

Review

Sillimon, Daniel, *Evangelicals: How Fiction Shaped a Culture and a Faith*. Grand Rapids: Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2021. 222 pp. ISBN 9780802879356

By Elsie Froment, PhD

What tied together the identity of American evangelicalism in the latter half of the twentieth century? Daniel Silliman finds the evangelical identity in the conversation carried on in evangelical publishing disseminated through the latter twentieth century ascendancy and early twenty-first century decline of the Christian bookstore. Silliman grew up in the Jesus People and earned his graduate degrees while his wife ran a student ministry in Germany. Now news editor at *Christianity Today*, Silliman is more comfortable defining evangelicalism through its institutions and the conversations they fostered than through its beliefs. For his study of evangelical identity, he selected five works of fiction that have been tremendously influential among evangelicals and set his analysis in the context of Christian publishing. The novels he selected are Janette Oke's *Love Comes Softly*, Frank Peretti's *This Present Darkness*, Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins' *Left Behind*, Beverly Lewis' *The Shunning*, and William Paul Young's *The Shack*.

When Oke wrote *Love Comes Softly*, American publishing houses were denominational and didn't publish fiction. Oke wrote her first book because romance novels had changed, and she wanted to portray a different picture to readers. She hoped to convey that if her readers trusted God, they would flourish in their lives. The market was ready for fiction. Eerdmans and Zondervan, followed by many other publishing houses, had strengthened the ties between fundamentalists by starting to publish nondenominational books. Distribution followed suit with the growth of an American Christian bookstore network, which reached 3,000 stores by the end of the 1970s. When Bethany House published *Love Comes Softly*, the booksellers knew that it would sell. It sold an average of 55,000 copies every year for 20 years. Readers, mostly white, middle class, suburban women, understood their own spiritual experience through it. And Christian fiction boomed, as many started writing it.

Peretti's *This Present Darkness* arose from different motivations. He believed that the daily cultural practice of belief was a spiritual battle with the principalities and powers of darkness. Most publishers rejected his manuscript, but Crossway was led by two brothers who believed that Christ had a claim on every area of life and therefore the Christian life should involve cultural conflict. Evangelicals saw themselves as marginalized and voices like Francis Schaeffer were urging them to get

involved to combat the logical outcome of secular humanism: despair. Crossway published *This Present Darkness* in 1986 and distributed it to the now more than 5,000 Christian bookstores in the US. It was horror fiction - the story of a plot to take over an American town on behalf of the New Consciousness Society, a spiritual conspiracy to establish a New World Order controlled by a demonic lord called Strongman - and it did not sell well at first. Then Amy Grant, at that time a Christian in crisis, read and promoted it in her concerts. *This Present Darkness* and its sequels continue to sell in Christian bookstores and crossover markets. *Christianity Today* included it on its list of the top 50 books that shaped American evangelicalism.

Tim LaHaye, a pastor who supported Barry Goldwater, the John Birch Society, and the Illuminati view of world events, wanted to evangelize and foster cultural conflict by acquainting readers with the rapture. Peretti turned his story idea down. A professional writer, Jerry Jenkins, accepted it. Tyndale House published *Left Behind* in 1995. Raymond Steele, a pilot, and “Buck” Williams, a newsman on his plane, are left behind when the rapture occurs. Steele knows what happened because his wife is a believer, and their evangelical church has prepared them for it. Williams’ editor assigns him to gather possible explanations. In the end, Steele, Williams, Steele’s daughter, and a pastor also left behind choose between belief and all other philosophies and form a “Tribulation Force” to oppose the new world government, world religion, and the antichrist. From Christian bookstores, *Left Behind* also crossed over into the general market. It and its sequels sold 80,000,000 copies and Tyndale House was able to publish a book of conversion narratives.

Lewis’ grandmother, who defied her Old Mennonite family by marrying an Assemblies of God minister, was shunned. Lewis decided to change the details and write her grandmother’s story as an experience in authenticity - finding oneself and expressing one’s true identity. She believed with Peretti that the Christian worldview was opposed to all others and with Oke that the goal of the Christian life was human flourishing. Human flourishing was, like consumerism, foundationally individualistic. The megachurch’s use of marketing techniques to grow congregations strengthened the latter twentieth century emphasis on individualism. After conducting a marketing survey, the founding pastors of Willow Creek designed a seeker sensitive service and preached tailored sermons for the consumer they identified. Saddleback Church followed suit. In time, the leadership of both churches de-emphasized marketing and management techniques in favour of authenticity - discovering one’s true self and becoming that self. After Bethany House published *The Shunned* in 1997, Amish fiction became a backdrop to this trend. Individualism as an evangelical emphasis was widely disseminated. Christian publishing in the US was making 3 billion dollars annually, sales were increasing 10 percent a year, and secular chains and big box stores were competing with them for sales.

