

NEWS

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Stan Guthrie / Stan Guthrie
 Communications
 (630) 665-4174
guthsc@att.net
<http://www.ralphdwinter.org>

NOTE TO MEDIA PROFESSIONALS: Article © 2012. Available for non-exclusive reprinting. Please retain all references to the book The Ralph D. Winter Story.

Author Harold Fickett on Ralph D. Winter: “He took ideas seriously ... he didn’t take himself seriously.”

Interview by Stan Guthrie

Harold Fickett is the author of novels, biographies, and works of spirituality, including The Holy Fool, The Living Christ, Dancing with the Divine, and The Ralph D. Winter Story. He was a co-founder of the journal Image and is a contributing editor of Godspy (www.godspy.com), where he writes columns on world Christianity and spirituality. Fickett has written for The National Review, Crisis, Christianity & Literature, Decision, The World & I, Publishers Weekly, The New Oxford Review, Books & Culture, Leadership, and Christianity Today.

How did you get the assignment to write a biography of Ralph D. Winter?

Ralph and I had preliminary talks about writing a book together before he met his second wife, Barbara. He was looking for a way to get his ideas across to a larger public and was thinking of writing a novel. I started to know Ralph and his work then through the materials he sent me. My friend Tim Stafford had written a seminal article on Ralph for *Christianity Today* and we lived in the same town in northern California those days. He clued me in to what an interesting thinker Ralph was. The idea came and went, or so I thought, but about a decade later Ralph approached me again with the idea of writing a novel together. By that time I knew a lot more about Ralph and his singular standing in the missions community and was very interested.

We started working on an outline for the novel, which involved my reading much of what he had written, talking about the material with him, and starting to imagine how to construct the fiction. I went to see him several times in Pasadena as we worked on the book. During our first meetings, I learned that he not only had cancer but also Lyme disease. He was still terrifically energetic.

The last time I saw him he was close to death. Yet, he still wanted to talk with me while he was in the hospital, and I’ll never forget how he kept working into the night, answering my questions in an increasingly faint voice, at a time in his life when that would have been the last thing I would have wanted to do. He was completely committed to his mission until the last.

After he died, I came to the memorial service. By that time I had become such a fan of Ralph’s and all he had accomplished that I didn’t want to let the project go. I thought I could turn the work done to date to good account by writing a short biography, as a service to readers and also to the group he founded, Frontier Mission Fellowship. Ralph was better known in the 1970s and 1980s, but his thinking was far more interesting in the last two decades of his life. I discussed

the idea of a short biography with the Frontier Mission Fellowship leaders, and they provided the means for me to do the work.

How was this project different from your previous books?

I found Ralph such a congenial spirit—both in the flesh and through his writing. He was truly all about God’s Kingdom, not his own personal ambitions. Most Christian leaders are—like secular leaders—people whose confidence and sense of direction attract followers, and they glory in how they’ve set the world around them spinning. They have big egos and they need them for the work they do, but they are rarely interested in cultivating relationships with people outside their orbit. Ralph could be hardheaded, as any of the people who worked with him will readily tell you, but he was genuinely humble, meaning that he took a genuine interest in what others were doing and liked supporting the work of others. He also had a dry sense of humor and a wonderful sense of life’s absurdities. He took ideas seriously, but he saw himself as part of something so much larger than he was—God’s purposes—that he didn’t take himself seriously. He had spent his life struggling with the contradictions of his personality and this came through in the ironic way he regarded anyone who wanted to make too much of him. In my eyes, of course, that made him truly great and such a relief from the usual Christian leader. After he passed, I still felt in writing the book that I was spending time in his company and he was the most companionable of biographical subjects.

I also felt that I glimpsed an unusual sanctity in him—he was fiercely protective of his Lord’s honor and hated the way people attribute the work of the devil in unmerited suffering to God. People speak very lightly of someone “loving God.” Ralph did, and it wasn’t a light thing but something that drove him through those last arduous interview sessions. He loved God fiercely.

How well did you get to know Dr. Winter?

I believe I came to know Ralph in a privileged way and for that reason unusually well. It’s hard for a biographer not to feel that way, since you sit in a room for months thinking about one person. You try to see the whole of their story, not just one thing after another but how one thing prepares for the next. In Ralph’s case, there was such a sense of God drawing Ralph into the unknown so that something totally new—a whole new type of missionary and missionary agency—could come into being. Ralph took a long, long time figuring out the person God had made him—one of the major themes of the book—and so I had the storyteller’s privilege of seeing the first from the last, as people who came into contact with Ralph at various periods of his life did not and as even Ralph did not until his last years.

As you say, Ralph Winter took a lot of time to “find himself,” with a blizzard of academic pursuits and ministry interests. How do his personal challenges in these areas illuminate his success in his later years?

It all made him the “missionary engineer” he became—the one who sees what others cannot and proposes solutions before others even grasp the problem.

While most people who understand the sweep of his career hail Ralph Winter, during his life some colleagues found his incredible drive to find creative solutions to longstanding problems in world missions to be maddening. Why do creative people such as Ralph Winter so frequently create friction among people who ostensibly are working on the same goals?

