

The Cross and the Crime Scene:
The Convergence of Writing as a Christian and the Mystery Genre

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A Senior Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for graduation
in the Honors Program
Liberty University
Spring 2023

Acceptance of Senior Honors Thesis

This Senior Honors Thesis is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the Honors Program of Liberty University.

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Abstract

This creative thesis begins with a discussion of the different approaches to writing as a Christian. It describes the evangelistic approach, the integrative approach, and the thematic approach, which vary in the degree to which the author's faith is explicitly or implicitly included. The thesis then focuses on the way Dorothy Sayers and G. K. Chesterton incorporated their faith into their mystery stories. It then includes excerpts from an original mystery novel. Finally, it considers the value and purpose of this project.

The Cross and the Crime Scene: The Convergence of

Writing as a Christian and the Mystery Genre

Following the example of God as creator, Christians ought to be the ones who are giving the world great art. In an article about aesthetics from a Christian perspective, Frank Gaebelien writes, “God is the great Maker, the only true Creator, from whom all other creative activity is derived” (51). As we are made in his image, we too are makers on a smaller scale. We have “a hunger for human creativity, for artistry, for beauty” (Ryken 151). Art and literature should not be viewed as interesting but ultimately pointless. They are bound up with what it means to be human, and that means they have the power to touch our souls in a way little else can.

Unfortunately, Evangelical Christian fiction is often—though not always—poorly written. One typical problem is that many works of Christian fiction are unrealistic. Difficult issues are avoided or handled in a trite, improbable way, and characters lack vitality and depth (Ingles 343). These books are not held to high enough standards (Ingles 344). Christian writers must make their work high-quality, seek to portray truth, and realize that they have, in this cultural environment, both advantages and disadvantages. Getting spiritual matters across to an unbelieving world in a compelling manner is a difficult task (O’Connor 161). However, the Christian novelist is assisted by a belief in sin and the soul, which are compelling subjects (O’Connor 167).

Although fallen artists will never make perfect art, redemption should and does make a difference in an artist’s work. Novelists who are not Christian may deal with deep religious themes, but their work is still written from an outside perspective, whether that is one of skepticism, belief in another religion, uncertainty, desire for what Christianity represents, or some other point of view. Christian authors have a different perspective, one which holds the

claims of Christianity to be true and vital, and their values and beliefs are reflected in their writing. However, the way in which Christianity is included depends on each writer's individual goals and personal views of the purpose of literature. Three broad classifications for the approaches Christian authors use are the evangelistic approach, the integrative approach, and the thematic approach, divisions which are based on the degree to which Christianity is incorporated into a piece of literature.

Approaches to Writing as a Christian

One approach to writing as a Christian author is the evangelistic approach. Authors following this approach generally use fiction as a vehicle for evangelism, which means their stories will usually include a clear presentation of the need for redemption and of how one can become a Christian. They will also often contain one or more characters who convert to Christianity over the course of the story. These characters serve as examples that the author hopes the audience will follow, a sort of subtle (or sometimes not so subtle) altar call that suggests one should pay attention to the fate of one's own soul.

An example of the evangelistic approach can be seen in the book *A Voice in the Wind* by Francine Rivers. Christianity is closely woven into the fabric of this story. The main character, Hadassah, is a Jewish Christian whose family dies in the siege of Jerusalem. Hadassah survives and is taken as a slave to Rome, which is a highly dangerous place in which to be a Christian at that time. Throughout the book, she trusts in God, prays for the family that bought her, and serves others in a Christlike way, but struggles with her fear of what will happen to her if she tries to encourage any of the people around her to convert to Christianity: "Every time an opportunity came, she remembered the arenas along the way from Jerusalem; she heard again the screams of terror and pain that sometimes haunted her nights" (Rivers 142). Eventually, though,

Hadassah overcomes her terror enough to start telling the father of the family, an older man who is terminally ill, more about her beliefs.

In a scene near the end of the book, Hadassah shares the gospel clearly with him, saying, “[i]f you but confess your sins and believe, the Lord will forgive you. Ask and he will come to dwell in your heart, and you will have the peace you crave. You only have to believe” (Rivers 428). Although her words don’t convince him, at that point, he appreciates the risk she took and the love that motivated it. Eventually, when he is about to die, he becomes a Christian. After his death, though, his daughter, Julia, who has been gradually becoming more and more corrupt throughout the story, arranges for Hadassah to be forced into a position where she will either have to deny Christ or be condemned to the arena. Hadassah finally conquers her fear and proclaims Jesus as the Son of God (480), though she knows it means she will, in all likelihood, die for her faith.

