

## **Sex, Death and Christian Fiction**

A talk given at Greenbelt 2005 by Simon Morden

### **Introduction**

One of the problems of preparing a talk like this and practising it over and over again is that it fails to convey just how cross I am. Christian writers, for the past 20-30 years, have been sold a lie: that there is one way to write, one message we need to communicate, that we're only here for one reason. It's led to the ghettoisation of Christian writers and a subsequent lack of artistic integrity and craft. We need to think very seriously both about how we got here and which direction we need to take next.

### **Sturgeon's Law**

The science fiction author Theodore Sturgeon was once asked by a fan, "Isn't 90% of science fiction crap?". "Sure," he replied, "but 90% of everything is crap."

Sturgeon's Law was born that day, and it bears some analysis. What he's not saying is '90% of everything you do is crap'. Education and experience will hopefully mean that proportion of disasters and plain mediocrity that happens around you will decrease. What he is saying is this: "Give me a theme, a label, a genre. 90% of it will be crap, but that's fine, because in ten years time no one's going to remember it."

You can point to any field of artistic endeavour, at what's being produced now – and safely assume that most of it will be forgotten by the time the next generation grows up. Hymns are an easy example – think of all the Victorian hymn writers, and think about how many hymns were written – and how many we still sing today. Even the good 10% gets whittled down by time and memory to a few classics.

Novels are another example. Here in the early part of the twenty-first century, more works of fiction are being published than at any time in the history of printing. Yet, Sturgeon's Law suggests that this isn't a result of a great outpouring of creativity and we live in a golden age of fine literature. Sturgeon's Law suggests that we have to wade through an increasing mound of dross to find the precious gold within.

But with what has been published under the label of Christian fiction within the past twenty, thirty years, we don't get close to 10%. I'm not saying that 100% of everything under the banner of Christian fiction is crap, just that it's significantly higher than 90%. I believe there are some good reasons for this, which I'll go into later.

### **Christian fiction**

But first, we need to decide what we mean by Christian fiction. Not all fiction by Christians is Christian fiction. Not all fiction involving explicit Christian themes is Christian fiction. In fact, the only coherent explanation of what Christian fiction is, is fiction that is published by Christian publishing houses. These Christian publishers are concentrated in the USA, where there are two umbrella organisations. For publishers, there is the Evangelical-Christian Publishers Association (founded in 1974), with 280 members nationally and internationally. For the booksellers, there is the Christian Booksellers' Association – the CBA – they've changed their name recently to something completely unmemorable, so we'll keep calling them the CBA. The CBA was founded in 1950 and has more than 2,500 member stores in the US.

Not every Christian publisher shares the same intentions or adheres to a similar statement of faith; however, most of the major Christian retail chains are members of the Christian Booksellers Association, and most of the major Christian publishers are members of the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association.

There are some signs of life on this side of the pond – SU being the main ones at the moment – but for the very great part, the Christian fiction market is dominated by US publishers; Zondervan, Tyndale, Bethany House and the like.

These two organisations – CBA and ECPA – act as gatekeepers for what gets published. Of the two, the CBA is the most influential – they have the power, singly or in concert to blacklist any author, imprint or publishing house, for straying outside the bounds of what is acceptable for their readers. If I make a complaint about author Smith to a CBA bookshop, the store owner is more than likely to firstly, refuse to stock anything by Smith in the future, secondly, consider refusing to stock anything by Smith's publisher, and thirdly, tell their fellow CBA members that Smith and their publisher aren't to be trusted.

Christian fiction is, essentially, CBA fiction. It's what's produced by the ECPA, and bought in CBA stores. I'll be using CBA as shorthand for the whole industry from now on. So to unpack what CBA fiction is, we need to look at CBA books. What criteria do they use when selecting books for publication?

Christian publishers are broadly similar in their approach. In intent, they aim to produce books which have two functions: to entertain and to inspire. Christian fiction is intended to be an entertaining and safe alternative to secular fiction, and Christian fiction is intended to inspire readers who may or may not be Christian.

