

14.20

What's in a Name? "Corinthian" Characters in Modern Fiction

The word "Corinthian" has never been a proper name—until the twentieth century. For some reason (or perhaps for various reasons) a number of characters in modern fiction have born this name.

***Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison:** Morrison's critically acclaimed novel features a prominent female character named First Corinthians Dead. The family with the surname Dead has a tradition of choosing names for children at random from the Bible. First Corinthians goes by "Corrie" and has female family members named Magdalene Dead and Pilate Dead. Critics have noted that although the name is supposedly random, First Corinthians attempts to unify people who are divided, just as Paul does with the Corinthian congregation in the first of his letters to that church.

***The Corinthian* by Georgette Heyer:** This 1940 novel may not have pleased critics to the extent of Morrison's work but it is justifiably famous as the book that gave birth to a new genre of literature: the romance novel. Indeed, it was the first in a series of what were called the Regency Romance novels, to be emulated eventually by Harlequin Romances and others.

The main character of the book is introduced to the reader with a phrase that gives the work its title: "He was a very notable

Corinthian.” But what does that mean? Most reviewers think the description is meant to imply “a man about town, a socialite, a man who loves luxury”—all of which would fit the character and comply with some dictionary definitions of connotations the word “Corinthian” can have.

But something else could also be implied (depending on how well Heyer knew the New Testament). The character is also a man who wants to avoid marriage at all costs. Thus he could be regarded as a character who has absorbed Paul’s counsel in 1 Corinthians: “To the unmarried and the widows, I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am . . . those who marry will experience distress in this life, and I would spare you that” (7:8, 28).

Sandman by Neil Gaiman: The classic series of graphic novels by Neil Gaiman garnered awards and set new standards for its medium in the 1990s. One of the most chilling characters in those volumes was a horrific serial killer name The Corinthian. Born of nightmares, he had two extra mouths where eyes would normally be (he covered these with sunglasses) and was known for devouring the eyes of his victims, a ritual that gave him clairvoyant powers.

But why was he named “The Corinthian”? Fan blogs were replete with theories and Gaiman seemingly teased his readers in one late installment (*The Kindly Ones*) by having a character remark that he did not care whether The Corinthian had derived his name from “the letters, the pillars, the leather, the place, or the mode of behavior.”

Thus there seem to be five options:

1. “The letters” is a reference to 1 and 2 Corinthians in the New Testament.
2. “The pillars” is a reference to Corinthian columns, a prominent style of Roman architecture.
3. “The leather” refers to Corinthian leather, a modern type of upholstery used in automobiles
4. “The place” could refer to the ancient or modern city of Corinth, Greece.
5. “The mode of behavior” could mean indulging in luxury and/or licentiousness.

Debate continues, though the first option seems most likely to many. One self-described “New Testament scholar/comic book nerd” has pointed out that the immortal character who creates *The Corinthian* refers to him as “a dark mirror,” a likely reference to 1 Corinthians 13:12. Still, most think there must be more to it than that, and the quest continues. Budding New Testament scholars/comic book nerds should feel free to join in.