A book that uses the evangelistic approach, like *A Voice in the Wind*, has the advantage of openly describing one’s beliefs. If one’s end goal is to lead readers toward Christianity, this approach offers a way to do so that cannot easily be ignored or misunderstood. However, writers should be aware that a danger of fiction that is written to demonstrate a point is that it can stop being art and become merely propaganda (Reffner 40). This can also limit one’s audience. In trying to reach those who do not know Christ, it is possible to alienate them instead, as most people dislike reading works that seem to be trying to preach to them.

Because of this, among other things, the evangelistic approach often has an unenviable reputation. While some Christian authors fit into this category but still write well, this approach is frequently associated with poor writing skills. Writers who use this approach are also often critiqued for their tendency to avoid the darker side of life—not simply violence, sex, and

profanity, but also realistic portrayals of other struggles (Bauer 106). Rivers, specifically, does not hesitate to confront difficult issues in her writing—in *A Voice in the Wind*, she deals with the unrestrained and often deviant sexuality of ancient Rome, abortion, abuse, and more. However, in this sort of fiction, “the desire to avoid offending sensibilities in regard to dialogue and human situations often results in plastic, smoothed-over characters, and a holding back from the kind of writing that may evoke true inspiration or authentic villainy” (Terrell 244). Writers who want to write a clean or uplifting book have to be aware of the trap of making it unrealistic.

A second approach to writing as a Christian is the integrative approach. Authors who choose this approach do not explicitly present the gospel but include Christian elements such as Christian characters or theological issues discussed in some depth. This is a more subtle, less direct option than the evangelistic approach, but it still contains references to Christianity—sometimes to a great extent, other times only infrequently.

A good example of the integrative approach is *Cry, the Beloved Country* by Alan Paton. *Cry, the Beloved Country* is set in South Africa during the 1940s and follows two major characters. Stephen Kumalo is a black Anglican priest who travels from his village, Ndotsheni, to Johannesburg in response to a message saying his sister is sick. While there, he discovers that his son Absalom, who had not kept in touch with his parents after leaving Ndotsheni, has turned to crime and is responsible for the death of a householder who startled Absalom and his friends after they broke into his residence. Kumalo is the main character, but in the middle of the story the perspective temporarily shifts to that of James Jarvis, a prosperous white farmer who lives near Ndotsheni and whose son, Arthur, was the man killed by Absalom. It is an incredibly difficult time for both men. However, their shared suffering draws them into a quiet friendship

with each other, and at the end of the book, both are working toward the rehabilitation of the land around Ndotsheni.

Christianity plays a major role in *Cry, the Beloved Country*. Arthur Jarvis, the man whom Absalom killed, was driven by his faith. He was an outspoken opponent of the exploitation and subjugation of the native races, and his writings help his father, James Jarvis, to awaken to the reality of the people around him. Stephen Kumalo has a strong, deeply rooted faith that directs his actions and gives him humility, and the same is true for the priests who help him in Johannesburg. Neither he nor the others are perfect, but their faith is sincere and powerful. When Kumalo finds his sister Gertrude—who, as it turns out, is not physically ill but has become a prostitute—he initially lets his anger guide his words. This temptation to hurt others through what he says is one of Kumalo’s flaws throughout the book, but he is always quick to repent and change his attitude. As soon as Gertrude says that she is “a bad woman” and “no woman to go back” (Paton 31), Kumalo’s heart is “filled with pity” (31) and he responds, “God forgives us ... Who am I not to forgive? Let us pray” (31). Kumalo prays frequently, desires to follow God in his life, and always is grateful for the kindnesses he receives from others. Even when he is at his darkest point, doubting there is any hope Absalom will receive either temporal or spiritual mercy, he still accepts what comfort and advice the other priests can give him (110).

