

# Tricky Subjects in Christian Fiction

HOW SHOULD CHRISTIAN  
NOVELISTS DEPICT DARKNESS,  
VIOLENCE, SWEARING, AND SEX?





## Introduction

Writing fiction as a Christian is hard.

Crafting a story that delivers a powerful, entertaining, and meaningful experience is difficult enough. Doing it faithfully as a Christian adds another dimension to the task.

Christian storytellers often wrestle with doubts about how to tackle tricky issues in their novels. How far is too far? How can you depict darkness in a moral fashion? Or violence? What about swearing and sex? Is portraying those last two appropriately even possible as a Christian storyteller?

This book is comprised of an article series we originally published on our site in October through November 2018 to answer those exact questions.

We hope that our thoughts on these topics help you discern how to approach them biblically in your own stories.

-Josiah DeGraaf

*Story Embers Editor-in-Chief*



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# Chapter One – Dear Christian Novelists: Cleanness is Not Next to Godliness

*By Josiah DeGraaf, Editor-in-Chief*

“Is he quite safe?”

“Safe? Who said anything about safe? Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”<sup>1</sup>

Mr. Beaver’s statement about Aslan in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* upends Lucy’s assumption that danger and goodness are incongruous. By extension, it challenges our perception of God and wise living—including the stories we feel safe writing.

We may not talk about “safe fiction” in Christian writing circles, but we have a similar concept: clean fiction. Many writers struggle to discern what classifies as clean. How far can we go without dirtying our stories? Where should we draw lines, and how can we avoid laying stumbling blocks for readers?

Clean fiction has a purpose, especially if the target audience expects it. Our submission standards here at Story Embers would be considered clean by most people. Yet I’m struck by how cleanness often becomes a moral imperative in the Christian writing field.

If *all* Christian fiction is clean, I’d contend that we’ve lost something.

## What Is a Clean Story?

Before tackling this topic, I need to make sure everyone is on the same page. Unsurprisingly, clean fiction is difficult to define. CleanIndieReads.com mandates “no erotica or sexually explicit content... minimal offensive language... [and] no graphic violence or gore.”<sup>2</sup> Fair enough. ThriftyandThriving.com, however, takes an alternate stance: “books [that] are not filled with swear words or sexual situations.”<sup>3</sup> Some places use a simpler rubric, prohibiting language, pervasive darkness, extreme violence, and sex.

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 86.

<sup>2</sup> “What Do We Mean by ‘Clean’?” Clean Indie Reads, accessed November 12, 2018, <https://cleanindiereads.com/clean-criteria/>.

<sup>3</sup> “Clean Books for Teens,” Thrifty & Thriving, last modified August 8, 2018, accessed November 12, 2018, <https://www.thriftyandthriving.com/clean-books-for-teens-girls/>.





To understand the meaning of this term, however, we need to examine practice as well as theory. Although sites like PluggedIn and VidAngel offer helpful services, they sometimes label bizarre items as negative elements. PluggedIn warns moviegoers that characters lie in *The Avengers*.<sup>4</sup> VidAngel allows parents to bleep nineteen “crude words” in *Toy Story* (unless you flinch at “stupid,” none of these are actually offensive).<sup>5</sup>

Certain genres also have checkpoints to abide by. Copyeditor Libby Sternberg describes some of the guidelines for inspirational fiction at a major publishing house: “I’ve had to refer to the guidelines to double-check if, say, it’s okay for the hero to say ‘for Pete’s sake’ (nope) or ‘jeez’ (nope) or can he play cards (nope) or drink (of course not)... No reference to Halloween, either.”<sup>6</sup> As Sternberg mentions in her article, Christian fiction in practice often follows the same restrictions.

Clean fiction is hard (impossible?) to define because people interpret cleanness differently. When we assess a book or movie as clean, we’re usually saying we’re *comfortable* with its content, and everyone has different levels of comfortability. For one person, any language at all is intolerable; for another, mild language is fine but harsher language is not. Hence, VidAngel lists “uncultured swine” as a phrase parents may want to bleep because they’re uncomfortable with their children hearing it.

While individual definitions vary, I would argue that a thread connects them all, and we can discover it by asking, “Clean from *what?*” Now, hopefully, that similarity becomes obvious:

*Clean fiction does not contain acts or words that might bother readers.*

## Clean by What Standard?

The above definition raises two questions: What acts or words bother readers? And, more importantly, is making readers uncomfortable *wrong*?

It certainly *can* be. But look at Scripture. Witches performed necromancy on dead prophets, Babylonian generals boasted that the besieged would drink their own urine, daughters conspired to get impregnated by their fathers, prophets wandered the streets naked—and that doesn’t even touch the last five chapters of

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Asay, “The Avengers,” PluggedIn, accessed November 12, 2018, <https://www.pluggedin.com/movie-reviews/avengers>.

<sup>5</sup> “Toy Story,” VidAngel, accessed November 12, 2018, <https://www.vidangel.com/movie/toy-story>.

<sup>6</sup> Libby Sternberg, “Christian Fiction Should Not Contain...,” *Libby’s Books*, September 23, 2017, accessed November 12, 2018, <https://libbysbooks.wordpress.com/2017/09/23/christian-fiction-should-not-contain/>.



Judges, which chronicle some of the darkest situations I've encountered in ancient literature, the lives of Roman emperors excepted.

Scripture doesn't seem to prioritize readers' comfort, nor are its passages clean by modern Christian criteria. Instead, we often draw stricter lines around what's acceptable to write about. After all, how many Christians would sanction poetry celebrating erotic love (Song of Solomon)? Or how many Christian writers would unabashedly describe feces spilling out of a dead king's body (Judges 3)? Scripture contains dozens of scenes that Christians would probably hesitate to approve in another context.

Why do we censor fiction more than Scripture?

Because many of us (myself included) like the idea of a sanitized reality.

We see fiction as an escape and don't want to show a grisly world in our storytelling. We fear that depicting vileness may imply vileness in *ourselves*. And we believe that sanitizing our stories helps us maintain purified souls.

