

Children and children's education in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Britain

Ashley King: Hi, dear listener! On this context chat, I had the opportunity to chat with Dr. Adam McCune.¹ He knows so much about children, children's education, and children's literature in 18th- and 19th-century Great Britain, and we also went to graduate school together, and so it was really fun catching up with him. I hope you enjoy listening in on our conversation. Adam, welcome to the Women of the Church podcast!

Adam McCune: Thank you! Thank you for having me.

Ashley King: So, to start off, would you please tell us a little bit about yourself, your research interests, or anything else you would like to share?

Adam McCune: Sure! I study representations of childhood and youth, mostly in nineteenth-century British literature, the way that children are described or portrayed. I've taught at Baylor University and I'm currently a Faculty Affiliate at the College of Charleston. And I've also served the Jane Austen Summer Program, along with you, and other research projects of that kind.

Ashley King: Excellent! I think that one of the things I did want to mention, because I think it's important for our listeners to be aware of, is that for a brief moment in time you and I were brother and sister. Right? Do you remember this?

Adam McCune: I do! I remember.

Ashley King: At the Jane Austen Program. It's a program that is affiliated with the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; it's where fans and academics come together to celebrate the life of Jane Austen. And so what we would do as graduate students—who were just eager to help in any way—is dress up in historical costume, as some of Jane Austen's famous characters.

Adam McCune: Right.

Ashley King: And I think it may have been the first year, right?

Adam McCune: Yup!

Ashley King: You dressed up as Charles Bingley, and I dressed up as Caroline Bingley. And I pretended to be a mean girl, which is not me at all; that was terrible casting on their part. And you were the nicest man who has ever lived, which is Charles Bingley.

So let's go ahead and dive into the questions for this particular context chat. And so I have a bit of an advantage, because we went to graduate school together. I know a little bit about your dissertation and your scholarly work, focused specifically on depictions of children in literature. So what first attracted you to that subject matter? Because it seems to me, not necessarily unique, but I think for a lot of listeners that might seem like a unique thing to study.

¹ This transcript has been lightly edited for length and clarity. Notes by Adam McCune.

Adam McCune: Sure. Originally I was interested in literature *for* children. You know, things like children’s fantasy and that kind of thing, just because I felt like it was an under-appreciated genre in academia, that it was under-studied or whatever. But to start out, I was trying to find a niche that would connect with the faculty at the universities I was applying to. And so I found this sort of crossover connection: even works that are more commonly studied—you know, things like Dickens—they have children in them as characters. And the depiction of those children is interesting because it tells us, “What did people think about children, and what they’re like inside, and how they interact with other people, and how they learn and grow, and all that kind of thing?” And then I became interested in that topic in its own right. Once I got into it, I was like, there’s a lot of interesting stuff here.

Ashley King: Yeah, absolutely. This might surprise some listeners, but the idea of childhood as a stage of development in a person’s life is a relatively modern-day concept. Going back earlier than the period that we’re focusing on in this season of *Women of the Church*, what did early 16th and 17th-century English Puritans believe about childhood?

Adam McCune: Yeah. Okay, so let me start with the first part of that question, the idea of childhood. Neil Postman has argued that, basically, our category of childhood is artificial, it’s not inherent. Obviously a baby is a baby, and a young child that can’t talk is clearly socially different from an adult. But when you get a little bit older—how is a seventeen-year-old a child? We sometimes talk about older teens like they’re children. That’s arbitrary. Why did we decide that an eighteen-year-old is an adult, and a seventeen-and-a-half-year-old isn’t? Basically, the argument that he makes is that childhood as a category, aside from the biological development, is defined by education. We think that when you’re done with your education, you’re an adult. But the education that we’ve designed is arbitrary; you could have a different system of education, and of course many places and times have had different forms of education. Specifically, Neil Postman argues that print-based education is what gives us this long childhood, because print-based education takes a long time—reading and writing, and the control of information where, until we give you the next book, you don’t know that thing. You have this gradual thing where the adults get to decide what you get to know at what time. That’s really different from, say, an oral education—speaking-based—where you would have to work a lot harder to control the flow of information there. It’s also different from television- and internet-based education, where it’s very hard to control the flow of information. There’s just all this stuff out there a Google away, which is sometimes quite scary, depending what the content is. He says, before print, back in the Middle Ages when people couldn’t read and write, or most people couldn’t read and write, they had a different idea of childhood, and we may be going into a world that has a different idea of childhood in the future, as it becomes harder to control what children do and don’t know.²

