

Fictional Mission

An introduction to and bibliography for missionaries in fiction



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One of the smaller sub-genres of literature that should be of interest to all mission practitioners is that of 'fictional mission'; in other words, novels (or other fiction) in which missionaries play a significant role within the plot, and at times may be the central character(s) within the story. Such novels have a long history – the earliest that I know of is Sydney Owenson's *The Missionary: An Indian Tale*, published in 1811 (and reprinted by Broadview Literary Texts, 2002). I would guess that there must be over a hundred novels within this genre; in a provisional list at the end of this article I have mentioned about fifty candidates for inclusion, and I would be grateful if any readers of this article can add to the list!

Of course, as with all genres, there are many 'fuzzy edges'; should one include, for example, epic novels set in the colonial period (such as Paul Scott's *The Raj Quartet*), or the many post-colonial African novels (by writers such as Chinua Achebe) which frequently have a missionary figure lurking somewhere within the narrative? What about R.M. Ballantine's nineteenth-century Pacific novels, such as *Gascoyne: The Sandal-Wood Trader: A Tale of the Pacific* (James Nisbet, 1864), or *Jarwin and Cuffy: A Tale* (Frederick Warne, 1878), in which John Jarwin, the hero, meets no less a figure than John Williams in the delightfully entitled chapter VII: 'Our Hero is Exposed to Stirring Influences and Trying Circumstances'? (John Williams, of course, is the 'stirring influence'; and Cuffy, by the way, is the name of Jarwin's dog – in case you were wondering). And what about the numerous examples of juvenile fiction published by the missionary societies to interest their younger supporters – Margaret Baldwin's *Rose Yuan of Ming-O: A Tale of Cathay* (1925), for example, one of a series of 'Entertaining Books of Missionary Interest' published in the 1920s by the Religious Tract Society?

It is notoriously difficult to define precise criteria as to which books should be included and which not, so (other than deliberately excluding juvenile literature) I have simply, and highly subjectively, tried to list those books 'which might be of some interest to the readers'. Please put all errors and omissions down to 'Ignorance, madam, sheer ignorance' – as Dr Johnson responded to the lady who asked him why he had defined 'pastern' as 'the knee of a horse'.

However, before giving you my own list of 'fictional mission', I will first suggest a few reasons why it might be useful to read such works, and then (for those wanting some guidance as to their summer holiday reading) I will give my own 'Top Five'.

Why read 'fictional mission'?

It is tempting to mention in passing that many mainstream missionary biographies probably contain a good deal more fiction than we might wish to acknowledge; and since this is a case where to mention the temptation is also to have fallen into it, I think the best thing to do is to move on rapidly. So why should one bother to read fictional accounts of mission, when books describing 'real' mission work must, surely, be more valuable in encouraging mission, informing prayer and in identifying appropriate mission strategies?

I won't discuss in this article the more general question of the importance of stories in human life, but let me suggest three reasons why missionary 'fiction' *can* be more useful in understanding the dynamics of mission than more 'historical' genres such as 'missionary biography':

a) a plurality of voices

Mission fiction is excellent at looking at events from a plurality of points-of-view; seeing them not only from the viewpoint of the missionary, or of mission supporters, but also from the viewpoint of the receptor culture, or from those who feel threatened by missionary activity. It often provides an articulate voice from the margins, or from the 'underside', and can be an effective critique of the Western/colonial mentality which we all acknowledge has at times infected the work of mission agencies.

b) a wider range of human experience

Mission fiction is very good at depicting that 'darker' side of human nature which missionary biographies are likely to edit out. It reminds us, perhaps unintentionally, that the treasure we have is in 'jars of clay'. A missionary struggling with jealousy, theological doubts, sexual fantasy, hatred of one's call, or of one's fellow-missionaries, or other emotions and temptations common to humanity, is not likely to mention the fact in their monthly newsletter or daily blog; and biographers are likely to skip delicately around such demons. However, the novelist has no such inhibitions, and therefore many novels are paradoxically more 'true-to-life' (or at least more 'true-to-the-inner-life') than many supposedly 'historical' accounts.

c) a wider historical and geographical canvas

If there is fiction in much 'historical' narrative, there is also a great deal of history in much 'fiction'. A good novelist will take pains to get the historical framework 'right', and will usually depict the relevant material in a far more powerful way than the historian. In addition, a novelist can unashamedly move their characters around the historical chess-board in order to be 'where the action is' without the constraints imposed upon the biographer. A range of significant missiological issues can be introduced into the life of a fictional character in a way which, as it happened, may not have been the experience of any one historical individual.

