicted by others and ourselves. We feel it in our own double-mindedness, in cycles of addiction, and in patterns we wish we could break. We feel it in a looming fear that grips us when terror alerts heighten, when driving through a dangerous neighborhood (or perhaps living in that neighborhood), when bullied by a boss or a coworker, or when our own anger grows beyond the fences of our self-control.

The sense of this tension is universal, and storytellers have sought to account for its presence for generations. Some have sought to explain its origins, as in the myth of Prometheus, who dared to steal fire from the gods, which both empowered and alienated humanity. This ancient story echoes Genesis 3: mankind steals something forbidden, which opens new worlds to them while also incurring the wrath of their God.

Star Wars episodes 1–3 are just such a fall story, too, tracing the descent of Anakin Skywalker (Haden Christensen) from a promising Padawan apprentice to a full-fledged Sith Lord.

He's entranced by the power of the dark side, and eventually compromises everything in order to gain that kind of power.

The aptly titled film *Prometheus*, Ridley Scott's loose prequel to the Alien franchise, is also an exploration of origins and fallenness. In it, the ship *Prometheus* travels to a distant moon as part of a quest for clues to the origins of humanity. But what the crew discovers is something far more dreadful.

The planet is abandoned, with ancient and fossilized remnants of a military installation from the "Engineers"—the aliens they believe created mankind. An exploration of the installation ensues, and bad things start happening at once. Peter Weyland (Guy Pearce), the billionaire financier for the mission, is discovered aboard the ship with ulterior motives: he came on the mission hoping to convince the Engineers to give him a way to extend his life.

The crew's search for knowledge and power leads instead to the discovery of a terrible biological weapon that seems destined to destroy all of them and humanity itself. Here, the Promethean myth is reinterpreted. The powers that they discover bring only disaster, and, one would assume, result in all the horrors that befall Lt. Ellen Ripley and her companions years later.

We think of yet another Greek myth of fallenness: Pandora's box. Zeus created Pandora as a vengeful gift for Epimetheus, with whom he had an ongoing bitterness. As a wedding present, Zeus gave Pandora a beautiful locked box that she was never to open. Zeus gave the key to Epimetheus and warned him never to open it, believing that he almost certainly would. Instead, Pandora stole the key and opened the box, her curiosity becoming far too much for her to handle. In it was every imaginable vice and evil: disease, hatred, bitterness, famine, strife, murder, and war. The world has been a mess ever since.



CHANNEL SURFING

Suffering and *The Tree of Life*

Terrence Mallick's *The Tree of Life* is a polarizing film. It's two hours and nineteen minutes that feels much more like a visual art installation than a movie. For some, Mallick's slow, impressionistic journey is a snooze-fest. For others, it's high art. For me, it remains one of the most beautiful and challenging things I've ever seen.

The film opens with a quotation from the book of Job: "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? . . . When the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" (Job 38:4, 7). From there, it juxtaposes the story of creation with a family's story of loss and suffering. Mallick journeys through the evolution of the world, with subtle meditations on death, tragedy, and violence. Against that backdrop is the story of the O'Brien family, an archetypical twentieth-century American family living in Waco, Texas. As the story unfolds, the O'Briens suffer—losing two sons (one to a pool accident, the other to Vietnam).

It's an echo of Job's story. Job suffered terrible tragedy, losing his children as well, and he expected God to show up and give him answers as to why. Instead, God beautifully humbles Job by recounting his handiwork in making the world. Theologian Belden Lane describes God's response like this:

When God finally speaks out of the whirlwind, it is to conduct a tour of the harsh Palestinian countryside. God points to the wine-dark sea, the towering clouds over a desolate land, the storehouses of snow and hail in the distant mountains. God asks Job what all this has to do with him.

Does the wild ox pay him any attention? . . . Does Leviathan speak to him a single word? . . .

In the silence that's left when the whirlwind subsides, Job finds what he'd sought all along. . . . Job is given no answer, but in being drawn out of himself, he's met by God.¹

In *The Tree of Life*, Sean Penn plays Jack O'Brien, the grown son of the O'Brien family who seems tortured by the loss of his brothers and the emotional distance of his harsh father. As the film progresses, we journey with Jack through his memories, juxtaposed with images of creation that serve to illustrate God's speech to Job, and by the film's end, Jack comes to a place of freedom.

The message of *The Tree of Life* is that there are two ways through this world. The first is the way of nature, and it's a harsh existence, subjected to forces much bigger than us and destined for suffering. Jack O'Brien's father (Brad Pitt) personifies this way, pushing his kids to be hard and strong. But ultimately, the way of nature crushes him. The other is the way of grace, personified by the O'Briens' mother (Jessica Chastain), whose nurturing and love is otherworldly. Through his memories of her, Jack comes to terms with his loss and transcends the darkness. He walks in a sort of dream state through a vacant desert, to an open door, and through it to a beautiful shoreline where his family awaits him amid a thousand other reunions, all ushered together by angelic presences.

Like Job, Jack comes to sense his smallness against the scale of creation, and yet he knows—through the gracious love of his mother—that his life matters to God, that he hasn't gone unnoticed, and though he has no answers for why, he has joy and hope that transcends.

The Stories We Tell

What apt metaphors such stories are for Genesis 3. How swiftly the world falls into chaos. How sharp the contrast is between the world before and after the fall.

