2003

New Frontiers In Christian Fiction

LeAnne Hardy
Overseas Council for Theological Education

*The Christian Librarian* is the official publication of the Association of Christian Librarians (ACL). To learn more about ACL and its products and services please visit [http://www.acl.org/](http://www.acl.org/)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/tcl](http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/tcl)

Part of the Library and Information Science Commons

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Christian Librarian by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.
Christian fiction must strive for a new quality of writing and be willing to go beyond what is “safe” if it is going to have an impact outside the church. Although such fiction may include language and situations that are not acceptable among Christians, it will glorify God by presenting the world as he sees it and grappling with deep spiritual issues rather than using clichés to brush over them. Librarians should support quality Christian fiction by purchasing it, recommending it and praying for those in the publishing industry.

Christian fiction today is in an identity crisis. Some would like Christian bookstores to be safe places where they can buy books they know will not contain objectionable language or sexual innuendos. At the same time, if they are to have an impact, Christian authors must speak to the real world, which is full of exactly those things that most offend us.

If they are to have an impact, Christian authors must speak to the real world, which is full of exactly those things that most offend us.

run the economy lived in townships like Tembisa near our home in Kempton Park. But in the three years I lived in South Africa, I never entered Tembisa. I never even saw Tembisa. No main roads went through the townships; streets and highways went around them. All I ever saw were the commuter trains that brought workers to my suburb every morning and took them home at night.

Some Christians would like the real world of 21st century North America to be as invisible as black South Africa was to South African whites before democracy. They don’t want to read books with four-letter words even though that’s how their neighbors talk. They don’t want the characters in their nice, moral fiction to be sexually active. It may be real, but it’s not ‘nice.’ Too often so-called Christian fiction quotes Bible verses and manipulates plots to shoot down cardboard characters and leave Christians with a self-satisfied feeling of being better than those around them without actually wrestling with the real problems of real people.

My question is: How can we ever minister to the real world if we can’t even see it?

In their chapter on Christian fiction in How to Grow a Young Reader, the authors point out:

What makes a book Christian? Is it the publisher? The author? The content? Or is it something else? If we say the publisher, we are only
pushing the question onto them, asking them to decide for us what is, or is not, Christian. If it is the author, is every book John Grisham writes Christian because he is a born-again believer? He couldn't even get The Testament, his most explicitly religious book, to catch on in Christian stores because the non-Christian characters used language we don't approve of.

One CBA book buyer says she looks for books that quote Scripture somewhere and contain an overt evangelistic message, even though she admitted that most of those who shop in her store are already Christians. If it is explicitly religious content that makes a Christian book, I fear we are condemning ourselves to perpetual mediocrity because real literature is never explicit or didactic.

In her book Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art, Madeleine L'Engle defines Christian art as 'incarnational activity.' Although L'Engle isn't too concerned about what the artist actually believes, writer Kristi Collier says Christian fiction "in some way glorifies God either by elevating Him or by expressing some quality of His or by creating a deeper understanding of who we are in relation to Him." Since all truth is God's truth, even a non-Christian writer may include incarnational elements without actually writing a Christian novel.

**A CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW**

I would like to suggest that it is a Christian worldview that makes a book Christian. Notice that I did not say traditional values. We are not merely looking for a comfortable, small town, old-time feeling. These may well be more American than explicitly Christian.

It is understood that a Christian book will not belittle Christianity or contradict scripture in its ultimate message (although individual characters may do precisely that in the course of the story.) The story itself may not talk about specifically religious themes. It may take place in a fantasy world where Jesus Christ never lived or died for our sins. But it will present a view of the world that is consistent with the way God made it.

Here are some things we can expect from a book with a Christian worldview:

- God is supreme, not an impersonal force, one of many or co-equal with Satan.
- People have value. They are not used or blown up without consequences.
- People are in need of redemption. Even sincere Christians have faults.
- Absolutes exist. Sin has consequences and choices matter.
- History has direction, purpose, and hope. Meaning is not merely existential, nor is life a cycle that endlessly repeats.
- God is in control even if it is not always obvious.

Can a book still be Christian if it includes alcohol, sex or crude language? Larry Avery, a representative for one of the major evangelical publishers, has received complaints about unrepentant drinking in Adrian Plass's recent novel Ghosts. He writes, "As we publish more books that portray life in a realistic way, we will get those types of reactions. In time of great stress and turmoil, people want to escape into a world of orderliness, where the guy in the white hat wins, no one struggles with sin, and everybody responds to the gospel the first time they hear it. I can understand this. But I also understand that we have an obligation to show life as it really lived. The key is finding the right balance." 5

Collier points out, "The right words are crucial to a good novel, and any book must use the language that is essential to the characters and their development." Recently rereading C.S. Lewis's adult science fiction trilogy, I was surprised to see how often he used the word 'damn.' It is the way real people talked in the British university world of the 1940s that he lived in and wrote about. My own publisher draws the line at taking the Lord's name in vain. They will allow some 'earthy' language when it is necessary to portray authentic characters, but nothing obscene or demeaning to Christ. To some extent we can get around this by writing things like "He swore every vile oath he had ever heard his father use." Foul language can be suggested rather than contained in every sentence, but after a while it becomes obvious if we are holding back on portraying reality, and the reality of our message suffers.

