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**James L.
Rubart**

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IN FANTASTIC
STORIES

FLASH REVIEWS:

Find the best
Christian-made
fantastical novels

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Realm Makers

The image is a promotional poster for the Realm Makers Writers Conference. It features a central illustration of a woman with blonde hair, wearing a vibrant red cloak over a dark dress. She has a quiver of arrows on her back and is holding a bow, looking down at a large, slain blue werewolf. The werewolf has yellow eyes and a long, purple tongue. The scene is set within a decorative, Art Deco-style frame. At the top of the frame is a golden archway with a wolf's head in the center. The background shows a dark, stormy sky with bare trees. The overall color palette is dominated by the red of the cloak, the blue of the werewolf, and the dark tones of the background.

Writers
Conference
St. Louis, MO
July 19-21, 2018
www.realmmakers.net



Captain's Log

Jesus's people need fantastic stories. We need them like we need food, water, air, love, and above all, Jesus himself.

Really? Can we say we "need" fantastic stories? Why not just say "want" or "can use"?

To answer, we start with Jesus's true story, the gospel. As the hero, Jesus lives, dies, and resurrects. He redeems evil enemies to turn them into his supporting cast of worshiper-preacher-adventurers. It's not only the greatest but the most fantastic story ever told.

Clearly, Jesus believes his people need that fantastic (and true) story.

But isn't this gospel enough? Why devote time and thought to man-made stories?

At *Lorehaven*, we don't believe human stories are simply "harmless entertainment." In fact, the gospel itself reveals that God told humans to imitate his creativity (Genesis 1:28). God made our story-making gifts originally good!

But stories are also dangerous. Since Genesis 3, we've corrupted God's good gifts.

Now, Jesus has saved his church to work and create forever in a redeemed world that he will rule. Until that day, Jesus calls us to recover his purpose for human creativity.

That means we must train to explore human stories—as worshipers of God, as his church, and as ambassadors in the world.

Many resources already help Chris-

tians explore general fantasy fiction. Yet we believe Christians are uniquely able to "shop local." We can share with one another excellent tales that only Jesus's people could create.

That's why we've launched *Lorehaven* magazine, with issues every quarter.

Inside, flash reviews help you find the best Christian-made fantastic-genre novels.

Book clubs help you engage these stories with friends and family in your real life.

And encouragement from Christian "fanservants" will help you in this God-glorifying mission: to learn about and love Jesus more, and find his truth in fantastic stories.



E. Stephen Burnett is *Lorehaven* editor in chief and creates fantastical fiction. He has explored human stories at resources like *Christ and Pop Culture* and *Christianity Today*.

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Alison Henry and the Creatures of Torone

Once the people and animals of Torone could speak to each other. Then the people forgot. But after the invasion of monstrous kozas, no one can stand alone. The gap will be bridged by young Alison Henry, plucked out of our world. C. J. Darlington, in *Alison Henry and the Creatures of Torone*, spins this tale of usurpers, chosen ones, and talking animals. The tropes are familiar but satisfying, and female

heroes lend a modern flair. References to the Bible root the story in a Christian cosmos—religion in Torone is vague but wears the Christian trappings of chapels and christenings. The style of the book is unadorned and, at times, too obvious even for its twelve-year-old heroine. Despite its simplicity, *Alison Henry* is good comfort food for people who dream of other realms.

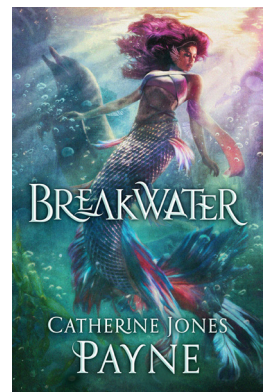
Best for: Middle-grade and young YA readers, especially those who love animals.

Discern: Mild name-calling and non-graphic violence.

Breakwater

In *Breakwater*, Catherine Jones Payne tells a watery tale of merfolk, naiads, and intrigue in the ocean city of Thessalonike. Jade, a young aristocrat, catches her fiancé in the murder of a lowly refugee girl. Her decision to expose him unleashes pent-up rivalries between the rulers and subjects of Thessalonike. But despite allusions to mythology and classical Greece, *Breakwater* is never epic. Jade, a teenage

mermaid who variously giggles and sobs, anchors this tale to contemporary ambience. Undercurrents of racial conflict, immigration, and political instability strike a counterpoint but don't displace the dominant tone. A clear sense of morality, unsupported by religion, suffuses the story. Readers looking for a quick, pleasant read rather than alien worlds will find that this book swims well.



Best for: Younger teens and those who enjoy contemporary fiction and sweet romance as well as fantasy.

Discern: Non-graphic violence, one questionable word, and repeated defiance of parental authority in serious matters.



Dongeng

Fairy-tale creatures are dying as people forget their stories. Someone must write the stories to keep their worlds from crumbling. The fairy-tale creatures choose Sara—against her will—drawing her into a world of magic, where monsters are real and boundaries are broken. Sara wants to help, but doesn't know how. She doesn't know the stories, and the creatures she meets are terrifyingly different from the folklore. The more she writes, the

worse things get. But all is not as it seems, and some creatures want to tell stories of their own. Sara must decide who to trust as she learns to breathe life back into the fairy-tale worlds. Author Anna Tan creates a beautiful multicultural world for *Dongeng*, weaving in characters from traditions both familiar and foreign. Danger and hope, fear and joy all come to life in this thoroughly fun adventure.

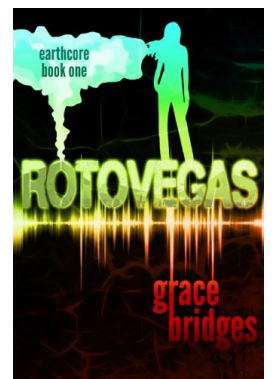
Best for: Young adults who enjoy fairy tales from multiple canons and cultures.

Discern: Some references to dark themes, some references to non-Biblical gods.

Earthcore Book 1: RotoVegas

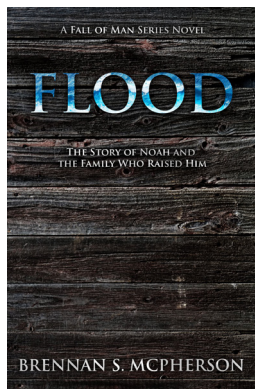
In the fine tradition of young adult adventure fare from the '80s and '90s—where locales are exotic, transportation incidental, friendships instantaneous, and parents largely out of the picture—Grace Bridges's *RotoVegas* follows seventeen-year-old Anira on a family-vacation-turned-paranormal-struggle in the New Zealand tourist town of Rotorua, famed for its geothermal vibrancy. When the hot spring behind Anira's hotel imbues her with height-

ened awareness, she begins to discover others who've been similarly gifted. Only by joining forces can they prevent a malicious plot to transform the quaint village into an international gambling mecca. Appropriately enough for a story sunk deep in Maori animism, the sense of place is lovingly grounded, and the style flows like water. Engaging characters coax us through cheesiness to a clever climax.



Best for: Young adults seeking a character-driven romp through a unique urban fantasy setting.

Discern: Intermittent mild language, brief violence, unreconstructed animistic spirituality, and the unfortunate implications of the fact that the mothers in the cast all seem to be single.



Flood

Flood comes at you like a storm. There's a simplicity to its tumult, a feral edge to its beauty. Nor does it break when you expect. In this telling of Brennan McPherson, the saga of Noah opens not with the voice of God, but with the torches of the God-King, demonic ruler of an antediluvian Earth. His plot to thwart the Almighty depends upon a pitiless harrowing of the family chosen to redeem mankind. The

struggle is generational and the stakes apocalyptic, but the battleground is in the heart, the objective in the mind. Can even a righteous man withstand the onslaught of such provocation? This second installment in the Fall of Man series is a tour de force of character drama. Strong personalities, vivid descriptions, and lifelike dialogue steady the reader amidst ravaging action and deceptively placid interludes.