Discovering the actual guidelines for publishing with the CBA is actually quite hard work. Some publishers are upfront about what they do and don't accept. Others are much more reticent. But for most there are a set of criteria involving content, plot and characters that include:

- A protagonist who is either Christian, or comes to faith as a result of their experiences in the book.
- A strand of spiritual development that has greater or equal weight to the other plot developments.
- The primary conflict in the book is resolved by spiritual, not earthly power.
- There is an bar on bad language, out-of-marriage sexual situations, the consumption of alcohol and other recreational drugs.
- Violence must be treated very carefully – they would rather it happens off-page than on.

Take a moment to think about those guidelines. Think about the type of books that would be possible to write, about those books that it would be impossible to write. If you're a writer, think about the story you're writing at the moment. Would it pass, or fail? Think about books and stories by your favourite authors. How would they fair? Think about fiction written by Christians in the past: books like *Lord of the Rings*, CS Lewis' novels. Chesterton, Dorothy Sayers, Dostoevsky. Tolstoy.

We soon realise that Christian fiction, as we currently define it, isn't a static monolith that's been with us forever. It's a very new idea, largely a creation of Christian publishing houses who have moved into the adult fiction market place only relatively recently. And they seem to have brought with them the guidelines of their non-fiction work. If you're a publisher of Christian fiction, you'll probably be also a publisher of devotional works, of Bible study notes, commentaries and translations of the Bible. Of course you're going to apply the same yardstick to fiction as you do to a book of prayers.

This is where we start to get to the root of the problem, which is the evangelical attitude to fiction.

### **The Evangelical Attitude towards fiction**

This is illustrated by a passage in Os Guinness's 'Fit Bodies, Fat minds', discussing the tendency of evangelicals to philistinism. He quotes Charlotte Elizabeth, who read *The Merchant of Venice*, aged seven.

Oh, how many wasted hours, how much of unprofitable labour, what wrong to my fellow-creatures, what robbery of God, must I refer to this ensnaring book! My mind became unnerved, my judgement perverted, my estimate of people and things wholly falsified, and my soul wrapped in the vain solace of unsubstantial

enjoyments during years of after-sorrow, when but for this I might have early sought the consolation of the gospel.

He identifies two themes common in the evangelical aesthetic of art: the objectification of Art as a source of views counter to evangelical morals, and the presentation of Art as an alternative to Christianity.

Guinness concludes his chapter with this comment:

It ... isolates evangelical artists – and poets, scriptwriters, sculptors, dancers and actors – as the least understood and most alienated single group of people in the evangelical churches.

I want you to compare the difference in attitude between the Charlotte Elizabeth quote, and this next one. In a lecture earlier this year, Rowan Williams was discussing the thoughts of the writer and critic Mary Flannery O'Connor:

Some of Flannery O'Connor's most pungent observations are to do with assumptions about 'Catholic art' which insist that such art should be edifying and moral; this, she argues, plays straight into the hands of critics of the Church who hold that dogmatic belief incapacitates a creative writer. On the contrary: 'The Catholic writer, insofar as he has the mind of the Church, will feel life from the standpoint of the central Christian mystery: that it has, for all its horror, been found by God to be worth dying for.' And this means that the Catholic writer is precisely someone who cannot rule out any subject matter; belief adds a dimension to what is seen, it does not take anything away: 'The Catholic fiction writer is entirely free to observe. He feels no call to take on the duties of God or to create a new universe... He feels no need to apologise for the ways of God to man or to avoid looking at the ways of man to God'. This imposes on the Catholic writer a dangerous task, since she has to deal with matters that may indeed be 'occasions of sin', subjects that expose the worst in humanity. And while 'to look at the worst will be for [the writer] no more than an act of trust in God', it may be a source of danger for the reader.

The word dangerous isn't often associated with Christian writers or for that matter, Christian readers. It's certainly not a word associated with CBA fiction. One of the reasons that CBA fiction exists is that it is a safe alternative to secular fiction. I should be able to read it without being tempted or scandalised. It is fiction which is pitched at adult audiences, but that my kids should be able to read. It is a place where Christian readers can escape to where they have nothing to fear and know before they start that everything will be all right in the end.

