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Catholic novels

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one of series of ironies involving the two.

Their first novels deal with similar themes: attacks on the church and the papacy, and the end times, though in somewhat different ways.

O'Brien describes the struggles of a monk, Father Elijah, called to help the pope battle church dissidents and the efforts of a secular organization to undermine the power of faith in the world.

Macfarlane, on the other hand, describes the attempted assassination of the pope, the rise of an "anti-pope," an invasion of the United States, and the intertwined lives of a group of people who suddenly discover faith and love.

In his second novel, O'Brien explores a Canadian family over several generations as they struggle to survive in the wilds of British Columbia, and then in an increasingly secular society. The story, the first part of a trilogy, is told primarily from the point of view of the central female character, an agnostic who discovers faith — and the meaning of marriage — through the love of her husband and the lives of her children and grandchildren.

Meanwhile, in his second novel, Macfarlane explores the relationships among a small group of friends — one of whom is an agnostic — as they struggle and grow in their faith in the midst of a secular world. The book also explores notions of what can help to make a marriage strong.

Yet another irony is the way the two writers met.

O'Brien explained that an acquaintance familiar with *Father Elijah* sent him *Pierced by a Sword*, so he could see how another writer had dealt with some of the same apocalyptic issues. After he read it, O'Brien wrote to Macfarlane to offer a few pointers based on his own experience as a writer and editor.

Macfarlane then called O'Brien and they spoke briefly. A few months later,

O'Brien had to speak at a conference in Chicago, and called Macfarlane to see if they could get together. They did, and as O'Brien noted in a forward to the revised *Pierced by a Sword*, began "a friendship that should last forever."

O'Brien, in fact, helped Macfarlane rewrite the revised edition of the book.

"He basically took it and rewrote it page by page," Macfarlane gratefully recalled.

Carrying the torch

The ultimate irony is that the two began writing Catholic fiction at a time when the genre seemed to have died out.

At one time, the church enjoyed the works of such writers as Louis de Wohl, Graham Greene, Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy, acknowledged Tom Ryan, director of marketing for Ignatius Press.

But, he said, "They died. No one's come in since to carry the torch."

As he readied *Pierced by a Sword* for publication, Macfarlane found a similar dearth of Catholic fiction writers.

"We hired a marketing director," he recalled. "He called other publishers. He called Catholic bookstores to see what kind of fiction is out there. They thought we were nuts."

There were few novels being written upholding church teachings, O'Brien observed, acknowledging that to be called "orthodox" is nearly a literary kiss of death.

"There are many gifted writers out there devoted to the church," he said. "They have been largely ghettoized. It's virtually impossible to get published."

Indeed, he said, "I wrote (*Father Elijah*) with a sense of fatalism, convinced that no secular publisher would touch it, that no Catholic publisher would accept it."

But while accepting the "Catholic" label, both writers noted that such works must do more than just state church teachings.

"A Catholic novel is called to be evangelical, but it must also be good fiction, too," O'Brien said.

"I don't think there is such a thing as a Catholic novel versus other kinds of nov-

els," Macfarlane explained. "What would make any novel Catholic is (if in the books) the world view is Catholic."

Such a view, he explained, allows characters to make choices, be open to failure, but also to have available the power of grace and forgiveness in their lives.

But while concerned with creating good fiction, both nevertheless view their writing as a means of evangelization.

"Very much at the heart of what I'm doing is trying to touch readers, and to draw them back to the reality of God's presence in the world," O'Brien said. "A novel can reach souls who would never listen to a sermon, who would never darken a church's doors."

Macfarlane, whose ministry at the Mary Foundation involves evangelizing people about the messages of Mary to the world, had doubts about fiction at first. But his wife encouraged him.

"My wife said a lot of people like to read fiction rather than listen to an audio tape," he said. "I started thinking about what fiction is, as opposed to a lecture or an audio tape."

In the beginning

Still, neither writer set out to create Catholic fiction.

Macfarlane said he received a call in the fall of 1994 from a friend who was trying to write a novel involving Marian apparitions. After the friend hung up, Macfarlane told his wife that he thought the friend would never finish the book. She suggested that he write a book himself instead.

Inspired, he spent a Sunday afternoon writing some character sketches, then put them aside. Months later, he returned to the sketches, which became the opening section of the book.

O'Brien actually wrote his first novel in the 1980s, but could not get it published. Then in 1994 he, too, received a nudge.

"One day while praying, I experienced a powerful, internal prompting to write a novel on the crisis we are facing," he said.

For the next eight months, he went to

daily Mass, then returned home to write.

"The book just basically poured out," O'Brien said. "The graces flowed very powerfully."

Both writers report that their books have apparently touched some people.

"We've had thousands of letters," Macfarlane said. "For me the best review somebody writes is 'I went to confession,' 'I've started to pray more.'"

O'Brien said people have written to say that his first book has brought them back to Catholicism or to convert to it, and that priests have reported their own faith and sense of ministry have been deepened.

The future

More books are in the works by both writers. Ignatius has already agreed to publish more of O'Brien's novels. Macfarlane said his goal is to publish a book a year.

Meanwhile, Ryan noted that Ignatius has received a number of manuscripts since the publication of *Father Elijah*, and is currently considering several.

"It was kind of an art that was lost, but it's starting to come back," Ryan suggested.

Macfarlane said the potential market is enormous. According to published statistics, the United States and Canada have some 74 million Catholics.

"It's a sleeping giant," he declared.

They also cited the success of evangelical Protestant fiction writers. In the last decade, Christian romances and novels have flooded the market, with such writers as Frank Peretti (*Prophet, This Present Darkness*) and Janette Oke (*Love Comes Softly, Roses for Mama*) selling millions of copies.

O'Brien said he hopes to reach Catholics and non-Catholics alike in what he sees as troubled, possibly even the end, times.

"Start looking around at the world with slightly more open eyes," he warned.

Even if the end times are not here, he added, Catholic fiction is well worth reading both for pleasure, and for the awareness of the faith such works can engender.

"The greatest adventure in the universe is ours," O'Brien declared.

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