

LEISURE

Beware of trips with series' Tribulation Force

The Left Behind Series, by Tim F. LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins; Tyndale House Pub.

Reviewed by Fr. Sebastian A. Falcone

Picture a 747 on autopilot hurtling over the Atlantic en route to Heathrow. Rayford Steele, Pan-Continental veteran pilot, is in a slump over his wife Irene's "blessing my socks off" fixation with the Rapture. He is fantasizing a new, exciting relation with flight attendant Hattie Durham, "drop-dead gorgeous" and 15 years his junior. (A little titillation amid the Great Tribulation!)

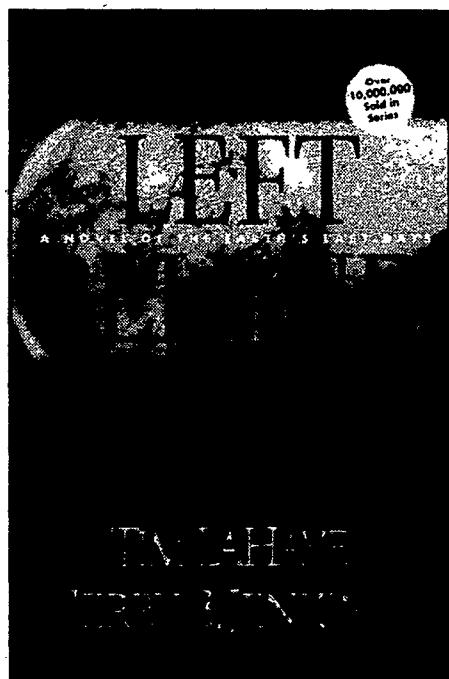
In first class sits Cameron ("Buck") Williams, youngest-ever senior writer for the highly regarded *Global Weekly*. This Clark Kent type is gloating over his feature story last year on Israeli scientist Chaim Rosenzweig, Newsmaker of the Year.

The plot of the *Left Behind* series is broad and complex. The Rapture has occurred during the flight to Heathrow, "in the twinkling of an eye." Christ has returned, and believers have been gathered up.

Those caught up leave behind everything: clothes, shoes, glasses, jewelry, fillings, hearing aids, pacemakers.

Within two weeks of the vanishings, a mysterious Romanian leader, Nicolae Carpathia, is swept to international power as head of the United Nations. He promises to unite the devastated globe as one peaceful village. But true identities get revealed, and the powers of darkness take on insidious presences.

The reader, over the course of the series, encounters evil and ambiguity in multiple manifestations. Among other things, an ecumenical council aiming at establishing a Global Community Faith, assassination plots, betrayals. Meanwhile the Tribulation Force, the group left behind but not radically bad, struggles to be faithful to its essential task, battling the Antichrist.



By the time Book 8, *The Mark*, appears, the cast of characters has swelled to 17. They come and go in a mix and match combination to fend off the evil powers, some satanically incarnate, some merely satanically driven. Overall this is one of the most ambitious publication strategies of recent record. Total so far: 3,591 pages. The next installment is promised soon.

But the end is not yet in sight. *The Left Behind The Kids* series, aimed at the 10- to 14-year-olds, is at number 14 as of this writing. The heroes are four teenagers who band together to fight Satan's forces after the Rapture has left them behind.

Still, the explosion of word and sight and sound moves on. Other video and dramatic performances of the books surface in new and unexpected formats: videos, dramatic broadcast performances, etc.

Granted, a thinly veiled evangelization is offered (a kind of "soft apocalypticism," if you will). The authors have revealed that more than 2,000 readers have made their decision for the Christ of the Rapture! But the traffic at the checkout counter is not a bad prospect to take in, either.

Each of the coauthors, Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, brings to this venture an earlier publication reputation. Jenkins has written more than 100 books; LaHaye, more than 40. The partnership might well have been expected.

Jenkins had worked for the Moody Bible Institute, Chicago. LaHaye, with earned doctorates from Western Theological Seminary and Liberty University, has pursued the single-perspective approach to Bible reading.

Most recently he has published *The Prophecy Bible Study* (2000). It gathers 55 contributors and 85 articles around the King James Version, with center-column references and the words of Jesus in red. The work follows the premise that "prophecy is history written in advance." Each biblical book is tagged with its own percentage of prophetic content. (A simple formula is used: total number of verses divided by "prophetic verses.") Thus, for example, Obadiah is rated at 81 percent; Zephaniah at 89; Esther at 1; Philemon at 0.

The premise overwhelms the evidence. All other biblical forms (e.g., history, poetry, narrative) drown in a deluge like Noe's. *The Prophecy Bible Study* is a road map to the *Left Behind Series*.

In the series, the authors allow those left behind one theological license: a second chance during the years of tribulation. Moreover, contrary to the promise of new bodies, the series provides for the old flesh and blood bodies to be taken to

heaven. And members of the Trib Force wallow in a crass materialism that is hard to reconcile in those who have already missed the first selection and have been left behind.

An interesting episode in Book 2 portrays the cardinal-archbishop of Cincinnati addressing an ecumenical council assembly that has been convened to create a one-world unified faith.

The twists and turns in the plot are a tribute to the authors' ability to draw recent politics with recognizable changes into their plot line. Summaries at the beginning of each book help keep the persevering reader on track with reviews, cast of characters, and appropriate quotations from the Book of Revelation. Absolute fiction, this is not.

Local bookstores contribute to the misunderstanding raised by the *Left Behind* phenomenon. One seller classified the series as "Christian Apologetics." Another, as "Christian Inspiration." A third, as "Christian Fiction." A fourth seller displays the series under a sign reading, cryptically, "Prophecy/Finance."

Reader beware. A trip through the Trib Force excursions calls for a hefty sense of theology, basic biblical interpretation, and an awareness of what makes for religious fiction.

When all is said and done, the primary challenge of the *Left Behind* phenomenon is — well, what exactly? The millennial syndrome? The disturbed order of our world? A hunger for biblical inquiry? A need to name the demonic in our culture? A search for a sustaining faith?

An awareness of the questions will make for a good reading.

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Father Falcone is a professor of biblical studies at St. Bernard's Institute.

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—Marguerite "Peg" Pinner
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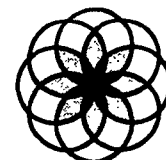
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