CBA authors and editors censor fiction not just because of its potential to offend, but because it offers vicarious experiences that may be seen as sinful. If we believe that sin occurs in the mind as well as in behaviour, any vicarious experience we read about might give rise to sinful feelings or thoughts. If I write a sex scene, which might be entirely necessary to the story, I have to find a way to write it that does not encourage lustful thoughts. A description of a murder must not encourage murderous thoughts, and so on.

There's a problem here. A hallmark of good writing is that it changes the way people feel. Writers are supposed to offer vicarious experiences, the more intense the better. A book which does not engage a reader's emotions is dull and lifeless. I don't want to write a book like that anymore than I want to read one. And yet, CBA fiction censors the vicarious experience, quite deliberately.

In Flannery O'Connor's aesthetic, we are called on not to rule anything out, not take on God's duties, not to apologise for God or avoid the ways of man. We are, in fact, to look sin full in the face and not flinch. I think Flannery O'Connor would have argued that the CBA approach to fiction is neither Christian or even fiction. She acknowledges the danger to the reader, but she does at least trust the reader.

In a recent essay, Christian writer J Mark Bertrand made this remark, following on a quote from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, regarding whether Aslan was 'safe' or not:

The question asked of Aslan could also be asked of a book like *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*. Is it safe? A fairy tale about talking animals and witchcraft? Written by a pipe-smoking, beer-drinking Oxford don who hints at all sorts of peculiar doctrine in books like *The Screwtape Letters* and *The Great Divorce*? Is it safe? Of course it isn't. But you know as well as I do that it's good. In fact, some of its goodness derives from the fact that Lewis was not in the least concerned with writing a safe book. Safe isn't a word we associate with greatness, any more than we do with God.

At the same time, *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* isn't unsafe. Strange as it seems, "safe" and "unsafe" are not the only options. We have a hard enough time understanding this when it comes to theology, so it's no wonder that the distinction is so slippery in aesthetics. Does a God who is not himself safe call us to write safe books? No. He calls us to write good ones. That, of course, is easier to state than it is to explain -- and it is far easier to state and explain than it is to do. And yet, the calling is inescapable.

### **The medium is the message**

I want to spend a little time talking about messages. Art being used to explore a particular set of ideas or put forward a particular view is commonplace. It's not peculiar to the Christian faith, or to any faith at all. Whether the idea is courtly love, or killing God, or the need to maintain a strong military against bug-eyed aliens who want to steal our air and/or women, writers can, if they are skilful enough, weave a story of such power and imagination that their point slides through our ribs and pierces our hearts.

When it's done badly, it hits us over the head. Over and over again. It's not far from the truth that message-driven fiction makes for bad fiction. As I hope to show, there are very great pressures on us as Christians to, at the very least, include a message, and better still, make the message the reason for writing, and that these pressures come from without and within.

When I think of a book with a wider message, I automatically think of works like *1984* and *Fahrenheit 451*. Whilst both of these books are brilliant, they're brilliant not because of the message, but because we care about Winston Smith and Montag the Fireman. And I think this is where the secret lies. I can only speak from my experience -- every writer, as far as I can tell, writes uniquely. No two writers create their stories in the same way. But this is how it is for me.

When I create a character, I don't tend to list a set of attributes, choose a name, and build them like I would a character in a role-playing game. Roll some dice, pick a race and a gender, pick a profession. Now, I know this is going to sound weird, but they choose me. I remember a conversation -- rather, an argument -- on the Subway list: one Subwayee was particularly affronted by the idea that I somehow called on my invisible friends to inhabit my books. It might affront you. But as an example, take the character of Va, the Finnish monk, from my next book, *The Lost Art*. He's an incredibly complex individual -- fervent to the point of fanaticism, utterly determined, single-minded in his devotion to God, yet damaged to the point of breaking by his past, which, quite literally haunts him.

Because he was his own man, and I knew him intimately, I could judge what he would do in any given situation. In the same way that you know your friends, and even closer than that, in the same way that God knows you, I could write about him in a way that made him real. Despite that *The Lost Art* was not originally Va's story, it was Va who sold the book for me. A bald, scarred, Orthodox monk bordering on the psychotic became the reason I was taken on by one of Britain's most respected publishers. And I had all sorts of problems with the rest of the characters: two of them fell in love without telling me first. Some of them dredged courage from the depths of their hearts that I didn't know was there. They surprised me. They took the story in directions I hadn't anticipated. It was exciting finding out what was going to happen next.

A lot of the writers I talk to don't know when they start, what their book is going to be like. I think, rather than this being a handicap, that it produces the creative freedom for a story to genuinely live. It's not me moving the characters around like I'm playing some great game of cosmic chess. We imitate

God the Creator, and I don't believe God treats us like chess pieces. Why should I treat the characters in my books like that? Just as I do what I don't want to do, and don't do what I ought, so do they. I am not an actor, reading out someone else's lines and following stage directions, and neither are they.

Because my characters live independently in my imagination, it becomes foolish, if not futile, to deliberately cram in a message. I would find myself frustrated at every turn. Winston Smith and Montag explored their worlds, lived and loved and cried and bled in them. The message comes through the way they live their lives. I don't need to tell you that we have a very real and present model for that.

### **Writing propaganda**

The sum total of the effects that I've been outlining is to foster conditions where it is very difficult – not impossible, but very difficult – to write good fiction. The quality of prose is not the primary concern of the CBA. I'm not arguing that it isn't a concern, just that it isn't their first concern.

For any other publisher, there are two main concerns. Which order they come in depends on the publisher. One, can we make money on this? Two, is it any good? And yes, rubbish gets published simply because it sells. There is a market for it, the publisher knows their markets, and we all have to eat at the end of the day. But most publishers I've talked to publish rubbish that sells so that they can finance the good stuff, the books that they really believe deserve a readership. The editors and publishers I know love books. To them, it's not just another day at the office. They love books. They want to publish great books that sell well, but most will settle for books that sell well, and great books.

For the CBA, the criteria are not based on either literary merit, or commercial success. There is another whole area of concern which overrides even the commercial one. Does it fit into our doctrinal basis? Does it have Christian characters at its centre? Does it avoid references to sex, drugs, drink, violence? Does it communicate God to the reader? Will it strengthen Christians? Will it save souls?

The publisher and the bookseller are no longer filters for artistic or commercial concerns. They become controllers of the content of the story. They are the gatekeepers, and their criteria for publication dictates what shall pass.

We, the writers, are faced with the proposition that if we do not write to their criteria, there is no chance of publication – no matter how good our writing is. We could send them the Chronicles of Narnia, and have it rejected on the grounds of smoking, drinking, violence and a nasty outbreak of Universalism in The Last Battle. We could send them Lord of the Rings and have it rejected on the grounds of – again, smoking, drinking and violence, the fact that God doesn't get a mention and no one gets saved in the third act.

What are the results of this? Listen to this: I copied this from a blog where Christian fiction was being discussed.

“I recently graduated from college with a major in Literature and a minor in Creative Writing with the hope of writing Christian fiction. Like some others who have commented, I sadly haven't found Christian fiction, with a few rare exceptions, to come close to matching the quality of most secular fiction. It seems to me that most Christian fiction is message-driven at the expense of plot and character development. The message is compelling, but the plot often tends to be contrived or overly sensational, and the characters are seldom complex enough - like a Hamlet or Othello - to really engage me or remain etched in my memory. My biggest complaint is the tendency of most Christian writers to bring their novels to nice, tidy conclusions, which may come across as overly pat and simplistic to many readers.