But there are also important distinctions. The fall isn't mere myth, and it's not just about the introduction or discovery of evil. Rather, it's the story of a broken relationship, and its consequences are inherently relational. We have become disconnected from the One who gives us meaning, whose image we bear. Augustine put it well when he said, "O crooked ways! Woe to the audacious soul which hoped that by forsaking thee it would find some better thing! It tossed and turned upon back and side and belly—but the bed is hard and thou alone givest it rest."² Or as he said elsewhere, "Thou hast made us for thyself, and restless is our heart until it comes to rest in thee."³

That sense of restlessness and alienation pervades our fall stories. The television series *Lost* was, in many ways, a fall story. Each character was introduced as a castaway, and much of the series was spent searching backwards through their stories. We discovered that they were all "lost" long before the plane crashed on the island, living lonesome lives of exile and twisted identity. This exploration of backstory created a dense complexity to the show, and it was the beauty of *Lost*. The characters developed in ways that left the audience perpetually off-balance, rendering them at times sympathetic and at times contemptible. Jack (Matthew Fox) appears as a Boy Scout until we see him as a drunk. Locke (Terry O'Quinn) appears as powerful and formidable until we discover that he's spent years confined to a wheelchair, and the island has restored his ability to walk. Even Hurley (Jorge Garcia), who seemed the most likable and least shadowy character on the show, had a dark past. In fact, much of the mystery and magic on the show could be traced to his one flaw: he opened a sort of Pandora's

box when he chose to use a cursed set of numbers for a lottery ticket. He won, and everything in his life fell apart afterward.

FALLING WITH *MAD MEN*

Perhaps the most expansive meditation on the fall in contemporary culture is *Mad Men*, created by Matthew Weiner and starring Jon Hamm. *Mad Men* tells the stories of a collection of characters connected through a Madison Avenue advertising agency. It's a grim exploration of identity, alienation, sexual politics, masculinity, seduction, and creativity (to name just a few themes). In short, it's a show about what it means to be human in a fallen world, set in the nostalgic, glamorous, and historically dense backdrop of New York in the 1960s.

All that makes *Mad Men* compelling was revealed—often in hints and whispers—in the first episode of the show. It opens with Don Draper (Jon Hamm) sitting in the midst of a noisy bar, drinking Old Fashioneds and writing busily on a paper napkin. He's stuck on a problem: how do you advertise cigarettes now that their health claims have been thoroughly debunked and the product has been linked to cancer? How do you sell a poisonous lie?

He interviews a waiter about the problem, asking why he smokes his brand. He then sets off to an apartment where we meet Midge (Rosemarie DeWitt), a beautiful artist with whom Don shares his thoughts, a drink, and her bed. At one point he says, "We should get married."⁴ Midge laughs it off, saying she doesn't want to be the future ex-Mrs. Draper, and Don heads off to work, still stuck, still swimming in despair over his problem. By that afternoon, he has to have an advertising pitch to give to Lucky Strike, one of his firm's biggest clients.

The scene cuts to Don's office building, where Peggy (Elisabeth Moss) is showing up for her first day of work at Sterling Cooper—the ad agency where Don is the creative director. She

The Stories We Tell

gets on the elevator with three young ad execs, who lob a variety of lewd comments at her, and then is quickly introduced to Joan Holloway (Christina Hendricks), the red-headed bombshell who runs the secretarial pool at the office. Joan tells Peggy that the men in the office don't really want a secretary; most of the time they want something in between a mother and a waitress. The rest of the time . . .

The implication is clear. Peggy is told to wear shorter skirts to show off her "cute ankles" and to spend some time in front of a mirror, undressed, with a paper bag punched with holes for her eyes over her head. Evaluate her assets. Dress accordingly. She's then sent off to an ob-gyn to get an exam and a prescription for birth control pills.

Pete Campbell (Vincent Kartheiser) enters the scene early on, as well. Pete is a vile young ad exec who is about to get married, and this happens to be the day of his bachelor's party. It's clear that he has one thing on his mind. Pete wants to be like Don, a successful lady-killer and ad exec, but he lacks Don's creative genius and charm. The contempt between the two of them is palpable. Don is disgusted by him, and dismissive. Pete is ambitious and conniving, eager for a chance to climb the next rung on the ladder.

At one point, Pete makes a number of sexually charged comments about Peggy, for which Don berates him: "I bet the whole world looks like one big brassiere strap, waiting to be snapped. . . . Campbell, we're both men here so I'm going to be direct. . . . Advertising is a very small world, and when you do something like malign the reputation of a girl from the steno pool on her first day, you make it even smaller. Keep it up and even if you do get my job, you'll never run this place. You'll die in that corner office a mid level executive with a little bit of hair that women go home with out of pity. Do you want to know why? Because no one will like you."⁵

The advertisers have a terrible first meeting with Rachel Menken (Maggie Siff), the owner of a department store who's considering changing ad agencies and hiring Sterling Cooper (the meeting is punctuated by a host of anti-Semitic side comments between Don and Roger Sterling [John Slattery], one of the agency's partners), and Don is soon back in his office mulling over the meeting with Lucky Strike. Losing this client will be disastrous.

When the meeting finally occurs, the entire Sterling Cooper team flounders. The owners of Lucky Strike are appalled by the hassle they're getting from the government about their product, and the agency has no workable ideas for helping get their reputation back in the market. People now think "cancer" when they hear "cigarettes."

Lucky Strike is standing to walk out of the room, when Don suddenly gets a spark of inspiration. He walks to a chalkboard, calls Lucky Strike back, and pitches a new idea. It's a trademark for him on the show—a moment of brilliant, creative wordplay and imagination that is the source of his reputation as the best creative director in the ad business. He's spectacular—seductive, winsome, and compelling—and the clients leave happy.

