

A Novel Idea

Christian fiction isn't new, but today's faith-inspired novelists have created a new literary genre that has caught the attention of secular publishers.

Christian fiction was difficult to find a few years ago. Stuck in the back of the store on one small shelf, the category was limited to straight-laced prairie romances and wholesome historical titles by Janette Oke, Brock and Bodie Thoene, and Grace Livingston Hill. But that was before the Left Behind series, which made authors Jerry B. Jenkins and Tim LaHaye millionaires and put Christian fiction at the top of best-sellers lists published by The New York Times.

Welcome to 2004, a time when Christian fiction is one of the few book categories that keeps breaking sales records in today's tough economy. The American public—and not just churchgoers—are enjoying novels that offer a good story without all the sex and profanity that characterize modern fiction.

In the last 15 years, the number of Christian fiction titles has risen from just more than 500 to about 2,500. Hundreds of Christian fiction books line the shelves at mainstream stores such as Borders and Barnes & Noble, with best sellers on display at Target, Sam's Club and other major outlets.

"There really is something for everyone now," says Jana Riess, a religion book-review editor for Publishers Weekly. "We don't just have thrillers; we have medical thrillers, political thrillers, legal thrillers. We have contemporary, historical—just a lot of diversity that we haven't seen before."

Cindy Crosby, a reviewer for Christianity Today and an avid fiction reader, says: "I used to shelve Christian fiction for my parents when I was 16 and worked in their bookstore, and it was a very short job because there wasn't much of it. When you look at it today, there is so much of it that you have to subcategorize."

Christian fiction even has its own annual awards program now. The Christys, named after Catherine Marshall's classic book, began in 1999 (with first awards given in 2000) with 82 entries from 13 publishers. By 2003, the number of entries had grown to 137 and the number of publishers had doubled to 26. Nine titles were honored in the 2003 ceremony.

Authors, readers, reviewers and retailers are noticing changes not only in quantity but also in the quality of Christian fiction. Novels in the genre are no longer just about the beautiful pioneer woman who falls in love with the widowed pastor. Characters in a sampling of Christian fiction published during the last year experienced contemporary problems: the death of parents or children, alcoholism, depression, schizophrenia, divorce, losses associated with Sept. 11, homosexuality, cancer and drug use.

This is not your grandmother's Christian novel.

"It has come a long way, especially in the crime fiction and mysteries that I like," says Lauralyn Lonquist, a college-educated mother of three who has been reading fiction since her teen years. "It is helpful if you read about characters who get through a situation because they find a certain Scripture or hope in the Lord."

"We have a facet, I think, that secular fiction doesn't," says Karen Kingsbury, whose books *One Tuesday Morning* and *Remember* (with Gary Smalley) were on CBA Marketplace's fiction Best-Seller List in 2003. "All fiction will bring the physical, emotional and intellectual into it. But we can add the spiritual. We are all spiritual beings, even if we don't acknowledge Christ. We bring a piece that has been missing."

Breaking Into the Mainstream

Those associated with the Christian publishing industry divide their conversation about books into two categories: The American Booksellers Association (ABA) and the Christian Booksellers Association (CBA). Christian fiction is released in both sectors, as ABA houses began showing avid interest in Christian fiction after discovering that it can sell millions, as proved by Tyndale's success with Jenkins and LaHaye. Their *Left Behind* series has now topped 60 million in sales of the original book and its spin-off youth series, audiobooks, and other ancillary products.

Penguin Putnam, Simon & Schuster, Warner Books and HarperCollins all have signed Christian authors. Warner has the *Christ Clone Trilogy* by James Beauseigneur; Simon & Schuster's Pocket Books sells Richard Paul Evans' *The Christmas Box*. Penguin Putnam released artist Thomas Kinkadee's *Cape Light* series and carries Jan Karon's *Mitford* series under its Viking division.

