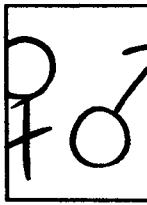


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# Catholic Courier

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## Two writers 'resurrect' the Catholic novel

STORY BY LEE STRONG

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY MATTHEW SCOTT

Summer is winding down.

There are just a few weeks left for sitting at the beach, in the park or on the porch to do some reading.

But you've already consumed the latest John Grisham, Mary Higgins Clark or Dean Koontz.

So where else can lovers of fiction turn?

Catholics might enjoy two new options.

In the last three years, Bud Macfarlane Jr. and Michael D. O'Brien have entered the market with two novels each: *Pierced by a Sword* (1995) and *Conceived Without Sin* (1997) by Macfarlane, and *Father Elijah: An Apocalypse* (1995) and *Strangers and Sojourners* (1997) by O'Brien.

Macfarlane's *Pierced by a Sword* tied for third-place honors in the 1996 Catholic Press Association's awards competition in the category of "First Time Author of a Book." And because he chose to self-publish his book in a low-cost, pulp format, distribution of the novel has already broken the 200,000 mark. The first printing of *Conceived Without Sin*, released in June, was for 50,000 copies.

On the hand, *Father Elijah*, despite a \$25 price tag, has sold some 17,500 hardcover copies through Ignatius Press, qualifying it as a best seller in the official Catholic publishing market. Meanwhile, *Strangers and Sojourners* has already sold 5,000 hardcover copies since the spring.

All the more remarkable is the fact that the two men, who did not know each other before their first novels were published, both set out to create "Catholic" novels — tales inhabited by Catholic characters espousing orthodox Catholic points of view — but stories that still work as fiction.

"My guiding principle is there's no edification without entertainment," Macfarlane noted.

And in the process, they have become friends, despite different backgrounds.

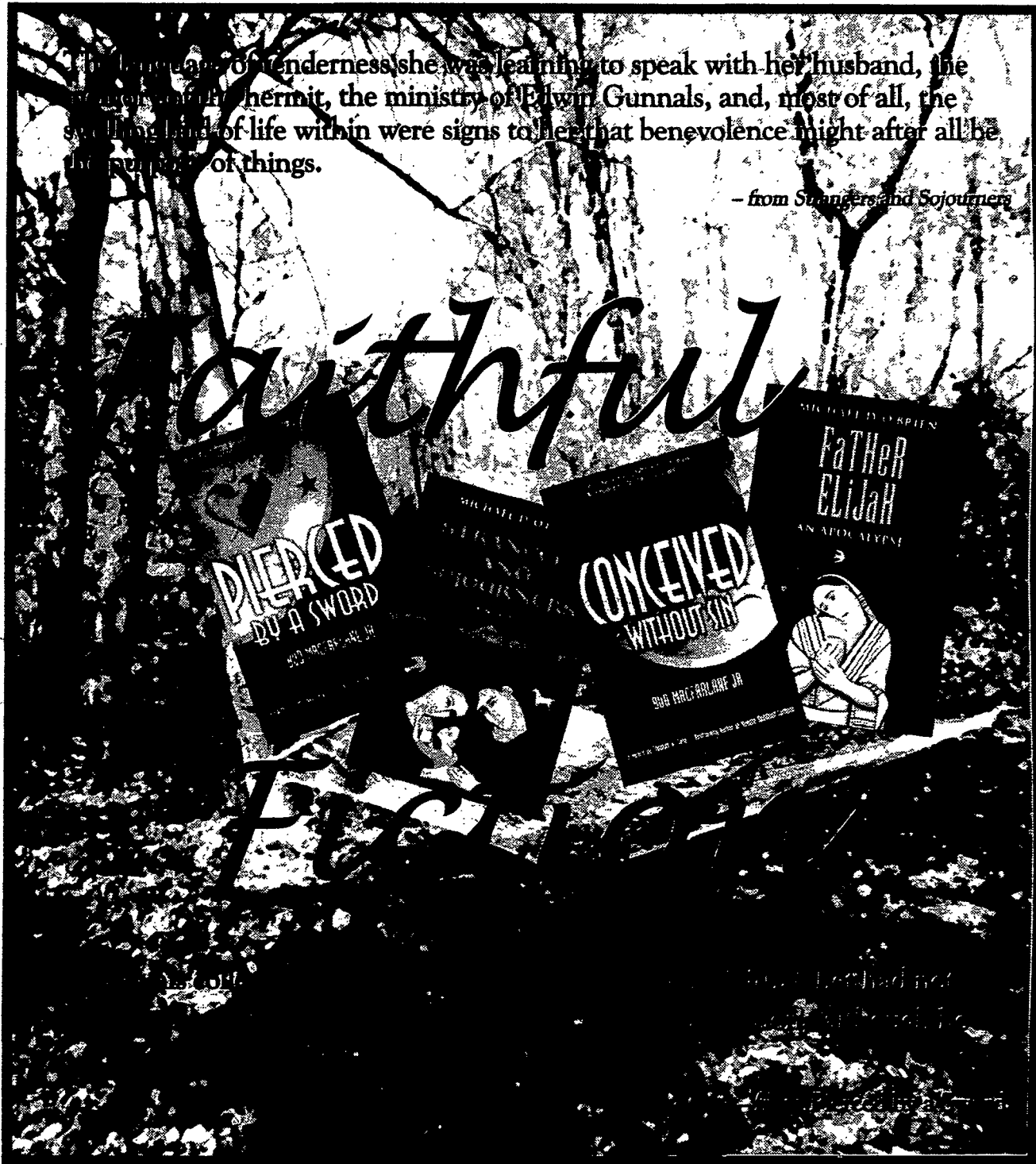
O'Brien, in his late 40s, is a successful, self-taught artist — he designed the covers for his books — who lives in Combermere, Ontario. As a youth, he left the Catholic faith, returning at 21. The married father of six edited a Catholic family magazine, *Nazareth Journal*, for seven years, and writes in a style Macfarlane praised as more "literary" than his own. Critics have compared his works favorably to those of C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, even Dostoyevsky.

Macfarlane, on the other hand, is in his mid 30s, and a graduate of the University of Notre Dame with a history degree. He grew up in a family devoted to Mary — his father is a noted Marian expert — and now lives in Fairview, Ohio, with his wife and two children. After trying such fields as teaching and business, Macfarlane created the Mary Foundation to distribute low-cost Catholic audio tapes, some of them featuring his father. His previous experience with writing had all been business related.

### Paths begin to cross

The fact that they published first and second novels the same years is actually only

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In moments of tenderness, she was learning to speak with her husband, the hermit, the ministry of Edwin Gunnals, and, most of all, the swelling life within were signs to see that benevolence might after all be the purpose of things.

- from *Strangers and Sojourners*

### Catholic stories rate rediscovery

The following orthodox Catholic writers were suggested by Catholic publishers and authors, who explained they either directly deal with Catholic themes or create Catholic characters who try to live out their Catholic faith.

- Wendell Berry (*Nathan Coulter, A World Lost*)
- G.K. Chesterton (the Father Brown stories)
- Ralph McInerney (the Father Dowling mysteries)
- Flannery O'Connor (*Wise Blood, The Violent Bear It Away*)
- Walker Percy (*Love in the Ruins, The Thanatos Syndrome*)
- J.F. Powers (*Wheat that Springeth Green, Morte D'Urban*)
- Louis de Wohl (*The Quiet Light, Set All Afire*)