Much of my writing met the same reaction. I think this happened for several reasons: First, I attempted to write a story around a preconceived message for which I already had a well thought out conclusion. Because of this, my plot and characters were not allowed to develop naturally but had to be forced to support the message. Secondly, I found that writing with the ever present awareness that

I was a Christian to be very limiting: I avoided subjects or character types that might have been offensive or disturbing to some Christians. I also felt compelled to make my characters respond to circumstances the way that Christians should respond rather than how someone might naturally respond, at least initially. I didn't trust readers enough to discern my character's motivations and didn't want readers to come to the wrong conclusion, so I felt compelled to thoroughly explain every thought and provide a comprehensive wrap-up in the end."

It seems that this is a common complaint – not just from readers, but like the example I quoted, from writers. Tailoring a story to fit within the boundaries of "Christian fiction" causes tensions, both inside the work itself, and outside of it, in the writers' life.

There is pressure on the writer themselves – they are strongly identified with the characters in their book. If one of their fictional characters sins, it's seen as a stain on the writer's character. If there is violence, it's because the writer is violent. If there is sex, it's because the writer is lustful. If there is swearing, it's because the writer is foul-mouthed. How can a Christian possibly write about these things if they don't have them in their own life?

This translates into a tension inside the work itself. There is a pressure to write about what I'm going to call 'fantasy Christianity' and 'fantasy reality'

Fantasy Christianity exists within the pages of Christian fiction and describes a Christian faith that doesn't exist. Demons are slain, sinners saved, prayers instantly answered, the righteous though tempted never fall, the unrighteous either come to faith or are smited by God's power. It is a faith that we will only have in Heaven.

Fantasy reality is the other side of the coin. If the Christian faith that is being written about doesn't exist, neither does the reality where, the wicked never prosper, bad things happen to good people only for a reason, no one swears or drinks or takes drugs, or has sex, the Gospel is met with acceptance or rejection, never indifference.

This is what causes Christian fiction to have such a bad reputation: it is simply that good writing is rejected because it does not say what the publishers want it to say. They are weeding out some of the 10% of the good stories, and leaving in more of the 90% of crap. There are always exceptions, but it is never enough to counteract the overwhelming tide of books that are poorly written, but doctrinally sound.

There is one last insult here. There's Christian fiction, labelled by an arbitrary set of criteria by a few publishing houses, criteria that have nothing at all to do with truth or beauty or art, that automatically excludes fiction written by other Christians (Greene, Dostoevsky, Lewis, Tolkien, Grisham, Chesterton, Sayers, etc etc). What they write was/is somehow unworthy. And frankly, that's the real fiction. They've taken a name that should be synonymous with the highest standards of craft – solid characters you believe in and care about, a setting so vivid that it immerses you in another place, a plot that picks you up and carries you who knows where, an attention to detail in research and a love of language – and turned it into something that's derided, even within the community it is supposedly written for.

### **So what do we do about it?**

As authors, there's very little we can do to influence the CBA. Pressure to change has to come from within the industry itself. I am aware of tensions beginning to build, but this is very much the hand on the tiller of a supertanker. It might turn, or not at all. Waiting for it to do so is a fools' errand. But there's plenty we can do to influence ourselves for the better.

Firstly, we need to become good writers. We need to cultivate and exercise our talent. We need to be able to say, "What I'll write tomorrow will be better than what I wrote yesterday." How do we get to be good writers? By reading: what we read influences how we write. My influences include the thousands of books I've read. But if I have to mention a few, I'll talk about Ray Bradbury. Lewis and Tolkien.

Julian May. Arthur C Clarke and John Wyndham. Orson Scott Card. Some of these authors are Christians. Some are avowedly not. I believe that writing well pleases God.

We become good writers by writing: it's said – how true this is, is debatable, but it's fair comment – that it takes a writer half a million words to find their voice. Half a million words is five decent length novels. You're going to commit yourself to writing five probably unpublished and unpublishable novels before you break the half-million word mark. Part of writing is being read, too, and accepting criticism, and going back and changing what you've written. Find some friends who'll be honest with you. Remember that finishing the book is just the start of the process.

There is no secondly. Getting published takes two out of the following three: Talent, Perseverance, and Luck. You cannot control Luck. Which means you have to concentrate on Talent and Perseverance, both of which are hard work.

