In this lucid book in the Interfaces series, Carol Dempsey employs rhetorical criticism and narrative criticism to explore Jeremiah as a literary character who evolves through interaction with God and others. Her goal is to illumine the leadership and vocation of Jeremiah by means of attention to (1) rhetorical features of the text such as symbol, metaphor, wordplay, chiasmus, and genre, and (2) narrative features such as point of view, setting, characterization, plot, and conflict. Dempsey offers an evocative and nuanced sketch of the persona of Jeremiah as distilled from key passages in the book of Jeremiah, an impressive accomplishment for only 111 pages of main text.

Jeremiah is many things in Dempsey’s treatment, all of them good: he is unreservedly faithful, creative, politically astute, assertive, wise, a savvy negotiator and gifted preacher, a poetic genius, and a model for believers today. Dempsey psychologizes Jeremiah’s relationships (“between God and Jeremiah there exists a deep level of trust” [54]; “God in turn is free enough, because of Jeremiah’s trust and love, to challenge the prophet with other personal questions” [99]), dramatizing the text in a way that will be as captivating for undergraduates as it is speculative for scholars. Dempsey claims that “a wildly compelling and intimate love is at the heart of Jeremiah’s prophetic vocation” (xv), that “the prophet is one who is madly in love with God and God’s people” (xxvii), and that
God “is madly in love with the people” (19). This hackneyed metaphor is apparently intended to convey not narcissistic obsession but sacrificial love; those who consider Jeremiah’s more bloodcurdling diatribes may not be entirely convinced. But here, Dempsey may be making a strategic appeal to romantic love as a powerful fetish of adolescent psychosocial development. Her speaking in a diction that is compelling to undergraduates may keep younger readers more interested in the difficult book of Jeremiah than they might otherwise have been.

Luminous exegetical soundings are the hallmark of this book. It seems almost churlish to register concerns about history and hermeneutics here, but because the biblical heritage is central to both literature and North American political discourse, it may be wise to examine how our undergraduates are being trained to think about Scripture via this book. Dempsey takes biblical ideologies of history as if they constituted an unproblematic reflection of the way things actually happened. In her review of the Syro-Ephraimite crisis, Dempsey says, not summarizing Isa 7 but reporting this in her own voice, “Ahaz lost trust in God” (xxi). She repeats Hosea’s indictment of his people as if it were historical fact: “The people continued in their duplicitous ways until such ways led to their downfall” (xxii). Speaking of Jeremiah’s compatriots, she offers, “Do they, however, take the prophet and his word seriously? History records otherwise” (30). Other examples could be mustered. These conflations of ancient ideology with contemporary historical analysis have the potential to foster in unseasoned readers an insupportable naïveté about history and textual representation.

A second issue is hermeneutical: How should one approach “character” in a heavily redacted text that was expanded by different scribal groups? The book of Jeremiah is not a novel written by a single author. The book does not present itself as a monolithic witness, as is clear from overt editorial interpolations and the regular vacillation between first and third person. Complicated theological and political motivations are at work in the creation of the speaker “Jeremiah” in the poetry and the speaker/actor “Jeremiah” in diverse traditions in the prose. Dempsey’s reading of the Jeremiah traditions does not attend fully to divergent points of view in the book, despite her promise to do so. Was Jeremiah an icon of dissent in his ancient culture or a commodified puppet of pragmatic politics? Both, unquestionably, if we attend to the complex ways in which his character is produced in different traditions within the book. More theorizing of the subject as refracted through the various oracles and prose narratives would have been beneficial, even if done with a light hand so as to keep the book accessible to undergraduates.

Further, the character “Jeremiah” is problematic. The Jeremiah of the poetry uses misogynistic metaphors. The Jeremiah of the prose not only counsels submission to the invading army that is slaughtering Judeans in the streets but urges wholehearted
assimilation (29:5–7) and vicious rejection of nonassimilatory Judeans (24:8–10; 29:16–19; 44:1–28) with a gusto that should make postcolonial critics cringe. But Dempsey’s character study is, in a word, hagiographical. We have here an exuberant lionization of Jeremiah rather than a critically incisive probing of all aspects of his characterization. Dempsey does hint at troubling aspects of the message of Jeremiah, gently noting its patriarchal cast (10, 25, 79), its classist assumptions (57), and its disturbing theology of retributive justice (19, 51–52, 74, 93). Helpful would have been more sustained attention to a robust theory of character development in light of these issues.

But would a sophisticated theorizing of the speaking subject be too challenging for undergraduates? Editor Barbara Green explains that each volume in the Interfaces series is “planned to provide young adults with relevant information … at a level of critical sophistication that matches the rest of the undergraduate curriculum” (x). A glance at the undergraduate curricula of the schools of the series consultants shows that undergraduates pay significantly more attention to cultural theory and ideological criticism than is assumed in Dempsey’s book. The English major at Colby College, per the school’s website, stresses “investigation of the central political, cultural, and ideological issues occasioned by [literary] texts, particularly issues of race, gender, and class”; an English course at Santa Clara University explores “questions of power and difference; racial, ethnic, and national identities; relations between cultures and generations, centers and margins.” In the book of Jeremiah, the persona of Jeremiah is constructed by means of conflicting cultural assumptions about the politics of subjugation and accommodation, gendered constructions of the social body of Judah, and discursive practices that reinforce, variously, the prophet’s insider or outsider status vis-à-vis the Shaphanide scribal establishment and the royal court. Undergraduates are already analyzing these sorts of cultural dynamics in other classes; religious studies professors will not want their textbooks to seem epistemologically naïve by comparison. To read character in Jeremiah in a doggedly synchronic way is simply not possible, if one attends closely to the entire book.

The alternative? A study of the character of Jeremiah after the postmodern turn might illumine the multiple “Jeremiahs” that speak in the book. Words of and traditions about the prophet were malleable vehicles for arguing about issues urgently important to postexilic Judeans. Is the poet who agonizes, “O that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people!” (9:1 [MT 8:23]) the same speaker who snarls, “Concerning all the people who live in this city, your kinsfolk who did not go out with you into exile: Thus says the LORD of hosts, I am going to let loose on them sword, famine, and pestilence, and I will make them like rotten figs that are so bad they cannot be eaten” (29:17)? Is the prophet who rages, “Babylon shall become a heap of ruins, a den of jackals, an object of horror and of
hissing, without inhabitant” (51:37), identical to the collaborator who murmurs, “Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf” (29:7)? An enterprising reader might be able to construct an odd continuity from those disparate voices—although not without rendering the prophet unstable and psychically fractured, to be sure. But more responsive to the rhetorical fault lines that run through Jeremiah might be a reading that helps undergraduates reflect on ways in which diverse purposes form and reform the character of Jeremiah in different literary settings.

Dempsey is an eloquent and passionate interpreter of Jeremiah, and readers of this beautifully written book will be instructed by her excellent overview of theological issues at stake in the biblical material and drawn into a rich portrait of Jeremiah as hero. Read in conjunction with other sources that more fully explore questions of literary theory and ideological criticism, this book will serve as an engaging resource for undergraduates seeking a way into the Bible.