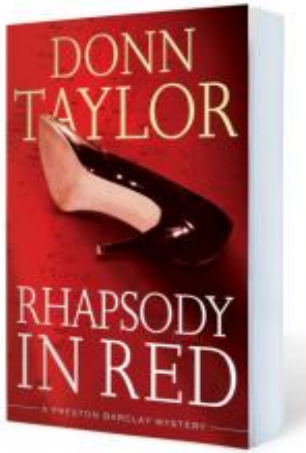


# Rhapsody in Red: A Preston Barclay Mystery

by Donn Taylor

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## About the Book

*That Wednesday, two weeks before Thanksgiving, was a bad day to find a corpse on campus.?*

Preston Barclay is a self-made recluse (and he likes it that way). Teaching college history allows him time to grieve the loss of his pianist wife and find relief from the musical hallucinations that have been playing in his head since her death. But when he and a headstrong colleague, Mara Thorn, discover the body of another instructor on campus, Press's monotonous solitude is destroyed.

When the preliminary evidence singles out Press and Mara, they must take some chances (including trusting each other) to build their own defense --- by bending the rules just a little bit.

They choose to form an unlikely alliance to stay ahead of the police, the college's wary and incompetent administration, and whoever is trying to get away with murder. Otherwise they both might end up unemployed, behind bars, or worse...

## Discussion Guide

1. At the beginning of the novel, how are Press and Mara different in their basic character and values? How are they alike?
2. What experiences have led Press and Mara into their extremes of reclusiveness? What actions against them by other people? How accurate is Press's statement that "The most obvious argument against Christianity is the conduct of Christians"?

3. After Press and Mara form a partnership, each one becomes the leader at different points in the novel. Where is Press better equipped to lead, and where is Mara better equipped? What in their backgrounds explains this difference?
4. As Press and Mara seek to defend themselves against false accusations, they violate a number of laws. Does the power structure's unfair attacks on them justify their violations of ethics and law?
5. What ideas about worship do Press and Pastor Tammons share? Have they captured the essential idea, or are they missing something? What activities are appropriate for a worship service?
6. Is there a lesson we should draw from Press's experience with Dogface?
7. At one point in the novel, President Cantwell is described as a cork (something without a level of its own, whose level and values are determined by external forces such as ocean waves) It is said that he needs to become a breakwater (something that maintains its own level and holds its own position, breaking the force of waves that attack it). In real life, is it better to be a cork or a breakwater? Or something in between?
8. The novel portrays several tensions of mission and values that exist in Christian colleges today, such as academic standards vs. commercialism (i.e., profitable enrollment), education vs. indoctrination, and Christian heritage vs. secular values and pop culture. What is the proper balance of these opposed tendencies?
9. One practice spreading through today's universities is establishment of Resident Life Education Programs which move instruction out of faculty-conducted classrooms into mandatory non-credit dormitory sessions led by dormitory supervisors, most of whom lack advanced degrees in any subject. As in Cindy's experience in the novel, the objective of these sessions is to change the student's beliefs and values to those advocated by the university administration. Is this a legitimate objective of higher education? Is it a legitimate method? To both questions: If so, why? If not, why not?
10. Mara converts to Christianity because of her demand for truth and the failure of her Wiccan faith to explain why evil is evil (or, conversely, why good is good). Does any faith besides Christianity provide convincing explanations of these questions? Is Mara's demand for truth a personal quirk, or is it a trait all people should share?

## **Author Bio**

Donn Taylor served in Korea and Vietnam and worked with air reconnaissance in Europe and Asia. He taught English and literature and two liberal arts colleges, and he is the author of a suspense novel and a collection of poems. He and his wife live near Houston.

## **Critical Praise**

"Richly embellished with literary and musical references, and peopled with some of academia's most intriguing eccentrics and snobs, this classic whodunit could herald the start of a delightful new series. Surfacing throughout the playfulness is the disturbing portrait of a 'progressive' Christian university that strays from its heritage to appeal to a

secular culture. Thoughtfully developed themes of redemption and restoration introduce a Christian perspective without preaching."

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**Publication Date:** September 1, 2008

**Genres:** Christian

**Paperback:** 306 pages

**Publisher:** Moody Publishers

**ISBN-10:** 0802451160

**ISBN-13:** 9780802451163