

John L. Sherrill, Bestselling Author and Friend, Dies at 94

One of America's top Christian authors, John L. Sherrill, died in Boston Saturday, Dec. 2, 2017, at the age of 94.

I had known him since 1979 and considered him a close friend and mentor. For reasons I never understood, he always called me Stefano (Italian for Stephen), so I called him Giovanni.

He was one of the greatest writers of our generation. Long before I met him, I read *They Speak With Other Tongues* (which undoubtedly boosted the fledgling charismatic movement,) as well as *The Cross and Switchblade* and *God's Smuggler*.

He co-authored most of his books with his wife of 70 years, Elizabeth, whom we called Tibby. They both wrote for *Guideposts* magazine for many years and got to know the publisher, Len LeSourd (another mentor of mine) and his wife, Catherine Marshall. Years later, the four co-founded Chosen Books, today owned by Baker Books.

To me, John Sherrill was an icon at a time when I was a neophyte writer and editor. He shared a close friendship with Jamie Buckingham, who invited us both on a pilgrimage to Mount Sinai in 1979. A bond developed that continued until John's death.

He was always kind, loving and an example of a solid Christian gentleman. His encouragement over the years impacted me greatly and compelled me to be a better writer.

A couple of years ago when I visited in Boston, where they had retired, I spent a wonderful evening with the Sherrills. When they visited family in Florida, they would always stay with us. I remember they enjoyed going with my wife and me to Cirque du Soleil in Orlando.

John was born in 1923 in Covington, Tennessee, while his wife, "Tib," began her life in 1928 in Hollywood, California. The prolific couple met aboard a ship on their way to Europe and were married in Switzerland in 1947.

Dan Wooding of Assist News Service wrote a touching tribute to John and his work. Wooding mentioned John's process of writing books with people like Brother Andrew and Corrie ten Boom and how they grappled with questions about the charismatic content in his books, including speaking in tongues.

Wooding quoted John as saying: "In both cases—and this is not backing away—we said, 'Let's allow the story tell that how the Holy Spirit moved in power, and not put a lot of tags on the experience.'"

However, it was a different matter with David Wilkerson, with whom they co-wrote *The Cross and the Switchblade*.

"David felt differently. He wanted us to talk about speaking in tongues," Sherrill said. "So, at the end of the book, we did just that.

"The book was published in various languages around the world, and one of them was in a Scandinavian language. Everywhere else, sales for *The Cross and the Switchblade* were phenomenal. but not in this country. One day, David got a letter from someone a friend in that country saying that the Scandinavian publisher had left out the part about the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues. So, David being David, he got in touch with the publisher and said, 'That won't do. I want you to pull that edition and republish it as was in the original.' And they had to, because they were in violation of the contract otherwise. After they made this change, the sales went sailing through the roof."

In 1967, some Catholic nuns at Duquesne University read the chapter in *The Cross and Switchblade* about how addicts who received the baptism of the Holy Spirit were able to stay off

drugs. The nuns prayed for that experience, which became the birth of the charismatic renewal in the Roman Catholic Church.

Wooding asked Sherrill if he thought these kinds of books would have been published had he and his wife had written them today.

"We have asked ourselves that same thing," Sherrill said. "I don't think books take off and do well or don't do well depending just on the quality of the writing. I think it depends on catching something that is in the air—that people need. You can do a careless job or a careful job. I think all three of these books did catch something that people needed at that time and we really were careful with our work, and so they hopefully they had that combination.

That may be one reason why they have lasted a long time and have sold 50 million copies.

Wooding concluded his interview by asking John Sherrill what advice he would give a new writer today.

"Just don't give up. Writing is such a long, hard road and, today, almost every would-be full-time writer needs to start by being on staff somewhere," he said. "So, find a job in a place where you will do a lot of writing. It's certainly possible to do. There's always a heavy turnover, and just keep knocking on doors until you get that job so that you can earn a living while you are learning."

John influenced many people in his long life. He was a great man, and the writing world has lost a giant in that field.

John is survived by his wife and three children: John Scott Sherrill, Donn Sherrill and Elizabeth Flint. {eo}