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# Straighter things

*by* *Mene Ukueberuwa*

A review of *Out of the Ashes: Rebuilding American Culture* by Anthony Esolen

**BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE**


*Anthony Esolen*

*Out of the Ashes: Rebuilding American Culture*

Regnery Publishing, 256 pages, $27.99

When Jeremiah withdrew from the ruins of Jerusalem to write his Lamentations, his only aim, it seems, was to tell the truth. By the time the city crumbled in 587 B.C., leaving the once favored children of God to "faint for hunger at the head of every street," the moment for a call to restoration had long passed. Rather than peddling false hope, any prophet worth his salt would have done as Jeremiah did, looking frankly at the wreckage and confessing to the crimes that caused it before God and posterity.

Jeremiah's approach has been repeated endlessly; witnesses to the fall of every great nation since his day have written their own civilizational autopsies, teaching their descendants to recognize the signs of the onset of decay. In writing *Out of the Ashes*, a record of the ongoing decline of American culture (which is by now a more-or-less accepted fact), the Renaissance scholar Anthony Esolen explicitly places himself within this prophetic tradition. He professes, for example, to "stand with Livy," who believed that the withering Roman Republic of his day could "endure neither vices nor

their cure." And yet, in the final sentence of the introduction, Esolen pulls himself back from the despairing depths of his forebears, declaring that, "It is time to get to work, and that is what this book is about." Unless he is simply an unyielding optimist—a charge that is easily debunked by the tone of his previous writings, such as "My College Succumbed to the Totalitarian Diversity Cult"—Esolen must have reason to believe that Americans might still avoid a Jerusalemic fate, and the book that ensues is therefore more rallying cry than Jeremiad.

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*Out of the Ashes* mourns the disappearance—caused by both deliberate malice and mere dereliction—of a litany of good practices that until recently prevailed in American life, such as the operation of community schoolhouses, the construction of beautiful houses of worship, and the confident embrace of men's and women's distinct natures. Before he assesses each of these separate branches, however, Esolen dedicates one chapter to the problem he believes is at the common root of this American rot. Lies about human nature—dutifully perpetuated by our schools, media, and government—are stripping away the ethical guidelines, institutions, and activities that we had cultivated for generations to restrict our worst tendencies and bring out the best in ourselves. "Americans are told, by justices whose business it is to know the truth, that the Constitution forbids capital punishment . . . forbids prayer to open a public meeting . . . upholds a right of privacy in matters sexual . . . and so on," Esolen writes, recounting just a few of the dubious dictates that have recently scrambled the country's moral consensus. Self-deceptions like these—about the harmlessness of sex, for example, or the right to limitless liberty—have always been alluring. But Esolen argues that today's mass media has an unprecedented ability to sell them—dangling the fruit of comforting falsehoods in our faces and constantly tempting us to taste, swallow, and regurgitate them, making plain but nourishing truths seem stale by comparison.

With such a fractured understanding of the good life, what do American communities look like today? Literally ugly, by Esolen's appraisal. "Our young people are not only starved for nature. They are starved for beauty," he writes, drawing a connection between our shattered social consensus and our wayward styles of music and architecture. He wearily tallies the wreckage: municipal buildings "with enormous glass 'walls' " that reflect the hollowing out of dignity from local civic life, and Broadway-style church hymns that "would not be acceptable for a jingle to sell jelly doughnuts." These examples of modern taste are made even more pathetic by their placement next to Esolen's descriptions of the great works of old. Of the church in his own boyhood hometown, he recalls:

> The church-builders were Irish coal-miners, and they built their Saint Thomas Aquinas Church in Romanesque style, pooling their funds to hire an Italian painter who had done some work on the rotunda of the Capitol in Washington. He came to lowly Archibald, Pennsylvania, and filled the church

with paintings, nave and sanctuary, walls and ceiling.

When it comes to the actual work of restoring culture, these detailed memories of better days—which are woven throughout the book—are much more stirring than instructive. As beautiful as Esolen's boyhood church may have been, readers are unlikely to leap from their armchairs to begin designing their own. And yet, as he declares in the introduction, Esolen has not written merely to stoke our nostalgia. He follows his examples of fine forgotten craftsmanship and music with suggestions for how their beauty might be revived today on a personal and immediate scale: ripping up carpets and linoleum to restore the hardwood floors of shoddily renovated homes and churches, or fishing old hymnals out of the attic to begin relearning sacred poetry worth singing. This same pattern of analysis—telling the truth about our pitiful state, illustrating the lasting value of our past achievements, and describing the first steps toward restoration—is repeated for every issue addressed in the book. Thus, to avoid the mess of today's mixed-up universities we are offered the simple-enough solution of instead sending our children to sane ones, like the many classical liberal-arts colleges that have opened in recent decades. And in another example, Esolen suggests that we might dodge the current dip in the male work ethic by allowing boys to immerse themselves in all-male groups, where they can cultivate the craftsmanship and sociability they'll need to embrace life as productive workers in any field.

There is one notable omission among the ten areas of American culture outlined in the book. One cannot fail to notice that Esolen—a devout Catholic who will soon assume a post at the theologically traditional Thomas More College of Liberal Arts—does not dedicate a specific chapter to the restoration of the Christian church. His references to his beliefs throughout every chapter, however, make it clear that he avoids addressing faith as a distinct item only because he believes it to be the proper root of all culture, which must run through every branch for the whole to remain healthy. In long passages that recur in each section of the book, the reader is presented with immersive descriptions of the many astonishing things within his reach—objects, activities, places, works of art—in a manner which suggests that they are not merely pleasant but can also be sources of divine enrichment when they are crafted and engaged with in the proper spirit.

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It is pessimism about this possibility—that our works and activities can reflect something good in our nature—that has made us susceptible to complacency, and sapped our tolerance for the burdensome work of maintaining worthwhile habits of living. "From the crooked timber of mankind no straight thing was ever made," wrote Immanuel Kant in his *Idea for a Universal Theory of History*—an insight that has devolved into the contemporary mindset: "Why struggle to build 'the good life' if we're merely sacks of impulses and appetites, bound to fall short?" In *Out of the Ashes*, Esolen doesn't deny the frailty of human substance. But he also points out that, despite our crookedness, we have nonetheless managed to produce an abundance of remarkably straight *things*. The nimble habits of attentive parents, popular verse that skillfully

apportions life's delights into a few frank lines, schools that steer students to reckon with the hard disciplines of liberal learning: all are among what might be thought of as the "straighter things" in American life. Tangible embodiments of the "permanent" values defined by T. S. Eliot, these are the activities and institutions which, when they are made well, have the ability to make us well. As a sufficiently skeptical witness of our culture's decline, Esolen rests his hope for the country not upon an airy dream of progress but rather on these concrete goods, crafted by our predecessors and still within our reach.

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