

**Christy Awards Keynote**  
**2006**  
**Speaker: Bret Lott**

Good evening, and thank you for having me here tonight. Thank you, Allen, for the introduction, and thank you, Donna, for having asked me to speak on such an august occasion as this one in the first place.

A friend of mine says that dealing with new people at church is always awkward: both the new people and those who are regulars have to do a strange little dance, trying to find out what and how the other believes what and how the other believes. Of course, he says, you want to come out and ask blunt questions – both of you do – but instead there’s a kind of ritual circling of each other, a sizing up of each other – all in good will, of course!

And so, because I find myself a stranger in a strange land this evening, a visitor to the congregation of the Christy awards—I have in fact never been to a CBA gathering before, much less the Christy awards (and now I come to find out it’s not even CBA anymore, but MOPAR? IROC?)—and because now suddenly I am your capital K capital S Keynote Speaker, I figure I might as well just present my spiritual bona fides here and now so you’ll know where I come from, and so that this particular dance might be over all the more quickly, in order that you might not believe all you have before you is some beret wearing, clove cigarette smoking writer. So, here goes:

- Though my parents took me to church all my life, I was born again after a Josh McDowell rally when I was eighteen and a freshman in college;
- I met my wife in the College and Career Sunday School class at First Baptist Church of Huntington Beach/Fountain Valley, an American Baptist Church but with a pastor more Southern Baptist than any I have had in the twenty years I have been a member of SBC churches;
- I have for twenty years been a member of SBC churches;

- I have worked my way through Blackaby and King's *Experiencing God*, answering every single question to the best of my ability;
- In the early 1990s, my wife and I taught the Newlyweds Sunday School class at East Cooper Baptist Church in Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina, this after our church suffered a rash of weddings one summer that resulted in twelve couples with no Sunday School class; as of this writing, there have been no reported divorces (and incidentally, one of the couples was Carey and Charity Cash, Carey later becoming Lt. Carey Cash, chaplain for the First Battalion, 5<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment in Iraq, and the author of the terrific book *A Table in the Presence*, published by Thomas Nelson, about his experiences as Marine Corps Chaplain at the absolute front line of the war in its first moments);
- I taught for nine years one of the adult Sunday School classes at East Cooper, a class wherein we worked through not only the entire Bible but also *The Purpose Driven Life*;
- My wife and I ran ECBC's Wednesday night supper for five years (pancake suppers were my favorite, though they were the messiest);
- I have been on two missions trips, both to Moldova, the first trip to help build an orphanage, the second to help run a Bible camp;
- Until our move from South Carolina to Baton Rouge two years ago, I played baritone sax in my church orchestra—not in the hip and cool Praise Band, but the orchestra;
- Oh, and I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth; and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; and in the Holy Spirit, made available to us all through Christ's death and resurrection. Oh yeah. That.

There's more I can run through for you, but I am hoping you will get the picture.

Because I want to come to you this evening not as a guest speaker, but as a brother in Christ who is only now stumbling into the room that is Christian writing, and Christian publishing. I have been writing more years of my life now than I haven't, having begun however lackadaisically when I was a twenty year old kid in a creative writing class I took only because it was the only course open at my local community college on the night I had free to take a course. I was an RC Cola salesman back then, having dropped out of college after my sophomore year because I got a D in a physics course in which I had to get a C or better in order to continue in the Marine Biology major, and after close to a year of being an RC salesman, I decided I wanted to go back to college because I didn't want to sell soda pop for the rest of my life. I took that creative writing course only because I wanted to get back in the groove of having assignments and reading and whatnot before reenrolling at the university I'd left, and, as the old saw goes, one thing led to another, so that now I am here, speaking to you.

But I am only now, in the long story that is my own life, discovering that there is an entire construct that is Christian writing and publishing, and am only now discovering its depth and breadth. Because the thought never occurred to me as I was learning to write, and as I was beginning to publish, and as I was continuing on and on and on in my writing life, that the books for sale in Christian bookstores might be published *for* those bookstores, or that a book of mine, because it wasn't published by a select publisher, or because it featured foul language or described bad deeds wouldn't or couldn't be sold in my local Christian bookstore. It wasn't until the trade paperback rights for my last novel, *A Song I Knew By Heart*—my eleventh book—were purchased from Random House by Westbow and published simultaneously with Ballantine, my trade paperback imprint at Random House, that I even knew such a thing was possible: a book being published at the same time in the same language in the same country just so that that book could be sold in two different stores. That's how much a rube I am in this whole thing called publishing, and how shallow my familiarity with Christian publishing.

