

For the Love of Story (and the Story of Love)

Christian romance isn't just one of the fastest-growing genres in publishing, it's also changing lives in unexpected ways

In a kitchen somewhere in the Southeast, a woman kicks her work shoes into the corner behind the door, turns the oven to preheat for the garlic bread, sets the spaghetti water to boil and leans against the counter to read another chapter in a Christian romance while she waits. The story is unlike her own, its heroine a pioneer-era woman who hauls spring water in a bucket, battles grass fires and town gossip, and still finds joy in homemaking and being faithful to God. Yet as the spaghetti goes a touch beyond al dente and the reader escapes further into the fictional world, she finds fresh hope and perspective for her contemporary struggles.

Meanwhile a single woman in Chicago struggles to hold out for a husband who loves the Lord like she does. She's tired from swimming upstream in a sex-obsessed culture, yet after reading about the consequences of wrong decisions in the pages of a Christian romance, she recommits to waiting for God's choice.

More than 2,000 miles away in the Northwest, a married couple laments the loss from yet another miscarriage. But as they sit on a loveseat with a novel between them, the story they read—a Christian romance laced with restored hope in God's healing love—somehow reaches into the crevices of their hearts where few conversations could assuage the pain.

It's real-life stories like these that prove the still-relevant power of fiction books in a culture mesmerized by reality TV, social media and instant everything. Such accounts have also prompted Christian romance to emerge as a significant—and yes, profitable—part of the publishing

industry.

While other segments struggled, the romance category of Christian fiction has grown more than any other in recent years. Publishers such as Thomas Nelson took note by more than doubling their percentage of romance titles in the past four years.

“Not coincidentally,” adds Allen Arnold, Nelson’s senior vice president and publisher, “we’ve experienced strong year-over-year growth during those same four years.” Citing various stats and trending, he notes that, when factoring in Christian romance’s most popular categories (historical, contemporary and Amish), “More than half the readers buying Christian fiction are choosing a romance.”

B&H Publishing Group has seen a similar spike in both interest and sales. “In 2008, romance accounted for about 12.5 percent of [our] total fiction sales,” says Fiction Manager Julie Gwinn. “In 2010, we saw romances take a huge jump to a little over 18 percent of total fiction sales.”

Jan Stob, senior fiction editor at Tyndale House Publishers says, “While only 10 percent to 15 percent of our fiction line could be categorized as romance, the majority of the fiction we publish contains a romantic thread. We seek to broaden the readership by publishing stories that could be more accurately described as love stories.”

Ties of Hope and Love

Therein lies the thread that connects readers, publishers and this ever-expanding genre. For all its formulaic book covers and replicated settings, Christian romance is essentially about telling a love story.

“The romance genre is more popular than ever,” observes Natalie Hanemann, senior fiction editor at Thomas Nelson, “with growing subgenres sprouting up all the time. A good love

story never grows old.”

Neither does a story that simultaneously provides an escape *from* daily life and encouragement *for* it. Author and Abingdon Press editor Ramona Richards says the attraction to Christian romance boils down to every reader’s deepest desires—“the needs for love, belonging, growth, and the reassurance that our work and our faith are foundational. Unlike some secular romances, which are written to stimulate us, Christian romance is more likely to affirm us.”

That’s especially true in uncertain times. Research shows that in a down economy, sales of romance novels increase as readers look to “block the bad news of a lost job, layoff or late mortgage payment with something that makes them feel good. Chocolate sales also usually climb during this same time for the same reason,” Gwinn says.

Romance offers “a happily-ever-after story in the midst of an uncertain world,” Stob adds. But it’s not just warm, fuzzy feelings that most believing readers are after; it’s something more substantial and life-changing. “Christian romance offers readers hope and points us to the ultimate romance: Christ and His love for us.”

Best-selling author Tracie Peterson knows about this firsthand. Throughout the 70-plus novels she has written, Peterson weaves a story of divine romance into her flawed, human yet inspiring characters.

“All of the Bible is a romance to us from God—a story about a wonderful prince who rescues his bride,” she says. “The power of story is incredible to cause readers to remember how much God loves them.”

Indeed, Christian romance novels “tackle a question we’ve been dealing with since Adam and Eve,” says David Long of Bethany House Publishers.

“What does God’s love for us look like when it’s mirrored in the lives of flawed people? It’s not perfect anymore. It’s broken and weighed down by selfishness or fear or pain. But these characters learn to love—or be loved—with God’s love.”

Yes, But Can Romance Change the World?

Whether it’s historical, contemporary, sweet and simple, complex and thought-provoking, serious or comedic, every subcategory of Christian romance has evidence of how the genre is going beyond the printed page to show its profound influence on readers’ lives. Most authors love getting feedback from fans of their books, yet in the case of many Christian romance writers, the letters received explain a profound effect that these seemingly “simple” stories can have.