But is this the standard Scripture follows? Scripture tells us that the world we live in is corrupt, yet it also states that we *can't* remove ourselves from the world. This is no less true in storytelling. We are not to condone or engage in activity that Scripture forbids, but depiction does not equal endorsement. We delude ourselves and readers when we equate cleanness with godliness and offer that as the only option in Christian fiction.

## **We Can't Purge Life's Impurities**

In our Christian Storytellers Manifesto, we call Christian writers to affirm that we have the freedom "to portray the full human experience in all its beauty and depravity."<sup>7</sup> The general wording of this clause was first proposed by staff members Sierra, Christi, and MacKenzie at our 2018 summer retreat, and when I heard it, I paused to consider the connotations.

*Are writers commissioned to portray the full human experience in all its beauty and depravity? Because that means everything in the real world has a place in fiction. Everything.*

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<sup>7</sup> "Christian Storyteller's Manifesto," Story Embers, October 9, 2018, accessed November 12, 2018, <https://storyembers.org/manifesto/>.



I realized I had to agree. As human beings, we need to *understand* reality's ugliness and splendor from both a rational perspective (through principle) and an emotional perspective (through story). We don't get a pass. To deepen our grasp of the full human experience, we *need* stories that display it.

No topic is therefore outside the bounds of storytelling.

Since parts of the human experience are tainted, some—if not many—stories will *need* to depict details that are less than clean. We can't omit facets of reality from Christian fiction if we intend to fulfill our obligation to be truth-tellers. Readers need the truth, the *whole* truth, and nothing but the truth.

## How to Depict Unclean Things

Although we're free to portray all of reality because readers need authentic stories, we have a responsibility to do so *appropriately*. The fact that people swear does not license us to pack our books with the worst curse words we can find.

Neither is every storyteller equipped to address tricky subjects. Some authors may be unable to handle certain subjects without falling into sin due to individual weaknesses. Not only that, but one writer *can't* encapsulate all of reality in a single book. I'm not insisting that all storytellers depict these subjects, but that we shouldn't reject them as taboo in Christian storytelling.

When we undertake this charge, though, we may be unsure how to wisely navigate tricky subjects. Romans 14 reminds us not to violate our consciences. But how do we properly calibrate our consciences to begin with?

Talking with other Christian storytellers has been invaluable as I've formulated my own views. At the 2018 Story Embers staff retreat, we set aside a whole evening to discuss tricky subjects on a hike. None of us knew each other's views beforehand, but wrestling through tough issues with other strong, thoughtful Christian writers was immensely helpful and encouraging.

We emerged from the conversation with a desire to provide our audience at Story Embers with the same opportunity.

So, over October and November of 2019, we published articles on how to discreetly depict four different tricky subjects in Christian fiction, which have become the following chapters in this book. Many of these chapters draw from the conclusions we arrived at during the retreat. A different staff member wrote each one, and in a designated section at the end of each chapter, other staff members will share their thoughts. We hope these explorations will spark helpful thoughts about these topics. Our goal is to give you various



perspectives to evaluate alongside Scripture so you can articulate your own position and determine how to approach these topics.

## Cleanness and Godliness

Cleanness is a complicated concept to define in storytelling. But I don't believe Christians should focus on writing clean fiction exclusively. As Mr. Beaver pointed out, safety and goodness don't always go hand in hand. Instead, we should aim to write fiction that showcases the full human experience in an honest yet appropriate fashion.

In Philippians 4:8, Paul exhorts us to meditate on the true, the good, and the beautiful. But we err if we interpret this to mean we should shun the false, the evil, and the hideous. After all, Paul began his epistle to the Romans by explicating man's monstrosities. Rather, I'd posit that he's urging us to contemplate the nature of the ideal reality whether we are looking upon beauty or depravity.

As fiction writers, we help readers to meditate on the true, the good, and the beautiful not by avoiding depictions of evil, but by crafting our stories so that readers glimpse the beatific reality beyond the shadows.

Fiction writing is a dangerous business. Portraying the full human experience in all its beauty and depravity is no small task. Nor is it necessarily a clean one. But when we use the contrast between light and darkness to reveal people's need for salvation and God's goodness in a broken and vicious world, our stories have power.





# Chapter Two – How Should Christian Authors Depict Darkness?

*By Hope Ann, Communications Coordinator*

Light is a paradox. Without darkness, the light's ability to reveal hidden wonders and dangers would be lessened. Without the night to conceal, gloom can't be driven away by dawn. Without shadows for contrast, even the brightest light cannot manifest its full strength. This is true of the gospel as well as writing.

Hence, we must approach "clean" Christian fiction with wariness. If we value truth, we cannot afford to whitewash and ignore reality to satisfy a market of readers who have taken the idea of clean fiction to an extreme. If we avoid the darkness, we risk undermining the truth by casting it in a misty, uncontested light.

To emblazon the truth in our writing, we must show the opposing darkness.

## Why We Need Darkness in Fiction

If sin isn't a temptation, redemption has no point. If death isn't a threat, life becomes worthless. During Jesus's ministry, He could have healed Lazarus with a single word as soon as He heard His friend was sick. Instead, He waited until Lazarus had been entombed so that God's power could be displayed in resurrecting him.

In Romans 9:17, Paul states, "For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, 'For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be proclaimed in all the earth.'"<sup>8</sup> God allows evil to fight against Him, not because He can't defeat it, but because His triumph over the darkness magnifies His radiance.

The world is dark. Catastrophes happen. People die. Fear and depression abound. Every day we hear reports of murder, assault, lust, and cult activity. Due to sin's curse, we don't live in a happy, "puppies and rainbows" type of place.

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<sup>8</sup> Romans 9:17, ESV.



So we read. We meet heroes and see the results of good and evil. Courage and inspiration arise from the stories. The emotions linger long after we've forgotten the words, influencing our view of the world and ourselves.

The truth a story presents won't become false if it appears in a field of flowers under clear skies, but a candle will pale in the sunshine. On the other hand, a lone torch flaring on a battlefield at midnight will draw the attention of everyone within sight.

Darkness does not alter truth. It does, however, provide a backdrop that discloses the alternative to truth, giving readers a reason to care. They know the world has darkness because they've wrestled with it. If we want to touch readers, we need to confront truth with reality, not a straw mask of trivial problems.

Unless hope vanquishes terrors and doubts in our stories, we've accomplished nothing. To reinforce truth, we must demonstrate its uncompromising endurance against darkness.

## Setting the Focus

No matter our intent, darkness must be handled with caution. We do not want our stories to flood readers' minds with darkness to highlight a truth. Nor should we immerse our imaginations in grotesque imagery as we're writing.

The key to writing a dark story is the focus. The level of darkness will vary depending on style, theme, genre, and audience. However, we need to evaluate our story's overall goal, as well as the purpose of each scene. What message are we trying to communicate?

Philippians 4:8 commands us to meditate on the honest, just, pure, and lovely. When evil is portrayed accurately (the honest) with ensuing consequences (the just) to accentuate truth (the pure and lovely), darkness falls into this category. If we describe a human sacrifice merely to generate shock, that will not satisfy the qualifications of the above verse. The same sort of scene, however, could be impactful if the atrocities the character is struggling to escape were contrasted with God's grace.

If our stories don't contain any darkness, we should return to Philippians 4:8 and make sure we're being honest about reality and effectively brandishing the truth. Although we might be able to write a book without darkness, the deeper we delve into the truth, the greater the lies that will challenge it. If we neglect to develop darkness in our story worlds and characters, we risk failing to exhibit truth in its full glory.



## Four Recommendations for Handling Darkness

While writing a dark scene, first remember your focus. Don't gloss over uncomfortable details just to protect your sensitivities. The Bible speaks of a woman petitioning Israel's king to force another woman to honor her vow to cook her son so they could survive the famine caused by the siege. This is accompanied by the realization of how far Israel had fallen and the king's own horror and sorrow. Yet, when Scripture records human sacrifice, it uses the phrase "making their children pass through the flame" instead of graphic descriptions. Thus, include enough details to paint a clear picture of the situation, but don't go overboard.

The second factor to consider is your target age group. Obviously, a young adult novel can address harsher realities than middle grade. In the former, a man might wander through a red-light district and stay until morning, with enough details to establish the setting and hint at his choices. In the latter, this topic might not even be broached. If immorality were part of such a story, it would probably be woven into the subtext. The characters' emotions and the sin's ramifications would be emphasized more than the action itself.

Thirdly, plan out the truth you aim to convey, then use your setting, culture, and plot to underline it. If your theme is love, create a culture where love is self-centered, sensual and pleasurable, or rooted in survival of the fittest and rife with betrayal. Then manipulate this setting to test and prove your message through the bitterest of trials.

Finally, don't concentrate solely on events, but also the characters' emotions, whether they're victims or witnesses of the aftermath. No matter how appalling a death, blood spatters and crushed skulls won't stir empathy, whereas palpable grief and alarm will. Build the character's arc to underscore the tragedy of a life cut short. Maybe he is murdered while preparing a gift for his son or en route to ask a friend's forgiveness. You can capture his last thoughts, as well as the emotions of onlookers and mourners. These reactions will expose the depth of your story's darkness like nothing else.

## Staff Perspectives

To develop a character to the fullest degree, a writer must seal herself inside his skin. If the character has a wicked heart, this intimacy becomes dangerous for both the writer and readers. Choosing the wrong point of view can plunge a murky scene into utter blackness.

Since every person on earth is guilty of falling into temptation, characters should be flawed, but an evil character will embrace his depravity rather than striving (or yearning) to overcome it. Writing a torture



scene from the POV of a tyrant who relishes inflicting pain versus a guard who follows orders but secretly loathes himself will produce two entirely different results.

Whether readers realize it or not, the POV character conditions them to accept or reject truths and lies according to his thoughts and actions. This is why writers need to be cautious about entering a villain's POV. Since he gazes at the world through a darkened lens, portraying evil from his perspective for too long and too deeply can throw a story off balance. If time must be spent with an evil character, don't forsake realism by toning him down, but consider whether the scene could be better conveyed through another conduit.

–Brianna Storm Hilvety, *Managing Editor & Graphics Director*

When I encounter elements of darkness in a story, my impression is not only based on the depiction but also on whether I see hope. When I mention hope, I don't mean wishful thinking, such as longing for snow on Christmas. That's an uncertain hope. True hope is expecting, knowing, and believing God's unwavering promises (Titus 1:2, Heb. 6:19).

I love Nadine Brandes' motivation for writing the Out of Time series: "I got sucked into The Hunger Games and, after that, Divergent, but had a hard time feeling hopeful by the end of those two series. So I started diving into an old story idea of mine with the goal of showing that hope can still overcome, no matter how despairing the darkness is."<sup>9</sup>

Though the world suffers from death, violence, hunger, pain, wrongdoing, and injustice, we have a hope that combats the darkness. It will overcome no matter how disheartening a situation seems. Hope helps us navigate the reality of darkness.

–Rolena Hatfield, *Outreach Manager*

## Depicting Darkness Appropriately

In the end, your message will be as strong as the enemies you pit against it. Compelling stories reflect the multifaceted reality of darkness and light that surrounds us.

Though we have a truth that cannot be destroyed, we must test it, and when it emerges victorious, it will shine brighter for being irrefutable.

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<sup>9</sup> "Interview on Dystopian and YA Literature with Author Nadine Brandes," Kingdom Pen, July 21, 2017, accessed October 12, 2018, <https://kingdompen.org/interview-on-dystopian-and-ya-literature-with-author-nadine-brandes-giveaway/>.



# Chapter Three – How Should Christian Authors Depict Violence?

*By Daeus Lamb, Community Director*

Should you write a scene of human sacrifice where the priest cuts out the victim's [bleep] with a stone knife, the body [bleep], and the blood [bleepity bleep bleep]? (I'm trying to be sensitive here.)

These kinds of questions plague Christian writers—especially beginners and those who have been raised without exposure to brutality. Even writers who have firm convictions sometimes struggle to discern whether a certain degree of violence is excessive or not.

This article won't answer all your questions, but it should help you better understand the violence issue and exercise wise judgement.

## Why Christians Should Depict Violence

To prove that violence has a place in Christian fiction, we need to examine writing theory. Here at Story Embers, one of the tenets we uphold is that compelling stories should reflect the full human experience. Humans are creatures of reason and emotion, and to “take every thought captive,” we must address both aspects of our nature. Fiction excels at exploring our emotions and humanity in any situation or walk of life. When we ban facets of the human experience from fiction, we're limiting our God-assigned dominion over the earth. Because violence is one of the world's harsh realities, it belongs in our fictional worlds to expand our emotional development—not in every novel, but many. If we always avoid it, we're being dishonest.

But how graphic should we be? I would argue that vividness is necessary at times. We do this, not because we *want* to highlight violence, but because we *need* to. If an author omits all the details, he isn't dealing with violence at all. Compare these two scenes:

*#1: I turned away. I couldn't watch Billy die.*

*“And now, for my ultimate victory!” Ruthgar shouted.*

*When I dared to look, Billy was dead and Ruthgar was putting his ax away.*





*#2: I turned away. I couldn't watch Grandpa die.*

*"Any moment now," the doctor said.*

*When I dared to look, Grandpa was dead. The doctor fidgeted awkwardly with his glasses.*

With the specifics of the beheading removed, the first scene is almost indistinguishable from the second. But the two should be markedly different. I'm not asserting that violent details are imperative or right for every story, but if Christians have the power to shine light on any dismal circumstance, we can do the same as novelists.

A raw portrayal of physical and emotional anguish, properly handled, has multiple benefits:

1. It exposes man's fallenness, prevents us from being overly trusting, and prompts us to consider our own sin and spiritual helplessness.
2. It reminds us of our frailty and mortality. In our age of medical breakthroughs and rewritten fairy tales where all the grimness has been extracted, we rarely think about death, and the consequences are significant—pride, love of the world, apathy for the human condition.
3. It debunks people's romanticization of battle.
4. It prepares us for hardships we may encounter down the road. Readers who hide from affliction might be unable to cope when they face it in real life.
5. Finally, to state the obvious, it builds intensity in a story.

One of the biggest advantages of violence, though, does not involve its dark attributes but how it magnifies times of healing. *The Count of Monte Cristo* was correct, at least in part. People who have endured suffering do tend to cherish happiness and peace all the more.

## **A Word of Caution**

Although violence can be expertly used in the hands of a master storyteller, we need to be aware of the hazards before diving in. Even if some violence is permissible, we may try to shy away from it as much as possible. I disagree with this mentality, but I know the downsides to violence firsthand, because one of my readers felt wounded, betrayed, and defiled by a scene I wrote (though it wasn't extremely violent).

Violent scenes are powerful and can scar people. This article's purpose is not to discuss whether writers are responsible for protecting readers from emotional harm, but if you wish to study the topic, [check out my post](#) about guarding our minds and hearts while choosing reading material.



We can never predict readers' sensitivities. When violence distresses us, it's usually because we sense an overpowering, invasive darkness, not because we're squeamish. However, the content that causes one person's skin to crawl may be something we don't expect—as in the instance I referenced above. Hopefully this mystery will be unraveled, but until then we can only do our best.

Writing violence can also negatively affect us. If we've created a vicious world and forget to include glimmers of hope, we could become cynical and lose our grasp on objective truth. Even worse, we might start reveling in the pain we inflict on our characters.

Finally, an inordinate amount of violence could tarnish our Christian witness. If readers leave our books with the impression that we relish sending characters through hell, they may be confused when they discover that we believe in a God who gave His Son to save people from hell.

The cost of writing violence appears high, but remember the proverbial baby in the bathwater (such a violent metaphor, sheesh). Surely a solution exists, but what is it?

## How to Depict Violence Appropriately and Effectively

The time has come to untangle this conundrum. Violence has inescapable dangers, but it is also necessary. If you're like me, a paradox makes you want to tear the world apart to find an answer.

When I read James 3:1, peace settled over me: "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, because you know that we will be judged more strictly."<sup>10</sup>

Although this verse about pastors may not seem comforting at first, it contains a surprisingly encouraging principle for novelists. All pastors will be judged for their teaching, but how many pastors preach pure truth their entire lives as if they were the mouth of God? Since pastors are human, they will err occasionally.

However, James isn't urging listeners to stay away from teaching because they might stumble. Instead, he's warning teachers to be vigilant. In a sense, novelists are teachers and thus risk communicating falsehoods. But as long as we understand the gravity of our task, we're ready to put pen to paper.

Although we're unlikely to write a foolproof novel that would never disconcert anyone, we can try by following seven guidelines.

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<sup>10</sup> James 3:1, New English Translation.



- 1. Seek counsel from various sources.** Everyone will yank us in different directions and we'll have to disappoint some people, but even if we reject a viewpoint, we may glean insights from it. For example, I might write a murder scene from the killer's point of view despite someone's objections, but that critiquer might help me realize that the killer's internal monologue is disturbing and needs toned down. If we only heed advice that affirms our opinions, we could easily become misguided radicals.
- 2. Keep the target audience in mind.** If we're writing for middle graders, we should restrict the violence to that level. If we're writing for adults, we can scale it up.
- 3. Never glorify destruction.** Battle is not without honor, but sometimes an author represents a cataclysm as awesome and unquestionable like a god. I hesitantly mention *The Sword in the Stars* by Wayne Thomas Batson. It's a wonderful book, but violence overwhelmed the final scenes. Perhaps this tactic isn't inherently faulty, and I believe Batson was trying to make his villain intimidating (which I admire), but evil seemed to possess all the power throughout the story. Ending on a note of desolation dimmed the positive elements that had been woven in. The spotlight was slightly more on evil's vigor than the search for truth. In contrast, I bring up *Hero of Ages*. In one chapter, a character blatantly worships violence and destruction, but his behavior is meant to be ironic. Readers aren't supposed to sympathize with him. People were butchered, but the massacre was displayed as tragic. To offset death and ruin, we need to demonstrate that hope is greater.
- 4. Funnel the horror.** Violence tends to evoke one of two reactions: shock or an oppressive feeling of darkness. Sometimes these two occur together, but they don't need to. Shock can be culture changing. For instance, abolitionists once told me that people shrug when they learn that babies are *aborted* in a nearby building. But, upon hearing that babies are *killed* there, people exclaim, "Whaaaat!" Ghastly details are alarming, and the key is to channel this response. Shocking readers for no reason is unkind. Violence should have thematic impact, testing characters' faithfulness to their convictions, punishing them when they're foolish, and shaking how they view the world.
- 5. Never endorse unbiblical justification for violence.** In a scene from *The Inheritance Cycle*, Roran decides to kill two guards to help his crew escape. Allowing a character to act pragmatically isn't wrong, but in this case the author seemed to personally support the choice. Maybe another reader would have interpreted the scene differently, but that was my impression. To keep from promoting humanistic rationale for violence, we need to study Scripture.
- 6. To be extra safe, we could print a content advisory at the beginning of our books.**