Although he wonders if he should stay as priest in Ndotsheni, as he has “a sister who has left her child, and a son who has killed a man” (226), Kumalo does not attempt to hide what he learned in Johannesburg from the people of Ndotsheni. When he returns, he prays publicly for the relatives he was able to bring back—Absalom’s pregnant wife and Gertrude’s child—asking that they would be welcome in Ndotsheni, and prays for God’s forgiveness for Gertrude and Absalom, adding, “[f]orgive us all, for we all have trespasses” (224). Kumalo, and many of the

others in the book, are motivated and led by their Christian beliefs. Although the gospel is never explicitly presented, these characters' genuine faith is an integral—and beautiful—part of the story.

Authors who use the integrative approach can intertwine their beliefs with the story in a more natural way. If a character believes in God, it makes sense that the character will think about God, or theology, at some point. If the character has a large role in the story, it would be unnatural if he or she did not do so. The integrative approach also has the advantage that it is not as likely to deter secular readers. However, if the references to God or faith are too obscure, the writer might not have as great an impact as hoped for, as readers may skim over the passages or fail to understand the writer's meaning. Also, this approach means the author does not make a direct declaration of the gospel, which could be seen as good or bad, depending on how well they would have handled such a scene.

Thirdly, some Christian authors make use of the thematic approach, which means they do not include Christianity in their works. Walsh writes that “Christian writers do not necessarily deal directly with anything that would be labelled ‘Christian’” (174). However, for a Christian writer who chooses this approach, their faith still naturally informs the themes and morals of their writing through “the angle of vision ... a way of understanding, not subject matter” (Walsh 174). This could include stories that represent the Christian experience of sin and redemption but do not label it as such, or that show the intangible in reality—how the world defies an easy explanation that does not take the supernatural into account.

One good example of the thematic approach is *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien's world has its own true mythology, but the characters in *The Lord of the Rings* never talk about the topic of God or pray to him. If one was only looking for clear statements and tangible clues, one might

just as easily assume Tolkien was an atheist as a Christian from the evidence in *The Lord of the Rings*. It is only in the themes of the book that Tolkien's beliefs come through, and when they do, they give the work much of its beauty. One of these themes is the elevation of the humble—it is the little hobbits who save Middle Earth, against all the odds and although many other characters are great warriors. Another is providence, as when Elrond tells those who have gathered at Rivendell that they are not there by chance, and have been called there, though not by him (Tolkien 255), or how Gandalf says to Frodo that Bilbo “was meant to find the Ring, and not by its maker. In which case you also were meant to have it. And that may be an encouraging thought” (65). Another theme is brought out when Sam sees a star high above the ugliness and barrenness of Mordor and realizes that “in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach” (870). This insight, once again, reflects the story of Christianity. Both assert that the evil that has such a strong grasp on our world will not triumph forever.

Tolkien saw the last theme as of great importance in fantasy. In his essay “On Fairy-Stories,” he writes about the “consolation of the happy ending” (Tolkien 68) when it comes suddenly, unexpectedly, and miraculously (68):

This joy, which is one of the things which fairy-stories can produce supremely well, is not essentially ‘escapist,’ not ‘fugitive’ ... It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the world, poignant as grief. (68)

Tolkien includes Christianity in *The Lord of the Rings* by the way its themes, such as the triumph of joy, echo the greater story that God has made.

The thematic approach can have an advantage in reaching secular audiences and portraying themes in an unusual way that may open readers' eyes to the wonder and beauty of the Christian story. By showing truth or beauty in a new way, it can awaken a longing for them that has lain dormant. Also, secular audiences are unlikely to be turned off by Christian themes, since they are ideas that resonate in their hearts, just as in the hearts of those who believe, which is why one can find a Christian theme in most stories or movies, if one looks hard enough. In most cases, the writers are not Christians, but they pick up on the truths that reflect what all humanity hopes for. However, the drawback to this approach is that the audience may misunderstand or ignore the Christian values or themes in the author's story. They may gain a better understanding of the beauty and wonder of creation, for example, which is a good thing, but that appreciation might never lead them any closer to God.