With bigger publishing houses, author recognition and higher sales comes more marketing dollars to grow awareness and visibility. Sam's Club sent the first chapter of Jenkins' new book, *Soon*, in a mass-market mailing to its customers the week

of the book's release last fall.

But with all this growth comes the inevitable controversy. What makes a novel Christian, after all? Are mainstream publishers allowing books into the market that are labeled Christian but fail to include enough of the gospel?

What about so-called Christian fiction that contains profanity or sexual themes? Some writers claim that Christian publishers are censoring authors too much, not allowing characters to be fully human in their faults.

Books in the CBA market are primarily understood to be evangelical in nature. Although plot lines are becoming edgier and more creative, most Christian publishing houses still shy away from anything extreme.

There are definite moral lines authors don't cross. CBA protagonists almost without exception do not drink, do not have sex outside of marriage, do not divorce, do not do drugs and do not gamble—unless their struggle with any of these issues becomes the impetus for their repentance and redemption. And profanity is off-limits.

With the introduction of new authors and publishing houses, however, the lines are blurring.

"My emphasis is not on what I can't write for a CBA publisher but what I can," says Robert Whitlow, attorney and author of legal thrillers *The Trial*, *The Sacrifice* and *The List*. He points out that Charles Dickens, Mark Twain and Herman Melville did not use profanity in their classical literature.

Whitlow says he is more concerned that Christian fiction is being shelved in religious sections at mainstream bookstores with Bibles and nonfiction theology books and isn't being allowed to hold its own against all fiction.

"I love the Bible, but I'm writing novels, not theological treatises," Whitlow says. "Our job is to write books that are so compelling and well-written that readers demand them regardless of where they are located in the bookstores."

Author Robin Lee Hatcher has written for both ABA and CBA publishers, and she says she has experienced more censorship from secular editors. "My work was censored in the general market in that I was unable to write about God in a true and honest manner," says Hatcher, who wrote more than 20 romance novels for mainstream publishers, including titles such as *Passion's Gamble* and *Pirate's Lady*.

"I had an entire scene cut from a book where a husband fell to his knees and prayed for his wife and child," Hatcher adds. "The editor said they 'didn't want to offend any of our readers.'" She has written five novels for Christian publishers, including *Whispers From Yesterday* (Waterbrook).

Author Reed Arvin had the opposite experience. He faced CBA censorship and left to find a home in the ABA world. Arvin began a critically acclaimed fiction-writing career with *The Wind in the Wheat*, a book published by Thomas Nelson. But the author couldn't find a CBA publisher who would take on his next novel, *The Will*, because the plot revolved around an unsaved young attorney who had sex outside of marriage and wasn't repentant about it.

Arvin said in a 2002 lecture that he left CBA rather than have his characters censored. Simon & Schuster's Scribner imprint quickly picked up *The Will*, and the film rights were optioned by Paramount.

"The truth is, both markets are driven by money, and they cater to their audiences. This isn't a criticism, it's just an observation," Arvin says. "In terms of how Christian a book can be in the ABA, it's a mixed bag.

I know editors who simply would not publish a book with an avowed Christian message, but there are others who would."

Arvin says his experience with *The Will* was positive because Scribner did not protest "at all" about the Christian subtext. The author thinks ABA publishers "put a lot of emphasis on literary quality, whereas CBA houses put emphasis more on message."

Some Christian authors are pushed out of the CBA because their personal theology doesn't line up with conservative evangelical beliefs. Phillip Gulley, author of the popular *Harmony* series, lost his contract with Multnomah over his belief in universalism. Gulley now publishes with HarperCollins.

Arvin's brand of Christianity also makes some uncomfortable. He openly declares on his Web site that he does not take all of the Bible literally. He also says he doesn't want puritanical Christians monitoring his word choices.

"I don't think I could write at all with the weight of the entire church looking over my shoulder, making sure I didn't

have a character think or do the wrong thing. It's profoundly uncreative," Arvin told Charisma.

In contrast, there are many authors in the CBA who maintain that the gospel must be present and obvious in their writing. Tracie Peterson, a Bethany House author whose recent title *Silent Star* hit stores last fall, believes Christian fiction should remain "overtly evangelical."

"I don't believe God calls us to water down His Word or to leave out critical points of Bible application that fit into our storyline, just because it might offend," Peterson says.

Breaking New Ground

Contemporary fiction and suspense are the categories seeing the most growth and improvement within Christian fiction, with names such as Robin Jones Gunn, Angela Elwell Hunt, Melody Carlson, Nancy Moser and Ann Tatlock joining Francine Rivers, Terri Blackstock and Hatcher as just a few of the success stories. Contemporary fiction, especially suspense, is also introducing the grittiest and edgiest plots.

Novelist Ted Dekker continues to break new ground with his thrillers *Blink* and *Thr3e*. In fewer than four years Dekker has written seven books with more than a half million copies in print. Three more are planned for 2004.

Dekker's characters never fall on their knees and pray the sinner's prayer, but his books are graphic stories of good vs. evil. *Thr3e* takes readers inside the mind of a serial killer, certainly something new for a Christian novel.

“They are real stories that tackle real questions and real struggles that we all face in America, within a genre that is very, very popular,” Dekker says.

But Dekker doesn’t like the Christian-fiction label. “I’m not sure what that [label] means, but my fiction will lead a person to a better understanding of God and of Jesus Christ and what it is like to follow Christ,” the author says.

Science fiction and fantasy are two categories that are still a hard sell in the CBA. That’s puzzling, since interest in . Tolkien’s faith-inspired Lord of the Rings trilogy is at an all-time high—31 years after his death—and J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series is setting new sales records in secular publishing.

When Theodore Beale began shopping his fantasy title War of Angels to Christian publishers, some liked it but told him it would never sell in Christian bookstores. Beale, who writes in the tradition of C.S. Lewis’ The Screwtape Letters, went to Pocket Books, which quickly bought the novel and signed him for several more. Pocket labels his books dark fantasy because they deal with demons and angels. They are shelved next to occult fiction.

To Beale’s knowledge, no Christian store has carried his book, but it is selling furiously in mainstream stores to Christian and non-Christian fantasy readers. The whole situation has left Beale upset.

“It has been very frustrating that the Christian media would rather complain about secular fantasy like Harry Potter than highlight the good, Christian alternatives that can take its

place.”

Beale believes that Christian fiction ought to expose the darker side of human nature—and spiritual forces—in order to point people to the light. “To highlight the light you must be willing to show the ugliness and darkness accurately,” the author says. “That doesn’t mean you have to wallow in it, but it does mean being honest about it.”

With new topics being tackled, what can readers expect next in this growing genre? Riess thinks marital sex, tastefully written, will eventually make its way onto pages. Divorce is also working its way into plot lines. A Christian couple actually divorces rather than reconciling in Multnomah’s 2003 release *Jumping Into Sunset* by Dawn Ringling.

“I think it is a wonderful trend to see Christian authors working with secular publishers and telling grittier stories,” Riess says.

With plots becoming more contemporary, new fiction will continue to appear on general-market store shelves. Author Bodie Thoene, who continues to find success with biblical historical fiction, hopes that doesn’t mean older fiction titles will be shoved out. Thoene thinks Christian stores can provide depth in Christian fiction that major retailers like Wal-Mart never will.

“We need to keep books on the shelves rather than removing them after a few months. A good book that was good 10 years ago can still be a good book today,” Thoene says.

Thoene and others in the CBA maintain that the goal of a

Christian novel should be to hook people into a good story—and then use it to draw them closer to God. With so many novels on the market and with many of them flying off the shelves of mainstream stores, the potential of Christian fiction and its influence on the culture may not be fully evident yet.

“I see God at work,” says author Tracie Peterson, “not because we are watering the message down, but because people are hungry for the truth.”

New Faces in Fiction

Here are a few of Christian fiction’s rising talents and their recent or upcoming books:

REED ARVIN: