

The Future of the Word: An Eschatology of Reading. By Tiffany Eberle Kriner. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014. xxvi + 326pp. Paperback, \$39.

The questions of literary criticism and theory *The Future of the Word* explores derive primarily from two contexts: the postmodern theoretical shift toward indeterminacy of textual meaning, and the American crisis of confidence in the humanities more generally. Kriner answers these questions theologically, grounding the teleological identities of texts and the teleological function of the reading process synecdochically within a broader eschatology dependent upon the creative, sustaining, and incarnate Word already and not yet bringing the kingdom of God into the world. Her book is therefore an important defence of reading as profoundly meaningful within a Christian theological and ethical context, participatory in the Gospel. Reading treats texts and authors as part of how God treats the world. Then, winsomely, in special sections called 'scrivenings', Kriner tries out the redemptive, reclamatory, or purposive readings she's been theorising on texts variously needing them, from *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* to *Lolita*. The book is thus also an idiosyncratic and capacious account of how a scholar-teacher has come to terms with her own vocation: what to do with the texts and life she's been drawn to. Its insistence upon reconciliatory and redemptive readings has wide implications, and places peculiar but welcome scrutiny even upon the office of reviewer.

The book's preface and introduction orient the argument in theology and literary theory. Kriner finds three substantial connections between texts and eschatology: texts are part of the created order that finds its fulfilment in God's Kingdom come, they organise the temporality of language towards meanings, and they are inherently communal in parallel to the Trinitarian kingdom community. Having those theological answers in hand, she turns to the question, 'Why read?' (p. 4). Her introduction argues that we ought to see reading not as human means or end but as divine means and end; our texts and our deployment of them find ultimate significance within the Gospel who is the Word and Sign of God. Chapter one focuses on Jesus as interpreter and fulfiller of previous texts, one who 'brings Old Testament texts forward' (p. 50) in exemplary fashion. Chapter two establishes how one might engage a given text eschatologically: through preservation, revivifying utterance, translation, and relational call-and-response. The book's first 'scrivenings' section then applies chapter two. It analyses three texts that offer 'futures for the living dead' by rewriting novels whose audience reception had reached an impasse: *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's lyric response to *Oliver Twist*, and 1Q84. Chapter three returns to theology and theory, drawing on the biblical wheat-and-tares parable to suggest how readers might take stances of provisional and gracious judgment upon presently evil texts whose meanings are still unfolding. A second 'scrivenings' analyses two literary works that feature interpretive judgment as a prominent and complex

theme: *Daisy Miller* and *Angels in America*. The book's final chapter recommends a practice of reconciliatory reading in response to ethically disturbing texts, and its final scrivenings model that practice by reconciling Kriner herself to two texts that have particularly disturbed her: Francine Rivers's Christian romance novel *Redeeming Love* and the paedophile *Lolita*.

The Future of the Word is a book of literary criticism from a theological press that has chosen to market it under the heading 'theology and culture'. This inter-disciplinarity offers strong advantages and enables some fluidity of form. Kriner draws a disparate array of thinkers into conversation, for instance citing (among others) John Walton, John Milbank, Stanley Grenz, Marianne Moore, Walter Benjamin, Alan Jacobs, Leslie Marmon Silko, Gertrude Stein, and Emmanuel Levinas in the confined space of chapter two. Similarly, making theological points outside strictly literary categorisation allows Kriner to group her scrivenings counter-intuitively and mischievously. Her theological framework *applied*, she intersperses several personal anecdotes outlining her own path through the disciplines of reading and teaching. Her style, occasionally informal ('it may be okay' [p. 57]; 'that sounds a lot to me like' [p. 100n4]), is more often poetic in evocative and precise phrasing, in parallelism and repetition. The book takes the shape not merely of a focused scholarly monograph but of a whole Christian life—intellectual, vocational, personal—lit by rich reading.

The book's occupation of the border between disciplines, as well as its eschatological focus, may (or may not) explain some structural and stylistic oddities. It features a 16-page preface and 36-page introduction; this embarrassment of riches disorients as well as orients, like any over-long explanation. A book committed to open interpretation may be partially excused an effect of imprecision because of its premise, and the author herself gives the game up, or away, explaining that eschatology inclines her 'terms of the discussion . . . , at times, [to] feel hazy' (p. xviii). At times they do. Theological terms in particular can lack sufficient definition to be useful analytically. 'The future of the word' functions like a poetic refrain several times before it receives theological grounding. The major structural motif of 'scrivenings' never gets defined or explained, nor does the book's quarantining of those scrivenings or close-readings into sections separate from the chapter organisation. Chapter four contains a powerful discussion of what it might mean to forgive a text, but does not clearly explain an important correlative: how a text might prompt such forgiveness through 'confession' (pp. 214, 228). The argument, style, and definition of terms need more realised eschatology.

Here may be as good a place as any to point out a lack of production scrupulousness. I count 10 errors of omission or redundancy. In my copy the numeral '1' is defectively printed in every page number in which it appears, as well as the copyright page, which also features a defective letter 'l'.

This book is an important *apologia* for the academic discipline of literary studies as Christian vocation. Its particular contribution lies in affirming literary meaning as eschatological, always a not-fully-realised plenitude. Such a notion powerfully enables interpretive multiplicity and innovation and constitutes a full ethical mandate for reading because readings get caught up in, formative of, the future of the word they read. In Kriner's vision, readers serve texts because texts serve God and even participate in the God who is the Word. Engagement with texts is therefore wholly potent, wholly fraught, worth whatever resources readers can give. But what I think I

will remember most are Kriner's own readings as she redeems *Redeeming Love*, resurrects *Pride and Prejudice* by means of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, and shows us how to love the compromised and lost Lolita by means of *Lolita*. At that ethical level Kriner's scriverings deserve attention beyond the explicitly theological, outside the confessionally Christian, from a literary discipline desperately in search of moral ends.

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