

*The publisher for my book JESUS – which will be released in early October -- asked me a series of questions about the book and how I approached the writing of it. My answers speak not only to this book, but also about character and writing in general. I thought to share them with you.*

**Q. The *Book of God* has sold over 1.5 million copies in 20 languages worldwide. Why do you think it has proved such an international success story?**

A. I lectured at length in Japan (where so many copies of BOG were sold) and continued to ask that same question, both directly and indirectly: people need story! They need the sort of story by which they may interpret a world, approach their own lives with some sense of meaning and order, find shape to otherwise bewildering experience. But the story must be both detailed and cosmological, both earthy and divine--and capable of embracing the hearer/reader, so that reading becomes not merely a mental activity, but a genuine experience. Individuals and whole peoples lack that sort of story. THE BOOK OF GOD tells such a story with intellect, craft, faith and high art. Folks may read it as a novel, yet receive it as a shaping event.

**Q. Your new book, *Jesus*, explores the charismatic and controversial person of Jesus. In our increasingly secular western society, why is Jesus still an object of fascination for people, whether or not they are Christians?**

A. Is it a premise of this question that the figure of Jesus is an object of fascination even among secular people? There must be levels to that fascination. Many secular prove their broadmindedness by approving of the Jesus they think existed, then separating that one from the Christians of whom they do not approve. But the Jesus these people like is a moral leader, generally a nice fellow who lived a loving life, who helped, helped, helped and blamed stuffed shirts. A weak figure after all. Others really do know and appreciate the deeper thought, the lifestyle, and the genuine force of Jesus. But neither group considers him a Savior or the communication of the almighty God.

Fascination may also come of the effect of Jesus, so long through history, so broadly throughout the earth, triggering the thought of the most excellent minds and the power of the most powerful rulers: who else has had such a run at fame?

And his story--certainly through the crucifixion--is of itself both fascinating and fundamental to almost every other story, the sacrifice for others, the lone individual against brute forces religious and political, good against evil.

But beyond the secular interest, add a resurrection.

The claims Jesus himself makes throughout this story, the claims the Scriptures make regarding him, the claims the Church and believers continue to make (upon which they will base their survival, their lives and their dyings even with peace, granting these claims a spectacular witness), claims completely unique--the Son of Man, the Son of God, the Word of God uttered upon a cross, the Suffered who attends all other sufferings, the Christ, the Savior--these claims and their fulfillment in the realm of human knowing are eternally fascinating.

**Q. What prompted you to tell the story of Jesus' life and work as a novel?**

A. For this there is a long story and a short story.

Short: I am a writer. This is both my craft of long development and my art. The finest tool I have for investigating any true or human or holy thing is to novelize that thing. And, apart from my own intense interest, others can experience the results.

**Q. It is clear that you have brought your skills as both a novelist and a theologian to this retelling. How far is this a retelling which is true to the gospel accounts and how far have you embellished the story?**

A. I'd have to answer this line by line, despite the organic nature of the creative act.

But NOTE: I work within severe and well-defined parameters, beyond which I won't allow my invention to stray. One of these parameters is the material of the Scriptures

**Q. Who did you have in mind as the intended readership of *Jesus* as you were writing the book?**

A. Actually, whenever I write narrative prose (whether a "children's book," a short story, a novel, a play) I pay all my attention to the prose and its propriety, to its rightness (in all senses), not to the audience. At that time I am my first audience.

In the back of my mind, however, I write for an audience of imagination, alert intelligence, delight in a striking sentence, willing sympathy (*syn-pathos*) for the story, readers capable of genuine personal response.

With argumentative prose I seek to persuade folks of something.

With narrative prose, I seek to encompass folks with powerful experience. In both cases, I seek to be true.

**Q. In this novel, although it is written in the third person, you use two eye witnesses as your key narrators –Jesus' mother, Mary, and his beloved disciple, John. Why did you choose these characters as the viewpoints for the book?**

A. Please note: **THE BELOVED DISCIPLE IS NOT JOHN!**

Nothing in the Gospel of John (and nothing in the synoptics) says that the "Beloved" is John. This is a tradition, not even as old as other church traditions--but I WANT THAT NARRATOR NAMELESS SO THAT THE READERS CAN THEMSELVES INHABIT HIM!

Several times in the book the narrator clearly states that he has no other name than that of his relationship with Jesus: BELOVED.

Note, too: the novel is not written in the 3rd person, but in the 1st. That's pretty clear throughout: the Beloved writes it in his old age.

**Q. The character of Mary is very powerfully drawn in the novel, fussing over her son one minute and arguing with God the next. Her pride and love of her son and her fears for his future come through strongly. Tell us a bit more about your decision to characterise Mary and her motivation in this way.**

A. Mary's relationship requires her stepping back from Jesus, radically changing the quality of her motherhood.

Two thoughts I will note here (out of far too many reasons than I could myself ever account for or even know): (1) I considered what it must have been like for the mother of such a figure to maintain both her own character and her motherhood while living with him even through to the end. (2) I believe that the mother of Jesus could not be the dewy-eyed, obedient "handmaid" to everyone else and survive.

But one doesn't create characters by making a particular decision. One may *begin* with a decision (a mental act); after that the character develops on her own, although in dialogue with the wary writer. She becomes the more complex because of the things happening around her (the language that gets used for her, the other figures, the events, her own sudden speech altogether unplanned for by [undecided by] the author). *This* organic discovery by the author is a single example of what I mean when I speak of novelization as the finest tool I have for investigation.

