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Christian-made
fantastical novels

SHAWN SMUCKER

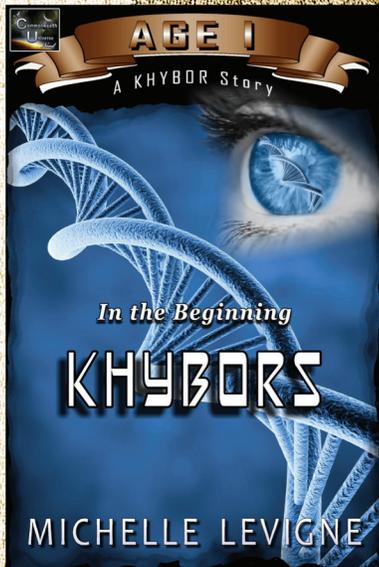
delights in magic at life's margins

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DISCERNING YA'S
ALLURE

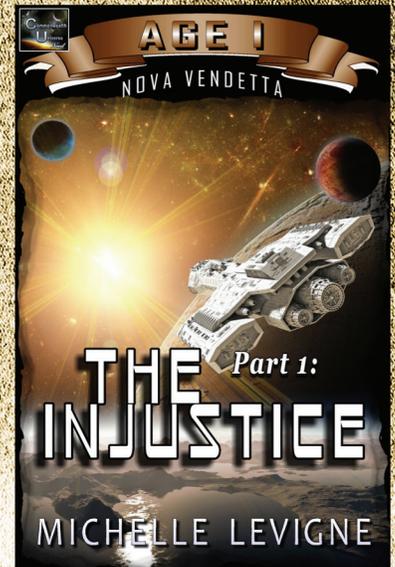
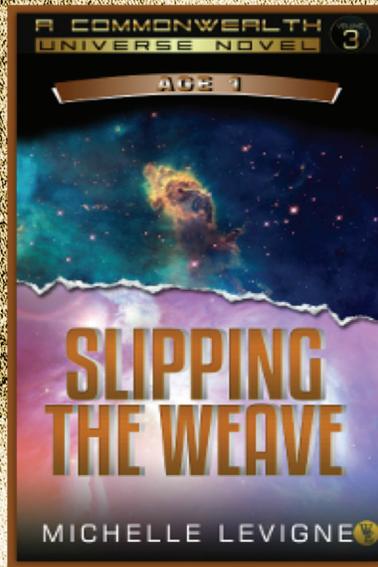
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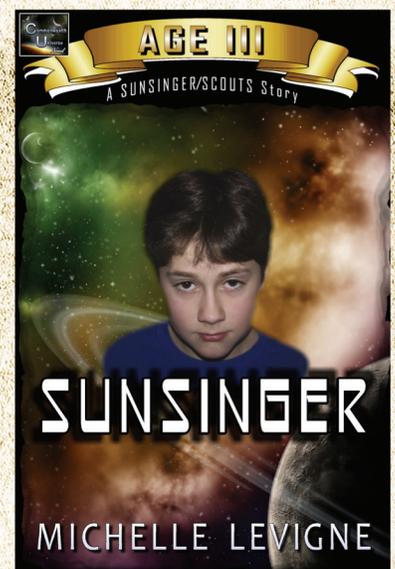
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Captain's Log

Christian fantasy reflects God in strange new worlds and in reality.

Wow. We really get all kinds of amazing books at Lorehaven.

A lot of these challenge my assumptions about Christian-made fantastical novels.

For example, many of these books include concepts like talking animals (because Narnia), medieval quests (because Middle-earth), and starships.

These novels often go full-fantasy, sharing new worlds and strange creatures.

As pastor/author John Piper says, these “impossible” stories can reflect deep truth: They “liken some aspect of reality to what it is not [to] reveal more of what it is.”

Other Christian fantasy novels, however, stick much closer to home.

They don't have kingdom maps or language glossaries.

Instead, they are set in places like small towns and childhood memories. They may deal in Americana or other

real-world cultures. Their characters have modern jobs and raise families. They might even show churches or other religious elements.

Yet these stories also serve a flavor of fantasy that readers need.

Their fantastical themes are not blazing at the center, but glowing at the edges. In them, magic realism, such as supernatural events, often occurs. But people take this in stride. Or God (in the story) works miracles. Or prophecies come true.

On the surface, these stories may seem to minimize fantasy. But they actually make bold choices. They remind us that fantasy, miracles, and deep magic don't exist only in other worlds. After all, Christians, really do believe that because of our epic God, *the real world* has just as much fantastical wonder as any tale of aliens or dragons.

Personally, I enjoy both kinds of stories.

If I need to remember that Jesus comes from outside our world, I prefer the “strangeness” of other-worldly fantasy.

And when I need to recall that Jesus also acts providentially in everyday life, I love fantasy that unfolds closer to home.

Christians must imagine according to both of these truths. Otherwise we might lose sight of Jesus's nature. He is immanent, that is, eternal, from outside our world. And he is imminent, the perfect God-Man who entered our world and will return.

In that day, I'm sure we'll see both daily providence and fantastical worlds. But for now, I'm glad that real life and our stories help serve us foretastes of both glories.



E. Stephen Burnett serves as *Lorehaven* publisher/editor in chief, and creates fantastical fiction. He is coauthor of a nonfiction book about biblical parenting and popular culture, which releases spring 2020 from New Growth Press.

fanservant@lorehaven.com
Lorehaven.com
[@ESStephenBurnett](https://twitter.com/ESStephenBurnett)

