Adventists and fiction: Another look

by
Scott E. Moncrieff

Historically, most Seventh-day Adventists have been averse to literary fiction. However, church members do write novels and Adventist presses do publish them. Adventist teachers, like myself, teach novels and write professional papers about them. Adventist academy students in North America typically study a novel or two, such as *The Scarlet Letter* or *A Tale of Two Cities*, and fiction is taught in North American colleges and universities. Still, numerous Adventists consider fiction to be harmful, trivial, and a waste of time.

This situation has come about, I believe, because of a widespread naivety about the nature and value of good fiction, and because of the legacy of Ellen White's comments about fiction.

Fact and fiction

Some may assume that "fiction" and "non-fiction" are opposite and unrelated kinds of writing. They think that non-fiction authors pursue their subjects while writing extensive notes on a yellow legal pad, and then transcribe the notes. Conversely, fiction writers might be cooking up wild tales of teen romance, science fiction, or something with little resemblance to reality or experience.

But consider some facts. To begin with, fiction and non-fiction have many compositional similarities. No story is an exclusive presentation of historical facts, because a story must be shaped to be told. The author selects a beginning, a middle, and an end from the unceasing stream of actual events. Even for authors working on a factual narrative, the needs of the story frequently go beyond the available facts. The author lacks exact quotes for dialogue and must often make educated guesses as to motivation, not to mention gaps in the facts themselves. Such impoverishment has led authors to include creative dialogues and juxtaposition of events.

On the other hand, fictional stories are never wholly woven out of imagination; they take in the author's personal experience, observational skills, and research. C. S. Lewis says, "we rearrange elements [God] has provided. There is not a *vestige* of real creativity *de novo* in us. Try to imagine a new primary color, a third sex, a fourth dimension, stuck together. Nothing happens."[1] Factual narratives stick closely to available facts and should not mislead the reader when they are not factual; fictional narratives consider facts as raw material, to be used, put aside, or transformed, according to the needs of the story and the purpose of the author.

Fiction as propositional

Most fiction might be considered propositional; that is, an author experiments with *what ifs*? Our children's Sabbath school quarterlies are full of *what-ifs* or *what-woulds*. What would Adam and Eve have done during their first few days in the garden? What would Dorcas's typical day have been like? This works on the adult level too. What would a believing family have been like during the Millerite movement? You could study historical records to find out what such a family might be like, and you might turn your study into a narrative like *Till Morning Breaks*.[2] The characters in this story—Justin Fletcher, Bethene Fletcher, and Rufus Bailey—are not specifically historical, but much of the merit of the book lies in their being historically plausible.The nineteenth century tone of a name "Bethene," for instance, would be ruined by substituting a contemporary name like "Brooke."

This tie to plausibility is one of the great attractions of good fiction and was established as a major evaluative criterion as long ago as Aristotle's *Poetics*. Authors establish the param-

Learning to be a good reader

1. Read good novels , essays, poetry, short stories, and drama as part of a well-rounded literary education.
2. Reread. Develop the pleasure of knowing a book better. Great literature improves with rereading.
3. React. As you read, write down your ideas in a journal. Discuss them with a friend, parent, or librarian. Ideas become your own when you work with them.
4. Don't accept something just because an author says it's so. Be open to new ideas, but don't swallow them.
5. Educate yourself about becoming a better Christian reader. I'd recommend C. S. Lewis's *An Experiment in Criticism* and/or Leland Ryken's *Windows to the World.*
6. Start with classics. Reading classics will give you a high standard to apply to contemporary works later on.

—Scott Moncrieff

eters of a novel, and within those parameters they must make a plausible novel—even if the story is a fantasy. Far from being a loose bag of lies, good fiction is typically a tightly woven cloth of internal coherence, closely linking cause and effect, motivation and action, in a way hardly observable in ordinary life, where events so often seem coincidental or random. Fact is stranger than fiction because fiction must carry along its own internal plausibility, whereas fact, i.e., reality, simply *is*.