What that means is, when we say, “children are like this” or “children are like that,” we have to ask ourselves, “Is that something that has to be true, or is it true at all, or is this something that we’ve made up?” One major idea that we have about childhood is childhood innocence. This is a very commonly held idea. And yet, what do we even mean by it, exactly? Essentially, what we mean by it, or where it comes from, is it’s the opposite of education. They haven’t finished their education,

² Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood* (New York: Vintage, 1982).

so they're ignorant, there are a lot of things they don't know.³ And some of those things we don't want them to know, and so we think that that's a good thing. But it's a kind of blurry idea. We tend to think that children, in addition to being ignorant, are also sort of morally guiltless, often. Well, how could they be bad, when they don't know anything? Well, that's not really how being bad works, is it? There are some things you learn how to do that are bad, like, I don't know, embezzlement. But there are other things that you don't have to learn how to do to be bad.

So when we talk about 16th-, 17th-century English Puritans, they're in the tradition of Saint Augustine of Hippo.⁴ Augustine, writing about late 300s, early 400s AD, has this very strong idea of original sin,⁵ and original sin is of course a biblical concept, but the way he talks about it is, some people think that a baby is good, but is a baby good? How would we know? What does it do? Well, it cries. I mean, that's not necessarily bad. But why is it crying? Well, Augustine said, is it trying to manipulate the adults? Because that doesn't sound very good. And it's certainly very self-focused. It wants things for itself. So it certainly doesn't have a lot of positive virtues. It's not generous, it's not patient. So, basically, he says babies are bad. With God's grace and a little bit of guidance, they might be better, but they don't start out innocent.⁶

The Puritans are very much in that Augustinian tradition.⁷ And so they had this idea that kids start out bad and then you try to teach them to be less bad. And you get some ideas like this in the Bible, too, in Proverbs. "Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of correction will drive it far from him."⁸ "Train up a child in the way he should go."⁹ You have to train them to be good, as opposed to not. So that's their starting point.

Ashley King: So there's a shift—right?—that occurs in the Enlightenment. Because we have thinkers like John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau who argue against this idea of original sin, essentially.

Adam McCune: Yeah.

Ashley King: Can you tell us a little bit about how this shift happens, or what types of ideas they were articulating?

Adam McCune: At the end of the 17th century, John Locke writes this book on education, and he says a child is like a "white Paper."¹⁰ So, in other words, they're blank. The phrase that's often associated with John Locke is the *tabula rasa*, which is literally an "erased tablet." So, he uses the metaphor of paper, but people also used wax tablets in schools. But the point is that the child is

³ One strand of thought in the late 18th and 19th centuries held that childhood "innocence" meant ignorance of "contemporary culture" (Marah Gubar, *Artful Dodgers: Reconceiving the Golden Age of Children's Literature* [Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 4-5).

⁴ Alan Richardson similarly places some Methodists and Evangelicals of the era in this Augustinian tradition of understanding children as sinful, although some of these authors occasionally also described children as innocent (Alan Richardson, *Literature, Education, and Romanticism: Reading as Social Practice, 1780-1832* [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994], pp. 11, 14, 17).

⁵ The term "original sin" can be understood as referring to all humanity's inherited guilt and/or inherited tendency to sin, in both cases inherited from the sin of Adam (Psalm 51:5, Romans 5:12-21).

⁶ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford University Press, 1992), Book 1.

⁷ Puritan education highlighted the idea of original sin in the couplet they used to teach the letter *A* in the alphabet: "In Adam's Fall, / We sinned all" (*The New England Primer*, 18th century, *University of Texas at Austin: Digital Collections*, https://www.cah.utexas.edu/db/dmr/image_lg.php?variable=NTC_0064c).

⁸ Proverbs 22:15.

⁹ Proverbs 22:6.