Most people don’t relish change the way creative people do because they don’t want to lose the measure of control they feel they’ve gained and they don’t want their lives to become harder. Being so in love with ideas and innovation makes creative people like Ralph self-forgetful—it’s the opposite of egoism. They lose themselves in their ideas—it’s truly a type of ecstasy, of being

“outside oneself”—and most are way too wrapped up in their own interests for that. To be fair, there is the “who’s going to clean up this mess” problem. Creative people can generate far more work than they can ever possibly get done in a host of lifetimes, and those around them are often worried—sometimes rightly—that the work being generated will fall on them. Ralph never felt himself above getting his hands dirty, though. While he wasn’t by any means a great administrator, he never put himself above the most menial of tasks. He was happy enough, though, for others to run with ideas he had generated. Truly. In that sense, they weren’t “his ideas.” He thought they were good ideas that needed implementing, and he was aware that others might do a better job executing.

What was the key to Ralph Winter’s success?

Ralph said that early on in his life—in his teens—he came to understand that the worship of God made him a better thinker. He didn’t use those exact words, but that’s in essence what he meant. He tried to understand the world and everything in it from God’s perspective and in term of God’s will. I think Ralph’s life proves that doing so opens up the imagination—not closes its down—and makes for advances in every area, most especially science.

How did Roberta Winter complement Ralph Winter and his ministry?

She was a tremendously smart person and Ralph’s partner in everything. Ralph, as I’ve indicated, had a warm and open heart, but like other technically gifted people he did not have great radar for what others were feeling. Roberta was his radar. She brought a needed dose of humanity to everything in which the Winters engaged.

Ralph Winter made a habit of making colleagues uncomfortable, whether as a missionary in Guatemala not satisfied with the status quo, as a fund raiser willing to think “outside the box,” or as a missiologist who wasn’t afraid to hit the “re-set button” on defining the Great Commission task. How do you think his emphasis on “evil intelligent design” late in his life fit in?

The problem of evil is *the* great theological challenge—one that few want to address directly. The presence of unmerited suffering in the world appears to disprove the existence of a good God. Long ago now, the existentialists argued that if God exists, and the world is such a terrible place, then the only moral response would be to live in rebellion against God.

Ralph understood that the absolute goodness and holiness of God must be the first proposition of a consistent Christianity. If God is the author of both good and evil, then God is not deserving of worship. He believed that evangelical Protestantism, for all of its vaunted orthodoxy, had succumbed to its own version of demythologizing, essentially ridding the gospel of the presence of Satan. Ralph asked us to reimagine Satan not as the Halloween figure but as Jesus’ foe in the Temptation, as the master of the demons Jesus exorcises repeatedly in the Gospels, as the “strong man” that Jesus binds, as the “prince of this world” Jesus comes to rule over. Ralph pointed out that the Gospels simply don’t make sense—nor does the Bible as a whole—unless you see God’s entire action through the lens of a reclamation project both of humankind and creation.

Ralph asked a provocative question. If our understanding of DNA grants us an ever-growing capacity to manipulate creation, could not an evil intelligence have acquired the same knowledge and used it to despoil God’s perfect creation? Isn’t that what we see in Genesis?

This makes us uncomfortable, I would guess, because it makes us face all the uncomfortable questions the problem of evil brings with it. We’d rather finesse these in various ways, all of which Ralph justly mocked. He wanted to go straight at questions, not avoid them. Also, he didn’t mind being wrong. What I mean by that is that he advanced his theory about evil

intelligent design because he thought it a workable hypothesis. One that people should discuss. What he could hardly abide was the refusal to look at this most difficult question honestly. That drove him crazy. He was a “trouble maker,” in part, because he was intellectually honest and would not back away from the toughest questions.

Ralph Winter never shied away from looking at problems in fresh ways or from asking hard questions. What challenges in world missions do you think could use the Winter touch today?

The missions world is so far behind in its use of digital technology it’s pathetic. The missions world has hardly advanced from the radio, print, conference model of the early 20th century. Ralph brought in the use of databases to the U.S. Center for World Mission as an aid to mission strategy. Unfortunately, the missions world, while using computers to catalogue unreached peoples and do some serious and valuable demographic work, has seemingly ignored the power of information technology to enable real-time collaboration, the delivery of educational services, and other evangelization initiatives. To me this is a scandal, and every missionary I’ve talked with knows it.

Missions is the last in line, unfortunately, when it comes to the deployment of the Christian community’s wealth, and mission agencies have by and large settled for keeping alive their legacy programs as they sit in their communication silos. That’s a horrible state of affairs.

Also, instead of paying attention to the distinct advantages that “sodality structures”—religious orders and other ecclesial communities—have in doing missionary work, evangelical churches have become ever more committed to evangelizing the world on the congregational model—each megachurch trying to do the whole job alone. Ralph saw how far the evangelical world had moved in this direction before his death and lamented it. He saw Frontier Mission Fellowship—the Protestant religious order he founded—as his greatest accomplishment. By the time the megachurch phenomenon hit in full-force, however, hubris about what any one megachurch could accomplish had completely taken over.

I’m sure he would have wanted to see a younger generation arise that would put his thinking about sodalities—or parachurch missionary institutions—more into practice. The collapse of denominational missionary agencies has not been a good thing. New and vigorous institutions arising out of the whole of God’s people need to replace them.

Stan Guthrie is author of Missions in the Third Millennium, All That Jesus Asks, and other works. Now a literary agent and Christianity Today editor at large, he was managing editor of Evangelical Missions Quarterly. His website is found at www.stanguthrie.com.