There's a brief celebration, and soon the younger men are off to Pete's bachelor party. Don invites Rachel Menken out to dinner to apologize for his rudeness earlier, and begins working that seductive skill on her, as well.

Their conversation turns to why Rachel isn't married. At first she's indignant for being asked. Is it wrong that she loves work? Is it wrong that she wants to make her father's business all that it can be? Then she adds that it's because: "I've never been in love."

Don mocks her, saying, "She isn't married because she's never been in love. I think I wrote that just to sell nylons."

The Stories We Tell

Don doesn't believe in love. He believes in the facade of advertising. He believes in seduction. He believes in manipulation. He goes on to describe what people *think* love is, and you can tell he hits a nerve with Menken, describing the marriage, family, and romance she indeed longs for. "The reason you haven't felt it is because it doesn't exist," Don concludes. "What you call 'love' was invented by guys like me. To sell nylons."

"Is that right?" Rachel says.

"Pretty sure about it. You're born alone and you die alone and this world just drops a bunch of rules on top of you to make you forget those facts, but I never forget. I'm living like there's no tomorrow because there isn't one."

Rachel's reply is loaded: "I don't think I realized it until this moment, but it must be hard being a man too."

"Excuse me?"

"Mr. Draper . . ."

"Don."

"Mr. Draper, I don't know what it is you really believe in, but I do know what it feels like to be out of place. To be disconnected. To see the whole world laid out in front of you, the way other people live it. . . . There's something about you that tells me that you know it too."

"I don't know that that's true."⁶ Don says, but it's obvious he does.

Rachel speaks from her social and cultural alienation. She's a woman in a decidedly chauvinistic world, and she's Jewish. Two strikes against her ability to be accepted in the WASPish world of New York high society. She's continually experiencing life as an outsider looking in, despite her beauty, despite the success of the department store, despite her wealth.

She's able to see, through Don's cold exterior, that he knows that feeling. He, too, has been an outsider looking in, and in

spite of his nihilistic professions, he knows loneliness and isolation. All is not glamour, seduction, and success.

Rachel agrees to work with Sterling Cooper, and they part ways. The camera then takes us to the exterior of Peggy's apartment, where Pete Campbell is drunkenly hammering on her front door. It's clear what he wants; his bachelor party was a bust for him, and no woman wanted anything to do with him. But Peggy's been told that this is her path to success in the office, and despite the fact that she finds him despicable, she takes him to her bed. The consequences aren't discovered for many episodes.

The show cuts back to Don, on a train, driving a car, then arriving at the front door of a big, beautiful suburban home with white walls and a red front door. As he enters, a light switches on upstairs, revealing Betty (January Jones)—Don's wife. Soon we also see his two sleeping children.

For those who've been watching the show for several seasons, you've probably forgotten the shock of this moment. But when I first watched the episode, I felt as though the final minute of the show reinterpreted everything we'd seen before: Don's conversations with Midge, his berating of Pete, his confrontation with Rachel. Everything becomes confused and murky when we learn he's a husband and a father. He's living in two different worlds. The show ends with a shot of Don, sitting on the edge of his daughter's bed, a hand on her back and a hand on his son, sleeping in another bed nearby. Betty stands in the doorway looking on. As the camera pans back and the credits roll, the song "On the Street Where You Live" begins to play—a song from *My Fair Lady* about the intoxicating effects of being close to the one you love.

It's a brilliant "reveal" moment, where we discover that as dark and complicated as things seemed, we were only scratching the surface—especially when it comes to who Don really is.



CHANNEL SURFING

Why *Seinfeld*'s Final Episode Was Perfect

Some readers may be too young to remember, but *Seinfeld*'s final episode was eagerly anticipated. It sits just behind *Cheers* and *Mash* on the list of most-watched series finales of all time. The TV Land network suspended programming while it aired, posting an image of a closed door with a taped-up sign that said, "Gone watchin' *Seinfeld*."

But the episode met with many critical jeers. Larry David, one of the show's creators, returned to help co-write the finale, and many blamed his caustic sense of humor for an episode they saw as harsh and bitter.

The plot centered on an incident in which the principal cast members—Jerry (Jerry Seinfeld), Elaine (Julia Louis-Dreyfuss), George (Jason Alexander), and Kramer (Michael Richards)—head to California. For much of the history of the show, Jerry and George have been trying to get NBC to pick up a sitcom based on Jerry's life. By this episode, they have the green light. On the flight out west, Kramer causes an incident, and the plane has to make an emergency landing in Latham, Massachusetts.

There, they witness the carjacking of an overweight man, and Kramer captures the crime on a camcorder. They don't help, they don't call the police; they just make cracks about his weight. The victim alerts the police and the four end up getting arrested. There's a law that requires bystanders to help in such a situation.

What follows is a trial of the four, parading characters from all nine seasons of the show as witnesses to their despicable character.

I think this ending was perfect. The genius of the

show was its ability to make these four incredibly selfish people watchable. Their pettiness, their destructive relationships, their materialism, their conniving and feuding—it had all been fodder for laughs for nine years. They acted as people without consciences, with an unspoken social contract of tolerance for one another, and with little in the way of loyalty or concern for anyone else on the show. And the finale judged them for their sins.

The episode ends with the judge throwing the book at them, saying, “I do not know how or under what circumstances the four of you found each other, but your callous indifference and utter disregard for everything that is good and decent has rocked the very foundation upon which our society is built. I can think of nothing more fitting than for the four of you to spend a year removed from society so that you can contemplate the manner in which you have conducted yourselves.”⁷

Interestingly, the show ends cyclically. In the jail cell, Jerry initiates a conversation with George about shirt buttons that’s identical to a conversation they had on the show’s first episode. George responds, “Haven’t we had this conversation before?” The conversation stops, and the camera pans back slowly, leaving the four in the cell in silence.

