

Writing Christian fiction for Young Adults

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Why write Christian fiction?

Young people often look to the characters in films and books to help them navigate what's real or important. Even if their faith is strong, most teenagers will be surrounded by non-Christian voices so there is a huge need for Christian role models to help them make sense of their faith. There are also many young people who are on a journey of discovery. They don't know what they believe about God or their own identity. They like the idea of being spiritual but have no road map to guide them.

These teens need books that don't just allude to Christian themes but which unashamedly present the gospel and the way to the one true God. They need characters who live out their faith in ways that inspire and excite them. Characters that make them think, "*I want to know God like that! I want to love God like that! I want to encounter God like that!*"

How do I avoid being preachy?

There are many who dismiss Christian fiction as being preachy or cheesy and unfortunately it isn't too hard to find examples that back this view up. However, I believe it's time for this to change. After all, if we say that we cannot write about the Christian life without sounding cheesy or preachy, then *what are we saying about the Christian life?* What message are we giving young people if we believe that Christian characters are uncool, irrelevant or boring?

As with any work of fiction, there are some basic elements that separate a good story from a poor one, authentic characters being top of the list. There will also be conflict, mystery, plot twists, meaningful relationships, something at stake, possibly humour. Basically, more going on than just the faith stuff.

A reader will feel preached at if they *are* being preached at. A major key is in creating real characters with real voices. Think about the people you know who live out their faith with integrity and honesty. When they speak, they are not cheesy or preachy. On the contrary, they most likely inspire you. In the same way, every character you create must have a deep inner life and a real story going on. Their purpose should not be simply to convey theological truths to your readers. If it is, then it will most likely be your voice and not theirs which stands out.

Resist the urge to give your readers all the answers. It's okay to be left with questions. It's also okay if your characters have not reached full redemption by the end of the book, so long as there is hope. Your characters should not be perfect or transform overnight just because they are a Christian. There's beauty in the brokenness. There's honesty in the imperfection.

How Christian should it be?

As Christian as you want! Young people need to be able to recognise their own doubts, questions, hopes and fears through the eyes of a character who is just like them; someone from their own culture and time in history with all of the concerns that modern teenagers have. They need to encounter characters who are new in their faith, characters who are embarrassed to mention Jesus at school, characters who would like to please God but don't know what it will cost them, characters who get angry at God and discover that he still loves them, characters who step out in faith and find that adventures with God are wholly worthwhile.

Bear in mind that when you write from a Christian perspective, you are not just writing fiction, you are also writing theology. What you write will make statements about what God is like and how Christians ought to live. Are you from a particular denomination? If so, how does this affect the way your characters behave? Do they hear from God? Do they pray out loud? Do they speak in tongues or worship in a certain way? Be aware that your own bias will affect the way you write.

You won't please all Christians, but that's okay. Be true to the vision God has given you.

Are there any topics I should avoid?

The Bible counsels us to think upon things that are true, noble, lovely and praiseworthy (Philippians 4:8). As writers, we have the responsibility to handle matters in a way that won't cause our readers to stumble.

Not all your characters will be pure but the language and essence of the book still ought to be. You may feel a call to cover gritty issues from a Christian perspective. If so, make sure the overall message is redemptive. Teens often enjoy reading about characters a lot older than themselves so if the book is not suitable for those under a certain age, consider saying so on the back cover.

There are no hard and fast rules but I would be wary about including the following... Certainly, the old adage 'show not tell' ought to be disregarded in these cases.

Sex - Be careful how you represent the relationships in your story. Avoid anything gratuitous.

Violence - Write only what is necessary. Allude to things without going into detail.

Drugs etc – Not all your characters will make good choices but be sure that if your character is engaging in illicit behaviour then it's a necessary part of the plot rather than an opportunity to be gritty.

Swearing & blasphemy - Real people swear and take God's name in vain, but it doesn't look nice in a book. Can you be true to your character without resorting to poor language? For example, by saying, '*He swore*' rather than actually quoting him?

Abuse – The sole purpose for including this ought to be as part of a story of healing or redemption. If you feel called to tackle such issues, then avoid going into detail.

Witchcraft etc – If characters are dabbling in non-Christian spiritual activities, then cover these topics with caution and without giving such activities any glory. At no point do you want to confuse your readers or cause them to seek a spiritual life outside of Jesus.

Above all, devote your writing to the Lord. Seek him, wait upon him and write what he puts on your heart. We want his stamp of approval more than the praise of man. And, unlike secular fiction, the true measure of success is the transformation of souls rather than the number of sales.

Karen Rosario Ingerslev is the writer of the Livi Starling series for young adults and the Celery Brown series for 9-12 year olds.