

Faith, Fiction, Fantasy & Truth

by Brad Jersak

“Sometimes fairy stories may say best what’s to be said.”

—C.S. Lewis

“C.S. Lewis taught me that in fiction, stepping into magical realms means encountering earthly concerns in transfigured form.”

—Lev Grossman

CAN FICTION BE TRUE?

I frequently encounter surprise and even disdain when I recommend works of fiction as an essential element in one’s spiritual or theological diet. Indeed, as a professor of theology, I’ve contended with students who were intent on exemptions from the classics I assign as coursework!

“What’s the point? Novels aren’t true,” I’m told with incredulity. Or sometimes, I hear, “I only read spiritual books,” with a judgmental edge. As if fictional stories are neither spiritual nor true.

This response belies a fundamental lack of understanding about the nature of *truth*. *Truth*, especially God’s truth, is true regardless of the genre by which it is delivered, whether as fiction or nonfiction; prophecy, poetry or parable; mythology, apocalyptic or dystopia, and so on. The authors and

characters of Scripture are entirely comfortable with narrating the truth in any of these literary forms.

Today, in addition to written literature, other mediums and formats have proven effective for the gospel message. These include movies and television (and not just documentaries!), stage plays and musicals, art installations, and music of every type. All of these forms have the capacity to deliver a message, and where there’s a message, there may be the truth (but also a lie, just as in nonfiction).

We know the dangers of presenting “facts” that actually convey *untruth*, whether in skewed polls, political propaganda, or worst of all, in loveless theology. On the other hand, the *Truth* is often portrayed best through works of fiction because drama engages the mind and heart of the reader as a participant. The characters sneak past our ‘watchful dragons,’ denial and defenses to expose blindspots where we’ve been resistant to a straightforward challenge.

Who, having read Shakespeare, Dostoevsky or C.S. Lewis could overlook the forest of truth composed of the fictional trees that we call ‘characters’ and ‘storylines’? Who would dare say that Jesus’ stories, such as the Prodigal Son or the Good Samaritan are not true, just because they’re fictional? The plots, themes and characters are true in a way we can never access in the glut of Christian ‘how-to’ books or so much devotional syrup.

Unfortunately, even when Christians have set to writing fiction, all too often the outcome is mediocre. Some books come across as heavy-handed and preachy, loaded with an agenda that strangles the story. In other cases, the readers (and authors!) may end up believing that the *Left Behind*-type fantasy novels are prophesying facts ... a sort of historical fiction in advance of events mistaken for biblical truth. Others, such as Paul Young, author of *The Shack* absolutely nail it and we ought to consider their creative contribution for our nourishment.

C.S. LEWIS ON FICTIONAL TRUTH

So, if we’re going to read and/or write good imaginative truth, why not turn to the modern master on the topic, C.S. Lewis, who kindly described the genesis of his process for fairy tales like *The Chronicles of Narnia*:

Some people seem to think that I began by asking myself how I could say something about Christianity to children; then fixed on the fairy tale as an instrument; then collected information about child-psychology and decided what age-group I'd write for; then drew up a list of basic Christian truths and hammered out 'allegories' to embody them.

This is all pure moonshine. I couldn't write in that way at all. Everything began with images; a faun carrying an umbrella, a queen on a sledge, a magnificent lion. At first there wasn't even anything Christian about them; that element pushed itself in of its own accord. It was part of the bubbling.¹

Interesting! Lewis began with story and let the gospel emerge itself. I strongly suspect that we see this same dynamic with great fiction by authors who don't even identify as Jesus-followers. *The Greatest Story*—the drama of redemption fulfilled in Christ—will inevitably 'bubble up' in every great story. Can you think of examples? Can you think of novels or movies where the 'old, old story' shines through?

Now, Stephen King doesn't claim to be Christian at all, but stories like *Lean on Me*, *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon*, *The Shawshank Redemption* and *The Green Mile* are all loaded with overt gospel themes.

Lewis continues, explaining why he thinks his fictional work is so effective in messaging the gospel:

I wrote fairy tales because the Fairy Tale seemed the ideal Form for the stuff I had to say... I thought I saw how stories of this kind could steal past a certain inhibition

which had paralyzed much of my own religion in childhood. Why did one find it so hard to feel as one was told one ought to feel about God or about the sufferings of Christ? I thought the chief reason was that one was told one ought to.

An obligation to feel can freeze feelings. And reverence itself did harm... But supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons? I thought one could.

They certainly did. The 'Inklings'—Lewis, Tolkien, Charles Williams, and the other "Inklings" in their literary circle—produced some of the best literature of the 20th century. In so doing, they also arguably generated the best of Christian theology.