Comedy often thrives on the antics of the fool. In *Seinfeld*, the fools are self-absorbed, judgmental, and malicious New Yorkers, and for nine years we laughed at them. In this final episode, Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld pull back the lenses a bit, showing us a wide-angle view of the show, and they remind us of all that we laughed at. By judging the characters, the audience who laughed along is implicated too, and maybe that’s what made the episode so unpopular.

ORIGINAL SINS

As the show progresses, we see Don's story told through a variety of flashbacks and odd, chance encounters. Not only is he living two lives (as a cosmopolitan, lady-killing ad exec in Manhattan and as a dutiful husband and father in the suburbs), but we discover that he isn't actually Don Draper at all. His name is Dick Whitman. While deployed in the Korean War, he switched identities with a man who died next to him during some shelling—a man named Don Draper. Whitman was just beginning his deployment, and Draper was at the end of his. So he switched dog tags with the dead man, spent some time recovering at an army hospital, and returned to the States a new man, avoiding the war and leaving his past behind.

It was a lie that held promise and hope—a new life and a new identity. He was leaving behind the life an outsider, the life Rachel Mencken saw in his eyes over dinner. It turns out that this tall, dark, handsome ad man is actually the bastard son of a poor farmer and a prostitute. He grew up despised by his stepmother and a constant reminder of regret to his father. By seizing a new life, a new name, he had hope for a new future.

But like all lies, it came with terrible consequences. The real Draper was married, and Don had to find a way to deal with his wife. He also had relationships and connections to his past that would inevitably come back to haunt him. Though he seems to only want to live for today, “move forward” as he often says, he can't escape his past and his true, broken identity.

Like all lies, it birthed more, and by the time we meet Don in the show's pilot, he's absolutely swimming in them. Over the seasons that have followed, we've watched them result in one terrible consequence after another.

Season 1 has an interesting set of bookends related to Don.

By the time it ends, we've seen him cycle through affairs, reject his past, and begin to lose his marriage. In the final episode of the season, he's pitching an ad campaign for Kodak's new slide projector. During the pitch, he talks about how in advertising, everyone thinks the most powerful word is *new*; it's not—there's something deeper. *Nostalgia*.

He delivers this speech to a room full of execs from Kodak and Sterling Cooper, speaking slowly and cycling through pictures of his own family: scenes of him playing with his kids, climbing trees, opening Christmas presents, each slide going back further and further through time, showing the children younger and younger, showing Don and Betty as new parents and newlyweds, hopelessly in love. The scenes—like most family photos—are idyllic.

"In Greek," Don says, "*nostalgia* literally means the pain from an old wound. It's a twinge in your heart, far more powerful than memory alone. This device isn't a spaceship; it's a time machine. It goes backwards, forwards. It takes us to a place where we ache to go again. It's not called the wheel; it's called the carousel. It lets us travel the way a child travels, around and around and back home again, to a place where you know you are loved."⁸

It's stirring. By the end, even these cynical ad men are moved. One gets up and leaves the room, emotionally wrecked. Don, of course, wins the account, but moreover, he seems to make (if only in his mind) a renewed commitment to his family. Betty and the kids were leaving for Thanksgiving, and he had planned on missing the holiday for work. Now, renewed in his commitment to them, he heads home on the train.

We see a side of Don that doesn't simply believe you're born alone and you die alone. Something in him still longs for connection, for family, for continuity.

We see him walk through the door of his home later, sur-

prising the family before they leave for the train station. Betty's face warms, the kids yell "Daddy," and everything seems hopeful again for the Drapers as he announces that he's going with them. But suddenly the scene cuts back to Don opening the door. What happened before was a scenario he played out in his mind. Instead, he opens the door to an empty house. He's too late; they've gone. The camera angle is identical to the night Don comes home in episode 1, where we first discover he's married. Now, he stands alone at the bottom of the stair, eventually slumping on a step. The nostalgic wound is throbbing.

Don isn't the only one whose sins are finding him out on *Mad Men*. In fact, it's hard to find anyone on the show that isn't in some way living a lie and suffering the consequences. Peggy and Pete's sexual encounter on the first episode (which isn't the only one between them) leads to another of *Mad Men's* trademark surprises.

In the same episode that Don wins the Kodak account (season 1's finale), Pete lands an account with Clearasil—a company that happens to be owned by his father-in-law. Peggy meanwhile has only become more hostile with Pete, and more liked and trusted by Don. She was invaluable on an earlier campaign, and now Don wants to promote her from the secretarial pool to junior ad copywriter.

Peggy is, of course, delighted and honored, and Pete is angry that a woman would be given an account so personally important to him. It adds insult to injury that the woman in question is Peggy, who has now spurned Pete.

As Peggy moves into her new office (enduring some biting comments from Joan, who is jealous as well), she breaks a sweat and begins to feel terrible, heading to the hospital. There, she discovers she's not only pregnant, but in labor, and she collapses. Here, at the moment of her great triumph at work—something she's hoped for and strived for with

bold ambition as a woman in the workplace—she becomes a mother, something her ambition simply cannot bear. How can she continue her climb and raise a child?

She ends up having a psychological breakdown, and she's kept in the hospital for several weeks. The blend of shock from her pregnancy and internal conflict about being a mother leaves her in a state of denial that is almost catatonic, and the doctors can't break through.