Best for: Adults eager to examine those old bloodstains behind the flannelgraph.

Discern: Strong violence, sexual references, non-graphic nudity, brief language, realistic depictions of intense grief and rage.

For Steam and Country

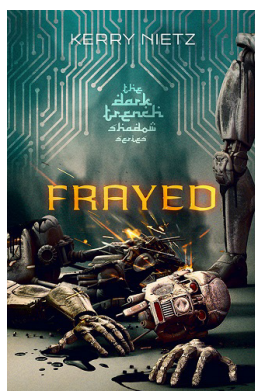
Jon Del Arroz's *For Steam and Country* constructs a world of escapades, mystery, and heroism. When spunky Zaira von Monocle is whisked from her plain farm life, she becomes a vital cog in the turning gear system of war. A simple but diverse cast of characters help Zaira pilot the plot which, like *Rislandia's* prize airship plying the sky, takes time to get off the ground. But once lifted, this story soars

into new, fascinating territory—complete with its share of mishaps. In places the story's quality is bumpier than a horseless carriage, but glimpses of a wider world and history, unexpected twists, and some good old-fashioned derring-do make up for the lack of polish. And the strong ending tantalizes readers with sequel potential.



Best for: Newer fans of steampunk who enjoy a romping adventure without an overload of intricate worldbuilding details or complex themes.

Discern: Moderate violence, a few light vulgarities, partial nudity, and some romantic content.



Frayed

With *Frayed*, Kerry Nietz returns triumphantly to the cyberpunk dystopia of The DarkTrench Saga, paralleling one of his prior tales as *la Ender's Shadow*. The setting: a far-future caliphate of ubiquitous automation serviced by human robots whose electroshock brain-implants render them eunuchs with seats saved in paradise. The narrative remains accessible to newcomers while rerouting the circuitry of *A Star Curiously Singing* to highlight former bit players. Our hero is ThreadBare, a dis-

satisfied debugger living vicariously through others' memories, unaware his station in life will soon be upended. But when misfortune deposits him in high places, he faces crises of conscience that compromise his faith and threaten to crash his whole world. Nietz's barebones style is punchy yet subtle, laced with lived-in jargon. This slow-burning psychological drama holds rich rewards for those who unravel its thematic threads.

Best for: Teens and adults seeking intelligent social sci-fi that doesn't feel compelled to set off an explosion every five minutes.

Discern: Some polygamous innuendo, pervasive in-world spiritual bleakness.

Orphan's Song

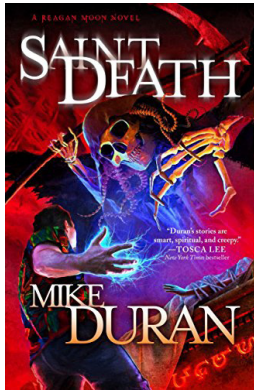
Orphan's Song begins with a familiar tune: an encroaching dark lord, an old peddler with a mysterious past, a ragtag band of urchin-rebels, and a Cinderella figure imbued with a power she doesn't comprehend. But Gillian Bronte Adams's arrangement rings with sincerity, drawing us into a classic medieval fantasy setting populated with archetypes that somehow feel fresh and vigorous. Birdie, the

titular orphan who alone can hear and channel the deistic soundtrack of the universe, is beset by doubts (but not by irritating angst). Her friends and allies likewise inhabit the third dimension. Relentless foes keep our heroes on their toes. Sudden violence and forceful diction drive the action forward, relieved by descriptive flourishes that accent secondary-world beauty for its own sake.

Best for: Young adults seeking the trailhead of a well-styled fantasy series that doesn't ask much of them.

Discern: Low scruples, moderate bloodshed, and high dudgeon.





Saint Death

What do you get when you cross a quasi-Catholic folk cult, an interdimensional conspiracy, and a hard-boiled reporter/Earth Guardian? Why, Mike Duran's *Saint Death*, of course. This second installment in the Reagan Moon series conjures a menagerie of the grotesque and macabre. When an anonymous tip leads Moon to a shrine used for human sacrifice, he learns demonic forces are threatening Los Angeles. But this time our loner hero must team

with a band of fellow oddballs to stand a chance of averting catastrophe. But can he hold readers' attention through swarms of internal monologues and plagues of overwrought prose? That will depend on readers' affection for the noir genre. Those who don't mind passively perplexed protagonists will find plenty of Peretti parallels in this noncommittally theistic paranormal thriller.

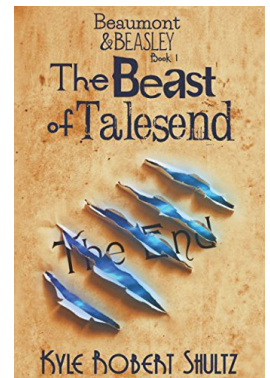
Best for: Adults interested in a gritty angels-and-demons yarn with astronomical stakes.

Discern: Creepy violence, mild-to-moderate language, and low-to-midlevel supernatural beings without much reference to supreme rulers of their good or evil hierarchies.

The Beast of Talesend

In *The Beast of Talesend*, modern and magical collide in a fashion reminiscent of the Harry Potter universe. Kyle Robert Shultz creates an enchanting story world grounded in familiarity yet saturated with fairy-tale qualities. Add a distinctly British ambience and this story is primed to delight. Private detective Nick Beasley, expert in debunking magic, believes the magnifying glass of reason and logic reveals magic as a hoax. Then he becomes tangled in a case

that opens his eyes to a world of new—and frightening—depth. His brother Crispin, Lord Whitlock, and “Lady Beaumont” round out a main cast that is quirky, highly individual, and engaging. Snappy dialogue, burgeoning mysteries, and riveting action keep a relentless pace all the way through the breathtaking conclusion. However, plenty of room remains for brotherly banter, dry wit, and a fascinating magic system.



Best for: Teens and adults who enjoy a clever, real-world fairy tale packed with action and humor and built around memorable characters.

Discern: Some violence, creepy creatures, and one semi-profanity.



The Songweaver's Vow

The Songweaver's Vow knits together a world where gods and goddesses come to life in all their glory—and all their humanity. Euthalia, a human, is sacrificed to become the wife of a god and is carried to Asgard by her new husband, a god she is not allowed to see. Jealousies kindle, passions ignite, and feuds erupt in this tale where good intentions have unintended consequences, lies are currency,

and true love may not be enough to conquer all. Laura VanArendonk Baugh masterfully draws on legends and myths both familiar and obscure to create a world that is all too similar to our own, with characters who display humanity's best and worst traits in a way that embraces honesty, forthrightness, and love.

Best for: Young adults who appreciate subtlety and shades of gray and situations that don't always have a “right” answer.

Discern: Open sex discussion, implied sex in the context of marriage, violence and gore.

Walking on the Sea of Clouds

It's the near future. Megacorporations have set foot beyond our planet—mining asteroids, colonizing the moon, riding herd on the bottom line. Earth's gravity well imposes brutal strictures on anyone seeking escape velocity, but it's worse for contenders who lack unlimited funding. And for two colonist couples chasing a dream, the thrill of barren lunar beauty may prove insufficient to patch their marital stress fractures. In *Walking on*

the Sea of Clouds, Gray Rinehart draws upon his own extensive professional experience to depict a world of claustrophobic vistas and high-tech deprivation, where even the tiniest details in relational and logistical dynamics may determine the difference between failure and success, life and death. This novel's style is literary, its pacing episodic, its science hard as a vacuum. Despite a meandering plot, tolerances are tight for marriage on the moon.



Best for: Adults seeking a slice-of-life missive from the pioneers of the 2030s.

Discern: Infrequent moderate language, occasional sexual innuendo, brief-yet-vivid descriptions of gore, and only briefly referenced Christianity.

