

Fitzgerald,” and slammed the phone down. And guess what, the next Saturday’s *Weekend Australian* featured a full-page feature with a large, smiling, photograph of me wearing my trademark panama hat.

The photographed hat is a crucial element in the story he tells of how the Australian Research Council operated in handing him a five-year grant of taxpayers’ money. The *Bulletin* had run a story on “the Successor to Manning Clark”, naming five historians but providing a photograph of only one of them, Fitzgerald. “When the selection panel—all scientists and mathematicians—met, they didn’t know who to choose when it came to the one place for humanities. Allegedly, a physicist professor said, ‘What about that bloke with the big hat who comes from Queensland?’”

The ARC fellowship gave him five years of freedom from teaching, during which he wrote two political biographies, one of ex-Queensland Premier “Red Ted” Theodore, the other of Fred Paterson, Australia’s only communist member of parliament. At least he produced, and substantially, unlike all too many of the recipients of such largesse.

These observations of the way our cultural superstructure operates provide a pointed context for the record of bad behaviour of Fitzgerald’s alcoholic years. And some of it is seriously bad. This is not a memoir of

convivial bohemian indulgence, but of solitary, suicidal desperation.

But as much as a saga of self-destruction, *My Name is Ross* is also a record of recovery and redemption. Alcoholics Anonymous proved his salvation, and he pays unambiguous tribute to its role in his regeneration. He offers an enthusiastic and persuasive picture of how AA can help, something which might encourage others to follow the path, together with a brief history of the organisation. Having discovered that “Carl Jung was instrumental at the beginning of Alcoholics Anonymous”, he even tracks down Jung’s son in Switzerland for an interview.

I am not sure that the underlying causes of Fitzgerald’s addiction are ever identified. He offers some attempts at examining his relationship with his parents. He details various sexual encounters. But the fundamental fear that requires obliteration remains unidentified. Perhaps it is just the fear of life and of death’s inevitability. Whatever it is, AA clearly provides an ever-available structure, with its regular meetings that are always welcoming, that always give the assurance that there is somewhere to go to, somewhere to meet others, that you are not alone.

*Michael Wilding’s latest novel, Superfluous Men (Arcadia), was reviewed in the January-February issue by Irina Dunn.*

## WHERE TRAGEDY CONFRONTS ETERNITY

by Michael Giffin

*The Shack,*

by William Paul Young;

Windblown Media, 2008, 256 pages, \$22.95.

THERE ARE SEVERAL reasons why *Quadrant* readers should be familiar with *The Shack*. It’s become a bestseller, rare for a novel from a niche market, it’s being widely debated and discussed, it’s popularised complex theological concepts that don’t usually make it beyond the confines of a seminary or yeshiva, it’s related those concepts to the difficult circumstances of human life, and, most importantly, it’s touched many readers.

My copy was pressed upon me by the Sister of Charity who taught me biblical studies in seminary. Read it, she said enthusiastically, before rushing off to distribute other copies to colleagues, friends and relatives. It’s the kind of book you want to share. Its theology is impeccable, as far as mainstream Christianity is concerned, although some true believers find it prob-

lematic. An excellent theological defence of the novel can be found at [www.windblownmedia.com](http://www.windblownmedia.com).

The story implies two fundamental questions that resist simplistic answers: First, where’s God in a creation filled with unspeakable human suffering? Second, what’s God’s nature and relationship with creation? In addressing these questions, Young chose to focus on the life of a single protagonist, rather than on human tragedy on a more global scale. That’s an astute and powerful choice, because it allows the reader to relate the events of the novel, and the theological context of those events, to their individual experiences.

The protagonist, Mack, was raised in a religious family, in which his devout but often drunken father used to beat and brutalise his equally devout mother. When the adolescent seeks pastoral help for his family from within the parish, his father’s response is to send his mother and siblings away for the weekend so he can teach his son a lesson he’ll never forget. After being beaten and brutalised, Mack puts poison in every bottle of liquor he can find in the house and runs away from home forever. Notice the theme being established here: damaged family living within a church that aids and abets the damage. Four implied questions flow from this theme: Is the damage caused by role models within

the family? Are these roles modelled on the way many religious people imagine God's nature and relationship with creation? Do these role models represent mainstream Christian belief? How do we break this cycle of damage?

