

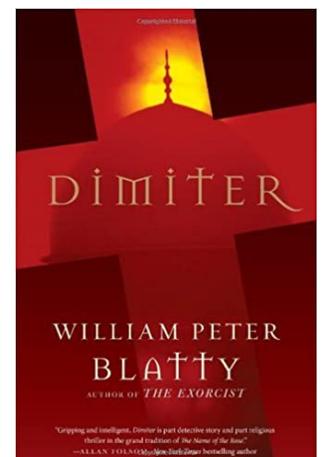
There are no coincidences



One of the great disappointments of my life is that I never had the chance to correspond with William Peter Blatty, the novelist and screenwriter best known for his best-seller “The Exorcist.” Or rather, I should say that I had the chance, but I never took it, which is of course the truth most often when we say, “I never had the chance.”

That’s something that Blatty himself would have understood, which is part of the reason why I wish I had reached out to him when writing an article on the 40th anniversary of “The Exorcist” for the About.com Catholicism site. Blatty took advantage of that anniversary to let the widest possible audience know what he’d always said about “The Exorcist”: that the novel and the film, for which he won an Academy Award for his screenplay, were not about horror but about faith. A devout Catholic, the son of Lebanese immigrants, Blatty recognized that, when addressing people who have concluded that God is dead, the reality of evil may be the best way to prove the existence of God. He summed up this approach in the title of his 1999 memoir, “If There Were Demons, Perhaps There Were Angels.”

I’ve read most of Blatty’s works over the past decade, but I’ve only just recently finished one novel that I had started twice before. Depending on how you count them, “Dimiter” is Blatty’s final novel. (“Dimiter” was published in 2010 before Blatty’s beautiful novella “Crazy,” but he revised it and republished it in 2013.) In the acknowledgments, Blatty declared “Dimiter” to be “the most personally important novel of my career.” He doesn’t go on to explain why, but anyone who reads “Dimiter” and is familiar with the



tragic death of Blatty's son, Peter, in 2006 will understand.

My failure to complete the novel the first two times was my fault, and mine alone; I lost the thread about halfway through each time, and couldn't pick it up again. This time, though, I couldn't put it down. Just as "The Exorcist" is not the horror novel that on the surface it seems to be, "Dimiter" is neither a spy thriller nor a police procedural, though it has elements of both. It is, rather, a story of the mysterious workings of grace in a fallen world, a reminder that even the most hardened killer is not beyond redemption and, just as important, may serve as a conduit for grace to others. It's a story as old as the Acts of the Apostles, and it's no coincidence that the title character shares his first name with the man who presided over the stoning of St. Stephen, the first martyr. Only a Saul could become a Paul, through whom the heroic witness of Stephen would live on.

In his later years, Blatty became convinced that "there is no such thing" as coincidence, as two very different characters in "Dimiter" each say. What we see as coincidence may well be the hand of God at work in our lives, but we refuse to recognize it because we've convinced ourselves that if the hand of God were to appear anywhere, it would be only in the biggest and most public events in history.

We also too often refuse to recognize that grace may be found in the most unexpected places, and that God may work on us through even those whose actions may turn our stomachs and our heads. Yet if God can take on the flesh of fallen man, there can be no doubt that in every sinner lies a saint waiting to be born, if only we accept his grace – from wherever, and whomever, it may come.

William Peter Blatty died five years ago, on Jan. 12, 2017. Yet, I still hope someday to have the opportunity to thank him for helping me to see the hand of God in the little coincidences of my life.

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