In an episode called "The New Girl" from season 2, we see a flashback to a conversation between Don and Peggy from that time in the hospital. Peggy disappeared from her office for weeks after the promotion, and when Don talked to her mother, he was told she had tuberculosis. This didn't comfort him, and he sought her out in the hospital, finding her in the psychiatric ward instead.

"What's wrong with you?" he asks.

"I don't know," Peggy said.

"What do they want you to do?"

"I don't know."

"Yes, you do. Do it. Do whatever they say." He leans forward. "Peggy, listen to me. Get out of here and move forward. This never happened. It will shock you how much it never happened."⁹

This is Don's philosophy. It near-perfectly describes his whole way of living and being in the world. He has spent his entire life running from his past, denying it, burying it, pretending it never happened, and at the time that he tells her this, his counsel has proven true. He's had few consequences for his secrets.

Peggy gives up the baby for adoption, heads back to work, and pretends it all never happened. Don, in a strange expression of loyalty, covers for her with the rest of the office. Unlike Don, Peggy carries the wound a bit more visibly on

The Stories We Tell

the show. In one moment, she describes the sense of inner vacancy, saying, “Well, one day you’re there, and then all of a sudden, there’s less of you. And you wonder where that part went. If it’s living somewhere outside of you. And you keep thinking maybe you’ll get it back. And then you realize it’s just gone.”¹⁰

Sin is costly. It takes a piece of us and leaves us with a hard-to-articulate feeling of longing and brokenness—a sense that there’s a hollow spot inside our souls.

THE COMPLEXITY OF SIN

Part of what makes *Mad Men* so compelling (and this is true of almost any tragedy or drama) is that it maintains a delicate balance between exposing the character’s flaws and eliciting the audience’s sympathy. Don’s sins are despicable, but somehow the audience still feels as though they’re on his side—especially in his work. He’s brilliant and eloquent, and he’s often the only one in the office who treats women with a sense of worth. He raises Peggy from being a secretary to being a top writer and part of the creative team. Joan Holloway receives endless harassment and advances from other men, but Don always shows her the utmost respect.

As Luther would say, we’re sinners and saints all at once. Even the lowest of sinners is capable, at times, of glorious good deeds and brilliant works. We are image-bearers, and we can’t help but cast off reflections of God’s glory—as dim and pale as they may be—throughout our lives. Our faded glory punctuates the tragedy of Genesis 3, reminding us how the world might have been had sin not shattered everything, and it fills many in the world with an insatiable angst when they see what might have been. That possibility haunts *Mad Men*, too. Don knows that he’s selling lies, but his unique gift is getting beyond thinking and talking about products

to thinking and talking about the deep longing that sits behind them. Advertising works when it taps into deep human desire, offering redemptive hopes that sell products that can never deliver on the promise. We long for love, for community, for beauty, and for happiness, and Don Draper knows how to cut through the din of marketing and tap into those longings. He makes his name selling false hopes for redemption and happiness.

But he isn't a mere monster. Rightly viewed, the world after Genesis 3 (and its human inhabitants) isn't simply condemnable; it's also pitiable. God himself—the only righteous Judge of the world—shows mercy again and again to sinners, clothing Adam and Eve, marking Cain, preserving Noah, Isaac, Lot, Israel, and of course, you and me. Sin has unleashed upon the world a host of troubles and sorrows, alienating us from God and from all of the good things that flow from him—all of the longings described above. We endure a world wherein we're separated from these good gifts, and our souls bear the scars of that separation.

Consider that Don Draper didn't ask to be born. He arrived in the world the son of a farmer and a prostitute who died at birth. His father, too, died when Don was still very young, after being kicked by a horse that was frightened by a thunderclap. His stepmother despised him, as he was a constant reminder of her husband's infidelity, and she reluctantly raised him, taking him along to live in a brothel where she worked (not as a prostitute, though) after his father's death.

In an episode titled "The Crash," we see flashbacks of Don's life in the brothel. Young Don—maybe thirteen to fifteen years old—is sick with a nagging cough and fevers. His stepmother shows no interest in helping him recover, and sends him to the attic with a bedroll. On his way there, a young prostitute pulls him into her room, checks him out, and lets him know

The Stories We Tell

that he's going to be okay. She puts him in her bed and nurses him back to health—the only nurturing that we've ever seen in Don's childhood.

But it doesn't end there. Before Don leaves her room, after his fever has broken and he's well, she has sex with him. She's later kicked out of the brothel for holding out on money with the owner, and in the process, she admits to sleeping with Don. The scene ends with a shot of Don, huddled in a corner, while his stepmother mercilessly beats him.

Freud would have a field day.

Who could fault the young hooker for nurturing the sick boy? And who could condone her sleeping with him? No wonder Don's sexual ethics are so mixed. He sees past a culture's objectification of women (like Joan) at least in part because this prostitute—our culture's ultimate example of objectification—showed him care and affection like no one else ever had. And yet his sexual identity is malformed in the process.

Don's alienated childhood leaves him adrift, unable to sustain any real intimacy or love, no matter how much he desires it. Sin unleashes generations of suffering on the world, and its results are complex, leaving individual motivations murky and hard to discern. Its complexity is most evident when we understand one another's stories, and it should result in compassion for one another.

Don's air of power and dominance is also ultimately revealed as a mask for a deeper wound. In "A Man with a Plan," Don is in the middle of an affair with Sylvia Rosen (Linda Cardellini), the wife of a doctor who lives one floor below Don and his second wife, Megan (Jessica Paré). Sylvia and her husband have separated, and Don has her meet him at a hotel room. Once there together, he becomes more demanding and domineering than ever, telling her that she exists only for his pleasure, and she's never to leave the hotel room. Sylvia, un-

comfortable, plays along, appearing weak and compliant. He refuses to let her leave the hotel, takes away the book she was reading, and won't tell her when he'll return. He visits her for their trysts, and disappears again. She's to stay undressed and wait for his return.

