

Reading From the Back of the Book

Barbara Kingsolver's remarkable novel, *The Poisonwood Bible*, is the story of Nathan Price, a Baptist preacher from Georgia, who takes his family on a mission to the Belgian Congo amidst the Congolese war for independence from Belgium. It's a powerful story of loss, of hope, of salvation. The story is related in turns by his wife, Orleanna, and their four daughters. One of the daughters, a twin named Adah, writes a love sonnet to the very nature of narrative, of poetry and palindromes, in words so delicious you want to lick them off the page. In a passage describing her long rainy days in the Congolese jungle, Adah says, "When I finish reading a book from front to back, I read it from back to front. It is a different book from back to front and you can learn new things from it."

I have always tended to read from the back of books and magazines towards the front, especially since the time I found out that the answers to the even-numbered geometry questions were there. That's where the book reviews are. That's where those quirky little classified ads promoting the lost secrets of the pyramids and how to get rich selling Tahitian Noni juice are. That's where the solution to it all lies. Where Poirot reveals the murderer and Jack Ryan saves the Republic. Call it dyslexia, adult ADD or just plain contrariness, I like reading from the back of the book.

Because the back of the book is where all the seeds of hope, longing and desire blossom. It's why I love the book of Revelation better than the book of Leviticus. It's not just that that I find its Dali-esque landscape so entrancing, where six-foot scorpions pour out of deep underground caverns, and trumpets blow so loud and long that the mountains crumble and the oceans hide under the sand, but that the end of the Book shines like the bright morning star. Hope blossoms into grace and grace into eternity.

For the human heart needs hope. Earlier this week, I heard Dr. Bob Ross, the Director of the California Foundation, talk about restoring hope to our inner cities, to our poor, our elderly, our youth. He told a story about Willie Ketes, a two-year-old boy whose tragic accident touched Bob Ross' life forever. In 1982, Bob Ross was the new pediatric intern at the Children's Hospital in Philadelphia. He was on duty in the pediatric ICU one beautiful summer afternoon when the paramedics brought in the limp, blue body of little Willie Ketes. You know how fast two-year olds can move. You know how they can be out of your sight in a moment. That's what happened to Willie's parents. They found him at the bottom of the family swimming pool.

By the time he got to the PICU, there was very little that could be done. They ran what they called the death protocol: a series of neurological evaluations under the guidance of the senior neurologist. The test results were heartbreaking: the EEG had almost flat-lined. The organ donor team was called. The neurologist came out to talk with Willie's parents. There was nothing else the medical team could do. If Willie could survive, which was nearly impossible, he would be a human vegetable: he could never talk, walk, eat, think. The family would have to make a tough decision, one no parent could make without ripping out their very soul.

Willie's mom shook her head and said, look, Willie's my baby. I have to have some hope for awhile. And so she began to sit with Willie, and day and night she talked to him. And when she'd leave for the heart-breaking trip back home, she'd leave a tape player of her voice and the voice of other family members talking and reading stories to Willie. And she'd leave batteries for the staff to put in when the tape recorder ran out of juice. Because she just continued to hope.

About seven or eight years later, Bob Ross had become a pretty famous doctor—the Commissioner of Public Health for Philadelphia with his picture all over the television and the newspaper as the city struggled with the twin public health problems of AIDS and crack cocaine. One morning, Dr. Ross was in the middle of a staff meeting with his senior team when there was a knock at the door: his assistant said that there was a child on the phone who needed to talk to him.

Bob Ross figured it was his son, but his secretary told him she didn't think so. And when he said hello, he heard a voice that only one person in the whole world ever thought anyone would hear. "Dr. Ross," the voice said. "This is Willie. I saw you on TV." Willie? thought Bob Ross. Not that Willie, not that kid. "Willie, Willie Who?"

