

STRANGER THAN FICTION: TRUTH AND FANTASY IN LITERATURE AND THEOLOGY

Introduction

In December last year, a survey conducted online by the ABC revealed what were at least claimed to be Australia's favourite books. Top of the poll was J. R. R. Tolkien's epic tale, *The Lord of the Rings*. My first thought about this news, I must confess, was a bit cynical – the claim to have actually read the book, rather than to have seen the movies, made me wonder whether we were collectively weaving our own bit of fiction out of a few scraps of reality.

Whether or not my scepticism was well-placed, it is intriguing and encouraging that Australians did seem to choose a collection of stories that raised the big issues. *The Lord of the Rings*, the Bible – the author was given, by the way, as “Various contributors” (!) - Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet*, Harry Potter of course, even *The Da Vinci Code*, all suggested that secular sceptical Australia was still game for stories of the struggle between good and evil, often with explicit touches of the religious and the supernatural.

The relationship between history and imagination is important to me, even in what might have to be termed a professional sense, especially but not exclusively when matters of the spirit are involved. As both a priest and an historian, I find myself now called to tell and to examine stories of various kinds, often about the distant past, but also about things only accessible, in our present existence, to imagination.

Yet within this list the Australian reading public faces choices more profound, even among those works explicitly linked with matters of the spirit, than may immediately meet the eye.

Tolkien and Lewis: Truth and Imagination

Lord of the Rings is itself of course not a “true” story in the common or garden sense, but there is arguably more truth in it than in many works of non-fiction. Its devout Roman Catholic author used his imaginative blend of mythical elements to construct an epic in which virtues of loyalty, courage and love prevail over those who seek power for its own sake. J R R Tolkien and his Oxford friend C. S. Lewis, who wrote the more explicitly Christian *Chronicles of Narnia* – also recently filmed across the Tasman and soon to make it to the big screen - both started from the premise that truth was not so much the merely factual that can be observed, as the genuinely good that is real but can often only be imagined and told in stories.

This preference for the imaginative was not, it must be stressed, a sort of romantic Pollyanna-ism about wishes coming true or castles in the air. Middle-earth and Narnia are not Neverland. Like many ancient theologians including some of the “various contributors” to that foundational collection of stories, the New Testament, Tolkien and Lewis were influenced by a philosophy – Platonism - that regarded the moral or spiritual truth that is observed with mind and heart as itself more genuinely and objectively real than things observed with the senses.

These stories of mind and heart remind us that there is something enormously important about the power of imagination, to which religion at its best is a - or perhaps the - key witness. Of course this does not make all imagination – let alone all religion – good, any more than it makes all mere facts bad. Yet I suspect that we often mistake or confuse the places of observable fact on the one hand and imaginary truth, on the other.

The Platonism of Tolkien or Lewis, with its emphasis on the real but unseen, contrasts with the dominant world view in early 21st century Australia, even and perhaps especially in religious circles, odd as that may sound. For much contemporary evangelicalism on the one hand, and also for the amorphous set of spiritualities labelled new Age on the other, have in common an emphasis on the observable rather than the imagined, and often make competing parallel claims about the effects of adherence to their groups and practices on the most concrete aspects of life – health, relationships, prosperity and so forth. Imagination or fantasy may be important, but often as a means to impacting the bodily and material reality which so often comes first for us. Where the unseen matters, it matters not as story or as moral or spiritual truth in the broader sense, but as “fact”.

The Da Vinci Code

Dan Brown's The Da Vinci Code illustrates this rather well. For what is really a fairly pedestrian thriller, compared even to the likes of Robert Ludlum or John Grisham, its remarkable success does point to the power of imagination, if not in the best way, but also to our odd obsession with “facts”.

If you haven't read it, never mind; but the short version is that Brown uses an elaborately constructed set of contentions about Jesus and Mary Magdalene having married, their offspring having been kings of early medieval France, and this “mystery” itself being the real “Holy Grail”, guarded for centuries by a secret society – involving Leonardo of course - as backdrop for a cloak and dagger tale that does, admittedly, have its moments.