By the episode's end, Don returns to find Sylvia dressed and ready to walk out the door. At first he's stern and threatening, but Sylvia merely sighs him away. "It's over. This is over," she says, referring not only to their time in the hotel, but the entire affair. Suddenly, Don's voice cracks. The hard exterior is gone, and he barely gets out the word, "Please."¹¹

The audience realizes in that moment that Sylvia's been in control the entire time. Don's domineering isn't real; it's an act, the fantasy of a broken man. So long as it was a convenient and exciting escape from her struggling marriage, Sylvia would play along, but now she's done. In the following episode, Don schemes to get her back, and we see him more desperate than ever before.

Few in Don's life see how truly broken he is. Betty doesn't see it until long after they've divorced, and she comments on it when they "hook up" at a summer camp where their son is staying. As they lie in bed talking about their failed marriage and their current spouses, Betty says of Megan, "That poor girl. She doesn't know that loving you is the worst way of getting to you."¹² Betty knows it first hand, having endured the pain of Don's lies and betrayal.

One of the few who got past Don's veneer was Anna Draper (Melinda Page Hamilton), the wife of the real Don Draper, who hunts him down in the years after the war. At first, Don is frightened that she'll expose him as a fraud, but eventually the two become close friends. She knows all of his secrets, and she is happy for him when he marries Betty (legally divorcing Anna in the process). He supports her financially right up until

The Stories We Tell

the time of her death of stomach cancer in season 4, an event that crushes Don.

In one of the show's most touching scenes, Don receives the phone call about Anna's death while Peggy is in the room with him. He weeps and says, "She was the only person that really knew me." Peggy places a hand on Don's, and says, "She wasn't the *only* one."¹³

It's a great scene for many reasons. These two have shared much. Don is Peggy's mentor, but they've also become confidants. Don knows about Peggy's child, and Peggy has helped Don out of trouble on a number of occasions. She knows that he's really Dick Whitman. And here, these two broken people find comfort and solidarity in their friendship; they wear no masks before one another.

A similar moment of solidarity comes in season 1. Pete Campbell, in a power play against Don, discovers his false identity. He brings the news to Bert Cooper (Robert Morse), one of the firm's partners, announcing that Don is a fraud, maybe an army deserter, possibly a criminal.

Bert walks across the room and shocks Pete by saying, "Mr. Campbell, who cares? . . . This country was built and run by men with worse stories than you've imagined here. . . . The Japanese have a saying: A man is whatever room he is in and right now, Donald Draper is in this room. I assure you: there is more profit in forgetting this."¹⁴

Pete leaves the room, and Bert tells Don he can fire him if he'd like, but he cautions against it. "One never knows how loyalty is born."¹⁵ Of course, the true loyalty born in the scene is the loyalty between Don and Bert.

In each of these scenes, someone's sin is exposed, and it's met with solidarity. Bert's comments, veiled as they are, seem to imply a level of understanding that goes beyond whitewashing the accusation; they imply (to this viewer, anyway) that he,

too, has his secrets. Bert, like Peggy, is extending grace—not as one in a position of moral superiority, but as a fellow sinner, someone in need of grace himself.

WHY WE LOVE *MAD MEN*

Perhaps this strange grace and solidarity are the key to the show's fanatical following. Why would anyone want to subject themselves to enduring the grueling journey we take with Don, Peggy, and the others? Or for that matter, why would we subject ourselves to the tragedy in *Hamlet* or *The Sopranos*? What keeps us coming back?

There are obvious dramatic answers. Good entertainment involves great writing, acting, directing, and more. Their world is believable and appealing, and it draws us in—that's the power of great art. But that's not the only reason.

We identify. We understand how it feels to keep dark secrets, to feel torn between who we want the world to see and who we know ourselves to truly be. We know the agonizing consequences of bad decisions, and when we see Joan or Peggy or Don or even Pete grinding through them, we can identify. We sense in some small way the solidarity of sinners. As alien as our lives might feel at times, others have felt the same.

There's always a place for tragedy in the stories we tell. In some ways, we watch to know ourselves. How did we get here? Why does everything seem so broken? Is there any hope for redemption?

Often, there's not. I don't think it any kind of coincidence that *Mad Men's* opening credits feature a silhouette of Don falling out of a skyscraper onto Madison Avenue, surrounded by images from ads that drift past like religious icons—efforts at redemption that do nothing to stop his fall. He's on a collision course with the consequences of his actions, and there's nothing to stop the fall. He can profess to only move forward

The Stories We Tell

all he wants, but the past has legs, and it finds him again and again.

Fall stories help orient us to a world that doesn't work out how we expect. They help us to make sense of the ruin we see around us. They help us to know we're not alone in our sorrows and failures, and they point to the deep need we all have for answers, for hope, and for redemption.

We have all lived our own fall stories in one way or another, and most of us hope that they're not the last word on our lives.

