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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION



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“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

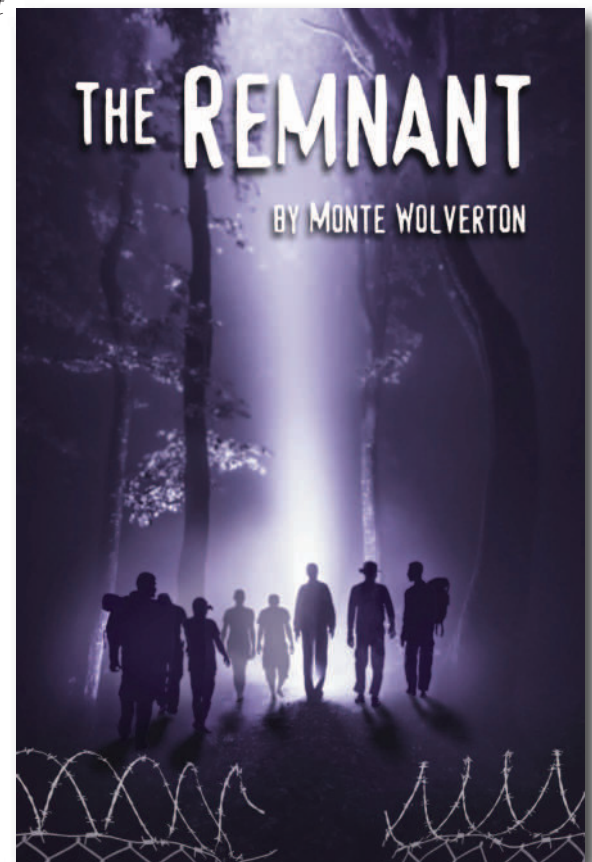
CWR press author, Monte Wolverton, wrote *The Remnant*, an award-winning piece of dystopian fiction, a story set in post-apocalyptic America (2131). Religion and religious books have been banned because of their role in the catastrophes that destroy much of the world's population.

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

week—few of us, if any, actually impute magical power to mistletoe, or believe that the ancient god *Woden* has some special power over Wednesdays. The pagan elements in our culture are largely no more than artifacts—reminders of our ignorant and superstitious origins. We cannot reasonably expect our literature, or our language to be laundered of pagan references, names and characters.

LESSONS FROM LITERATURE

Literature is a reflection of culture. Everywhere in literature and movies—wherever a story is told—we encounter good and evil. We encounter good characters and evil characters. More true to life, we encounter characters who are a mixture of both, or who are complex and conflicted.

Skilled authors draw elements from the culture to tell their stories. At times, some of these elements are pagan. The writer may employ fantasy and magic. But the critical question for Christians is not whether there are pagan elements in the story, but the motive: where is the author going with those elements? What lesson is he or she trying to communicate or even promote?

Would-be Christian censors often focus on the form, rather than the substance. As Christian author Connie Neal observes:

“This is what I am challenging people to think through. If we apply the same kind of censorship to other pieces of literature as we do with Harry Potter, where does it stop? If you say, ‘I will not read a story that

has any wands or spells,’ then you have to get rid of over two-thirds of classic children’s literature, including Cinderella, Peter Pan and Beauty and the Beast.”

When we focus on the form, rather than the substance, we may find ourselves rejecting some excellent literature and letting through far more dangerous ideas that come wrapped in pleasant and innocuous packages.

Many movies and television shows from the “good old days” of the 1930s, ‘40s and ‘50s, for example, may seem wholesomely devoid of pagan elements, and may seem to uphold Christian standards. Yet upon careful analysis and scrutiny, some of these movies and television shows promote racism, stereotypes and materialism.

While wealthy, white businessmen are portrayed as fine, upstanding citizens, African Americans, Native Americans and Mexicans are portrayed in disparaging roles. Many of these shows are still regularly aired, yet I hear very few Christians complain about them.

During that same era, the celebrated Christian theologian and author C.S. Lewis published his *Chronicles of Narnia*. Some Christians promptly attacked the work, as it contained witches, gods and goddesses and animistic spirits.