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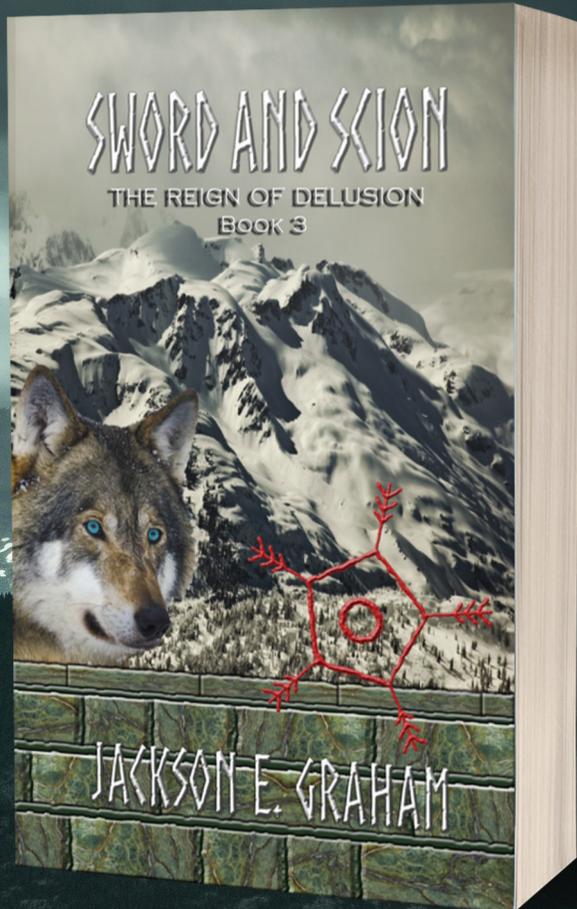
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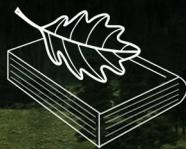
He set out for revenge.
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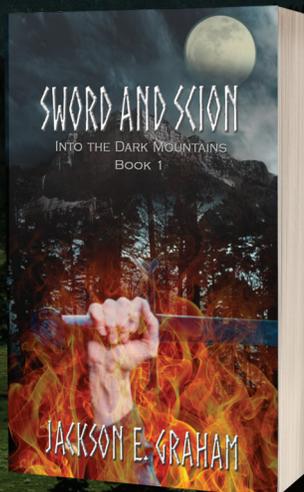
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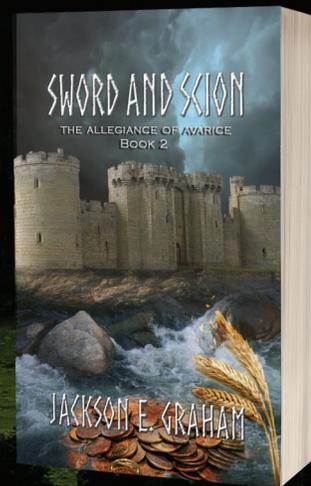


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Logic's End

This bleak and alien world's only law is 'survival of the fittest.'

Have you ever tried to fathom the unfathomable number of stars and planets? Then guess what: life is rare. Thus, when NASA does discover another habitable planet, scientist Rebecca Evans is shaken by the possibilities. She had eagerly joined the mission of exploration. She was absolutely sure that any life on that planet—even a microbe—would settle the question of the origin of life on Earth. Now she will discover life, and it will settle the question of life's origin.

But what happens next will be so different than she thinks.

In *Logic's End*, Keith A. Robinson has fused two different projects.

First, this story shares the creation of a singular and comprehensive world, unlike our own world, and complete in itself. A range of species, each vividly different from the next, populates this grimly evocative world. Here, Robinson gives little concession to the old tendency to make aliens mirrors of ourselves. The aliens of his planet are intelligent beings with an essentially inhuman nature. Their physiology is almost monstrous, and their abilities are often novel. But it is their psychology that puts them at fundamental odds with humanity. From them radiates a sense of otherness.

Second, *Logic's End* builds a world that evolved by the ruthless principle of the survival of the fittest, with no hand to guide it into grace. This novel enters unabashedly into the evolution versus creation debate, with plenty an argument. In order to make this case, *Logic's End* mainly relies on showing. Its aliens, with all their sharp detail and studied cruelty, demonstrate the Darwinian ethos as the author believes it to be. Yet for all the book shows, the book is also not shy about telling. Didactic passages lightly, but undeniably, sprinkle the novel.

Taking the story on its own terms, *Logic's End* argues strongly but not unassailably, even to a sympathetic reader.

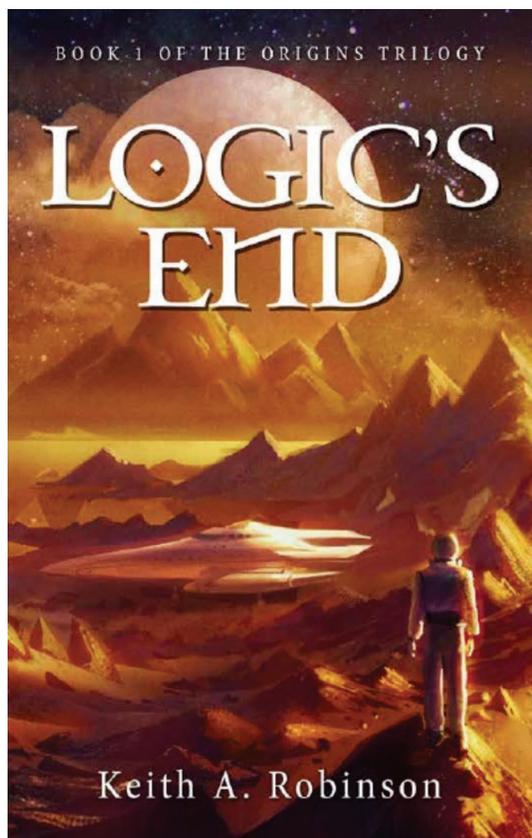
For instance, one suspects that the evolutionist could make a good case for the survival value of love and compassion, or at least a better case than this novel admits. Various minor points can also be contested, such as the asexuality of the novel's intelligent aliens. This is



Keith Robinson

teaches others how to defend the Christian faith. Since the release of *Logic's End*, his first novel, he has been a featured speaker at Christian music festivals, homeschool conventions, apologetics seminars and churches.

ApologeticsFiction.com
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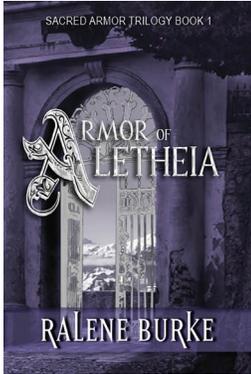
intriguing as an element of world-building, but unpersuasive as a line of argument. It is not clear that asexuality is, from an evolutionary viewpoint, either likely or advantageous. Asexual reproduction would, after all, cripple the diversification of DNA and the development of kinship bonds, both of which have obvious value for the survival of a species.

Logic's End is based on an idea. To some extent, it is an argument for an idea. On both counts, it is open to challenge. But a book that leaves you thinking about the evolutionary value of love and the biological impact of asexuality has accomplished something.

