

to instantiate their faith in fresh forms and emergent communities. And many are already creating bizarre new aberrations of pseudo-Christianity, easily as odd as Monte imaginations. His story is not *factual* but nevertheless deeply *true*.

Most of all, the great takeaway for me is his pun on “the Remnant.” After Christendom, will our sectarian remnant mentalities lead us to a post-exodus Promised Land? Hardly.

The one Hope, the Anchor, the true Remnant, is the remnant of Truth found in the story of Jesus Christ, symbolized by Cochran’s fragment. Now, that is the *Truth* worth telling, even—no, *especially*—through fiction. □

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Sand sculpture of Narnia’s “Mouse & Lion”  
by Rachel Stubbs

## IN, Not OF, the World

Monte Wolverton

Though it is not a direct biblical quotation, Christ-followers are said to be “*in*” the world but not “*of*” the world. During his last discourse to his disciples, Jesus spoke of the tension his followers experience in a hostile-to-God environment (John 15:19 and John 17:14-16).

The Apostle Paul reminds us that were we to avoid associations with all immorality, then of necessity, we would need to be somewhere other than “this world”—for such a safe and pure place we would, says Paul, “*have to be out of the world*” (1 Corinthians 5:9-10).

Christians have wrestled with the practical implications of being *in the world but not of it* for two thousand years. One of the most

contentious and hotly debated topics in this dilemma is that of fantasy—of myth—and what some protest as “pagan” origins of literature and music, for example.

Western culture has been shaped and influenced by Christianity for only the last two millennia. Some portions of Europe and the British Isles were converted to Christianity only about a thousand years ago. We are not that far removed from the ancient gods our ancestors worshiped. The names of our days and months echo the ancient deities—*Saturn, Janus, Woden and Thor*.

Early on, the Christian church co-opted some of the ancient, pagan festivals and customs in an effort to redirect the attention of

the people to Christianity. Churches were erected on formerly pagan holy sites. Pagan household deities were replaced by saints. *God*, a pagan Anglo-Saxon word which once referred to deities such as Balder and Thor, came to refer to the Christian Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As the church expanded, pagan territory (intellectual and geographical) was claimed for Christ.

It should come as no surprise then, that the Western culture we sometimes call “Christian,” is really an amalgam of ancient paganism, Christianity and other, more recent philosophies and modes of thought.

While artifacts of paganism are all around us—Easter eggs, mistletoe and even the days of the

week—few of us, if any, actually impute magical power to mistletoe, or believe that the ancient god *Woden* has some special power over Wednesdays. The pagan elements in our culture are largely no more than artifacts—reminders of our ignorant and superstitious origins. We cannot reasonably expect our literature, or our language to be laundered of pagan references, names and characters.

## LESSONS FROM LITERATURE

Literature is a reflection of culture. Everywhere in literature and movies—wherever a story is told—we encounter good and evil. We encounter good characters and evil characters. More true to life, we encounter characters who are a mixture of both, or who are complex and conflicted.

Skilled authors draw elements from the culture to tell their stories. At times, some of these elements are pagan. The writer may employ fantasy and magic. But the critical question for Christians is not whether there are pagan elements in the story, but the motive: where is the author going with those elements? What lesson is he or she trying to communicate or even promote?

Would-be Christian censors often focus on the form, rather than the substance. As Christian author Connie Neal observes:

*“This is what I am challenging people to think through. If we apply the same kind of censorship to other pieces of literature as we do with Harry Potter, where does it stop? If you say, ‘I will not read a story that*

*has any wands or spells,’ then you have to get rid of over two-thirds of classic children’s literature, including Cinderella, Peter Pan and Beauty and the Beast.”*

When we focus on the form, rather than the substance, we may find ourselves rejecting some excellent literature and letting through far more dangerous ideas that come wrapped in pleasant and innocuous packages.

Many movies and television shows from the “good old days” of the 1930s, ‘40s and ‘50s, for example, may seem wholesomely devoid of pagan elements, and may seem to uphold Christian standards. Yet upon careful analysis and scrutiny, some of these movies and television shows promote racism, stereotypes and materialism.

While wealthy, white businessmen are portrayed as fine, upstanding citizens, African Americans, Native Americans and Mexicans are portrayed in disparaging roles. Many of these shows are still regularly aired, yet I hear very few Christians complain about them.