GENERAL INDEX

- 30 Rock*, 15, 21–22, 84–85, 89
50 Shades of Grey, 41
A Million Miles in a Thousand Years, 204–5
 Adam, 77–79, 92
 addiction, 17–23, 92
 advertising, 20–21, 58
 alienation, 96
All-Star Superman, 186
Amazing Race, The, 203
American Idol, 38
An American Family, 193–94
Arrested Development, 79, 206
 ascension, 178–79
 atom bomb, 74
 atonement, 138, 152–53, 162–63
 Augustine, 96
Avatar, 58

Bachelor, The, 17, 45, 88–89
Bag of Bones, 118
 Ban, Martin, 32
Bartleby the Scrivener, 117–18
 Batman, 150–51
 Bay, Michael, 16
 beauty, 34, 44, 50–51, 80–81
Before the Devil Knows You're Dead, 68
 Berry, Wendell, 60
 Best, Harold, 55
 biblical heroes, 189–91
 biblical imagery, 65–66
Big Lebowski, The, 182–83

Blue Like Jazz, 204–5
Bourne Identity, The, 188–89
 brokenness, 150
Buffy the Vampire Slayer, 145

 Campbell, Joseph, 174–75, 179
Castle, 35–36
 celebrity, 194–96
Cheers, 206
 Christian filmmakers, 216–19
 Christian freedom, 46–47
Coming to America, 41
 community, 54–55, 206
 companionship, 82
 conscience, 53–55
 consummation, 33, 37, 209, 216
 Coppola, Francis Ford, 16
 Craig, Daniel, 200
Crash, 122–23
 creation, 32, 37, 43–44, 47, 57–58, 77–78, 209, 216
 creation stories, 59, 68, 72, 149
CSI, 35
 cynicism, 21

Dances with Wolves, 58
 Dark Knight films, 150–51
 darkness, 48, 146–47, 150–51, 179–81
Days of Our Lives, 54
 daytime talk shows, 204
 dehumanizing entertainment, 41
Descendants, The, 61–64
 desire, 19–20, 23, 37, 208–11

General Index

- despair, 115–19
Devil, 139
Dexter, 37, 151–57
Didion, Joan, 90
Django Unchained, 169–70
Dogma, 118–19
Drag Me to Hell, 136–39
- Eden, 57–58
enlightenment, 59
Ephron, Nora, 16
Episodes, 21
Esther, 45
Eve, 77–79, 92
evil, 12, 67, 69, 139, 145
Extreme Makeover: Home Edition, 46
- Facebook, 207–8
fall, 32, 37, 44, 64–67, 96, 115–16, 216
fall stories, 114, 150
fallenness, 44, 93, 97–101
fame, 199–200, 209
fear, 42, 135–36
feminism, 85
food porn, 46–47
forgiveness, 63
Frankenstein, 69–70
Friday Night Lights, 60–61
Friends, 17, 89, 206
- Gardner, John, 211
Girl and the Dead Man, The, 138–39
Gladiator, 86
glory, 209–11
God
 creativity of, 43
 image of, 28–29, 33–34, 108, 215
 love of, 213
 playing, 68–75
 presence of, 66
 promises of, 47
gospel
 and culture, 42–53
 and longing, 37, 211
 and satisfaction, 211, 214–15
gossip, 86
grace, 44, 52–55, 63–64, 95, 113,
 162–63, 211, 215
Grimm, 145
- Hamm, Jon, 200–201
Harry Potter, 189
heart, 37
Here Comes Honey Boo Boo, 37, 201–3
“Hero’s Journey, The,” 174–75
heroic forces, 145
heroism, 172–91
Holland, Savage Steve, 16
hope, 19–20, 36–37, 90, 150, 170, 213
horror movies, 135–36
How I Met Your Mother, 82–84, 89
Hudsucker Proxy, The, 118, 152–53
Hughes, John, 16
human nature, 12
human weakness, 69
Hunger Games, The, 189
Hunter, James Davison, 217
- idolatry, 37–38, 46, 196
imagination, 19–20, 27–28, 51–52,
 135
incarnation, 175–76
Inception, 21
Inglourious Basterds, 168
irony, 21
Israel, 30–31, 173–74
- Jesus
 as the archetypal hero, 175–79,
 189
 life, death, and resurrection of,
 44–45, 177–78
 as storyteller, 30–31
Jobs, Steve, 39
Joe Versus the Volcano, 35, 187–88
judgment, 166–69, 204–5
judgment films, 135–36
Jung, Carl, 174

- Jurassic Park*, 70–72
Just Shoot Me, 17
 justice, 119–32
- Kafka*, 16
 Kardashian, Kim, 198–201, 203–4
Keeping Up with the Kardashians,
 20–21, 198–201
 Keillor, Garrison, 64
 Kepler, Johannes, 43
 Kerouac, Jack, 216
Kill Bill, 167–68
King Lear, 37
 King, Stephen, 133
 kingdom of God, 43–44
 kingship, 173–74
Knocked Up, 32–33
- Lane, Belden, 94–95
Last Samurai, The, 58
 law, 115–16
Law & Order, 35
 Lewis, C. S., 209–11, 215
 liturgy, 213
 loneliness, 92, 206
 Lord of the Rings trilogy, 179–81,
 217–18
Lost, 59, 96, 145–47
 love, 12, 19, 81–90, 99–100
 love stories, 36, 79, 89–90, 213
 Lynch, David, 16, 146
- Mad Men*, 91, 97–101, 104–14
Magnolia, 162
Man of Steel, 185
Manhattan, 80–81
 marriage, 89–90, 196
Matrix, The, 67, 72
 McGee, Ryan, 202
 meaninglessness, 119–32
 media boundaries, 40–42, 55–56
 media consumption, 49–51, 54–55
Melrose Place, 21
 Melville, Herman, 117–18
- Mentalist, The*, 35–36
 Miller, Don, 204–5
 Miller, Frank, 149–50
Mission, The, 162–63
Mission Impossible, 68
 Mitchell, Joni, 67
Moby-Dick, 48
Moonstruck, 80
 Morrison, Grant, 74–75, 184, 186
 mystery, 146–47
- narcissism, 195–201
 new heavens and new earth, 57–58
Newsroom, The, 21
No Reservations, 46–47
 Nobel, Alfred, 69
 Nolan, Christopher, 150
 nostalgia, 105–6
Notting Hill, 32–33
 nudity, 225–26
- Odyssey, The*, 37
Office, The, 118
Office Space, 118
- paradise, 59–67
 paranoia, 144
Parts Unknown, 47
 perfectionism, 68–69, 75
Pleasantville, 65–66
 plot repetition, 35–36
 pornography, 48–49, 197
Pretty Woman, 162
 pride, 42
Project Runway, 203
Prometheus, 93
 Proust, Marcel, 57
 providence, 73
Pulp Fiction, 157–67
Punch Drunk Love, 162
- radical acceptance, 162–63
 Raimi, Sam, 135–36