Yet the work has a profoundly Christian message. As C.S. Lewis himself said: *“Within a given story, any object, person or place is neither more nor less, nor other, than what that story effectively shows it to be.”*

In other words, even though the elements in a story may derive from paganism, they are merely

being used to tell a story. The important thing is—what does the story say?

C.S. Lewis, J.K. Rowling (author of the *Harry Potter* series) and J.R.R. Tolkien (author of *The Lord of the Rings*) were, and are, committed Christians. The messages of their work are Christian messages—the triumph of good over evil.

Jim Ware, co-author of *Finding God in the Lord of the Rings*, says, *“At its deepest level, The Lord of the Rings is also a tale about the sovereignty of God. The God who uses even the enemy’s wicked designs to bring about the ultimate fulfillment of his perfect plan.”*

The *Star Wars* series, although not specifically ‘Christian,’ sends the same message—tyranny and evil may hold power for a short time, but freedom and good will always triumph in the end.

BIBLICAL BOOK BURNING?

“But,” some may counter, “doesn’t the New Testament give an example where newly-converted Christians destroyed books dealing with the black arts? Shouldn’t we do the same?”

In Acts 19:19 we read that a number of people who had practiced sorcery in the city of Ephesus, responding to the gospel, destroyed their books on the occult arts. These were not *Harry Potter* or *Lord of the Rings* books, written by Christian authors, promoting Christian virtues. They were scrolls containing serious incantations and instructions for practicing actual pagan rites.

While the Bible condemns sorcery and the worship of pagan gods, it does not condemn Christians who must live and conduct daily activities in a pagan

culture. Consider the way the apostle Paul responded to the early Corinthian church when a controversy arose regarding whether Christians should eat food that had been sacrificed to idols. He reminded the Corinthians: *“We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one”* (1 Corinthians 8:4).

Likewise, Christians two millennia later should recognize that they need not fear the powerless gods of paganism—much less worry about literary references to sorcery and magic.



“Harry Potter” by Reilly Brown / WikiCommons

However, Paul goes on to say that we should be careful not to offend those who, because of a “weak conscience” (8:10) might be sensitive or fearful about such things.

Likewise, Christians today who find moral significance and meaning in literary fantasy would be wise not to force their freedom of conscience and preferences on other Christians.

The biblical record shows that Paul was by no means cloistered. For someone who had once been a strict and closed-minded Pharisee, Paul had a surprisingly open outlook toward pagan culture. His writings are sprinkled with references to classical literature and poetry, so we may assume that he had

read and studied them. He was able to use this pagan literacy to effectively communicate with non-Jews, as he did with the Athenian philosophers in Acts 17.

HOW TO HANDLE IT

Here are some points to consider for parents who are concerned about the impact of fantasy on their children.

1) If you have questions about a book or movie, consult responsible reviews, or better yet, read or view the work yourself. Only then can you intelligently discuss it with your child or decide what kind of guidance to give.

2) Discern the author's intent and motive. What is the moral of the story? Ask God to help you discern.

3) Forbid reading or viewing the material in question if you think you must—but realize that it may be difficult, if not impossible, to prevent your child from viewing a movie, reading a book, listening to music or playing a game. Forbidden fruit becomes sweeter and all the more enticing, especially if friends are doing it. That's why the next strategy is preferable.

4) Discuss the material with your child. Play the game, see the movie or read the book with them. Discuss the principles involved from a Christian viewpoint. Give your child all the tools he or she needs to think it through and form an opinion. If the opinion differs from yours, keep the dialog open and continue to let your child know where you stand and why.

Our world presents parents with a long list of potential prohibitions on which we must choose where to draw the line. How many prohibitions can we invoke before losing our relationship with our children? On the other hand, how many prohibitions do we need to impose to avoid losing our children to immorality?

In a world filled with child abuse, hatred, crime, drugs and child pornography, literary works of fantasy do not seem to call for the kind of absolute line-in-the-sand that other issues do. Far better that we find truth wherever we can, and use it to inspire ourselves and our children. □

Monte Wolverton has authored three novels with CWR Press: Chasing 120, The Remnant and The Remnant 2: When Church and State Collide.



