

On Christian Fantasy

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I have sometimes heard (from devout Christians) that there is really no such thing as Christian Fantasy, as if the two words were somehow utterly incompatible things. But I think most of us can see pretty well what the term means. Fantasy is any writing which concerns things that are not real. One might go even farther and say that it concerns things that could never be. So far, so good. In that sense, fantasy writing is the purest example of literary art, and also the most malleable. What is it, then, that makes a work of fantasy particularly “Christian” in nature? There are two major opinions on that subject.

The first school of thought holds that in order to be a Christian fantasy, the work has to include some explicitly Christian theme, such as retellings of Scriptural passages or possible further adventures of Biblical characters, often (but not always) set in ancient times. Examples of this type of work include the *Left Behind* series or a number of others.

The second viewpoint goes a little bit farther. It would extend the label of Christian fantasy to those works which, although not explicitly referring to Scripture, are wholly consistent with a Christian worldview and moral teachings. Books of this kind would include J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* or C.S. Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narnia*, as well as Madeleine L’Engle’s *Wrinkle in Time* series.

One might say that the difference between the two varieties is that the first type is explicitly Christian, while the second type is implicitly so. The Christian element in the first type is obvious to everyone who reads the work, but in the second type it is more subtle and perhaps not so easily noticed except by other Christians. That doesn’t mean it isn’t equally real.

My own viewpoint is that the purpose of any writing should be either to strengthen the saved or to reach the lost, and that only insofar as any book or story or poem attempts to accomplish one or both of these things can it be considered Christian work. But, that being the case, it should be clear that the ways in which an author could go about doing this are limited only by his imagination. To be sure, some

methods may be more effective or useful than others, but that's another matter entirely.

The most obvious thing a Christian author must always keep in mind while he writes is that we mustn't present sin or heresy or ungodly things in a favorable or approving light. This is among the worst failings of secular literature. Sex outside of marriage, lying, cursing, treachery, broken promises, revenge- any or all of these things (and worse) are presented to the reader as something acceptable or even admirable, with the result being that the hearts of everyone who reads such work will be corrupted to a greater or lesser degree and pulled farther away from God.

Does this mean that a Christian author can never address these topics? Of course not. The difference lies entirely in the attitude and the approach. You may write a story, for example, in which the main character engages in an affair with a co-worker and even conspires with him to kill her husband, provided that she later has an attack of conscience and repents of what she meant to do, or is shown to suffer bad consequences for her choices. Such a story could be a strong testimony to the world about the power of love and forgiveness. . . if handled properly. This is not the type of story I personally enjoy, but it's a legitimate subject for those Christian authors who feel up to the task.

What you would never want to do would be to present such a person as being justified in what she did because her husband was a cold and distant man, or cheated on her, or whatever else the reason might have been. The idea that the ends justify the means is one of the deadliest and most damning sins known to mankind, and if you wrote a story in which that idea were presented favorably (or even worse, went entirely unquestioned), then you have parted ways with all Christian thinking.

There remains one other matter, which I alluded to in the beginning of this article. Namely, the idea that Christians ought not to write fantasy at all, regardless of whether they do so in a way that attempts to give glory to God. People who hold this view tend to think that by its very nature, fantasy is a type of lie, and that since God has not in fact created things such as mermaids or time travel and so forth, that it somehow dishonors Him to write about them.

I have two objections to this idea. The first is that, if we truly believed it and took it seriously, then we would be forced to stop writing *any* kind of story. All fiction, even the most everyday and ordinary kind, deals with people who don't really exist, saying and doing things which never really happened. I do not think God intended us to live in a world containing nothing but textbooks. Scripture itself is not written that way. The Bible is full of proverbs, psalms, prophecies, and parables, some of which are very obviously not meant to be taken literally. As C.S. Lewis once said, when Jesus told us to be like doves, He didn't mean that we were supposed to lay eggs.

My other objection is that Scripture tells us we are created in the image of God, and I believe we could all agree that one of God's primary characteristics is the fact that He creates things. Tolkien once said that no one considers it to be mockery or dishonor when a small child makes a play of the deeds of his father. I think when we create things (in our small and clumsy way) we are only doing what all children do as they learn to walk in their Father's footsteps. When we take our creations and offer back to Him in love the work of the hands that He has made, then I believe He smiles and accepts the gift. He would not be the loving Father that I know Him to be, if it were otherwise.

Always remember that your guiding principle as a Christian author is to love and glorify God in all things. As you write, ask yourself these questions: Does this work uplift my readers and draw them closer to God? Is it faithful to what is taught in Scripture? Does it honor the Lord? If you can truthfully answer "yes" to all these questions, then you can honestly claim the label of Christian fiction for your work, no matter what subject matter you've chosen.