

It's a Novel Idea

TODAY'S FAITH-INSPIRED NOVELISTS HAVE CREATED A NEW LITERARY GENRE THAT IS FINDING BROADER ACCEPTANCE THAN EVER BEFORE

Christian fiction was difficult to find a few years ago. The category was limited to straight-laced prairie romances and wholesome historical titles by Janette Oke, Brock and Bodie Thoeue, and Grace Livingston Hill.

But welcome to 2004, a time when Christian fiction continues to break 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, Barnes & Noble, 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."

MOVING INTO THE MAINSTREAM 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: alcoholism, depression, schizophrenia, divorce, losses associated with Sept. 11, 2001, homosexuality, cancer and teen drug use.

"We have a facet, I think, that secular fiction doesn't," says

Karen Kingsbury, who had two books on the CBA Marketplace fiction Top 20 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."

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 published by CBA—and now by ABA publishers, which began showing avid interest in Christian fiction after discovering that it can sell millions, as proven by Tyndale's success with a series of books by Jerry B. Jenkins and Tim LaHaye.

Secular publishers Penguin Group (USA) Inc., Simon & Schuster, Warner Books and HarperCollins all have signed Christian authors. And with bigger publishing houses, author recognition and higher sales comes more marketing dollars to grow awareness and visibility. But with all this growth comes questions surrounding the direction of the literary genre itself.

WHAT DEFINES A CHRISTIAN NOVEL? The mainstream successes of several Christian fiction writers has given rise to 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?

Books in the CBA market are primarily understood to be evangelical in nature. Most protagonists do not drink, have sex outside of marriage, divorce, do drugs or gamble—unless their struggle with any of these issues becomes the impetus for their repentance and redemption. Profanity is off-limits.

Most Christian publishing houses still shy away from anything extreme. With the introduction of new authors and publishing

houses, however, the lines are blurring.

Robin Lee Hatcher has written for both ABA and CBA publishers, and she says she has experienced more censorship from secular editors. "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.'"

There are many authors in the CBA who maintain that the gospel must be present and obvious in their writing. Tracie Peterson, a Bethany author, 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, Hatcher and Terri Blackstock as just a few of the success stories. These categories are also introducing the grittiest and edgiest plots.

Bodie Thoene, co-author with her husband of several best-selling historical series, believes trendy fiction isn't always good fiction. "We also 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 today, and many of them flying off the shelves of mainstream stores, perhaps we've yet to see the full potential of Christian fiction and its influence on our culture.

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

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