Then came a novel that introduced uncertainty into the evangelical identity and hastened the demise of the network of Christian bookstores. A movement had begun within the Leadership Network, which consisted of megachurch pastors and business management experts. The Network noticed that churches were reaching all age groups except young professionals without families. They diagnosed the problem as philosophical - the missing were postmodernists who were skeptical of metanarratives and finding ways to live with the tensions at the intersections of multiple big stories. Leadership Network members decided that they could, like missionaries, learn a new language and a new culture to reach them. Aided by Brian MacLaren's books, the Network launched the concept of the Emergent Village which argued that Christians should be open to ambiguity. Then, William Paul Young, a son of Canadian missionaries in Netherlands New Guinea, abused and abuser growing up on the field and in missionary schools, who had learned to follow Christian rules to be accepted but who knew he was living a lie, was caught in an affair by his wife. At his wife's request, he wrote *The Shack* for his children. *The Shack* is about a fictional father being invited to a weekend retreat with God at the place where his daughter had been murdered by a serial killer. Young's multi-style, confusing novel, self-published in 2007, was criticized by evangelical leaders for misrepresenting the Trinity, being universalist, and downplaying the Bible but most readers did not care. *The Shack* sold widely in mainstream outlets, online, and finally Christian bookstores. It topped the New York Times bestseller list for 50 weeks and stayed on the list for 177 weeks. Because Christian fiction could be bought in multiple markets, the network of Christian bookstores declined at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Silliman asks the question - what would hold together the evangelical identity now?

Silliman utilizes an unusual approach to exploring the identity of evangelicalism. Previously, scholars had relied on defining it through beliefs held in common. Most followed David Bebbington's definition that evangelicals are characterized by their adherence to biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism, and activism. Growing up in a radical Christian tradition, Silliman was not familiar with that identity and was more attracted to defining evangelicalism through its culture. He represents a new generation of evangelical scholars who utilize many academic disciplines in their research. Sillimon refers to philosophers, literary critics, sociologists, and historians. In the evangelical conversation available through the Christian bookstore, he finds that American evangelicals are focused on living God's best life, developing their unique selves, and believing that life as a faithful Christian involves conflict. A segment of those who live in the postmodern generation are comfortable with living with the tensions of multiple metanarratives.

Silliman's analysis could have benefited from a broader analysis of the American culture. Did American evangelicals both imbibe and resist that culture? The message of human flourishing permeated North American life in the 1970s. Americans were encouraged to follow their dreams on the grounds that anything was possible. The 1980s were characterized by corruption in pursuit of individual betterment. In the 1990s, conflict accelerated generally with the Clinton investigations, the rejuvenation of the Ku Klux Klan, bombings, and greater sophistication concerning toxic working environments. Protest and activism strengthened in the first decades of the twenty-first century. In the midst of these cultural trends, the fiction of the American evangelical movement did appear to foster a certain kind of politics and the leadership of a certain kind of politician.

Whether Silliman's analysis amounts to definition is not clear. For example, the postmodern readership of *The Shack* was so broad as to make conclusions difficult. According to Silliman, the crossover between Christian and secular publishing had started with the Peretti series. Evangelical literature had entered the mainstream, but was the readership now evangelical? Clearly, the practical reality of crossover and online sales lessened the need for the Christian bookstore. The influence of the Christian bookstore has faded to that of a church supply centre for a large geographic area, and even that function can easily be handled online. As Silliman laments, the Christian bookstore no longer provides a site for investigating identity.

Many readers of this review will be nostalgic for the heyday of the Christian bookstore. If they are fortunate, they still have access to one. Christian bookstores supported church libraries and church libraries brought Christian literature to families. In support of Silliman's thesis, an added effect of the demise of the Christian bookstore is the inability of evangelicals themselves to form a clear picture of the movement of which they are a part.

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