

The Naked Eye

The God Ghetto

BY MARK MATOUSEK

The author of a spiritual memoir struggles with publishing prejudices.

Recently I was locked in a neck-and-neck debate with the manager of my local bookstore about why copies of a memoir I wrote last year should be moved from the religion shelf up in the nosebleed section of the balcony, down to the street level in nonfiction where it belonged.

"But the title says enlightenment," the stubborn little man reminded me, as if that were justification enough for retail exile.

"I don't see *Conversations With God* up there," I countered.

"That's because it's on the list," he said, meaning *The New York Times* bestseller list. I thought I detected a hiss in the way he said it. Without humiliating myself further, I left the store feeling like David without a slingshot.

This incident shouldn't have surprised me. Since my maiden voyage into book publishing last year, I've seen how spiritual books are ghettoized by the mainstream market. At first this commercial wall between church and state surprised me. I'd naively believed that the book world was hungry for paradox and complexity, its categories loose enough to allow books to be both worldly and godly, without chopping them in half for the sake of marketing. Because no one I knew was one thing or the other, I assumed that the marketplace would reflect this subtlety. This is not the case.

The unspoken message to authors is "Choose your side and stay there." For those of us with sacred and profane interests, that is cause enough for an identity crisis, if you don't already have one. Once you're pegged a spiritual author, you're branded and seques-

tered as a product, a worldview, a voice. There are exceptions to this prejudice—world-class writers such as Peter Matthiessen, Reynolds Price, and Kathleen Norris whose careers sometimes transcend this barrier—but they're rare indeed. In terms of mainstream coverage, I've been luckier than many, even though my genre mixing confused some reporters. When, to my agent's surprise ("They never cover books like this!") a *Times* review appeared, the critic (who mostly liked the book) couldn't help accusing my publisher of trying to



cash in with a "hip, gender-bending *Celestine Prophecy* (seeing the words "consciousness" and "oral sex" on the same page must have thrown her); still, the journal of record deigning to give half a page to a book about self-realization was apparently a favor in itself.

Pundits would have us believe that times are changing fast. In a recent special issue of *The New York Times Magazine* entitled "God Decentralized," Pulitzer Prize winning author Jack Miles writes that "...religious books, once ghettoized by the publishing trade, are promoted by the biggest chains, reviewed in major newspapers, and monitored closely by *Publishers Weekly*," as if that were some kind of major coup, as if God should sit down immediately and write a thank-you note to the CEO of Barnes and Noble. It seems absurd, if not offensive, that books concerning life's essential questions should ever have been on the outside in the first place. What's more, in the lives and careers of most spiritually inclined authors, the claim that a major sea change is taking place in publishing because a few blockbusters have crossed the line is like saying that Jackie Robinson's entry into the Major leagues was a giant leap forward for the average black man on the street—and equally deceptive.

Despite the enormous market for spiritual books, they continue to be labeled alternative in mainstream eyes, no matter how many millions of copies are sold. In other words, the ghetto is not disappearing, it's just getting bigger. Why else would it be impossible to find a Toni Morrison novel at my local
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Illustration by Timothy Cook

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spiritual bookstore, or almost any novel for that matter, regardless of how profoundly religious the author's work might be? Why else would I not be able to pick up a Stephen Levine book on death and dying at B. Dalton in spite of the fact that its clientele are 100 percent mortal? While it's true that no single store can carry every title, how different is that from saying, under the circumstances, that there are just so many seats on the bus?

To be fair, this segregation isn't the fault of the book business alone. A good number of mainstream authors prefer not to be associated with spirituality for fear of being labeled kooks. I was on a panel recently with playwright Tony Kushner, who complained about having his essay placed in the spirituality section of the anthology *Gay Men at the Millennium* (where I was). Even though his claim to fame is a modern-day spiritual masterpiece called *Angels in America*, and he was about to launch his adaptation of the Yiddish (spiritual) classic *The Dybbuk*, Kushner claimed to feel out of place. He called his placement among us spiritual authors inappropriate because he had no daily practice, but I wonder if that was the whole story. It's equally likely, I suspect, that his objection had to do with the S word itself, as if being labeled a spiritual author were somehow less serious, political, or artistic.

This question of artistry among spiritual authors is touchy. In the cases of dharma teachers or self-help professionals who happen to write books (or have them written for them), these remarks don't strictly apply. But for spiritual authors with any sort of literary ambition, the responsibility for maintaining this ghetto must be shared, at least in part. As a community, we've come to expect inspiration and information from our spiritual authors, but rarely literature. We've largely disregarded art in favor of message; how else do

you explain why there are so many badly written spiritual books in the world? I'm sure that Betty Eadie's a wonderful person, for example, and I don't doubt her story for a minute, but have you tried to make it through her prose? Or Redfield's or Walsch's for that matter?

By absolving spiritual authors of literary standards, we've helped to relegate ourselves to a kind of artistic no-man's land. That may be why so many excellent writers with spiritual interests—Annie Dillard, bell hooks, Alice Walker, and Noelle Oxenhandler spring to mind—seem to have kept their distance from the fringe, knowing how hard it is for a professional author to escape the ghetto once her work has been put there. Accepting the facts of the marketplace, I've thought a great deal about this dilemma and how not to be cornered professionally by my own beliefs. But in the day-to-day act of doing your work, career planning is mostly an afterthought; the best I can do is follow *my* muse and hope for the best. I remind myself that any truthful, deeply felt, beautiful work rendered with skill and intent will somehow touch on the religious, whether or not it has God in the title. As an author with feet planted in different worlds, I look forward to a more imaginative spiritual literature that reaches beyond the choir into the hearts and minds and pockets of the mainstream public. I anticipate a time when spiritual authors are not set apart as something *other*, but seen for what we are, writers trying to widen the lens and describe what it means to be fully human.

In the meantime, I'm taking matters into my own hands. When the manager left the store that day, I went back and rescued my books from where they were hidden, depositing them in nonfiction between Primo Levi and Sherwin Nuland. Three days later they were gone.

Mark Matousek is working on a sequel to his memoir *Sex Death Enlightenment* to be published by Riverhead Books. He welcomes responses at MMATOUSEK@AOL.COM.



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