But I would argue that your job as a writer, as a Christian writer, is to write well. You should be able to tell your stories with both clarity and passion. When you write about faith, then write about a real faith, one that Christian and non-Christian alike will recognise as true. When you write about reality, do the same. You have to acknowledge that drinking, swearing, sex and violence happens in a fallen world. You cannot ignore it. One of my Subway colleagues thinks that to do so is to deny the Incarnation, that Jesus came into this world, with all its complexity and shadow. Andy Crouch addressed this year's Christy awards ceremony – given for the best of CBA fiction – with a direct challenge. "I plead with you not to tell me stories which improve on the world. Instead, tell me stories about the world as it is, strange and real and full of grace."

### **What will this look like on the page?**

Mainly because of the genres in which I write, there is a lot of violence in my stories. Bad things happen. Often. Taking my characters to hell, sometimes leaving them there, sometimes bringing them back, is part of the stories I write. I've written about alien invasions, the Rwandan genocide, nuclear terrorism, hostage taking, and drinking yourself to death. These events, some real, some imaginary, deserve to be taken seriously.

Tyndale's guidelines state: "Readers should feel uncomfortable with the results of violence in a story, not by the violence itself. In other words, readers do not need to see the violence to understand and lament its impact. Moreover, violence and its effects should be answered by the hope of Christ and redemption. We will not accept gratuitous violence in our fiction. If used, violent content must be integral to the story and used infrequently. Here is a case where we encourage writers to break a rule of fiction writing—tell, don't show."

There are no rules of fiction writing, but that's a lengthy aside. Violence can be sudden and shocking, it can be cold and premeditated. It can happen on a battlefield or at the supermarket. What Tyndale mean by gratuitous is 'don't show us the physical consequences of shooting someone in the head. Don't show us the pattern of blood and brains against the wall, the way the body is thrown back like a marionette who's had its strings cut. We don't want to see the moment where life ends and death begins. We don't want to see what we've done.' You might not want to see what you've done, but I for one am going to show it you, because it is full of meaning.

What the rest of the world mean by gratuitous is something done for its own sake, entirely without cause. This means that a pornographic approach to violence – where the violence is the reason that you're doing the scene – is artistically poor. Good writing would use a violence incident to advance the plot or to show character. Good writing would not look away. Good writing is not always safe.

My characters sometimes have sex. And they're not even sorry about it afterwards. I'm not anticipating a flood of Christian porn hitting the shelves next year – you might have other ideas – but in the real world I'm writing about, even Christians fall. In fantasy Christianity, that never happens, and it's as fake as a three-pound coin. As for imposing a Christian morality on characters who aren't Christians... readers can see through it in an instant. I would argue that if, for want of a better expression, a sex scene doesn't advance the plot or illuminate the characters, it's not necessary. I would argue though, that any scene that doesn't serve the plot or advance character isn't necessary. We also have to

remember that there are degrees between a chaste kiss and full-blown affair. Something as simple as a look across a crowded room can be charged with sexual tension.

My characters drink. Even the Christians. Beer and spirits. Why? I don't think I need a reason to explain why. If King David can get drunk and dance naked to the Temple, two of my blokes can sit in a pub and have a swift half. This is one of the most pernicious cultural impositions CBA throws up: that drinking is seen as something the Others do, not Christians. But this is entirely cultural, and has nothing to do with Christianity. A British story with British characters cannot have a realistic British setting. A historical novel set in Puritan Massachusetts has to omit that the Puritans drank beer. Quite how we handle Paul's advice to Timothy regarding his wine intake is anyone's guess.

And yes, my characters swear. Not all the time, but sometimes when the need arises. It depends on the character, on the situation, on the setting. I write about soldiers some times. Having hung around the occasional army barracks in my time, the language is positively industrial. Using the F-word as every other word is not only poor writing, it gets boring very quickly. But pretending it doesn't happen is straying into fantasy reality territory. It lessens your story. It makes it look like you know nothing about soldiers at all. Whether or not you're writing for squaddies, if one reads your story, would they recognise themselves on the page?