Introducing Lorehaven Book Clubs

We're starting Lorehaven Book Clubs to explore Christian fantasy in reality.

"Books are something special—writer speaking to a reader—so I think making the reading of a book the center of a social event, the meeting of a book club, is a brilliant idea."

—Yan Martel, author of The Life of Pi

I love to read.

That probably doesn't come as a shock to you, seeing as how I'm an author.

As a reader, I have a peculiar taste when it comes to books. They must be fantastical—not only in quality, but in breadth of imagination and depth of theme. They should span lost worlds and reach into unexplored corners of the galaxy.

In short, the stranger, the better.

But there must be more than that. Every story carries a message, either overt or covert. Certain stories resound in my heart and mind. I want to read more of them—the stories concocted by brothers and sisters in Christ, whether those stories cleverly whisper the truth or shout it from page one.

Trouble is, I find few people with whom I can talk about those books.

But what if there were more? What if there were a place where you and I could meet to discuss the very best of Christian fantasy and science fiction, those speculative stories written by our fellow believers?

Guess what?

There is.

Lorehaven magazine is starting a network of book clubs, where fans of Christian-made fantastical novels—fantasy, science fiction, paranormal/horror, and beyond—can meet to share these stories, explore them, and delve into their truths and beauties.

And we want you, gentle reader, to join us.

"Wait a second," you're saying. "I don't know anything about book clubs. I've never even been in one. How do I know where to join, what we're reading, or even what to do?"

That's where I come in.

I'm the coordinator for Lorehaven Book Clubs. That means I'm in charge of providing your leaders with all the tools necessary for organizing a book club in your area.

In fact, our first book club has already begun, thanks to the blessing of social media.

We'll have resources aplenty, not only to show leaders how to make their book club experiences the best ever, but also to put you in touch with the nearest real live club in your region.

And that's the crux: "real live." After all, we spend hours communicating across the electronic ether about our likes and dislikes, our popular culture critiques, and discussions about faith. Yet we don't often

speak our minds to flesh-and-blood people.

With Lorehaven Book Clubs, we want to help you experience the joys of personal fellowship. My day job as a librarian will help in that respect. One of my tasks is to coordinate the ordering of books for seven private book clubs in our county. I'm bringing my experience managing different personalities and a variety of reading choices to the table, with the goal of making your entry into a book club as smooth as possible.

Want to join a club? Start with the Lorehaven Book Clubs group on Facebook—at least, until some courageous adventurer starts a real-world club near you. (Of course, this adventurer could be you.) Check Lorehaven.com for a complete list. You can also subscribe to email updates about book clubs.

I look forward to welcoming you into the Lorehaven Book Club network. Join us as we embark on a fantastic journey into the heart and spirit of Christian-made speculative stories!



Steve Rzasa helps run a library and has written multiple science fiction, fantasy, and steampunk novels. He and his family live in Wyoming.

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To be selected for review in Lorehaven magazine, novels must meet these qualifications:

1. Christian author
2. Fantastical in genre
3. Published, indie or traditional

Authors can share their books at Lorehaven.com. Our review team will consider each novel, matching qualifying entries to the reviewer best suited for each kind of story.

We also prioritize newer novels, so we will consider a book's date of release.

Authors can also consider sponsored reviews for older books, or books we otherwise cannot select organically. We treat each sponsored review just like any other review: we emphasize fairness yet positivity, and assign these books to the review team reader most likely to appreciate the work. To learn more, reach out by email to reviews@lorehaven.com.

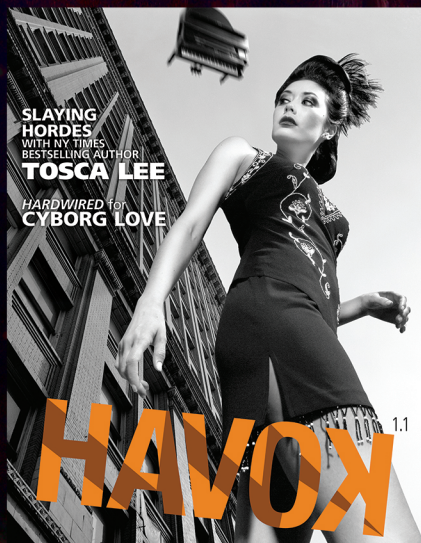
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Austin Gunderson

Avily Jerome

Shannon McDermott

Zachary Totah



HAVOX

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The Man He Never Was

James L. Rubart's novel fleshes out the quest of a man at supernatural war with himself.

To enjoy James L. Rubart's contemporary/fantasy novel *The Man He Never Was*, you likely need to appreciate the core idea behind the genre of Christian social drama.

Many of God's people love these kinds of stories, such as the movies *Fireproof* (2008) and *God's Not Dead* (2014). They reflect scenarios that Christians often face in reality, such as child illness, marital discord, or societal pressures against the church.

But Rubart's novel, despite surface similarity, comes with bonus fantastical twists.

Imagine if bitter husband Caleb (Kirk Cameron) from *Fireproof* actually became literally, physically fireproof. Or what if Josh, the college-debating student from *God's Not Dead*, discovered he could hypnotically persuade atheist professors to confess faith in Jesus?

In either case, these characters' spiritual journeys with supernatural edges would actually complicate their lives, rather than giving them simple solutions.

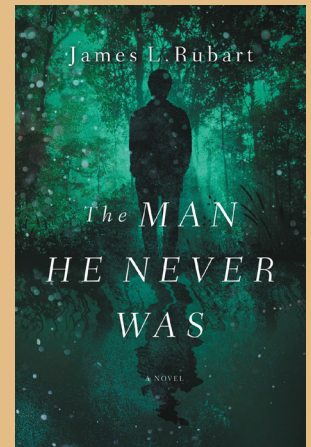
Thus *The Man He Never Was* opens when former football player Toren Daniels awakens in a strange hotel, emptied of his recent memories. To his shock, he's also liberated from temptations to anger—the source of his separation from his wife, Sloane, and their two children. But quickly we discover such apparent miracles actually don't provide easy solutions. Rather, Sloane has moved on with her life, relieved to be freed from covering up Toren's temper and even acts of physical abuse against her. His children don't know how to react to his "I've really changed" claims—especially since he can't explain them. And Toren finds himself stalked by a sneering, thuggish old friend from the past.

From there, some elements can feel predictable, partly because book cover and story alike give away the story's inspiration from Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. However, Rubart is careful to construct vivid settings and emotions, and builds in some

unforeseen final twists. And fantasy fans may appreciate shout-outs to Hyde-inspired figures such as the Incredible Hulk.

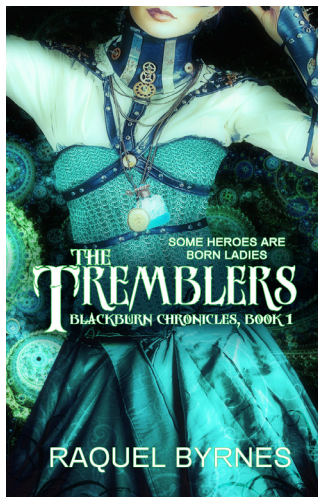
Ultimately, *The Man He Never Was*

provides a vital service for Christian readers. As C. S. Lewis remarked, "watchful dragons" guard us from truth, and familiar fantasy tales can smuggle truth into our hearts. Yet in this case, Rubart is stealing past "watchful lambs": crafting tales about familiar real-life drama that can smuggle in the delight of fantasy.



Best for: Fans of Christian social drama who are curious about fantastical themes.

Discern: Family and marital conflict as well as intense scenes of emotional and physical abuse, including between a cruel father and vengeful son.



Raquel Byrnes writes in several genres including YA steampunk, fantasy, and Gothic mystery. She lives in Southern California with her husband, six kids, and various reptiles.