“Conservative believers”, so-called – since fundamentalism is not really a form of historic Christianity but a phenomenon impossible without modernity - have of course risen to arms in the face of what they see as rank heresy. I would rather point to the fact that scholars of all descriptions – not just theologians, but many others and art historians in particular – have groaned collectively as the world seemed to fall under the sway of the The Da Vinci Code's collection of rather silly borrowed conspiracy theories, with wild suggestions about everything and everyone from the Mona Lisa to Isaac Newton.

What interests me most of all is that Brown wove his fictional narrative over what he presented as a host of so-called “facts”. The preface of The Da Vinci Code has a bold title “FACT” followed by the statement “All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate”. In fact the book is of course riddled with old and discredited theories, rather than revolutionary discoveries. What interests me more particularly is that a good deal of how Brown got them taken seriously by

many readers, was precisely because they were presented as facts. And conversely his fundamentalist critics felt constrained to argue about the same question, of what was a “fact” and what was not.

In fact Dan Brown plays the sceptic about religion as the means to introduce ideas as implausible as the most tendentious of pious religious proclamations. But if this is somewhat revealing about that book and its author, just as intriguing is what the success of this kind of claim says about our contemporaries.

The Left Behind series

Another popular book or set of books that seem to me to get the mix wrong is Tim LaHaye’s and Jerry Jenkins’ Left Behind series. These books – 12 and counting – did not make the ABC list but have been prominent in the New York Times best-seller lists for some years now, ducking and weaving with Dan Brown’s novels for prominence.

Left Behind is a pulp fiction collection that depicts what LaHaye and Jenkins, fundamentalist Christians, regard as future fact – the misinterpretation of some NT elements, that presents a Christian apocalyptic scenario in the very near future, with the so-called “rapture”, woven into events like those of the current world.

In Left Behind the “rapture” – the notion that real Christians will disappear at a given point in the events of the last days – plays an equivalent part to Dan Brown’s conspiracy theories about Leonardo and the Holy Grail. This idea of the faithful being selectively “beamed up” is largely a 19th century construction based on poor biblical interpretation and of little interest to scholars – but as in the case of The Da Vinci Code, a pseudo-scholarly element is key to the presentation of the paperback as the profound.

There are worse aspects to these works – they bring to mind Dorothy Parker’s comment in reviewing a book now forgotten, that “this is not a novel to be tossed aside lightly. It should be thrown with great force”.

LaHaye and Jenkins, along with depicting a world in which screaming children might be left in driverless cars careering along freeways rendered chaotic by the divinely-engineered disappearance of their born-again parental drivers, barely attempt to hide connections between their view of an imminent end and US foreign and military policy. They depict, in the climactic volume of the series *Glorious Appearing*, a final and grossly violent war on terrorism led by Jesus himself – a Jesus whose character makes Osama Bin Laden start to seem like Francis of Assisi. It is hard to say whether it is the sacralization of current US policies that is more objectionable, or the depiction of a Christ who behaves in ways that would have him instantly arraigned before any war crimes tribunal:

All the firing and the running and the galloping and the rolling stopped. The soldiers screamed and fell, their bodies bursting open from head to toe at

every word that proceeded out of the mouth of the Lord as He spoke to the captives within Jerusalem.

And at another point:

The riders not thrown leaped from their horses and tried to control them with the reins, but even as they struggled, their own flesh dissolved, their eyes melted, and their tongues disintegrated. As Rayford watched, the soldiers stood briefly as skeletons in now-baggy uniforms, then dropped in heaps of bones as the blinded horses continued to fume and rant and rave.

This isn't just bad, it is poisonous.

Fact and Fantasy – reversing the polarity

Both *The Da Vinci Code* and *Left Behind* fail not in the mixture of the factual and the fantastic, but in their confusing of the two and their respective places and values.

Dan Brown, delving into the depths of myth and tradition for the ingredients of his work, is a sort of anti-Tolkien – rather than presenting truth in the guise of fantasy, he presents fantasy in the guise of truth. The results are, to state the obvious, less than profound.