And please don't construe this as an indictment of either Christian publishing or writing. No. Rather, it is to tell you that the thing I was always struggling with as a writer wasn't a market, or a genre, or how to publish a Christian book.

Instead, from the time I wrote my very first short story, I struggled with how to tell a lie—that is, write fiction—while serving Christ. My struggle, then, was always with how to be a Christian, and how to be a writer. The whole notion of how to be a Christian writer wasn't even an issue, and would never have solved anything anyway. Donna pointed out to me in a conversation we had yesterday the incredibly brilliant point that the word "Christian" was never meant to a modifier in the first place. One simply *is* a Christian, and I was trying to learn how to be a Christian who writes.

And what I wrote was garbage, allegory after allegory after allegory of what it meant to be lost and how to be found. Later, I would find the book *Mystery and Manners*, by my hero Flannery O'Connor—and any time I am rambling on about writing I am thinking of her, and her vehement belief in the nature and aim of fiction, and its role as a redemptive force in the battle between grace and depravity. In that book, I would find this passage, about the role of art, the making of it, and the way the believer ought rightly to see the creation of art in honor of the God who created us:

St. Thomas Aquinas says that art does not require rectitude of the appetite, that it is wholly concerned with the good of that which is made. He says that a work of art is a good in itself, and this is a truth that the modern world has largely forgotten. We are not content to stay within our limitations and make something that is simply a good in and by itself. Now we want to make something that will have some utilitarian value. Yet what is good in itself glorifies God because it reflects God. The artist has his hands full and does his duty if he attends to his art. He can safely leave evangelizing to the

evangelists. He must first of all be aware of his limitations as an artist—for art transcends its limitations only by staying within them.

But, of course, that definition was years away, and wouldn't help me until long after I was out of my undergraduate days. Meanwhile, I was writing the kind of fiction Ms. O'Connor describes elsewhere in *Mystery and Manners* in this way:

Ever since there have been such things as novels, the world has been flooded with bad fiction for which the religious impulse has been responsible. The sorry religious novel comes about when the writer supposes that because of his belief, he is somehow dispensed from the obligation to penetrate concrete reality. He will think that the eyes of the Church or of the Bible or of his particular theology have already done the seeing for him, and that his business is to rearrange this essential vision into satisfying patterns, getting himself as little dirty as possible.

That was me, to a T. I wanted to write allegories that would hit people over the head with their being lost, and that would do so in a pleasing manner, getting as little dirty as possible.

But Ms. O'Connor also writes in this same book the following about the character of the work that writing good fiction should be:

The fact is that the materials of the fiction writer are the humblest. Fiction is about everything human and we are made out of dust, and if you scorn getting yourself dusty, then you shouldn't try to write fiction. It's not a grand enough job for you.

Again, these words wouldn't come to me until a few years later, and only after I myself had been well rehearsed in their observations by the first-hand creation of bad art.

Yet, fortunately for me, I did come across a Christian writer early on who was a great help to me. His name was John White, and I met him at a college retreat on Catalina Island—Campus by the Sea. He was the guest speaker, and though I was very impressed with him—he was the author of such Intervarsity books as *The Fight* and *Eros Defiled*—I would not write to

him until I was a graduate student at the University of Massachusetts. But write to him I did, asking how one does this whole thing of fiction while serving Christ.

His answer was a good one, one that has served me well all these years, and that hasn't yet let me down. He wrote that all one had to do was to write with the integrity of Christ. That is, to see the world as best as possible through the eyes of Christ, with empathy and detail and love. One also had to write concretely of the concrete world, because this is where Christ lived, and worked. The dust O'Connor wrote of, I realized, was the same dust Christ trod, and that Christ formed into mud with his own spit, and that He washed from the filthy feet of his apostles. And with John White's words, I saw that the only job left to me as a writer was to tell the truth, in its brutality and poignancy and loss and triumph and failure and dust, and to do so all in love. Christ, I realized, saw the world more deeply and concretely than anyone, ever. And so it fell to me as a fiction writer to render to my writing that quality of fact and flaw and sin and *humanity* that Christ saw when he looked out on the city of Jerusalem, and cried out, "How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling."

And now we are here today, and I am speaking to you as a vaunted Keynoter, when no single book of mine was published by a Christian publisher, though Christ has been inside every book I have ever written. Christ and His example of mercy, and forgiveness, and indictment, and sorrow, and redemption, the books themselves merely my attempts to see my characters through eyes that rendered in words those qualities of Christ's sight.

