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## Preaching the Word in Season and Out: The Portrayal of Missionaries in Contemporary Fiction

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# Preaching the Word in Season and Out: The Portrayal of Missionaries in Contemporary Fiction

by Kathleen O'Sullivan and Larry Poston

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## Missionary Fiction: Parabolic Teaching for the Modern Day?

The Christian religion has been developed mainly from scriptural sources—the writings that form the Bible. Secondary sources have included such works as the *Nicene Creed*, the *Chalcedonian Formula*, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and the *Westminster Confession of Faith*.

Third in importance have been books penned by scholars of the faith, such as Augustine's *De Civitate Dei*, Aquinas' *Summa Theologicae*, and Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. But presently, these traditional venues appear to be taking a back seat to popular works of fiction that include Christian themes.

With respect to the discipline of missiology, for instance, there are several standard non-fiction works that deal with the theology and history of missions. Kenneth Latourette's *History of the Expansion of Christianity*, George Peters' *Biblical Theology of Missions*, Stephen Neill's *History of Christian Missions*, Lesslie Newbigen's *The Open Secret*, David Bosch's *Transforming Mission*, and Craig Ott's *Encountering Theology of Mission* are only a few of the many works available.

Such books have formed the academic fare at Bible colleges and seminaries around the world. But the publication numbers for each of these are minuscule in comparison with bestselling fiction. James Clavell's *Shogun*, Peter Mathiessen's *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*, James Michener's *Hawaii*, Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*, and John Grisham's *The Testament* are but a few of the contemporary novels that deal with missions. *The Testament* alone enjoyed a first printing of 2.8 million copies, and *The Poisonwood Bible* was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in 1999 and in 2000 won the Boeke Prize.

The audiences for these fictional works are thus enormous and varied, and it is safe to assume that much more "Christian teaching" is being disseminated by these novels than from the textbooks ordinarily used for missionary training.

This essay focuses on Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* and Grisham's *The Testament*. Each work deals with the "classic" missionary stereotype (i.e., westerners ministering to indigenous tribal peoples in primitive living conditions). Each contains a mixture of positive and negative depictions of missionary philosophy in general and of individual missionaries in particular. Given their bestseller status, it is appropriate to ask what the hundreds of millions of readers of these works are learning about missions, and whether missiologists and teachers of missions would be wise to incorporate such works into their training of missionaries.

**Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* (HarperCollins, 1998)** Within Christian contexts, missionary ministry has long been cast in a heroic light. Written and oral accounts nearly always focus on "successful" efforts through which hundreds of converts are made and/or idolatrous ways are abandoned. "Unsuccessful" mission work is seldom, if ever, brought to light. But *The Poisonwood Bible*—written from the perspective of a non-Christian—supplies a balance point that is a highly useful tool in any missionary training curriculum.

*Poisonwood* tells the story of the Price family (father, mother, and four daughters) who arrive in the Belgian Congo from the American Bible Belt in the late 1950s. The family's preconceptions regarding Majority World societies, in addition to their prejudices against dark-skinned people, make it difficult for them to connect with their neighbors. Things go wrong from the beginning: the family is welcomed by the Congolese with a magnificent feast upon their arrival, but what the natives view as celebration, the Prices perceive as pagan chaos.

In the words of the eldest daughter Rachel, "We just got shoved straight into the heathen pandemonium." Shocked by the nudity and discordant chanting of those who will be the focus of his ministry, husband and father Nathan preaches an off-the-cuff sermon based on Genesis 19's account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. But by pronouncing judgment on a culture he does not understand, he estranges himself from his parishioners from the outset of his ministry.

Africa, in Nathan's mind, is irrevocably linked to what God most detests: idolatry, immorality, and hedonism. To assimilate into Congolese culture or to acknowledge the logic of Congolese ways would be tantamount to relinquishing his Christian faith. His evangelistic strategy consists of forcing his own Western religious paradigm on the natives without consideration of even the most elementary forms of contextualization.