Ellen White's legacy

Why has the Seventh-day Adventist Church been loath to accept novels? Partly because of Ellen White's critical remarks about fiction. And partly because of her interpreters, such as Leon William Cobb. In *Give Attendance to Reading* (1966), Cobb asserts that "throughout a period fifty-seven years long, which closed only two years before her death, [Mrs. White] was inspired to condemn every class and quality of the novel." To reiterate, "the reader might find no place for honest doubt that 'high-class' fiction is as specifically condemned as the low."[3] Mrs. White clearly made many strong statements about "novels" and "fiction," and the tone of those comments, while differing in intensity, is uniformly negative. However, even those who acknowledge her authority have advanced several arguments for the intelligent use of fiction.

1. *Ellen White's negative comments were largely and justly based on the inferior popular fiction of her day, thereby leaving the door open to intelligent consumption of "good fiction."* John Wood's "The Trashy Novel Revisited: Popular Fiction in the Age of Ellen White" surveys the American literary landscape of the last half of the 19th century, leaving no doubt that most popular fiction deserved a bad reputation.[4] Many of White's comments were directed specifically against this category of fiction. Josephine Cunnington Edwards, one of our "classic" storytellers in the English-speaking world, asserted that "Ellen White meant the corrupt novel" when she condemned fiction.[5] However, White also makes some specific statements condemning "high-class" fiction.
2. *White advocated broad intellectual development and attainment of literary knowledge. Surely the reading of fiction would be one branch of such development.* Paul Gibbs, an English professor at Andrews University from the late 1950s to the mid 1960s, makes this case and points out that Moses, Daniel, and Paul appear to have been broadly trained in the secular culture of their day.[6] The drawback of this "broad culture" argument is that it works by implication rather than direct statement, whereas the arguments against fiction are based on direct statement.
3. *White herself read and recommended fiction, so we could.* This argument has two main thrusts. First, White appreciated and recommended John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Although *Pilgrim's Progress* is fictional, it would be considered an allegory, not a novel, according to general literary usage. Nevertheless, its lengthy fictional narrative, complete with lively characters, made it a central influence on the development of the novel in English. White does not appear to have been a close reasoner about genre. Presumably, she saw no contradiction in condemning fiction and advocating *Pilgrim's Progress*.

   The second thrust is the compositional nature of stories White collected for *Sabbath Readings for the Home*, as described in John Waller's study.[7] As Waller shows, White clipped many stories from religious periodicals of her day, assembled them in scrapbooks, and eventually compiled selections from these scrapbooks into *Sabbath Readings*. After analyzing the editorial policies of the magazines from

which the stories were selected, Waller concludes that many of the stories were fictional. Other Adventist scholars have arrived at the same conclusion.[8] Thus, either White contradicted her own views, or she didn't understand that she was clipping out fiction, or she meant something other than simply "non-factual" by "fiction." Waller argues the latter point: "Apparently, then, her condemnation was not intended to be applied indiscriminately to all stories that do not happen to be true-to-fact."[9] From this exception, it seems like it can be said logically that today's English teachers may select "good" fiction for their classes, and likewise Adventist presses may publish "good" fiction.

4. *Although White condemned fiction, she did not reject it for being fiction, but for other reasons. Therefore, so long as the "other reasons" don't exist, fiction may be permissible.* White's main concerns on fiction may be summarized as follows: "(1) It is addictive. (2) It may be sentimental, sensational, erotic, profane, or trashy. (3) It is escapist, causing the reader to revert to a dream world and to be less able to cope with the problems of everyday life. (4) It unfits the mind for serious study and devotional life. (5) It is time-consuming and valueless."[10] Ironically, White's specific condemnations of fiction indicate, by reversal, the conditions under which she might have appreciated it. While it is clear that she makes many statements against the novel and fiction, a wholesale condemnation of the genre would be contradictory to her own practice, and not necessarily according to the reasons for which she condemns fiction.

Two other key arguments advocating fiction have often been used by Adventists and other Christians.

The Bible and fiction

The Bible contains fictional material, thereby giving *imprimatur* to fiction. Jesus's parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) and the parable of the trees (Judges 9: 8-15) provide samples of biblical fiction. It is hard to dispute this point, but Cobb, for example, creates peculiar definitions of parable and allegory as "unliteral" but not fictional, thereby rescuing the Bible and *Pilgrim's Progress* for his argument (pp. 59, 72). These definitions are not generally persuasive—even to Arthur White, who refers to *Pilgrim's Progress* as "fiction."[11]

Common sense

No one I have read has made a convincing argument against fiction *per se*. Therefore, fiction must be judged on a case by case basis, as are works from other genres. For a long time, key Adventist educators, including Harry Tippett, Alma McKibbin, and Don Snider, have argued that the genre itself is morally neutral, and that individual works must be scrutinized individually.[12]

Change of times

I would like to suggest one more argument. In White's day, fiction was primarily a form of popular entertainment. Although it is still partly that way, radio, television and movies have dramatically changed home entertainment. Many of White's concerns about fiction would be more appropriately addressed today to television, movies, and popular music.