"Willie Ketes," came the halting voice. "I-I saw you on TV." Bob Ross asked to speak with Willie's mom. When she came on the phone she told him that Willie had indeed survived, and that though he was in a wheelchair, he was alive and in school and growing towards adulthood. Because his momma had never given up hope. She and her family and friends had spent years re-growing his injured brain synapses by talking, reading, singing and praying with him.

Even when you're in a prison, your wrists chained to the wrists of your best friend and your feet locked down in the stocks, you've got to keep talking, reading, singing and praying. It's what Paul and his pal Silas did when they got themselves into trouble in Macedonia. They'd been out preaching their way from one village to another with their strange message about the Jewish rabbi who'd been killed but rose from the dead. Now usually, whether they came through tiny villages or sprawling cities, they would encounter a mixture of scorn and detached interest, and every once in awhile something approaching genuine faith. That's when they'd stop and tell the story more fully and sometimes people would believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and get themselves saved.

But one day, on their way to a local temple in Phillipi, they were telling their story not far from one of those roadside fortune-tellers. You know the kind: just outside the city limits, there's a sign with a big red hand and a moniker like "Madame Athena" or "Sister Joanna." For some reason, Paul and Silas told their story just outside her hut, and a crowd gathered. They talked about the Rabbi who was dead and now alive. And from inside the hut, a young woman came out. She'd been enslaved by some businessmen who thought that the fortune-telling business was an easier way to empty travelers' purses than simply hitting them over the head. She wore wrist bangles and large silver earrings. Her clothes were sensuous and colorful, a whirlwind of silk, a hint of cleavage, a suggestion that you might get something extra-special in exchange for your shekel: especially if you looked like you had a pocket full of silver.

That's when the shrieking started. "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation!" Maybe she thought these new sorcerers would cut into her business and she thought she could drive away their customers. Maybe deep within her desperate soul, something stirred at the story of Jesus of Nazareth. Or maybe, she was possessed by some mental illness that pushed her to extreme and deviant behavior. Whatever it was, the crowd soon dispersed and Paul and Silas loaded up their backpacks and trudged off down the road with their new friend following them.

It went on for days. They'd slip away, when she appeared to looking off into the distance, but then couldn't seem to get rid of her. They thought sometimes they had lost her, down one village street or in the shadows behind a tavern or an inn, but every time they would start talking to anyone about Jesus, there she was, screaming and whirling and frothing at the mouth. Every potential convert in a hundred miles took cover. It was hard enough to convince people that they weren't charlatans without this one-woman windstorm screaming at people to follow them.

Finally, Paul turned to her and did something he never knew how to do before: an exorcism. He ordered the demon in her to leave her alone. The girl crumbled to the ground in a heap. One of her owners, anxious that she hadn't been around lately to fleece unwary travelers, took her home. But the trouble was just beginning. Because when the girl's owner shoved her down in front of her crystal ball, she just stared at it. Her head was clear for the first time she could remember. She thought about her mother, about the village she was born in. She thought about the strange men and their story of Jesus who was dead and then rose again.

"I-I can't see anything." Her owner screamed at her, slapping her face so hard that her eyes got all blurry, demanded that she tell the future. She shook her head quietly. "I can't. I can't do it any more."

Well that was just about the worst thing her owner could imagine. So he did what you'd do if you thought somebody stole your business. He called the cops. That's when the ruckus began.

He shouted to the police and the crowd forming around his door: "These Jews are coming into our village with their weird Jewish God and their weird Jewish hair and their weird Jewish politics and they are destroying this place. We can't even make a living with the Jews around. They've ruined my business and they will ruin yours too, if somebody doesn't stop them."

All those people who'd been just a little ashamed of the unseemly man and his unseemly pals who owned the girl who told the fortunes of unwary sojourners, now turned on Paul and Silas and began to beat the living daylights out of them. The police swung their nightsticks until they felt the satisfying sound of flesh tearing. Then they dragged them before the judges who thought that Jews should be beaten just because they were Jews and so the police beat them some more. After they caught their breath, they grabbed Paul and Silas, and took them to the jail-house, a forlorn stone building at the edge of the village.