In all of these ways 'fictional mission' paints mission on a bigger, and often more human, canvas than many traditional missionary genres. At their best such novels can explore the way that 'being a missionary' is also a way of 'being human'; and can provide vivid reminders of how a failure to become fully human will also lead to being a failure as a missionary. They are voices that, as human beings, we all need to hear.

My Top Five – in brief!

Wilkie Collins, in the original 1860 preface to *The Woman in White*, wrote to his reviewers:

In the event of this book being reviewed, I venture to ask whether it is possible to praise the writer, or to blame him, without opening the proceedings by telling his story at second-hand?... is he doing a service to the reader, by destroying, beforehand, two main elements in the attraction of all stories – the interest of curiosity, and the excitement of surprise?

Let me therefore promise at the outset not to give away any significant plot details or surprises! There is of course a great deal more in each of the books than I can possibly convey in a single paragraph, so if you choose not to read them *because of* the review please read them instead *in spite of* the review! If you love literature at all, you will not be disappointed. Incidentally, I have generally given the UK publishers; although several of these novels were published slightly earlier in the US.

1. John Hersey *The Call* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1985)

A vast, 700-page, epic novel of missionary work in China during the first half of the twentieth century. David Treadup answers 'the call' to become a missionary with the YMCA in China, arriving in 1905. Over the following decades, against the ever-present background of China's turbulent history, Treadup struggles with how best to articulate the Christian message within the Chinese context. Just about every significant missiological issue affecting missionaries in the China of that time is addressed, and the Chinese background (with which John Hersey is familiar, having spent his early childhood in China) is accurately and sympathetically portrayed. Overall, a magnificent novel.

2. Barbara Kingsolver *The Poisonwood Bible* (Faber and Faber, 1999)

Perhaps the most famous recent example of fictional mission, in April 2003 it came 125th in the BBC's 'The Big Read'. (Mind you, having just reread the list of the Top 200 I'm not sure whether that says anything much at all!) Once one gets over the unlikelihood of the dysfunctional Price family being accepted for missionary work in the Congo in the late 1950s, the book is perhaps best read as a classic example of how *not* to do missionary work. However, it is also beautifully and evocatively written, being told (and, I think, rightly) from the perspectives of Nathan Price's wife and 4 daughters rather than from Nathan Price himself. I'm still not convinced that the final 100 pages or so were necessary, but nevertheless it's a book that can be read again and again.

3. Shusaku Endo *Silence* (Peter Owen, 1976)

From childhood Shusaku Endo was fascinated by the history of the Jesuit mission to Japan. Francis Xavier had landed in 1549, and there followed a period of remarkable success, and by the end of the century around 300,000 Japanese had become Christians. However, this was brought to an abrupt halt when a combination of political, economic and religious factors caused the expulsion of all missionaries in 1614. Those who stayed on were ruthlessly hunted down, and the church was persecuted almost to the point of extinction. Most of the missionaries suffered martyrdom rather than denying their faith, but in 1632 Ferreira, the head of the Jesuit mission, apostatized, sending shock waves through the order. Apostasy was symbolised by stepping on a *fumie*, a medallion with an image of Mary and/or Jesus. Shusaku Endo had seen such a *fumie*, worn down and darkened by the numerous feet that had stepped on it, in a museum, and, having grown up with the stories of the heroic Christians who had been martyred, he became fascinated by the stories of those who were weak and who had apostatized. Was there the possibility of forgiveness or redemption for such people?

Silence deals with key missiological issues such as persecution, martyrdom, betrayal, torture, apostasy, failure, and the silence of God, and the often rather bland question 'What Would Jesus Do?' is brought to an excruciating point; and it is hard to avoid reading it without the question frequently being turned around to 'What would I have done?' Neely (1996, 458) writes about this work: 'No other novel about missionaries probes basic theological issues so thoroughly, nor incites more conflicting views.'

4. Mario Vargas Llosa *The Storyteller* (Faber and Faber, 1990)

Set amongst the Machiguenga tribe in the jungles of Peru, this book again powerfully explores questions of language, contextualisation, storytelling, and the survival of an indigenous way of life. Saúl Zuratas – nicknamed Mascarita, or 'Mask Face' – is a student

who becomes fascinated with the figure and role of the tribal 'hablador', or 'storyteller', who 'using the simplest, most time-hallowed of expedients, the telling of stories, were the living sap that circulated and made the Machiguengas into a society, a people of interconnected and interdependent beings.' (p93). He fears that the SIL missionaries, whilst seeking to preserve the Machiguenga language, are actually destroying something even more fundamental to the nomadic Machiguenga identity. Again, a novel that raises vital questions for mission to indigenous peoples and more widely.