WOLVERTON'S REMNANT

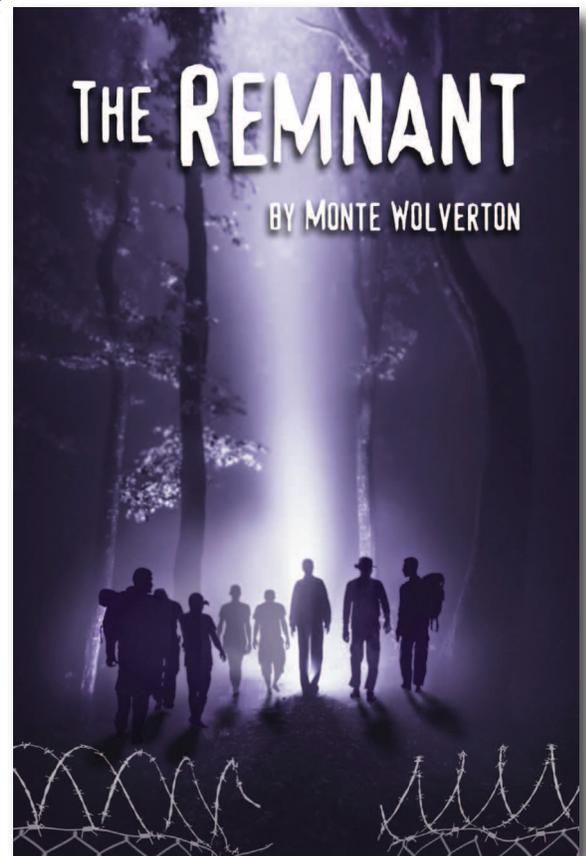
CWR press author, Monte Wolverton, wrote *The Remnant*, an award-winning piece of dystopian fiction, a story set in post-apocalyptic America (2131). Religion and religious books have been banned because of their role in the catastrophes that destroy much of the world's population.

In his story, the protagonist, Grant Cochran, obtains a 'remnant'—a fragment of the Sermon on the Mount—and with it, leads a company of friends and family on a dangerous quest for authentic Christian community.

In this post-IC (Institutional

Christianity) world, they long to find a faith where they can settle and belong. The search leads to encounters that range from ominous to cringe-worthy to humorous.

Question: does Monte actually think he's predicting a factual future we need to worry about? Of course not. Rather, he is addressing the real experience—the truth—of so many 'nones' and 'dones' at this very moment. And I love that his message never becomes 'preachy.'



The fact is that the world already blames religion for its role in sowing seeds of apocalypse. Tens of millions have already made their exodus from the IC and almost none will ever return. Of these, a great multitude still loves Jesus or at least maintains an acute spiritual hunger. Many are already seeking

to instantiate their faith in fresh forms and emergent communities. And many are already creating bizarre new aberrations of pseudo-Christianity, easily as odd as Monte imaginations. His story is not *factual* but nevertheless deeply *true*.

Most of all, the great takeaway for me is his pun on “the Remnant.” After Christendom, will our sectarian remnant mentalities lead us to a post-exodus Promised Land? Hardly.

The one Hope, the Anchor, the true Remnant, is the remnant of Truth found in the story of Jesus Christ, symbolized by Cochran’s fragment. Now, that is the *Truth* worth telling, even—no, *especially*—through fiction. □

Brad Jersak serves as an editor and does art design for CWRm.



Sand sculpture of Narnia’s “Mouse & Lion”
by Rachel Stubbs

IN, Not OF, the World

Monte Wolverton

Though it is not a direct biblical quotation, Christ-followers are said to be “*in*” the world but not “*of*” the world. During his last discourse to his disciples, Jesus spoke of the tension his followers experience in a hostile-to-God environment (John 15:19 and John 17:14-16).

The Apostle Paul reminds us that were we to avoid associations with all immorality, then of necessity, we would need to be somewhere other than “this world”—for such a safe and pure place we would, says Paul, “*have to be out of the world*” (1 Corinthians 5:9-10).

Christians have wrestled with the practical implications of being *in the world but not of it* for two thousand years. One of the most

contentious and hotly debated topics in this dilemma is that of fantasy—of myth—and what some protest as “pagan” origins of literature and music, for example.

Western culture has been shaped and influenced by Christianity for only the last two millennia. Some portions of Europe and the British Isles were converted to Christianity only about a thousand years ago. We are not that far removed from the ancient gods our ancestors worshiped. The names of our days and months echo the ancient deities—*Saturn, Janus, Woden and Thor*.

Early on, the Christian church co-opted some of the ancient, pagan festivals and customs in an effort to redirect the attention of

the people to Christianity. Churches were erected on formerly pagan holy sites. Pagan household deities were replaced by saints. *God*, a pagan Anglo-Saxon word which once referred to deities such as Balder and Thor, came to refer to the Christian Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As the church expanded, pagan territory (intellectual and geographical) was claimed for Christ.

It should come as no surprise then, that the Western culture we sometimes call “Christian,” is really an amalgam of ancient paganism, Christianity and other, more recent philosophies and modes of thought.

While artifacts of paganism are all around us—Easter eggs, mistletoe and even the days of the