"Keep them secure," said the police to the jailer. "These two are trouble. We'll be back for them in the morning." The jailer looked at the bruised and bleeding men. They didn't look too dangerous, but you could never be sure these days, particularly with Jews. He took them to the inside cell, and clamped their feet in the stocks.

It was all quiet for awhile when Paul said, "Silas, you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay," came the hoarse answer. "My head hurts though."

"Well your eyelid's so swollen up, you look like Cyclops." Paul chuckled.

"You ain't exactly Adonis, brother," shot back Silas. They both laughed.

"You think we'll get out of here alive?" Silas said.

"We've got to hope so, friend," Paul answered. "I'm not letting go of it."

Paul began to hum. Silas began to hum. Paul started to sing one of the old, old hymns, and Silas joined in harmony. They sang about Moses and they sang about David. They sang about Jerusalem and they sang about the Red Sea drowning old Pharaoh. Just as they got to the song from the end of the Book, the one about the lion and the lamb and the peaceable kingdom, why the earth began to shake, and the walls began to tremble and the ceiling began to fall and all the other prisoners began to scream.

It only lasted a moment, but it felt like eternity. When it stopped, the prisoners realized that their chains were no longer stuck in the walls. Paul and Silas stood up gingerly and spat out dust. The

jailer's head appeared around the corner. He looked at the prisoners through the dark and the dust. He began to unfasten his scabbard.

"Wait a minute!" shouted Paul, "don't do that! It's okay, man, everybody's here, and nobody's going to escape."

The jailer knew a miracle when he saw one. He took Paul and Silas into his house, and dressed their wounds. "Look, I know you people didn't do anything to deserve this. You've come to our village to talk about your Jesus who saves people. He must be some kind of Savior if his people even treat their jailers with kindness. What do I have to do for him to save me?"

"All you have to do is believe in him, and you will be saved." They told him the story of Jesus, of his miracles, of his resurrection, of how people could still do miracles in his name. The jailer believed. He believed so much that he got saved, right then and there. So Paul and Silas, still hurting and bruised from being beaten that afternoon, stood in the kitchen of the house of the man who had jailed them and poured water over him in the name of Jesus. Then they all sat down had the finest meal that any of them could remember.

It happened because Paul and Silas had hope. Because they read back from the end of the Book. When they left his house, the jailer had hope too.

The hope that their dirty and blood-soaked robes would soon be clean and white. That Jesus, gone a long time now, would be coming back soon. That even earthquakes and crazy mobs and poor enslaved little fortune tellers can someday be full of hope and grace and truth.

Jesus himself, on that long dark night before he died, prayed in hope that it wasn't all just some ghastly and senseless dream. That in his own betrayal, terror and pain God's own glory would shine through. He prayed that his friends, scattered by fear into the darkness, would regain their hope and believe again. That through their belief, the whole world would believe. Jesus held on to his hope.

You know what? Three days later the earth cracked open and he stood on it again. Then fifty days later, heaven cracked open and wind and fire danced on the heads of people who had learned to hope again.

It's what we still have to hold on to. The hope that the things we do, the things we believe, the things we long and pray for will come true. That peace will come and justice, will flow like a river. That we can really end the cycle of poverty and hopelessness that engulfs half a planet. That a medical mission in Honduras and a school in Haiti are changing the world in some very real tangible way. That people, divided by religion, tradition, class and race, can come together in a prayer of hope, crying "Amen! Come Lord Jesus." That grace will come because of that hope. You can read all about it, right at the very end of the Book.

Oh, about Willie Ketes, there's more. If you go to the end of the Book, you'll find out that in 2004, he graduated from West Chester State University in Pennsylvania. Because his momma hoped. And never quit hoping.

Amen. Come Lord Jesus.