5. Charles Williams *The House of the Octopus* (Edinburgh House Press, 1945)

'This play represents the full maturity of Williams' thought on the question of human integrity and its relation to the providence of God, and it throws a searching light on a certain kind of religious temperament.' (Glen Cavaliero in Horne, Brian *Charles Williams: A Celebration* (Gracewing, 1995, 203). It was certainly one of Charles Williams' final works, as he died on 15th May 1945. The play concerns a missionary, Anthony, who has established a church in the South Seas. Again the themes of persecution, betrayal and apostasy are highlighted, as the island is invaded by the empire of P'o-l'u, but the story mainly concerns the way in which Anthony, although initially very judgemental about a girl who has apostatised under the threat of persecution, is finally forced to recognise the deep and equally dangerous pride within his own heart. When the congregation tell him:

'The new life must be ours and not yours;
God is our cause of being, and only God'

he is finally compelled to admit:

'I do not wish you to live from God alone;
I wish always to be your means to God.' (p78)

It has to be said that Charles Williams is never the easiest of writers, but there are unique and profound aspects to his vision which make him well worth wrestling with.

A 'fictional mission' bibliography

I have arranged this bibliography by continents. It is by no means complete, and, as I mentioned above, I would be glad to be informed [contact me [here](#)] of any additions that you think should be included. Sydney Smith once wrote 'I never read a book before reviewing it; it prejudices a man so.' I can't claim to be in Sydney Smith's league, as I have actually read some of these books; but I confess, not all, and at times I've needed to trust that most notorious example of hyperbole in the English language, the publisher's blurb. George Orwell once wrote, 'When all novels are thrust upon you as works of genius, it is quite natural to assume that all of them are tripe.' Well, many of these novels are not works of genius; but I hope that none of them are tripe either. My apologies that space prevents a greater degree of annotation; but do come back to *Encounters* with any comments of your own about 'fictional mission' books you have read!

General articles

There is something of a dearth of critical writing about fictional mission, but the best starting point is:

Neely, Alan. "Images: Mission and Missionaries in Contemporary Fiction and Cinema." *Missiology* 24:4 (Oct 1996) p451-478

Three novels (those by Willa Cather, Chinua Achebe and Barbara Kingsolver) are also reviewed in the recent article:

Price, J. Matthew "Popular Notions of the Missionary Task in a Post-Missionary Era: A Hopeful Response to the Images of Missionaries Depicted in Twentieth Century Novels" *Missiology* 36:2 (April 2008) p245-257

Europe

From the point of view of fictional mission, this is by far the easiest continent. Does anyone out there know ANY novels about mission in Europe? The only one I am aware of is:

Arthur, Randall *Jordan's Crossing* (Multnomah Publishers, 1993)

Unfortunately, the publisher's blurb in this case rather put me off: 'A SUSPENSEFUL, ACTION-PACKED NOVEL OFFERING INSIGHT AND HEALING TO THOSE AFFECTED BY LIBERALISM IN THE CHURCH' (all capitals and colours courtesy of the publisher). Well, at least you've been warned.

Asia

We've already mentioned Owenson's *The Missionary*, Hersey's *The Call*, Endo's *Silence*, and (in passing) Scott's *Raj Quartet*. We should certainly add here other novels by Shusaku Endo (such as *The Samurai* (Peter Owen, 1982)) which are equally worth reading.

A couple of well-known novelists from the earlier part of the C20th should also be mentioned; both of these books were best-sellers in their time:

Cronin, A.J. *The Keys of the Kingdom* (Victor Gollancz, 1942) [early C20th China]

Godden, Rumer *Black Narcissus* (Peter Davies, 1939) [India]

If one also includes novelisations of the lives of real missionaries, then perhaps we should mention:

Morrow, Honoré Willsie *Splendour of God* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1929)

- a novel based on the lives of the Judsons in C19th Burma.

More recent novels should include:

Lapierre, Dominique *City of Joy* (Warner Books, 1985) [Calcutta, India]

Matsuoka, Takashi *Cloud of Sparrows* (Delacorte Press, 2002) [C19th Japan]

and, although more of an adventure story with some missionary characters,

Highland, Frederick *Ghost Eater* (Thomas Dunne Books, 2003) [C19th Sumatra]

Africa

Over the last 50 years the Heinemann 'African Writers Series' has become very well-known, and includes numerous books which feature a missionary character; or at the very least deal with the clash between Christianity and African Traditional Religion. Amongst many others (not all published by Heinemann) we could mention:

