

Who Reads *Those* Books?

When a priest known for his sociology, theology and journalism turns to novels, he attracts attention. Catholic critics have been implacable, but each of the books has become a best seller

I began writing novels five years ago with two assumptions from my sociological research: 1) Given the decline in the sales of Catholic books despite the increased educational attainment of American Catholics, there had to be a large and as yet untouched Catholic reading market, and 2) stories are the best way to talk about religion, an assumption shared with the various narrative theologians such as John Navone, John Shea and (implicitly) David Tracy. I would therefore write theological novels, comedies of grace.

I will confess that the novels have been successful beyond my most extravagant expectations—approximately three million copies in print of each of them, including book club, paperback and foreign sales. There seems to be *prima facie* evidence of the truth of the first assumption and at least a probability of the truth of the second.

In candor, however, I must admit that the response from the Catholic community has been underwhelming. Reviewers, clergy, religious, Catholic college faculty members and respectable Catholic liberals have been almost unanimous in condemning the books: "Soft core porn written to make money" (John Jay Hughes in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch); "garbage" (Richard Shaw in promotions for his own novel); "self-aggrandizing 1950's pornography" (Mary Gordon quoted in Newsweek); "steamy" (originated by Mayo Mohs in Time and now almost universal); "sleaze" (the self same Mayo Mohs in People); "trashy, potboiler" (Philip Nobile in the National Catholic Reporter); "vertiginous" (AMERICA); "filled with rancor and bitterness" (AMERICA); "successful only because of curiosity about books about the priesthood by a priest" (Frank Butler in the NC news service, the first of the canned NC reviews that

repeat the same theme—together with the confident prediction that this is the last of books which people will read); "voyeuristic"; "devoid of theological content" (National Catholic Reporter); "an embarrassment to his nieces and nephews" (the Rev. William Smith in the National Register, without a poll of my nieces and nephews, by the way); "not Waugh or Undset, Dante or Michelangelo" (National Catholic Reporter).

In clerical circles some of the reactions were, "confirming what the church's enemies have always believed"; "shocking to the ordinary faithful"; "washing the church's dirty linen in public"; "doing grave harm to the church"; "injuring the image of the priesthood"; "threatening the faith of the young" (Bishop Thomas J. Grady of Orlando, Fla.).

Not much notice of my stories of God or comedies of grace.

The issue in principle admits of empirical verification. It ought to be possible through the ordinary techniques of social research to find out the reactions of the readers instead of settling for name-calling exchanges between my critics and myself. To do research on one's readers will doubtless be called self-serving. It surely is a form of self-defense, (presumably not illegitimate activity). However, it is also an exploration in search of truths, some of which, I will argue in this article, have important implications for the work of the church. Finally, 12 million copies of novels written by a priest are a phenomenon that demands investigation.

Warner Books has agreed in my new contract that there will be research questionnaires in all future books, an idea that the publishing industry considers quaint but interesting. As a preliminary test we included 25,000 business reply

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cards in the paperback edition of *Ascent Into Hell*. The response rate has been excellent for a study of this sort and may reach 20 percent before the book lapses into extinction.

One must make the technical observation that in the logic of probability statistics one cannot, strictly speaking, project from such data the responses of those who did not return questionnaires. One can only project to that population of readers who would have returned a card if there was one inserted in all two million books. However, one can speculate about the nonrespondents and create mathematical scenarios about them, as I shall do later in this article. It should be noted that the items are evenly balanced between favorable and unfavorable responses.

Ascent Into Hell is about a priest who falls in love with a nun, impregnates her and leaves the priesthood to marry her. On the theological level it is a parable of the contest between grace and justice, with Maria, the childhood sweetheart (not the nun) representing God's implacable grace.

Who are the readers? Sixty-five percent of them are Catholic, as opposed to 25 percent Catholic in the population, thus confirming my first assumption about a Catholic reading audience. Their average age is 30. Half of them do not attend church regularly. Three-quarters pray every day. Seventy-five percent of them are women. Eighty percent of them have read the previous novels.

(The age and sex may be overestimates. Older people and women are more likely to cooperate with surveys. Almost two-thirds of the fiction in the country, incidentally, is purchased by women.)

And how do they react to *Ascent Into Hell*? First of all, how much harm is done to the priesthood and the church? More than three-fifths say the book has caused them to have greater respect for the priesthood. Only six percent say that it made them feel contemptuous of priests, so my theology of the humanity of the priesthood—lifted from the Epistle to the Hebrews—works despite the clerical murmurings. Twelve percent say that the book caused them to have less respect for the church. Six percent feel that it is a disgrace to the church and the priesthood. Sixty percent, however, say that the book has helped them to understand the Catholic Church better.

Assume that six million people read the books (most books have more than one reader). What other technique is causing 3.6 million people to have greater admiration for the priesthood?