In Mindy Starns Clark’s Million Dollar Mysteries series, heroine Callie Webber finds herself attracted to her boss while still healing from a painful past. Most secular books would make no issue of the romantic sparks progressing into an eventual bedroom encounter. Yet Clark’s character took a different, more virtuous path—one noticed by a reader who wrote to the author.

“In her note, the reader said that she had always thought that celibacy was ‘a nice idea, especially for a Christian, but basically unrealistic.’” Clark says. “But then as she read Callie and Tom’s story and saw how they were committed to purity and managed to resist temptation despite their deepening relationship, this reader decided to follow their example.” Clark says the reader decided to recommit to God and commit to purity until marriage.

Christian romance authors such as Kristin Billerbeck, Kathy Herman and T.L. Higley have received letters from readers who

say they accepted Christ into their lives because of their books. Other readers have stopped short of suicide after finding hope through these books, while countless marriages have been rescued after women found strength—through the pages of a Christian romance novel—to recommit themselves to their husbands.

“Some people refer to Christian novels as ‘clean,’” says Thomas Nelson fiction editor Ami McConnell. “While it’s true that Christian romance novels don’t [contain] gratuitous sex or profanity, it’s more than that. God uses romantic love to work sacred things in our lives. Romance, and especially marriage, is a holy thing.”

Readers point to Christian romances as the place they were introduced to the truth that God loved them. In a novel, they found a reason to change course and choose life over an abortion. They drew courage to wait for the Lord’s choice for them. They discovered a communication bridge in those books, a talking point for friendship, marriage and faith. They saw their own relational blind spots reflected in the characters and determined to start viewing life and the people they love the way God sees them.

“No genre offers hope more dramatically and emotionally and inspirationally than romance novels,” Arnold says. “In a world full of broken promises and unpaid bills and isolation, readers yearn for an eternal love that transcends time. Only a Christian view of life can offer that. It’s not a flirtatious love but a truer, deeper, sacrificing love—as mirrored first in Christ—that can satisfy us at the soul level.”

A Future for Women

It’s not by chance that most of the issues addressed in Christian romance lean toward the feminine side. This is, after all, a genre almost completely targeted toward women. Authors and publishers alike understand the overwhelming

majority of Christian romance readers are female and, given the proactive nature of their audience, that suits them just fine. Women are prone to identify with characters in a book and glean insight from them as they deal with their own relational or life difficulties.

This proactive way of reading, in turn, is shaping the future of the genre—from its heroines to story settings to plotlines.

“Our Love Inspired franchise was launched in 1997, offering three contemporary romances a month,” says Love Inspired editor Melissa Endlich. “Then the readers spoke, and we listened. Now, in 2011, there are two additional lines, Love Inspired Suspense and Love Inspired Historical, and we offer readers 14 books a month to choose from. ... As we get deeper into the 21st century, there are more readers who see 1900-1945 as a historical period and less as the recent past. We’ve seen an uptick in the number of stories featuring heroines entering formerly male-only professions (as in the Air Force), heroines involved in wartime espionage and so on. We’re definitely looking forward to seeing what other innovative ideas our authors can create.”

Publishers note that while the public’s current appetite for Amish fiction (see page 52) is likely to diminish, other subgenres featuring another time period or culture will undoubtedly emerge in its place. Yet whatever the future holds for this thriving category of fiction, as long as readers still enjoy the escape and encouragement found in Christian romance, authors and publishers are happy to provide new settings, characters and plots by which the everyday reader can learn about a higher love.

As romantic suspense author and romance reader Colleen Coble says: “[Christian romance novels] let me see God and His love in the shadows of those stories. And that’s one big difference for me between Christian romance and general market novels. I see Christian romance as a great way to reveal how love is a

choice. When we're upset about towels left on the floor, we might be snappish, but the books can be a reminder that love overlooks the unimportant."

Cynthia Ruchti is the author of a story of reclaimed love in *They Almost Always Come Home* (Abingdon Press) and the romantic comedy *The Heart's Harbor* in *A Door County Christmas novella collection* (Barbour Publishing). She is a past president of *American Christian Fiction Writers* and lives in the heart of Wisconsin with her plot-tweaking husband.

What's the Deal With the Amish Appeal?

Is it curiosity? Domesticity? The signature bonnets? Why can't readers seem to get enough of Amish fiction these days? A recent survey for Harvest House Publishers titles revealed these reasons, straight from the hors-er, readers' mouths:

- **Simplicity.** "The way faith is wound into the story and their lifestyle is beautiful to read about. The stories really do give you a glimpse into another life, one without all the worldly distractions. Yet, the characters still stumble, have troubles and make mistakes."
- **Presence.** "I'm right there with the characters. They remind me I am blessed."
- **Peacefulness.** "I often wonder if I could live like that. ... [It] makes one appreciate the true value of life."
- **Perseverance.** "[I love] the fact that the characters go through so many trials, but their faith remains intact and stronger."
- **Godly examples.** "Amish women remind me of the joy to be found in homemaking and the simple things in life."
- **Spiritual message.** "The faith lessons—they're whispered rather than shouted."

- **Community.** “Everyone is there for one another.”