Although readers of *Left Behind* are likely to be harsh critics of the *Da Vinci Code*, it could be described as the Bible Belt's answer to Dan Brown. Just as Dan Brown's book turns a series of tendentious fantasies into the supposedly factual basis for his fiction, so too *Left Behind* uses problematic pseudo-biblical fantasies, which are identified with the ultimate facts – the "Word of God". In this case there is of course a further and problematic implication – that scripture itself has been rendered the sort of object of factual research, and rather than being the inspired and inspiring witness to unseen truths, is more the guaranteed source of facts.

Recent voices

I may be making it sound as though only literature written in or before the fifties and available for my childhood was adequate to the linking of imagination and fact. In fact there are of course many contemporary examples of stories that do rather better at mixing the tall and the true.

Australian author Tim Winton's fiction does have the occasional fantastic element in it, such as a Pentecostal pig in *Cloudstreet*. His writing works less by turning away from reality than by heightening and focussing it with a poignancy and compassion that bears witness to his own Christian faith.

And I could hardly avoid mention of another model – which would certainly come up in the results of any scientific poll of 12 year olds living at my place – of course Harry Potter. Although J K Rowling is no Tolkien, she deserves credit for telling truths about friendship, loyalty and loss in genuinely humane ways – despite the fact that her books have been banned and even burned in quite a few so-called Christian schools.

Chesterton

Between them, Brown and LaHaye and Jenkins are a healthy reminder that scepticism is as important a thing as imagination in the reading of stories.

Although Brown himself does profess a form of Christian belief, his popularity seems to illustrate what G. K. Chesterton was harrumphing about in the early twentieth century, saying that people who stop believing in God actually tend to believe anything.

Chesterton's own great contribution to pulp fiction came many years before there were airport newsagents to present it and many years before there was Tim LaHaye or Dan Brown. Ironically enough his paperback hero was Dan Brown's namesake, a fictional detective priest who sometimes suffers – as clergy and Christians in general often do - under the misconceptions of others about his faith, and how it should lead to credulity.

In one case Fr Brown says somewhat resignedly about another character “He had the notion that because I am a clergyman I should believe anything. Many people have little notions of that kind.” Fr Brown is also made to say at another point “Well, I do believe some things, of course, and therefore, of course, I don't believe other things”.

Chesterton reminds us of the importance of what we do not believe as well as what we do. Theologian Christopher Morse calls this a “dogmatics” of “faithful disbelief”. The examples I have discussed indicate not only that there are things we ought not to believe, but ways we ought not to believe them. It is not good enough, for instance, for Christians to bone up on why Dan Brown is wrong – what is wrong with this picture may be our sense of truth itself.

Conclusions

In different ways and to different extents these examples in the contemporary sphere necessarily point back to scripture itself and how we read that work of “various contributors”. Scepticism about fundamentalist claims as well as about others is a necessary step towards a fuller and more imaginatively-rich set of possibilities for reading and for living.

The spectre of an inadequate view of scripture lurks over the contemporary crises of Christianity in general and Anglicanism in particular. While there are certainly readings of the Bible which are insipid or reductionist, it seems to me that far greater a danger lies in the hyper-protestant view – not represented in the reformers or classical Protestantism – of the Bible not as the divinely-inspired truth couched in the height of human imagination and creativity, but the divinely-dictated directory of scientific, historical and practical “fact”.

In this case it is not the Bible that is sovereign, let alone Christ, but the world-view that reduces mystery to formula, liturgy to meeting, sacrament to nothing. This is not an unapologetic Christianity, but a faith that has given way to a contemporary pseudo-scientific, secular, and narrowly-empirical view of reality.

It is not enough to turn holy scripture itself into an encyclopaedic collection of facts – this is not too high a view of scripture but too low a view of it. The architects of the great movement towards critical study of scripture once spoke of reading the Bible “like any other book”. This has at times become a threatening statement to some believers, as though scriptural authority were thus dismissed or undermined. But I suspect in our time we now must plead for the Bible to be read at least like any other book – as potentially as full of drama, mystery, imagination and gripping uncertainty as the best page-turner. For it is clear that many do not read other books with the necessary critical lenses, but do still read with enquiring minds and searching hearts; and unless we can read the Bible with the sense of joy, play, openness - and critical acumen - we bring to any other book, then we may acquire plenty of Bible facts – but we may miss the truth along the way.