

Saving Stories

Can Christian fiction help rescue our nation?



This year finds our country in increasingly chaotic circumstances—devastating unemployment, progressively angry political divisions, huge moral leadership gaps and destructive warring factions around the globe. Each night the dreary headlines blaze across television screens and the front pages of the newspaper. Yet we also are a nation most blessed, with freedoms and material prosperity unimagined in most countries of the world. For the most part, even our politicians are honest and out for the country’s good—how astonishing is that compared to so many other nations? The question is this: How are we to sort through, think about and address the problems—personal and national—that, along with our blessings, dog our days?

Maybe novels are being written right now or are already out there that can provide new direction, new ways of thinking, and answers to the questions and trials that seem to consume us. The majority of fiction is written and bought for entertainment value, and a well-crafted story certainly will have “refreshing diversion” as foundational to the reading experience. But the most memorable and long-lasting fiction also has the potential to fire the imagination, inspire and challenge readers toward new approaches to the complications, difficulties and yes, evils of life.

This has been the case down through history. In America, the best-known fiction game-changer is Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Her strong faith, along with the influences of her theologian father and abolitionist husband, is woven throughout this novel of slavery’s terrible wound on a nation’s soul. An unprecedented 300,000 copies were sold

during its first year in print as a complete book (it was originally featured in newspaper serials of the time). The book's sales soon surpassed a million copies—at a time when the entire population of the country was barely over 30 million—and stirred citizens' hearts and minds to action. It has been reported that during the author's visit to the White House, President Lincoln mused, "So you are the little woman who wrote the book that started this great war."

Almost exactly 100 years later, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* picked up on some of Stowe's themes but in a more modern setting. Lee's story—the only novel she ever wrote—had extraordinary influence on the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and into the present.

In England, centuries before C.S. Lewis' visionary and captivating Narnia series, another Britisher, John Bunyan, crafted a parable of good and evil, of trials and triumphs that has remained in print ever since publication in 1678. *The Pilgrim's Progress* was my first "grown-up" novel, which I read many times over during my early years as part of a missionary family in the jungles of Borneo. Even though my 10-year-old mind wouldn't have found the words to describe the depth and breadth of the novel's devout insights, this account of Christian's journey to the Celestial City captured my imagination and has made a profound impact on my own spiritual journey. And how to measure its continuing power on those who still read the story 300 years later?

The truth is that there are times when a story—whether historical or contemporary in setting, a sermon illustration or a work of fiction—can be just what our souls need, and possibly what our nation needs.

Such a piece of fiction brought a king to his knees 2,500 years ago. "You are the man!" The dramatic announcement followed a heart-wrenching account of a poor family whose beloved pet lamb was cruelly snatched away to provide a meal

for their rich neighbor's visitors.

"The man who did this deserves to die!" the king shouted. And then Nathan's finger pointed straight at the perpetrator. The prophet's little parable was clear and powerful and convincing. It no doubt saved David's reign and his nation.

In my four decades in Christian publishing, three novels represent similar influences on a generation of readers.

The first is Frank Peretti's *This Present Darkness*, published in 1986 from Crossway Publishers. I have heard several accounts of what launched the book into the stratosphere in both sales and inspiration, including Amy Grant holding it up at her concerts. On the personal side, I probably heard from a dozen friends and acquaintances that I "had to read it" before it actually got to the top of the stack at my bedside.

But however this all happened, what the novel did was bring a new awareness of the unseen world, the divine messengers as well as the enemies of righteousness that surround us whether waking or sleeping. It also introduced a large group of people to Christian fiction, then a rather new but burgeoning category in Christian bookstores and beyond. And the book's influence has not been limited to believers—readers outside church circles have been introduced to prayer, the spiritual world and what it means to be part of the kingdom of God.

The second is *Left Behind* by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins and the books in the series that followed, published by Tyndale House. Beyond the spectacular sales numbers—something like 70 million copies and climbing—the number of readers who have been converted to Christ through these novels is truly phenomenal.

As a publishing event, it no doubt was the "perfect storm": first, an action/thriller with a significant readership that gravitates to this category of story; and second, published on the eve of a new millennium swirling with Y2K uncertainties

and apocalyptic warnings. But I believe way above those dynamics was a divine opportunity to turn the attention of a broad and diverse audience to end-time possibilities and biblical alerts—challenges to live beyond the here and now, with eternity's values shaping our lives, choices and decisions.

The third is William P. Young's novel, *The Shack*, the self-publishing event of the century and now part of Faith Words/Hachette. At the very least, it certainly has prompted a lot of discussions in my circle of friends and associates (and we editors are nothing if not opinionated!). Theological concerns or editorial issues aside, this novelist has struck a nerve with a whole lot of readers, probably many of them in the under-30s demographic, who resonate with the soul searches and struggles of the main character.

How all this is working out is as specific and individual as the book's millions of readers. From what I see and hear, this story's spiritual influence cannot yet be fully understood, even after an astonishing 10 million copies sold and continuing *New York Times* best-seller appearances.

These authors and their publishers all had a vision for the story they wanted to tell, how they wanted to tell it and its possible audience. But I doubt if any of them could have foreseen what would happen when their novels arrived in the marketplace—neither the overall impact on the church nor on individual believers. And ultimately, on our nation and readers around the world.

I am going to mention a fourth novel, *Lion of Babylon* by Davis Bunn, just released from Bethany House. Since I was the editor on the project, I know firsthand the author's hopes and prayers for this suspense story set in modern-day Baghdad—admittedly, eager to capture the audience for thrillers with spiritual themes, but even more, to stir us in the West to a new frame of reference in responding to Middle

Eastern struggles and our attitude toward Muslims. It is of course far too soon to know for a fact, but early reviews indicate that it just might have the spark that ignites our faith to hope for the impossible: peace in the Middle East. Carl Madearis, author of *Christians, Muslims, and Jesus*, says, "I can recommend [*Lion of Babylon*] to my Middle Eastern friends—whatever their background." Perhaps this story will provide a new platform for drawing hopelessly diverse factions together for discussions, decisions and a way forward.

When might the next game-changing novel appear in bookstores and on our e-readers? The fact is, we can't foretell what it will be, who will write it or how the Holy Spirit will use it—a good reminder of both the limitations of our humanity as well as a story's potential when God breathes on an idea and inspires the words that give rise to a memorable, thought-provoking novel. With that in mind, let's be vigilant, watchful and swift to recognize the Spirit at work when that next story with "something more" appears on the scene.

Carol Johnson, editorial director at Bethany House Publishers for three decades, was instrumental in developing and establishing the category of Christian fiction, as well as the Christy Awards for Excellence in Christian Fiction. She and her husband, Gary, now consult with publishers, authors and editors via their J&J Literary Advisors enterprise.