Achebe, Chinua *Things Fall Apart* (Heinemann, 1958) [Nigeria]
 Echewa, T. Obinkaram *The Land's Lord* (Heinemann, 1976) [Nigeria]
 Mopeli-Paulus, A.S. and Miriam Basner *Turn to the Dark* (Jonathan Cape, 1956) [Lesotho]
 Munonye, John *Obi* (Heinemann, 1969) [Nigeria]
 Nzekwu, Onuora *Blade Among the Boys* (Hutchinson, 1962) [Nigeria]
 Thiong'o, Ngugi Wa *The River Between* (Heinemann, 1965) [Kenya]
 Wangusa, Timothy *Upon this Mountain* (Heinemann, 1989) [Uganda]

Not surprisingly, missionaries often figure in novels by non-African writers set in Africa. Here are a number to add to Kingsolver's *Poisonwood Bible*:

Barley, Nigel *The Coast: A Novel* (Viking, 1990) [Niger]
 Hulme, Kathryn *The Nun's Story* (Muller, 1956) [Belgian Congo]
 Jeal, Tim *The Missionary's Wife* (Warner Books, 1998) [Southern Africa]
 Leanne, Shelly *Joshua's Bible* (Warner Books, 2003) [Southern Africa]
 Michener, James A. *The Covenant* (Random House, 1980) [Southern Africa]
 Target, G.W. *The Missionaries* (Duckworth, 1961) [Central Africa]
 Tyler, W.T. *The Ants of God* (Collins, 1982) [Ethiopia]

North and Central America

Novels in this section usually involve missions to the indigenous Indian tribes; for example:

Craven, Margaret *I Heard the Owl Call My Name* (Bodley Head, 1967) [British Columbia]
 Mitchener, James A. *Texas* (Random House, 1985)
 Moore, Brian *Black Robe* (Jonathan Cape, 1985) [Northern Canada]
 Wyman, Margaret *Mission: The Birth of California, The Death of a Nation* (Idyllwild, 2002)

One exception, set in San Francisco in the early C20th, is:

Burrows, Geraldine *Chinatown Mission* (Five Star, 2002)

Moving down into Central America, two more novels should be mentioned:

Cather, Willa *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (Heinemann, 1927) [Mexico]
 Hardie, Sean *Till the Fat Lady Sings* (Michael Joseph, 1993) [Honduras]

Latin America

Two well-known films dealing with missions to the indigenous Indians each have books associated with them:

Bolt, Robert *The Mission* (Penguin, 1986) [Paraguay]

Matthiessen, Peter *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* (Random House, 1965) [Brazil]

Like *The Mission*, another novel dealing with the Guarani Indians in Paraguay is:

Pallamary, Matthew J. *Land Without Evil* (Charles Publishing, 2000)

Llosa's *The Storyteller* obviously deals with a similar theme, and one other book by another best-selling novelist can hardly be missed out:

Grisham, John *The Testament* (Century, 1999) [Brazil]

Finally, two novels by former missionaries are:

Elliot, Elisabeth *No Graven Image* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1966) [Ecuador]

Montgomery, G. *The Lonely Ones* (Scripture Union, 1970) [Peru]

Australia and the Pacific Islands

There are a growing number of aboriginal writers dealing with the clash between missionaries and aboriginal culture. Two that I am aware of are:

Johnson, Colin *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* (Hyland House, 1983)

McLaren, Philip *Sweet Water – Stolen Land* (University of Queensland Press, 1993)

And one older book by a non-aboriginal writer:

Stow, Randolph *To the Islands* (Macdonald, 1958)

The islands of the South Pacific have always held a romantic fascination for the European mind, and various novels (or plays, in the case of Charles Williams) set in the area include missionaries amongst their cast of characters. Going back to the nineteenth century we have already mentioned the novels of Ballantine; perhaps we should also mention in passing:

Melville, Herman *Typee: A Narrative of a four months' residence among the natives of a valley of the Marquesas Islands: or, A peep at Polynesian life* (John Murray, 1846)

Let me also mention four C20th works:

Kirchhoff, Bodo *Infanta* (Viking, 1992)

Maugham, W. Somerset *Rain: The Story of Sadie Thompson* (Dell, 1921)

Shearston, Trevor *White Lies* (University of Queensland Press, 1986)

Warner, Sylvia Townsend *Mr Fortune's Maggot* (Chatto and Windus, 1927)

Finally, moving northwards we have:

Michener, James A. *Hawaii* (Random House, 1959)

Conclusion

Hopefully this has given you a taste for what is available! I'm sure that there is much material that I have not come across, and a large scope for missiological analysis of such books; but don't forget that many of these can be read for the simple enjoyment that reading a good story brings. I leave you, though, with a final question to ponder on: why, on the whole, have the best books (as literature) been written by writers with major reservations about the missionary task?

Please Note: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of Redcliffe College.

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