RaquelByrnes.com
[@RaquelByrnes](https://twitter.com/RaquelByrnes)

Sponsored Review: The Tremblers

Charlotte Blackburn searches for her lost father in this thrilling steampunk adventure from novelist Raquel Byrnes.

Ever so often, a book begets adventure unlooked-for. That's certainly the case for Charlotte Blackburn, plucky heroine of Raquel Byrnes's *The Tremblers*, and so shall it be for readers fortunate enough to crack open this rip-roaring tale of post-apocalyptic steampunk peril.


When Charlotte's aristocratic father suddenly vanishes, she is thrust into a realm of espionage and rebellion, pursued across a broken, disease-ravaged land by relentless fac-

tions she doesn't understand. Can she trust the dashing Ashton Wells, or does he too operate in that gray haze between the good and evil she once thought so plain?

Byrnes writes with a strong, clear voice, and the occasional syntactical stumble cannot impede the momentum of this narrative. Romance kindles, dirigibles detonate, and the cast of charmers is forced to face trial after trial by fires both breathtaking and heart-rending.

Best for: Adults and teens seeking a vividly drawn adventure yarn that does seemingly everything, and does it exceptionally well.

Discern: Pervasive violence, death, some sexual tension, elements of zombie-esque horror, and sporadic scriptural references.



‘The Magic is Real’

*James L. Rubart’s stories explore
a Christian’s fantastic and
redeemed identity in Jesus.*

INTERVIEW WITH AUTHOR JAMES L. RUBART
IMAGE COURTESY JAMES L. RUBART

Novelist James L. Rubart believes your favorite stories reveal the kind of person you are. For example,

his favorite three films are *The Matrix*, *The Shawshank Redemption*, and *It's A Wonderful Life*. Each story follows a hero who finds his true identity in a surprising way. Rubart says this theme keeps recurring in his novels, including *The Long Journey to Jake Palmer* (2016) and his newest release, *The Man He Never Was* (February 2018).

Rubart says his new story explores a man who will “go into the darkest part of his soul and face that and ultimately find victory over it, in a way that he could never imagine.”

As a child, he found his own identity formed by fantasy stories that reflect biblical truth, including, of course, C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* series.

“I was just taken away to this world,” Rubart says. “At the point in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* where Aslan says, You're going to have to get to know me in your world by a different name . . . my little tiny eleven-year-old brain thought, ‘Is he talking about Jesus? Is he Jesus? That's the coolest thing in the world.’

“That was the moment when I thought: someday I've got to try to do for others what Lewis did for me,” he says. “I was captured by the idea of story.”

Rubart says he didn't originally intend to write fantasy genre fiction. In fact, rather than story-telling about humans drawn from reality into fantasy worlds, he prefers crafting fictional heroes who experience God's miraculous twists in their realities.

“I've had some experiences where I realize the magic is real,” Rubart says. “And by that I mean:

we read all these supernatural, fantastical things happening in the Bible.”

Christians may believe these stories are true, but don't imagine how they affect our real lives. Rubart asks: if these stories really happened—if God has supernaturally authored a gospel of miracles in human history—how should we

“The magic is real . . . all these supernatural, fantastical things happening in the Bible.”

see ourselves and our world?

“I'm fascinated by the idea that we are absolutely spiritual beings having a human experience, and not the other way around,” Rubart says.

Biblical teaching often inspires Rubart's novels, such as a sermon by the Rev. Tim Keller about Romans 7. In that chapter, the apostle Paul explores how Christians have “died” to sin but still struggle to follow our new, spiritually alive nature in Jesus.

Rubart says he realized Robert Louis Stevenson's classic novella *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* also explores Romans 7. But because Stevenson seems to let the dark side win, Rubart says, his new novel adapts the tale with a modern and more redemptive theme—one he believes reflects the biblical truth of the Christian's new nature.

“We have this trope or this story that we use in the church . . . that there's a white dog and a dark dog, and whichever you feed more is go-

ing to win,” he says. “That story is not true if you're a Christian. . . . We have been crucified with Christ [Galatians 2:20].”

So instead of lamenting our struggle, Rubart says, we are called to read our own “label”—saved, made new by Jesus—and join our Savior on the adventures he sends us.

Rubart says he's planning several new fantasy adventures of his own.

Along with helping start the Rubart Writing Academy for aspiring authors, he's trying stories with more overtly fantastical themes. For example, fans can watch for a new series of time-travel novellas and audiobooks from Rubart and two coauthors. That series will star Rembrandt Stone, a detective recruited to solve cold cases in history.

But although we need history and nonfiction truths for our minds, Rubart says, it's stories and imagination that stick in our memories and excite our hearts.

“We do not remember three-point sermons, as wonderful as they might be; we remember stories,” Rubart says. “As people who follow Christ, he's probably a pretty good model to follow. And that's the way he taught: with fiction.”

We may also find that fiction lasts as long as Christ's people live, he says.

“We're going to have this wedding feast, right?” Rubart says, referring to Jesus's future marriage supper referred to in Revelation 19:6–9. “Are there going to be any stories told around the wedding feast? Well, somebody's got to write those stories.”



Christian Geeks, Rejoice In Your Strange Gifts

Even if you feel like an alien at church, rejoice that God made you a fantastic story fan.

As Christians who are fans of fantasy, or “Christian geeks,” we often struggle to fit in.

Sometimes we might even feel like there’s not much of a place for us in the local church.

This feeling can even lead to a sense of discouragement, or even resentment.

I’ve served in fruitful ministry in my local church for the past 20 years. I’ve even been on staff and worked as worship pastor for a few years in the mix. But I can still easily feel jealous of the greater gifting others have.

At times I’ve thought to myself, “Why couldn’t I have the same spiritual benefits as so-and-so when they were growing up? Why are some other people just naturally better at the Christian life than I am?”

For example, one of our lead pastors is about 10 years younger than me. He and I both grew up in Christian homes and became believers very early in life. My parents gave me wonderful examples of faith. But I can see evidence of the uniquely Spirit-filled home environment my pastor received, whether he’s teaching up front or having burgers at my house. I would have loved to get the same advantages growing up.

But that’s just not where God placed me.

At other times, I have recoiled when meeting someone with more spiritual maturity or giftedness than me. Jealousy would take hold before I knew it. Inside, I would label these folks in some way—“legalist” or “Ned Flanders” come to mind—that made me feel more secure in my own status.

But more often, others’ gifts simply discourage me—at least until good friends with these spiritual gifts remind me about the unique gifts God has given me too.

I recall one conversation among worship team members, about the books we like to read purely for fun. One of our lead pastors told us, “This will probably sound boring, but I just like reading and studying

the Bible. I don’t read any fiction. Reading the Bible is my idea of fun.”

Well. I immediately felt embarrassed and ashamed for talking about Brent Weeks and The Night Angel Trilogy.

I said, “Man, I wish I was like that! When I relax I like to read a bunch of dumb stories about magic and laser guns.”

Pastor Bob was quick to shake his head. He told me, “No, don’t feel that way. It suits your calling. Just like my love for reading the Bible suits mine.”

Pastor Bob’s words felt both gracious and insightful. Since 2006, through Spirit Blade Productions and later by Christian Geek Central, I’ve created online entertainment and resources to equip, encourage and inspire Christian geeks to live for Christ.

If I didn’t genuinely enjoy those things, I wouldn’t have much to say that could genuinely speak to the hearts of geeks like myself.

You may not be doing full- or part-time ministry as a vocation. But God has called us to minister to each other in our local church communities (Ephesians 4:7–16). He gives us even our supposedly “useless” interests and talents to bless others in unique ways.

In Ephesians 4, Paul shows his vision for Christian unity and partnership amidst wildly different types of people. He uses Psalm 68 to identify Jesus as the authority in charge of distributing gifts. Jesus takes all the resources of this world, from possessions to genetic coding, and portions them out in the way that best supports his eternal purpose.

