



Christian Fiction

update

some more recent titles in our collection

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There is a steady demand for Christian fiction and some libraries have even found it convenient to arrange these books in a separate section. Another indication of local interest is the number of overseas titles being co-published locally in English and also translated into Afrikaans. Most titles originate in America and are typically written by Evangelical Protestants, though there are some from other Christian traditions too. Christian fiction spans a range of popular genres (such as thrillers, historical novels, romances and family stories) but the common factors are the author's assumption of a Christian worldview and the role that faith plays in the lives of the characters. Some are, frankly, rather preachy, but there are others where the religious angle is adeptly handled and well integrated into the story.

One of the most popular Christian fiction series in recent years must surely be *Left behind*, a 12-volume sequence of apocalyptic thrillers based on scenarios from the biblical book of Revelation, by Tim F LaHaye and Jerry B Jenkins. The main series was completed with the titles **Desecration**, **The remnant**, **Armageddon**, and **Glorious appearing**, but there is now a three-volume prequel series, called *Countdown to the rapture*,

comprising the titles **The rising**, **The regime** and **The rapture**. LaHaye is writing another series, *Babylon rising*. These fantasy thrillers also have apocalyptic overtones, as they pit biblical archaeologist Michael Murphy against an evil opponent who resembles the Antichrist. The titles in the series (so far) are: **Babylon rising** (written with Greg Dinallo), **The secret on Ararat** (written with Bob Phillips) and **The Europa conspiracy**. In similar vein, *Left behind* co-author Jenkins has written a couple of futuristic thrillers set in a world where religion is officially banned. These are **Soon: the beginning of the end**, and **Silenced: the wrath of God descends**, in *The underground zealot* series. Paul Luther Maier's **More than a skeleton** and William Proctor's **The last star** are other thrillers that use the theme of Christ's second coming. Apocalyptic motifs aside, futuristic scenarios and fantasy, like science fiction, are not strong features in Christian fiction. An exception is **Arena**, by Karen Hancock, a skilful blend of science fiction, fantasy and Christian allegory.

Some thrillers do have a fantasy element. Frank Peretti's **Monster** makes use of fantasy and horror. **The blessed child** and its sequel, **A man called blessed**, by Bill Bright and Ted Dekker, feature a miracle worker with special powers. Many Christian thrillers follow mainstream genres. For example, there are legal thrillers by such writers as James Scott

Bell, Randy Singer and Robert Whitlow.

Could I have this dance? by Harry Kraus is a medical thriller. Some other thrillers are Ted Dekker's **Thr3e** and **Thunder of heaven**, Angela Hunt's **The justice**, **Rumors of peace** by Gary E Parker, Frank Simon's **The gathering storm**, **The oracle** by Ellen Gunderson Traylor, and **Bloody Point** by Linda J White. Dee Henderson's *O'Malley* series features seven people who have adopted one another as siblings and taken the same surname. The plots are in the crime and thriller mould, but a crucial point in each story is the main character's conversion to faith. The titles so far are: **The negotiator**, **The guardian**, **The truth seeker** and **The protector**.

The **Bible** is an obvious source of inspiration for Christian writers, who may use biblical characters, events or settings in their novels. The popular Francine Rivers has produced a series of novellas, called *A lineage of grace*, on five women of the **Bible**: Tamar (**Unveiled**), Rahab (**Unshamed**), Ruth (**Unshaken**), Bathsheba (**Unspoken**) and Mary (**Unafraid**). There is a similar series by her on men of the **Bible**, *Sons of encouragement*, with titles so far on Aaron (**The priest**) and Caleb (**The warrior**). Tommy Tenney's **Hadassah: one night with the king** tells the story of Esther. Two novels on Mary Magdalene are **Unveiling Mary Magdalene**, by Liz Curtis Higgs, and Margaret George's **Mary, called Magdalene**. Bodie Thoene's **First light** is set at the time of Christ and Tracy Groot's **Stones of my accusers** in the aftermath of the Crucifixion. Liz Curtis Higgs has adopted a different approach to biblical characters in her **Fair is the rose** and its sequel, **Thorn in my heart**. She retells the story of Jacob, Rachel and Leah in the form of a period romance set in 18th century Scotland.