What do the readers think of the story itself and its religious impact on them? Eight percent agree that the author should be ashamed of writing such trash. Ten percent say that it was written merely to make money. Only six percent agree with the Bishop of Orlando that it would be a threat to the faith of young people.

On the other hand, 70 percent report that the book made

them think seriously about religious problems, 60 percent agree that it was a novel with a deep spiritual message in the form of a fascinating story, 45 percent say that it helped them to understand the meaning of God's love and 38 percent acknowledge that it helped them to understand better the relationship between religion and sex. Finally, 26 percent report that the story deepened their religious faith.

Multiply any of those proportions by a number of your choice between three and six million, and you will arrive at some estimate of the positive impact of *Ascent*. Using the lower number, 2.1 million readers may have been forced to think seriously about religious problems because of the book; 1.35 million were helped to understand the meaning of God's love; 1.14 million understood better the relationship between religion and sex. Garbage, huh? Vertiginous? Indeed!

More than half of the Catholics who are not regular church attenders testify that the book brought them closer to their church. Eighty percent of the non-Catholics say that *Ascent* gave them a better understanding of the church, and 72 percent of them said it increased their admiration for the priesthood. Only 11 percent said it caused them to have less respect for the church and only 5 percent said it made them feel contemptuous of the priesthood. Let him whose evangelization net spreads farther cast the first stone.

Who are the adversarial readers? Eighty percent of them are Catholic. Ninety percent are women. Virtually all of them go to church every week. Their average age is six years older than the approving readers. In other words, they may not like the book, but it is not likely to have a negative effect on their religious practice.

What about the sex scenes? Do the readers find them as vertiginous (you can always tell a college English instructor by her vocabulary) as did the *AMERICA* reviewer?

In order:

Human	86 percent
Sensitive	80
Tasteful	72
Sympathetic	70
Delicate	62
Mild	58
Inspiring	58
Compelling	48
Unreal	12
Steamy	11
Racy	8
Trash	7
Obscene	5

As a matter of professional principle I do not fudge data. Yet if I were to fudge these data I would lower the favorable response and increase the unfavorable if only to gain more credibility with the skeptical murmurantes.

The reader reaction to the sex in *Ascent* points up a problem that demands an explanation: Why is their opinion of it so different from that of Catholic community elites? Why is the adjective "steamy" used with the frequency that "damn" modified "Yankee" in the South a couple of decades ago, even though only 11 percent of the readers find my work "steamy?" Why in fact do the readers perceive the story as a religious novel when none of the Catholic reviewers so perceive it?

There are a number of possible explanations: 1) Eighty percent of the respondents have read previous books, and the same proportion (God bless them) say they can hardly wait for the next book. Those who feel negatively about my novels probably have dropped out earlier and would not even buy *Ascent*. However, the sales of *Thy Brother's Wife* and *Ascent* are 90 percent of the sale of *The Cardinal Sins*; *Lord of the Dance* after two months has already sold more in hardbound than *The Cardinal Sins* did in nine months. Those who have departed the audience because they were offended by the books are therefore relatively few in number.

2. It may be that the complainers do not send in questionnaires. But generally speaking, those who dislike are more likely to write than those who like, especially when it is painless and costless to complain. We have made it easy and free to complain, and yet the complaints are minimal. Moreover, if one creates a mathematical "worst case" simulation in which the response rate is 80 percent and those who increase the rate from 20 to 80 percent are five times more likely to be hostile and only half as likely to be approving, the favorable reaction of all 80 percent would still be greater than the unfavorable reaction.

3. The readers may be dummies, as not a few of the Catholic reviewers have hinted. They may not recognize trash or sleaze or steaminess. They may be voyeurs. They may be curiosity seekers. They may be the same kind of women who read the so-called "romances." They may be, as one Catholic reviewer said, the sort of person who reads the *National Enquirer*.

I will not attempt here to defend the literary quality of my novels. I set out to write entertaining stories, not "literature," whatever that may be. I can think of no more self-destructive exercise than the attempt to write "literature." The test of the worth of a book, it seems to me, is whether it is read 25 years after its publication.

But I do think there is some point in suggesting defenses for my readers. First of all, to write off millions of people as dummies with no more evidence than your own taste is dangerously close to arrogant snobbery. Second,

my books sell four or five times as many as do the typical "romances," so the audience, even if it included the romance addicts, is broader. Third, the Catholic elite reaction to my stories is not so universally echoed in the secular world as to be self-evidently true. Like all books the reviewer reaction to mine is mixed, perhaps more contradictory than to most novels because most novels are not written by priests. Yet the preponderance of opinion is not unfavorable. In any analysis of reviews of *Ascent*, 65 percent were categorized as favorable. The *New York Times* reviews thus far have been all that a storyteller could hope for, even though Father Smith quotes them out of context to make his point. The long profile in *The New York Times Magazine* on May 6, 1984, by novelist Mark Harris hardly lends support to the Catholic elite reaction.