Christian Authors and Mystery

Although the examples so far have come from other genres, these classifications can be used for mystery stories by Christian authors as well. Some good examples can be gathered from the works of Dorothy Sayers and G. K. Chesterton. In her mystery novel *Whose Body?*, Sayers shows, by a thematic approach, how disregard of religion and morality makes one a danger to oneself and others. The main character, Lord Peter Wimsey, is reading a book by the murderer when he realizes how the murder was committed. The main point of the book the killer wrote is that "knowledge of good and evil is a phenomenon of the brain, and is removable" (Sayers 168). The catalyst for the case all coming together in Lord Peter's mind is the realization that such a philosophy would be "an ideal doctrine for the criminal" (167). Later, at the end of the book,

when the murderer writes his confession, he contends that “a perfectly sane man, not intimidated by religious or other delusions, could always render himself perfectly secure from detection” as long as “the crime were sufficiently premeditated and that he were not pressed for time or thrown out in his calculations by purely fortuitous coincidence” (232). His view that morality is meaningless is portrayed as dangerous and ultimately unsuccessful. This philosophy has caused great harm to other characters, through his actions, and also to himself.

In another novel, *Unnatural Death*, Sayers edges into the integrative approach by having certain characters discuss the theological and moral implications of the actions in the story. Her main character, Lord Peter Wimsey, is not a Christian. She writes in a nonfiction book, *The Mind of the Maker*, as a sidenote, that Lord Peter is “doubtful whether any claim to possess a soul is not a rather vulgar piece of presumption” (Sayers 131) and says that “[f]rom what I know of him, nothing is more unlikely” (131) than that he would become a Christian. This does not mean there are no Christian characters in her stories, though. In *Unnatural Death*, Lord Peter has a conversation with a vicar on the morality of the murderer’s actions, and of Lord Peter’s actions in investigating and possibly stirring up the murderer to further action. In the conversation, the vicar says to Lord Peter, “Leave the consequences to God. And try to think charitably, even of wicked people. You know what I mean. Bring the offender to justice, but remember that if we all got justice, you and I wouldn’t escape either” (192). These sentences hint at God’s mercy, justice, and omnipotence.

In another part of the book, Miss Climpson, an old lady who is helping Lord Peter, has an exchange with a young woman who is overly attached to her friend and insists that great friendship has “got to be just everything to one. It’s wonderful the way it seems to color all one’s thoughts. Instead of being centered in oneself, one’s centered in the other person. That’s what

Christian love means” (Sayers 154). Miss Climpson’s response is wiser and is in line with Christian doctrine:

Well, I don’t know ... I once heard a sermon about that from a most splendid priest—and he said that that kind of love might become idolatry if one wasn’t very careful. He said that Milton’s remark about Eve—you know, ‘he for God only, she for God in him’—was not congruous with Catholic doctrine. One must get the proportions right, and it was out of proportion to see everything through the eyes of another fellow-creature. (Sayers 155)

Miss Climpson is proved to be right through the events of the story, as the young woman lies for her friend, in excessive loyalty, and says her friend has an alibi, when she is actually the murderer. Not surprisingly, the young woman is murdered not long afterward in order to prevent her from telling the truth. In small ways like this, Sayers inserts a theological perspective into her work.

G. K. Chesterton’s Father Brown series is another good example of the integrative approach in mysteries, although it is very different from Sayers’ work. Where Sayers leans toward not including much about Christianity, Chesterton leans heavily the other way. His main character, Father Brown, is, as one might expect, a Catholic priest, and his profession has an impact on all the cases he investigates, both in how others react to him, which opens up many discussions on religion or lack thereof, and also in the many snippets of theology and philosophy scattered throughout the books, which are usually given with Chesterton’s brevity, wit, and ability to make one see things in a new perspective, whether one agrees with him or not.

The Father Brown mysteries have an emphasis on character and human nature, but especially on philosophical and theological views of the world. The criminals in the Father Brown stories are motivated by their ideologies, and the themes of the stories often defend

Christianity and Catholicism. For example, in *The Innocence of Father Brown*, when Father Brown is first introduced, both the criminal in the story and the detective who is trying to find the criminal assume that Father Brown is naïve and unintelligent. The criminal, Flambeau, tries to steal a sapphire cross from him, and the detective tries to protect the priest, who he thinks is a gullible victim. However, it turns out that Father Brown was aware of Flambeau's plans, saved the cross, and made sure the detective was able to follow them. Father Brown explains, "Has it never struck you that a man who does next to nothing but hear men's real sins is not likely to be wholly unaware of human evil?" (Chesterton 33). Chesterton also includes, in the same story, another point in the church's favor—one cause Father Brown had to suspect Flambeau was that he "attacked reason ... It's bad theology" (34). The Father Brown mysteries are filled with themes and remarks about theology like the ones in the first story.

