

How Much Christian Should There Be (in your Christian Fiction)?

Intro Summary

- If you are at this conference, I can assume you have an interest in either writing Christian fiction, or writing fiction as a Christian. What's the difference?
 - Writing Christian fiction means the Christian message in your novel will be pretty obvious and upfront. In the things that happen in the story or in the things your characters say and do.
 - Writing fiction "as a Christian" for the general market means the Christian message will likely be somewhat hidden, if it's there at all.
 - This kind of writer is hoping to reach the non-Christian audience more directly, so they realize any message must be very subtle.
 - If it's too obvious, non-Christian readers will be turned off and close the book. Example of this kind of fiction: CS Lewis "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe."
 - Let's call these two approaches to Christian Fiction:
 - Message Novels
 - Worldview Novels

Writing for Ministry or Entertainment?

- I suppose you can ask this same question to any Christian working in the "Arts."
 - Writing, Music, photography or painting.
 - Are you doing what you're doing as a "ministry for the Lord" or maybe just to provide wholesome entertainment?
- There is biblical evidence to support the idea of God giving special gifts to people in the Arts.
 - **Exodus 31:1-3, 6** Then the LORD said to Moses, "Look, I have specifically chosen Bezalel son of Uri, grandson of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. I have filled him with the Spirit of God, giving him great wisdom, ability, and expertise in all kinds of crafts...And I have personally appointed Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan, to be his assistant. **Moreover, I have**

given special skill to all the gifted craftsmen so they can make all the things I have commanded you to make.”

- **Daniel 1:17** “God gave these four young men **an unusual aptitude for understanding every aspect of literature** and wisdom.
- Wouldn’t you expect these individuals would appear to be extraordinarily gifted as a result of God’s involvement? Sure you would (and they were).
- CAUTION - Be careful about saying “God called me to do this” or “God gave me this book” too quickly (especially when shopping for an agent or editor).
 - I’m not saying God won’t give people gifts to be able to write, or even give us help when we write. The Bible even says in James, “All good gifts are from above.”
 - I’m saying be careful not to “over-spiritualize” the situation.
 - Don’t pronounce upfront how gifted you think you are, or how God gave you this story. It comes off like boasting.
- I do believe Christian fiction can be a powerful ministry tool.
- But I also think it’s possible to be a Christian and write books that are entertaining and inspiring.
 - Even if that’s all they are – entertaining and inspiring.
 - That’s something we need desperately in this country right now: more good wholesome entertainment.
- Great stories, with great characters, written well that inspire people with godly values.

How Much *Christian* Should Be in Your Christian fiction?

- Some important Questions:
 - *What readers are we **mostly** hoping to reach, non-Christians or believers?*
 - *How does the answer to these questions affect the way we write?*
 - The answer to the first question can only become clear once you answer the second question.
 - Once you have these 2 answers, the answer to the MAIN question is “A Whole Lot.”

- You have to decide who your primary audience is, the “target group” you are writing for. Is it:
 - Primarily Non-Christians (people who do not profess to follow Christ)
 - Primarily Christians (committed followers of Christ).
 - In other words, do you believe you are supposed to write primarily for:
 - The Lost or the Saved?
 - Unbelievers or Believers?
- Getting settled on this question will help you decide “*How Much Christian Should Be in Your Christian fiction.*”
- Some of you may be thinking: “I want to minister to Christians AND reach the lost. Can’t I write for both groups?”
 - The short answer is: **No, you can’t.**
 - Some people can. A very few people have (very few).
 - The overwhelming evidence would suggest you are not one of them. I don’t think I am, either.
- Greg Johnson, a seasoned and respected literary agent in Christian fiction, wrote about this in his blog a while ago. He called his post: “The Myth of the Crossover Christian Novel.”

“I’ve got 20 years and about 2,300 books I’ve had the privilege of representing. About 10% of my sales over the years have been through general market houses. In all that time I’ve heard hundreds of authors and potential authors tell me they wanted to write the book for ‘the crossover market.’ Read: *I want to do some appropriate, hidden preaching so that the reader will consider faith or make a conversion.*

“So if you tell me you want me to sell a proposal to a general market publisher, saying something to the effect of ‘*let’s be bold and take the Cross over to a secular publisher,*’ I’ll be sympathetic with your goal, then immediately talk you out of it. Your heart may be in the right place, but your realistic knowledge of what publishers want is lacking.

“The truth: It can’t be done. General market houses care about great books that serve readers ... and sales. They don’t want to hear from a Barnes and Noble manager that books were returned from angry customers who felt duped (or offended) by the content. My opinion is that those few books that

do escape the religious section in B&N (perhaps 1 or 2 a year) really aren't making a lasting impact. They're not even planting seeds...

- Can anyone think of some of these rare examples of “Crossover Books”?
 - There's only a handful out of thousands and thousands of published Christian novels in that timeframe.
 - What I said before may sound offensive, but it's really true, isn't it?
- Because this is Reality, I've accepted and become settled on who I'm writing for and who my audience is.
 - Another way to say this is:

“Aim for everyone and you'll reach no one.”

- Here's an observation after writing Christian Fiction novels for several years:

I don't think the goal in Christian Fiction is to actually connect with the culture, but to connect with the Christians standing one mile back from that edge.