Mack grows up, marries a wonderful woman, Nan, an oncology nurse, and has five wonderful children: three boys and two girls. The family is religious, and Mack is a different kind of father from his own father, and a different kind of husband as well. In spite of that, tragedy strikes on a camping holiday. A daughter and son, Kate and Josh, are canoeing on a lake, but the canoe overturns. Kate swims free but Josh is trapped under the canoe and is drowning. Mack swims out to rescue him and succeeds. While this is occurring, another daughter, Missy, who has been sitting at a table on shore, quietly filling in her colouring book, is abducted and never seen again. An extensive manhunt leads them to a shack in the wilderness where Missy's bloodied clothes are found. The authorities finally confide to Mack that the man who abducted his daughter is a wanted child molester and serial killer. The manhunt stops. The killer can't be found. Missy's body can't be found either.

Life goes on, as it does. A great sadness descends on Mack, and, perhaps ironically, his sadness is greater than Nan's, presumably because she's more spiritually evolved than her husband. Several years later, Mack receives a letter in the mail, which says: "Mackenzie, It's been a while. I've missed you. I'll be at the shack next weekend if you want to get together. Papa." Without giving too much away, the rest of the novel describes Mack's journey back to the shack, to the source of his great sadness, and to his eventual healing.

**T**HE *SHACK* POPULARISES three theological themes that were big in the twentieth century. Whether they remain big themes in the twenty-first century remains to be seen.

The first theme is found in the different relationships Mack and Nan have with God. Mack's relationship is influenced by his father, which naturally creates problems and barriers for him. Nan's relationship is different, more loving and dependent, which allows her to refer to God as Papa, in an obvious reference to the Aramaic term *Abba* used by Jesus and St Paul to describe the fatherhood of God.

The second theme is found in the way the novel describes the three Persons of the Trinity and how they

relate to each other, as loving equals, none higher or lower than the other. Nothing in *The Shack* is contrary to the Athanasian Creed, which defines and summarises what most mainstream denominations in the Western church believe about the Trinity. However, some denominations, and some dioceses within denominations, teach subordinationism, the doctrine that God the Son and the God the Holy Spirit are subordinate to God the Father, both relationally and in their nature and being, and these denominations and dioceses are critical of *The Shack* because it doesn't validate the heterodox doctrine of subordinationism.

The third theme flows from, or is woven among, the first and second themes, and is found in the way the novel promotes process philosophy and process theology. Process philosophy and process theology reject metaphysical views that privilege being over becoming. According to process thinkers, whether Christian or Jewish, God is not omnipotent in the sense of being coercive, but is instead forbearing. Because the universe is characterised by free will, God can't totally control any series of events, or any individual, but offers possibilities instead. God has a will in everything, but not everything that occurs is God's will.

I had to put aside several editorial prejudices when reading this novel. A few chapters have different authorial voices from others, the quality of writing is uneven, and some of the theological themes are laboured and should have been tightened. If this novel had come from a trade publisher, you'd have to say the author hasn't been well served by the editors who acquired the manuscript and produced the book. Reading between the lines, though, it's apparent no trade publisher was willing to take a calculated risk on a mid-list manuscript from an unknown author. This is understandable, since publishers are driven by the bottom line, and, apart from being a potential failure, the original manuscript would have needed a lot of development and taken up many resources. This left the author with no choice but to publish the book another way, assisted by a band of enthusiastic collaborators.

Given such circumstances, it's good to see *The Shack* has proven to be such a success. In spite of its editorial flaws, the story is important, has flashes of brilliance, and deserves to be widely read.

*Dr Michael Giffin, a frequent contributor to Quadrant, is a priest in the Anglican Diocese of Sydney.*