

## Book Review of *The Shack* by William P. Young

*The Shack*. By William Paul Young. Los Angeles: Windblown Media, 2007. 248pp. \$14.99.

*The Shack* is part theodicy, part spiritual autobiography for author Paul Young. Raised by missionary parents among a stone-age tribe, Young recounts in an interview how men in the tribe began to sexually abuse him when he was four years old. Sent away to a boarding school, Young also suffered abuse there. He later trained for the ministry, married, and began to raise a family. He wrote the book for his children.

"There is no 'agenda' behind my book," Young says on his website, "I wrote it for my six children. *The Shack* is not scripture, not a book on systematic theology, it is fiction" (<http://windrumors.com/>). Friends later convinced him to publish the story for a wider audience.

The story is strikingly original. Mackenzie "Mack" Phillips suffers a "Great Sadness" when his daughter Missie is kidnapped and brutally murdered. Mack struggles with anger toward God and fears that his family is disintegrating. He receives a note from God which invites him back to the scene of the murder at a remote shack in the wilderness. Against his better judgment, Mack returns to the shack, where he encounters the three persons of the Trinity. Mack is surprised to see that the Father is a large, black woman named "Papa." The Holy Spirit is an Oriental woman named "Sarayu," and Jesus is an unremarkable-looking Middle-Eastern man. "Papa" tells him that he is manifesting as a woman in order to get past Mack's childhood abuse by his father (93). As Mack interacts with the three Persons of the Godhead, he comes to understand the true nature of God in the context of Trinitarian perspective. By the end of the book, Mack has come to know God personally and many of his questions have been answered.

Young's story is helpful on four accounts.

First, the power of story to communicate is well-known. "Stories are affective by their very nature," literary scholar Leland Ryken says (*How to Read the Bible as Literature*, 67). *The Shack* penetrates theological membranes precisely because it is a story, absent the dusty theological terms and esoteric arguments that often beset Trinitarian writings. Missie's horrifying death confronts readers with compelling questions: Is God really good? How can a sovereign and loving God allow terrible things to happen? The warmth of the conversation between Mack and God elicits positive feelings toward Young's Trinity. Readers feel that they have not just learned *about* God, but have *experienced* him, and this feels very satisfying.

Second, Young is comfortable expressing thoughts and feelings that most Christians are schooled to repress. When Mack says to Papa, "If you couldn't take care of Missy, how can I trust you to take care of me?" (92), readers resonate. Simply exhuming this darkness can feel cathartic.

Third, some of Young's most helpful elements relate to psychological truth. When Papa tells Mack that "I often find that getting head issues out of the way first makes the heart stuff easier to work on later" (93), it is clear that Young has experience with counseling.

Fourth, Young's breathtakingly unorthodox portrayal of the Trinity compels the reader to think deeply and critically about their own perceptions of God. Does God love me? Do I experience him? What is the relationship between the Trinity? How does this impact me? With Bible in hand and critical thinking turned on, this can be a fruitful analysis.

There are several elements of the book, however, which warrant strong caution.

First, the Bible has much to say about God, yet never refers to God as a woman, or as revealing himself in feminine form. While Young's intent is to disarm negative presuppositions about God, he dances boldly where the Bible never treads.

Second, though Young seeks to answer the problem of suffering, he never mentions the role that Satan and his demons play. This damages the integrity of his solution.

Third, there is confusion of roles between the members of the Godhead. For example, "Papa" displays the wounds of the cross (95) and says that when Jesus became human, all of the Trinity did (99).

Fourth, the portrayal of God as completely immanent borders on the slap-stickish. For example, Papa tells Mack not to stand there "gawkin' with your mouth open like your pants are full" (88), and Jesus drops a gravy bowl which makes the Trinity bust up laughing (104). Indeed, Young's God is so syrupy and collegial that his awesome qualities are totally eclipsed. Young's exclusive emphasis on God's love to the exclusion of his holiness and righteous wrath has hamstrung the balance—and thus the accuracy—of his Trinity.

Ironically, in an article Young wrote after *The Shack* was published, he says: "Emotions don't always tell you the truth ... They tend to point you in the direction of what you perceive and believe" ("The Beauty of Ambiguity," <http://windrumors.com/>). In *The Shack*, Young seems to have let his feelings of who he thinks God *ought* to be conflict with who God really *is*.

Insofar as readers take this book as non-fiction and are led to simplify and fraternalize the biblical portrait of the True and Living God, the book misguides its readers. Yet Young's effort to show the synergistic interplay of the Trinity, as well as God's great love for us, does some real good.

Read this book, but keep your thinking cap on and your Bible open.

-Stephen A. Smith, Th.M.

©Liberty for Captives 2013

[www.libertyforcaptives.com](http://www.libertyforcaptives.com)