

Rapture Fever

When an offbeat suspense thriller called *Left Behind* hit bookstore shelves in 1995, no one could have predicted its astonishing success. The Christian novel, published by Tyndale House, jumped from obscurity to notoriety with alarming speed, hitting No. 9 on *The New York Times* Best-seller List and earning a top 10 spot on Barnes & Noble's Top 100 Picks of the Century. It seemed pop culture was catching rapture fever.

Indeed, you can hardly browse through your local bookstore or walk through an airport terminal without spotting a point-of-sale display for the popular series, which currently has eight titles available and will eventually boast 12. Total product sales are expected to exceed 30 million units by the end of the year, an unheard of, runaway success for a Christian book series.

Move over John Grisham. American readers just can't seem to get enough of the Apocalypse.

So just how did a fictionalized story based on the book of Revelation rise from the shadows to become a publishing phenomenon that would throw millions of readers into an end-times frenzy? According to the authors, prophecy expert Tim LaHaye and writer Jerry B. Jenkins, it all began with a simple idea.

While on an airplane back in the mid-1980s, LaHaye came up with the concept of writing a fictionalized account of the end times. He felt sure the story could be a hit but was not certain he could do justice to writing a good fiction novel. So his literary agency, Alive Communications, eventually paired him up with Jenkins.

The result of that collaboration has become a publishing sensation, breaking out of the confines of Christian culture and into the eye of the mainstream market. The seventh title

in the adult series, *The Indwelling*, hit No. 1 on *The New York Times* Fiction Hardcover Best-seller List in June and held the top spot for four weeks, also reaching No. 1 on best-seller lists in the *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today* and *Publishers Weekly*. In addition, the children's series has sold 5 million copies and is heard as a dramatic series on 500 radio stations across the United States.

At the time, the novel broke all records for Christian book sales. The eighth novel in the series, *The Mark: The Beast Rules the World*, had a record-setting first printing of 2.5 million copies for its November release and was touted by the Associated Press as possibly the fall's "biggest seller" commercially, up against new books by mainstream authors such as Anne Rice and John Updike.

And then there's the feature film, *Left Behind: The Movie*, produced by Christian film company Cloud Ten Pictures. The film was released on home video in October 2000 and then to nationwide theaters in February 2001.

At the time, Christian consumers in particular caught the Revelation bug. In an Evangelical Christian Publishers Association (ECPA) newsletter, ECPA president Doug Ross called the books a "watershed event" in Christian publishing that equals the introduction of The Living Bible in 1971. "I can't think of anything that has driven more people into Christian bookstores than the Left Behind series," Ross said in 2000.

Commercial hype aside, the series does seem to be reaching the hearts of many Christians who say they have rededicated their lives to the Lord because of the books. And it also has pierced the souls of non-Christians, who say they found salvation within the thriller's pages.

"I used to want to be a warlock, and I used to look for books on witchcraft," 13-year-old Robbie told *Charisma*, asking that his last name not be used. "I also used to be depressed all

the time, and I rarely smiled. I didn't really believe in God, and I almost started praying to Satan."

Instead, Robbie says, he picked up *Left Behind: The Kids' Series* at a local library and found himself pulled into the tale of teen-agers who are left behind after Jesus returns to take all the Christians to heaven. Their mysterious disappearance leaves the books' characters to experience the horrors of the tribulation.

"I read all of [the books] and finally decided to change my life and accept Christ," Robbie says. "Ever since, I have been so happy. I witness everywhere I go. I owe it all to the Left Behind series."

Many Christians say they find the series shaking them out of their routines and renewing their passion for evangelism. Carla Davis, a systems analyst in Overland Park, Kansas, walked into a bookstore looking for a good thriller and instead found books that set her life on fire.

"I have been a Christian since I was 9 years old," Davis says. "The series did, just for a brief moment, make me wonder if I was really saved and not just going through the motions, much like the characters in this book. That thought alone made me fall to my knees and reconfirm my position in the Lord. The series made me long for a closer walk with Him, and I have felt closer to Him than I have for a long time."

Davis attributes the books with helping her become more sensitive to the needs of others. And she says she finds herself constantly looking for opportunities to witness and minister now.

The testimonies no longer surprise the authors, who report receiving more than 2,000 accounts of people who have become believers in Christ because of reading the books. At least one character in each book in the series finds salvation.

“Dr. LaHaye wanted a real, genuine conversion experience in each book and those are the toughest to write,” Jenkins says. “[The characters] are desperate; they are cynical; they don’t just believe everything they hear. [But] they come to a realization of what the truth is.”

Not everyone is jumping on the *Left Behind* bandwagon, however. Many question if tapping into people’s fear of the Apocalypse is really the best way to evangelize the lost. Some wonder if the series is only preaching to the church. And others question the scriptural interpretations that are used as the basis of the story’s plot.

End-Time Madness?

The presentation of biblical truth presented in the *Left Behind* series is being debated by some pastors and Bible scholars, who think LaHaye and Jenkins’ account of dispensation premillennialism—the belief that the church will be raptured before a seven-year tribulation period signifying the end of the world—is off-base, and even dangerous.

“Is there any good coming from it? I’d have to say no,” says Gary DeMar, president of American Vision in Atlanta and author of the book *Last Days Madness* (Wolgemuth & Hyatt Publishing). “I know this is fiction, and I respect Tim LaHaye, but this is what he believes. It’s his views of the end times, and those views cannot be supported by a study of Scripture.”