## 7. Pray.

### Staff Perspectives

In film, one of the most repulsive depictions of violence I've seen wasn't the gory battles in *Hacksaw Ridge* or any of the other R-rated movies I've watched—it was the arrow scene in *Guardians of the Galaxy 2*. Though the violence was relatively minimal in that film, showing hundreds of characters dying to the rock-and-roll beat of “Come a Little Bit Closer” painted the slaughter as comedic. Sure, people are dying and screaming in agony, but these are the antagonists—their lives are worthless, right? Aren't we free to laugh at their deaths?

On the contrary, if we truly value human life as Christians, that needs to extend to how we portray violence and death in fiction. In my opinion, violence becomes problematic when we use it improperly, regardless of how graphic or rampant it is. We can either remind readers that human life is precious (*Hacksaw Ridge*) or cheapen it for the sake of a joke. If every human being, whether good or evil, is created in God's image, treating any life as worthless is, in a sense, a form of blasphemy. If we want to honor God in our storytelling, that means striving to ascribe value to human life—no matter whose it is.

—Josiah DeGraaf, *Editor-in-Chief*

Some girls can handle blood and gore, but not me. That's one reason why I write children's books. I don't have to deal with those things—or do I? Many children's authors make the mistake of distorting violence. Villains are entirely unthreatening and commit nothing more treacherous than squashing the protagonist's cupcake. This may be fine in some instances or in picture books, but a story full of sunshine will give children the wrong impression of the world and cause them to lack discernment regarding danger. I would shudder if I ever ruined a child's innocence, but if I exclude all violence, I would be hurting children in a different way.

How do we balance reality yet maintain the purity and wonder of childhood? Children's books can have the same violence as adult books—minus the graphic descriptions. For example, dinosaur attacks are common in my books. Instead of reporting that the person's intestines oozed out, I could have the character hear screaming that suddenly stopped, and later he'd find bloodstains and T. Rex footprints on the ground. This implies violence rather than showing it, yet the threat is still real. Also, violence can be counteracted by introducing a strong sense of light into the story. *The Last Battle* could be considered violent, but C. S. Lewis never tarnished children's innocence because of the overarching theme of hope.



–Mariposa Aristeo, *Graphics, Email & Instagram Manager*

## **Preparing for Battle**

I've always enjoyed an exciting fight scene or murder mystery. Violence can enrich a story, but like a fire that either heats a house or burns it down, it's dangerous as well as useful. Thankfully we have the Holy Spirit to guide us. Let's not quench the Spirit, but listen to our consciences and walk in humility. Then we can take the leap.





# Chapter Four – How Should Christian Authors Depict Swearing?

*By Sierra Ret, Social Media Strategist*

Swearing, like most subjects in the Christian community, has created its share of controversy. Are English words, which are nothing more than subjective pairings of vowels and consonants, offensive to the Almighty, or only when combined with His name? Should we avoid saying certain words around children? What about typing them out?

These are all questions that Christian writers are forced to resolve at some point in their careers. You've likely grappled with them if you've ever read the language section of a Plugged In review. They boil down to one key quandary: Should Christians include swearing in their writing?

The answer goes beyond a simple yes or no. Since our goal as Christian storytellers is to glorify God in our speech and actions, let's look at Scripture's teaching on foul language.

## **Biblical Condemnation Against Swearing**

Though Scripture doesn't specifically list the words or phrases we should shun, the New Testament provides several instructions for godly speech.

"Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving."<sup>11</sup>

"From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so."<sup>12</sup>

We are to bless, not curse, and express our thankfulness, not indulge in rude or profane speech. But most importantly, "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ephesians 5:4, ESV.

<sup>12</sup> James 3:10, ESV.

<sup>13</sup> Exodus 20:7, ESV.



This is not an optional recommendation, but a solemn command not to debase the holiness of the Lord's name. Unlike curse words that fall in and out of use, this mandate is constant throughout the ages. Nowadays "OMG" is thrown about carelessly by even young children, but this habit should not be present among the redeemed.

## Biblical Instances of Swearing

We should all be able to agree that profanity is distasteful. Ideally, man should speak with a clean, loving heart and tongue all the time. But dichotomy often exists between exemplary behavior and humanity's sin nature.

In 1 Samuel 20, after King Saul discovers that his son was protecting David, he hurls this insult: "You son of a perverse and rebellious woman! Don't I know that you have sided with the son of Jesse to your own shame?"<sup>14</sup> The euphemistic Hebrew translation can be easily understood by substituting the modern term, "You son of a \*\*\*\*!"

The Old Testament writer is being descriptive, not prescriptive. Far from condoning bad language, he's emphasizing the degree of King Saul's corruptness in verbally attacking his son (and by extension, his wife). The writer could have used a more general phrase, such as "Saul's wrath was kindled against Jonathan," but that might have lessened the emotional impact.

In Philippians 3, Paul contrasts the value of worldly ambitions with Christ: "Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For His sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ."<sup>15</sup>

"Rubbish" seems a lackluster translation considering that the Greek word *skubalon* literally means "excrement." Since the word appears only once in the Bible but much more frequently in non-literary historical documents, Paul seems to have deliberately chosen an expletive to shock his audience. Its offensiveness likely falls somewhere between "crap" and the s-word.<sup>16</sup>

This cannot be passed off as vulgarity from a degenerate biblical character the way that Saul's can. Paul is redeemed in Christ and still brandishes this term, whereas elsewhere he exhorts others to "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> 1 Samuel 20:30, NIV.

<sup>15</sup> Philippians 3:8, ESV.

<sup>16</sup> Daniel Wallace, "A Brief Word Study on Skubalon," Bible.org, October 1, 2007, accessed November 12, 2018, <https://bible.org/article/brief-word-study-font-facegreekskubalonfont>.

<sup>17</sup> Ephesians 4:29, ESV.



Paul employs this language for the purpose of teaching, not as an angry attack or out of laziness. Given the extreme flexibility of the f-word as a noun, verb, or adjective, swearing tends to replace creativity. But as the most prolific and educated New Testament writer, Paul was capable of producing a more genteel term. Instead, he selected a word that nevertheless accurately conveys the revulsion we should feel toward life apart from Christ.

The Bible contains several other examples of vulgar word usage, but out of consideration for the younger demographic in our audience, we will skirt them. In summary, two possible reasons to include swearing in fiction are: A) to demonstrate a character's depravity, and B) to stress a point.

## How to Depict Swearing with Wisdom

Now that we've established our biblical foundation, we're equipped to tackle our next topic: How should we tailor our writing for our audience?

Since some Christians view swearing or misusing the Lord's name as heinous, we should be aware that our work will be judged and perhaps boycotted if it contains anything questionable. But violence, drinking, or romance poses the same risk, so we must choose our battles wisely.

Being a Christian storyteller does not mean obscuring sin's ugliness or portraying it inaccurately. But a strong element of discretion is involved. Children and adults alike can understand the stories of Joseph and Potiphar's wife and David and Bathsheba without displaying the grisly details of adultery. As we consider how to deal with language, we should ask ourselves whether we're writing stories for adults to explore alone or to read aloud to the entire family. Having a clear vision of our audience should simplify content decisions.

Oftentimes, made-up exclamations in fantasy or brief statements that a character cursed can function the same as literal profanity. In cases to the contrary, apply the biblical guidelines discussed earlier. For the most part, conveying a character's obscenity should be possible without spelling it out.

One frequent abuse of swearing in secular culture is the misconception that injecting an expletive into a joke's punchline automatically makes it funny. This flippancy encourages people to see swearing as light and fun instead of filthy. Thus, "crude joking" as condemned in Ephesians 5 should be avoided if our goal is to provoke laughter instead of a cringe.

Another challenge is characters who compulsively swear, especially when the stories happen in real life (several military biographies I've read spring to mind). Omitting strong language will likely ring false to



readers, yet its true-to-life form will oversaturate our pages with expletives. Vulgar language easily pervades our thoughts, so reading and writing it can be spiritually unhealthy for both writers and readers. Deciding to include it should not be taken lightly.

I would personally advocate using strong language in moderation (and only if the context demands it), with the frequency heavily determined by the age of the audience.

Some might argue that Christians should never blaspheme, but showing characters doing it is fine since they're only mimicking people's real speech. This is true to an extent (writing a character who commits murder doesn't make the author a murderer), but out of concern for readers' minds and as a stylistic choice, I would keep this to a minimum in my own writing.

## Staff Perspectives

I have an advantage in navigating strong language since I write fantasy, which allows me to invent words that are offensive in my fictional culture but not to readers. However, this doesn't remove all potential quandaries.

When I'm evaluating whether to include swear words in dialogue, one of the first questions I ask is what impact I want the scene to have on readers and the characters. To reflect and showcase the power of language, I prefer to reserve cursing for intense scenes.

If I decide a scene needs forceful dialogue, I then consider whether the dialogue can be equally vehement without a swear word. If so, I'll avoid using a swear word so I can exercise more creativity in my prose. If not, and cussing is the best way to convey the character's emotions and personality, I'll insert real swear words.

Though people don't always restrain language in real life, literary dialogue never perfectly imitates speech, but instead seeks to *resemble* it in a way that emphasizes whatever needs to be communicated. As a result, I only bring out the "big guns" if I believe they're necessary to the scene.

–Josiah DeGraaf, *Editor-in-Chief*

After much study, I've come to accept foul language as an appropriate writing tool in certain situations, but one area I still deem untouchable is blasphemy.

Because God's name is holy and awesome, it's inherently different from all other swear words, which are inappropriate, derogatory, or cruel. Defaming the name of our Creator is much more serious than



employing vulgar words for vulgar purposes. In the Old Testament, blasphemy was a capital offense. Even if we distance ourselves from characters who blaspheme in our stories, God's name, which should be precious to us, is still being dishonored.

Can we ever write a character blaspheming without violating the third commandment? I'm not yet ready to make an absolute statement. After all, I believe we can include other swear words in fiction. However, I must soberly ask, is God's name so suitable for showing a character's frustration or dismay that I can't rely on another word? If I use God's name when another word would suffice (and I think another option is always available), then that seems like vain and empty treatment of His hallowed name.

–Daeus Lamb, *Community Manager*

## **The Power of Words**

Words carry weight, even when spoken by imaginary characters in fantasy worlds. Ultimately, we want readers to judge our stories by quality, not the quantity of expletives. Seeking to implement the principles laid out in Scripture regarding strong language should give clarity to our next word-choice dilemma.





# Chapter Five – How Should Christian Authors Depict Sex?

*By Josiah DeGraaf, Editor-in-Chief*

“One day we two were reading for delight about how love had mastered Lancelot; we were alone and innocent and felt no cause to fear. And as we read, at times we went pale, as we caught each other’s glance, but we were conquered by one point alone.

“For when we read that the much-longed-for-smile accepted such a gentle lover’s kiss, this man, whom nothing will divide from me, trembled to place his lips upon my mouth... That day we did not read another page.”<sup>18</sup>

Weighty implications are contained in the last words (“we did not read another page”) of Paolo and Francesca’s adulterous relationship in Dante’s *Inferno*. Like many medieval writers, Dante had few qualms with addressing sexual relationships in his work—though his beliefs about illicit acts are clearer than most (setting your story in hell helps).

Of all the topics we’ve covered in our tricky subjects series, sex may be the most controversial. Yet, in the ongoing aftermath of the sexual revolution, sex is possibly the most *relevant* subject of the four in our current culture.

That’s why we need to get it right as Christian storytellers. In a world where the gods of sexual pleasure pose strong opposition to Christianity, we *need* Christian storytellers who are ready to write about sexuality appropriately and biblically.