'Biases, predispositions and subcultural norms, I submit, constitute a mythology'

Thus the Catholic murmurantes can hardly find unanimous support for the explanation that my readers are tasteless dummies. On the contrary, the readers could cite the majority opinion, including that of the reviewers in *The Times*, to defend themselves effectively against the contempt of the Catholic elites.

4. Finally, it may be that the readers have read the book without any predispositions against the author and the book. The readers are free of a mythology about my novels that dominates the reactions of the Catholic elite, a mythology that "yuks" about the alleged sexual steam and cannot see the theological theme.

Let me illustrate: *Thy Brother's Wife* is about, among other things, the womanliness of God. In one of her mystical experiences Nora Cronin understands that God loves us the way she loves her teen-age daughter. "Everyone," she says to God, "wants to be a mother, even you." The theme is repeated frequently in the story and, just in case it was missed, restated in the afterword. A reviewer could quite properly find fault with me on the grounds that I have failed to achieve my own goal or that I have inadequately portrayed the womanliness of God. I begin to be suspicious of mythology, however, when the reviewer ignores this goal completely or when, like Michael Gallagher in the *National Catholic Reporter*, he misses it so totally as to assert that the book has no theological concern.

Did Mr. Gallagher deliberately deceive his readers about my explicit theological purpose? I doubt it. Rather, because of his predispositions and antecedent biases and because of the norms of the Catholic subculture of which he is a part, it seems to me, he was incapable of seeing an explicitly stated theme. Biases, predispositions and subcultural norms, I submit, constitute a mythology.

Or, again, the main theme of *The Cardinal Sins* is that the proud priest is a worse sinner than the lustful priest. The latter achieves a measure of salvation because of his reckless courage in time of grave crisis, while the former is progressing uncertainly toward salvation as he learns tenderness. It is only a modestly subtle point, made dozens of times in the story. As Mark Harris pointed out in *The New York Times*, Catholic readers have no trouble grasping it. Yet not a single Catholic reviewer even noticed it, so eager were they to identify the narrator (the proud priest) with the author and beat up on the author because of the narrator. As a member of the magisterium Bishop Grady knows that pride is the worst of the capital sins (unlike the Catholic right, which does not recognize any sin but lust) and as a sometime English teacher he knows that it is a fallacy to equate the author with the narrator even if the latter has had some of the experiences of the former. Yet it did not occur to him that I might be striving for a modestly subtle theme about pride and lust because, even worse than the other Catholic reviewers, his biases and propensities, his mythology and vested interests, precluded that possibility a priori. To explain such blindness is his problem (and that of the other Catholic reviewers) not mine.

'The national lively-arts media fear religion as though it were banned by the Constitution'

It might be argued that I ought not to worry about the elite Catholic mythology about my novels. The books sell, don't they? And which is more important, the adjective "wondrous" from Burton Schott in *The New York Times* or the noun "garbage" from Father Shaw? Which makes more difference, a thoughtful profile of your work by Mark Harris in *The New York Times Magazine* or a savaging of it by Bishop Grady in *The Chicago Catholic*?

I concede the point, though it does not excuse either Father Shaw or Bishop Grady. I do not need, am not entitled to and do not want sympathy. (There might be a question of justice, but priests, nuns, bishops and liberal laity are usually the first to talk about justice and the last to practice it.) Yet more must be said. A mythology that distorts a writer's work beyond recognition and ignores his stated and obvious purposes (even when they seem to be self-evident to his readers) is an invitation to always restless religious authority to intervene.

Thus a functionary of the Chicago chancery recently laid down "unofficial" terms for my rehabilitation in the Archdiocese. I must do some form of public penance for the harm caused to the "simple, ordinary faithful" by my novels and publicly promise to be more concerned about their feelings in the future. I argued from my mail and from these data that many of my readers were not harmed. The

argument was granted for the sake of the discussion. The real difficulty, however, I was told, was the feelings of those who had not read the books but were profoundly shocked that I had written them.

It was Catch 22. How can you reassure those who won't read the novels anyway? And who are these "simple faithful" so beloved by priests, bishops and apostolic delegates? I confess that I have never in all my research found any statistical evidence that they are more than a tiny fragment of the population (though lots of people write letters claiming to speak for them). In fact, what was meant in this instance was a dozen or two letter writers who had demanded that the Chicago chancery stop me from writing scandalous novels. In the name of appeasing such folks, work that is beneficial literally to millions is supposed to be stopped. So much for reconciliation in the Archdiocese of Chicago. And for integrity, courage, loyalty and friendship, too.

