



Beyond the Book



A Resource on Writing and Publishing from Copyright Clearance Center

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You Better Believe It: Books of Inspiration ~ Beyond the Book visits BookExpos in DC, Toronto ~

By Robert Preer

Writing about matters of faith and belief demands patience, passion, and - above all - listening, according to authors who participated in a pair of recent symposia on religion and spirituality in publishing, sponsored by Copyright Clearance Center (CCC), the world's largest licensing agent for text reproduction rights.

"I believe fundamentally in our need to talk to each other," said broadcast journalist **Jay Allison**, whose popular *This I Believe* radio series is about to become a major book. "Everything I do in my working life is to figure out how to make that happen," he told a BookExpo America audience, "how to get our stories, our truths, shared among us so that we can understand each other better."

These two *Beyond the Book* symposia, held at BookExpo America (BEA) in Washington, D.C., on May 20, 2006, and BookExpo Canada, in Toronto, on June 12, 2006, explored a range of topics related to religious books and other works that express deeply held convictions. At BEA, **Rev. Martha Simmons**, one of America's best-known women preachers and author of a new anthology of African-American sermons, said listening to people breaks down differences. "Not listen to them for what they can do for you. Not listen to them because they may agree with you or because they disagree with you. But just listen to people because they're part of the human family."

The BookExpo America forum featured three prominent American authors. **Cholene Espinoza**, a professional pilot and military correspondent for Talk Radio News Service, wrote *Through the Eye of the Storm: A Book Dedicated to Rebuilding what Katrina Washed Away*, an account of rediscovery of faith working with an African-American church in Mississippi in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.



Jay Allison, Rev. Martha Simmons, Cholene Espinoza, and moderator Christopher Kenneally discuss the challenges of writing about matters of faith.

Photograph by Amy Genevieve Kozak

The Rev. Simmons, a preacher for the past 20 years and editor of the journal *The African American Pulpit*, is the author of *Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons, 1650 to the Present*. A regular on NPR's All Things Considered and Morning Edition, Jay Allison is curator and co-producer of *This I Believe*, a large and growing collection of statements of faith and conviction by people all over the world originally produced by legendary newsman Edward R. Murrow in the 1950s.

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The BookExpo Canada event featured **Brian Stiller**, president of Tyndale University College and Seminary in Toronto and author of ten books; **Denyse**



Oriah

O'Leary, author of *By Design or by Chance*, an overview of the intelligent design controversy regarding evolution; **Marlene Coughlin**, executive director of the Christian Booksellers Association in Canada; and **Oriah**, author of the inspirational

prose-poem and best-selling book, *The Invitation*, as well as several other books.

Christopher Kenneally, CCC's director of Author and Creator Relations and moderator of both events, acknowledged the challenge authors face to reach an audience while holding true to personal beliefs and ideals; he likened it to sportswriters who are most comfortable covering the home team. "The hard labor is to engage readers who may not be fans and who could even be rooting for a rival squad."

Espinoza said the key to connecting with readers is opening a dialogue. "It takes really understanding and storytelling, whether it's my book or whether you're learning about other cultures... and you say, 'Wait a second. That person is nothing like me, but, you know what? I agree with him.'" O'Leary said that bridging the gap between faiths requires choosing words carefully. Noting that two people can read the meaning of an email very differently, she said, "The challenge I have is to make sure that when I use words I make clear how I'm using them so that people are not taking away a message that I never sent."

This report was prepared for the not-for-profit Copyright Clearance Center by Robert Preer, an experienced writer and researcher whose work has appeared in the Boston Globe, Washington Post, Philadelphia Inquirer, Commonwealth magazine, and many other publications. He has done research and writing for private clients, as well as the Massachusetts Senate. His book, Emergence of Technopolis: Knowledge Intensive Technologies and Regional Development, examines high technology development policies.

Stiller underscored the importance of storytelling in drawing in readers. Asked what sells best among religious books, he replied, "Stories. A great story is a great story is a great story," adding that parables are a particularly effective kind of story that can reach believers and non-believers. "A parable by its nature has a particular kind of idea that by way of story comes beneath the radar of our selection out of things that are too logically driven, and brings within the heart of the person an idea that is transforming," Stiller said.

Sometimes a book takes form in a moment of inspiration - then goes on to become a best-seller. Oriah told how *The Invitation* grew out of her thoughts returning from a party in 1994 and realizing that she and the other guests had been asking the wrong questions of each other: "What do you do for living? Where do you live?" Almost immediately, she wrote a prose poem based on an exercise of repeating and completing the lines, "It doesn't interest me... What I want to know is..." Oriah recalled that what she really had wanted to ask others was, "... What you ache for. And if you dare to dream, meaning [tell me what is] your heart's longing," she said.

Oriah sent the poem by regular mail to 600 students she had worked with over the years. The recipients copied it and forwarded it; two years later, the work was an Internet phenomenon. At the suggestion of an agent, she expanded the poem into a book that became an international best-seller that has been translated into 15 different languages.

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