

Inspired by faith, Catholic businessman seeks to underwrite beauty in Catholic fiction

By JOSEPH O'BRIEN
Staff Writer



Peter Mongeau

BOSTON — The modern Catholic fiction writer has a tough row to hoe. On the one hand, he is expected by his fellow Catholics, at least those unfamiliar with the complexities of modern literature, to write simple moral stories where good wins out over evil, the princess is saved and happily ever after becomes the only acceptable conclusion to a story.

On the other hand, the Catholic fiction writer is also hoping to reach out to the modern non-Catholic and mostly non-Christian reader with the assumption that his story is worth reading — and yet he must not say too much about the “R” word (religion) lest his readership begin heading in a panic for the exits.

The 20th century southern Catholic writer Flannery O'Connor puts the dilemma this way in her 1957 essay “The Church and the Fiction Writer:”

“Part of the complexity of the problem for the Catholic fiction writer will be the presence of grace as it appears in nature, and what matters for him is that his faith not become detached from his dramatic sense and from his vision of what-is. No one in these days, however, would seem more anxious to have it become detached than those Catholics who demand that the writer limit, on the natural level, what he allows himself to see.”

Besides being pressured by secular and Catholic readers to fit into their own notions of what fiction should be, the Catholic

writer's row is made all the tougher to hoe because of the dearth of publishing houses willing to give Catholic writers a chance to show that they can write compelling, well-written and grace-infused stories for the Catholic and non-Catholic alike.

But Boston businessman Peter Mongeau is doing his best to make sure that the Catholic writer does find a voice within the milieu of today's bestseller lists.

Fed a steady diet of good Catholic fiction throughout his life — including works by O'Connor, Graham Greene, G.K. Chesterton, Walker Percy, and Evelyn Waugh — Mongeau has started Tuscany Press, a startup publishing company which seeks to provide the Catholic fiction reader a lodestone for quality storytelling. He's also announced an annual prize through the press which pays winning fiction manuscripts in cash and publication contracts.

A graduate of Boston University, Mongeau received his master's in business administration from Boston College. After working in New York City for a time in the investment field, he returned with his wife and four children to Boston.

Boston bookworm

It was in Beantown that Mon-

geau first got the itch to enter the publishing business.

Before starting Tuscany this past June, Mongeau had already founded Christus Publishing, a Catholic press which specializes in books on traditional Catholic spirituality, with a strong emphasis on Carmelite writers. As coordinator of his parish's book club, Mongeau became familiar with Catholic publishing and noticed a demand for books on Catholic spirituality — which led to his starting Christus. Developing plans to expand the number and kinds of Christus' titles, Mongeau noticed the hunger for quality fiction.

“As I looked into expanding Christus, I kept running into two things,” he said. “First, that people were looking for Catholic fiction along the lines of Flannery O'Connor, Chesterton, Percy, and Graham Greene, the Catholic literary novels of the 50s and 60s,” he said. “Second, there was a dearth of modern-day Catholic fiction.”

Talent and treasure

Consulting publishers, literary agents and writers, Mongeau undertook an analysis of the publishing industry which led him to recognize an underserved market of writers and readers.

“I thought there was a definite need from a reader's perspective in terms of Catholic fiction and from a writer's perspective with people writing Catholic fiction but couldn't get published,” he said. “So that's how Tuscany Press was born.”

Mongeau also took his cue to

start a Catholic fiction publishing house from the writings of Blessed John Paul II. Quoted on Tuscany's website (www.tuscanypress.com), the late pontiff's 1999 “Letter to Artists” encourages writers to use their talents to promote a culture of life.

“In order to communicate the message entrusted to her by Christ, the Church needs art,” John Paul II writes. “Art must make perceptible, and as far as possible attractive, the world of the spirit, of the invisible, of God. It must therefore translate into meaningful terms that which is in itself ineffable.... The Church has need especially of those who can do this on the literary and figurative level, using the endless possibilities of images and their symbolic force.”

In Tuscany's light

It was another Christian writer — Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky — who led Mongeau to naming his founding press after the picturesque region of central Italy.

“Dostoevsky said that ‘Beauty will save the world,’” Mongeau said. “God is beauty and one of the most beautiful places I've ever been has been Tuscany. That's why I chose the name — it's where I found beauty. When I was out in Tuscany, it epitomized the beauty we have in art — and the beauty that God provided us in this world.”

While Mongeau is banking on beauty being a bestseller, he also wants to sweeten the deal for writers — by attracting them to Tuscany with a literary prize. With cash awards and publication in the novel, novella and short story categories, the Tuscany Fiction Prize has four criteria, Mongeau said.

“Is it a good story? Is it well written? Does it capture the imagination of the reader? And does it have the presence of God?” he said. “If a book doesn't have these four things, it's not going to be good Catholic fiction.”

This last criteria — the presence of God — Mongeau acknowledges, isn't a matter of making sure God is a character in the novel so much as the writer sees in a fallen world a possibility for redemption. He stresses that the Catholic imagination seeks to bring God to readers “symbolically, subtly and deliberately.”

“The Catholic imagination takes into consideration the

whole world as we know it, as we live it, as we believe it,” he said. “God is present in the world and events don't just happen. There is a God, a living God who is active in the world in which we live.”

The deadline for the prize is Sept. 30, he said, and already he's being inundated with manuscripts in all three categories.

“The prize is there to encourage writers to take up the craft of writing Catholic fiction and stories, to promote Catholic fiction and to recognize the talent when it comes along,” he said.

Rewriting the market

Optimistic about the success of Tuscany Press, Mongeau said the publishing world is vastly different from what it was before the so-called information age dawned.

“The barriers to entry are lower today in publishing than they've ever been,” Mongeau said. “Technology has provided the ability to start a publishing company on short dollars. While it's still significant dollars, it's not like it was years ago. The industry has changed dramatically in 15 years.”

In those 15 years, Mongeau said the advent of online distribution through Amazon and Barnes & Noble, and the creation of e-book platforms — Kindle, Nook and I-Book — have led to an explosion of independent publishing houses.

“The distribution channel alone has changed dramatically,” he said. “If you're selling books through Barnes & Noble, Amazon and electronically [through e-books], I'd say you have over 50-60 percent of your distribution channel. Plus you have global worldwide distribution that way also.”

In addition, it goes without saying, Mongeau said, that Tuscany Press is also taking advantage of the social media empires to spread the word about Catholic fiction — including Facebook, Twitter and a blog which Mongeau maintains on Tuscany's Web site (www.tuscanypress.com).

“We have to go out there and prove that Catholic fiction works, and is written well, and there is a market for people to buy Catholic fiction,” Mongeau said. “But we do believe we can do this.”

For more information about Tuscany Press or the Tuscany Prize for Catholic Fiction, call 781-424-9321 or contact Peter Mongeau at publisher@tuscanypress.com.



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