The only question is *how*.

Today I want to outline seven principles to consider when incorporating sex into our stories.

(Note to our younger readers: This chapter will *not* be graphic or crass, but it *will* be frank about sex in fiction. Exercise wisdom as you assess if you’re mature enough to continue reading.)

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<sup>18</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, trans. Anthony Esolen (New York: Modern Library, 2005), 53.



## 1. Sex Is Good

Though this may seem obvious, sometimes a conspicuous truth can be overlooked. And since sex is an outlier in our discussions the past five weeks, our intentions might be misinterpreted.

The previous subjects in this series were negative. Darkness is a reflection of a twisted society in rebellion against God; violence may be necessary at times but nonetheless is a repercussion of a world still waiting for peace; and swearing is violence in words. None of these were present in Edenic paradise.

But sex was.

Why point this out? When sex is lumped into the same category as darkness, violence, and swearing in fiction, classifying it as negative becomes easy. While inappropriate depictions of sex (in vogue at this moment in history) are undeniably bad, if sex is *truly* a positive aspect of creation, appropriate depictions of it can be good.

Such depictions, of course, do have unique dangers. Unlike other tricky subjects, sex is *not* evil, but it *does* have more power to tempt readers.

To understand how to appropriately depict sex in storytelling, however, we must start with this foundation: No matter how people misuse it, sex is part of God's design.

## 2. Readers Need Stories that Depict Sex Appropriately

For the past forty to fifty years, our culture has openly rejected biblical principles governing sexuality. This is one of the biggest hurdles for unbelievers to cross when evaluating Christianity, and sex presents a major temptation for believers as well.

However, we can't expect to fully solve the problem by writing nonfiction books that explain why the biblical worldview on sex brings the most long-term happiness and success for individuals and communities. Why? Because people usually spurn biblical teaching due to *desires* rather than *beliefs*. The desire for sexual pleasure runs deep, and if people are to resist it, they need changed *mindsets* and *perspectives*. They need works aimed at their minds *and* hearts.

This is the advantage of storytelling.



Great stories impact individuals and cultures by emotional appeals that embody beliefs in narrative form and powerfully *show* readers truth. Our culture needs stories like Randy Alcorn's *Dominion*, which examines premarital and teenage sex, or Francine River's *Mark of the Lion*, which explores biblical truth amid a sexually depraved society. We need stories that don't shy away from sex because of its dangers but that steer our thoughts in the right direction—believers and unbelievers alike.

Past Christian storytellers didn't have an aversion to sex. In Edmund Spenser's *The Fairy Queene*, the protagonist forfeits a "perfect" virgin bride for an adulteress and spends considerable time with her before he regrets his action and realizes his need for deliverance. Sexual and adulterous affairs intersperse Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (the definitive work of Arthurian legends). Chaucer and Boccaccio constantly deal with such matter in *Canterbury Tales* and *The Decameron* (though they don't always handle it appropriately). *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, translated by Tolkien, focuses on the protagonist nearly being dragged into adultery. And we haven't even touched Shakespeare yet.

Christian authors of previous eras didn't treat sex as taboo because Scripture doesn't shun it. This doesn't mean *every* Christian author must write about sex. Much of the human experience doesn't involve sex, and our culture needs reminded of that as well. However, sex *is* a valid topic for Christian storytellers to tackle.

### 3. We Must Know Our Audience

If we feel called to delve into sex in our stories (and not everyone is), how should we depict it? Pinpointing our target audience is crucial when undertaking any tricky subject, but it's perhaps most applicable for this one.

I'm not talking about the fact that we shouldn't write stories about sex for children, but that a huge spectrum exists within YA and adult audiences. Though most teens can handle appropriate conversations about sex (I regularly discuss sex and chastity with my ninth and eleventh grade English students), the information a ninth grader can absorb and process will be different than the threshold for a forty-year-old married couple.

Interestingly, children in ancient Israel weren't allowed to read Song of Solomon until a certain age (at least according to claims)—not because the book contained anything wrong, but because even good literature may not be suitable for all ages. When writing about sex, we need to consider how much our readers can or should handle.



## 4. Remember the Seventh Commandment

As I mentioned in my first principle, though sex is not evil, it qualifies as a tricky subject because it has a *strong* ability to cause readers to lust if depicted indiscreetly. Knowing how to thread this needle is difficult and requires wisdom, but here are two sub-principles to keep in mind:

**1. We *are* responsible for depicting sexual matters appropriately.** Christ warned His disciples that one should rather tie a millstone to his neck and throw himself into the sea than cause a “little one” to sin. “Little one” refers to His disciples (our brothers and sisters in Christ), not just children. The dozens of minute decisions we make as storytellers must be for the goal of cultivating an understanding of reality, not sexual gratification.

Christian authors need to be especially cautious with lustful point-of-view characters, who have the potential to engage readers in the protagonist’s pursuit of sin. A series by a well-known Christian fantasy author ostensibly promoted chastity with a protagonist who waited until marriage to lose his virginity. However, the protagonist didn’t easily follow this course and frequently lusted after various women. This was depicted so extremely that I struggled to read the story without being pulled into his sinful thoughts.

**2. However, we are *not* responsible for the sins of our readers.** Some people will use anything as an excuse to lust. Some men will lust for a woman no matter how conservatively she’s dressed. The same applies to stories. We are accountable to God for our own sins, but not for the sins others choose to commit—even if they blame our work. We pray for God’s guidance and strive to portray actions as appropriately as we can. But when we’ve fulfilled that burden, how readers respond is up to them.

## 5. Don’t Avoid Writing about Sexual Sin

If storytelling is to mimic reality and “accurately reveal the brokenness of the world,” not all of the protagonists in Christian fiction should be virgins.<sup>19</sup>

Protagonists aren’t supposed to be perfect role models for readers to emulate (that honor belongs to Christ). They’re supposed to be flawed characters in need of God’s grace and redemption. This pertains to sexual ethics along with “regular” ethics.