Undoubtedly, there are Catholics who are angered and shocked by my novels, some of whom have indeed read them. There is no reason to think any of these folk are going to leave the church or change their religious practice because of the books. And, of course, they do not have to read them. Yet given the power of the mythology, a demand can be made in their name to terminate writing that seems to help large numbers of people who do want to read them and for many of whom they are the only contact with the church. To satisfy a handful of letter writers who claim that the image of the priesthood is being hurt and an angry clerical mythology, I must stop writing stories that cause hundreds of thousands and perhaps millions of people to have in fact a higher regard for the priesthood. It's a weird sort of economics.

I presented the first draft of this article to Authority. The response was that while I did a good job explaining the intent of my novels, the difficulty was that not everyone understood my intent. The empirical data were apparently as invisible as the theology of the womanliness of God was to Mr. Gallagher in the N.C.R. I asked how high the favorable response would have to be to eliminate the "difficulty"? Ninety-nine percent?

There was no response. My guess is that 99.9 percent would not suffice so long as there was one letter of shock or dismay from someone who had read none of the books. Obviously the Archdiocese is not going to try to stop me from writing my novels. It knows full well that I would not stop (and would not leave the priesthood either). If I were younger and less independent of the church's financial controls, I would be slapped down tomorrow.

The issue, then, is not sympathy but a climate of toleration and support for those who experiment and particularly for those whose experiments dare to appear, as the world judges such things, enormously successful.

Which brings me to two conclusions that I think transcend this particular act of self-defense.

First of all, I take it that it is now as proven as anything can be in social research that the popular novel is a productive way of communicating about religion. Note that I did not say the "clerical" novel. Despite the NC's cheerful predictions, *Lord of the Dance* is my most successful novel, and it is not about priests but about a young lay woman and an older lay man. The story's theme, in the words of Noele Marie Brigid Farrell, its teen-age protagonist, is "Resurrection isn't supposed to be easy"; perhaps not an extraordinary theme, but surely religious.

The "comedy of grace" must not be pietistic or moralistic or preachy or, much less, edifying (as the writers of letters to the chancery demand). It must deal with religion explicitly, that is to say with good and evil, love and hate, death and resurrection, God and us. Moreover, it must be entertaining. I could imagine the neopuritan clerical and nunnish eyebrows go up when I wrote a few paragraphs back that I was writing entertainment. Is that not sinfully irrelevant?

Without going into Aristotle's *Poetics* or other such sources, I take it to be self-evident that if a story does not entertain, it fails as a story. I hope my stories do more. The data cited in this essay suggest that they do. But if they were not first the sort of story about which the readers say they can hardly wait for the next one, then all the rest would be wasted.

Would anyone seriously claim that the stories of Jesus were not first of all entertaining? Much more, of course, but nonetheless compelling as stories.

If the tellers of such comedies of grace are to be held to the standards of edification laid down by conservative letter writers or if they are to be subjected to endless distortion by priests, nuns and Catholic elite who are blinded by the question of what the writer does with his money, then it is safe to assume that the popular novel will continue to be neglected as a platform for announcing God's love. (If anyone says that is not what I have in mind when I write my novels, I say they are speaking falsely against me.)

Second, I submit that there is a huge vacuum in the lively arts, which yearns for comedies of grace. Joseph A. O'Hare, S.J., editor of *AMERICA*, led me to prepare this essay when he wrote in his column that "perhaps" the success of my stories was evidence that they responded to religious needs. I think the data reported here calls into question the "perhaps."

Sixty percent of the readers perceived that *Ascent* was a novel with a deep spiritual message, and 54 percent asserted that there was a need for more books in which religion was presented in story form. The book succeeded, in part at any rate, precisely because it was religious.

Yet there are almost no feature films, television films,

television miniseries or popular novels that are explicitly religious (film makers think "Monsignor" was a religious film, confusing, like Frank Butler, "religious" with "ecclesiastical"). The national lively-arts media fear religion almost as though it were banned by the Constitution, just as the Court says it is banned from the public schools. Despite the obvious evidence that religious needs are very important in American society, the lively-arts media avoid it as though it were infectious, mostly, I suspect, because the personnel of the media are themselves not religious and are afraid of religion. They understand neither religion nor religious people. However, rather soon the existence of a vast potential for religious lively arts will become obvious to the moguls of Midtown. The profit motive will overcome their bias against and fear of religion.

An opportunity for Catholicism that presumably will be blown. ■

You're Here, Walt

*You're in the streets
and in the stroller's pause
to slip his toes
in the city fountain.*

*You're resting at a park bench
elbows planted by your side
tossing bread bits.*

*You're in the markets
and wharves with your rumpled hat
and sprawling beard neighborly
observing longshoremen
and their accents.*

*You're here, Walt,
close to the river,
with your flask of iced tea
and lemons after a century
still browsing.*

PETER KROK