- We can't actually reach the culture standing one-mile back, of course. God can, but we can't. I think I've become content with the limitations of Christian fiction to reach unbelievers effectively.
- I've revised my target audience to be people who might actually buy my book and be glad they did. That would be Christians standing one-mile back.
- I think that's where most Christians end up anyway after the first few months of coming to Christ.
 - They've done their best to evangelize all their unsaved friends.
 - But as their desires for God-things and growing lack of desire for old things grows—coupled with perhaps the necessity of breaking some worldly ties to keep from being sucked back into things they now know they need to avoid—they move further and further back from the edge.
- So we make “excursions” closer to the edge to evangelize, but we don't live there.

- So I've decided to reach primarily believers with my work, the ones standing one mile back.
 - To stir them and possibly provoke them to move a little closer to the edge...and do it more often.
 - To help them see how good the good news really is, so they'll keep wanting to share it.
- **ONE EXCEPTION TO THIS** - the **only** unbelievers who would read Christian fiction and actually be glad they did are **those God is drawing to Himself already**.
 - This can happen. The Bible speaks about this:

“For no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them to me, and at the last day I will raise them up.” (John 6:44 – NLT)
- Paul talked about this “spiritual phenomenon” to the Corinthians:

“Our lives are a Christ-like fragrance rising up to God. But this fragrance is perceived differently by those who are being saved and by those who are perishing. To those who are perishing, we are a dreadful smell of death and doom. But to those who are being saved, we are a life-giving perfume.” (2 Cor 2:15-16)

 - Paul is saying that to one we are a fragrant aroma of life, but to another the stink of death.
 - We have no control over this. We can't control other people's hearts or change the way they think (not if they are hardhearted or have fixed opinions).
- We can imagine, “If I water down the message enough, I can erase the ‘stink of death’ for the hardhearted.”
- But I think we often wind up sowing empty seeds that can't possibly turn into anything worthwhile.
- **CAUTION** - be careful of “**Message Overdose**.” Even Christian fiction readers hate books that are preachy. That's not why they buy Christian novels.
 - It's okay to have Christian truth come out in your story.

- But it should never be forced or appear to be “tacked on.”
- A fiction book has to be about a great story with great characters. Great characters are not obnoxious people. **Don’t see your novel as just a clothesline to hang your Christian points.**
- Now for those who would see themselves as “Christians writing fiction” for the general market, I think you have to “let your light” shine in a more behind-the-scenes way.
 - Look for ways to weave godly values into your stories.
 - You can share your faith more directly, perhaps, in interviews or blogs.
 - But be prepared for the reality of living in a “post-Christian era.”
- You should also be aware of a few additional challenges:
 - Many secular publishers won’t be okay with your bad guys saying “Dang it” when they get angry. They will want to see profanity when they think it’s called for.
 - And they won’t be okay with your romantic characters simply kissing passionately and then behaving themselves as decent, moral people should.
 - **You’d have to write a book that is so good and so compelling with characters so amazing, the secular audience doesn’t even realize the book is wholesome and clean.**
- In my 4+ decades of following the Lord, I’ve observed two fundamentally different ways Christians serve God.
 - The more popular, American way.
 - The Less Popular Way (the way Jesus did, and the early disciples).
- I think “having hearts that are completely his” refer more to this 2nd, less popular way.
 - The Popular Way –
 - Desire to serve God and do things for God, but we’re mostly the ones deciding what that looks like.

- We think a lot, plan a lot, but spend little time in prayer waiting on God for direction.
 - We have a general hope, and may even pray, that God will bless what we're doing.
- The Less Popular Way –
- We see ourselves as belonging to God, as bond-servants, so we don't feel comfortable setting our own agenda, making detailed plans we hope God will bless.
 - It places a heavy emphasis on prayer and waiting on God, looking for direction from God and strength from God even for ordinary things.
 - The greatest reward along this path is experiencing the nearness of God, not getting things from God that we want.

“Once in a while, someone will say, ‘Don’t just stand there, do something.’ Sometimes individuals and churches are so busy doing things they think will help God accomplish his purpose that He can’t get their attention long enough to use them as servants to accomplish what He wants. We often wear ourselves out and accomplished very little of value to the kingdom. I think God is crying out, ‘Don’t just do something, stand there! Enter into a love relationship with me. Get to know me. Adjust your life to me. Let me love you and reveal myself to you as I work through you.’ A time will come when the doing will be called for, but we cannot skip the relationship. The relationship must come first.”

—Henry Blackaby, *Experiencing God*

- This is exactly how I approach my writing life.
 - He is at the center of it all, not me.
 - He's the master, I'm the servant. I'm here to do his will, not the other way around.
- One of the greatest blessings of following the Lord this way is...All the weight shifts from my shoulders to his.

- I don't have to figure it all out. I don't have to try and control things that are out of my reach (things I can't control anyway).
- I do have to work hard and be faithful and diligent, but when you are a follower, the doing flows out of that relationship.

Closing

- One last passage I'd like to refer to as I close...

“Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.” (Luke 12:6-7)
- Why would Jesus use these illustrations, telling us that God sees every sparrow that falls and even knows how many hairs we have on our heads?
- It's to bring home the fact that God cares for every aspect of our lives and wants to be involved in every aspect of our lives, including the smallest details.
- But for us to experience the blessing of his presence and his help, we have to learn to surrender it all to him.