

EXCERPT



Reading Buechner

Exploring the Work of a Master Memoirist, Novelist, Theologian, and Preacher

November 19, 2019 | \$18, 232 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-4580-4

Frederick Buechner is one of the most gifted writers of his generation, with an important legacy as a memoirist, novelist, theologian, and preacher. In this book, Buechner expert Jeff Munroe presents a collection of the true “essentials” from across Buechner’s diverse catalog, as well as an overview of Buechner’s life and a discussion of the state of his literary legacy today.

Buechner’s Voice for Today’s Polarized Culture

My strong conviction is we need Buechner’s voice today more than ever. The one word that best describes both the church and our wider culture at the moment is *polarized*. To paraphrase William Butler Yeats, the center has not held, and there are constant forces that move everything toward one pole or the other. There is precious little middle ground anymore.

Buechner, however, refuses to be pushed toward a side. Attempts to classify him result in oxymorons. He is a conservative liberal. Or is he a liberal conservative? He is a Pentecostal mainliner, or is he a mainline Pentecostal? He is a novelist ordained to evangelize, and while that may not be an oxymoron, it is certainly unique. There are other ordained ministers who write novels, but none of them are being nominated for America’s most prestigious literary awards. He is an ordained novelist who refuses to preach in his novels while being one of our greatest preachers. He is also a creative, wry, and witty theologian, which is certainly another oxymoron. I am in the very small number of people who can truthfully say, “Some of my best friends are theologians,” and while they generally appreciate great literature, the abstract nature of their field limits its literary quality. Buechner wrote theology, but it was never abstract. It was always personal and highly pastoral.

Our need for wise guides in our fragmented and complex world is one reason for the current popularity of memoirs. Buechner was a pioneer in the spiritual memoir movement, and we look to him still to help show the way. We need his voice to help affirm faith in a world that is falling apart.

What does it mean to believe in God when there is so much evidence to the contrary? This is Buechner’s great theme and the thread that holds the novels, memoirs, popular theology, and sermons together. The earliest novels explored the emptiness and despair of modern life without God. Beginning with the clack-clack of two branches in 1965 in *The Final Beast*, Buechner’s novels assumed God was present, alive, and active, albeit “here and there, now and then, mostly hidden.”

Only those who are paying attention notice the subterranean presence of grace. It is, as Buechner says in *The Final Beast*, as subtle as “the approach of the approach perhaps of splendor.” As Buechner reached his most productive years, he settled on writing novels about saints, and Leo Bebb, Godric, Brendan, and Jacob—who resided on different continents in different centuries—were united by being saints with feet of clay, the only kind of saint Buechner knew. Yes, each saint was a life-giver, but what matters most in their stories is the grace and love given to them, the sense that just below the surface is something—or Someone—working for good.

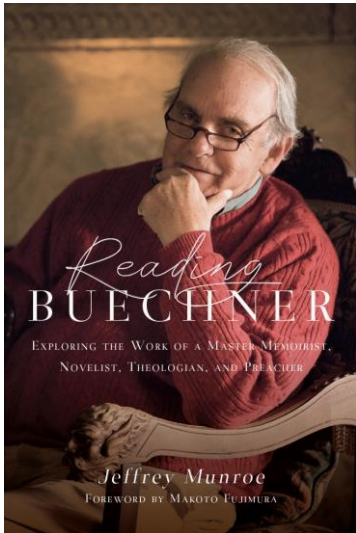
Eventually, as he began writing about his life, he wrote his memoirs like he wrote his novels, exhibiting his sense of the subterranean presence of grace. From there came *Wishful Thinking* and the other books of theology, *Telling the Truth*, and collections of sermons.



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“Reading Buechner gives us exactly what the title promises. These are a fan’s notes, based on many years of reading and reflection, aimed at fellow Buechnerites but also readily accessible to newcomers. Unpretentious but deeply versed in his subject, Jeffrey Munroe is a winsome guide.”

John Wilson, contributing editor, Englewood Review of Books

The ABC books of theology and the sermons bear the same witness to God’s subterranean presence. Buechner reflected on the meaning of the “subterranean presence of grace,” saying,

That’s a wonderful way to put it. It’s beneath the surface; it’s not right there like the brass band announcing itself, but it comes and it touches and it strikes in ways that always leave us free to either not even notice it or to draw back from it. . . . But that’s what I try to do, to speak about human beings and the existence, human beings who are here and there touched by grace through people they come to know or through things that happen to them or things that don’t happen to them.

—Taken from chapter eleven, “Reading Buechner Today”



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Jeffrey Munroe is executive vice president at Western Theological Seminary, where he also teaches writing. He was a charter member of the advisory board of the Buechner Institute of Faith and Culture and is an ordained minister in the Reformed Church in America.

"Reading Buechner Can Change Your Life"

Why a book on Buechner now?

Jeffrey Munroe: I realized that this is a pivotal moment for Buechner. He has retired. Will his work endure? I believe it should, yet I work at a seminary and deal with dozens of new students each year who may or may not know the name but don't know Buechner's work. I have done my best to produce something that will help people get into this great writer. There's also a secondary market of the already converted, devoted Buechner followers who will get into something like this.

How do you introduce your readers to Buechner?

Jeffrey: There are forty Buechner books. Where should you start? What should you read? I look in depth at ten of them, which I call essentials. I also provide a short description of all forty books in the appendix. He is the only ordained minister to be nominated for major literary awards, both the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award in fiction. He really started the spiritual memoir movement. He wrote very accessible (and witty!) theology. He produced powerful sermons and wrote one of the best books there is on preaching. There have been three other books about his work—two were done decades ago (and are mostly unreadable) and the other, which is over a decade old, weighs in at about four hundred pages and is pretty academic. My book is much more accessible.

What do you want readers to take away from *Reading Buechner*?

Jeffrey: Reading Buechner can change your life. It changed mine. His deeply personal memoirs speak truth into broad spectrums of readers. But he's more than a memoirist. Many Christians struggle to know what to do with his fiction, which isn't like typical "Christian fiction." I think I help them figure that out. Many also don't know where he fits theologically—he is an embodiment of a bunch of theological oxymorons—I don't know if he's a liberal conservative or a conservative liberal. He's ordained as a Presbyterian but isn't a typical mainline Protestant—in many ways his theological home is among the Pentecostals. He's an Eastern literary Ivy Leaguer who feels more at home at Wheaton than Harvard Divinity School.



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