

What is Christian Fiction?

By
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Teachers talk on it at conferences. Editors and agents weigh in with their opinions on panels. Writers debate hours and flood writing loops with scores of emails about it—only for everyone to walk away more confused than ever. What is “Christian” fiction?

Is it only those novels that present a gospel message? Do Christian characters wrestling with their faith make a story Christian? What about those books with subtle Christian themes? Or is a Christian novel simply a book written by an author who claims to be a Christian?

Like many things in the Christian walk, **neither extreme seems to be the solution**. Yes, books that handle the journey to faith of a character are Christian, but the Christian faith is so much more than that.

Yet on the other hand, a Christian author does not equate Christian work. A biblical worldview (seeing the world through the lens of Scripture) is not automatically implanted at conversion, but must be learned over time and through hard study. Therefore, Christians can and have produced some decidedly non-Christian writing.

That leaves the two ideas in the middle: Stories that espouse blatantly Christian thoughts and stories built on a biblical worldview. So **which one is right definition of “Christian fiction”?**

Both—depending on how you use the modifier *Christian*.

One way refers to a genre, much like you would say something is a fantasy or a romance. So like any genre, “Christian fiction” must have certain elements. As a murder mystery must have murders and sleuths, so the genre Christian fiction must deal with the journey to faith, how to live that faith after conversion, or in the case of fantasy and sci-fi, contain clear allegorical parallels to the Christian faith. Also Christian fiction often comes with the expectation of minimal swearing, graphic sex, and graphic violence.

In short, the Christian faith must be integral to the plot of Christian fiction, often driving the internal conflict and sometimes the external as well. Janette Oke, Sharon Hinck, and C.S. Lewis would all be good examples of the genre “Christian fiction.” However, authors like J.R.R. Tolkien would not be.

And that’s where the second use of Christian fiction comes in: ***Christian is a description of the overall content*** much in the way you might say a plot was fast-paced or the writing vivid. This kind of Christian fiction carries Christian themes and subtle allusions to a biblical worldview, like redemption and sacrifice, the sinfulness of man, and unconditional love. Here Jesus Christ is the foundation of the story rather than the focal point. Hence, Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, Dorothy L. Sayer’s *Lord Whimsy* mysteries, much of Stephen Lawhead’s and Debbie Macomber’s work are said to be “Christian fiction.”

Neither definition is wrong. They are just different with different styles, different expectations, and different audiences. But both are necessary, and a world without either would just not be the same.