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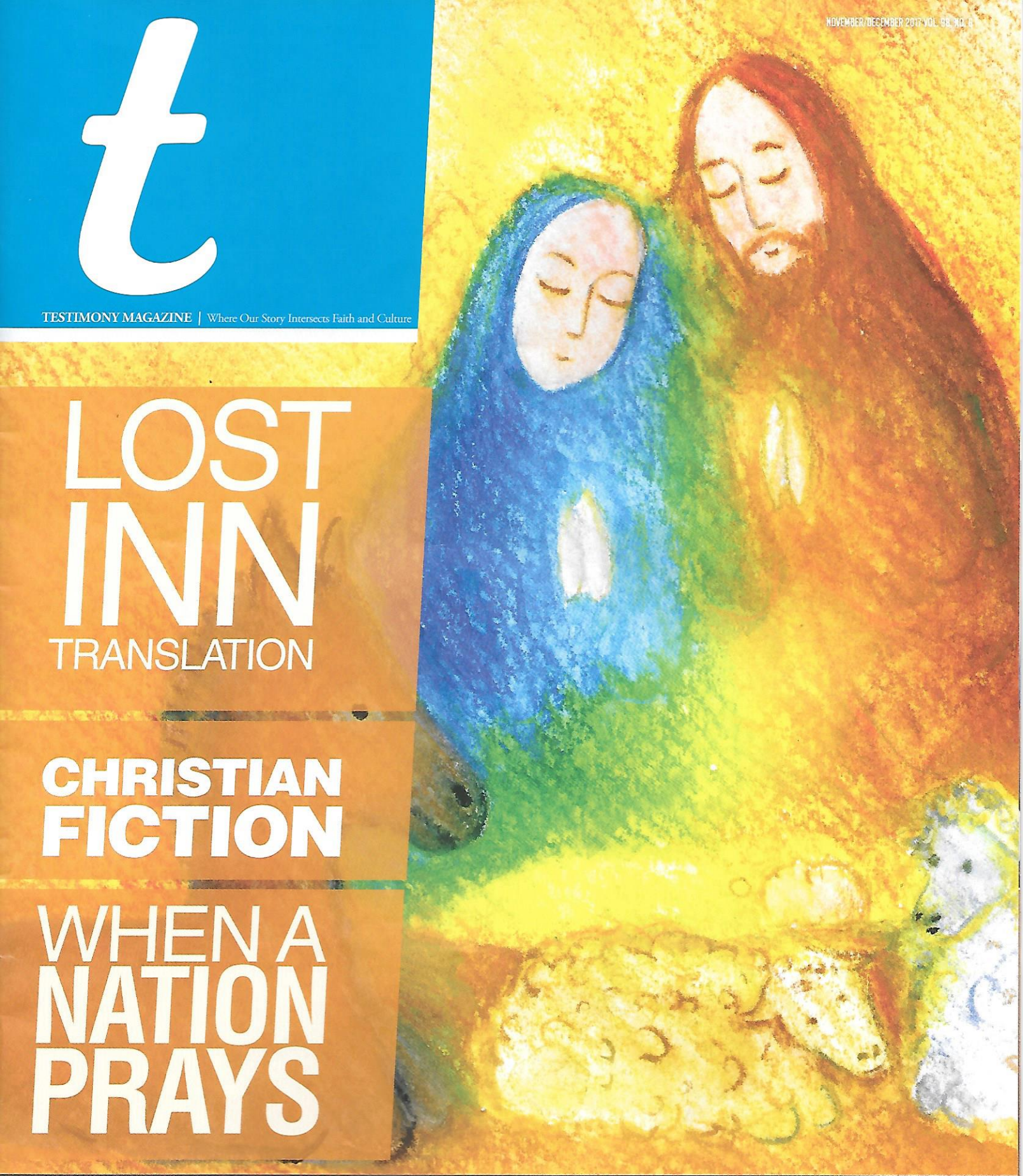
TESTIMONY MAGAZINE | Where Our Story Intersects Faith and Culture



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PERSPECTIVE

by Melony Teague

CHRISTIAN FICTION

Something's happened to it while you weren't reading it

For me, there is something fundamentally satisfying about reading Christian fiction. I try to live my life in such a way that my faith is inseparable from my thoughts, decisions and world view. So it seems only natural for me to read stories that incorporate that same approach. I learn from characters' victories, their struggles and mistakes, and their journey to grace or redemption.