Some readers will object to the novel's didactic nature; others will object only to the specific opinions expressed. Yet the open promulgation of ideas is as classically sci-fi as the complex strangeness of the alien beings. *Logic's End* is an intricate and weighty work of science fiction, overflowing with ideas and with the bleak visions of an alien world.

Best for: Adults; fans of science fiction.

Discern: Frequent violence, including battles and the murder of helpless beings; disturbing acts of cruelty, such as torture, mutilation, and the killing of injured comrades; sentient beings drink blood and engage in cannibalism.



Armor of Aletheia

In only two days, Karina becomes queen of Aletheia and prophetic of the Creator. She begins a divine quest to find six holy relics and use them against a powerful warlock—a lot of responsibility, especially for a seventeen-year-old young woman. Ralene Burke's *Armor of Aletheia* gives readers classic fantasy suffused with spirituality. Its world is built with elves and griffins and goblins, and the heroine's quest

leads her through colorful landscapes. The author creates settings with particular skill, vividly and efficiently evoking a sense of place. Both established religion and individual spirituality are prominent, driving the characters and forming the world. Although some challenges are easily defeated, especially after the discovery of holy relics, *Armor of Aletheia* finishes as sweet, colorful fantasy.

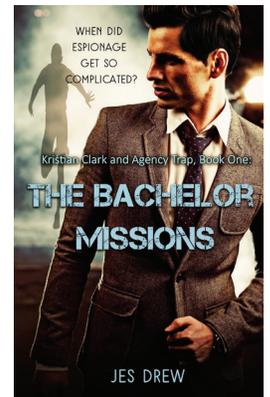
Best for: YA audiences; female readers; fans of fantasy and Christian fiction.

Discern: Mild violence; villain murders a close family member; drunk ruffian sexually harasses a young woman (someone else intervenes); and a kidnapper implies, to his female victim's embarrassment, that they are renting a room.

The Bachelor Missions

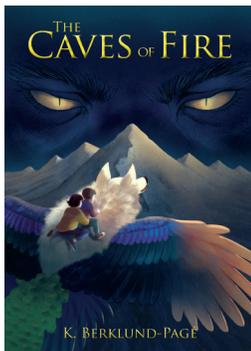
Normal life and romance are difficult enough for a secret agent, but time-traveling doppelganger girlfriend-wannabes who use futuristic weaponry were not covered in the training courses. Jes Drew's *The Bachelor Missions* follows our hero, Kristian Clark, through three separate but connected espionage adventures with plenty of romantic difficulties. Be-

cause these stories are set in the real world, characters plainly discuss Christianity and some common arguments for and against the faith. Still, God-talk and two conversion scenes remain light in favor of the stories' light and humorous tone—like *Men in Black* but without the aliens.



Best for: Young adults, adults, and fans of fun, escapist reading.

Discern: Romantic boundaries get pushed, such as when Kristian and his lady secret agent partner sneak into a cult, or pretend to be married and share a bed, yet no further inappropriate activity is mentioned or endorsed.



The Caves of Fire

Prophecies cause trouble, even if you don't live in a fantasy world. In K. Berklund-Pagé's *The Caves of Fire*, Canadian twelve-year-old children Daniel and Evie face terrible odds against Javerra, the murderous ruler of a shape-shifting realm. When Javerra kidnaps Daniel's mom, the children embark on journey to rescue her. Meanwhile, Fee, a slave from the shape-shifting realm, is supposed to lure

Daniel in—but finds he doesn't want to. Can a slave say no? Fee and Daniel struggle with decisions as fully formed characters. Descriptions give a you-are-there flavor, and the world presents unique elements. This fantasy feels mostly dark because of overwhelming odds, until the somewhat puzzling but satisfying ending.

Best for: Readers age twelve and older who like fantasy tales.

Discern: A divine creator is mentioned once, and she is female. Both children directly disobey their parents without consequences.

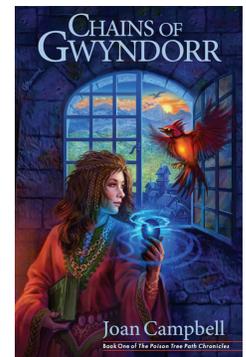
Chains of Gwyndorr

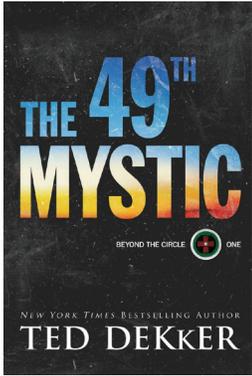
Joan Campbell's *Chains of Gwyndorr* traces the daily paths of a varied cast as they slowly entwine toward a climax. A poisonous forest encroaches on a city of conqueror Highborns, who forbid education to the defeated Lowborn caste but remain strangled by their own tyrannical government. Unique worlds and sympathetic characters entice readers through a maze of slow-moving action. Mysterious pasts,

destroyed lore, powerful secrets, and a magical red-gold bird bring hope and courage to people in need. Tension rises page by page until the reader's expectations have been stretched taut. If all the novel's vague allusions to future revelations bear fruit in the final installment, the Poison Tree Path Chronicles will prove a fantastic series for those who enjoy complex plots.

Best for: Lovers of in-depth character development and leisurely, tantalizing reads.

Discern: Depictions of cruel beatings, death from toxic flora and overexposure, and practical magic that can induce violent effects.





The 49th Mystic

In how many ways can someone's whole life be a lie? Sixteen-year-old Rachele Matthews is about to find out. Blind since childhood and confined to a remote survivalist community, she's haunted by nightmares of a shadowy villain infiltrating her home. Then one day he shows up in the waking world to plunge her into a fantastical parallel reality where she's a prophesied Mystic with the power to change

history. But to stop Shadow Man from blinding both worlds, she must unlearn everything society has taught her. In *The 49th Mystic*, Ted Dekker overhauls Other Earth with an adventure that's part *The Village*, part *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*. Fans of Dekker's Circle Series will enjoy the new episode's bewilderingly breathless twists and turns, though perhaps not some questionable themes (see below).

Best for: Young adults and adults willing to wade through polemical mysticism to access mind-bending thrills.

Discern: Soft-gnostic themes and even heterodox preaching, not just shown subtly in the story but blatantly told in an introductory author's note and concluding detailed Scripture interpretation; plus frequent attacks on portrayals of organized religion, and a Holy Spirit-like figure prefers feminine pronouns; as well as bloody violence, terror and torture, non-graphic nudity, and brief sensuality.

