

de Souza: Four friends – and authors – offer the gift of great Christmas reads

An alumna of our [Newman House](#) chaplaincy at Queen's University in Kingston, Ont. offers an inspiring model of reading – of actual books.

A few years back, Claire Brown realized that she was spending too much of her free time watching TV or scrolling the Internet, so she made a resolution to devote time to the proper reading of proper books. She read 45 books in 2016, 75 books in 2017 and more than 80 books this year. She wrote of her experience on her blog Saltwater and Stories (she grew up in Nova Scotia).

It's been three years since I last recommended books for Christmas gifts, so it's time again. Permit me to recommend four books this year, all involving friends of mine. It's a blessing not only to have friends who read books, like Claire, but who write them, too.

Randy Boyagoda is the principal of the [University of St. Michael's College](#) in Toronto and an acclaimed novelist. His latest, *Original Prin* (Biblioasis), is about a Catholic immigrant from Sri Lanka who is a professor at a small Catholic university in downtown Toronto.

He and his wife – from Milwaukee – are devout Catholics with four daughters. All that is autobiographical, but Randy insists that the novel is NOT about St. Mike's, any more than he has prostate cancer or gets mixed up with terrorists. That's just fictional Prin, not the real Randy.

The book is highly entertaining, cracking jokes about the erosion of Catholic mission at our universities – Holy Family University becomes UFU, University of the Family Universal – or about whether filial piety trumps liturgical piety. Can one go to a steakhouse on Good Friday if your father insists upon it?

Catholic readers will enjoy it for the sheer amount of Catholic culture in the novel. As a review in *Quill & Quire* noted: "It is fabulously rare, in our secular age, to find a novel that focuses so insistently and un-ironically on a character whose religion is not an ancillary aspect of his persona but absolutely central."

Natalie Morill is another alumna of our chaplaincy, and her first novel, *The Ghostkeeper* (HarperCollins), won the HarperCollins/UBC Prize for Best New Fiction. That such a young writer should be so gifted is remarkable and makes me very proud. Her beautifully written, heart-breaking story also deals with faith.

In Vienna of the Second World War, Josef Tobak's closest friend is a Catholic who joins the Nazi party, yet helps Josef's family to safety during the

Anschluss. The Tobaks endure great suffering through illness, separation and loss during the wars.

The human drama here is vast, with displays of great courage and conviction in the face of overwhelming suffering, in contrast to the weakness and betrayal of others. It is a tale of family, enduring friendship, and forgiveness. Claire read this book twice, so that is a high recommendation!

Al Smith is not an author, but has done a great service in compiling *The Cries of Jesus from the Cross: An Anthology* (Sophia Institute Press). It's a collection of seven of Archbishop Fulton Sheen's famous *Seven Last Words*. Sheen preached the *Seven Last Words* for 58 consecutive years on Good Friday.

Most of that material was published in various places over the years, but not all of it. Smith has now brought it together in one volume, useful for all those who profit from Sheen's preaching – and who doesn't? – and for those, like me, who preach the *Seven Last Words* each year.

Smith is an "ordinary" Catholic layman from Midland, Ont., except that in his devotion to his faith and his promotion of Fulton Sheen is anything but ordinary. A treasure of the Church in Ontario, he has travelled widely and invested heavily in making Sheen's materials more widely known.

Describing himself as a "porter" in the "School of Sheen," his [website](#) is a magnificent resource.

I can thank Fulton Sheen for introducing me to his friend, Al Smith, who I now count as one of mine.

Canadian Converts: The Path to Rome: Volume II (Justin Press) is another edition of convert testimonies, which never fail to inspire. The 15 selected here are not as famous as those who were in Volume I, but are perhaps more accessible for that reason. For cradle Catholics it is a gift to see the faith through the eyes of those who have "chosen" it in a way that we did not have to do.

(Editor's note: Dr. Jason West, president of Newman Theological College, is also a contributor to Canadian Converts: The Path to Rome. [Read the Grandin Media story here](#))

My favourite chapter was from a young man whom I have seen mature over the years, Benjamin Turland, growing in admiration and affection for him. Now a campus missionary at Ryerson University in Toronto, he is a true collaborator in the work of evangelizing university students.

Finally, I might suggest, as I did three years ago, that parishioners who want to give an (expensive) gift to their parish might consider buying a new altar missal. The missal produced for Canada in 2011 was so shoddily made that it is now dilapidated, even more unworthy than it originally was to sit on the altar.

Some busy parishes have already worn through their second missal. But don't throw good money after bad; offer your pastor the more beautiful missals being produced in the United Kingdom and the United States.

A blessed Advent – and happy reading!

– *Father de Souza is editor-in-chief of Convivium.ca and a pastor in the Archdiocese of Kingston.*