For many people, including me, Canadian author Janette Oke's *Love Comes Softly* was the beginning of their Christian fiction experience. Steve Oates, VP of marketing for Bethany House and Chosen books, the leading publisher of Christian fiction, sheds some light on the industry's history and how it has changed since that pivotal book.

"There was a Christian fiction market before Oke ... You could read the Grace Livingston Hill titles ... or the C. S. Lewis fantasy books or Stephen Lawhead, but there was not much to read," said Oates. "Then along came Frank Peretti's *This Present Darkness* ... a sort of modern *Screwtape Letters* fable that brought spiritual warfare to evangelicals. The late '80s saw an explosion of historical fiction, mostly with a romance thread woven in, and we began to see more writers venturing into suspense, westerns, speculative fantasy and allegory ... then the *Left Behind* series came along. Suddenly we had *NY Times* bestsellers, and the mass markets opened up to Christian fiction. Their favourite categories were the newly popular Amish fiction [by authors like] Beverly Lewis and historical fiction [by authors like] Tracie Peterson and Francine Rivers. This period was the peak of interest in Christian fiction."[1]

According to Oates, the current landscape is less dependent on these two genres. We can now find many different viewpoints, types of content and voices. David Long, executive editor, Fiction, with Bethany House Publishers agrees: "Overall, I think the quality of

writers who've come into the market since the '70s has been improving year after year. So many readers now are wanting, and finding, more sophisticated storytelling. I think, for the most part, there's more nuance to the presentation of faith in fiction."[2]

But with brick-and-mortar stores limiting their selection of Christian fiction, the problem lies in spreading the word. "There developed a common understanding that the Christian fiction market was separate from the mainstream fiction market," says Oates. "That understanding lives on today, and Christian fiction [is] still stocked in the religion section of most secular bookstores, clear across the store from the rest of the fiction."[3]

Sandra Orchard, Canadian author of the *Serena Jones* series, says, "If you enjoy reading general market fiction, you will be pleasantly surprised to find many talented authors writing in a wide variety of Christian fiction subgenres appealing to almost every taste. If you are only familiar with the prairie romances set in the 1800s, you are definitely in for a surprise. The subgenres include fantasy, "steampunk" [a subgenre of science fiction], contemporary and historical romance, romantic suspense, mysteries, thrillers and literary fiction. Some novels touch on spiritual matters only lightly, while others delve more deeply or overtly."[4]

Non-fiction readers might want to consider reading fiction as a worthwhile experience. Ellen Graf-Martin, President and Founder of Graf-Martin Communications, says, "I think a reader can learn a memorable lesson by journeying with a character through a crisis in a novel. And I suspect that the lesson might stick with them long after the book was closed. That's the power of narrative—and it's how Jesus often taught too. The parables, after all, were the first Christian fiction."[5]

When it comes to subject matter, contemporary authors are courageously facing the messiness of life. "I love that Christian fiction is tackling some tough issues," says Orchard, "such as human trafficking, spousal abuse, single parenting and addiction, in addition to the issues that touch all of our lives, such as grief and lost love. I personally discovered Christian fiction after my mom died when my own children were very young. I became immersed in the lives of characters that were walking the same road I was. Seeing how they worked through the changes and challenges in their lives to emerge happy and whole on the other side equipped and inspired me and gave me hope."[6]

"Writers have been truly creative in tying in real-world influences," says Amanda Bostic of HarperCollins Christian Publishers. "For instance, *The Evaporation of Sofi Snow*, a recent young adult release from Mary Weber, looks at issues such as gaming, the blurred lines between virtual reality and reality, and what role artificial intelligence may play in our future. As society deals with new challenges, Christian writers are faced with finding ways to remain connected to current readers while also drawing in new audiences who need inspiration. The guiding themes of Christian fiction will always remain part of the stories we publish.