However, Chesterton never explains Christianity itself. Nor does he present the gospel; instead, he avoids the topic. The closest he comes is when Father Brown, in a later story, runs into Flambeau again. Flambeau has stolen some silver from a fashionable restaurant and comes to the cloakroom, where he meets Father Brown. Father Brown has figured out the way Flambeau stole the silver, and suggests so to Flambeau. Flambeau grabs hold of Father Brown's collar and says, "I don't want to threaten you, but—" (Chesterton 84). Father Brown replies, "I do want to threaten you ... I want to threaten you with the worm that dieth not, and the fire that is not quenched" (84). Flambeau comments on how Father Brown is an odd cloakroom clerk, and Father Brown says, "I am a priest, Monsieur Flambeau," then, "and I am ready to hear your confession" (84). The scene cuts out at that point. When Father Brown explains the story later, he omits any explanation of what happened afterward, despite his interlocutor protesting that Father Brown has stopped just as he reached the place where, "the interesting story begins ... I

think I understand his professional trick. But I don't seem to have got hold of yours" (102).

Flambeau later gives up his life of crime, though, becomes a good friend of Father Brown's, and takes up the profession of a private detective, which serves to introduce many of the cases in the stories that take place after his reformation.

The inclusion of Christianity in Dorothy Sayers' mysteries is unlikely to offend even strongly secular readers, but it is not nonexistent. Her books subtly reflect Christian beliefs and challenge the defensibility of other worldviews. Chesterton's work, on the other hand, is much more blatant, as he makes specific, clear theological points and refutes arguments against Christianity. This overt inclusion of his faith leads to "a certain unease that prevails in most studies when assessing Chesterton's position in the history of the [mystery] genre" (Arnautou 292). However, these critics, and many other people, are still reading and discussing Chesterton's work, whether they agree with his philosophical and theological views or not. Both Sayers and Chesterton incorporate their faith into their stories while keeping them interesting and enjoyable for a wide audience, which is a good balance for a Christian mystery writer to pursue.

Story Excerpts**Chapter 1**

Jayden Yang picked up the phone, keeping one eye on the road. A text. Tyler was having one of his parties Friday night and hoped Jayden could make it.

Jayden hoped he could make it, too. It would mean less prep time for his exam, but it had become a creed to him that he had to attend every party Dyson and Lexi did. Had to make it uncomfortable for Dyson. You couldn't just steal someone's life and expect them to politely avoid you, after all. Jayden slowed for a stop sign and texted Tyler to say he'd be at the party.

What annoyed him was that, lately, Dyson's guilty look when he saw Jayden had faded. But perhaps he should let it go. They could go their separate ways. Lexi wasn't the only girl in the world. Or maybe he should throw his scruples out the window and make sure Dyson got what he deserved. There was a yellow light ahead, and Jayden sped up. He made it through the intersection, although the light turned red while he was in the middle.

* * *

Michael Bieker lay back on the couch and listened to the insistent tick of the clock. He despised Tyler's parties. Hours of pointless waiting, or even more pointless conversation. But he needed to go. He didn't have a choice. Not anymore. He sighed.

* * *

Zach Winters walked into the kitchen to find Christopher and Dyson sitting at the table. Christopher's head was bent over his phone. Dyson was eating raisin bran and appeared to be staring intently at the cabinets.

“You know,” Christopher said without looking up, “we have a problem. Dyson is only just now having breakfast. He doesn’t think it’s weird to eat it at a time of day when most people are like, ‘Oh, cool, that was a really good lunch—that I had a couple hours ago.’”

“I know.” Zach pulled out a chair, brushed the crumbs from the seat, and sat down. “Horrible, of course,” he added. He leaned over to see what Christopher was doing.

Dyson grinned. “Strange though it may seem, this is ordinary behavior for a Saturday. It’s you two who get up at some ridiculous hour long before dawn.”

“7:30 isn’t before dawn.” Christopher tilted his phone so Zach couldn’t see it. “Of course, you’ve never had the chance to find out.”

