



Learning to Believe: A Review of Dwelling Places
(Vinita Hampton Wright, HarperSanFrancisco, 2006,
339 p.)

In Beulah, Iowa, widow women all over town garden in the clothes of deceased husbands. From a distance, they often look like small-framed men. They keep their husbands' clothes because it's wasteful to throw away hats and shirts that still have wear in them. They wear the clothes in memory of the men they have survived, even after the scent of them has been laundered away.

If you enjoy books firmly rooted in a particular place, you might enjoy this year's [*Dwelling Places*](#), by Vinita Hampton Wright. It's a book about a dysfunctional family, one struggling to deal with the loss of a way of life, farming, in a small Midwestern town.

Wright looks at the disparate responses to this loss through the alternating eyes of Mack, the father who has just returned from a brief stay in the psychiatric ward for depression; Jodie, his wife, who has stoically held things together while he was gone, and now, on his return loses both faith and fidelity; fourteen-year old Kenzie, who has turned to Jesus but, alas, come under the sway of an older man who, unbeknownst to her, has his own mental and emotional problems; Rita, the grandmother, who hangs onto faith but won't have anything to do with the church; and Young Taylor, the sixteen year old son who dresses in Goth attire and keeps his distance.

Really, all of these characters are struggling with faith in God, with believing in a good God even when life is difficult. Mack is depressed and almost takes his own life. Jodie has an affair that nearly ends the family. Kenzie goes off the religious deep end. Rita retains faith in God but has none in people. And Young Taylor, the one who the story doesn't directly focus on? Well, he's the one who makes the clearest affirmation of faith. He's having a conversation with Mack, telling him about how he had almost drowned when he was sixteen after falling out of a boat:

I started taking in water, and I tried to find the surface but couldn't. I couldn't see my own air bubbles. I thought, This is a stupid way to go.

Young Taylor pauses. So does Mack. . . .

And then I had this feeling that I was going someplace else and that everything would be okay. I knew that in just another minute I'd see people on the other side. But all of a sudden somebody grabbed me real hard and pulled me straight up out of the water. I thought it had to be one of the guys, but it felt like somebody a lot stronger. I could hear Bobby and Dale screaming my name -- they were at least ten yards away. I tried to see who pulled me up, but nobody was there. . . .

Why did you tell me this, son?

I thought you needed to know. Death is just another country. . . . It's another country. And God's taking care of things there, the same as here. God's in charge of getting people from one place to another. You don't need to worry about it, or be afraid of it."

So the quiet one, the Goth-kid, robed in black, turns out to be the one with a firm faith; Kenzie, disillusioned, is just beginning to find out what true faith is; Mack is learning to trust God again, moment by moment; and Jodie's not able to trust, not yet, but she's staying with her family. Grace breaks through into this problematic family, a voice here, and angel there, and faith returns, slowly but in a real way, like gold. While the faith they possess may seem a bit thin to Christians, particularly when juxtaposed against the rich words to the hymns reprinted as a preface to each chapter, these are people recovering, learning to believe, not just in some kind of cultural Christianity but in a real God, one who is sovereign and good and yet one who allows us to be refined in the crucible of trial.

I warmed to these characters very slowly, so much so that I almost turned back. But I'm glad I stayed with it. Wright quietly and slowly builds her characters. Now, during the day, I catch myself thinking of them, wondering how there are now -- and then remembering that they're not real. Or are they?