One Easter, for instance, he insists on baptizing children in a nearby stream, which Rachel describes as "a lazy, rolling river as warm as bath water, where crocodiles are said to roll around like logs." The village chief forbids the ceremony on the grounds that "Nathan wanted to feed their children to the crocodiles." But adamantly refusing "to bend his will in any way to Africa," Nathan cannot comprehend his congregation's refusal to submit to this non-negotiable ordinance.

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Eventually, the reader learns that for Nathan, missionary work is an attempt to acquire personal redemption. A veteran of World War II who narrowly escaped death when hit by a shell fragment, he was later rescued and subsequently learned that his entire company died on the Death March from Bataan. Unable to forgive himself for his survival, Nathan's remorse transforms him into a man "with a stone in place of his heart."

He adopted an air of religious fervor that eventually led him to Africa, and in the Congo he becomes a soldier again, unbending to the attacks of the Enemy and unrelenting in his service on this new battlefield. Leah describes his spiritual struggle as "a great holy war going on in my father's mind, in which we're meant to duck and run and obey orders and fight for all the right things." Nathan's tyranny over his household and the village is motivated by his desire "to save more souls than had perished on the road from Bataan...and all other paths ever walked by the blight of mankind."

Typically for his day and age, Nathan placed himself above the Congolese on the basis of skin color and cultural background. Informed of the Congo's impending independence, he exclaims, "[They do] not [have] a desire for freedom—they don't have the temperament or the intellect for such things!" Africans must become "white" in order to be considered truly "spiritual." Ironically, it is the Price women who build the closest and healthiest relationships with the native people.

Wife and mother Orleanna sees a direct correlation between her own personal struggles and the Congo's political situation when she describes her marriage as a "foreign occupation," with herself "swallowed by Nathan's mission, body and soul." In her eyes, the Price women and the Congolese are equally oppressed, and the two groups are able to connect because of their shared victimization.

In stark contrast to Nathan's superiority is the Roman Catholic Brother Fowles. He is the personification of Kingsolver's conviction that Christian ministry can take a variety of forms, with some embodying Christ's love much more clearly than others.

Fowles gives deep, well-considered answers to questions; he sympathizes with Orleanna when she expresses her frustration with Nathan, and he shows Leah how the Congolese are, in fact, "very religious people." Fowles has personalized his faith and as a result has "come to love the people and their ways of thinking." To Nathan, his views are rank liberalism, but his relationships with the Congolese are far more winsome than Nathan's haughty judgmentalism.

A series of gradually escalating crises brings the story to its climax. The political situation in the Congo precipitates an order from the Prices' mission agency to evacuate—an order they refuse to obey. Nathan's mental condition deteriorates to the point of insanity, and the youngest daughter succumbs to snakebite. At that point, Orleanna and the three surviving daughters literally walk away from their village, leaving their husband and father to carry on his caricature of missionary work alone. Thus, *The Poisonwood Bible* provides a multitude of discussion topics for aspiring missionaries.

## **John Grisham's *The Testament* (Doubleday, 1999)**

Besides being a best-selling lawyer-turned-author, John Grisham is also a born-again Baptist layman with a heart for missions. Having often traveled to Brazil as a volunteer with the Southern Baptist International Mission Board, many of the scenarios in *The Testament* are derived from his personal experiences.

The plot of this international bestseller centers around Rachel, a young woman with “World Tribes Mission” who ministers deep in the heart of the Amazon River valley—and who has become heir to an \$11 billion fortune.

Rachel lived in a hut or a lean-to, and slept on a bed she'd built herself, and cooked over a fire, and ate food she'd grown or trapped and killed, and taught Bible stories to the children and the gospel to the adults, and knew nothing and certainly cared nothing for the events and worries and pressures of the world. She was very content. Her faith sustained her.