### **Leavings**

This is what I'm arguing for you to leave in – not to necessarily include. If your story doesn't contain sex, death, scenes of extreme drunkenness and a mass of profanity, don't feel compelled to put some in. This isn't a competition of extremes. Bearing in mind everything I've said, your stories are your stories. No matter how you write them, you and you alone are responsible for them, their content, and every word that appears on the page. There's no getting round this, no cop-out of the "the characters wanted to do this, I had no control over them". Even if that's true – your published fiction is your responsibility. Don't take anything I've said as an argument for an anything goes approach. There are some stories that probably should not be told.

What you should also leave in, but not feel compelled to include. If you think that writing about Christians, the Christian faith, matters of morality and ethics in a fictional setting is the literary equivalent of shooting yourself in the foot before you start, let me assure you: there is no conspiracy. The secular publishing industry is not censoring you, it's not run by militant atheists hell-bent on the destruction of all believers, there is no secret computer programme they use to check the number of times you use the word 'prayer' in your manuscript. Reactions to my work have been varied, but I have never found it a bar to be a Christian, or write about Christians. I have never been published by a Christian publisher, short stories or novels. On the basis of this talk alone, I probably never will be.

### **What makes my story Christian then?**

You get back home after Greenbelt, and you're talking to your vicar and you say, "I heard this talk by some bloke who said it was not just okay, but almost compulsory to write about violence, sex, drink and swearing." The response might well be along the lines of "But what's going to make your story Christian?"

My usual, somewhat flippant response to this is: I tried to make my story Christian, but the pages got wet when I baptised it. Often what the questioner means is, "Does your story fit in with an agreed doctrinal basis? Does anyone get saved? Does it preach the gospel?" It might do. More often than not, mine don't. But that's not how stories get judged. It's not whether this story is safe. It's whether this story is good. I wouldn't go quite as far as Madeleine L'Engle and say any story that is good is Christian, but there is more truth in that than any Christian story is good. A good message never saves bad fiction.

If you're lucky, the questioner is actually asking "Is there anything distinctively Christian about your story?" This is much harder question to answer. It might be that your story is about Christians, about themes of faith or morality, set in a Christian community – but these things of themselves don't make a story Christian.

I believe that part of the answer is, you. The nuts and bolts of writing are the same for me as they are for every other author out there. It's words, put into sentences, joined into paragraphs and chapters that make a story. Being a Christian isn't the inside track to writing well, but neither is not being one. You can learn technique.

The difference you bring to your stories is you. We all tell stories differently – the Gospel writers had the same story, but told it differently – and we bring ourselves to our stories. Our experiences. Our hopes and fears. Our loves and hates. Our passions and our concerns. Our sense of fun and our determination. And if we have faith, we cannot help but bring that along too.

Tolkien talked about Middle-Earth being an act of sub-creation. Not sub as in substandard, but sub as in secondary. Whether we're new Christians, or such old Christians we wear our faith like a worn-out shoe, we infuse our subcreation with something of our understanding of what it means to belong to God. Tolkien did, Lewis did, Chesterton did, Sayers did, Tolstoy did, Dostoevsky did. I hope I do.

If you take my advice on these things, you might find that you're not writing CBA fiction. But don't think for a minute that it makes your story – or you – any less Christian. In closing, I would urge you to be honest, fearless and unflinching. Writing is hard enough without the expectations of others preying on your mind. Don't write the stories you think you ought to write because you are a Christian or the stories others think you ought to write because you are a Christian. The privilege and responsibility we have as authors, the one that you have: we tell our own stories. We create them, sweat them, live them, and more often than not, tear them down and build them up again. But they are ours and ours alone.

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Os Guinness - "Fit Bodies, Fat Minds" Baker Books 1994/Hodder and Stoughton 1995

J Mark Bertrand - <http://themastersartist.blogspot.com/2005/07/safe-or-good-lets-begin-with-narnian.html>

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