

**Reading a Different Story: A Christian Scholar's Journey from America to Africa.**

*By Susan Vanzanten. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013. Pp. 144. \$19.99.*

This is a beautiful book which begins by telling stories of Professor Vanzanten's childhood days in an insular Dutch Calvinist community in the Pacific Northwest and ends by briefly celebrating the stories of the acclaimed Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. The narrative between is a memoir of a Christian literature professor's intellectual and personal development through graduate school and four different Christian colleges in the United States. While not a work of literary criticism, this well-written book nonetheless provides the reader with glimpses of a scholar's love of literature as it turned from American novelists Faulkner and Melville to African writers Gordimer, Coetzee, Achebe, and others. Readers unfamiliar with these works – American or African – are given just enough of a taste of Vanzanten's appreciation for them to want to investigate them further.

Theological seminaries, Christian colleges, and other educational institutions in the global North still struggle to re-configure their curriculum to take into account the shift southward of world Christianity. Vanzanten's intellectual autobiography provides a set of signposts for such reconfiguring. As is befitting of a memoir, these signposts are of a personal rather than prescriptive nature, but they are helpful for academics in North America and elsewhere who find themselves at institutions which – amazingly – still largely teach Christianity as though Africa, Asia, and Latin America were mere footnotes to a Mediterranean and European story.

Graduate students and younger faculty members at North American Christian colleges will find Vanzanten's book especially helpful as a way of reflecting upon their own growth as

scholars and teachers. Struggles to overcome the anti-intellectualism and sexism found in the evangelical subculture are recounted in this book which will surely give solace to Christian students and faculty alike who face similar challenges today at many institutions. One also learns the history of how Christian colleges in North America slowly grew in their curricular appreciation of world Christianity. As a graduate of one of those institutions, I had little perspective of the curricular struggles going on some twenty years ago when I took a course on African literature. Today, I regularly assign works of fiction by Shusako Endo and Chinua Achebe in my history of world Christianity courses. I have Vanzanten and other teachers like her to thank for the gift those works continue to be for myself and my students.

For all its strengths, this book will not resonate as well with scholars less influenced by the culture of American Christian colleges of the past half-century. For such persons this memoir will still be informative even if the mostly Reformed interlocutors with whom Vanzanten engages like Jacques Ellul, Arthur Holmes, Abraham Kuyper, Francis Schaeffer, and Nicholas Wolterstorff will be more foreign.

As new Christian colleges and universities are established and grow in the global South – and especially in Africa – I wonder how Vanzanten’s book will be received in the future and in places not as far away as they once were thought to be. Curricular changes of a different sort will need to take place there too and yet another “different story” will need to be told.

Benjamin L. Hartley is the Associate Professor of Christian Mission and Director of United Methodist Studies at Palmer Theological Seminary, the Seminary of Eastern University in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania.