

The Shack Stokes Praise, Criticism

Although the best-selling novel has energized millions of readers, some claim it has a low view of Scripture

The year's most popular Christian novel is also one of the most controversial. Critics of *The Shack* have lambasted its theological underpinnings as it makes its mark on Christian publishing.

Although *The Message* author Eugene Peterson compares it to *Pilgrim's Progress*, Prison Fellowship founder Charles Colson claims *The Shack* has a "low view of Scripture." Others have said it presents a faulty view of forgiveness and has traces of universalism.

None of this upsets author William P. Young, who says he doesn't embrace universalism. The one-time church staff member says the metaphorical shack in his novel represents the place where people get hurt and hide their secrets. "If you're interested in dealing with it, at some time you've got to go back," Young said.

Despite the novel's controversial aspects, flocks of readers have praised the fictional story of a man's encounter with the Trinity after the murder of his young daughter. After hosting Young on his *Life Today* TV show in mid-July, James Robison offered the book to viewers who support the ministry's outreaches and encouraged others to buy it.

Robison said *The Shack* invites people who are stuck in a pit to look up to God to lift them out of despair. "It is not difficult to stir up controversy among Christians," Robison said of the disputes about the book. "[But] I want to be part of an answer to Jesus' prayer that we 'be one,' and I believe that is Paul Young's intent."

Tom Wymore of the Foursquare Church's national church-planting team knows of two district supervisors who bought cases of the book so they could give a copy to each pastor in their districts. "A 70-year-old woman on staff at a church in Midland [Texas] where I was the pastor ... was in tears trying to describe for the first time in her life that she was able to call God 'Papa,'" Wymore said.

The book's publication is itself a dream come true. After Brad Cummings and Wayne Jacobsen helped Young revise the original manuscript, they created Windblown Media to release it after receiving multiple rejections from publishers.

As the book crossed the 1 million mark last spring via word-of-mouth advertising, the former *Charismatic* pastors signed a business agreement with Hachette Book Group, which expects sales to top 5 million by Christmas. A screenplay is in development, with a film anticipated by the summer of 2010.

A former associate pastor of a Vineyard church in Los Angeles, Cummings said the book is engaging a culture that is interested in God but hasn't connected with the church. "[We're saying] you can have a wonderful relationship with God, whether you fit into the boundaries of the institutional church or not," Cummings said.

Wymore said it is easy to see why Young has become so popular after observing him at the recent 2008 House2House conference in Dallas. "It was wonderful theology," Wymore said of Young's talks. "He did a remarkable job of tracing the implications of the fall and how [humans moved] away from intimacy with God."

Yet Young's identification with the house-church movement symbolizes the problem with *The Shack*, says a New Testament professor and noted author. Ben Witherington of Asbury Theological Seminary appreciates the book's thought-provoking nature, but says it espouses house churches' anti-establishment, anti-institutional rhetoric.

"[It's] the 'house church is the solution, the small group is the solution' kind of approach," he said. "They don't have an adequate theology of the church, which is certainly much bigger than little, tiny independent house churches."

He said the book also projects an anti-authoritarian philosophy that he calls unbiblical, but its most glaring error is that it projects a "fuzzy image" of the Trinity. Although *The Shack* portrays a Trinity of coequal parts, 1 Corinthians 15 says that when Christ returns to vanquish His enemies, He will hand everything over to the Father and submit to the Father, Witherington said. "There's no hierarchy of the Trinity at all [in the novel]," Witherington said. "They're just sort of interchangeable parts. It's certainly not what the Bible says."