
Reviewed by **Kenneth Paradis**, Wilfrid Laurier University

In *Reading Evangelicals: How Christian Fiction Shaped a Culture and a Faith*, Daniel Silliman, news editor of *Christianity Today*, explores the imaginative landscape articulated in a series of popular Evangelical novels to understand better how American Evangelicalism, despite its sectarian sprawl, functions as a relatively cohesive imagined community. Though many of this study’s objects of inquiry have been covered in more intensive particular readings, Silliman finds a way to make an original contribution in each case, and, more importantly, reveals the coherence (in its function as a cultural mediator) of Evangelical fiction. The book buttresses a suggestion that has been emerging in recent scholarship: the community this fiction addresses is better understood through inquiries into its “imagination,” via the cultural products it produces and consumes, than into its “mind,” via inquiry focused on its community leaders’ polemical statements.

Silliman grounds his literary and cultural analysis in discussions of an institution that had organized much of the conversation framing Evangelical culture in the period of its most recent revival (roughly from the 1950s to the present): the Evangelical bookstore and the “Christian” publishing industry. He focuses not only on the development (and decline) of Evangelical publishing and distribution infrastructure, but also on several key novels emerging from that industry which provide imaginative incarnations of the ideas shelved in other parts of bookstore. These novels and others in the genres they shaped, in Silliman’s account, crystalize contemporaneous doctrinal and political concerns into the kind of affectively resonant narrative images that help these ideas to become incorporated into their readers’ lived identities, thus enabling congregants of disparate, often extradenominational Protestant churches to become a coherent culture.

Some of these novels help crystallize the gendered aspirations and anxieties of Evangelical readers. Silliman’s analysis of Jannette Oke’s *Love Comes Softly* (1979), which inaugurated the (modern) genre of Evangelical Romance / Inspirational Fiction, maps the novel into the discourses and Evangelical counterdiscourses swirling around 1970s feminism. He argues that the novel provided an appealing narrative image of the Evangelical argument that women could live an abundant life is by cultivating a spiritual connection to Jesus. Thus, rather than demanding political and social equality, they would encounter a higher form of fulfilment in their embrace of traditional feminine roles grounded in faith-filled romantic love and faith-strengthened familial and social relationships.

https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajac219

© The Author 2022. Published by Oxford University Press. All rights reserved.
For permissions, please email: journals.permissions@oup.com
Similarly, Silliman shows how the Evangelical “Amish novel” genre inaugurated by Beverly Lewis in *The Shunning* (1997) engages, in a particularly gendered way, anxieties around “authenticity” that arose in the late 1990s and early 2000s following the success of “seeker sensitive” megachurches that marketed Christianity as a lifestyle to suburban spiritual consumers. In this first scholarship published on the genre, Silliman argues that Amish novels such as Lewis’s freed Evangelical readers to indulge in a double-faceted fantasy of authenticity that could temporarily alleviate the sense of shallowness engendered by late twentieth century suburban life and faith. First, these novels allowed readers to nostalgically indulge in the bonnet-and-buggy Amish fantasy of a simpler time, and of life in a tight-knit, close-to-the-land Christian community enriched by tradition and materially grounded in relationships between women who were fulfilled in traditionally gendered roles. Second, and somewhat contradictorily, the novels enabled readers to indulge in the fantasy of the free, self-determining Evangelical (i.e. non-Amish) woman, whose own faith is free of the Amish’s restrictive (and putatively non-Biblical) doctrines and repressive community structures. Instead, the Evangelical reader is encouraged to recognize and affirm the value of determining her own spiritual path by forging (in good Evangelical fashion) a personal relationship with Jesus. Both aspects of the fantasy, according to Silliman, neutralize the anxieties over authenticity preoccupying Evangelicalism in its period of reflection on megachurch spirituality.

Other novels Silliman looks at incarnate Evangelical fears and anxieties. Silliman argues that Frank Peretti’s *This Present Darkness* (1986), which inaugurated the modern Evangelical thriller / horror genre, provides an affectively powerful and appealing vision of the “worldview conflict” theories fueling the Moral Majority and 1980s culture war discourses while fusing these to a fully imagined practice of spiritual warfare. To this end, Silliman makes a valuable contribution to the much-studied *Left Behind* novels written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins (Tyndale, 1995-2007). He shows how the forced-choice logic of conversion vs. damnation these novels narrativize so vividly and yoke to such affectively powerful images of culture conflict—images rejected as extremist, anti-intellectual and politically inflammatory by moderate Evangelical thinkers—resonates profoundly with the oft-downplayed nastier implications of the work of C. S. Lewis, beloved intellectual grandfather and ubiquitous presence in contemporary American Evangelical thought.

The last novel Silliman studies provides a model for imagining a more ambiguous kind of faith than the militarized “us or them” worldview that conservative Evangelicalism had adopted in its culture war period. In his analysis of *The Shack* (2007), Silliman argues that W. Paul Young’s independently published book about a spiritually wounded man’s weekend with God narrates a model of Evangelical faith grounded in an acceptance of uncertainty and ambiguity that resonates with the discourses surrounding the “Emergent
church” movement of the late 1990s and early 2000s. For Silliman, the overwhelming Evangelical response in the second decade of the new millennium to Young’s deeply emotional portrait of uncertain faith shaped by personal trauma marks the diffusion of the ideas associated with the Emergent church into the way everyday Christians understood themselves... including to the point where that imaginative shift leads believers (such as The Shack’s author), to dissociate themselves from the increasingly politicized imagined community of “Evangelicalism” altogether.

Silliman’s study complements and adds historical and cultural context to existing scholarship on, for example, sentimentalism in Evangelical culture (Todd Brennemen’s Homespun Gospel [2014]); Evangelical inspirational fiction (Lynn Neal’s Romancing God [2006]), or on Evangelical apocalyptic fiction (Amy Frykholm Johnson’s Rapture Culture [2004]). Silliman’s analysis of how the Evangelical imagination is the product of nonfictional discourse crystallized within affectively powerful narrative models channeling widespread identification also complements Christopher Douglas’s If God Meant to Interfere (2016), a study how of Evangelical culture is represented in the US (post)secular literary imagination. The only substantial weakness of Reading Evangelicals is that its objects of study are already fairly dated – even the most recent novel Silliman deals with is published in 2007 – and its engagement with recent scholarship is spotty. A work published in 2021 could be expected to pay some attention to more recent authors such as Karen Kingsbury (on the inspirational side) or Ted Dekker (on the horror/fantasy side) who, with others, have moved to the fore as the most prominent fictional voices in Evangelical culture in this “end of White Christian America” moment (Jones 2016).

But though the age of the novels Silliman chooses makes his attempt to link his analysis to the recent “Why do Evangelicals love Donald Trump” discussions a bit tenuous, his conclusions are valid. As a Christian in the ambit of Evangelical culture Silliman is sympathetic to readers who find comfort, affirmation, and a sense of empowerment in Evangelical fiction, but he concludes that these novels’ vividly imagined mix of nostalgia, sentimentalized self-interest, and apocalypticized fear bathed in culture war imagery helps to shape a cultural imagination that craves the kind of quasi-messianic figure who would save the true faith from its persecutors, a part Trump was happy to play. And this is the most significant contribution of Reading Evangelicals. Not its hypotheses about Trump, but the underlying argument that supports the recent scholarly tendency (see Molly Worthen [2014] and Kristen DuMez [2020]) to understand North American Evangelicalism not through the lens of doctrine, and not even through the lens of politics, but to see both of these as grounded in and animated by an imagination made up of communally shared, affectively powerful images and narratives that model what it means to live one’s faith in a world perceived as hostile to it.