

Heaven Is Hot: Books About Visitations Remain Best-Sellers

Heaven is hot. Hotter even than that other place. Just ask any bookseller in America.

Three of these titles have ascended to heavenly heights on *USA Today's* best-seller list recently, and more are on the way:

– Colton Burpo, then almost 4 years old, dies during an emergency appendectomy, travels to heaven and reports back how “really, really big God is.” *Heaven Is for Real: A Little Boy's Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back*, the Rev. Todd Burpo's 2010 tale of his son's round trip to the Pearly Gates, has sold more than 7.5 million copies after 22 printings. It has been on *USA Today's* best-seller list for 111 weeks and reached No. 1 eight times in 2011. It's now No. 94.

– Eben Alexander, a Harvard neurosurgeon who was in a coma for seven days in 2008, encounters an angelic being who guides him into the “deepest realms of super-physical existence.” His *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey Into the Afterlife*, published last fall, peaked at No. 4 in December and is now No. 10.

– Mary Neal's *To Heaven and Back: A Doctor's Extraordinary Account of Her Death, Heaven, Angels, and Life Again: A True Story*, published in May, tells of the orthopedic surgeon's celestial journey after a kayak accident in Chile in which she was pulled underwater for so long that even she thought she was dead. It has been in the top 150 for 33 weeks and reached as high as No. 14 in July.

“Once word-of-mouth took over, there was no stopping” the *Heaven Is for Real* phenomenon, said Matt Baugher, senior vice

president and publisher at Thomas Nelson, Burpo's publisher. "That got people talking about heaven and their own experiences and opened up the door to other stories as well."

Seems everyone is talking about the trend, and just how "real" it is.

Christianity Today editor Mark Galli gave the phenomenon a serious look in December as the magazine's cover asked the question on everyone's mind: "There and Back Again: What are we to make of all those stories of visits to heaven?"

Neal, who says she was not particularly religious before her journey, says even she didn't have an answer to what happened at first.

"I didn't seek out people to talk to," she said. "I put everything on the back burner until the day that God threw me out of bed and said, 'OK, now is the time you are going to write this.' And from that point on, this has been an incredible lesson in obedience, because I said, 'OK. I'm doing it.'"

Alexander confesses to a similar tug to tell.

"Once I realized the truth behind my journey, I knew I had to tell it," he writes in his book's prologue. "Doing so properly has become the chief task of my life."

Alexander was a skeptic of such near-death experiences until he came out of his own coma in 2008 with a story to tell, which he shared with Oprah Winfrey at the end of last year. The trip, which he calls "a great and beautiful revelation," changed his life.

"What's most shocking is that I spent all these years not getting it," he said. "I had all the clues about the reality of this kind of thing, but science is mute on this issue. ... What I bring to the table now is that I can help people with

the (dying) process. That death is not the end, it's just a transition."

Phyllis Tickle is, well, tickled pink by all this talk. The founding editor of the religion department of *Publishers Weekly*, she is now a freelance authority on religion in America, author of numerous books—and energized by such discussions.

Not to be left behind, she even owns up to her own near-death experience 50 years ago. "But 50 years ago, you didn't talk about such a thing," she said. She acknowledges that now, at age 79, she may have missed her opportunity, although her doctor husband wasn't buying any of it at the time. Still doesn't.

"There's got to be an element of hope here," she said. "We want to hear from someone who has gone there, done that, seen it. That there is something beyond this life, which is miserable, even for those of us who are happy."

More than hope, she believes buyers of these heaven-and-back books are just seeking "something reassuring."

Carol Fitzgerald, president of the online *Book Report Network*, agrees.

"In uncertain times, which is what we're experiencing now, people look for comfort," Fitzgerald said. "The concept that people have seen 'what's next' and shared what it's like gives hope and a feeling that life on earth is part of a journey with a greater reward."

Craig Wilson writes for USA Today.