Each person receives gifts of different nature and strength. But all portions are distributed by the same Giver. His specific reasons aren’t clear to us. But he’s a good king, so we can trust him with that responsibility.

We can also remember that our individual gifts don’t increase our value or significance.

Despite what Bruce Wayne in *Batman*

Begins once told his girlfriend, it’s actually not “what I do that defines me.” Instead, God created and defined us as reflections of him. Jesus became a person, suffered shame, torture and death on our behalf, and rescued us from separation from him to remake and adopt us to partner with him forever!

God’s baffling fixation on each one of us is what gives us value.

We can’t add to or subtract from that based on our skills, talents, or natural tendencies.

Of course, I believe we’re *all* called into an increasingly deeper life with God and his word. But we’re not made complete yet. And we’re each in different places, with special gifts for unique relationships with different kinds of people.

In God’s gigantic jigsaw puzzle of the universe, you represent one piece. Only you can connect with the unique combination of pieces around us.

So let’s pursue growth, but also stay paradoxically content with our geeky and gifts.

In my case, God may never give me the obvious ministry fruit as a pastor or music leader. But I’m increasingly content with the limits of my gifting and my impact.

That’s the peace we need as we watch other Christians practice their gifts, or as we look at other creative people whose work gains greater quality or popularity.

We can rejoice in this peace, knowing Jesus is authoring his fantastic story with us in it.



Paeter Frandsen created Christian Geek Central and Spirit Blade Productions. He produces audio drama, reviews geeky stories, and volunteers at his Arizona church.

ChristianGeekCentral.com
[@SpiritBladeInfo](https://twitter.com/SpiritBladeInfo)

What If Your Kids Don't Read Fantasy?

"Entertainment" is too shallow a word for the blessings fantasy can bring to our hearts.

I can't tell you how many times I've spoken with a mature Christian friend about their uncertainty of the role of fiction and imagination.

They may know it's good in a nebulous sense, but what should they do when their child suddenly has an appetite for fantasy? What if they ask to read Harry Potter?

They don't consider themselves fundamentalists, yet they think fantasy poses a real threat to their child.

Parents often ask questions like: Is a specific book or series okay to read? How can we tell if a fantasy novel will encourage our child to use magic?

In all my years of reading fantasy, I have yet to meet someone who joined the occult after reading a book with magic in it.

Parents can ask themselves this instead:

What negative impact will it have on my child's mind and heart if I don't let them read fantasy?

That is a far more pressing concern, and one more Christian parents should have.

God created our children in his own image—created to be creative. In fact, the first character trait we learn about God is that he is creative. In Genesis, we discover our own place in the cosmos:

So God created man in his own image; he created him in the image of God; he created them male and female. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it. Rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and every creature that crawls on the earth." (Genesis 1:27–28, CSB)

That last bit is known as the "cultural mandate." As divine image bearers, we're commanded to fill the earth, subdue it, cultivate it.

In *The Mind of the Maker*, Dorothy Sayers argues that creativity is the primary way humankind are made in God's image. Our ability to create beauty is an essential part of fulfilling the mandate. This includes everything from farming and engineering to music composition, and space exploration—cultivating all the possibilities of God's creation.

So why advocate creating fantasy spe-

cifically? After all, there's a lot of fantasy out there that's just plain weird, for example, anything made by Tim Burton, Jim Henson, and Hayao Miyazaki. We think these storytellers must be very strange. How did they come up with something so jarring and disturbing? We decide they're probably mentally unstable, therefore what they've created must be bad. We certainly wouldn't want to expose our children to the creation of a mad man!

In his essay, "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien addresses this issue:

I am thus not only aware but glad of the... connexions of fantasy with fantastic: with images of things that are not only 'not actually present,' but which are indeed not to be found in our primary world at all.... That the images are of things not in the primary world (if that indeed is possible) is a virtue, not a vice. Fantasy (in this sense) is, I think, not a lower but a higher form of Art, indeed the most nearly pure form, and so (when achieved) the most potent. Fantasy, of course, starts out with an advantage: arresting strangeness. But that advantage has been turned against it, and has contributed to its disrepute. Many people dislike being 'arrested.' They dislike any meddling with the Primary World, or such small glimpses of it as are familiar to them. They, therefore, stupidly and even maliciously confound Fantasy with Dreaming, in which there is no Art; and with mental disorders, in which there is not even control: with delusion and hallucination.

When we encounter stories that jar us with their strangeness, we should not run from them but to them. They're strange to us because another person has experienced things we haven't and has grown their imagination either in a different direction or to a larger degree than we have. This is not evil. Imagination, especially the arresting kind, increases our ability to stand in awe of God and his creation. Strangeness draws our eyes, and in so doing, places special emphasis on truth and reality.

Even non-Christians have something to teach us about *reality* through *unreality*. God has given them common grace—the

grace that God gives all humans to see and understand truth. Armed with our ability to think critically about culture, we can learn from them and grow our own imagination to better worship God. And yet, it's because we cannot think outside the box of normalcy that we cripple our critical thinking capacity.

The Bible itself has excessively weird stories, many of which are metaphors—unreality used by God to convey truth. And yet we not only disengage from such practices when people create similar stories, but condemn it.

Back to the original question, what do we deprive from our children when we don't allow them to read fantasy? It's not like many people will spend their lives sub-creating—when a human creates an imaginary world in divine imitation—in the same manner as Tolkien. Yet, if using imagination to create—whether it be a story, a car engine, plans for a building, a board game, or dance choreography—is a virtue, expanding its scope through unusual stories will only further our talents as well as our sanctification.

Reject the notion that fantasy is mere entertainment. That is an ugly word for what is really going on in our hearts when we engage with fantasy. We are seeking our own joy, and in so doing, expanding our imagination which furthers our journey toward virtue, and therefore, glorifies God.

An early version of this article appeared at SpeculativeFaith.com.



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Finding Truth in Science Fiction

For centuries, people have speculated on the future in surprising, provocative stories.

I love science fiction.

From my earliest days watching *Lost in Space* reruns and reading comic books, science fiction, or sci-fi, has run in my blood. I like the stories' "what if" nature, adventure, exploration, and worlds of endless possibilities.

You probably love science fiction too, even if you don't know it.

We may assume science fiction is a twentieth-century phenomenon, a product of the space race, microchips, and Hollywood. But sci-fi elements have existed for a long time.

The eighth-century Japanese fairy tale of Urashima Tarō features time travel. *The Arabian Nights*, commonly known for its stories of Aladdin and Sinbad, also has stories of interstellar travel, lost technologies, and robotics.

Many literary classics have elements of science fiction. *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) has weird science and alien cultures. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) features a mad scientist experimenting with innovative technology. So do later nineteenth-century novels, such as Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and H. G. Wells's *The Invisible Man*, *The Time Machine*, and *The War of the Worlds*.

Venerated Christian authors wrote and still write science fiction. C. S. Lewis's *Cosmic Trilogy* (also called the *Space or Ransom Trilogy*) has space travel, arcane science, and aliens. So does Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*. Stephen Lawhead's *Empyrion* series and Kathy Tyers's *Firebird* series are science fiction. I myself join many author friends in writing science fiction.

So, what exactly is science fiction?

Science fiction is better defined by its tropes—by its themes and plot devices—than by any rigid classification.

Does the story have space travel? Extraterrestrials? Science fiction. Time travel, future societies, parallel universes, or advanced experimentation? Science fiction, all.

The genre splits into two basic categories: hard sci-fi and soft sci-fi.

Hard sci-fi focuses on getting the scientific details right, specifically the natural sciences like physics, astronomy and chemistry. The story is presented as if it could truly happen someday and the reader may learn something along the way.

