DANIEL DE ROULET

Following Jesus —*and Owen Meany*

HOW "LITTLE CHRISTS" CAN SHOW US HOW TO LIVE IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD

In the early 1580s, Sir Philip Sidney sat down to write *A Defense of Poetry*. If the time and work seem remote, a few details may help.

Sidney was living in the midst of the ongoing "culture wars" of his time. He had just fallen out of favor with the powers that be and found his office transported from the Queen's inner circle to the English backwater. He also found himself between two great cultural heavyweights—those who believed the church and only the church was the keeper of truth and thus distrusted human creations such as art and fiction, and those who believed in the the growing movements of humanism and materialism, which saw the potential of humankind's creative power and knowledge as almost limitless.

Sidney, growing comfortable with his new role of having no political friends whatsoever, wrote a defense of what we today would call fiction in which he argued against both groups.

Lest we think all this doesn't involve us, perhaps we could remember the reception of one current film and another fairly recent one: Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, and Martin Scorsese's 1988 production, *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

I lived about forty miles south of Hollywood when Scorsese's film was released, and the protests in the Los Angeles area, and eventually around the country, by conservative Christian groups helped what was a mediocre movie become a media event.

But the heart of the protest was not all that different than the religious distrust of fiction during Sidney's time: how much freedom should the arts take with sacred subjects, and what if this freedom translates into something seemingly intent on damaging the faith? Mel Gibson's film has elicited reactions from the humanists and materialists of our day: why must the Christian faith be so intent at focusing on the dark side of human nature at the expense of celebrating human goodness and potential? And, why must society get caught up in potentially damaging religious controversy when, materialists would say, what is really important is what we do about the here and now?

Sidney's defense of fiction takes no prisoners—it is guaranteed to anger just about everyone—but at its heart is a message for the culture wars of both his time and ours. People usually tune out doctrine being preached at them, and yet if we humans content ourselves with humanism and materialism, we become prisoners of the world we can see and measure. Fiction, says Sidney—especially Christian fiction—is indeed risky business, but it creates an atmosphere in which we can, for a few moments, transcend the limits and pressures our earthly lives. It allows us to get a glimpse of who we, as God's creations, were created to be.

To put all this another way: have you ever heard a sermon and come away fully knowing what you ought to do but without an inspiring model, a bridge, of how to get from where we are to where we and God want us to be? Conversely, have you ever read a book or seen a film in which the techniques of fiction writing or filmmaking were brilliant, but the content itself didn't take you anywhere? Books like Nikos Kazantzakis's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (source for the movie) express one sort of Christian fiction that fancifully attempt to fill in the relatively sparse details of the Gospels.

I am interested in the Christian fiction at which Philip Sidney hints: fiction that can give us not still another rendering of Christ, but instead, through presenting human, Christian heroes, can help us remember who we are supposed to be.

Two examples of Christian heroes at different ends of the continuum will have to serve for now: John Irving's title character in his 1989 novel, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, and Jeremiah Land in Leif Enger's compelling 2003 first novel, *Peace Like a River*. Both novels, through very different Christian heroes, show how such people can bring ordinary, flawed folks like ourselves into

the community of grace.

Irving's novel begins this way: "I am doomed to remember a boy with a wrecked voice—not because of his voice, or because he was the smallest person I ever knew, or even because he was the instrument of my mother's death, but because he is the reason I believe in God; I am a Christian because of Owen Meany."

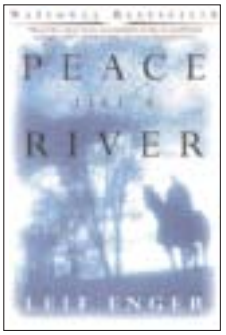
In my mind this is one of the most compelling surprise openings of anything in the ranks of recent best-selling fiction. And it outlines the character of the novel's Christian hero—a boy not at all physically impressive in a world that worships physique; a hero who is damaged goods in every sense from his squeaky voice to the unfortunate accidents that seem to plague him to his seeming failures.

Owen Meany has a set of flaws to challenge the best of us, and at times he isn't a likeable or a particularly pious human being. He is constantly right and lets other people know this, he is a loner, his tastes can be described as strange, and his ego—well, he insists on casting himself as the Christ child in the local nativity play, and even gives the baby Jesus a speaking part.

But Owen Meany also speaks truth when it is not at all to his personal advantage, he sees the important things in life as following God's plan—as improbably as that plan may seem at times, and he values sacrifice for God over a life of personal success, even when the sacrifice is his very own life. And the message is uncompromising on Christian faith itself: "Anyone can be sentimental about the Nativity; any fool can feel like a Christian at Christmas. But Easter is the main event; if you don't believe in the resurrection, you're not a believer."

Christian heroes such as Owen Meany provide the bridge for being Christians, "little Christs," in a world that needs to hear, and in our hearts that need to receive.

For much of *Peace Like a River*, Jeremiah Land is just Rube Land's father, and not the particular focus it seems, of Rube's story of growing up. Rube draws our interest to his father because Jeremiah seems to be a focal point of miracles. He prays over Rube himself—a child who by all medical accounts should not have survived birth—and the child lives. He defies the laws of physics in prayer, and the last miracle in the novel transforms Rube thoroughly, just as Owen's act of sacrifice transforms the narrator of his novel.



But what makes Jeremiah Land a memorable Christian hero is his imitation of Christ in a current context of our own troubles. He is a father who faithfully stands by his prodigal older son. He survives the loneliness of a failed marriage and the responsibility of raising three children. He suffers scorn from those who do not deserve his good will and blessings. And, perhaps most impressively, he makes a choice to give up a prestigious vocation for one which many would reject, because the latter will be good for the formation of his soul.

This novel, in an age of materialism and humanism, has found many critics who reject its world view, but the novel is unflinching in its message. It tells its story and challenges the reader up to its last line: "Make of it what you will."

We live in a troubled world where, as the Apostle Paul wrote, "We see now through a glass, darkly, but then face to face." But we are all called to be Christian heroes. Christian fiction at its best imitates the call of Christ on human lives—it takes people as they are, it accepts the limits and joys and errors of our humanity. But it does not sit comfortably in the lap of culture, accepting ways of life and thought that in the end will do our souls no good. Christian fiction presents heroes we connect with because we see so much of our own troubles in them, and having done so, it reminds us of who we are called to be and of who we can become. ❑

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Some Other "Little Christs" in Fiction

Atticus Cody in Ron Hansen's *Atticus*—a sixty-seven-year-old cattleman who, like the father in the parable of the prodigal son, is a model of hope and patience

Hank Gavin in Adela Rogers St. John's *Tell No Man*—a pastor who, daring to understand the Epistles as written to him as a twentieth-century Christian, finds his life in Christ to be reborn with risk and power

Babette Hersant in Isak Dinesen's story "Babette's Feast" (later a film)—an exiled master chef who gives away all she has to serve and redeem a troubled community

Frodo Baggins in *The Lord of the Rings*—who steps out of the safety of his comfortable life and, in doing so, becomes who he is called to be

Orual in C. S. Lewis's *Till We Have Faces*—a gifted ruler who overcomes her own sorrow, jealousy, and disbelief to live a life in God ❑