



Austin Carty. *The Pastor's Bookshelf: Why Reading Matters for Ministry*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2022. 182 pp.

I am reviewing a book about the value of reading for a journal devoted primarily to the value of experiential learning. Indeed, Austin Carty sets for himself a big task in *The Pastor's Bookshelf*: to convince his readers that through reading we will become better pastors.

Carty lays out the book in three parts. In the first, he draws a picture of what a pastor-reader is, one who sustains a discipline of wide, deep reading. In the second, he shows why reading benefits preaching, pastoral care, vision casting, and pastoral leadership. Finally, he shares his systems for choosing, marking, and filing what he reads. Throughout, he offers anecdotes from his own practice of spending up to thirty hours a week reading novels and biographies and other nonfiction. Whether explicitly theological or not, texts give us a reservoir of wisdom and illustrations that we can draw upon in our ministry. They also give us time with characters and ideas we might not otherwise encounter. Reading is like pastoral visitation. Carty argues that we need not take away immediate lessons from the books we read, nor even remember them, for them to work on us.

As I read his anecdotes and argument, I found a great deal of correlation between Carty's stories about reading and his stories about becoming a better minister, but I did not necessarily find causation. In other words, even while he tries to demonstrate that reading was the reason he became wise, loving, or empathic, he actually ends up crediting instead activities, experiences, and relationships for their effect on him. The most dramatic example is the story of a time when he spent eighteen months reading contemporary literature about race and racism and later finally experienced an epiphany upon reading the very last sentence of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Even then, to describe how he truly confronted his white privilege, he tells about an experience of co-planning a community prayer vigil with a Black colleague during the summer of 2020. He suddenly recalled Ellison's words, and they rang true.

I do not mean to quibble. I believe it just goes to show how difficult it is to prove the outward effects of the internal transformation reading has on readers. It is like trying to prove a causal relationship between our exercise regimen and our good health. We only know that, over time, we seem to feel better in small ways. In the end, perhaps it is not necessary to succeed at the proof. Carty is not arguing that we *only* spend our days reading, after all. His book is replete with evidence of how collegial relationships, hard

work, rich experiences, spiritual practices, *and* reading have all shaped the pastor he has become. He is simply insisting that we not let everything else in our lives crowd out the time we spend reading, and he is right to do so.

I can share that, after reading *The Pastor's Bookshelf*, I have found myself spending more time reading! If you are looking for encouragement to do the same, you will find no more passionate advocate than Austin Carty.

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