The Hidden Queen

Royal weddings can be such a bother, especially when you can't find a suitable Fred Astaire to dance with the hat rack. In Janelle Garrett's *The Hidden Queen*, a farm girl learns she's really royalty. Then, early in her reign, she must determine for the sake of her people the person with whom she'll finally walk the aisle. But realpolitik keeps this story from being yet another typical romance,

because our heroine's decision could create enemies as well as needed allies. Once readers find serious drama with our heroine's servants, threats to her authority from her close friend's religious ideas, and the fact that her proposed groom isn't even royalty, *The Hidden Queen* turns out to be a surprisingly smart story.



Best for: Young and college-age adults.

Discern: Some ethical and moral concerns are left unresolved, possibly to continue in later books.



Living in Times of Dragons

Dragon scales aren't soft. Even the slightest shove can skin you. And Roger Rommel, a sixty-year-old security contractor fleeing a dark past, faces much more than abrasion when a flying lizard tears a hole in a courthouse just to apprehend him. John A. Pretorius's *Living in Times of Dragons* crashes out of a wild imagination like a shot across the bow of Christian fiction. It's a whirlwind of ancient conspiracies and alien worlds seen through the passionate,

contemplative eyes of a Christian father haunted by sin. In Pretorius's hands, a potentially cartoonish concept matures into something with real heft. Raw, bizarre, and in need of another copyedit, the story roars ambitiously from the veldt of South Africa to the jungles of Central America—tapping into pathos that pushes human endurance, blowing open a gateway to a vast, fantastical milieu ripe for full-fledged fandom.

Best for: Adults seeking hard-boiled high fantasy.

Discern: Strong bloody violence, harsh cursing, intense emotional and psychological distress, depictions of drug use and alcohol abuse, brief sexual innuendo, and a magic system that resembles astral projection.

Oath Sworn

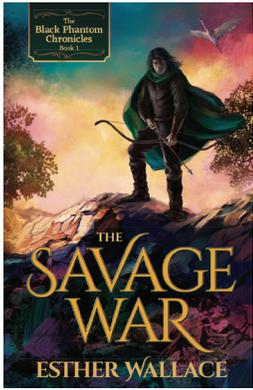
The more things change, the more difficult our challenge to adapt to those changes, especially when they involve people and failed responsibilities. While there's plenty of aerial swashbuckling and adventure and even political sparring in Meg MacDonald's *Oath Sworn*, the central conflict unfolds between two people—a young boy who's something of a priest, and the man who swore to be his guard-

ian but couldn't prevent him from going missing. When the boy suddenly returns, launching a flotilla of political and religious ramifications for several kingdoms, his friendship with his guardian grows strained under the weight of secrets left unspoken. Strange concepts and tumultuous dialogue can soar over the reader's head, but this narrative moves at a riveting clip.

Best for: Adult readers.

Discern: Some stronger language might discomfit some Christian readers; vague references to abuses that a certain enemy inflicted on both heroes.





The Savage War

Arnacin was happy enough, but happiness is not everything. At only fifteen, he set sail alone in search of a place to be a hero. What he found was a place to be a soldier. Pledging aid in return for aid, Arnacin joined Mira's war against the savages, only to discover how right and wrong can blur into each other. With *The Savage War*, Esther Wallace spins a tale that balances moral conviction with moral complex-

ity. The right side of the war is hard to find. Gentle romance and subdued supernatural elements add to the dominant theme without displacing it. The characters' motivations are not always persuasively established, and the novel takes on an episodic feel as certain events leave no lasting impact. Still, many readers will welcome the moral complexity and religious hints of this fantasy tale.

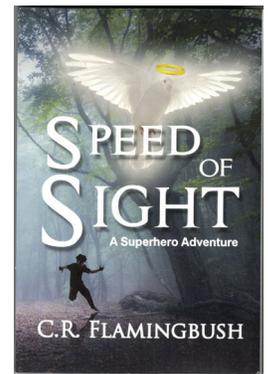
Best for: Middle-grade and YA audiences; fantasy fans.

Discern: Battle sequences and violent deaths, but none graphic; one instance of brief and non-explicit torture; someone is drugged against his will; two teenage heroes are affirmed in their rebellion against parental and governmental authority.

Speed of Sight

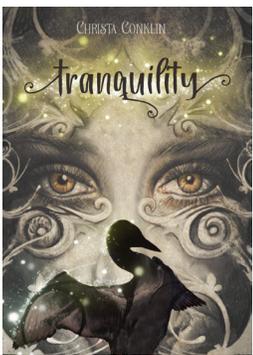
In *Speed of Sight*, C. R. Flamingbush presents Jericho, a drab town where everyone observes rigid rules. So when his friend hands him a banned comic book for safekeeping, Pete can't resist opening it. It's no ordinary book: with a bright light, it rescues Pete and his friend from bullies. Pete, meanwhile, gets tagged by the author of his own story for some special super powers. Now he

can run amazingly fast instead of stumbling all the time. Echoing the stories he reads in the banned comic books, Pete fights the shadowy spirits that egg on the bullies, sicken his friend, and separate Pete's parents. It's a fun concept—comic book stories within Pete's comic-book-style story, like plays within a play.



Best for: Older children and young teens who'd enjoy a comic book told in prose.

Discern: Themes of spiritual warfare, which lack a mention of Jesus or his place in this kind of world.



Tranquility

In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man gets his eye ripped out because he is different. In the human world of Christa Conklin's *Tranquility*, similar differences are not welcomed. Drethene is a young lady whose red eyes stand out, and although she tries to hide her differences, others view her with suspicion and find her guilty of a crime in which

she had no part. This is an arresting setup, but the story intervenes to downplay any struggles; that is, whenever Drethene appears to be in serious trouble, something happens to keep her from have too rough of a time. In the world of *Tranquility*, conflict and tension defer to the pleasantries of picnics with fairies and merfolk.

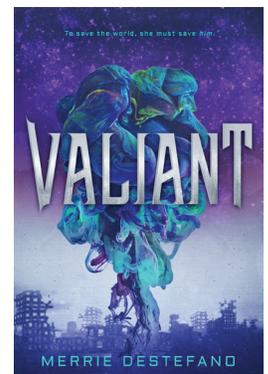
Best for: Teens and young adults.

Discern: Possible confusion about the message difference between two religious books, the *Tranquility* and the *Sacred Writ*.