Zach shifted his chair, but was still unable to see Christopher’s phone. “The early bird gets the worm,” he said, without putting much thought into it.

“I prefer cereal.” Dyson said. “But I won’t judge.”

Zach looked over at Dyson with a sudden surge of anger. So there was at least one action that Dyson wouldn’t judge. How open-minded.

Zach shook his head. It was ridiculous to be thinking this way now. He needed to stop before he said something he’d regret later. Needed to think about something else. There was a reason he’d come in here in the first place, wasn’t there? Ah, yes.

“Dyson, did you see Tyler has one of his parties on Friday?”

“No, I hadn’t. Are you going?”

“Yes—could I ride with you?” Zach got up and walked toward the fridge, slowing down behind Christopher to see his screen. Texts. A promise to pay someone back as soon as possible. Interesting.

“You bet,” Dyson said. “I’ll be driving Lexi as well, unless she can’t make it.”

“Of course,” Zach said, but half his mind was already planning his week. If he wrote those essays on Monday and Thursday ... he’d drop by the store on Wednesday and get ingredients for a salad to bring to the party ... he had nearly forgotten the paper for Merton’s class—he’d have to fit that in somewhere.

* * *

Sophia Craig looked out the window at the gray sky and barren trees. Some snow would be nice. It would make things look less dreary. But one couldn’t expect snow often in Alabama, even if it was freezing outside.

Sophia looked down at her phone, erased the text to Rachel, and began to rewrite it. After she finished it, she made a few revisions and finally sent: “Hey Rachel!! Will you be able to come to Tyler’s party?”

Almost immediately, the dots popped up that showed Rachel was typing, then her text appeared: “Will Dyson be there?”

That was awkward. Sophia wrote, “Yep,” but she doubted Rachel wanted to come now.

Rachel texted, “I think I can make it.”

Sophia raised her eyebrows. Perhaps Rachel really was still in love with Dyson. She’d never have believed it, but this plan might work out after all.

* * *

Stephen Martello looked down at the body with the sense of a job well done. Then he left the room, turning out the lights and locking the door behind him. As he peeled off his second pair of gloves, he looked at his watch. Dang! He’d lost track of time. And he was going to be late to his date with Vanessa.

Stephen changed clothes in a hurry, dumping his old ones into a thick plastic bag which he placed in the trunk of his car. He'd wash them when he got home. As he started the car, he texted Vanessa to let her know he'd be fifteen minutes late. He hoped she wouldn't ask why. Being late for their first date was bad enough.

As he walked toward the restaurant from his car, Stephen thought he caught a whiff of formaldehyde, but he dismissed it as his imagination. He'd changed clothes and washed his hands. And that was after taking off the PPE. Besides, if he still had formaldehyde on him, he would have smelled it in the car, not out here where the cold wind was blowing down the collar of his coat. He passed a bakery with darkened windows that reflected the streetlights and the people walking past, then came to the brightly lit windows and door of the Italian restaurant where he was meeting Vanessa.

He pushed open the door, entered, and heard a man's voice call his name. Stephen looked over to his right and saw Dyson leaning against a wall that was covered by a pattern of wooden tiles.

"Hey!" Dyson said. "How are you?"

"Doing well. I can't talk, though. I'm here for a date with a girl and I need to go find her—I was supposed to be here thirteen minutes ago."

Dyson raised his eyebrows. "I'm here for the same reason—I have a date with Lexi—but I was early. Hope it goes well."

"Thanks." Stephen scanned the tables, saw Vanessa, and began to make his way to the table.

* * *

"So, what do you do?" Vanessa asked.

Stephen felt like swearing. Everything had been going so well. If Vanessa was upset he was late, she hadn't shown it. She had accepted his explanation that "something came up with my work" and hadn't pried. She had a good mind and could carry on an intelligent conversation about philosophy in fiction or poetry. And she was attractive, not just physically—he'd known that already—but in the way she talked and moved. If she had held off on that question for just a couple more dates.

"I'm a funeral director." Then he added, "A mortician." Might as well be upfront about it now that she had asked.

"That's ... very interesting." Vanessa said it in the way she might if an enthusiastic child was showing her a large and ugly spider.

This date was unrecoverable. "It actually is interesting."

Vanessa didn't quite mask her horrified expression in time. "But, why did you choose ... of all the jobs ..."

