

Excerpt from
MIZ LIL AND THE CRONICLES OF
GRACE

Walter Wangerin Jr.

The Chronicles of Grace: An Afterword

Of the three books in this volume [THIS EARTHLY PILGRIMAGE], I distinguish the third, this *Miz Lil*, from the other two.

Ragman and *Little Lamb* are each a collection of pieces (essays, stories, poetry) assembled around certain loose themes. *Ragman* pays its greatest attention to Christ and the Church. *Little Lamb* considers the family in all its ages, infancy to old age, and all the relationships between these extremes. I was not haphazard in the arrangement of the pieces in either book: rhythm, pacing, color, mood, effect, genre, and the dramatic sequence of things all governed my choices and the final arrangements. Yet, almost any *individual* piece could stand on its own. I would rather that people read *Ragman* and *Little Lamb* from first to last, according to the order I chose for them; but the reader can make sense of it all by picking and choosing until the whole has been read.

Miz Lil, however, is a different matter altogether. Here is a life in a little; a spiritual life, mostly; my life, though the particulars of one man's experience become, in such a work as this, universals for every reader.

Miz Lil is not a collection of short stories merely. It must be seen as an artistic unit, every story affecting every other story as the threads of a spider's web join together in a geometric whole; and all the stories are here arranged to honor change and growth and maturation. They are photographs, complex and sharply focused, of crucial junctures in a life that moves from innocence to culpability, and from culpability to a palpable knowledge of God's grace. Let the stories, therefore, be considered almost as the chapters of a novel—though not quite that, since I have kept for each the motion the climax, the sense of a story. Such story-chapters, then, can appear out of chronological order, creating their own order; and the times between each juncture in this writer's "life" need no telling; and the narrative demand for thousands of details conjoining the times and the chapters is simply skipped. Theme, therefore, and image, character and the present moment intensely told bulk larger in the reader's imagination, allowing his and her mind to reach—personally—for the deeper joins between the chapters which are stories.

And here is how the book has been arranged indeed: to move forward with two sets of stories, one set showing the child's "life" from birth to adolescence, the other showing the man's ministerial life from its weak beginning even unto his discovery of God again and grace.

But each set takes a contrasting direction to the other. The boy bit by bit, loses his shining innocence and by the end has entered into a self-preservative sinning. The pastor, on the other hand finally exchanges his sinful attitude for one of community, and communion with God *through* the community.

Lay these two patterns side by side with their opposing directions (the boy, as it were, descending; the pastor ascending) and you have the form with which I bind the book and all its insights together- it is called a *chiasmus*, from the Greek letter *chi*, which looks like an X. Now—visually lengthen the X as if you could pull it left and right like taffy, and you "see" the shape of *Miz Lil*: a cross, a crossing for the boy's track and the man's cross one another in this book—even as I believe our true lives and our vaster experiences continue to form such crosses: for, in a sacred manner, we *are* rising and falling both at once, till heaven intervene; and rather than time's shaping the truth of ourselves, why, this pattern of nearness and distance from God, from truth, from one another, from ourselves, actually shapes *time* as though the chronology of external realities were a plastic thing. Our inner life must ultimately be recognized as the authentic life. It cannot lie or dissemble. It cannot be groomed as one's face and hair, nor dressed in clothing that conceals.

And, deeply, quietly, this *chiasmus* has delighted me ever since the publication of *Miz Lil and the Chronicles of Grace*, for its very shape declares the intrusions of grace and the renewal of our souls: it is the absurdest act of God, the bumfuzzlement of reasonable people, the foolishness of those who make public their faith in Holy Inanities. It is the cross and crossing of the Christ.

Read this book for the experience alone. And then read, within yourself, the experiences *Miz Lil* has caused for you. Watch for the themes of growth: how truth is discovered and then communicated among us; how the artist begins and develops, and what society thinks of that; the crucial role of communities; sacramental meanings, baptism in particular, and the wonderful conveyance of the sacred by means of the common.

Indeed, there is a great weaving of many themes regarding the growth of peculiar individuals.

And at the same time this book chronicles in all of its parts but one theme: Grace. Here are twelve and thirteen acts in the pageant of the good Lord's grace.

Which theme, all rounded out in fullness, cannot end in a physical death. For spiritual deaths occur over and over again. But a genuine chronicle of grace can end nowhere else but in contentment.

Crick, crick.

Walter Wangerin

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