Valiant

When a regular girl must travel through time to save her brother from an alien invasion, high-stakes action enters an endless loop. In Merrie Destefano's *Valiant*, Sara knows only one thing for certain: if her brother dies, the world ends. So she repeats the same day over and over, attempting to save him in a new way each time and watching him

die again and again until the time portal breaks and she's given one final shot. Some rushed action and thin character development at the outset make the story difficult to get into, but once this story ramps up, it's a thrilling read, with plenty of unexpected twists, a surprise ending, and pressing questions that demand a sequel.



Best for: Young adults who enjoy fast-paced action, aliens, time travel, dystopia, and futuristic technology.

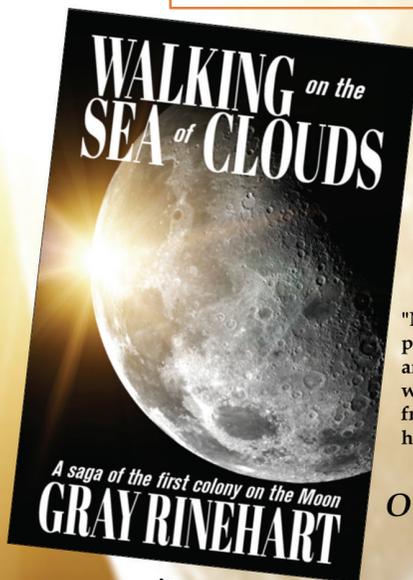
Discern: Lots of violence and gore, open portrayal of drugs and drug use.

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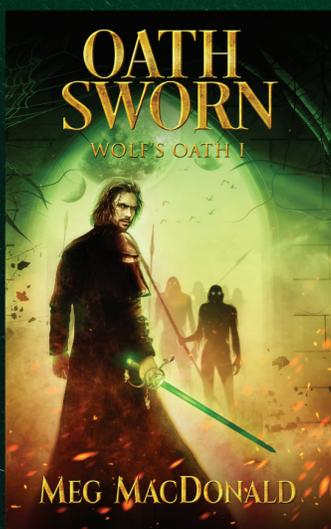
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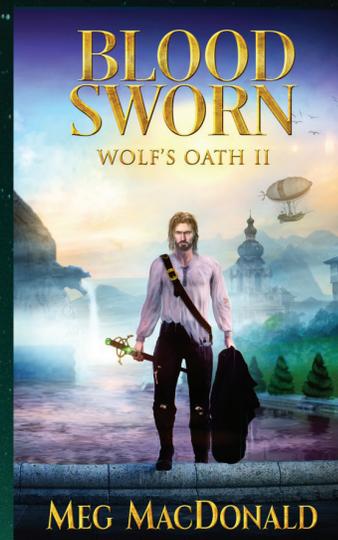


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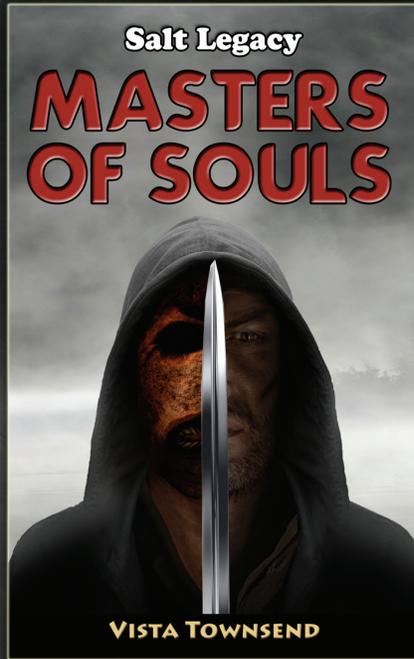
Aralt syr Tremayne must help his gifted young ward, Lian, claim his place as high priest of a faith from which Aralt is estranged. But will their common enemy destroy his soul before Lian can reach it?



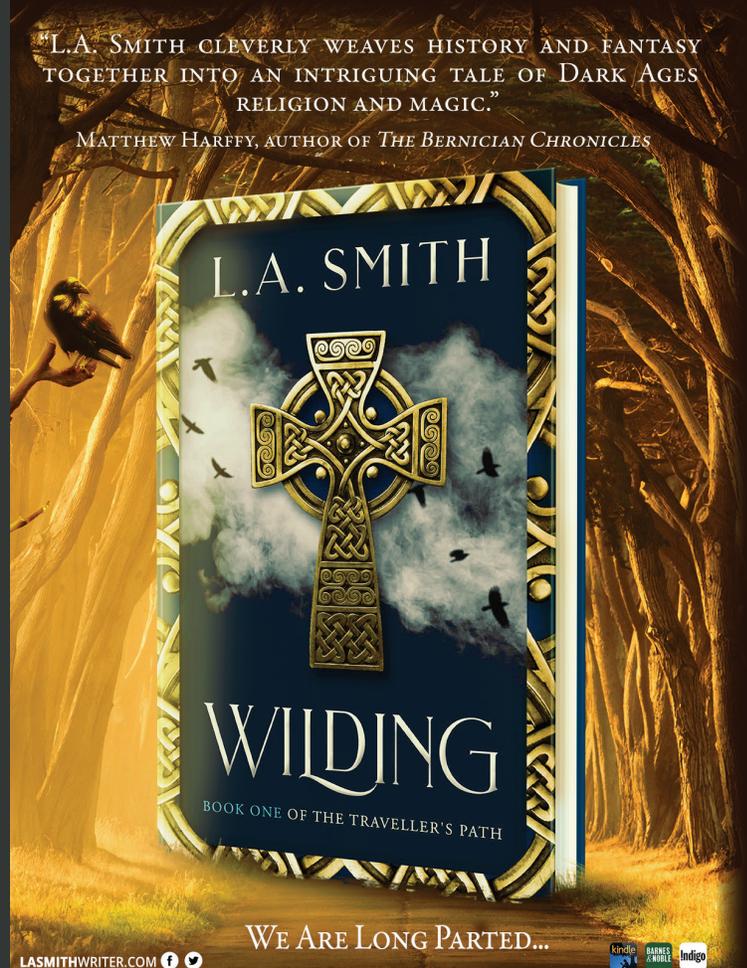
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Light from Distant Stars

Magic-edged memory meets the reality of death and family trauma.

Fathers and sons. Fathers and sons. They're everywhere.

Entire Bible chapters regale readers with lists of fathers, who beget fathers, who beget even more fathers. Apostles encourage fathers in passages like Colossians 3 and Ephesians 6. And, of course, Jesus himself identifies as a Son to God the Father.

