



Modern Baptists

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Universally and repeatedly praised ever since it first appeared in 1983, *Modern Baptists* is the book that launched novelist James Wilcox's career and debuted the endearingly daft community of Tula Springs, Louisiana. It's the tale of Bobby Pickens, assistant manager of Sonny Boy Bargain Store, who gains a new lease on life, though he almost comes to regret it. Bobby's handsome half brother F.X.-ex-con, ex-actor, and ex-husband three times over-moves in, and things go awry all over town. Mistaken identities; entangled romances with Burma, Toinette, and Donna Lee; assault and battery; charges of degeneracy; a nervous breakdown-it all comes to a head at a Christmas Eve party in a cabin on a poisoned swamp. This is sly, madcap romp that offers readers the gift of abundant laughter.

Modern Baptists Details

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Author : James Wilcox

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From Reader Review Modern Baptists for online ebook

Dan says

This is another one of those books: I'm not sure whether I'm judging myself or the book.

This is humorous fiction. The characters are more or less ordinary people living in a small town in Louisiana. Almost all reflect the community's lack of intellectual, educational and financial opportunity. At the beginning, Mr. Pickens is an assistant manager of what seems to be a cheap "department store" called Sonny Boy. Two of the prominent female characters are Burma, in her late thirties, and Toinette, much younger; both work there. The book opens with the arrival of Mr. Pickens' half brother, F.X., who has just been released from prison after serving time for a small cocaine sale. These and other characters struggle with their yearnings, mostly for love (and maybe for meaning) within the confines of Tula Springs. They do absurd things and things that turn out absurdly. And they yearn to get beyond their failings.

Critics have given Wilcox' work enormous praise and *Modern Baptists* seems to be his most highly regarded novel. According to the cover squibs, it is a comedic novel and Wilcox is a comic genius. Anne Tyler, no less, says she "laughed so hard" she kept forgetting to mark passages for use in her review.

I liked this book a lot; maybe it comes closer to 4 stars for me than 3. I finished it last night and already it is growing on me. While I read it, I smiled a lot, at least inwardly, and I got two soft outward chuckles out of it, perhaps as much as anything at the concept of modern Baptists who would allow you progressively more vice as you got older— Mr. Pickens' version of the church he considers founding. But I didn't have Anne Tyler's reaction (and who am I not to?). Nor was I enormously amused at the other fictional humor book I've listed on Goodreads (de Vries).

So is it me, lacking appropriate physical responses to humor (no hard laughing), or is it the book?

As soon as I ask myself that question, I instantly want to defend the book: I liked it. I've been trying lately to find the kind of analysis of humor that my academic background (not in literature) leads me to seek – a long article or short book that carefully analyzes and illustrates types of humor in fiction, with abundant examples and a clear explanation why it works as it does. Almost despairing, I'm reading humorous fiction, meaning that I'm looking for humor. Therefore, it's my fault, not the book's, that I failed to laugh so hard I lost my place in the book.

That leads me to ask myself this morning what I laugh at, and I surprise myself by what first comes to mind: Michael Keaton's wonderful performance as Dogberry in Branagh's *Much Ado About Nothing*. And not just Keaton, but Shakespeare's lines themselves. The second thing that came to mind was Falstaff. Whoa. Am I stuck in this kind of rollicking 17th century humor?

I'm thinking that humor in fiction (and I don't mean wit or witty language or the subtler delights of irony) is often based on how the author treats flaws of the characters. It is surely easier to laugh when a pretentious character is exposed, especially when, as with Dogberry, he exposes his own pretentiousness. (Dogberry, a man with shaky grasp of words and their meanings, is trying nevertheless to impress with his high language. He manages to say seemingly contradictory things like "thou villain, thou art full of piety,"— a line that reveals Dogberry's ignorance and maybe also take a swipe at those who are full of piety but in fact also villainous, so we might even have layers of laughter.)

