



Getting up to Speed in... Christian Inspirational Fiction

Here's what Christian Inspirational Fiction is:

Christian Inspirational Fiction books are those which deliberately promote a Christian worldview. Some Christian Inspirational Fiction books explicitly encourage a belief in Jesus and Christian values, while others are more allegorical. Oftentimes the genre is simply called "Inspirational" or "Inspirational Fiction" (though these alternative phrases can refer to other religions, albeit infrequently).

Here's what happens in Christian Inspirational Fiction:

Good always triumphs over evil in Christian Inspirational Fiction — though, as in the Christian bible, it doesn't always happen right away. In lengthy series, the triumph may be delayed until the very final book. Sometimes the battle between good and evil takes place within an individual character; sometimes the battle takes place on a global scale; sometimes it even takes place on a universal scale, involving multiple planets, dimensions, and heaven and hell.

There are books in every genre, of course, that celebrate the triumph of good over evil. In Christian Inspirational Fiction, however, "good" and "evil" are both defined according to the author's interpretation of Christianity. "Good" can signify God, Jesus, Christian values, or Christian lifestyles. "Evil" can take any number of forms, from the obvious, such as Satan or demons, to the more subtle, including atheism, sin, and spiritual indifference. Battles of good versus evil can occur between the full hosts of heaven and hell, or they can be personal spiritual battles fought within a solitary individual.

Christian Inspirational Fiction books will often focus on a particular theme with relevance to Christianity, such as evolution or abortion or fidelity. Other books avoid making a case for a particular moral stance, focusing instead on the general merits of adhering to Christianity, or the dangers of ignoring it.

Here's why people like Christian Inspirational Fiction:

Most (though not all) readers of Christian Inspirational Fiction are themselves Christian, and so a tremendous appeal of the genre is validation. Christian readers find their own beliefs and values reflected in the books; they find affirmation for their religious choices when the characters are rewarded for making those same choices. And the very best Christian Inspirational Fiction offers not just affirmation but guidance, too. The faith-based decisions of characters in books can serve as models for real life.

This is not to suggest that protagonists in Christian Inspirational novels always make the *right* decisions. Characters may have faith in a different religion, or no religion at all; or, frequently, they will have a lukewarm or wavering Christian faith. Poor choices on the part of these characters show what *not* to do. At the same time, their inevitable journey toward the Christian faith can offer hope to readers suffering from religious insecurities.



Other times, of course, writers will use characters who are quite strong in the Christian faith. These may be Christ-like figures — characters whose actions clearly resemble those of Jesus — or simply people who lead virtuous lives. Whereas flawed characters are appealing because they show that anyone may work towards faith, characters who lead Christian lives with grace and strength offer inspiration and motivation.

Christian Inspirational Fiction commands a wide audience not only because it promotes Christian values but because it shies away from elements averse to Christian lifestyles. Books in other genres, having no particular religious purpose, will often introduce themes or descriptions that may cause discomfort for Christian readers. Christian Inspirational novels, however, are "safe" books: sex is usually alluded to in elliptical terms, or not at all, while coarse language is mild or nonexistent. Do note, however, that some Christian Inspirational books include violence; this is an appeal for some readers, a turn-off for others.

Here are key titles to read:

- The Left Behind series is a publishing phenomenon, the best selling Christian Inspirational Fiction ever. Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins set their fast-paced apocalyptic thrillers during the seven years of the Tribulation, the time between the Rapture and the end of the world. This is a fundamentalist, evangelical set of books, designed to draw people to the Christian faith. Start with the first in the series, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days*.
- *Home to Harmony* is the first in the Harmony series, a gentle look at small-town life in the Midwest. Minister author Philip Gulley centers the story on a Quaker congregation, filled with marvelously flawed characters. Gulley writes his stories not to convert readers but to demonstrate the role of God's grace in everyday lives.
- *Thr3e* is propelled by high-octane suspense from the first action-packed page. The hero must yield to the demands of an anonymous terrorist, or very bad things will happen; the hero's car exploding in the first few pages is the least of those bad things. This Psychological Thriller, like all of Ted Dekker's novels, offers a mainstream interpretation of Christianity, one that seeks to inspire, though not necessarily convert, the reader.
- *At Home in Mitford* is the first of Jan Karon's character-driven Mitford Years series, starring Episcopal Father Timothy Kavanagh, a man strong in his religious beliefs. Set in the Blue Ridge Mountains in the fictional town of Mitford, North Carolina, these gentle reads offer a gentle, contemplative reflection on the power of God and the importance of Christian faith.
- Beverly Lewis has written several series of interest to evangelical Christians, but start with her first adult fiction novel, *The Shunning*, the first of the Heritage of Lancaster County series. Set amongst a cozy Amish community, this is the story of a young woman named Katie Lapp, who is obediently trying to ignore her yearnings for a different life — until she finds a secret in the attic that will change her whole world.