On the manmade front, many movie and TV screenwriting bibles may list “just add father issues” atop their twelve-step recipes for assembling a fantasy or emotional drama. And among Christians, some leaders focus exclusively on father issues, with a few even speaking as though all men have a “father wound” that must be healed.

Thanks in part to societal family breakdown, many people do have such wounds. Which is just the theme of Shawn Smucker's latest novel, *Light from Distant Stars*.

Like the titular light itself, this story travels fast, but takes its time before reaching its final destination. We open with Cohen Marah in the basement of his father's funeral home. On the floor lies his father. Dead? Or nearly dead? Either way, why?

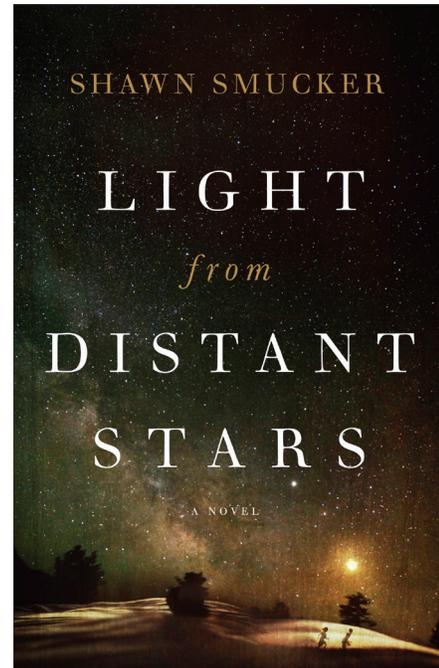
From here, however, the story with present-day scenes and flashbacks reveals less interest in the technical, murder-mystery details. Instead this investigation focuses on the slow and tragic death of Cohen's relationship with his father. In particular, Cohen's childhood of sticky summers, dull sermons, and baseball practice becomes dimmed by his confused feelings about a certain Sunday school teacher. Then his world is darkened by his father's adult-level sin, which ruins his family and the local church.

Smucker portrays these events with delicacy yet brutal honesty. People have issues. Churches have even more so. But lest we fall into yet another “Southern Gothic” trap of literary darkness, where good men can't be found and every church closet holds skeletons, *Distant Stars* shines its light. Angry mothers can still cling to faith. And even adulterous fathers might still know to give good gifts to their children.

The Father who set this light in motion won't let it be eclipsed unless he wills it so.

Still, this isn't a simple or obviously God-directed journey. Nor does the trip stay confined to “safe” places like rural small towns. Because even as Cohen recalls his family's breakup, he also draws on childhood memories of an escaped arsonist. Next comes a creeping, supernatural slime-creature. Finally, Cohen is joined by two other children—real? symbolic? imaginary?—who help pursue this beastly foe.

All the way, Smucker helps us believe these unearthly things with devoted, literary attention to earthly things. Like a child's waking discovery of complex relationships. Or the adult monotony of waiting on medical staff. Or the faraway reassurance of



Shawn Smucker is the author of the young adult novels *The Day the Angels Fell* and *The Edge of Over There* as well as the memoir *Once We Were Strangers*. He lives with his wife and six children in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

ShawnSmucker.com

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

Explore this novel at lorehaven.com/library/light-from-distant-stars.

whatever light enters this world. It shines through smaller things, like life-and-death contemplations that break through our distractions, or greater things, like the calm aid of an Episcopal priest who accepts Cohen's confessions and points him to Jesus.

By this story's end, Smucker lets just enough light fall to show a possible way out. No, the supernatural-like memories don't always get explained. Nor do the human abuses and manipulations that can wound the hearts of marriages or children.

But for readers who must continue imagining their way through such trauma, or need to accompany loved ones who do, *Light from Distant Stars* is a Godsend. In the real world, we need more than platitudes or devotionals to help us heal. Instead, to start imagining our way through any family trauma, in the light of our Father and his truly good gifts, we need more fierce and compassionate stories like this one.

Best for: Older teen and adult readers, who are prepared to grapple with intense social drama that overlaps into literary, magical realism–like fantasy.

Discern: Young boy experiences early sexual attraction, described in emotional and not prurient terms; child witnesses act of adultery, only outlined at a distance; and in-depth exploration of abandonment, some emotional abuse, and estrangement.



‘I’ve Always Loved the Magic at the Margins’

Shawn Smucker delves into fantasy to delight in daily miracles.

STORY: E. STEPHEN BURNETT
PHOTO: COURTESY SANDERSON IMAGES

Shawn Smucker says he shares some backstory with his latest hero, Cohen Marah.

They both grew up in country churches. They both had fathers in pastoral ministry.

Yet in Shawn’s novel *Light from Distant Stars*, Cohen struggles to recall if he tried to kill his father—a former pastor whose sins divided his family and country church.

Whereas Shawn learned to love Jesus’s people thanks in part to his loving father. Shawn’s dad served as an associate pastor at a rural church, which was located on the border of Lancaster County and Chester County in southeastern Pennsylvania.

“In those days, we went to church three times a week,” Shawn recalled.

His family attended every Sun-

day morning and evening, and on Wednesday nights.

“I loved going to church,” he said. “I had a group of guys—maybe four or five or six other guys—that I grew up with. . . . That just really served to create for me an image of church that I know a lot of people don’t necessarily have these days.

“We were such a tight community,” Shawn said. “My grandparents were actually Amish, and they left before I was born and when my parents were very young.”

Shawn’s ancestors have lived in Pennsylvania for thirteen generations, he said.

“A lot of the creative stuff in my life came also from my church,” Shawn said. “My very first exposure to really good stories came when my Sunday school teacher read *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* to us when

I was probably seven years old. . . . I had never before heard anything in my life like that. This was amazing.”

These dual themes—the Church’s goodness versus human sin, and conflict between life and death, and light and darkness—are brought to life in Shawn’s novels so far.

Where reality meets fiction

Shawn has worked as a full-time writer as well as a ghostwriter. He’s spent time in the business world and co-written his aunt’s memoir. Another book project sent him to Istanbul, Turkey, where he spent three weeks meeting with a man dying of cancer.

“It really opened up my eyes to this idea of mortality,” Shawn said.

That man’s story sent Shawn on a creative journey. He had already spent a lifetime since childhood loving great fiction, especially fantasy

from many authors, from C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien to Susan Cooper and Lloyd Alexander.