**Q. Judas is traditionally depicted as the 'villain' among Jesus' followers. In this book, you depict Judas' betrayal of Jesus as a result of his eager ambition and misunderstanding of Jesus' intentions rather than an act of malice. Does this reflect your understanding of the gospel accounts? Or was it a twist to make the narrative more compelling?**

A. Be clear: I will never introduce a "twist" merely to make the narrative compelling. Where I have latitude (granted by the Scripture itself, and by my own most careful and incisive hermeneutic) I seek likeliest scenarios, again, finding them in organic progression. The character and the motives of this Judas (slightly different from the Judas in THE BOOK OF GOD) are highly possible presumptions. In both books Judas mistakes the purposes, the love, the mission of Jesus; he seizes events (so he supposes) from Jesus rather than obeying him; he places himself in the seat of the leader. This is overweening pride, however he might himself interpret his actions. Judas was a disciple at some length with Jesus. In several of the Gospels Jesus offers him communion. This implies the fullness of Judas' participation in events--and in Jesus' teaching, activity, heart. If Judas were merely greedy, others would have seen it (especially in their close relationships and under the hard scrutinies and the deep strains of the attacks they had to endure, even down to their last days in Jerusalem). If Judas were merely greedy, he would have departed when things came to such a violent head. But he stuck it even to the very end--and giving back the 30 pieces of silver suggest that there had been a significant relationship between him and Jesus (yes, in his own mind too), and that greed did not overcome it.

So, the novelist seeks likeliest solutions to character, though character always contains contradictions; and out of character comes action; and within the action--sometimes!--is motive discovered.

See how marvelous and how complex is this writing game? Well, at least as I play it. The "twist" seldom leads me or moves me.

**Q. Mary Magdalene is a character who has been the subject of much debate recently because of *The Da Vinci Code*. In your book, she emerges as a woman who has “an ineffable love for Jesus” and who owes him everything, but without the kind of relationship between them which Dan Brown alleged. What are your thoughts on the way in which Dan Brown portrayed her character in *The Da Vinci Code* and how did you decide how to portray her in *Jesus*?**

A. The "how" of my portrayal of Mary from Magdala in the novel can be answered just as I've answered some three of the questions above.

With regard to Dan Brown's novel--I would have sweetly dismissed the whole thing (a book so embarrassingly written, thuggish with its language), until he had himself recorded saying that he began the project to disprove it and now has found himself believing in his results. Till then he was an entrepreneur playing in fields infinitely more noble than himself. Now he has become either a charlatan, lying about his beliefs, or a complete fool. There are conspiracies in this world--but not of this stature, this age, this complexity. And any evidence he thinks he has for Mary's intimacies with Jesus fail against the standards of the antiquities, these stories and books in her name having been produced so long after more primary evidences. And as Judas, a profound embarrassment to the earliest church, was nonetheless remembered in the stories regarding Jesus, so would such a relationship also have been remembered.

**Q. Are there any parts in the novel which you think will shock or surprise readers? (Christians? Non-Christians?)**

A. Someone else will have to find such passages. I don't know.

**Q. How would you respond to people who worry that a novelized retelling of Jesus' life is in danger of muddling fact and fiction?**

A. Truly: a fact/fiction dichotomy diminishes the Truth/Faith, experience/trust tensions of the sacred story repeated.

Let these people think about what Christian Churches themselves do as communities of faith and trust when they put on Christmas pageants and plays; consider the number of changes they make in the "fact" of the Scriptural accounts of Jesus' birth. Let them look at their stained glass windows and the ways faithful art re-tells (with marvelous invention as well as details taken from the context of the artist and not of Christ's culture) the Scriptural story. Listen to Bach. Read Milton. Listen to their preachers re-telling the stories with imaginative details introduced. And if they don't yet get the point that we've been doing this blessed, faithful and flexible re-telling of our Saving Tale since the very beginning, I'll tell them of the ten circles, the ten parameters, within which I work in order NOT to produce fiction at all, but text true to the original.

**Q. “I know the story of Jesus. I can read it in the Bible. Why do I need to read a novelized version of it?” How would you reply to a) a Christian or b) a non-Christian asking this question?**

A. "Knowing" the story and "dwelling within" the story, "knowing" the story and "experiencing" the story are two different things. Worship is the latter. And we return to worship again and again. The liturgies of Holy Week, the Tri duum, Easter celebrations are the latter. We know the stories. It isn't knowledge, however, which comprises the whole of faith.

I've always believed that in the communities of Christ, some are given to recount the fundamentals of our faith in such ways that the rest of us might be elevated in the hearing, might, rather than merely comprehending the story, BE comprehended BY the story, as one is embraced by a loving parent. That's what a novel like this does.

And if the non-Christian already knows the story by a close reading of the Scripture (as if to say, "What new can this offer me?") the novel introduces the artist's vision of the tale. Even so is Milton read (taught, assessed, analyzed, criticized) by the non-Christian, and the Sistine Chapel's ceiling and walls, and Bach's St. Matthew Passion. I don't mean to equate my work with these; rather I note here how much of a tale told is in the telling, not only in the tale known.

**BUT I DO NOT INTEND TO PREACH TO THESE! NOR TO CONVERT THEM.**

And no good novel is written just that someone might "know" something new or different. Consider all the Greek Tragedies the stories of which everyone in the audience already knew.

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