But again don't construe these words as any sort of indictment of the Christian writing and publishing world. Rather, I can't tell you what a relief it is to be able to talk to a group of people who share the knowledge of the Grace of Jesus Christ, who acknowledge a supernatural and loving God who cares about us, and who know what I mean when I talk about the power of the Holy Spirit. Praise God, I am saying to you all in thanks for having me here, because now,

finally, I don't feel so very alone. Out there in the cold world of academia and New York publishing, people really don't know what the heck to do with me. Folks know I am a Christian, but because I wrote well I get treated something like an idiot savant: He's a good writer, so we look the other way when it comes to that whole religion thing. My publicist at Random House said of *A Song I Knew By Heart*, a contemporary retelling of the Book of Ruth, and I quote here, "Bret, to tell you the truth, there are a lot of people here who just can't figure out what you're up to." That's where I live, folks.

And yet.

Though I am extraordinarily thankful and honored to be here, I do want to exhort all you writers out there and all you editors out there and all you booksellers out there to understand one thing: Christian fiction, though it has made great strides in the last ten years, can and should do more than it does right now.

I know this will rankle some people. In fact, I know this will hurt some feelings, and even make some people mad. I also know that this won't be news to a lot of you out there. But I will say it anyway: unless we create fiction that does more than simply entertain the troops—unless we *make room* within the Christian writing industrial complex for writers to create worthy work—art—that in its craftsmanship and vision challenges the heart and soul and mind of our readers—then we will be nothing more than happy clowns juggling for one another.

The model to which I always repair when I think in these terms isn't the fiction of Flannery O'Connor, though her stories are sterling examples of artistic renderings of the struggle between sin and grace, and it isn't Larry Woiwode, our best contemporary fiction writer who is also a Christian.

It is always and only to the parables of Christ that I go when I think of what the art of Story could be.

Oh no, you're all thinking. Here goes another writer carrying on about the parables of Christ. But I don't care. I'm the Keynoter, remember?

Briefly, I'm going to use the parable of the Good Samaritan, a story we all learned early on—way early on, when we were kids in Sunday School, and even if we didn't go to church or Sunday school, chances are you heard tell of this story anyway. But to illustrate what I think of as the “dust” with which Christ was so familiar—that is, the visceral quality of Story He knew so well—we here in 2006 ought to imagine the story taking place on 16<sup>th</sup> Street here in Denver, maybe one block down from the pedestrian mall, where this evening a man has been stabbed and robbed and left to die in the little cubbyhole of a doorway that leads in to the shoe repair store over there, a place out of the way and half-hidden for the way shadows from the streetlamp at the corner fall so that no one sees him. Now we must *imagine*—listen to me now, if I may borrow the oft-used phrase of Dr. Charles Stanley, listen to me now—we must *imagine* that the first one to come upon him is none other than Billy Graham, who is in his motorcade on the way to a rally at Coors Field. We watch Reverend Billy Graham tell his driver to slow down, watch him look at this body on the street—and here's the hard part, but necessary all the same so that we can understand the depth of effect Christ's parable had on his listeners—we must *imagine* the Reverend tells the driver to move on, that there is a crusade to get to.

Next we must imagine that here in Denver this same night the next passerby is Kay Arthur, on her way to a Women of Faith conference at the Pepsi Center, home of the Denver Nuggets. We must imagine that we see her slow down as well, and that she sees this man in a doorway dieing, and that though she sees him, she too has to make her own conference—there are books to sign, precepts to discuss!—and she leaves him there, intent on not letting down the thousands who have paid good money to see her, and to hear what she has to say about the Word and all it means.

And last, we have to imagine we see a man walking along that same street, and we have to imagine his seeing a shape in a doorway, a heap of something, angles and darkness in this light from the streetlamp. He sees a spreading pool of black beside this shape—it's a man, he sees, a man!—that pool beside him a shape finding its edge farther and farther from itself each second he stands there watching, and we must see this man bend then to the other, and take his pulse, turn him over, then look left and right until he spots the Rite Aid at the corner of 16<sup>th</sup> and Welton, a place he knows he can bring him for a few moments and can get someone to call an ambulance for him. And then the man picks up the one who has been stabbed, and carries him quick as he can across the intersection, and inside, where there will be help.

But the man, the one who stopped when the others wouldn't. Who is he?

An imam, walking home from the mosque over on 13<sup>th</sup> and Champa, the Maghrib over a while ago. He lives in an apartment building four more blocks away, and dinner is waiting, as are his three children and wife. But there was business to attend to at the mosque—someone arguing over how to calculate the noon prayer of Zuhr and why that caused the evening prayer, Maghrib, to be off by a minute; a woman showing up at the door as he was locking up to ask after some money for food—and now he was late. But not too late to save the life of a stranger.

