

# A.P.O.V. \*

\*Alumni Point of View

## Hope, Hell and a Happy Ending

*A girl with one foot in the church and the other in the library grows up to be a minister who writes romance novels.* By BETH PATTILLO, MDIV'90

I GREW UP IN LUBBOCK, TEXAS. IN the past I have blamed a number of character flaws—as well as my inability to pronounce the word “theater” without a long “a” sound—on the place of my birth. But even though I spent the first 18 years of my life plotting how to escape West Texas, I can now acknowledge a significant benefit of spending my formative years on what we affectionately referred to as “God’s parking lot.”

You see, in Lubbock there wasn’t a lot to do but read and go to church.

In a town where the streets ran parallel, either north-south or east-west, and every intersection was perfectly perpendicular, I might have found it difficult to experience the transcendent had it not been for two important places.

The sanctuary of the First Christian Church, with its arching beams and tall stained-glass window, provided a sense of majesty sorely missing from my three-bedroom ranch existence. I logged enough hours on the ruby velvet pew cushions to know there was something different about being in church. Between the soaring notes of the pipe organ and the adults’ hushed reverence as they passed the communion trays, I learned that even in Lubbock, Texas, one might encounter the Holy

My other sacred place was the George Mahon Public Library. It opened when I was 11, part of the rebuilding of downtown in the wake of the deadly 1970 tornado. The first time I set foot in the cavernous new library, I almost wept when I saw row upon row of cabinets containing the voluminous card catalog. Such an embarrassment of riches was overwhelming. By the time I was 12, my mother



DANIEL DUBOIS

allowed me to ride the city bus downtown unaccompanied, and I logged even more hours at the library. With no adult looking over my shoulder censoring my choices, and no younger brother pestering me to hurry up and choose my books, I worked my way through the Dewey decimal system. I cruised the shelves row by row, often plopping down on the floor to peruse a promising volume. Freed from the juvenile section and a force-fed diet of Newberry Award winners, I feasted on Victoria Holt’s gothic romances, travelogues of distant lands, autobiographies of famous women, and even the occasional slim volume of poetry. When I finally left the library, replete with books, I juggled my discoveries precariously in my arms while fishing bus fare out of the pocket of my Jordache jeans.

In church I read the Bible from cover to

cover. Even working my way through the Byzantine Levitical code was preferable to puzzling out the sermon. And, often, my library books seemed as incomprehensible to me as the Revelation of St. John. Yet, I knew enough to realize that despite my limited understanding in either case, I was on to something really good. Something greater than me, greater than the church or the library. And definitely greater than Lubbock. The time I spent in church and in the library formed in me a deep appreciation for the sacred nature of story—of any story, whether it was between the faux black leather covers of my Bible or had “Property of the Lubbock City-County Library” stamped on the flyleaf.

Perhaps such lofty influences should have instilled in me a desire for the highest intellectual planes, but, alas, they did not. Even at that tender age, I was already exhibiting my shocking preference for pop culture. I found Ruth and Esther far more interesting than the Apostle Paul, who didn’t seem to know that the shortest distance between two theological points was a straight line. I was honest enough with myself to admit that I would rather read about the crime-solving Nancy Drew, speeding around in her blue roadster, than a crazy sea captain in pursuit of a whale. I didn’t need deep literature; I just needed a good story.

All the stories of my childhood—the sacred and the secular in equal measure—taught me



NATALIE COX MEAD

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to hope. Like any good romantic heroine, Esther used her royal position—as well as her handy-dandy beauty—to deliver God's chosen people from death, proof that even in biblical times, a girl could be faithful and fabulous. In fact, Queen Esther didn't seem that different from the narrator of Victoria Holt's *Mistress of Mellyn*, who survived multiple attempts on her life before proving that her brooding love interest did not, in fact, kill his first wife. Despite evidence to the contrary, a good story demonstrated that everything might indeed turn out well.

All those stories also taught me that life held real and inescapable suffering. Sometimes hell was right here on earth. Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi, faced starvation and death before Ruth's bold actions brought them under the protection of their kinsman, Boaz. That Ruth would freely choose to follow Naomi into poverty and peril showed me that sometimes the right choices were the ones for which you paid the greatest price. And Pollyanna, for all that she's maligned for being

a cockeyed optimist, lost both her parents to untimely deaths and wound up temporarily paralyzed. Melodrama? Maybe. Over the top? Possibly. But most of the people I knew in church had stories that could easily match Pollyanna's. Suffering was part of everyone's story, a life requirement that couldn't be avoided. In reading about suffering, I learned to accept that I couldn't escape it.

Despite teaching me about the reality of suffering, though, the stories I found in church and the stories I checked out from the library instilled in me a thorough-going belief in the transformative power of a happy ending. Resurrection became the model for the way I saw the world. Even in the face of the worst the world had to offer, love could and did triumph over evil. The mystery could be solved, the enemy defeated, the exile brought home. Like the rest of the world, I longed to be made complete, and the stories I read told me that such unity was indeed possible.

Eventually, I started to write stories of my own. I kept one foot in the church and the

other in the library, so it came as no surprise to me when I grew up to be a woman minister who writes romance novels. In my stories I write about hope in the face of suffering, and I'm happy to provide my readers with the requisite happy ending. Some folks will say that popular fiction is little more than brain candy, empty calories for people who don't want to read anything that challenges them. But I say that any story that gives us hope, takes us to hell, and finishes with a happy ending does what a story is meant to do—bring us one step closer to that which is, as St. Anselm says, “greater than anything of which we can conceive.”

