

Saving Christian Fiction

By Lynn Garrett | Publisher's Weekly, Jan 19, 2018

No news might be good news for publishers of Christian fiction—or it might just be that there is no big news. Steve Oates, v-p of marketing for Baker Publishing Group's Bethany House and Chosen imprints, describes the state of the category as “stable” and says: “The marketplace just keeps getting a little tougher all the time, but no one or no direction is really standing out. Where are the new names appearing on the bestseller list? Who is coming out of nowhere in fiction? What is the next big thing?”

Oates has no answers to these questions, but Baker's fiction imprints continue to offer readers books in reliable genres like romantic suspense, historicals, and, most notably, romances set among the Amish, which have been published by the hundreds and sold in the millions by the industry. Industry watchers keep predicting the demise of the genre, but the books still have an audience. “We are still seeing a lot of interest in our Amish novels, and we aren't doing fewer,” says Andrea Doering, executive editor of Baker's Revell imprint. “Readers continue to be drawn to the idea of a simpler life and the strong families and communities of the Amish.”

Bethany House has brand-name authors of Amish fiction on its list, including Beverly Lewis, whose stand-alone romance *The Road Home* releases in April. Lewis has sold more than 17 million copies of her books and has charted on the bestseller lists of *PW*, the *New York Times*, and *USA Today*.

Another star is Suzanne Woods Fisher, whose books just reached the one-million-copy sales mark. Her newest, *Phoebe's Light* (Feb.), is the first in a new Quaker series, Nantucket Legacy. (Could Quakers be the next big thing?)

Other Amish-themed novels include Thomas Nelson's *The Solace of Water* by Elizabeth Byler Younts (June), who brings a new twist to the genre: set in 1957, the book features two women, one white and Amish and one African-American, who become friends and fight for their freedom—one from racial prejudice, the other from religious constraints.

A more traditional approach is taken by Harvest House, with *The Amish Quilter* by Mindy Starns Clark and Leslie Gould (May). Barbour has two books coming from another Amish-romance star, Wanda Brunstetter—*The Celebration* (Feb.) and *The Hawaiian Discovery* (coauthored with Jean Brunstetter, June). While not a Christian press, Skyhorse will publish *Home Is Where the Heart Is* by Linda Byler in May. And Gilead Publishing has *Buried Secrets* by Barbara Cameron (Apr.), a tale of an Amish widow's second chance at love.

While some see the category as stable, others are not as sanguine. Gilead publisher Dan Balow uses the word *flat*, pointing out that “at least a half-dozen Christian publishers of fiction have stopped in the last five years, and the ones that remain are the largest [houses].”

Balow believes “Christian fiction has been struggling primarily because authors have been encouraged to stay creatively narrow for a long time.” He adds, “The business solution is in encouraging author creativity.”

Gilead, just two years old, is among the publishers that have recently entered the fiction fray, despite the category's struggles. It publishes in a range of Christian genres, and one of them looks to the future instead of the past.

"Speculative fiction—science fiction, fantasy, and supernatural genres—is one of the most popular categories of entertainment in the general market," Balow notes. "More than 100 new feature films or TV shows released in 2017 were either science fiction or fantasy, including the Marvel Comics stories and the new Star Wars movie. A generation of readers have grown up with these types of stories, and we feel there is a market for Christian-friendly themes in these books."

In 2016, Gilead acquired Enclave, a press focused on the speculative genre, and struck a partnership with Kregel, which publishes in a variety of romance genres. "Gilead has brought us books and genres we wouldn't have chosen, that have energized the sales and marketing teams," says publisher Jerry Kregel. New books coming from Enclave include new volumes from several series set in dystopian worlds, among them *Amber Eyes* by S.D. Grimm (Jan.), the second in the Children of the Blood Moon series, and *Into the Void* by Joshua A. Johnston (Feb.), the second in the Chronicles of Sarco series.

Another newcomer, By the Vine Press—launched in 2014—this year will publish a five-book Christian speculative romance series, Children of the King by Gloria Clover. The first volume, *Washed Under the Waves*, releases in March; the fifth, *Lost in Beauty*, in July.

"There is reader interest in edgier and out-of-the-box titles in the Christian market," says editor-in-chief Stephenia McGee. An inspirational science fiction novel, *The Man Who Could Transfuse Time* by Dennis Hensley, comes from By the Vine in April.

Concordia also came late to the fiction game, launching its program in 2014. Its *The Messengers: Revealed* by Lisa M. Clark (May), the third in the Messengers trilogy, is set in a totalitarian future and features rebels determined to preserve and spread the teachings of the Bible. Similarly, *F-S-H-S* by Randy Dockens (Carpenter's Son, June)—described by publisher Larry Carpenter as "futuristic sci-fi—imagine a Christian version of *The Matrix*"—also takes place in a future in which Christianity has been outlawed and an underground group must battle for the Bible.

Baker Publishing imprint Revell's entry into the speculative genre is *The 49th Mystic* by Ted Dekker (May), which portrays characters who live in two worlds and must recover five ancient seals to save themselves from destruction. The author of more than 40 books and winner of many awards, Dekker has sold more than 10 million copies of his books worldwide.

Though it publishes much less fiction than in the past, B&H will release a companion to the allegorical Prince Warriors trilogy, *The Prince Warriors: The Winter War* by Priscilla Shirer, in August. B&H says the trilogy has sold more than 100,000 units since the first book was released in 2016.

As Christian fiction publishers hunt for the next big thing and look for emerging authors, these two genres—one offering tales of a soft-focus past and the other of a harder-edged future—bookend the category.