

North of Hope

Introduction

Amy Welborn

Jon Hassler is often described as a “regional writer.” That’s true in the sense that John Updike and William Faulkner are regional writers. Like them, his novels are rooted in the particularity of a regional setting—small-town Minnesota in Hassler’s case. And his fiction, like theirs, flowers from these regional roots into narratives that touch on universal concerns. There’s nothing narrow about Jon Hassler’s regionalism. From his chilly corner of the world, this masterful novelist explores an inner landscape where fully realized characters live and breathe, find and lose connections, and neglect and restore hope. Always hope. Hope is Jon Hassler’s literary virtue. It’s the soul, as well as the title, of this novel, his richest and most ambitious.

Hassler’s fiction, beginning with *Staggerford* (1977) and continuing through three decades to *The New Woman* (2005), introduces us to characters who are ordinary people. But as we ordinary people know—every ordinary life embodies a story worth telling. Hassler’s characters are shopkeepers, professors, homemakers, priests, teachers, bankers, and doctors. Young and old frequently collide but always manage to learn from each other. Catholics watch, sometimes sadly, as their church changes. Family bonds are broken, reknit, and stretched to embrace the runaway, the abandoned, the rejected.

In the outwardly tight, secure bonds of the small town, the university, the Native American reservation, Hassler’s characters often find themselves in vexing situations of loneliness and separation. They feel displaced, whether they have just moved to one of Hassler’s rural outposts or lived in the same house their entire lives. As one writer put it, “His stories are about people who don’t quite fit where they are, discovering where they belong” (Patricia Horn and Mark Preece, “When We Don’t Quite Fit: Novelist Jon Hassler’s Rich Search for Community,” *Sojourners* 26, no. 1 [January–February 1997]).

All of these qualities are evident in *North of Hope*. We explore the territory of this small Minnesota town and the neighboring reservation through Hassler's unwavering eye for telling detail. We meet fully drawn characters who are never stereotypes, even when they cross the boundary, in this novel, from understandably flawed to evil.

North of Hope is about human beings, their choices, and consequences. Although adult readers of any age will appreciate the novel, it speaks most powerfully to those who have had to confront the questions of midlife, in which we wonder how we got to the place we are now, and what the rest of the journey could possibly hold.

At the center of *North of Hope* are Fr. Frank Healey and his unrequited adolescent love, Libby Girard. The novel begins in the 1950s, with Frank as a boy, having recently lost his mother, living with a reclusive father, but under the watchful gaze of the local Catholic priest and his rectory housekeeper. Libby, recently moved from Minneapolis, strikes Frank with her beauty and her forthrightness, and he is startled by an inner voice that insists, "She's the one."

Jon Hassler has acknowledged that this first part of *North of Hope* contains a heavy dose of autobiography:

The high school experiences of Frank Healy, my protagonist, were much like my own. Although I, unlike Frank, had both parents well into my fifties and I did not aspire to the priesthood, I, too, was . . . very shy of girls. I find this entry in the journal I kept while writing *North of Hope*, dated January 1, 1987:

I hope to God this novel works out. I can see what sort of boy Frank has become. He is taught to venerate women the way his father venerates the memory of his mother, and there are no women in his life whom he knows well enough to see them as ordinary mortals. Maybe if he (and I) had had sisters, we'd have been more realistic in our relations with women. . . . To flesh out the tale, I will have to add scenes from my memories of Plainview [the Minnesota town where I grew up], such as Frank candling eggs [as I used to do in my father's grocery store], Frank at his piano lesson, Frank in the cemetery at a military funeral, and Frank serving Mass for his old pastor [as I did, year after year, for old Father O'Connor].

The girl in my life was named Mary, and I, too, was devastated when, in the middle of our senior year, she told me she was quitting school to marry her high-school sweetheart.

(Jon Hassler has maintained journals during the writing of all of his novels. One of them, about the writing of his first novel, has been published as *My Staggerford Journal* [Ballentine Books, 1999].)

This first section of the novel draws a precise and bittersweet portrait of love that might be young, but is no less real for its youth. Frank and Libby trust each other as neither can trust anyone else, and the missed opportunities in their relationship are heartbreaking.

But are they? Both Frank and Libby make choices in this first part of the novel, choices that propel them down life paths that prove to be challenging, puzzling, and even disastrous. As we watch them make these choices, we cringe, but at the same time, we have to admit that we understand, for our choices sometimes come from the same place as theirs: reaction, fear, and resignation.

Fast-forward to twenty-five years later. This part of the novel, not at all autobiographical and “entirely imagined” according to Jon Hassler, reintroduces us to Frank and Libby, as well as a rich cast of characters that surround them. Frank has been a priest for many years, although he has reached a crisis. After ordination he remained as a faculty member at the minor seminary he had attended, staying there until the place ultimately closed. His first assignment, at the dioceses’ cathedral parish, had not ended well, as Frank, unaccustomed to parish life and ministry, began experiencing a “leak”—a sense of emptiness and uselessness that manifested itself, quite dramatically, in moments of literal speechlessness during homilies. The bishop suggested that perhaps regrouping was in order, and the best place to do that would be back in Linden Falls at the parish in which he grew up.

As associate pastor of the parish he has an additional responsibility—the struggling mission on the nearby Native American reservation. The mission’s future existence seems doubtful, the community diminished and weakened by substance abuse and the attractions of the world outside the reservation. It seems like a small thing—this tiny group on the edge of hope, but haunted by his childhood inspiration, the nineteenth-century priest who died in the process of bringing the faith to the area, Frank finds in this community and in the simple faith of his now elderly pastor, Monsignor Lawrence, the possible means to stem the leak.

The challenge, though, is Libby, who reappears in Frank’s life, superficially happy, but in reality sinking under the weight of what her life has become, a process that will be accelerated by almost unbearably painful revelations in which Libby will have to confront her own role in her daughter’s damaged life.

In a cold winter full of all kinds of ugliness, hope seems out of reach. The foundation of the lives that Libby and Frank have built is revealed to be unstable, inadequate, and illusory. The choices they made as young people seem at best naïve and at worst disastrously wrong-headed and even based on what turns out to be a lie.

But into this reality—sometimes a very cold and ugly reality, because that is the way life can be—warmth creeps, slowly. All of the characters in *North of Hope* face crises, small and great. The real drama, slower, absorbing, and deep, lies in the process of these same characters emerging from the crises that have shaken them, and accepting that the past cannot be changed. You are where you are, and right now, another choice presents itself. You can drown in regret and self-loathing, or you can reconnect with life, with hope—with God.

It happens, of course, through love. *North of Hope* is, among other things, an exploration of love and its power. It is not a potboiler or a novel about ideological conflicts within Catholicism, despite this central relationship between a celibate priest and a woman, potentially dangerous material in the hands of another writer. The respect Jon Hassler has for life, its realities, and the human beings who struggle through it bring a solidity and grace to the page, impossible to miss. What critic Philip Zaleski wrote about another Hassler novel, *Dear James*, applies to this one as well: “One feels a great moral force surging through this novel, a sense that lives do indeed matter, that God oversees the comedy and that fiction is the right means to get this message across.” (*First Things*, August/September 1994)

“She’s the one” are the words Frank hears when he is young, watching Libby from behind in a movie theater. Decades later, he hears these words again as she comes to him in the cold of winter, broken and far, far north of hope. The beauty in this novel lies in discovering, along with Frank, what those words really mean.

Amy Welborn is the general editor of Loyola Classics.