

## Editors' Preface

This issue of *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* presents four essays centered on significant issues, patterns, and themes in American religious and cultural life as these appear in select twentieth-century American novels.

Robert Detweiler concentrates on E. L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*, a creative repossession of the historically visible spectacle and more hidden aftermath of the trial of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg. Detweiler finds in the novel a complicated religious, political, and psychological dynamic made up of the identification of evil, scenes of ritual victimization, and convulsions of confession and atonement. Set against the backdrop of the communist scare in mid-century, the novel reveals a telling American episode of public shame and private guilt.

Ann-Janine Morey explores how women's fiction that treats child death and mother grief can raise to fuller critical consciousness a scarcely articulated and deeply problematical realm of religious experience often cramped in implication by prevailing literary assessments and social conventions. The subject of child death, this nearly "unimaginable" aspect of life, as powerfully imagined in novels by Perri Klass, Toni Morrison, and Harriette Arnow, challenges the adequacy of such conventions, especially in a biblically informed American culture.

Una M. Cadegan concentrates less on the drama and import of fictional patterns than on the situation of the novelist. The focus is on Richard Sullivan, a midwestern Catholic writer working at Notre Dame in mid-century who was quite prolific but largely unheralded outside Catholic literary circles. In Sullivan's pursuit of broader success, Cadegan locates a telling case of the writer's ways, means, and limits in solving conundra of religious belief and secular cultural expression, of tradition and modernity, of sacramentalist imagination and literary "realism" in contemporary America.

Kyle A. Pasewark's interpretive entrances into the "Rabbit-saga" in John Updike's novels pull to the fore a tacit but operative religious energy exemplified in Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom's distinc-

tively American cravings and predictably American acts. In Rabbit's confused chasing after "something more," Pasewark discerns a dichotomy between an American quest for a transcending freedom and an equally American insistence on a world of mortal meaning, a conflict between the shapes of ecstasy and the possibilities of grace, as this paradoxical life-story invites theological critique.

Each approached as a case in critical point, the works of these novelists become important for our essayists not because of any traditional appeals to sacred texts, advancements of creeds, or defenses of communities of faith, but because they crystallize for inquiry evidence of American religious life to be discovered outside of those conventional forms of religious expression. The essays, through the approaches taken to the novels, suggest powerful religious sensibilities pulsing within the fictional dramas, playing powerfully in and among the specificities of time and place, scene and situation, rendered in imaginative terms. They appear in struggles with the forces of modernity, in threats of sociopolitical pathologies, in the agonies of private lamentations, and in the desperate pursuits of sensate ecstasy. And, if the old adage holds in any of its several variations, the expression of such sensibilities through fiction can convey experience and ideas to its readers in ways more general than the accounts of history, more particular than the commentaries of philosophy, and possibly more disclosive than either about some facets of the story of American religious existence.