¹⁰ John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (London: A. and J. Churchill, 1693), p. 261.

empty. They aren't born with anything. They don't know anything, but they also don't have an inherent character, apparently, according to John Locke. So he says, we're going to write in this white, blank piece of paper. That's what education is: adding to nothing. It doesn't particularly get into the question of whether they're bad. In fact, it would seem, if they're blank, they don't have anything bad yet, but he also doesn't seem to think there's anything particularly good about them, either. There's just sort of nothing.

Later, sort of mid-18th-century, we have Jean-Jacques Rousseau. And he has a different metaphor. His metaphor is a plant. So, he says, a child is kind of like a plant. So if you just leave the plant alone, provide it what it needs, it knows how to grow. It'll grow in a healthy, natural way. And he says, you mess it up if you meddle too much.¹¹ He didn't think you don't educate children, but he thought of education as facilitating the natural inclinations of the child, rather than filling up their emptiness or guiding them the way they should go. He said their nature is good.

John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau have different ideas, but neither of them is this idea of original sin. They're both thinking about education in a different kind of way than those Puritans are.

Ashley King: How, then, do these ideas have an impact, if any, on the ways that—let's just say, to give an example—a middle-class or upper-class boy would be educated?

Adam McCune: Boys and girls in Britain in the late 18th, early 19th century—their education begins with their mothers. Mothers were responsible for their children's education up until there was somebody else—you know, a governess or tutor or something, or a school to send them to. (And here I'm talking middle/upper class, because education for the poor was a different thing. There was a whole bunch of charity schools and things; they were trying to get the poor educated. Widespread education progressed over the course of the nineteenth century.) But these middle and upper class—the expectation is the mother is supposed to be in charge of the education.¹² And she might delegate. Lady Catherine de Bourgh says to Lizzie Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, “What? You didn't have a governess? Your mother must have been such a slave to your education!” In other words, she would have no time; she would spend all her time educating you, because there wasn't a governess to do it for her. Because you could delegate to a governess. And Lizzie Bennet says, “No, not really. We had teachers, we had tutors.”¹³ So she was still delegating, she just didn't have a governess running the show; she was the one responsible. And some people did in fact monitor, oversee more closely. The Countess of Oxford, for example—she was not born into the aristocracy, but married into it—she was an upper-class woman, could have had everything taken care of by somebody else, but she was praised by her friends for overseeing her children's education. She did have tutors for them,¹⁴ but

¹¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), p. 39.

¹² The proto-feminist Mary Wollstonecraft argued in 1792 that a mother's responsibility to educate her children was an important reason for women to receive a good education: “nor will the important task of education ever be properly begun till the person [i.e., body] of a woman is no longer preferred to her mind. For it would be as wise to expect corn from tares, or figs from thistles, as that a foolish ignorant woman should be a good mother” (Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* [London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1891], p. 283).

¹³ “Five daughters brought up at home without a governess! — I never heard of such a thing. Your mother must have been quite a slave to your education.” Elizabeth could hardly help smiling, as she assured her that had not been the case. . . . “We . . . had all the masters that were necessary” (Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* [1813], chapter 29).

¹⁴ Joseph Farington, *The Farington Diary*, 7 vols, edited by James Greig [New York: George H. Doran Company, 1922-1927], volume 7, p. 164; Enrico Manzini, “Cav. Giambattista Rabitti,” *Memorie Storiche dei Reggiani Più Illustri Nelle Scienze Nelle Lettere e Nelle Arti* (Reggio nell'Emilia: Degani e Gasparini, 1878), pp. 278-281, see p. 279; Mario Scotti, editor, *Epistolario*, volume 8 [Edizione Nazionale Delle Opere di Ugo Foscolo, volume 21] (Florence: Felice le Monnier, 1974), p. 161.

she was there with them for several hours in the day, making sure that they were getting educated.¹⁵ So there was definitely a responsibility there—for the mother—for both boys and girls.

And then things kind of diverge. Girls maybe spend more time with the governess and learning certain subjects, and boys, they have either different tutors, or they go to school.¹⁶ And there were girls' schools, too. Again, they would tend to focus on different things. Some of the girls' schools' reputations weren't great,¹⁷ and of course, the same could be said of some of the boys' schools.¹⁸ But there was kind of a divergence then in the expectation of subjects that they would cover.