A woman recently returned Francine River's Redeeming Love to a Christian bookstore because it was about a prostitute. True. The story is a retelling of the Biblical book of Hosea where God commanded the prophet to marry a prostitute. God saw it as an effective metaphor for his faithfulness in spite of our wanton sin.

I contend that a Christian book can show sex appropriate to the age level for which the book is intended if it 1) is necessary for the plot, 2) is either between married partners, or realistically shows the consequences of sin, and 3) is not told in a way that titillates the reader. How much detail is titillating will probably depend on the reader.

**HOLDING BACK ON REALITY**

We have been so concerned about shielding ourselves and our children from the world in which our unsaved neighbors live that our fiction has become banal. We are worried that Left
Behind may not conform to our eschatological charts and ignore the wordy, manipulative, agenda-driven writing style. We are afraid of anything subtle; we feel compelled not only to demonstrate the lesson, but also to explain it in case someone missed the point (which, if we had done a better job of mastering the techniques of effective fiction writing, he would not have missed.) In the process we fail to take the reader seriously. We dumb down our writing so the reader becomes accustomed to not expecting much from Christian fiction, or he feels insulted and puts the book down, unwilling to ever again consider something he suspects might be similar.

Mediocre Christian fiction represents Christianity as mediocre, predictable, unchallenging, not worth investigating. Of course, by the grace of God, some readers are touched by even mediocre writing. But how much wider impact for the Kingdom might be made by a well-crafted book that takes the real world seriously?

Christian authors need to think deeply about the world and issues that concern unbelievers. Gladys Hunt, author of Honey for a Teens Heart, says, “What is needed is something like the writings of Chaim Potok, who, in the course of his stories exposes the reader to the Jewish worldview. Too often the Christian worldview is packaged as propaganda, rather than a well-crafted story that engages the mind and asks questions rather than giving answers.”

If Christian writers wrestle with real questions rather than repeating evangelical clichés, their light fiction will reflect the world as God made it. Their serious fiction will demonstrate God’s point-of-view on authentic, maybe even worldly characters, and be alert to the eternal consequences of what happens in the plot. If the author’s worldview is thoroughly Biblical, he or she will not be able to explore serious issues without considering the eternal implications although they may not be made explicit in the story itself.

A CHRISTIAN LIBRARIAN’S ROLE
As librarians we are not as constrained as the buyer for a Christian bookstore. Our economic survival does not depend on not ruffling any feathers. We have the opportunity to stretch our students, encouraging them to think through their faith and its relationship to the world of the unbeliever. Let us commit to “buy the good stuff” whether it comes from a Christian publisher, a Christian author writing in the mainstream or an unbeliever whose writing has in some way a touch of the incarnational. And let’s share with each other those wonderful finds we make that delight us with their use of language and give us new insights into what it means to live as a child of God in a fallen world.

Let us also commit to pray for Christian publishers who are making hard decisions between what is comfortable and what will impact our society. Pray for Christian authors, struggling to find the right images, characters and plots to convey truth effectively to this generation. And pray for illustrators of Christian texts, who may not themselves be Christians, but the Holy Spirit is able to influence them to illustrate truths beyond their conscious understanding. Pray also for those authors that you know are not yet believers and yet in whose work you find some reflection of the God of the Bible. He may well be at work in their lives.

Story matters. Story puts flesh and blood on the bones of information. It explores the consequences of living with, or without, the commandments of God. Hopefully we can learn from the mistakes our characters make, but as C. S. Lewis pointed out, the moral will not ring true unless it is inevitable, and when we force it into our fiction it does not ring true.

Daniel Taylor, Professor of English at Bethel College writes, “We live in stories the way fish live in water, breathing them in and out, buoyed up by them, taking from them our sustenance... We are characters making choices over time—and living with the consequences—and that is the essence of story both in literature and in life.”

WORKS CITED

1 Kathryn Lindskoop and Randela Mack Hunsicker, How to Grow a Young Reader; Books from every age for readers of every age (Wheaton: Harold Shaw, 1998), p. 311.


3 Larry Avery, quoted in personal correspondence, May 2003

4 Kristi Collier Thompson, personal letter, April 2003