That's the story Christ might have told, if I may be so bold, to his listeners. And then he would have asked of them, the Evangelical and Fundamentalist and Catholic leaders who had egged him on in the first place with their smart aleck question 'Who is my neighbor?'—Christ would have asked of them this: "Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers' hands?"

And they would have had to answer, "The one who showed mercy toward him. The Muslim." And Jesus would have said to them, "Go and do the same."

Christ's stories surprised His listeners. They were unexpected, yet the surprise of them was totally logical and clear and, finally, the kind of surprise that makes good literature good

literature: the surprise turn in a story—not of plot, but of character—when the reader must come face to face with *himself*, and his own failures, and the dust of his own life, a dust with which we are each of us fully familiar, but which we forget about or ignore or accommodate ourselves to. The dust of our lives that we have grown accustomed to, and which it takes a piece of art created in the spirit of Christ to remind us of ourselves, and our distance from our Creator—and the chasm that is bridged by Grace.

But am I speaking here of a call for edgier fiction? Am I lobbying for fiction that has freewheeling, gratuitous sex, or that features drinking and drugs and cussing just to show our readers that our characters are regular people, no harm no foul? Am I calling for details that will make the art we after creating simply more attractive to the lost world out there?

No.

I am calling first for writers to know that when Christ's apostles broke off the heads of wheat as they walked along on the Sabbath, and that when the Pharisees and Sadducees accused Christ of their breaking the Sabbath, that Christ's explanation—the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath— meant that His calling, His presence—His being Lord of the Sabbath—transcended the Law of the Sabbath. The spirit of the Law transcends the letter of the Law, and that those who enforce it to the letter don't understand the need for the care of men: their nourishment. Let him who has ears to hear, listen.

Next, I am calling for editors and publishers and booksellers to be willing to make room in their warehouses for work that will not simply reflect to readers their own comfortable expectations, but that will challenge them, as Christ's parables challenged His listeners. I fear we live in a day when we are feeding too often on Christian fiction as a child feeds on milk, while the hearty food of a vigorous and tough-minded novel written in the spirit of a life lived in Christ and to the glory of God our creator sits growing freezer burns in the fridge, while we all continue to chow down on Cocoa Puffs.

And finally, I am calling for an attitude of reverence and awe for the written word by all parties involved. There is no way poor writing—and I am here speaking of grammar, of imagery, of typos, of repetition, of cliché, of *imprecision in crafting our work*—there is no way that poor writing can and will reflect the integrity we must have as representatives of Christ. Reverence and awe are called for in the making of words, and sentences, and paragraphs, and chapters, if we are going to have any impact whatsoever on our world.

I have tried today not to come to you as an Oprah pick, or as a New York Times bestseller or as an editor of a prestigious old literary journal or as a professor of English, though I know in my pomposity I may have seemed as such at some point or another in all this—maybe the whole way through.

But who I *have* tried to come to you is, to the best of my ability, as a guy who honked for several years on a bari sax in your church orchestra, and a guy who flipped pancakes at a Wednesday night supper last summer, and as a guy you maybe saw in the crowd at a Josh McDowell rally back when you and I were young and trying to figure out why we longed for meaning in a confused world, and realized that Christ not only offered that meaning, but was and remains that meaning.

I have tried to come to you all, most importantly, as a brother in Christ. The fact I am a writer, though a piece of the equation, isn't, finally, the answer I want you to have when you think back on why Bret Lott came and spoke at that Christy awards dinner a while back.

Rather, I'd like you to think, he wanted me to think for myself, and to create—and to edit, and to market, and to sell—books that will magnify Christ in the way that only I—you listening to me—can magnify Him. That's all. And it is work enough—and joy enough—to last each of us our own lifetime.

As a parting gift, you've all been given a copy of this book, *Best Christian Short Stories*, which I hope you will read and enjoy and be challenged by. And I hope that in this room full of writers that some or all of you will feel inclined to send me work to be considered for the next volume. Our next go round in trying to bridge the gap between Christian fiction and literary art. You editors out there will, I hope, contact writers you believe may very well want to send me work as well, because we are all in this together. We aren't called brothers and sisters for nothing. I hope you enjoy the book, and I want to thank especially Allen Arnold and my editor, Amada Bostic, for their willingness to make that room in the warehouse at Westbow for art made to Christ's glory.

And I want to thank you all for the honor this has been, and the blessing. God bless you all for the work you are doing.