One of the big demarcations is that old-school education was very humanities-centered. Now, when I say, "the humanities," I don't of course mean English literature. English literature—I mean, children memorized poetry and stuff.¹⁹ They read Shakespeare, maybe.²⁰ But they didn't get English classes the way we think of them.²¹ Latin and Greek were the core of the humanities, well into—actually, the early 20th century.²² And Latin and Greek make a great deal of sense as education because, for centuries, everything was written in Latin, in Europe, everything—in fact, as late as the early 19th century, at least.²³ So all these old schools that were founded in the Middle Ages, especially the grammar schools, the great public schools of Britain, were centered on the Classics.²⁴ They had this humanistic core. And that was associated with boys, not typically part of girls' education. Mathematics was important, and history, geography, French, games, choir was a thing that they did, natural sciences, law, moral sciences (what we would call social sciences or philosophy), theology.²⁵ These are things that were there especially as the public schools and the universities reformed to expand their topics, especially towards the early nineteenth century.

Girls' education was a bit different. In some ways it was better by our standards. One of the common focuses for girls' education was "accomplishments." "Accomplishments" were things like

¹⁵ In 1806, Joseph Farington noted that Lady Oxford personally oversaw her children's education "from ten o'clock in the morning till one," and allowed only approved reading material near them: "novels & such like are not permitted to be seen" (Farington, *Farington Diary*, volume 4, page 31).

¹⁶ Barbara English, "The Education of the Landed Elite in England c. 1815-c. 1870," *Journal of Educational Administration and History* 23.1 (1991): 15-32; see pp. 18, 23-24, 26.

¹⁷ Ann Bermingham, *Learning to Draw: Studies in the Cultural History of a Polite and Useful Art* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2000), pp. 189-190.

¹⁸ Even the elite public schools had significant problems (see, e.g., H. C. Barnard, *A History of English Education From 1760* [London: University of London Press, 1961], pp. 17-19, 71-72, 77).

¹⁹ Catherine Robson, *Heart Beats: Everyday Life and the Memorized Poem* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 43-46, 49.

²⁰ In 1812, the teenaged Lady Jane Harley claimed she could recite "all Shakespeare by heart" (Lord Broughton [John Cam Hobhouse], *Recollections of a Long Life, with additional extracts from his private diaries*, edited by Lady Dorchester, 2 vols [New York: Scribner, 1909], vol. I, p. 45).

²¹ One of several changes was a shift in emphasis from philology (the study of language itself) to a "literary" study of English literature; at American universities, this shift took place in the late nineteenth century (Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*, 20th anniversary edition [University of Chicago Press, 2007], pp. 77-80).

²² For example, C. S. Lewis, although as an adult he taught English literature at Oxford, describes his own Latin-and-Greek-centered education in the early twentieth century in his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*.

²³ Barnard, *History of English Education*, p. 14: "There had been a time when the classical languages... were the key to almost all human knowledge." Despite Barnard's use of the past tense, there were still some practical advantages of knowing Latin and Greek in the early nineteenth century: apothecaries still had to be able to read medical texts written in Latin (Henry Stead, *A Cockney Catullus: The Reception of Catullus in Romantic Britain, 1795-1821* [Oxford University Press, 2016], p. 276).

²⁴ Barnard, *History of English Education*, p. 15. Cf. Sydney Smith, "Professional Education / Too Much Latin and Greek" [1809], *The Works of the Rev. Sydney Smith* (New York: Edgar G. Taylor, 1846), pp. 50-54.

²⁵ Subjects taught at public schools in 1798, 1828, and 1836, and at universities in 1807, 1824, 1848, and 1853 (Barnard, *History of English Education*, pp. 73-83).

music, drawing, dance, needlework, and could include modern languages,²⁶ like French or Italian. There's an expectation that they would read extensively. So these are the kinds of things, for example, that Mr. Darcy and Miss Bingley talk about in *Pride and Prejudice*: "this is what a really accomplished girl would know," and Lizzie Bennet's like, "Nobody knows *all* that stuff, nobody does it all."²⁷ But there was kind of an expectation that you could do it all.

Some people complained that this was not a good system of education. That this is really—well, why would you learn how to dance and play the piano? Isn't this mostly just to show off, to attract a potential suitor? And in fact it's clear that that was one of the primary functions of those things.²⁸ Hannah More, for example, was arguing that really education should be more about moral formation,²⁹ or some purpose better than just the marriage market. She talks about a devotion to fashion and that kind of thing as a kind of a "white slave trade"—this is her phrase.³⁰ It's a marriage market.³¹ It's not really about education.