One recent hard sci-fi book (and movie) is Andy Weir's *The Martian*. Other well-known hard sci-fi authors are Michael Crichton (*Jurassic Park*), Arthur C. Clarke (2001: *A Space Odyssey*) and Isaac Asimov.

Soft sci-fi leans toward the social sciences, such as psychology, economics, and sociology. But it's better described as stories that focus on plot, characters and adventure with minimal regard for scientific feasibility. Two of my favorite soft science fiction writers are Ray Bradbury (*The Martian Chronicles*, *Something Wicked This Way Comes*) and Edgar Rice Burroughs (*Tarzan* and *A Princess of Mars*).

Either mode of sci-fi offers a plethora of different subgenres, ranging from popular to obscure. Often books straddle more than one subgenre, and occasionally some will defy classification altogether. But here are a few of the main subgenres:

Space opera stories span multiple worlds, have diverse (possibly alien) characters, and lots of space travel. Their biggest defining feature is their scale. They are epic and operatic. *Star Wars* is a classic example, but also Frank Herbert's *Dune*, Steve Rzasa's *The Face of the Deep* series, and the *Firebird* series.

Dystopian stories focus on a future terrible society, usually one whose oppressive central government keeps the population enslaved. Classic examples are George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. My novel *Mask* is dystopian, featuring a world where everything is subject to vote, including people's right to live.

Time travel tales feature someone traveling from one time period to another. Early examples include Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* and Wells's *The Time Machine*. Two recent examples are Michael Crichton's *Timeline*, and *Wayback* by my author friend Sam Battermen.

Apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic dramas focus on a catastrophic event—nuclear war, plague, meteors, or zombies—and the human struggle to survive. For Christians, the *Left Behind* series by Jerry B. Jenkins and Tim LaHaye is considered apocalyptic. So is William R. Forstchen's *One Second After* or Max Brooks's *World War Z*.

Superhero stories feature figures with supernatural or metahuman powers. This is doubtless the most popular sci-fi subgenre right now. Superman, Batman, Wolverine,

and the Avengers all live here. So do books by Christian authors, such as John W. Otte's *Failstate* series and Adam and Andrea Graham's *Tales of the Dim Knight*.

Cyberpunk presents a future of advanced technology, cybernetics, robotics, and heavy urbanization. Typically, the future is also dystopian or anarchical. The genre is popularly represented in movies like *Blade Runner* and *The Matrix*, and in books like William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, Neil Stephenson's *Snowcrash*, and Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One*. My *DarkTrench* series has a heavy cyberpunk vibe. So does Kirk Outerbridge's *Eternity Falls* and Frank Creed's *Flashpoint*.

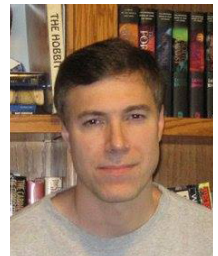
Steampunk's technology is predominately steam-based—no electronics—with a styling and setting inspired by the nineteenth century. The Sherlock Holmes movies (with Robert Downey Jr.) have flashes of steampunk. So does the infamous movie *Wild Wild West* (with Will Smith). Christian novelists Morgan L. Busse (*Tainted*) and Steve Rzasa (*Crosswind*, *Sandstorm*) have both created popular steampunk novels.

Other subgenres worth exploring are alternate history (such as *The Man in the High Castle*), alien invasion (*War of the Worlds*), and robot fiction (*I, Robot*).

As a Christian, I find science fiction the perfect medium to explore greater truths. It gives us a chance to speculate about God's creation and explore its purpose. Sci-fi also provides an excellent way to shine light on cultural trends by extrapolating them to their potentially dangerous ends.

Unfortunately, a fair share of science fiction today is written from humanistic and in some cases anti-Christian perspectives. But Christian writers like me hope to change this by crafting stories of exceptional quality and timeless truth.

I hope you'll join me in this exciting adventure. The possibilities are endless.



Kerry Nietz writes award-winning science fiction novels, including *The DarkTrench Saga* series and *Amish Vampires in Space*. He and his family live in Ohio.

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Popular Fantasy Chases the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

Why do Revelation's four horsemen so often feature in non-Christian stories?

For two thousand years, the four apocalyptic horsemen of Revelation 6:1–8 have captured the imaginations of non-Christians and Christians alike.

But these days the four horsemen seem to be almost entirely absent from Christian fiction. While non-Christian authors take these images and run with them, Christians have let their own Bible's concept lie dormant.

In Revelation 6, God shows the horsemen to the apostle John. Each horseman is associated with one of the first four seal judgments God unleashes on the world. Each horse's color embodies a primal force of division and destruction: Conquest, on a white horse; War or Strife, on a red horse; Famine, on a black horse; and Death, on a pale horse.

However, most fictional versions don't strictly follow this list. Most stories usually drop Conquest. They combine this horseman with War, or replace it with Pestilence, which appears nowhere in Revelation 6. Sometimes adapters replace Conquest with Strife or make up entirely new horsemen.

You don't have to look far to find an innovative representation of the horsemen. For example, the television show *Charmed* shows the horsemen as corporate agents of The Source of All Evil, bent on bringing about destruction by reaching their death goals.

Meanwhile, the TV series *Supernatural* gives each horseman a distinct personality. Ironically, Death seems the most personable. He's also the most blasphemous, claiming he'll one day reap God.

Another TV series, *Sleepy Hollow*, intentionally uses Revelation 6 and other Biblical passages, but also turns the horsemen into agents of a demon, bent on conquering and destroying the world.

Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett famously update the horsemen's roster in *Good Omens*, replacing Pestilence with Pollution. Even superheroes have

their own takes: Marvel's ancient mutant Apocalypse always appears with four chosen henchpersons. In the film *X-Men: Apocalypse* (2016), these are Storm, Archangel, Psylocke, and Magneto.

Novelist Veronica Rossi offers one version of the horsemen that is surprisingly truer to the Revelation account. Her young adult adventure novel *Riders* focuses on four teenagers who are temporarily given the roles and powers of the horsemen—but in order to stop a group of demons from unleashing hell on Earth.

Okay, so that last part is artistic license. Bear with it.

Still, Rossi's horsemen follow the actual Biblical roster. Conquest is there. The horse colors are accurate. So is the fact that these figures or forces are unleashed as part of a divine plan. In contrast to the horsemen of *Sleepy Hollow*, who serve the demon Moloch, the heroes of *Riders* are chosen by God to fulfill their roles and act as his agents while they are horsemen.

So how come in the last few decades, non-Christians have speculated on the horsemen more than Bible believers?

Maybe we avoid everything in the book of Revelation, at least when it isn't packaged in literalized form, such as in the *Left Behind* series. Apocalyptic literature like Revelation presents difficulties for a modern audience, because we're separated by time and culture from its original context. So the apostle John's inscrutable images may confuse us. (Or else, we don't want to start up an end-times debate with Cousin Ben.)

But in this case, good fiction should encourage these friendly debates. Fiction spurs us to think about these issues, even if our question is as simple as, "Do we see these four horsemen only as symbols, or can we interpret them as literal angelic beings or events?"

Many Christians will agree the horse-

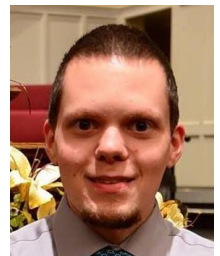
men are symbols, representing literal events during a seven-year Tribulation, or more generalized moments across church history.

Or maybe we avoid the horsemen because we feel popular culture has appropriated biblical images. In fact, because the world's ideas of angels, heaven, and even the Rapture have become entrenched in popular imagination, we as Christians may struggle to recall biblical views of these things. Can Christians find anything new in this concept?

Rossi's novel gives me hope that the horsemen can return to their Biblical roots. But that hope will find its true satisfaction in seeing the Christian fan community embrace this part of their own culture and bring it back home. Perhaps a local pastor is brought face to face with War in his home town? Or maybe a military professional returns to her faith after an encounter she can only describe as biblical?