To the extent that many of White's concerns focus on "young people" consuming popular entertainment in an unscreened environment, I agree with her. I don't want my children to watch "Power Rangers" or visit video arcades. However, the study of literature has become an academic field since White's time, producing professionally trained, analytical/critical readers. True, we are entertained, but we are not engaging in or teaching the trashy, hasty, superficial, or random reading that usually concerned Mrs. White—rather, we are providing an antidote to it.

Literature: general criteria for Adventist schools

Literature assigned in Seventh-day Adventist schools should:

1. Be serious art. It will lead to significant insight in the nature of human beings in society and will be compatible with Seventh-day Adventist values.
2. Avoid sensationalism (the exploitation of sex or violence) and maudlin sentimentality (the exploitation of softer feelings to the detriment of a sane and level view of life).
3. Not be characterized by profanity or other crude and offensive language.
4. Avoid elements that give the appearance of making evil desirable or goodness appear trivial.
5. Avoid simplified, excitingly suspenseful, or plot-dominated stories that encourage hasty and superficial reading.
6. Be adapted to the maturity level of the group or individual.

—Selected from *Guide to the Teaching of Literature in Seventh-day Adventist Schools*, General Conference Department of Education.

Three changes in our attitudes

In that educational context, I would suggest three changes in our attitude toward fiction.

1. *Change the focus from choosing the right books to doing the right kind of reading.* Some books are better than others, and it is no doubt best to spend one's time reading the finest books. But have we mistakenly emphasized selection as the crucial aspect in reading? The Christian literary scholar Leland Ryken says, "The least reliable index to a work's morality is its subject matter, even though this is often the chief criterion applied by Christians when they object to works of literature." More important is "the moral perspective that writers build into their works," "and the response of the individual reader."[13] As part of a solid education, we need to develop good reading habits: trying to understand a book in the spirit in which it was written; developing a close, critical attention, the stance of active rather than passive reader; rereading.
2. *Do not use moral instruction as a sole or primary justification for studying literature.* The traditional purpose of literature is twofold: to delight and to instruct. We tend to lean to one side. It is so hard for us to justify literature for enjoyment. The editors' introduction to my reviews of Adventist novels notes that "From the parables of Jesus to John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Christians have used imaginary characters and stories to convey moral and spiritual truth."[14] True, but nothing is said about delight or enjoyment. We should never forget the instructional potential of literature, but we should equally recognize delight and enjoyment as worthy qualities.
3. *Novels come as mixed baggages and challenge mature readers to treat them as such.* The parable of the wheat and the tares suggests the mixed nature of earthly life. So let us not focus on separating books into categories of perfection and damnation, but rather strive to identify the excellencies within a particular book. Philippians 4:8 has been occasionally misused as a biblical proscription on fiction, with "whatever is true" requiring stories to be composed of authenticated fact. I would suggest another application. As Lewis points out, one of the chief pleasures of literature is that it takes us outside ourselves, lets us see the world from another person's viewpoint.[15] As a mature reader, I can search for what is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy in Lewis's novels, or a potentially controversial film like *Jesus of Montreal*. I can recognize points of disagreement while still appreciating the book or movie. If as a church we had given more weight to identifying excellencies than flaws, I suspect that as a youngster I would have ingested something besides a steady diet of Disney movies at church socials.

As Adventists, we have long viewed fiction and novels with suspicion. We ought to continue to view all forms of popular and high brow culture with critical attention, but the novel no more so than other forms. Let us read with intelligence and discrimination, by all means, and may we be equally ready for laughter, pathos, or thoughtful reflection, as the situation warrants.

Scott F. Moncrieff (Ph. D., University of California, Riverside) teaches English Literature at Andrews University and has authored several articles and critical studies. His address: English Department, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI 49104, U.S.A.

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