But Wilcox characters, though maybe familiar, are not stereotypes, and their flaws are mostly of a different order than those of Falstaff and Dogberry. Their flaws derive mostly from their confinement and their painful, unsatisfied yearnings, yearnings we are allowed to see and experience. That's true even with the preachy, controlling Donna Lee. No doubt even Dogberry has his yearnings, but we are not allowed to see those acted out. To be sure, Wilcox treats his characters' failings lightheartedly, humorously; neither their flaws nor their actions are grand enough for an easy tragedy. And they are indeed absurd and funny at times. But we also see their very real feelings, especially in the main characters here.

A teacher I respect enormously once warned that the author must not be patronizing (nor invite the reader to be). Yet, much of the humor (apart from clever or witty language) is based on character flaws, treated lightly. How is the author to avoid being a put-down artist if, after all, he is making fun of his characters? Perhaps by proportioning the humorous jibe to the targeted flaw? By making the character evil as well as flawed, so that the put-down is deserved? By giving the character a redeeming grace on some surprising matter, so they are not merely inadequate but have other dimensions, too? Wilcox, it seems to me, solved the problem by giving his characters human misery and yearning, treated lightly, to be sure, but very real. As one blub-quoted reviewer said, Wilcox had enough kindness toward his characters to make us care.

Maybe Wilcox' humane feelings for his characters damped my laughter. I guess if your funny characters are suffering, no matter how ridiculous their pains appear from the point of view of readers with relatively advantaged lives, the book must finely balance their suffering and their absurd actions. Even that won't guarantee all readers will laugh out loud, because some readers will surely react to the characters' pain and desire so much that outright laughter is hard to reach; compassionate smiles at characters' ridiculous actions are about all such readers can manage. Other readers, maybe more balanced, can, in Lyndon Johnson's elegant phrase, fart and chew gum at the same time – feel for the characters and laugh at them, too. So I'm still not sure if my failure to achieve Anne Tyler laughter is me or the book.

One thing I am sure of: less than half a day from finishing it, it is growing on me and I love this book.

Beth says

A very satisfying read with a gentle story. The hero (Mr Pickens) is brilliantly exasperating and exasperated with his brother's (the awesomely named F.X.) constant pursuit of fame and adoration. I fell in love with the female characters (Donna Lee and Burma) as they try to fix the lives of the hapless brothers, although I secretly hoped they'd give up on them and leave Tula Springs for better things. This book makes you feel like you're bathing in a hot southern sun on a wooden porch (maybe in a creaky rocking-chair) even if you're on the other side of the world in snow. Written in small bite sized chapters, this book is as close to the perfect novel to read when dashing between places/a quick read before sleep as you could ever hope for. Just awesome

Drew says

A quirky, funny, weird novel. Love the Louisiana flavor of it.

Caitlin says

I discovered this book in a search for "authors like Charles Portis," which I knew was a fool's errand but couldn't resist the possibility that there might, somewhere, be another author out there I liked as much. So of course my first reactions to "Modern Baptists" were of a comparative nature, and generally negative-- I'd say the closest Portis analogue is "Norwood," and "Norwood" got me laughing a lot more and a lot louder. However, as I made my way through Wilcox's novel, it grew on me in all the right ways. It *is* funny--but seldom laugh-out-loud funny. Though Wilcox does engage freely in slapstick, it's often simultaneously sad. At the same time, all that's sad in his novel-- the unlovable-ness of his protagonist, the brokenness of FX, the general decrepitude of Tula Springs-- becomes gradually funny. It does so not because Wilcox is mocking the subjects of his novel (an issue I'm having with a later novel of his, "Sort of Rich," though I am going to wait it out and see if his satire shifts or softens), but because they prove to be richer, more capacious, in some ways even more self-aware than they had seemed initially. For instance, Bobby is a creepy middle-aged man infatuated with a much younger woman-- but he realizes, as he's sitting in his car watching said younger woman at her cheerleading practice, that this is exactly what he must look like. So he drives away--without judging himself too harshly. Similarly, I found myself judging the book's misfit characters less and less harshly as the story progressed. Life is rough, and we cope as we can, with laughter and especially with forgiveness.