"It's the family business. But also, I wanted to do it. It seemed so much closer to what's important in life than some office job. And though I can't change what's happened, I can make it easier, even if it's just in a small way, for the family of the deceased at one of the most difficult times in their lives."

"Family of the deceased ... oh my goodness." Vanessa shook herself. "I'm sorry. It's fine—fine that that's your job. Really."

But Stephen could tell she was lying.

"So, do you have any pets?" Vanessa asked in a forced voice.

"No." He wasn't going to tell her his dog had died recently. She'd probably wonder whether he'd embalmed it. He motioned to their waitress and asked for the check.

As they left the restaurant, Stephen saw Dyson at a table with a girl whose back was turned, but whose hair was an improbable shade of blond. Must be Lexi. He hoped Dyson's date had gone better than his.

Outside the restaurant, Vanessa paused, then said in a rush, "Thank you—I had a good time—it was really good. I just don't think we have enough in common—I really respect you, though—but I don't think this will work out."

Stephen said, "I understand." He wasn't going to say anything else. If he did, he'd say too much. And even though the date hadn't worked out, he still wanted it to end civilly.

She looked at him as if trying to read his thoughts, then gave a weak smile and turned away.

From Chapter 14

[In the intervening chapters, the following events happened: Dyson died at the party, Stephen came across evidence that suggested foul play but was not definite, and (because of that evidence) Stephen started meeting up with the people who had attended the party. He has discovered a good deal of information, as well as some strong motives for murder. When this scene starts, Stephen is at his apartment drawing sketches of the suspects he talked to that day.]

He [Stephen] got a pencil from a drawer in the kitchen and started on the drawing of Zach.

He put Zach in a train carriage in the 1920s, with a rain-streaked window beside him. He was immaculately dressed, and looked like he was talking to the indistinct person opposite him, while trying to steal a glimpse of the newspaper the blurry figure beside him was holding.

As a picture, Stephen liked the result. But what it stood for—was it any more helpful than the timeline was? You skimmed the surface of a group of people's lives. You learned something about them, true, but how could it be enough to spot a murderer? There had to be so much more to each of them, things that only a long friendship would reveal, or secrets that they intended to keep to the grave.

He had to work with what he could get, though. He'd put the events he knew about down on the timeline, and make the best estimates he could of the suspects from his own impressions and from what others said. Maybe the clues would add up and be enough. Or maybe they wouldn't.

Stephen put Zach's card aside and moved on to Lexi's. He'd liked the 1920s theme, so he drew Lexi as a flapper, smiling up at Dyson, who was dancing with her. Stephen paused, then

added Jayden in the background, leaning against the wall and watching them. It was the first index card he had put more than one character in, but it felt right for this one.

Next, he drew Tyler, in the same hoodie as Tyler had been wearing when they met, and put him backstage, hands in his pockets, watching a group of figures as they prepared to put on a play. He might be just watching. Or he might be supervising it, might be the one who was running the whole thing for some purpose of his own. It was hard to tell. His expression was blank, polite, and utterly unhelpful in deciding.

On the fourth index card, Stephen drew Kierra sitting on the balcony of an apartment that looked very modern, with a laptop on the table in front of her. It was morning—well, the picture could have been morning or afternoon, but Stephen meant it to be morning—and the city below her was busy. Her eyes weren't on the laptop but were looking out across the people walking in the street below.

Stephen collected the index cards and was about to take them to the living room, but put them down again and got another card. He drew Sophia on this one, standing on a castle wall and looking out over the battlements, watching for something, with the sun behind her, half showing over a row of hills, and the sky above unnaturally dark.

He was working on getting the sky right when he remembered he hadn't prayed for Sophia and her mom in a while. He'd done so when he first met them, and then a couple of times the next day, but then, during the week, the search for who might have murdered Dyson had distracted him. He went ahead and did so, now, thinking as he did that he well might have been ignoring the more important thing for the less important, especially if the murder investigation came to nothing. He prayed it wouldn't, though.

He took the index cards to the living room, taped them up against the bookshelf, and looked over the group. His gaze rested on each of the faces, imagining what their motivations might be, the many ways they might react if they were discovered to be the killer, and wondering—if he found out who the murderer was, what would he do next? He'd originally planned to lay the evidence before the police, and he still would probably choose to do so, but he was in a strange middle position.