There are many Christian historical novels and period romances with non-biblical settings. (Indeed, some Christian publishers in the United States have produced a range of seemingly interminable series using American historical settings, which we have generally not bought for our stock.) Reg Grant's **Storm** is a fictionalised biography of the great Protestant reformer, Martin Luther. In **Wings of refuge** Lynn Austin combines romance, thriller, historical and religious elements and looks at the history of the Holy Land through the lives of three women, past and present. **Loving Libby**, by Robin Lee Hatcher, is a period romance set on a sheep ranch in Idaho in the late 19th century. **Glimpses of paradise**, by James Scott Bell, is a story of war, murder, faith and drama set in the early 20th century. **Fallen angels**, by Patricia Hickman, is set during the Great Depression. A man on the run and three

abandoned children join forces. Desperate for food and shelter, they end up posing as the expected new preacher (a widower) and his family in a small town in rural Arkansas - with surprising results. This is supposed to be the first title in a series and we have not seen any further instalments, but it can stand alone. An effective blend of pathos and humour with a vivid historical background, it could be described as a Christian equivalent of the old Joe David Brown title, **Paper moon**. Another title with a Great Depression setting is Lynn Austin's **Hidden places**. **Joshua's Bible**, by Shelly Leanne, tells the story of a young black man from Ohio who is sent to South Africa in the 1930s to serve as a missionary to the Xhosa and becomes involved in the struggle. This well-written work was a winner of the Fiction Honor Books Award from the Black Caucus of the American Library Association. Robert Vaughan, an Episcopalian lay-minister and a Pulitzer Prize nominee, has written two novels looking at American servicemen and those they left behind during World War II. In **Touch the face of God** a bomber pilot is the main character, while **Whose voice the waters heard** has a naval background.

Mother-daughter relationships over three generations feature in both **Gardenias for breakfast**, by Robin Jones Gunn, and **All she ever wanted**, by Lynn Austin. **The amethyst heart**, by Penelope J Stokes, chronicles six generations of a family of Cambridge, Mississippi. The *Redemption* series, by Karen Kingsbury and Gary Smalley, centres round the Baxter family and looks at problems in relationships. Though there were some very negative published reviews, Kingsbury is popular with Christian readers and this won the (American) Christian Retailing's 2005 Retailer's Choice Award for Best Series. The titles in the series are: **Redemption, Remember, Return, Rejoice and Reunion**. Kingsbury is following this with another series, the *Firstborn* series, which picks up where **Reunion** ended but also introduces new characters. The first two titles are **Fame** and **Forgiven**. Traci DePree's *Lake Emily* series offers stories of family, friends, community, love, heartbreak and faith, set in an American Midwest farming community, with the titles **A can of peas, Dandelions in a jelly jar and Aprons on a clothesline**. Here the spiritual angle is handled with some subtlety.

In **Worlds collide**, by Alison Strobel, the marriage between Hollywood star Jack Harrington and his girl-next-door wife Grace comes under the spotlight when a celebrity biographer interviews them, as do Jack's problems and his discovery of faith. Victoria Christopher Murray's titles **Joy**

and **Temptation** are examples of African-American Christian fiction. Being accepted as a newcomer in a small community and dealing with mistakes of the past come into play in the story of a romance between a widow and a widower in Robert Elmer's **The duet**. Romance in Oxford in the 1960s features in **Inklings**, by Melanie M Jeschke, and its sequel, **Expectations**. In Lori Wick's **The Princess**, an arranged royal marriage leads to love though faith. Kristin Billerbeck's **What a girl wants, She's out of control** and **With this ring, I'm confused** star reluctantly single thirty-something Ashley Stockindale in a light but entertaining Christian chick lit trilogy.

Some relationships are complicated by illness or ended by death. In Robert Elmer's **The celebrity**, a popular singer suffering from burnout goes anonymously to take his late mother's ashes to her small home town. There he meets a young Christian teacher who is struggling to come to terms with her disabilities after a head injury. **I'll watch the moon**, by Ann Tatlock, is set in the late 1940s and a case of polio plays a pivotal part in the plot. Karen Kingsbury's **A thousand tomorrows** tells of two young rodeo stars who fall in love. But Cody's brother has Down's syndrome, which wrecked his parents' marriage and has made Cody bitter and angry, while plucky Ali is slowly dying from cystic fibrosis. **Circle of grace**, by Penelope J Stokes, is about the lives of four women friends and the changes wrought when one of them is told she is terminally ill. This is not typical Christian fiction and the religious angle is low-key but it should appeal to the same readership. Leslie Gould's **Garden of dreams** tells of two friends, one of whom gets cancer, and it looks at the issue of sincere prayers for healing not bringing the expected answer. Vanessa Del Fabbro's **The road to home** also deals with the friendship between two women, one of whom is dying, but in this case it is a friendship between women of different races, who meet in hospital, and is set in South Africa. In Angela Elwell Hunt's **The awakening**, Aurora suffers from agoraphobia, haunting dreams and thoughts of suicide. Can she (like Sleeping Beauty) be awakened to life and love - and to faith? In Deborah Raney's **Beneath a southern sky**, a woman missionary in South America loses her husband, who's reportedly killed while delivering medical aid to a village. She returns home, rebuilds her life and remarries. Then comes a message that her first husband is still alive. In **The living end**, by Lisa Samson, a woman contemplates suicide after the death of her beloved husband of many years. But the husband has left a wish

list of things he'd like her to do, which starts her on the road to recovery and faith. **The threefold garland**, by Severine Kirchhof, tells of a terminally-ill woman, her husband and daughter. Through their story the author, a nun, offers a meditation on living and dying. Despite the theme, this is not depressing or morbid and it has some lighter touches.