Here are key authors to know:

- **Terri Blackstock** writes fast-paced Suspense novels in a contemporary setting. Her characters often struggle with their faiths, and with their love lives, too; expect a healthy dash of romance in these conservative Christian books. Try starting with *Cape Refuge*, the first in a Mystery series set in a small coastal town.



- **Karen Kingsbury's** conservative, evangelical novels take place in contemporary settings. Richly-drawn characters must grapple with romantic conflict and religious issues that test the strength of their faiths. Perhaps begin with *Oceans Apart*, in which the sudden appearance of an orphaned child forces a woman to realize that her husband has not always been faithful to her.
- Travel back to the Canadian prairie of yesteryear with **Janette Oke**, who blends historical details, romantic intrigue, and conservative Christian values in her gentle reads. Begin with *Love Comes Softly*, the first in her *Love Comes Softly* series, starring Marty Claridge, a headstrong young woman who never expected to find love in the hardscrabble nineteenth-century frontier.
- Sure, you won't find strong language or sex in the novels of **Frank Peretti**, but there's nothing gentle here. Readers looking for intense, violent, edge-of-your-seat action will enjoy the thrills of his Suspense, Fantasy, Science Fiction, and Horror. Discover Peretti's conservative, evangelical perspective in his debut, *This Present Darkness*, in which humans, angels, and demons participate in an apocalyptic battle of good and evil.
- **Joel Rosenberg** keeps his readers turning pages to find out what happens next in his suspenseful Political Thrillers. It's no wonder that high-stakes action and descriptive violence drive the stories — this is Apocalyptic Fiction with a keenly evangelical bent. Perhaps begin with *The Ezekiel Option*, in which the body count is high and the stakes are higher: With Russia and Israel preparing for war, the Apocalypse may well be nigh.

Here's how to talk with Christian Inspirational Fiction fans:

- Different readers mean different things when they ask for Christian Inspirational Fiction (or, more commonly, when they ask for Inspirational Fiction; the "Christian" is usually implied). Find out whether your reader wants books that reflect a more conservative or liberal Christianity, and whether they want books that offer a literal interpretation of scripture. For some readers it will not matter; for others these are matters of crucial importance.
- Find out if your reader wants a gentle read. While sex and strong language are nearly always muted or absent in Christian Inspirational Fiction, graphic violence and high-intensity action have a prominent role in some titles.
- Determine if your reader wants books with an explicitly evangelical bent. Some readers prefer scripture-based novels that clearly incorporate a faith in God and/or Jesus. Other readers prefer novels that are more allegorical.

A few more tips:

- No two readers are the same, so assume nothing about their beliefs or reading preferences. Ask if they have a preference for or against books that feature particular denominations. Of course, it can be tricky to guess if a book promotes a specific denomination. Try skimming the back cover for general clues as to whether the title is Protestant, Catholic, Mormon, etc.
- Find out if your reader wants a genre crossover. Contemporary, realistic, mainstream novels have a strong following, but so too do crossovers into genres such as Suspense, Fantasy, Political Thrillers, and Romance. Historical Fiction crossovers are perennial favorites, with settings in biblical times and the Old West being especially popular. And, thanks to the Left Behind series, crossovers into Apocalyptic Fiction are in great demand. Within the context of Christian Inspirational Fiction, these are not generic speculations on the end of the world, but rather fictionalized versions of the end times, as described in the Book of Revelations.



- Not sure if it's a Christian book? Check the verso of the title page to see if the credits site a source for scripture quotes; if so, you're on the right track.
- Don't forget the award-winners. The two big awards for Christian Inspirational Fiction are the *Christy Awards* and the *ECPA Christian Book Award* (formerly the Gold Medallion Book Awards).

Jessica Zellers works in Adult Services at the Williamsburg (VA) Regional Library whenever she's not reading fat Russian novels.