After Shawn's trip to Turkey, he began writing a book intended for younger readers.

That story ended up with the title *The Day the Angels Fell*. Shawn said it asks the question: "Could it be possible that death is a gift?"

Because he was keeping busy helping other writers create books, Shawn originally self-published the story. Then his agent read the book and asked if she could shop it around. Shawn landed a contract with Revell Fiction, and the book's new version arrived September 2017.

However, Shawn's young adult titles don't just follow younger characters. *The Day the Angels Fell* starts with an elderly man, Samuel. His story is told in flashback, when he was ten years old and trying to bring back his mother after her sudden death. Samuel learns that the biblical Tree of Life may have regenerated in a nearby valley. He sets out to find the tree and restore his mother's life.

"I think a lot of the books that I'm working on right now—maybe it's the age that I'm at, I don't know—but they definitely encircle themes around death," Shawn said.

Since then, more readers beyond the book's original younger audience have found the story. It has won a *Christianity Today* 2018 book award. A year later, its sequel, *The Edge of Over There*, won *CT*'s award of merit in the same category. Writing for *CT*, reviewer Jennifer Grant remarked, "Smucker nimbly weaves common experiences that teens face—shifting relationships with parents, the desire to become socially active, and the yearning for connection—into this almost dystopian fantasy."

Where contemporary fiction meets fantasy

Shawn said he wants to keep making contemporary stories with fantastical edges.

"As a kid, you wonder if there really are gnomes or fairies, and you think you see them," he said. "I really enjoy reading and writing stories that could be true, even though they're

fantastical . . . creating something that happens in this real world, but challenges the boundaries between real and magical or fantastical."

For example, *Light from Distant Stars* (releasing July 2019) does not start with any fantasy backstory or map of a distant star system. It begins with Cohen Marah, very much a person of our world, staring down at his dying father in a funeral home. Cohen must then reckon with his father's impending death, and his own childhood brokenness when his father was caught cheating with a Sunday school teacher.

Still, the story gets fantastical as Cohen flashes back to a side quest involving two mysterious children, an escaped arsonist, and a shadow-creature called the Beast.

"I got the idea from mythology—Thanatos and Hypnos," Shawn explained. "What I was really exploring with this book was the questions of: How accurately do we really remember things from our childhood? And how do these memories that we think we remember impact our very real lives in the present?"

"I was trying to play around a little bit with that idea of how Cohen remembers his childhood, and how his memories of that childhood have impacted his relationship with his father," he said. "And also his faith, his memories of church, his memories of God, that has changed for him, now that he's older. He's really struggling to figure out what was true about his childhood faith and what was made up."

In *Light from Distant Stars*, fantastical images, like shadow-creatures and magical realism memories, shine light on the wonders of ordinary things, like childhood baseball games, thunderstorms, and family trauma leading to reconciliation.

"I will probably stick to these ideas, at least for a little while," Shawn said. "I've always loved the magic at the margins."

Where stories meet deeper questions

To be sure, some readers impulsively disregard stories intended for young adult readers, or that seem to be

labeled or marketed for Christian audiences. Other book fans, however, might write off either fantasy or non-fantasy as genre choices.

Shawn said he hopes his books can transcend these kinds of stigmas.

"When a story is set completely fantastical, I think it is a bit easier to swallow," he said. "Whereas when you set something in the real world and then introduce magical realist elements, some people can get a little bit turned around with that.

"I'm eager to see what people think of this book, as a more adult experiment."

"I just feel so intrigued by that whole field of what happens to us at the end of our lives. For me, usually, writing novels is a way to dig deeper into questions."

—Shawn Smucker

After *Light from Distant Stars*, Shawn plans to return to his two young adult books to finish their storyline as a trilogy. His next book, though, releases summer 2020. And all of them will likely keep exploring those reality-and-fantasy, life-and-death ideas.

"I don't feel myself moving away from those anytime soon," Shawn said. "I've had close friends and relatives who've passed away in the last couple of years. I just feel so intrigued by that whole field of what happens to us at the end of our lives. For me, usually, writing novels is a way to dig deeper into questions."

But great stories usually keep on asking such questions, Shawn said. Their fantasy is meant to encourage readers to seek out the answers in the real world.

"I certainly do not want to create a story that attempts to answer deep questions," Shawn said. "I ask the question. I maybe suggest, 'Well, would you think about this as a possible answer?' But I don't want these novels to become sermons. Ask the question with me, and go on the journey with me."



How the Psalms Reflect our Heart Desires

Fans can find instruction and inspiration from God's creative writers.

As geeks, we are often very inward-focused, imaginative, creative types of people.

We wonder and we stew. We contemplate and agonize over all kinds of thoughts.

Because of this, I've really come to value the Psalms. This biblical book of songs and poetry was written by contemplative, agonizing, creative people. Their passionate thoughts of anger, praise, despair, and joy were all given God's stamp of approval. The psalmists get real, and God both welcomes and invites this realism.

Some psalms stand out to me as being especially applicable to geeks, given our strengths, weaknesses, and temperaments.

The first of those that comes to mind is Psalm 16. I thought I'd walk us through part of it here. Along the way, I'll offer some reactions and observations that will hopefully be useful.

Psalm 16:1–2: "Preserve me, O God, for in you I take refuge. I say to the LORD, 'You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you.'"

When the imaginative thoughts of my internal "worry machine" are at work every day, I have to constantly recommit to trusting God (not my worry-fueled plans) to be my refuge. After all, he is good and worth trusting. In fact, all the good I have—both temporary pleasures like geek entertainment, and eternal gifts like forgiveness as well as future immortality—are all mine because of God.

This psalm reminds and challenges me to constantly associate

the things I enjoy with God, rather than thinking of them as merely things in the world with no origination in God.

Verse 3: "As for the saints in the land, they are the excellent ones, in whom is all my delight."

Sure, I can be an introverted geek and content to be a "hermit Christian." This verse, however, reminds me that there is delight and inspiration to be found through growing in faith alongside other Christians.

Verse 4: "The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply; their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names on my lips."

I'm never tempted to worship another god. But the modern equivalents of false gods can be found in countless broken, self-destructive ways of thinking, perpetuated by marketing campaigns and entertainment media. As the psalmist saw in his time, we see sorrows multiply among those who embrace broken views of themselves and the world.