General Index

- Ramsay, Gordon, 203
Real Housewives, 17
Real World, The, 194
reality television, 86–89, 193–211
redemption, 12, 33–34, 75, 109, 131, 161, 216
redemption history, 29, 32, 37
redemptive violence, 149–70
Reservoir Dogs, 68
resurrection, 42, 137, 167, 178–79, 189
Return of the King, The, 37
revenge, 152–53, 167–68
Road Rules, 194
romantic comedies, 32–33
Rushdie, Salman, 27
- salvation, 138, 215
salvation history, 31–32
Satan, 176–77
satisfaction, 78–79, 116, 132, 214
Scorsese, Martin, 16
seduction, 100
Seinfeld, 17, 21, 102–3, 206
self-discovery, 175
self-righteousness, 41–42, 129
self-sacrifice, 183–86
selfies, 207
sexual politics, 85, 97
sexual repression, 66
sexual shame, 66
sexual temptation, 48–49
sexuality, 20–21, 45, 196–97
Shyamalan, M. Night, 35
Signs, 35
sin, 34, 43–45, 47, 54, 59, 65–66, 92, 108–9
 bearing one another's, 206
 consequences of, 115–16
 effect on the world, 150
 original, 64, 157
Sixth Sense, The, 35
skepticism, 144
Sleeping Beauty, 79, 186–87
Sleepless in Seattle, 35
Smith, James K. A., 17–19, 213–14
Smith, Will, 200
social media, 23, 195, 205–11
Soderbergh, Stephen, 16
Spider-Man, 72–73
Star Wars, 92–93, 189
Steel Magnolias, 16
stereotyping, 122–23
storytelling, 19, 28–29, 43–44, 47–48, 215–19
suffering, 57, 94, 116
suffering servant, 182–83
Supergods, 27, 171
Superman, 183–86
supernatural, 133–47
Survivor, 194–95, 203
- Tarantino, Quentin, 16, 157–70
technological progress, 68
temptation, 176–77
Terminator, 72
texting, 207
Titanic, 68–69
Tolkein, J. R. R., 179–81
Tower Heist, 68
tragedy, 91, 94, 113
Tree of Life, 94–95
TRON-Legacy, 72
True Grit, 152–53
Truman Show, The, 64–65, 193
Turkle, Sherry, 207–8
tweeting, 207
Twilight Zone, The, 16, 139–41
Twin Peaks, 36, 146
- Unbreakable*, 35
Uncle Tom's Cabin, 28
utopia, 67
- vengeance, 153, 157–62
Village, The, 35
vocation, 217

General Index

- Wallace, David Foster, 12, 18–19,
21–22, 50–51
*Who Wants to Marry a Multimillion-
aire?*, 86–88
Wilder, Billy, 16
Wire, The, 115, 119–32
worldview, 28, 216–17
worship, 19, 46, 213
wrath, 48, 92, 168–70
Wright, N. T., 30, 178
X-Files, The, 17, 142–45
You've Got Mail, 32–33, 35

Also Available from Mike Cosper



For more information, visit crossway.org.

"With the amount of TV and movies our culture devours, this book is a must read."

Matt Chandler

The average American watches 5 hours of TV every day. Collectively, we spend roughly \$30 billion on movies each year.

Simply put, we're entertainment junkies. But can we learn something from our insatiable addiction to stories? Mike Cospers thinks so.

From horror flicks to rom-coms, the tales we tell and the myths we weave inevitably echo the narrative underlying all of history: the story of humanity's tragic sin and God's triumphant salvation. This entertaining book connects the dots between the stories we tell and the one great Story—helping us better understand the longings of the human heart and thoughtfully engage with the movies and TV shows that capture our imaginations.

"Cospers gives us new eyes to see and new ears to hear the stories we tell. I love this book and I think you will too."

Paul David Tripp, President, Paul Tripp Ministries; author, *What Did You Expect?*

"Cospers insightfully examines narratives in pop culture to reveal the larger Story of God at work in the human heart."

Ed Stetzer, President, LifeWay Research; author, *Subversive Kingdom*

"Cospers examines—critically and charitably, wisely and generously—the culture-shaping power of stories. Essential reading for anyone consuming, engaging, or shaping the culture."

Karen Swallow Prior, Professor of English, Liberty University; author, *Booked: Literature in the Soul of Me*

Mike Cospers is one of the founding pastors of Sojourn Community Church in Louisville, Kentucky, where he serves as the pastor of worship and arts. He is the author of *Rhythms of Grace* and the coauthor of *Faithmapping*.

CHRISTIAN LIVING