DeMar holds to a Reformed view of eschatology—one that states that most of the prophecies in the book of Revelation were fulfilled in the first century. This position, sometimes called post-millennial or preterist, is common among many Presbyterians—and quite a few charismatics.

DeMar says the premillennialist movement is as recent as the 19th century and overlooks the literal interpretation of Scripture, which he believes supports the theory that the earthquakes, famines and plagues outlined in the Bible have

already been fulfilled. By promoting the view that human beings are living in the “last days,” DeMar says that LaHaye and Jenkins are about 2,000 years too late and that they are leading Christians into complacency and away from working for social transformation.

“I say there is a sinister side of it,” DeMar says. “Christians use the end times as a reason for not getting involved. Many feel [the Left Behind scenario] is supposed to take place, and things are supposed to get worse and worse. In the long term, I see the negative effects of this to be extremely consequential for America.”

DeMar also fears that non-Christians who come into contact with speculative prophecies about the end times that fail to come to pass will be turned off from Christianity completely.

“Every generation has predicted that Christ would return in their generation, and they have all been wrong,” DeMar says. “It is not much different than in the 1970s when Hal Lindsey, in his book *The Late Great Planet Earth*, predicted that the rapture would occur in the 1980s. Psychologically, it’s dangerous and one of the reasons why we are in the mess that we are in today.”

But DeMar is not the only critic of the *Left Behind* series. Other ministry leaders have voiced concerns that strict premillennialism can cause Christians to place emphasis only on soul-winning, while neglecting to reach out to help those in need. In other words, Christians could get so focused on their desire to escape the world through the rapture that they ignore their responsibility to feed the poor and disciple the nations.

“I think LaHaye and Jenkins have done a service to the body in writing these books, and they are a great read,” says Clive Calver, president of World Relief, the international assistance arm of the National Association of Evangelicals.

“And anything that gives glory to God and engages society is well worth having. I just want to go a step further and say, Let’s not just present the gospel—let’s lead and suffer with our brothers and sisters.”

Calver says the books go “two-thirds of the way” by presenting the facts that Jesus is coming back and that Christians need to confront people with the good news. But he feels that the gospel and social action go hand in hand.

“I want Jesus to come back, but I am a bit worried about Him coming back,” Calver says. “I am worried about when I meet a Christian from Sudan or Cambodia and they say to me: ‘Remember the year 2000 when we were suffering? I am sure you were praying for us, but what did you do to help us?’ To me, the whole message of Left Behind is that when the King comes, I want to have done the job He wanted me to do.”

Criticism of the series has not distracted the authors, however. LaHaye, who has studied biblical prophecy for 50 years, sticks closely to the premillennial views and believes that part of people’s fascination with the series is due to the dearth of prophecy teaching Generations X and Y have received, since many pastors have stopped preaching about the end times.

“It is breaking down barriers,” LaHaye says. “People can now talk about religious subjects. The fact that these books are on the best-seller lists gives them credibility [in the mainstream], and people want to read what we ‘religious people’ believe.”

And, boy, are they reading. Although the authors and Tyndale House declined to release any specific sales figures, the series has made the authors “multimillionaires” and has also made a “significant financial impact” on the company, according to Dan Balow, director of marketing.

“We don’t need to discuss any finances outside the company,”

Balow told *Charisma*. "We originally felt *Left Behind* was an excellent product and could conceivably sell 100,000 copies. Our president felt we would sell half a million. It has obviously exceeded anything anybody expected."

Left Behind in Hollywood

LaHaye hoped the spiritual impact is far-reaching and says he has asked God for 1 million people to come to Christ through the book series. And he hoped for another million souls to come to Christ after watching the film.

But despite the fact that the books have been runaway best sellers, *Left Behind: The Movie* did not attract a major studio, nor did the owners of the film rights, Namesake Entertainment, necessarily feel comfortable trusting the story to Hollywood, fearing its spiritual message would be lost on the cutting room floor.

Instead, Namesake paired up with Niagara Falls-based Cloud Ten Pictures to produce what is now the biggest Christian film to date. The film was shot in Toronto this past May and June, with a budget of just more than \$17 million. It stars former TV sitcom celebrities Kirk Cameron and his wife, Chelsea Noble, as reporter Buck Williams and flight attendant Hattie Durham. The couple, who are committed Christians, jumped at the chance to portray the most popular characters in contemporary Christian fiction.

"I was reading the book at night and was elbowing Kirk while he was sleeping, telling him what a great book it was," Noble told *Charisma*. "I told him if they ever made a movie, I would love to play Hattie."

Noble said that shortly after that statement, Cameron got a call from his agent, who said Cloud Ten wanted to cast him as Buck. "Then they said that they were looking for someone to play Hattie and asked if my wife might be interested," Cameron says.

The film became the object of controversy and much speculation early on because Cloud Ten founders Peter and Paul Lalonde announced that they were releasing it on home video first, before premiering it in theaters nationwide. Author Jerry Jenkins, who visited the set and said he had no comment about whether he was pleased with what he saw, was candid in his remarks that he wished it was going to the theaters first.

Many people were confused by the move, but the Lalondes believed it was smart business. They feel the approach will create enough stir in the industry to make Christians want to bring their unsaved friends to the movie theater.