All around us, people normalize and joke with a shrug about materialism, lust, and selfishness. And we can find ourselves chiming in or going with the flow of those sentiments. But instead, like the psalmist, we should aim to commit our hearts and minds to being influenced only by what God reveals in his word, pursuing only what God says is valuable in its intended proportion.

Verses 5–6: "The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The lines have fallen

for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance."

The psalmist contrasts these gifts with things the world pursues—the worship of other gods. Instead, the psalmist says that Yahweh himself is his reward. God is not only the ultimate source of all we enjoy, he is also the source of all we will enjoy in the eternal future he has promised us.

I'm challenged by the psalmist's estimation of God compared to what the world around him is pursuing. He compares his eternal inheritance with property lines drawn out favorably for him. In essence he says, "I'm getting an amazing deal here!"

My mind so easily gravitates toward (and gets stuck in) the here and now. So I struggle to see the rich wealth God has promised me. I fail to contemplate and remember the wealth of who God is. But by example, the psalmist shows us that the deeper we know who God is, and the more we ponder, hope, and fixate on God instead of the countless fading pleasures in the world, the more contentment we will experience in this life as we reflect on our promised inheritance of him.



Paeter Frandsen created Christian Geek Central and Spirit Blade Productions. He produces entertainment and resources, and volunteers at his Arizona church.

ChristianGeekCentral.com
@Christian_Geek

Let's Guard Against Temptations in YA Fiction

Parents can guide teenage readers, starting with these suggestions.

Parents are often thrilled when their child becomes a reading machine. Moms and dads may assume any book is better than hours in front of a screen!

But many parents who don't read the same books as their children aren't aware of the amount of sexual content in modern young adult (YA) fiction.

Christian freedom allows for us all to draw the line in different places. But regardless of where your family places that barrier, books' themes about sex and lust can challenge us about what we worship—either God or our own passions.

As a preteen, I read a YA novel fraught with sexual tension, even though it contained no explicit sex scenes. That was my first encounter with what I later labeled “emotional porn.” Then I stumbled upon a quote by novelist Stephen King, where he explains why Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* saga was such a hit.

King wrote: “[Meyer is] opening up kind of a safe joining of love and sex in those books. . . . It's exciting and it's thrilling. . . . A lot of the physical side of it is conveyed in things like the vampire will touch her forearm or run a hand over skin, and she just flushes all hot and cold. And for girls, that's shorthand for all the feelings that they're not ready to deal with yet.”

Elsewhere, King even referred to Meyer's series as “tweenager porn.”

Here, King shows that he understands the power of literature better than most readers. Reading a book is not the same kind of experience as watching television. Although TV and books both tell stories, books will always have a power over the mind and body than a film ever will—especially for women.

When it comes to sex, women are less likely to seek visual stimulation like men. They care more to be desired and desirable, and not always in sexual ways.

I believe King is saying that modern storytelling methods of showing not telling—using frequent internal and external sensations—can help a reader feel what the character is feeling. They can taste, hear, smell, and see what the protagonist is experiencing. But you will never have the same kind of reaction when you watch a film. It will never take you as deep, or make you fall in love as hard as a book will. This is a wonderful thing! *Unless* the author uses this power irresponsibly, or worse yet, uses it *against* the reader in order to wreak havoc on their heart.

Trust is earned. When I read, I'm putting my heart into the hands of a stranger. I continue to do this because stories are important and God-glorifying. But this is a trial run. If authors prove to be untrustworthy, I won't recommend their books to others. If I feel their stories are leading me to sin, I won't finish them at all.

So how can we as parents practically help our children discern what to read?

I highly recommend doing this research for yourself rather than taking recommendations from strangers or even well-meaning friends. They will likely draw the line for sexual content in surprisingly different places.

Sometimes a book's front cover will be a dead giveaway. For example, if the characters are already immodestly dressed and kissing, the story inside the book will almost certainly go further.

Most of the time, however, we'll need to dig a little deeper to figure out what's really inside a book. Take time to familiarize yourself with the jargon of book descriptions and reviews on Amazon and Goodreads. For example, if the love interest is described as “mysterious and alluring,” the story will likely include sexual overtones.

Blurbs and reviews are not often so straightforward. To get a better sense of

the book, try reading the first chapter. I once picked up a book where the female protagonist says a boy's lips look “achingly kissable” on the first page. That description foreshadowed what I could expect later in the story.

Check the author's websites. Some authors are already aware that parents of teens aren't always thrilled with the sexual content in their book. You can occasionally find content warnings on their personal websites.

Pray with your child through the Psalms and other passages that focus on affections. For example, pray along with Psalm 1:2 that your kids will “delight . . . in the law of the Lord.” Or with Song of Solomon 2:7 that they will “not stir up or awaken love until it pleases.”

Ultimately, do not be discouraged about literature. The world is filled with wonderful, character-building books. And all Jane Austen fans worth their salt know a romance novel can edify as well as entertain.

Stories are an incredibly powerful tool—used either to help us to worship God, or draw us farther away from him. Pray that our sovereign God will guard your child's heart, as Paul says in Philippians 4:6–7: “In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”



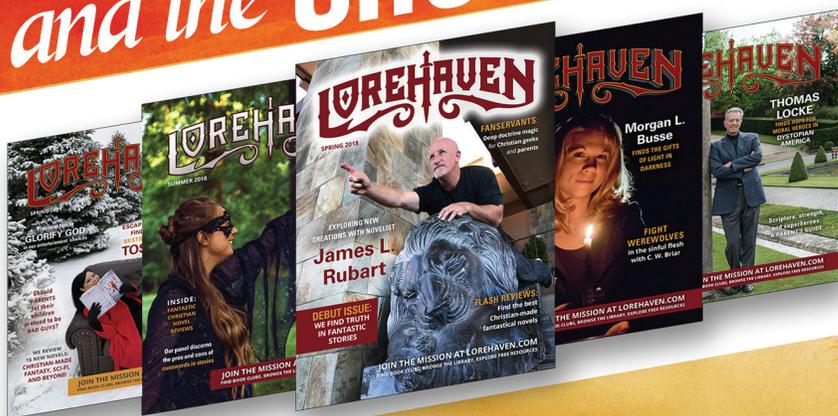
Marian Jacobs writes about Jesus, monsters, and spaceships. Her work is featured at *Desiring God* as well as *Stage and Story*. She and her family live near Houston.

MAJacobs.com
[@MarianJacobsAuthor](https://twitter.com/MarianJacobsAuthor)

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