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Connecting the Gospel and Reality Via Fiction

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Despite the fact that last year *The Purpose Driven Life* outsold *Harry Potter 5*, other than a blip around the time of Mel Gibson's record-breaking film *The Passion of the Christ*, there has been a steady decline in the number of Christian bookstores over the past two years.

Religious books are big sellers:

And yet religious books are big sellers. Popular fiction is strong. Evangelical publishers are moving beyond Christian versions of secular genres and even breaking new ground in some areas. Ray Blackston's *Flabbergasted* (Revell, 2003) pokes fun at Southern church culture, where singles rank churches according to which has the best pick of the opposite sex. It has been called "chick lit from a male point of view."

The good news is that evangelical fiction is getting better – there are fewer bad books being published. Publishers note more professionalism and solid technique from writers, as well as a less sanitized view of life. Eerdmans is bringing out fiction that is moral but without specific Christian references. They are also republishing the classics – George MacDonald, C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams, etc. And there is a growing amount of Christian literary fiction. Lawrence Dorr's short stories about a Hungarian Calvinist during and after World War II are wrenching struggles with God, human nature and the problem of evil. (*A Bearer of Divine Revelation*, Eerdmans, 2003) W. Dale Cramer's *Sutter's Cross* (Bethany, 2002) received a starred review from *Publisher's Weekly*. They wrote, "Contemporary offerings such as this well-crafted debut from Cramer give the evangelical Christian fiction market reason to hope that the term 'excellent CBA novel' is not an oxymoron."

Really high-brow fiction doesn't sell well in the CBA, but publishers are looking for more bridge books like these – author's within the inspirational genre, who can raise the quality of Christian fiction with powerful stories and excellent writing.

Cultural trends:

A number of cultural trends have impacted the Christian book industry. Religious titles now appear in Walmart and the chain stores. Whatever you think of the *Left Behind* series, it woke up the commercial world to the market potential of religious books. Christian fiction is no longer cloistered in the CBA; it is connecting the gospel with the market place. The difficulty is the gatekeepers. Only the bestsellers make it onto the shelves at Barnes and Noble or the impulse racks at Target. There is no room for the midlist – good books that will never sell a million copies. Too often books from religious publishers are stereotyped and stuck on the inspirational shelves without consideration of broader appeal. But a few break out and make it onto the general shelves.

The gatekeepers of the large chain stores – those who decide what is ordered, how many copies, and when to reorder – are not necessarily sympathetic to our Christian worldview. They may even be antagonistic to our beliefs, but primarily they are concerned with the bottom line. They are not interested in doctrinal purity, ministry needs or the biblical lifestyle of the author, but with how many copies will sell and with what profit to the company.

Amazon.com has virtually no gatekeepers. After 9/11 Kregel Publication's timely release, *Unveiling Islam*, reached thirty-fifth on Amazon's best-seller list. Of course, the lack of gatekeepers can also be a disadvantage. The glowing reviews that induce you to buy, may well have been written by the author's cousin or best friend without regard to actual literary quality. On-line shoppers are generally looking for specific titles. There is less chance than in a bookstore that they will just happen to notice that book that was recently recommended on the ACL list and pick it up.

Public libraries are carrying more and more inspirational fiction. Librarians buy it because patrons ask for it. Once again, Christian fiction is connecting with people who may never go to a Christian bookstore or visit a church. This is a large market for Christian publishers. It may be stereotyped on inspirational shelves, but not always. Libraries are better than bookstores at not practicing censorship by labeling.

More advertising and less review space in magazines hurts the book market in general, but especially Christian books because there are fewer discriminating review sources to begin with. Music and gift items consume space that once was allotted to books.

Probably the biggest cultural trend to impact Christian fiction is the aging of the baby boom generation and the rising impact of generation X and the millennial generation. As John Sawyer of Baker Book House pointed out, "We boomers are having trouble coming to terms with an on-going revolution." We overthrew the shackles of our parents in the '60s, but we can't conceive that a new generation might have their own ideas.

The 20-30 somethings who are buying books, making corporate decisions and coming out of library schools today are better educated, more critical thinkers, more sophisticated and less denominational than their parents. In general. Because the one thing this generation hates more than all else is to be put in boxes and labeled. They are as diverse as the Internet that has shaped them along with Columbine, 9/11, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the fractured families of the "me" generation. They are less concerned about swear words and a glass of wine, and more concerned about authenticity. They are weary of secularism and yearn for the mystical. Where boomers were repelled by tradition, the younger generation is attracted to it – especially traditions that link the ancient and the future. Sawyer says, "Those who have said they were spiritual but not religious are now looking for a place to land." Will Christian books connect them to Christ or leave them unsatisfied in their search?

What could be lost?

It has been suggested that if the Christian Booksellers Association does not reinvent itself, it will be gone in ten years. If that happened, what would be lost? CBA stores are specialty stores. Unlike large chains that only give shelf space to the most popular titles, specialty stores go for breadth. They stock good books that will only interest a small group or that stir up controversy, and they promote obscure titles in their area of specialization.

If CBA stores are gone in ten years, small Christian publishers will quickly follow. Even now some religious chains only agree to see the representatives of the publishers that are their ten best sellers. Smaller companies can't even get an appointment. Selection is based on catalogs alone. Small publishers are usually more open to new talent. They are more willing to take risks and less driven by the financial goals of big business. The loss of small publishers would mean fewer opportunities for new writers and fewer voices prodding us from our comfortable status quo.

In conclusion, Christian books must continue to get better if they are going to compete. We need to see better writing and more compelling characters, wrestling with real questions this generation is asking.

Christian editors and publishers will have to demand higher quality. They must take the time for proper editing, and expand their own horizons by reading the best of secular literature to know what we Christians are being compared to. They need to stop the practice of self-censorship of things that aren't primary in our faith. Someone must be willing to stand up and let the argument happen.

Store managers must discover what makes them unique and explore new ways of connecting with a new generation.

As librarians we must keep buying the good stuff, keep stimulating our students, and keep praying for those in the industry who make the decisions.

We are making progress. Be encouraged! ✚

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