



**Short, and Good: A Review of *The Best Christian Short Stories*, ed. Bret Lott (Nashville: Westbow Press, 2006, 250 pp.)**

When I first saw this collection of short stories, entitled *The Best Christian Short Stories*, my skeptical nature took hold. Smiling to myself, I figured that the "best" thing about these Christian short stories was probably, in fact, that they *were* short, given the abysmal state of Christian fiction, packed as it is with mimicry, stories that don't ring true, and sermonizing. That's a gross generalization, I know, and not completely fair, but it is true that when you want to read serious literature, you usually don't (sadly enough) look in a Christian bookstore. Nevertheless, given that this collection was edited by Bret Lott (*Jewel*), and contained a story by an acclaimed writer like Larry Woiwode, I bought the book. I'm glad I did.

As Bret Lott says in the introduction, the goal is that the collected stories "will begin to fill a gap in the world of fiction: that between popular Christian writing and that of literary art." It's an intriguing goal and one largely met by the eleven stories that follow.

While the most literary and "high-brow" of the stories is "Firstborn," by Larry Woiwode, it would be a mistake to think that this literary art is anything but accessible to ordinary readers, and yet, it is not simplistic or didactic in approach but nuanced and thought-provoking. I was captivated right away by Mary Kenagy's "Loud Lake," about Pete, the son of a father who runs a Christian camp, who, while not unappreciative of his upbringing, has to find his own way, his own path of faith. It's remarkable what cynics we moderns are: for much of the story I kept waiting for Pete to leave the fold, or for the father to turn out to be a hypocrite of some sort, and yet, while their humanness was on display, they were, in the end, people of faith.

That human, believable element also abounds in James Calvin Schapp's "Exodus," about a father who has to intervene in a crisis to rescue his daughter and grandchild from a failed marriage. Wilfred Staab is a rough-hewn man, a believer, and yet one who finds it difficult to express love. In a crisis situation, God gives him what he needs. It's a very believable domestic conflict that almost gets out of hand, or maybe it does, and yet we witness a Christian man trying his best, by God's grace, to deal with it.

And that's how it goes here. In "Landslide," by David McGlynn, we see a portrayal of a very human and yet very faithful pastor, successful and yet aware of his failings, his inability or unwillingness to keep up with a friend who faded into oblivion, outside the fold of faith. I kept waiting for the usual stereotypes to creep in -- Bible thumper, right-winger, hypocrite, the ones we hear all the time -- and when it didn't, I was taken by surprise.

Reading these eleven stories, I have to think that a non-Christian reading these stories may be given a different opinion of Christians. They might believe that Christians do usually mean what they say, want to practice what they preach, but inevitably fail and struggle, like them. In other words, they may think us human. I wonder though if they'll ever find these stories, if they'd ever pick up a book that says "the best Christian" anything. I suppose the goal here is to raise the bar for Christians reading, and maybe that can happen, but I suggest that these writers simply write these stories about Christian people and seek publication in the mainstream press, like everybody else. Good stories will sell. They don't need a label.

This is billed as a "first volume in a collection of contemporary fiction that combines the artistry of critically acclaimed writers with a clear Christian worldview." It's a hopeful start. The only way it will continue is if we buy it, if we let the publisher know that this is exactly what Christian publishers need to be selling. I plan on buying several copies and giving them to friends this Christmas. Consider that, would you? It's a start.