Remember, the horsemen are part of our story—a story that culminates with the greatest horseman—the King of Kings in Revelation 19.

The world may offer their takes on him and the many smaller parts of his story that capture the imagination. But we as Christians are best equipped to explore that story. It is after all, the story of our Savior. With a faith so filled with supernatural imagery and power, who better to explore those images with our God-given creativity?



Elijah David wrote the fantasy novel *Albion Academy* and edits *Lorehaven* magazine. He and his wife are raising their first child in Georgia.

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Engaging Fictional Violence in Our Real Worlds

Our expert panel explores how Christians should view fictional and real-world violence.



Andrew Winch works as a physical therapist and edits Splickety Publishing Group.

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Carla Cook Hoch creates stories and edits fight scenes with Quill Pen Editorial.

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Robert Liparulo writes fantastical thriller novels, such as *The Judgement Stone*.

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E. STEPHEN BURNETT: As part of our mission, *Lorehaven* magazine will explore big issues helpful to Christian fans of fantasy and sci-fi stories. Today we'll begin with one of four topics, which we'll call the Four Horsemen of the Fiction Apocalypse. In particular order, they are violence, language, sex/nudity, and fictional magic.

Oddly enough, violence is actually one of the easier topics to address as Christians.

"Story violence" is the key phrase here. We'll describe it like this: "Violent acts in a visual or written work of fiction."

Of course, the Bible itself includes written references to violence. Our faith has a lot of violence in it. Interpretations vary as to how the violence is redemptive and how much God is involved with that. But Christians would agree: violence is part of this world, even though it doesn't belong here.

However, just because the Bible has violence in it doesn't mean we get to enjoy it in fiction. God has privileges that we don't, and we have to proceed with care and discernment with those issues. So let's explore this topic of story violence as biblical Christians and story fans.

We'll also explore this with our differences and Christlike unity in mind. We have unity in Jesus, I believe. And the key verse here, and for every roundtable discussion we will have at *Lorehaven* in the future,

is Galatians 5:13:

"For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another."

1. WHAT IS THE MOST VIOLENT ACT YOU HAVE SEEN OR READ ABOUT IN A STORY? HOW DID THIS AFFECT YOU? DID YOU MAKE ANY CHANGES IN YOUR STORY PURSUITS?

CARLA COOK HOCH: Robert Liparulo's novel *Comes a Horseman* includes an act of beheading. But it is handled in a very good way, in that it is descriptive, but it is not gratuitous. You understand what has happened without adding sensory details that are so engrossing that it takes you off the point of what happens and directs it, rather, to the gross-out factor. So I *really* appreciated that.

For the most part, I don't read very many books with violence. As far as what I've seen, I attend a gym where we do fight training. I have many friends who are fighters. It has given me a great amount of respect for humanity, because you see the humanity of someone in pain, and when you experience pain yourself.

ROBERT LIPARULO: I do watch horror movies, and I've seen some extreme violence. I don't like gratuitous violence. The violence has to have a very specific reason: to show the result of evil, or the level that we have to go to, to avoid vio-

lence being done to us, or to a loved one or somebody who can't fight for themselves. But I don't think that all the violence on the screens or all the violence in books are necessary.

TRAVIS PERRY: I've seen violence in person, and not just accidental violence. I'm also affected by historical accounts of violence, such as the the Battle of the Somme during World War 1—30,000 people killed in less than a day.

One fictional scene that pops up in my mind is the chest-buster scene in *Alien*. *Alien* portrays the universe as fundamentally hostile to humans. That's what some people believe is true about the universe, that violence is natural. It's not my view.

ANDREW WINCH: Like Robert, I'm a fan of horror. but I've found that I can't handle cruelty. I don't mind fantasy violence. I don't mind fantasy wars. I don't even mind monsters. But anything with human-on-human cruelty makes me physically nauseous.

As a physical therapist, blood and guts don't affect me that much. I mean, I've had to study gross anatomy. I know what the human body is, as a creation of God. But it's the reason for it, not necessarily the sight of it, or reading it, that affects me, anyway.

2. HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT POPULAR TELEVISION SERIES WITH VIOLENT ACTS?



The Great Day of His Wrath by John Martin (1853)

STEPHEN: One of the most infamously or famously violent stories on television right now is *The Walking Dead*. I've never seen that. However, one of the most violent visual shows I've ever seen is actually animated. It's an anime series called *Attack on Titan*. It has really helped me imagine through some of this topic, just seeing what seems to be a very redemptive view of violence. And yet the violence is so visceral. I mean, there are these giant humanoid creatures that devour humans.

TRAVIS: I was a fan of *The Walking Dead*. I enjoyed it because I thought it showed humanity at its worst, which I think is realistic. Humans go bad.

But there was a finale of a season, and the opener of the next season, where this character, Negan, beats two people to death with a baseball bat. I decided to stop watching *The Walking Dead* because of that scene, because it was gratuitous violence. It's not entirely realistic. And the scene made me question if the show's whole purpose is to desensitize people to violence.

ANDREW: I still watch *The Walking Dead*. And I think that's where different opin-

ions come in. I have conviction that I'm not necessarily supporting something evil if I continue to watch a show that, to me, still has a good overarching story.

These shows often have a rotating staff of different writers. So the story will become an amalgam of the personal beliefs of these writers. I think it's obviously the viewer's responsibility to know what those writers are pouring from their hearts into these stories. But for me personally, I still see enough redemptive qualities in the show.

But I agree: I think that that scene was written distastefully.

CARLA: It was horrifying. Horrifying. And it made me sick and it made me cry.

But it also showed me that the story's living people were on par with the dead. It showed how little respect they have for humanity and how little respect they had for life. There was actually not much difference between them and the zombies. This man knew exactly what he was doing, and he made that choice. It wasn't about survival. It was about how he had lowered humans beneath zombies.

STEPHEN: I understand this is a key theme in the show, and in other stories that arguably show violence in an almost Judeo-Christian view—violence doesn't belong in our world.

When you say "gratuitous," I hear you saying that the creators of a story seem to be saying, "Yes, violence belongs here. Isn't it violent? Let's just accept it and revel in the violence, because we're just beasts at heart." There's no light to be seen, even from somewhere behind the camera, even if it's not in the story itself.

CARLA: I will say that as a woman, I have an especially difficult time with sexual violence against women and violence against children. I think that it can be handled in such a way that you still show the reality of something. Especially when you have stories based on reality, like the films *Schindler's List* or *12 Years a Slave*, if you don't show the reality of it, you're disrespecting what those people had to endure. But if you show too much, then the emphasis is on the gore of it, versus what these people survived.

You just have to know the author's intention. As a reader, I can usually know

whether the author's intention is to serve the story, or to pique my interest in darkness.

ROBERT: I do think of my stories as both educational and entertaining. But when I write violence, I hope to depict evil for what it is. And it is a disservice to the reality that people face, when we either stylize violence or don't show it. I'm not saying that it needs to be as gross and bloody as it can be. But I think when you see almost cartoon violence, that is insulting to the people who have to endure real violence.

In my novel *The Judgement Stone*, the owner of a privatized army desensitizes young soldiers by giving them a helmet that augments reality. So they think they're fighting fictional people. The blood is blue, and everything is stylized cartoonish to get them to kill. And I think it's wrong in fiction to depict violence in a cartoon way as well.

3. WHAT IS THE MOST CHALLENGING OBJECTION TO STORY VIOLENCE YOU'VE HEARD?

ANDREW: "You're gonna make somebody stumble" (Rom. 14, 1 Cor. 8–10). Stories are very tricky. Because whose hands are they going into?