From our perspective, the more valuable topics that were commonly taught to girls would be things like French; and history; or geography was a common one; mythology, which, again, in order to understand literature you have to know the mythology that keeps getting referred to in it; things that we might call the basics of chemistry—so, for example, in *Mansfield Park*, Fanny Price's cousins brag about learning the metals and the semimetals, and they learn about the planets, and distinguished philosophers.³² You get a little bit of history; arithmetic, geography, grammar are common topics.³³ Actually, one thing that's interesting is that many girls' schools emphasized the natural sciences more than boys' schools, particularly botany³⁴—because botany was associated with drawing, it was associated with girls.³⁵ Actually, quite a lot of material could get covered in these schools.

Ashley King: So how central was the Bible to children's literature? I would say even writers who weren't "religious" would still quote from the Bible, would still have passages of Scripture memorized backwards and forwards. So can you talk a little bit about that?

Adam McCune: Sure. Well, in fact, one thing that has been recently pointed out by scholars is that—we think about the major works of any given period as the ones that we think are important, but the

²⁶ Christina de Bellaigue, *Educating Women: Schooling and Identity in England and France, 1800-1867* (Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 173.

²⁷ "[Miss Bingley:] 'No one can be really esteemed accomplished, who does not... have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages... and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions...'

'All this she must possess,' added Darcy, 'and to all this she must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading.'

[Elizabeth Bennet:] 'I am no longer surprised at your knowing *only* six accomplished women. I rather wonder now at your knowing *any*'" (Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* [1813], chapter 8).

²⁸ Barnard, *History of English Education*, p. 22; Bermingham, *Learning to Draw*, pp. 183-184.

²⁹ For example, Hannah More writes that young women should be taught to imitate Christ (Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education, with a View of the Principles and Conduct Prevalent Among Women of Rank and Fortune*, vol. 2, 2nd ed. [London: T. Cadell Jun. and W. Davies, 1799], pp. 142-143).

³⁰ Hannah More, "The White Slave Trade," [1804,] *The Works of Hannah More*, vol. 3 (London: T. Cadell, 1830), 385-396; cf. Bermingham, *Learning to Draw*, p. 192.

³¹ Hannah More, "The White Slave Trade," p. 395.

³² Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (1814), chapter 2.

³³ de Bellaigue, *Educating Women*, p. 176.

³⁴ de Bellaigue, *Educating Women*, p. 176.

³⁵ David Allen, *The Naturalist in Britain: A Social History* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1976), pp. 28, 48-49.

bestsellers were always religious books in the early nineteenth century—off the charts.³⁶ That’s what people were reading. And that’s probably still true; people don’t write up fancy reviews of them, but that’s what people are buying, stuff from the “inspirational” section of the bookstore. So people would read things like—Fordyce’s *Sermons* comes up in Jane Austen, for example.³⁷

Actually, the original Sunday Schools—we think of Sunday School as something that is primarily a service to the parents—the kids who are too young to sit through a sermon go and learn more at their level. But the original Sunday Schools were actual schools. They were on Sunday because that’s when poor children weren’t working. They were schools that were meant to teach children to read, but they used the Bible to teach them to read.³⁸ You need something to read—well, let’s use the Bible. That’s going to be a pretty useful text, and of course it’s intended for moral instruction and so on as well. The Bible was a core, especially in a context like that, but everybody was just steeped in Christianity in Britain. It was everywhere. Which is not to say that everyone prioritized it in the same way personally, but it was unavoidable. All the schools, I mean all the schools, were religious—most of them Church of England, but the Nonconformists (people who were not in the Church of England) also had their own religious schools. And it wasn’t really until later in the nineteenth century that we get into more a concept of a secular government-based school system. All those schools are based that way—they’re a religious institution.

Ashley King: Okay, gotcha. Well, then we’re going to go ahead and dive into standard final questions for the context chats for the Women of the Church podcast. So here’s a question—it’s very important, Adam, so I hope you’ve given this a lot of thought—but which do you prefer, tea or coffee?

Adam McCune: I would say, if we’re talking without cream and sugar, I would choose tea. But with cream and sugar, I would probably choose coffee.