Nate is the lawyer sent to inform Rachel of her new fortune, and he is at first convinced that she is merely hiding from an unhappy past. She assures him that this is not the case: “No, you are wrong. I have perfect peace, Nate. I surrendered my will to Christ many years ago, and I follow wherever He leads...I am completely and perfectly at peace in this world.”

Such stilted dialogue reveals the difficulty of communicating biblical truth in a credible manner. Thus, *The Testament* brings to light a problem that Christians nearly always face when they attempt to communicate with non-Christians: the fact that the “Christianese” that (usually) works within Christian circles falls flat among non-believers.

The account of Nate's conversion experience after he is eventually drawn to Rachel's Christianity is equally awkward: “Nate closed his eyes too, and called God's name. God was waiting.” The next sentences are somewhat better:

With both hands, he clenched the back of the pew in front of him. He repeated the list, mumbling softly every weakness and flaw and affliction and evil that plagued him. He confessed them all. In one long glorious acknowledgment of failure, he laid himself bare before God. He held nothing back. He unloaded enough burdens to crush any three men, and when he finally finished Nate had tears in his eyes. “I'm sorry,” he whispered to God. “Please help me.” As quickly as the fever had left his body, he felt the baggage leave his soul.

Grisham then slips back into Christian lingo and most likely loses his non-Christian readers:

He opened his eyes and wiped his cheeks. Instead of seeing the young man on the pulpit, Nate saw the face of Christ, in agony and pain, dying on the cross. Dying for him. A voice was calling Nate, a voice from within, a voice leading him down the aisle.

Now some might observe that Jesus was equally blatant in his preaching and teaching, but Jesus was speaking mainly to religiously-oriented Jews in a culture that still gave prominence to religion. Grisham, however, is writing for persons who purchase his works as New York Times

bestsellers and who are not (for the most part) religiously-oriented and are therefore not expecting a religious agenda.

But the presence of such an agenda in the novel paves the way for significant classroom discussions that can prepare aspiring missionaries and ministers to proceed cautiously and with sophistication in their attempts to communicate the gospel.

Rachel's character becomes more believable when she admits her struggles as a single and isolated missionary: "I was homesick for three years, and there are times now when I would like to drive a car, eat a pizza, and see a good movie." These more "earthy" characteristics are what win Nate over in the end: "She was everything he wasn't—strong and brave, grounded in faith, happy with simplicity, certain of her place in the world and the hereafter."

Consequently, upon learning of her death from malaria, Nate is devastated and pays a very poignant homage to her: "Buried there was Rachel Lane, the bravest person he'd ever known because she had absolutely no fear of death. She welcomed it. She was at peace, her soul finally with the Lord, her body forever lying among the people she loved...He had never met anyone like Rachel Lane, and he missed her greatly."

Through Nate's reflections in the midst of his grief, Grisham portrays aspects of the missionary calling that others often miss: "Her death was tragic, but then it wasn't. She wasn't a young mother and wife who left a family behind. She didn't have a wide circle of friends who'd rush to mourn her passing. Only a handful of people in her native land would ever know she was gone."

These are somber but beautiful truths. They communicate very poignantly that the lot of the missionary is not one of celebrity or even casual recognition, but rather one of quiet, below-the-radar and behind-the-scenes service and anonymous sacrifice. Grisham eloquently illustrates Jesus' teaching that it is, after all, the meek who will inherit the earth.

### **Facilitating Discussions around *The Poisonwood Bible* and *The Testament***

Contemporary young people, including Christians, are being characterized as "people of the screen" as opposed to "people of the book." They are generally more adapted to "story" and "narrative" than they are to volumes of complex and densely-written material such as is found in standard textbooks.

Consequently, teachers have a difficult time finding written materials that will actually be read, explored, and retained. But given the opportunity, students are often able to consume fictional stories, discuss them in depth and profit from them in a variety of ways.

