

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Letters to Barbara*; Glenn Meeter; Eerdmans, 1981; 256pp., \$13.95, cloth. (Reviewed by Gary VanDer Schaaf.)

Glenn Meeter, professor of English at Northern Illinois University, has published short stories in several magazines, including *Redbook* and *Atlantic Monthly*. *Letters to Barbara* is his first novel.

Seen through the eyes of Adrian Vander Vaarten, the principle character, the struggles of a small, Dutch, Reformed community against the inroads of secularism — via radio, television, urbanization, and integration — form the background of the novel's central action.

Taking a summer job as a park supervisor in a large, "unReformed" city, Adrian meets swearing, drinking, dancing co-workers and the street-tough, world-wise children of the city's ghetto. Most importantly, he meets Barbara, his attractive, black, fellow supervisor who is to be his partner for the summer.

By summer's end, the relationship that develops between Adrian and Barbara comes to a climax in visits to each other's churches, and there the great cultural and spiritual differences separating the two young people are finally seen as an insurmountable ob-

stacle to continued involvement. The relationship's end sets the stage for Adrian's final confrontation with the beliefs and traditions of his youth.

Meeter has done a remarkable job of portraying the type of close, tightly-knit, Reformed community with which most of our readers are familiar. Problems within the church (*Psalter* vs. *Psalter-Hymnal*), problems from without (a large, chain-supermarket that threatens to open on Sunday), and the people who must face these troubles are all presented in an accurate and sensitive way. Most satisfying to me is the warmth, love, and understanding that Meeter brings to his community and its characters as they face their struggles. Absent for the most part is the satire, the venom, even the hatred that marks the work of other Dutch-American authors (Peter DeVries, David Cornel DeJong, Fredrick Manfred) when they have written about the people and culture to which they were born.

There are too many sub-plots in the book for the author to develop adequately. The author divides his energy (and our interest) among too many conflicts: the town's antithetical struggles, Adrian's dissatisfaction

with his church, Adrian's relationship with Barbara, and the larger problem of prejudice within the church. I felt a dissipation of tension that prevented real involvement in the novel.

Nonetheless, Meeter is to be commended for his work. His use of words, his ear for language and dialog is certainly a cut or two above that which character-

istically is found in "Christian literature." And Meeter has succeeded where so many others have failed: his Dutch Calvinists are human, he has put the name of God into the mouths of fictional characters without making those characters seem to be fools. *Letters to Barbara* should be a welcome addition to high school, church, and home libraries.

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**EERDMANS' CONCISE BIBLE ENCYCLOPEDIA**; edited by Pat Alexander; Eerdmans, 1980, 256 pp., \$8.95, paper. (Reviewed by Gary VanDerSchaaf.)

This slim volume is a pocket-sized abridgment of the 1978 publication, *Eerdmans' Family Encyclopedia of the Bible*. According to the jacket blurb, the text attempts to "cover the historical, geographical, and cultural setting of the Bible as well as its teaching." Entries include "Archeology," "Canaanite Religion," "Family Life," "Religion of Israel," and "Jesus' Teaching."

The book provides in a straightforward, easy-to-understand manner, "the historical, geographical, and cultural setting of the Bible." The sections of the encyclopedia which deal with such matters would be helpful to anyone interested in the

"life-situation" of God's people throughout the old and new testaments. The illustrations that accompany some of the articles add to the book's appeal.

It is when the authors use culture and history as hermeneutical tools to delineate and explain the Bible's teachings that the book fails. Higher criticism is tendentious in nearly every article involving doctrinal issues; in some articles, such criticism is blatant. Regarding creation, for instance, the entry reads: "The Bible has nothing to say about which scientific theory of creation is most likely to be true. This is not surprising, since it was never intended to be a book of science" (p. 57).

If the reader is wary of such statements, the book is recommended for high school and personal libraries.

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EERDMANS' BOOK OF CHRISTIAN POETRY; Pat Alexander, Editor: Eerdmans, 1981; illustrated, 125 pp., \$10.95, cloth. (Reviewed by Gary VanDer Schaaf.)

Over sixty authors are featured in this attractive volume that presents some of the best poetry, sacred or profane, written in the last 1300 years.

In a format designed to wet the appetite, brief poems, from the seventh century's "Caedmon's

Hymn" to John Updike's "Seven Stanzas at Easter" (a personal favorite), are presented in chronological order. Readers are sure to find their own favorites among the poems of John Donne, George Herbert, William Blake, Gerard Manely Hopkins, and T.S. Eliot. Readers will also delight in the work of authors of less reknown.

The brief biography of each author and the many rich and varied illustrations add to the enjoyment of the book. A real treasure for home and school!



"... we let our young men and women go out unarmed in a day when armor was never so necessary. By teaching them all to read, we have left them at the mercy of the printed word. By the invention of the film and the radio, we have made certain that no aversion to reading shall secure them from the incessant battery of words, words, words. They do not know what the words mean; they do not know how to ward them off or blunt their edge or fling them back; they are a prey to words in their emotions instead of being the masters of them in their intellects."

— "The Lost Tools of Learning"  
by Dorothy Sayers in *National Review*