But you ought to read a story you've researched and are sure you're ready to read. You don't just pick up a book and start reading. Same thing with a movie. Someone will look at a movie and say, "This probably isn't something that's good for my heart. I shouldn't watch this." They shouldn't just say, "Oh, this got great reviews, I'm going to watch this." They're being irresponsible as a consumer and as a creator. In that respect, I think the burden falls on the person consuming more than the person creating.

TRAVIS: I'm going to disagree with you a little bit. I think authors should ask: what will somebody think you approve of, by what you portray?

Similarly, I feel responsible as a soldier, because people think I know what war is like, and I think I do know what war is like. And I think that I am therefore obliged to portray it in a certain way, and I can't just portray it in a way that I think is fun.

That's not so much really the classic stumbling-block objection. But I don't want people to think that I approve of something that I don't. That, I think, is

an important factor.

STEPHEN: The apostle Paul says, "Do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil" (Rom. 14:16). That's a good principle to keep in mind.

CARLA: The objection I've gotten is, "Well what does light have to do with darkness?"

Here's the thing: if you make life too antiseptic, you discredit how difficult it is to be faithful. You do a disservice to everyone who works very hard every day to be the person that God wants you to be, and let the Holy Spirit work in their life.

4. HOW DO YOU RESPOND TO THE CLAIM THAT 'THE BIBLE IS FULL OF VIOLENCE'?

ROBERT: When I talk to creators who have created something that I think is gratuitous violence, often they'll bring up the violence in the Bible. They're absolutely right. I mean, you have people getting staked through the forehead. You have dogs eating everything but the palms of somebody's hands. It's very violent.

God shows us an example of the way to live, and that might include how to tell stories. And that might include violence in stories. However, some stories do present violence for violence's own sake. In the Bible, violence is not treated as light-heartedly. It's always used to show the consequences of sin and beyond.

TRAVIS: A lot of times the Bible says things like, "Joshua smote the city with the edge of the sword," and says nothing else. The Bible is very minimalistic about a number of descriptions, including of violence. And when you write a story, you

have to give a little more than the Bible. It's expected to give more. And certainly in movies, it's almost impossible to give as little description as the Bible gives.

CARLA: We've forgotten that we, in comparison, live in an antiseptic society. The Israelites killed their own food. They were people who had sacrificial blood sprinkled on them. What we consider to be violent probably isn't what they consider to be violent. And they would come to our culture and see our pornographic media as more repulsive and repugnant than anything they encounter.

STEPHEN: We're also talking about an ancient society in which God himself instituted a violent sacrificial system, to do what I like to call "inception" in the minds and hearts of his people. God planted the idea that without the shedding of blood, there's no remission of sins (Hebrews 9:22). Every time you sin, one way or another, something had to die, and you had to smell the blood and you had to know: This is terrible. This is the penalty.

Without that violence, you would not have the redemption. You wouldn't have the recognition of the truth when Jesus arrives as the final sacrifice, the final High Priest. He himself is the sacrificial lamb. He himself is slaughtered in the most violent act of barbarism in the history of the universe, and is victorious, so we don't have to do that sacrificing any more. And that has no impact unless we knew that violence before.

You can't understand the full gospel of Jesus Christ without violence.

So the concern about being gratuitous—that's when acts of violence are separated



from some kind of redemptive context. It is then exploitative, and you are not being realistic. Which is the same problem with an antiseptic story or an antiseptic view of reality.

One of my favorite quotes from *The Screwtape Letters* is where Screwtape is talking about violence and how considering violence can be escapism too. In other words, you can be all happiness and light and fluffy kitties and rainbows, and that's escapism. But so is an undue emphasis on human remains plastered against the wall, while you're assuming there's no such thing as happiness or songs or joy in the world.

5. HOW CAN WE ADDRESS THESE OBJECTIONS IN GRACE BUT ALSO CHALLENGE THEM?

CARLA: Part of what I don't tell people about doing fight workshops is that I do come from a history of violence in the home. That is why God led me to this.

So there is a very redemptive quality for me because I am showing people: look where God has brought me. Early on, after my training, I was literally going back to my minivan, and crying and shaking, because I was terrified. Now, the fact that I am able to do all of this fight training speaks to the power of God. Because I have gotten beyond that place and not only am I beyond that place, but I can help other people come out of that place.

God did bring me there through faith and through his word. But he also brought me there through a couple of punches. And I think I got to the point to where I had to understand—God has made me unbreakable—not physically, but spiritually unbreakable. So I think sometimes the violence and that sort of thing has to be told.

STEPHEN: It is kind of incumbent on the fan who feels strong in this area to help serve the “weaker” brother or sister in this area. And maybe refrain, but also show love to them, and make it clear: “I don't believe reading or viewing this is wrong for me.”

TRAVIS: I think it's important is to promote stories that do violence the right way, such as the science fiction novel *Ender's Game*. Was it necessary for humans to fight the Formics at the beginning? Of course it was. But humans go be-

yond what was necessary and try to wipe out the entire species. And then the hero Ender's reaction to it—that's a perfect way to show violence. That's great! That's the kind of story that I want to see.

I actually don't meet a lot of people I feel have a problem with too much violence. I think I meet people who are too accepting of violence. So I'm trying to say, “Hey, let's moderate this by being realistic about the consequences of violence.”

ANDREW: We'll use the idea of a teenager reading a book: consuming and digesting the story. The teen's consumption of the story has a lot to do with the creator's heart, method, and intention. How did they want the story to be perceived? Digestion comes from the kid's preconceived notions, but also conversations that he has about that scene. Is he reading between the lines that the author never intended because of that reader's own preconceived notions? So I think it is important to see the duality of that.

If you're concerned about your teenager reading a violent scene, discuss that scene with them. Why did that happen the way that it happened? Was it okay? Was it not okay? What does that mean in the real world in their life?

STEPHEN: Which presumes that parents are acting as servants and exploring popular culture and stories with their children, as their children are growing older.

6. HOW DO WE VIEW STORY VIOLENCE VERSUS ANY NECESSARY VIOLENCE IN REALITY?

ROBERT: There are times when violence is necessary, and the lack of violence, in my opinion, is disobedience to God. Because we are required to protect ourselves, our children, our families, and other people who can't protect themselves.

Some Christians disagree with all violence, even at the point of protecting others or your own life. But I believe that God has asked us to protect ourselves because we love ourselves. God is clear that we love ourselves, because we are to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. If we don't oppose somebody who wants to destroy or do violence to someone God created and asked me to protect, I am disobeying God.

CARLA: When I talk about self-defense, people have said, “Well, God will take care of me.” And that is true. God will take care of you. He has created a home for you in heaven. Okay? God has the ability to fill the hillside with angelic warriors on horses. And sometimes he puts the sword in your hand.

If I am the temple of the Holy Spirit, if the Holy Spirit lives within me, then what are you doing when you harm my person? No one has a right to put harm on your physical person. Yes, the Lord may set that person on fire. He may also empower you to pick up your own hand and defend yourself. That does not make you less of a Christian.

ANDREW: Personally, I would protect a loved one, and I would protect myself from being killed. But I have never been in a fight and I've never desired to be in a fight. I've been punched in the face, and I stood there confused. I'm just not a conflict person.

Violence for goodness' sake is a very gray area, and varies from person to person.

TRAVIS: I respect pacifists. That's not my conviction. But I think there's some good things about pacifism, because sometimes the real struggle isn't physical, but spiritual.

STEPHEN: “What's it going to do to your heart if you're involved in violence?” That's what stories can help us work through. Even if we're never in such situations, we must think about those things. Because, especially as Christians, we have brothers and sisters who are, say, soldiers, or working in emergency services, triage, or something like that. They go through these choices all the time. Fiction helps us to empathize with them. It helps us climb outside ourselves and imagine through these things as well as think through them logically. You have to do both. That's one way that we worship our Lord and Savior—who eventually will make all of this violence, very joyously, a moot point. And he will make everything turn out redemptive in the end.

This interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.

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