He wasn't a policeman, who had a duty to the law, nor a priest, who had to keep confessions secret no matter what they were. He could go either way, and although, with his job, he tended to treat what people said as something that shouldn't be repeated, none of them had ever confessed to murder.

He decided it would depend on what the murderer's attitude was, if he ever confronted them. It wasn't that he didn't think this murderer deserved to be caught—there wasn't much doubt about that—but mercy was a beautiful thing, something all people needed desperately, and something one *was* supposed to give to others. He wouldn't completely rule out letting the murderer go. On the other hand, he would have to be utterly certain he wasn't endangering other people by doing so. There was a sort of obligation to society that one had. He couldn't do it unless he knew, for sure, that the murderer wouldn't kill anyone else. And that sort of proof would be hard to obtain.

Conclusion

As the excerpts above would suggest, I use the integrative approach in my mystery novel. I do not consider it inherently better or worse than the evangelistic or thematic approaches, but it fits better with the setting I chose, it is easier for me to write about, and it flows more naturally with the storyline. The mystery is set in the present day, in Birmingham, Alabama and in the fictional town of Southern Pinedale, which is just north of Birmingham. Since, in that locale, most people are either Christian or nominally so, it would be unrealistic if none of the characters in the novel claimed belief in God. Most of the characters are college students, but this only means that the percentage of characters who are Christian or would say they are is lower than it would be for an older demographic, not that there would be none of them. Besides, I think writing a book with no Christian characters would have made me feel depressed.

Before I started writing, I spent a lot of time brainstorming about the plot. During this time, I decided that the simplest way to naturally integrate Christianity into the story would be if my main character was a Christian. I also relate better to my main character under those circumstances. Every way in which a character is different from the author will inevitably shift the way the character would act away from the way the author finds it natural to act. Because of this, although the characters all need to have their own personalities, it helps if each one has some connection to the author, no matter how small it is. A character the author does not relate to in any way is far more unlikely to be realistic. Although my main character, Stephen, had a childhood that was different from mine in some major ways, and though his personality is not the same as mine—he's less concerned about what people think, more quick to anger, and more stubborn, to name a few differences—we have quite a few similarities, too, one of which is

having grown up in a Christian home and been a Christian nearly all one's life. This makes it easier for me to write from his perspective.

None of the reasons mentioned above would have prevented me from using the evangelistic approach. However, I do not believe I am an experienced enough writer to handle the evangelistic approach well. I would end up worrying so much about what the evangelistic elements would look like from a reader's perspective that it probably would feel forced. Instead, by using the integrative approach, I could include more subtle references to Christianity when they seemed natural or when their omission would be unrealistic. Also, I could avoid the emphasis on conversion that might easily look like—or even turn into—propaganda.

I am not trying to write the Great American Novel here, or anything like it. I wanted to write a mystery novel because I enjoy mystery novels. However, I want this to be a well-written, interesting book. I want the characters to be realistic and three-dimensional, the wording to be clear and polished, and the plot to flow smoothly and not have any plot holes.

I also hope that readers would be moved a little closer to Christianity because of this book. The portrayal of Christians in media nowadays is sometimes sympathetic, but often not, especially if the Christians actually believe what their faith teaches and has taught for a couple millennia. I'm not trying to make my portrayal of Christianity lean falsely in the other direction, but I am trying to write, in many ways, what I have experienced. I grew up in a Christian environment, and although everyone there had flaws, of course, most of them were admirable people. They were compassionate and generous, wanted to help outsiders feel like they fit in, and loved God. To be fair, most non-believers I have met are nice people, too. There is a certain level of virtue, though—of humble love for others—that I have only seen in certain Christians.

There is also an emphasis on the value of truth in the novel, generally because the point of a mystery is to discover the truth and specifically because Stephen becomes romantically interested in one of the murder suspects, Rachel Kendrick, and thus has a personal stake in learning what really happened. Although the emphasis is so slight that readers may not observe it, if they do, I hope it might make them consider that desire cannot change truth, and might make them realize, for a moment, the importance of knowing the truth. Hopefully, this novel will be a contribution to the field because it will be a well-written, interesting book and will point the readers to an understanding of the human condition, the beauty of goodness, and the necessity of truth.

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