Some titles deal with problems, controversies and social issues. In Catherine Ryan Hyde's **Electric God**, Hayden loses all he holds dear through his violent (though not unprovoked) outbursts, and struggles for years to understand before he finds forgiveness and redemption. The protagonist of **In all deep places**, by Susan Meissner, struggles to comprehend the suffering of others, when a return to his old home town calls to mind a childhood friend, her family, and their misfortunes. In Gaylynne Sword's **Dear me** Vanessa must come to terms with her past, her family and her mistakes, including an abortion. The problem of alcoholism in a Christian family in the 1950s is dealt with in Robin Lee Hatcher's **Beyond the shadows**, while Angela Elwell Hunt turns to the controversial topic of cloning in **The pearl**. Complications ensue when a childless couple who want to adopt and a pregnant teenager meet in Tracie Peterson's **The long-awaited child**. In Deborah Raney's **A nest of sparrows**, Wade Sullivan has already become a father to his divorced fiancée's children,



but when she dies, her abusive first husband turns up to claim them. Raney's **A scarlet cord** asks whether deception is ever right. Two broken people find comfort and love together, till one of them disappears. **The amber photograph**, by Penelope J Stokes, tells of a woman's search for an unknown sister which leads her to face her own dark past. The consequences of an illegitimate child unexpectedly reappearing in the protagonist's life are used in different ways in **Oceans apart**, by Karen Kingsbury, **Firstborn**, by Robin Lee Hatcher, and **The debt**, by Angela Elwell Hunt.

Hunt's **The debt** also looks at issues involving ministers of religion and the church itself, as the main characters are a couple who have worked their way up from running a small church to becoming very successful television evangelists. **And the shofar blew**, by Francine Rivers, is about a young minister, eager to build up a church, allowing his ambitions to overcome his scruples so that he loses sight of his real purpose. Sylvia Bombola's **Refiner's fire**, set in Romania in the late 1980s, can be called a thriller but it is of particular interest for its vivid depiction of the persecution of Christians under Nicolae Ceausescu. Jonathan Tulloch's **Give us this day** provides a portrait of Father Tom Carey and his spiritual struggles. A good, conscientious, well-liked man, he seems an ideal Catholic priest, but underneath he is in turmoil, and unexpected events are set to challenge him further. This is an absorbing

read with some substance to it. Popular author Andrew Greeley, himself a priest, does not hesitate to tackle the controversial issue of sex abuse scandals and cover-ups in the Catholic Church in **The priestly sins**. However, as much of the book tells of the life of the whistleblower in this particular scandal, an honest, wholesome and likeable priest, it is by no means a cheerless read. In **A blessing in disguise**, by Elvi Rhodes, thirty-something widow Venus Stanton is the new Anglican vicar in a rural English parish, where some of her congregation are dead set against the idea of a woman priest. This light but pleasant read is not typical faith fiction, but it has a strong Christian element appropriate to the main character. In **A miracle for St Cecilia's**, by Katherine Valentine, a small-town Catholic church is threatened with closure because there are too few parishioners. Some pray for a miracle and get more than they bargained for, but all ends well in this gently humorous and charming feel-good tale.

Beverly Lewis uses the unique lifestyle of the Amish as the setting for her novels. There are three titles in the series *The heritage of Lancaster County*: **The shunning**, **The confession**, and **The reckoning**. The first title in a new series, *Annie's people*, is **The preacher's daughter**. While the vivid background details sound authentic, and the Amish are depicted with warmth and sympathy, the author does take issue with some of their beliefs.

A local title translated from the Afrikaans is **Shades of crimson**, by Marzanne Leroux-Van der Boon. Here modern Israel and the Middle East conflict form the background to Marc's search for identity. Could he live in Israel to marry the woman he loves? Is he South African or Israeli? Jewish or Christian? A sequel has recently been published, called **Hatikvah: land of hope**.

Sutter's Cross, by W Dale Cramer, is set in a small town in the Appalachian mountains. The novel has multiple themes, but it is the arrival of Harley, a homeless, working-class man who does good deeds, that is the catalyst for developments. Something unusual is Angela Elwell Hunt's **Unspoken**. Through the story of a woman who is trying to teach a gorilla sign language, it asks whether animals have souls and what they can tell us about God. Restoring a painting in an Italian church leads to spiritual and emotional healing in Suzanne M Wolfe's well-written **Unveiling**, which handles the religious angle in a subtle and unobtrusive way.

For more background on LaHaye's *Left behind* series and for a booklist of older Christian fiction titles see the **Cape Librarian** of January/February 2001.

