

S B PEOPLE

Randall J. VanderMey

PROFESSOR

Westmont College's popular associate professor of English is more of a modern Renaissance man than a typical academic. With a blue-eyed twinkle and a sparkling turn of phrase, this Grand Rapids, Michigan, native can

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engage you in intellectual conversations about art, poetry and religion as fluidly and captivantly as he can turn the dialogue toward the joys of getting down on the floor to play blocks with his 2-year-old granddaughter, Jasmine Marie.

Despite his many literary accomplishments—he's written several books, published short fiction, nonfiction and poetry, and produced three plays—VanderMey is really a teacher at heart. He describes the Christian liberal arts college, which he's been at since 1990, as having "an atmosphere that's really quite filled with trust and joy."

A highlight of VanderMey's professional and personal life was escorting 43 students through a semester in Europe in fall 2003, during which they spent four months traveling through 23 cities in 12 countries. One of the best parts of the trip was spending a week each in four different religious communities: the abbey on the Isle of Iona in Scotland, where Celtic monks are believed to have begun writing the *Book of Kells* (a marvelous example of medieval illumination); Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre in Birmingham, England; a Catholic monastery in Taizé, France; and Austria's Schloss Mittersill Study Centre, which VanderMey describes as a castle housing a Protestant evangelical community.

He writes and teaches with the same zest for life with which he embraces his family. VanderMey—who loves body-surfing, tennis and racquetball—is an enthusiastic grandpa and 54-year-old father and stepfather to four grown children (Gabrielle VanderMey-Silk, Julia and Jason Clark, and Mike Sackers), as well as the self-proclaimed "biggest fan" of his wife, Dana, who is a supervisor at St. Francis Medical Center's parish.

VanderMey's entire life is informed by his faith, which is anything but blind. In fact, a critical examination of faith is a recurring theme in his work. "I'm writing

out of my core convictions, which is why things germinate for 10 years before I write them," he says, over a latte at downtown's Finestra Caffè. While certainly heartfelt, his work is also a bit irreverent. For example, his 1993 book, *God Talk*, a critical look at "the triteness and truth in Christian clichés," looks at routine phrases—such as "God wants you to succeed," "Act of God" and "There must be a reason"—and examines what people really mean when they say them. Writes VanderMey: "The habit of using stock phrases can sometimes be not only a symptom, but also a cause, of spiritual paralysis."

Language, both spiritual and otherwise, is a topic close to VanderMey's heart. He's the coauthor of *The College Writer: A Guide to Thinking, Writing and Researching*, which is now in its second edition. And locals may know VanderMey's work from the 2004 production *Kenosis*—a theatrical staging of his spiritual poetry set to contemporary music—which played at the Center Stage Theater. He has also taught poetry writing classes (partnering with local author Perie Longo) at Hospice of Santa Barbara and is currently at work on another textbook, with the working title of *The Contrary Reader*.

Indeed, as a professor, VanderMey prizes and encourages questioning and independent thought. "I have a model in my mind of what kind of student I want to produce—a student who's a little bit contrary. They should be willing to stand up for themselves against what they read—not to be hostile to it, but to think for themselves," says VanderMey. This idea, he acknowledges, "might surprise people who think of a Christian college as a place where students are taught to think in lock step. But that's not how Westmont is and that's not how I am at Westmont. I want to make them open-minded and better critical thinkers. If the Christian faith can't stand up to critical thinking, why embrace it?" n

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