I also really admired Wilcox's powers to evoke a sense of place. Without drawing attention to his atmospheric stylings, he managed to make Tula Springs come vividly alive, in its decrepitude and its beauty. So why only four stars? I must return, ultimately, to a Charles Portis comparison--though one of (I hope) a higher order. For those of you who have read "Norwood," you will remember its symphonic ending--the way the apparently scattered, haphazard plot comes together, and so do the characters, in unexpected but completely fitting ways. It seemed to me that "Modern Baptists" had similar aspirations for its ending; but I wasn't totally convinced by the way the loose ends were tied. The Christmas Party, which was a great place (from a plot perspective) to end things, left me feeling cold; and the romantic pairings at the end seemed to me (in the one case) odd or borderline perverse, and (in the other case) unconvincing. I felt that Wilcox was taking more of a trendy-short-story-writer approach to his material at the end, which in my opinion sold his novel a bit short.

BUT. All this being said, I still loved the novel and would highly recommend it. It's a page-turner, revelatory and funny and absorbing and Southern. You'll be glad you read it.

Chrystal says

A funny story, but that's all it is: a funny story with no substance.

Blake says

Jim Wilcox is one of the nicest writers I've ever had the pleasure of meeting. He's super generous with his time, gracious in his feedback on others' writing, and always the Southern gentleman. And in *Modern Baptists*, a sense of the genteel butts up against some fairly Faulkner-esque happenings, and the comic plot that ensues provides characters ample opportunities to miss sharply described chances at changing for the

better. Tula Springs, the fictional setting of this novel, is so clearly inscribed in my mind (perhaps in part because it's not very different from the Livingston Parish home of my grandfather) that it's difficult for me to distinguish real small-town Louisiana from it. And the characters that arise out of this setting--FX and his half-brother who struggle at living together, especially--behave in classically surprising but inevitable and always funny ways that are deftly described at every turn, every page. This is, simply put, one of the best novels to come out of the South in the last 50 years.

Dustin Saxton says

The characters in this book are alot of fun- nothing like backwoods Louisiana.

Cary O'Donnell says

Tedious

L. Scott says

All I can say is, if you don't like it, then fuck you and I don't want to be your friend.

Judith says

This was the first James Wilcox novel I've read but it won't be the last. Quirky, funny and a good read - I enjoyed it and am definitely going to check out his other work.

Shalon Lippert says

Funny, I think I know some of the characters in this book. I live in the community in which this story takes place and, I can tell you, it is an accurate account. The humor is subtle but sharp. I found myself laughing at things a few pages later... Don't understand why some people hated it so much. I do agree that you kind of expect more to happen but then, nothing really happens here anyway.

JOSEPH OLIVER says

If you like novels of the Southern States as I do, and you like those novels set in fairly nondescript places we all have to live in, and you like characters that are nothing special and don't save the world - then you will really like this book. Really like it. I rarely laugh when reading novels and have read a few which I have found more sad than funny but this one does justice to the term 'understated humour'. I had to reread some of

the paragraphs and sentences because they were written in such a way that you'd miss the humour and the character description if you didn't pay absolute attention. He must have spent a fair amount of time precisely carving each sentence to weed out any excess baggage.

I'm an Irishman and believe me I meet these people every day at work or on the train. They are in no way exclusive to Tulsa Springs. You can find them in any supermarket or small town in this country believe me. I think that is why I could identify with so many of them. Maybe if your social circle is quite limited you could find them strange or imaginary but they are not. They live everywhere and Pickens is on every train I travel on. And Mr Randy - step into any small town grocery store here and say hello!

I loved it and only discovered this author by accident. I have ordered the rest of his books because they certainly pass an hour in the train every day. Burma I see opposite me with her make up bag almost every day and I've worked with Emmet in a school. Do yourself a favour and read it. Relax and enjoy the humour and the plot.

