

Where Are All the Christian Novelists?

by Megan Donahue

*Editor's note: Megan Donahue asks where all the Christian novelists are, and Brenda Zook reviews Marilynne Robinson's **Gilead**, a novel which wowed the critics and won the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for fiction, quite a coup for a book with explicitly Christian themes. We invite you to join the discussion at www.rosedale.edu. Just follow the links to 'Where are all the Christian novelists?' An exciting bonus: Marilynne Robinson has agreed to participate!*

If I had to compile a list of "The Greatest Christian Novels Ever," I would freak out. I don't have any authority to create such a list, and even if I did, I know I'd be opening myself up for all kinds of criticism. First of all, I'd have to define a "Christian novel." There's no way I could come up with that without provoking somebody. Then I'd have to write the list without having read all the novels ever written, or even all the Christian novels, and so I'd be sure to leave something out.

But if it were unavoidable, I would need an arguable, hypothetical, and purely subjective working definition of the "Christian novel." Very well. The Christian novel might be: a novel that presents Christ; a novel that presents Christian themes; a novel that presents a Christian worldview. There are many books that fit these descriptions, and what follows is an arguable, hypothetical, and purely subjective *beginning* of a list.

The first novel I would choose would be Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, because it is essentially about redemption. Then quickly after would come *The Chronicles of Narnia*, en masse. Then I'd probably throw in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, maybe *Silas Marner*, and *The Count of Monte Cristo* (on my mother's insistence...I haven't read it yet). By reputation, the great Russian novelists would probably get in. And *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, even though it reputedly started the Civil War. My list would go on for awhile, but here's the crucial "hmm factor" (in that it makes me say, "Hmm..."): only C.S. Lewis would show up in a Christian bookstore. And not one of

these books was written in the last forty years.

When talking literature with the unchurched, I know that every book on my list is accessible to them. They are in the public and university libraries. Criticism has been

written about them, they have been studied, and analyzed, and most of all, enjoyed by generations of readers. They contain a strong Jesus message, and yet are part of the canon of "secular" literature.

If my great Christian novels aren't in Christian bookstores, what is? "Christian fiction," a category that contains both Jan Karon's charming Mitford series and Christianized trashy romance novels. While one could spend a great deal of time debating the merits of this genre, and the consumer culture that created it, that is for another day. My grand question is: Why aren't there more Christian novelists?

Obviously someone is creating all this Christian fiction, and I suppose we should call these people novelists, yet they are not the kind of Christian novelists I mean. The kind of novelist I am looking for creates stories that pose questions in the broader cultural discussion. This novelist is not writing for a specific marketing target group (i.e., Christians), but rather to explore issues and tell stories that we encounter as human beings. This Christian novelist's work is just as interesting to the non-Christian reader as it is to those who share the novelist's faith. This novelist, present since the advent of the novel, is conspicuously lacking in modern literature.

I blame the culture wars. This is hardly surprising, because I blame the culture wars for a lot of things. Still, in this case, I think my assessment holds. In recent years, American Christianity has been so intent on itself that it has largely withdrawn from participation in larger cultural discussions. In effect, we have a cave, and the books are only for the people who live in it. It's not that Christian novelists have nothing to say, it's that they're not saying it to anyone who isn't saying the same thing. When one examines the political climate, that may seem untrue, what with the emergence of the religious right, but in the arts and culture sector the Christian voice is largely absent as a discussant.

Yet many Christians are writing novels. The issue is clearly not the creation of literature; rather, it's a question of the utility of that literature beyond American Christian subculture. A novel that revolves around Christian characters, engaging in specifically Christian problems, holds

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little interest and even less relevancy to the unchurched. A novel about a person struggling with concepts like sacrifice, nobility, honor, and redemption, as does *A Tale of Two Cities*, is relevant and interesting indeed.