As a writer I can only hope that somewhere in a quiet little town, one where all the streets run parallel and there's not much to do but read and go to church, another little girl will pull one of my books from the shelves of her local library, plop down on the floor, and be transported to a world well beyond her own. I hope my stories will teach her to

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**From the Reader** *continued from page 6*

### **Mighty Oaks from Little Acorns**

I READ THE ARTICLES IN THE SUMMER 2005 issue of *Vanderbilt Magazine* and appreciated your efforts to compile such an interesting array of subjects and photos. I was especially interested in the “Green Spaces” section [of the “Greetings from Vanderbilt” article, p. 51].

Since leaving Vanderbilt in 1966, I have enjoyed returning to campus just to walk around and view the lawn, shrubs, flowers and trees. Several years ago I purchased a seedling from the Bicentennial Oak on campus and planted it in my front yard. Each year I have taken a photo of the tree to track its growth. It is a source of pleasure to know a small part of the Vandy campus lives in my front yard.

DR. BILL ELIAS,  
BA'61, MD'65, HO'65  
Roanoke, Va.



**Dr. Bill Elias, in September, with his prized tree, grown from a seedling of the Bicentennial Oak on Vanderbilt's campus.**

### **Consider Us Lashed**

FRIENDS, WE SPEND OUR WINTERS IN southern Arizona. To our knowledge, there is no town or city whose name is spelled “Tuscon” [Summer 2005 issue, “Scholarship Winner Globetrotts in Pursuit of Public Service,” p. 16]. The last time we checked, the

proper spelling is “Tucson.” A few lashes for your copy editor are in order.

CHARLES B. HOELZEL, PHD'60  
Livingston, Texas

### **Magazine Appreciation**

IN THE SPRING 2005 ISSUE OF *Vanderbilt Magazine*, you ran a photo of the Class of '54 banner at the '54 reunion [Homecoming and Reunion ad, p. 1]. I'm the fellow in the raincoat and sunglasses right behind the returning cheerleader in the black sweater. If I can have or purchase a copy of that shot, I'd appreciate it.

Thanks. You must be doing something right down there to keep the conservative contingent so upset all the time.

BOB SORRELLS, BA'56, MA'57  
Rochester, Minn.

I JUST WANTED TO WRITE AND tell you how much I enjoyed the summer issue! Thank you for all you do to keep the alumni informed.

LISA NEAL, MED'94  
Kennesaw, Ga.

**Letters are always welcome** in response to contents of the magazine. We reserve the right to edit for length, style and clarity. Send signed letters to the Editor, *VANDERBILT MAGAZINE*, VU Station B 357703, 2301 Vanderbilt Place, Nashville, TN 37235-7703, or e-mail [vanderbiltmagazine@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:vanderbiltmagazine@vanderbilt.edu).

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game. Throughout the SEC season, she made that big save in tight games to keep us in the match. Sometimes they were saves so big, she ignited our team and our play instantly improved.”

In the classroom Griffin is an economics major with a minor in financial economics. Her summer internships have given her good insight into the world after college. She ran her own painting business for a summer in Charlotte—a good experience, but one she doesn't plan to repeat any time soon. The hard-

est part was having charge of her own employees. “They never do what you say. I'm sure that's what our coaches are saying right now: “These soccer players don't ever do what we say.””

The city of Nashville also turned out to be a good fit for Griffin. A self-taught guitarist, she enjoys country music and has a particular fondness for Reba McEntire and The Judds. “It's been fun living in Nashville. Any night you go out, there's music downtown. Every now and then somebody big will be playing. It's a great environment if you like any music.”

One might even say it's serendipitous.

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ing resources and our common humanity. We come together because we love people and want to help them. We leave with a deeper understanding of people's lives, experiences and circumstances.

Just as the Nashville high-school students really only need information they lack about standardized tests, applications, scholarships, financial aid and shower shoes, Shawn and the rest of us really only need firsthand information about how other people live in order to respect our mutual humanity and desire to improve each other's life experience.

Two years after the founding of Synergy, I can tell you confidently that it has been a wild ride. I've laughed until I've cried. I've cried until I've laughed. I speak for all the mentors and individuals who helped make Synergy possible when I say that I love these youth. I worry about them, I feel happy for them, I feel sad with them. I want society to pay more attention to them, and I intend to spend my life reforming the systems that will increase their opportunities and improve their lives.

I would like to continue relaying the stories of “my children” and their mentors, but I have to go now. James has been skipping school. I need to call him and make sure he is planning to attend tomorrow. Shanika's baby is turning 6 months old Tuesday, and I promised I would bring one of the Harry Potter books for her to read to him. And my paper for Public Policy about reforming the U.S. public education system is due in less than 24 hours. ...

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hope. That they will tell her something true about the suffering she will face in her life. But most of all, I want them to instill in her a belief that a happy ending isn't a cheap convention of a dime-store novel. It's the moment of affirmation life is always seeking, the movement toward unity with God. And even if it's only between the covers of a book, I want her to believe that a happy ending is, in fact, always possible.

Without that possibility, life wouldn't be worth living.