During that same era, the celebrated Christian theologian and author C.S. Lewis published his *Chronicles of Narnia*. Some Christians promptly attacked the work, as it contained witches, gods and goddesses and animistic spirits.

Yet the work has a profoundly Christian message. As C.S. Lewis himself said: *“Within a given story, any object, person or place is neither more nor less, nor other, than what that story effectively shows it to be.”*

In other words, even though the elements in a story may derive from paganism, they are merely

being used to tell a story. The important thing is—what does the story say?

C.S. Lewis, J.K. Rowling (author of the *Harry Potter* series) and J.R.R. Tolkien (author of *The Lord of the Rings*) were, and are, committed Christians. The messages of their work are Christian messages—the triumph of good over evil.

Jim Ware, co-author of *Finding God in the Lord of the Rings*, says, *“At its deepest level, The Lord of the Rings is also a tale about the sovereignty of God. The God who uses even the enemy’s wicked designs to bring about the ultimate fulfillment of his perfect plan.”*

The *Star Wars* series, although not specifically ‘Christian,’ sends the same message—tyranny and evil may hold power for a short time, but freedom and good will always triumph in the end.

## BIBLICAL BOOK BURNING?

“But,” some may counter, “doesn’t the New Testament give an example where newly-converted Christians destroyed books dealing with the black arts? Shouldn’t we do the same?”

In Acts 19:19 we read that a number of people who had practiced sorcery in the city of Ephesus, responding to the gospel, destroyed their books on the occult arts. These were not *Harry Potter* or *Lord of the Rings* books, written by Christian authors, promoting Christian virtues. They were scrolls containing serious incantations and instructions for practicing actual pagan rites.

While the Bible condemns sorcery and the worship of pagan gods, it does not condemn Christians who must live and conduct daily activities in a pagan

culture. Consider the way the apostle Paul responded to the early Corinthian church when a controversy arose regarding whether Christians should eat food that had been sacrificed to idols. He reminded the Corinthians: *“We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one”* (1 Corinthians 8:4).

Likewise, Christians two millennia later should recognize that they need not fear the powerless gods of paganism—much less worry about literary references to sorcery and magic.



“Harry Potter” by Reilly Brown / WikiCommons

However, Paul goes on to say that we should be careful not to offend those who, because of a “weak conscience” (8:10) might be sensitive or fearful about such things.

Likewise, Christians today who find moral significance and meaning in literary fantasy would be wise not to force their freedom of conscience and preferences on other Christians.

The biblical record shows that Paul was by no means cloistered. For someone who had once been a strict and closed-minded Pharisee, Paul had a surprisingly open outlook toward pagan culture. His writings are sprinkled with references to classical literature and poetry, so we may assume that he had

read and studied them. He was able to use this pagan literacy to effectively communicate with non-Jews, as he did with the Athenian philosophers in Acts 17.

## HOW TO HANDLE IT

Here are some points to consider for parents who are concerned about the impact of fantasy on their children.

1) If you have questions about a book or movie, consult responsible reviews, or better yet, read or view the work yourself. Only then can you intelligently discuss it with your child or decide what kind of guidance to give.

2) Discern the author's intent and motive. What is the moral of the story? Ask God to help you discern.

3) Forbid reading or viewing the material in question if you think you must—but realize that it may be difficult, if not impossible, to prevent your child from viewing a movie, reading a book, listening to music or playing a game. Forbidden fruit becomes sweeter and all the more enticing, especially if friends are doing it. That's why the next strategy is preferable.

4) Discuss the material with your child. Play the game, see the movie or read the book with them. Discuss the principles involved from a Christian viewpoint. Give your child all the tools he or she needs to think it through and form an opinion. If the opinion differs from yours, keep the dialog open and continue to let your child know where you stand and why.

Our world presents parents with a long list of potential prohibitions on which we must choose where to draw the line. How many prohibitions can we invoke before losing our relationship with our children? On the other hand, how many prohibitions do we need to impose to avoid losing our children to immorality?

In a world filled with child abuse, hatred, crime, drugs and child pornography, literary works of fantasy do not seem to call for the kind of absolute line-in-the-sand that other issues do. Far better that we find truth wherever we can, and use it to inspire ourselves and our children. □

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