The two novels analyzed above are very useful when incorporated into undergraduate and/or graduate missionary training or assigned as independent studies in conjunction with pre-field orientation programs. They can be effectively used in classes that deal with cross-cultural adjustment, cross-cultural communication, the history of missions, missionary life and work, and similar courses of study.

The novels are not intended to replace, but rather to complement standard textbooks. From *The Poisonwood Bible*, for instance, teachers can facilitate discussions regarding the following.

1. **Motivations for missionary service.** As a supplement to Scott Sundquist's *Understanding Christian Mission*, *Poisonwood* can be used to discuss 'proper' motivations for missionary service. What would these be? Should candidates who are operating from a "salvation by works" motivation or who appear to be resolving issues of guilt by pursuing a missionary career be excluded from consideration? If so, on what basis? How could one test for such motivations?
2. **Family life in missions.** As a supplement to Dwight Baker and Robert Priest's *The Missionary Family*, Kingsolver's narrative could be used to discuss several issues regarding family in relation to missions. Is it possible that the required celibacy of Roman Catholic missionary personnel is actually a wiser approach than that of Protestantism? Or could a properly maintained family be a witness in itself—particularly in Majority World cultures? How does one determine a balanced perspective regarding family responsibilities versus ministry activities? What counsel could have been given to each of the Price family members—father, mother, and daughters?
3. **Government and mission agency administrative issues.** If a family's country of citizenship or mission agency orders them to evacuate the country in which they serve, should they obey without question? Or should they remain in the midst of an incendiary situation? Should the knowledge of 'the missionaries on the ground' outweigh the insistence of governments and missionary agencies, or do biblical principles of submission to authority have precedence?
4. **Missions and mental health.** As a supplement to Kelly O'Donnell's *Missionary Care*, *Poisonwood* can be used to discuss whether it is possible for missionary personnel to experience such trauma that they become certifiably insane, as was the case with Nathan Price. What is the responsibility of a mission agency, and what steps may be taken to either prevent such lapses or deal with them when they occur?
5. **Contextualization of the messenger.** As a supplement to Scott Moreau's *Contextualization in World Missions*, Kingsolver's work can be used to compare Nathan Price's approach to mission with that of Brother Fowles. What would be the pros and cons of each man's way of relating to the indigenous population? Is it true that theological 'liberals' are better able to relate to indigenous peoples? If such persons are more readily accepted in particular cultures, is this necessarily a 'good' thing?

Grisham's *The Testament*, on the other hand, can lead to discussions regarding the following.

1. **The focus, dedication and simplicity of the missionary lifestyle.** As a supplement to Harold Cook's *Missionary Life and Work*, *The Testament* can be used to demonstrate that since most missionaries today do NOT live in circumstances anything like those of Rachel, the idea of a 'simple lifestyle' will need to be adjusted. How would one

determine what simplicity consists of both in the developed and developing worlds?

2. **The need for patience and perseverance in missionary ministry.** As a supplement to Roland Allen's *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* Grisham's work can be used to discuss which criteria may be used for determining 'success' or 'failure' in mission settings. How long should one work in a specific manner before evaluating to see if changes are needed?
3. **Renunciation of Western culture.** As a supplement to Lesslie Newbigen's *Foolishness to the Greeks*, *The Testament* can be used to discuss what items are actually needed to perform ministry effectively. How does one determine from culture to culture what is 'materialistic' and what is 'spiritually appropriate,' avoiding the exportation of Western culture as an automatic accompaniment to the Christian gospel?
4. **Missionary communication.** As a supplement to David Hesselgrave's *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*, Grisham's work can be used to ask if all forms of communication of the gospel need necessarily be as 'stilted' and/or 'canned' as those of Rachel and Nate. What would be appropriate principles for communicating the gospel and effectively discipling new Christians?

Jesus—the Master Teacher—used numerous stories told in parabolic form to communicate the theological and moral truths He desired His followers to adopt. With careful attention and skill, *The Poisonwood Bible* and *The Testament* can be used with equal effectiveness today.

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