Sadly, the conclusion that can be drawn is that not only Christian novels, but the Christian voice itself, and to go farther, the message of Christ, are irrelevant and uninteresting. This could not be farther from the truth, but literature of recent years is not a particularly glorious testimony. It wasn't always this way. Where is the Dickens, the Tolstoy, the Lewis (flawed men all, and some with shaky theology, but each presenting truth in his own way)? Where is Harriet Beecher Stowe, writing for both justice and truth?

Perhaps they've been scared away. Hand in hand with the culture wars comes our own indigenous fear of becoming tainted by the world. We're holed up in our little Christian nests because we're afraid of what might happen to us, what we might become, if we acknowledge the world that is not like us. If nothing else, we'll get really depressed.

This is where all my great Christian novelists have so much to offer. Each of the novels acknowledges the sinful, despairing, cynical world. Each one details it in some way. Yes, say my Christian novelists, there is pain, and hatred,

and abuse, and racism, and death, and unworthy life, and the good do not always triumph, and sometimes evil carries the day, and yes, yes, yes, it's not all sunshine and rainbows, *but*, and each of the novels carries the crucial *but*, this is not all there is. This is not all that matters. This is not all we have to measure by, to know, to be part of.

With that assertion, that all the world, with all the agony, is not the final point of discussion, Christian novelists make a statement and a separation. The statement is profoundly different than most writers. The separation is one that doesn't allow them to become part of the world in its final despair. *But*, and once again, this is the crucial *but*, they maintain that separation and make that statement while engaging with that very world.

It's a tightrope walk. The potential for failure on either side is great. Maybe that's why there aren't many Christian novelists lately: it's really hard.



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Here's One! by Brenda Zook Is There a Balm in

Gilead by Marilynne Robinson is a not a swift-moving stream of words rushing through a sunny meadow, nor is it a cascading waterfall splashing refreshment on unsuspecting hikers. But for those who are patient and ready to venture off the beaten path of Christian fiction, the quieter waters of *Gilead* offer pools of reflective thought for the journey. The waters of *Gilead* are deep; the reader will want to linger along the bank with time to ponder and reread.

John Ames is a minister in the little town of Gilead, Iowa and, at the age of seventy-six, he has decided to write a memoir of sorts for his seven-year-old son to read when he becomes an adult. There are so many things he wants to tell the boy, or that he wants him to know someday, when he is a man. Ames includes stories of a family line that marches back to Kansas Free-Soiler battles and forward to a future he can't quite see. He fears that future will be filled with hardship for the boy and his mother, since he had so little time to prepare for it. Rev. Ames tells many tales, but he is not first and foremost a storyteller, for he frequently rambles and his accounts are often interrupted by apparently randomly selected descriptions of daily occurrences and his reflections on those events:

You and Tobias are hopping around in the sprinkler. The sprinkler is a magnificent invention because it exposes raindrops to sunshine. That does occur in nature but it is rare. When I was in seminary I used to go sometimes to watch the Baptists down at the river. It was something to see the preacher lifting the one who was being baptized up out of the water and the water pouring off the garments and the hair. . . . I've always loved to baptize people, though I have sometimes wished there were more shimmer and splash involved in the way we go about it. Well, but you two are dancing around in your iridescent little downpour, whooping and stomping as sane people ought to do when they encounter a thing so miraculous as water.

Hilarious moments of cat baptisms are juxtaposed with theological musings. He offers wisdom and observations of the natural world, ("I was trying to remember what birds did before there were telephone wires. It would have been much harder for them to roost in the sunlight, which is a thing



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they clearly enjoy doing..."), as well as introspections about himself and his failures and joys. Thoughts and themes wind over and under and back around, creating a fabric of emotions and pictures that draw the reader back time and again. John Ames (or is it Marilynne Robinson?) is a weaver, inserting a relational thread here, adding a swath of shy humor there, slipping in the darker lines of loss and grief without any seeming pattern or plan. He is weaving for his son the tapestry of a life, his own life, imperfect, yet well lived.