"New authors have been well received by industry reviewers and Christian fiction consumers. Catherine West continues to receive starred trade reviews across the board for her most recent books, *The Memory of You* and *The Things We Knew.* Authors are tackling relevant issues and writing stories sparked by politically and religiously charged news headlines. *The Space Between Words* by Michèle Phoenix is a news-inspired novel that takes on life after the Paris terrorist bombings."[7]

Supporting our Christian authors has never been more crucial. In this fast-paced, crazy world, we need the inspiration they are offering. As Amanda Bostic says, "As writers of faith, we have the ability to bring light and hope to our readers, no matter how dark or difficult the topic may be. That's a special gift and one we should be honored to share."[8]

As new voices emerge, let's support them. "Tell people what you're reading!" says Ellen Graf-Martin. "Often, people just won't have even considered Christian fiction or may not know it exists."[9]

Christian fiction has been evolving right under our noses. Now is a great time to give it another try.

Melony Teague *is a writer living in Toronto with her husband, two teenagers, and two cats. She handles the communications for two medical missions organizations in the Greater Toronto Area. She is an avid reader and book reviewer at www.melonyteague.com.*

1. Steve Oates, interview by author, Q & A via email, July 18, 2017; 2. David Long, interview by author, Q & A via email, July 24, 2017; 3. Oates, interview; 4. Sandra Orchard, interview by author, Q & A via email, July 28, 2017; 5. Ellen Graf-Martin, interview by author, Q & A via email, July 25, 2017; 6. Orchard, interview; 7. Amanda Bostic, interview by author, Q & A via email, July 31, 2017; 8. Ibid; 9. Graf-Martin, interview.

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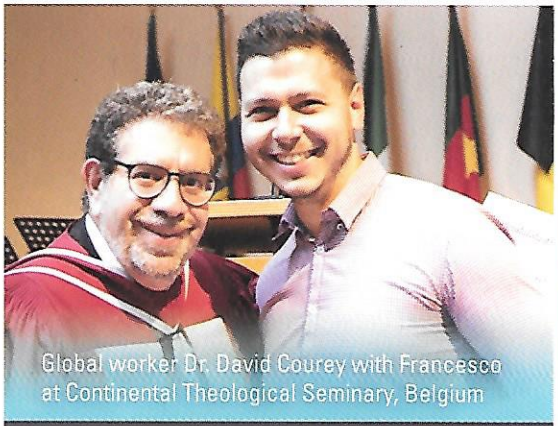

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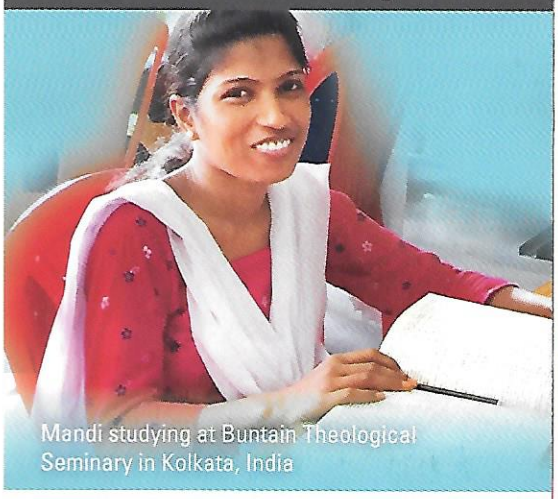

Mandi studying at Buntain Theological Seminary in Kolkata, India

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