GREG ALBRECHT

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

Fairy Tales, Fantasy & Parables

Is it a lie to read and enjoy fairy tales, fables and fantasy? Can fiction even be “more true” than facts? Fairy tales and fables are not literal, factual or historical. However, that does not mean the stories they tell are *untrue*.

Of course, we know the *Three Little Pigs* never existed, but the story teaches children to be industrious, that plans are important and that play should follow work. These values help overcome adversity, symbolized by the wolf in the story.

The race between *The Tortoise and The Hare* teaches children (and adults) to never give up. Though the tortoise is overmatched and outclassed, he prevails in the end against the hare, who is the odds-on, obvious favorite. “Keep on keeping on! Slow and steady wins the race.”

In *The North Wind and the Sun*, the elements stage a contest over who can cause a traveler to take off his coat first. The wind blows hard but the traveler merely tightens his coat, while the sun slowly and gently increases its rays until the traveler finally removes his coat. The moral? Kindness and gentle persuasion are more likely to bring about lasting change than extreme measures.

Fairy tales and fables are forms of storytelling, and Jesus used a similar genre called parables. He was the greatest storyteller to grace our Bible. The parables are not factual accounts about actual people or events—they are not breaking news.

Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son is not about an actual father and two brothers—no, the story is greater than that. The father is our heavenly Father. And all of us, at some point, find ourselves in the role of the prodigal or his older brother. The truths in Jesus’ parables are truths that last long after we forget the lessons of historical events.

Up to one-third of the Bible is written in poetic style—but who would dare abandon its poetry as untrue because it lacks literal authenticity?

Great contemporary fantasy writers like C.S. Lewis and J.R. Tolkien illustrate how fiction can effectively proclaim the gospel, often more so than lectures and sermons. Many child development experts believe the fantasy world of children is a healthy and productive stage of their maturation.

What about Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy? Many parents perpetuate these magical myths, pretending that an old man from the North Pole breaks into the house each year, leaving presents, eating cookies, and returning home on his sleigh, pulled by reindeer parked on the roof.

Some say Santa Claus is a blatant lie and that once children discover he doesn’t exist, they will be disillusioned and lose trust in their parents. But nothing I’ve seen leads me to believe that magical myths lead to long-term damage. Revealing that Santa doesn’t actually exist is a minor obstacle for parents as they prepare children for the greater

challenges of the world at large.

On the flip side, there is no evidence that families who observe Christmas and Easter without Santa or the Easter Bunny will raise children more well-adjusted to life. What matters is that children learn at a young age about the hard work and self-sacrifice of their parents to providing them with special gifts, as well as the mundane necessities of life. Eventually, children will learn to attribute credit to their parents rather than to mythical characters and creatures.

Having watched five grandchildren mature beyond Santa Claus, then watching how they and tens of millions of others can be entranced, deceived and manipulated by social media fantasies, if I had a choice, I would much rather abolish social media and retain old Saint Nick. □

Greg Albrecht is founder and president of Plain Truth Ministries.

Fairy tales and fables are forms of storytelling, and Jesus used a similar genre called parables. He was the greatest storyteller to grace our Bible.

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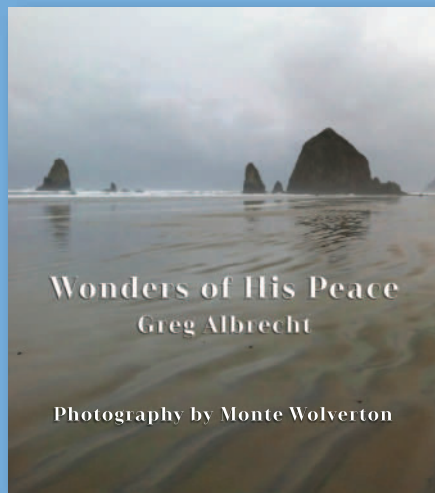
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