As the pages slip away, the tapestry reveals its patterns. Fathers and sons: a prodigal son received by a waiting father, a wandering father sought by an angry son, a disappointed father criticizing his son's preaching, an old man delighting over a young son, a wayward son devoted to his born-out-of-wedlock son – misunderstandings and sacred bonds. Fathers and sons are everywhere in *Gilead*:

Well, see and see but do not perceive, hear and hear but do not understand, as the Lord says. I can't claim to understand that saying, as many times as I've heard it, and even preached on it. It simply states a deeply mysterious fact. You can know a thing to death and be for all purposes completely ignorant of it. A man can know his father, or his son, and there might still be nothing between them but loyalty and love and mutual incomprehension.

Loyalty and love. These sturdy cords seem to hold the tapestry together. Such love John Ames has for this small boy who arrived late in his life after marriage to a much younger woman!

I'd never have believed I'd see a wife of mine doting on a child of mine. It still amazes me every time I think of it. I'm writing this in part to tell you that if you ever wonder what you've done in your life, and everyone does wonder sooner or later, you have been God's grace to me, a miracle, something more than a miracle. You may not remember me very well at all, and it may seem to you to be no great thing to have been the good child of an old man in a shabby little town you will no doubt leave behind. If only I had the words to tell you.

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The ministry. John Ames' comments on ministry and all things theological add color and depth to the waters of *Gilead*. As a pastor's wife, I found some of his anecdotes to be humorously familiar, such as the call from an elderly widow who had just recently left the farm and moved to a cottage:

You can never know what troubles or fears such people have, and I went. It turned out that the problem was her kitchen sink . . . hot water came from the cold faucet and cold water from the hot faucet. I suggested she might just decide to take C for hot and H for cold, but she said she liked things to work the way they were supposed to. So I went home and got my screwdriver and came back and switched the handles. She said she guessed that would do until she could get a real plumber. Oh, the clerical life!

His museful remarks and observations only add to the winsomeness of this thoughtful man. He takes life seriously ("There's a lot under the surface of life . . . a lot of malice and dread and guilt and so much loneliness, where you wouldn't really expect to find it either"), but himself not too seriously. He has boxes in the attic containing, by his own estimation, 2,250 sermons written out word for word, about 30 pages per sermon, and he's trying to decide what to do with them:

It might be best to burn them, but that would upset your mother, who thinks a great deal more of them than I do – for their sheer mass, I suppose, since she hasn't read them. It's humiliating to have written as much as Augustine, and then have to find a way to dispose of it.

I found myself wondering what it would be like to meet John Ames. I liked how his mind worked; I admired his honest confessions and his vulnerability. Sometimes I felt slightly annoyed to realize he was a fictional character. But his words were true and thoughtful and I found much to ponder when I learned to read the book at the pace it required.

To be honest, I didn't really like this book at first. I thought it was *sloooooow*. There was so little action. Where was the dialogue? (I think there were two sets of quotation marks in the first twenty pages.) What was going to *happen*? My mind kept trying to race ahead, but this book was not moving at that speed. About halfway through the book I stopped checking to see what page I was on, and when the evening came during which I would read those last few pages I had the sudden thought that I might burst into tears. (Someone in our house said, "Mom, it's a *book!*" And a fiction book at that!) But I wasn't quite ready to say goodbye, so the next night I started again at the beginning. I was ready for another quiet walk on a dusty path listening to the wit and wisdom of John Ames. I was going back to *Gilead*.



Brenda Zook longs to make a difference in the world from her own Gilead on Hickory Lane near Belleville, Pennsylvania. She is delighted to be a part of the congregation at Locust Grove where her husband Max is pastor. Together they are committed to parenting the boys God sends them, currently two biological teen sons, an adopted four-year-old, and a young adult foster son. She also likes helping to raise assorted other living things, including sheep, chickens, fruit and nut trees, perennials and herbs. Life is never dull.

Gilead

2005 Pulitzer Prize for fiction
Marilynne Robinson
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