Stephen Roth says

Poor Bobby Pickens. His doctor has diagnosed him with malignant cancer, his half-brother, F.X., has moved in after being released from Angola Prison, and Bobby is in danger of losing his job as assistant manager at the Sonny Boy Bargain Store in Tula Springs, Louisiana.

If that doesn't sound particularly funny, read on for a few pages and see why Bobby Pickens (or "Mr. Pickens" as he is usually addressed) might be the most amusing Southern anti-hero since Ignatius Reilly in *Confederacy of Dunces*. James Wilcox's *Modern Baptists* is filled with small-town dreamers: the handsome and Hollywood-obsessed F.X., the stuck-up and leggy red-head Toinette, and the big-hearted and big-boned Burma, who is about to be married but can't shake her longing for another man.

We see all of these characters through the very shallow lens of Mr. Pickens, a chubby, middle-aged man with a bad comb-over, several layers of self-pity, and an unfortunate talent for being at the wrong place at the wrong time. We follow him through one awkward social encounter after another. Bobby Pickens is like most of us on our worst days: unsteady, unkempt, self-conscious but yet hopelessly unaware of that piece of toilet paper sticking to the bottom of our shoe. That's every day for Mr. Pickens, and it's sometimes a wonder he can pick himself up from the plastic-covered love seat in his elderly mother's house.

James Wilcox wrote *Modern Baptists* in the early 1980s, and many critics have hailed it as one of the finest novels you may not know about. *GQ* magazine's 45th anniversary edition rated it as one of the best works of fiction in the past 45 years. It certainly must be one of the funniest. Wilcox has a dry delivery that lets you in on his characters' flaws without being heavy-handed about it. Watching two residents of Tula Springs interact is like watching a chess match between a pair of barely sober checkers players. Each has a different agenda, and each is certain that he or she is achieving it. Yet Wilcox gives you just enough information to know that no one is winning much of anything. I haven't laughed so hard reading a book in a long time.

Bobby Pickens suffers countless indignities. The other characters beat on him like a tetherball through most of the 239 pages. In one scene when Mr. Pickens kneels with another man to pray in a darkened bedroom, you cringe in anticipation of the embarrassment that is sure to come.

Through all the defeats, however, the main character of *Modern Baptists* carries on and maybe even earns a smidgeon of dignity along the way. If not a hero, he at least becomes someone you can root for. That is what

makes Wilcox's book a study in humanity as well as humor.

Julie Ehlers says

This is one of my favorite books of all time, but there's really nothing I can say about it that hasn't already been said in this review.

Melki says

"Bobby, do you think you drink too much?"

"I guess so."

"And we're Baptists."

"Modern Baptists can drink. It's only stuffed shirts like Dr. McFlug who don't."

"Well, I guess I'm a modern Baptist, then." She was still looking at the sky. "Want to get drunk?"

Bobby Pickens's life will never be the same now that his half-brother, F.X., has been sprung from prison and parked himself on the plastic-covered love seat in Bobby's house. Within a matter of days, EVERYTHING will be crazy, convoluted and spiraling out of control.

Wilcox's first novel is chock-a-block with flawed characters who all have plans and dreams and cockamamie schemes. Some dream of unattainable love, and others wish for fame, but they would ALL like to stop being so miserable all the time...even if it means turning to religion...

Mr. Pickens knew that once he got his preaching diploma, he would open a church for modern Baptists, Baptists who were sick to death of hell and sin being stuffed down their gullets every Sunday. There wasn't going to be any of that old-fashioned ranting and raving in Mr. Pickens's church. His Baptist church would be guided by reason and logic. Everyone could drink in moderation. Everyone could dance and pet as long as they were fifteen--well, maybe sixteen or seventeen. At thirty, if you still weren't married, you could sleep with someone, and it wouldn't be a sin--that is, as long as you loved that person. If you hit forty and were still single, you'd be eligible for adultery not being a sin, as long as no children's feelings got hurt and it was kept discreet. But you still had to love and respect the person: you couldn't just do it for sex.

Amen! Now, pass the collection plate!