Don’t be afraid of writing about protagonists who sin sexually—even horrendously. Look at Abraham, Jacob, Judah, Samson, David, and Solomon. We do need Josephs who stand strong and remind readers

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<sup>19</sup> “The Christian Storytellers Manifesto.”



that resistance is always possible. But we also need Davids who reassure readers that even if they fall into horrible patterns of sin, God's grace can overcome.

Three works that do this well are *The Last Disciple* by Sigmund Brouwer, *Fairy Queene* by Edmund Spenser, and *The Echoes from the Edge* series by Bryan Davis (which is a useful example of how to cover sexuality for Christian teens). All three feature protagonists who sin—whether by engaging in premarital sex or making immoral marriage choices—and are offered God's grace.

Of course, this principle applies to antagonists as well as protagonists. If we have the courage to show protagonists who sexually sin, we shouldn't hesitate to show antagonists who do the same. But since the former comes easier for Christian writers, I'm focusing on it here. The protagonists-are-virgins/antagonists-are-harlots dichotomy doesn't accurately represent reality and God's grace toward sinners.

## 6. Portray Immorality as Sin

Some writers may take the advice I've given so far as license to flaunt sexual sin on every page, and in the name of "being realistic," lure readers toward debauchery and portray sexual sin simply because it exists.

That's why this sixth principle is so crucial.

We must portray sexual sin *as wrong*, not merely something that happens. We aren't truly revealing the depravity and brokenness of the world if we're not casting it in a negative light.

Some might argue that realism is sufficient justification for such portrayals. But is iniquity devoid of consequences realistic? As Christians, we understand that the consequences for sin—especially sexual sin—are severe (see the book of Proverbs). If we're omitting those consequences, we're not portraying reality faithfully.

Our goal as storytellers is to help readers view the world correctly. This doesn't mean we must *always* denounce sin (stories have word limits and we can't fully depict all sins with their consequences). But the more we focus on certain aspects of reality, the stronger this duty becomes.

## 7. When Portraying Sex, Less Is More

Significantly, when the Bible records a sexual act, it either describes it briefly ("Adam knew his wife Eve") or poetically (Song of Solomon). This is partially due to the Bible's literary style (tending toward brevity



without much detail), and to be clear, the poetry of Song of Solomon is more vivid in the original Hebrew text than most English translations. Though Scripture is more explicit than is the norm in Christian fiction, it's nowhere near as graphic as secular novels.

When you peruse classics like *Epic of Gilgamesh*, *The Aeneid*, *Faust*, *The Fairy Queene*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and *Brave New World*, you'll notice they're full of sexual scenarios (which surprises some of my students' parents). Yet I believe all those examples do it appropriately because, like Scripture, they depict the act for a purpose and don't lusciously dwell on it. Not *only* is this a more virtuous approach, it's a more *literary* approach. Giving readers all the details and eschewing subtlety is lazy writing.

Because the Bible describes sex, I don't believe that doing so as a writer is *necessarily* wrong. As a rule of thumb, however, I'd propose that intimacy should either be described briefly or, if lingered upon, poetically.

## Staff Perspectives

"But I say unto you, that whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart."<sup>20</sup> Jesus views thoughts as seriously as actions. And real people (thus realistic characters) have lustful thoughts.

Personally, I'm likely to set down a book that's *filled* with inner, lustful monologue. When authors let their characters get away with lustful thoughts, it's frustrating and distracting. Since lust begins inwardly, characters often don't confront the problem. I feel that showing the reality of lust only has a purpose *if* we can expose it as a grievous sin.

One way is to use the character's conscience to convict and urge him to stop harboring lustful thoughts. But if he refuses to listen, his thoughts will eventually become immoral words and actions. At this point a mentor may warn the character that his thoughts and behavior will lead him to serious consequences if he doesn't turn from them.

Even then, we need to consider our target audience and ourselves. Writing or reading about lust can create an emotional roller coaster of disruptive thoughts. Thus, if you feel called to address this issue, be extra cautious and pray before attempting it.

–Rolena Hatfield, *Outreach Manager*

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<sup>20</sup> Matthew 5:28, KJV.



No conversation about sex would be complete without touching on the topic of marriage. As Josiah said, sex is good *within the boundaries God set for it*: the union between a man and a woman for life. Though immorality must be treated as sin, we can't focus on fornication and adultery and avoid ever demonstrating the rewards of God's design for marriage.

Now, this does *not* mean we ought to be graphic or sensual about the portrayal of sex, whether it's a sin in a character's life or a husband cherishing his wife. Subtext and implication can go a long way. But don't get so caught up in the perversion of a good act that you neglect to show the virtuous side.

Also, remember that marriage is about much more than sex. Marriage is two people committing to love each other for life, sacrificing personal desires for a spouse, and working together as a unit to forward God's will, raise a family, and help and support each other. Yes, sex is a part of that. But marriage has many other attributes.

–Hope Ann, *Communications Coordinator*

## Charting New Paths

For myself as a storyteller, sex is the hardest topic to navigate.

But it's also one that needs addressed in our current society.

We live in a culture that's largely abandoned biblical teachings in this area. That provides a golden opportunity. We have the chance to advocate a biblical ethic so that readers viscerally *experience* its value.

Perspectives will vary on what strategy is best and which books do or don't cross the line of appropriateness. But even though we all might set different barriers, the principle remains. Our culture needs to understand why biblical teachings on sexuality give us true happiness and freedom.

Let's show that to them.





## Conclusion

Christian storytellers need each other.

Without the opportunity to bounce ideas off others and engage with their perspectives, we'll struggle to be fully equipped to write masterful stories for Christ.

In this book, we've provided advice on how to address a variety of topics—but we hope this isn't the end of your analysis. Instead, why not sit down and talk about these subjects with a fellow Christian writer? Initiating these sorts of conversations can be awkward, but perhaps you could send your friend a link to this e-book for starters. You may be surprised by how fruitful your conversation becomes.

Of course, you're always welcome to continue discussing these subjects on our forum. Many writers have found it a wonderful place to connect with and be sharpened by like-minded Christian storytellers.

Writing as a Christian is never easy. But when you have a community of believers to encourage and edify you, the challenge will be surmountable.

We need Christian storytellers who understand how to appropriately depict tricky subjects so that their stories will impact the world and transform lives for Christ.

Are you ready to ignite a spark?