Ashley King: Okay, so you could take both.

Adam McCune: Yeah. I like to tell people I’m a social drinker. I don’t drink tea or coffee voluntarily, but I drink when other people are drinking.

Ashley King: But how did you survive grad school without some kind of caffeine? That’s a miracle in and of itself. Because I became a coffee drinker in grad school, to survive.

Adam McCune: Right. Yeah, I had a professor at UNC who said, when I was in college and grad school, I transitioned from being a carbon-based life form to being a caffeine-based life form. So he was pretty surprised that I wasn’t interested. I do eat chocolate.

³⁶ For example, Hannah More’s bestselling religious works, due to subsidies from her supporters, made her financially “the most successful British author of the romantic period”; book clubs also bought religious books, pamphlets, and sermons, and nineteenth-century British readers were “steep[ed]” in eighteenth-century religious culture through school books (William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* [Cambridge University Press, 2004], pp. 137, 162, 669).

³⁷ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), chapter 14.

³⁸ One of the primary goals of the Sunday Schools was to teach poor children to read the Bible (John Carroll Power, *The Rise and Progress of Sunday Schools: A Biography of Robert Raikes and William Fox* [New York, 1863], pp. 90-91). The Bible was also the primary textbook: in 1785, a Baptist pastor responded to a plan for Sunday Schools using only “the spelling book, Bible and Testament” by suggesting they also use Christian catechisms and religious songs for children written by the hymn-writer Isaac Watts (Power, *Rise and Progress of Sunday Schools*, pp. 106-108).

Ashley King: Oh, okay.

Adam McCune: That has caffeine. I'm not sure if that's what got me through it. What Blanche tells me—that's my wife—is that the way I cope with issues of sleep is that I just deny myself sleep as necessary, and then eventually it catches up to me, and then I sleep a million hours, or take a nap or whatever, and just catch up. So maybe that's how I got through grad school.

Ashley King: You're a power napper.

Adam McCune: Yeah, but when people say "power nap," they mean like, "I'm going to take a twenty-minute nap and jump up refreshed." Whereas my idea of a power nap is like two to four hours.

Ashley King: Oh, okay. You take "napper" to a whole new level. It's basically another REM cycle, if you will.

Adam McCune: Yeah, exactly.

Ashley King: Is there a book that you've read more than once that you would recommend. It obviously doesn't have to fall within "children's literature." But is there a book that you would recommend?

Adam McCune: You know, I recently reread C.S. Lewis's *Till We Have Faces*, and I got so much more out of it the second time. So I would definitely recommend that. *Till We Have Faces* is based on the myth of Cupid and Psyche. The myth of Cupid and Psyche is that the god of love falls in love with a mortal woman. Unfortunately, his mother, the goddess of love, hates her, so he has to hide her. As part of his secrecy, he marries her invisible, and makes her promise never to see him. He only comes in darkness. And her sisters talk her into shining a light and seeing his face because they're like, "He must be a monster if he's hiding himself." Well, she does it. He's gorgeous, because he's the god of love, but she spills some hot wax on him, and he wakes up and he's like, "Now we can never be together!" and he goes off, and then she gets tormented by his mother, for some reason, and then they finally get back together. Which is a pretty weird myth. But C.S. Lewis uses it as this incredible allegory for overcoming all of our hang-ups and sins in relationship to God. I understand that that doesn't sound at all related, and it really just doesn't, but it's a surprisingly incredible book, and it rewards rereading. As I said, the first time I read it, I was like, "That's kind of cool, but I really don't know what's going on." And the second time I read it, I really got a lot more out of it.

Ashley King: Awesome. Do you have a hero of the faith? Is there someone from Christian church history that you particularly admire?

Adam McCune: Well, I mentioned Saint Augustine earlier. I don't like everything about Augustine, but he is incredibly articulate about some of the most important things in the faith. In particular, I really appreciate his articulation of what it means to desire and enjoy God. This is a theme that was taken up in the Bible, of course, by David in the Psalms especially, and of course by Jesus as well. But Augustine kind of fleshes out what that might look like, or what that might be like, in a very clear and compelling way that continues to be a really central idea in Christian thought now.

Ashley King: I can't think of a better way to end our context chat. Thank you so much! ☺