

# Ghostwriting trend haunts Christian publishing world

Few best-selling authors write own books

By Larry Witham  
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The Christian book industry opens its annual trade convention tomorrow, happy about its \$3 billion market, but haunted by the ghostwriting that increasingly sells its books.

The Christian Booksellers Association (CBA), gathering in New Orleans, reports that that religious bookstores are booming more than ever. What customers may not know, however, is that few top-selling Christian celebrities truly write the books that bear their names.

For years, top ghostwriters in the industry have penned works that fill the evangelical best seller firmament, such as religious broadcasters Pat Robertson and D. James Kennedy, megachurch pastor Bill Hybels and marriage guru Gary Smalley.

By some insider estimates, 85 percent of the Rev. Billy Graham's books have been ghostwritten.

"All responsible Christian publishers wrestle with this," said Lyn Cryderman, a senior editor with Zondervan Publishing House, a major Christian publisher.

Ideally, he said, the public should know whose ideas and prose they are reading and praising, and ghostwriters who do the heavy lifting should get paid accordingly.

"We view it as an issue of truth and fairness," he said.

At the annual editor's conference of the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association, which met this April in Grand Rapids, Mich., the publisher at one leading house advocated a total end to undisclosed ghostwriting.

The use of ghostwriters long has been mainstream in American

politics and publishing, if not in academia or journalism.

President John F. Kennedy won a Pulitzer for a book he did not write. Leaders are remembered for lines their ghostwriters coined. And most New York houses know the lucrative art of gluing a celebrity name on a ghosted novel.

Yet pangs of conscience have struck Christian publishing as far back as 1982, when the evangelical monthly Christianity Today decried the practice. Masking true authorship, an editorial said, is "a canny but this-worldly approach to life, a playing of all the angles, a cunning attempt to skirt the edge of moral forthrightness."

The issue was brought into full light in a 1993 World magazine expose by Edward E. Plowman of Annandale, a veteran news writer for Christian publications.

Nearly every form of Christian writing now is "grist for ghosts, grinding away for people long on reputation but short on time, self-discipline, or writing ability," he wrote then.

Christian publishers will continue to use celebrities as "marketing gadgets and [as] part of a system of abuse" until readers kick the celebrity habit, he wrote, adding: "There are gifted but lesser known writers out there with something important to say."

That article "did raise some dust in publishing circles," Mr. Plowman says, and now, "More publishers are willing to use 'and' or 'with' on book covers to credit the ghostwriter."

The rationale for talented writers to ghostwrite is economic. Not having marketable names, they can make a better living by ghostwriting celebrity books that sell well and generate top royalties.

Often, Christian publishing cir-



Photo by Julia Duin/The Washington Times

Author Jerry Jenkins (right) writes the popular "Left Behind" book series, to which the Rev. Tim LaHaye (center) lends his theological expertise.

cles view such projects as team writing — helping the well-known minister or leader package his "original thoughts" so readers may benefit. Yet in the Plowman assessment, this slippery slope may lead to a ridiculous outcome if Christian publishing does not reform.

The day may come, he says, when a Christian work is "a celebrity preacher's ghostwritten book of ghostwritten sermons bearing a ghostwritten foreword by another celebrity and ghostwritten endorsement blurbs on the dust jacket by still more celebrities, none of whom has read the book."

A few best-selling Christian authors indeed write every word. One is Philip Yancey, a Colorado-

based essayist and stylist. "He writes every word," Mr. Cryderman said. "To us, that's the ideal."

The Rev. Charles Swindol, president of Dallas Theological Seminary, has crafted best-selling books from his sermons, and has felt the need to defend their authenticity.

"I have no writing staff or team of researchers who provide me with historical and illustrative material or serve as my 'ghostwriters,' he said in his 1992 book, "The Grace Awakening."

"Every word comes from my own pen through the age-old process most authors still use: blood, sweat, tears, sleepless nights, lengthy stares at blank sheets of paper, unproductive days when

everything gets dumped into the trash, and periodic moments when inspiration and insight flow."

Clashes over who truly shed sweat and tears — and got paid accordingly — sometimes erupt after a best seller climbs the CBA charts.

In the early 1990s, Colorado radio minister Bob Larson, whose name is on a novel trilogy that began with "Dead Air," sued a woman who broke confidence by claiming she was the real author.

The top-selling "Christianity in Crisis" book by radio host and "Bible Answer Man" Hank Hanegraaff ended in a lawsuit by a ministry staffer who claimed to have done much of the work.

One recent case of remarkable candor has been Tyndale House Publishing's "Left Behind" novel series, which has sold nearly 8 million copies.

Although each novel is written by professional scribe Jerry Jenkins, he shares credit — in equal-size typeface on the cover — with a celebrity evangelical, the Rev. Tim LaHaye, who advises on the fiction's theology.

Tyndale House may be less forthright on a current blockbuster, the Charles Colson and Nancy Pearcey book, "How Now Shall We Live," a 572-page tome on "the Christian worldview" pub-

lished last October.

One Christian scholar, reviewing the book in the journal First Things, lamented that it was being "marketed on the 'superstar' model that dominates evangelical publishing — itself a scandal to the evangelical mind."

Nevertheless, the review credits the book as "a true collaboration" between Mr. Colson and Mrs. Pearcey — whose book cover name is in a small font.

In fact, people familiar with her work claim she wrote more than half the book over a two-year period. The book also credits ghostwriter Harold Fickett for "story chapters," that amount to nine of the 45 total.

Still, Mrs. Pearcey rarely is mentioned in book reviews and Tyndale publicity downplays or omits her name.

Mrs. Pearcey, who is in legal discussions with Tyndale, would only comment that her contract was "for co-authorship, not for ghostwriting." In November, she resigned as executive editor of Mr. Colson's daily "Breakpoint" radio spots.

After two decades of writing on science, culture and the "worldview" approach of the late evangelical thinker Francis Schaeffer, she now is a senior fellow at the Discovery Institute.