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Faith and the law

Whitlow's novels tackle ethical issues

What does a novelist do when *Publishers Weekly* dubs him the “John Grisham of the Christian (fiction) market”?

Praise the Lord, and keep writing.

Robert Whitlow, a Charlotte, N.C., lawyer and 1976 Furman graduate, is at work on his fifth Christian legal thriller. His last, *Life Support*, has sold more than 35,000 copies since coming out in July.

That's hardly a Grisham-level number, but most novelists would like to have it. Whitlow has impressed Christian fiction insiders, including Jana Riess, religion book review editor at *Publishers Weekly*.

“I read so much Christian fiction, and most of it is lousy,” she says. “To find a novelist like Robert Whitlow who knows how to tell a good story and who improves with each outing — that's a real joy.”

Christian fiction is a rapidly growing force in religious book publishing, Riess says. The biggest name is Tim LaHaye, co-author of the blockbuster “Left Behind” series, but the list includes other successful authors — among them Gary Parker, an Atlanta minister who is also a member of Furman's Class of '76.

The story of how Whitlow came to write Christian legal thrillers has twists and turns.

He grew up in Georgia, his love of reading kindled by his older sister Annette, a future librarian who passed on *Look Homeward, Angel* and other books. When he got to Furman he planned to major in business, but changed directions after a conversation with English professor James Stewart.

“I'm eternally grateful to him,” Whitlow says. “He told me, ‘Don't worry yet about what you're going to do for a living. You're at a liberal arts school. Take advantage of what we have here in the liberal arts.’”

Whitlow majored in history, graduating Phi Beta Kappa. Then he went to the University of Georgia law school, where he made law review.

Between college and law school, he worked at a camp for emotionally disturbed children. The stress caused him to pray seriously for the first time. Whitlow credits prayer, along with reading C.S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity*, for his move from casual to devout Christian.

Near the end of law school, Whitlow felt God telling him not to accept a job

offer from a big Atlanta firm. Instead he joined a small firm in Dalton, Ga., representing injured carpet mill workers in civil cases.

During 17 years in Dalton, Whitlow built a lucrative practice. He married Kathy McClure, and they had four children.

In 1994, his wife dreamed that the family was moving to Charlotte. A year later, she had another Charlotte dream in which she saw the house they were living in. She told a friend, who said her brother owned a house just like that. In Charlotte. And it was for sale.

The Whitlows decided God wanted them, for reasons they didn't understand, to be in Charlotte. They bought the house in question.

The family moved in 1996, but Whitlow continued to practice in Dalton, driving to Charlotte on weekends. He recalls waking up one morning with the idea that few people appreciate the influence their forebears have on them, for good and bad.

As he drove to Charlotte that day, he thought of a story to illustrate the point: A young Southern lawyer learns, on the death of his father, that he has inherited membership in a secret society dating to the fall of the Confederacy. The bequest has social and financial advantages but becomes a curse from which only a turning to God can save him.

When he got to Charlotte, he told Kathy the story. She insisted he write it. So Whitlow began his first novel, *The List*.

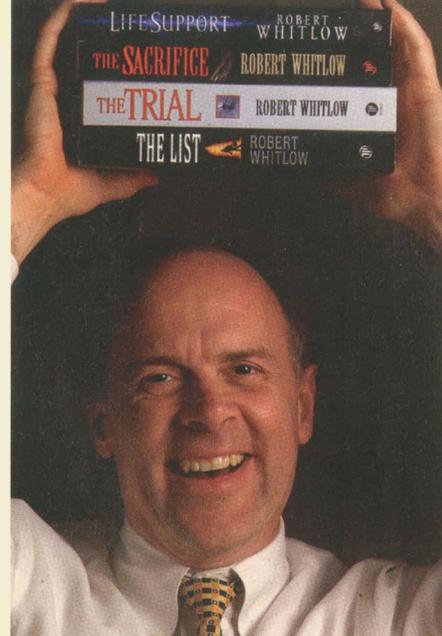
“I turned on the computer and typed ‘Chapter One.’ I didn't know what to do. I just had this thing in my head.”

Whitlow soon closed his Georgia practice and moved to Charlotte, deciding he could afford to write full time for two years. But he struggled with his novel and eventually set it aside.

In early 1998, he dared look again. “Awful,” he says. “But one chapter was good.”

That was encouragement enough. Whitlow finished *The List* and got the attention of an editor at W Publishing Group, a division of Thomas Nelson Inc. The firm bought the novel and published it in 2000.

The List sold 20,000 copies in six months — impressive for an unknown author. Whitlow followed the next year with *The Trial*, about a small-town Georgia



LAYNE BAILEY/THE CHARLOTTE OBSERVER

Robert Whitlow will soon add a fifth novel to his growing canon.

lawyer who defends a man accused of killing a wealthy college student. *The Trial* won a Christy Award, given by the Christian Booksellers Association for outstanding fiction.

In 2002 came *The Sacrifice*, about a North Carolina lawyer who defends a white teen-ager accused of a hate crime. Whitlow followed with *Life Support*, about a female lawyer who finds both Christ and a boyfriend while representing a troubled young wife who wants to pull the plug on her comatose husband. He's well into a sequel, *Life Everlasting*.

All of Whitlow's novels feature contemporary Southern lawyers grappling with faith and ethics. His overarching theme, he says, is that “God is real and wants to interact with us.”

Now a member of a Charlotte firm, Whitlow says he enjoys legal work but acknowledges that he does it mainly for health insurance and a steady income. Evenings and weekends, he's writing fiction.

Whitlow is unpretentious, volunteering with a laugh that many of the lofty epigraphs he uses at the beginning of his novels' chapters come from spins through “Bartlett's Familiar Quotations.”

But he's serious about what he believes he offers his readers: “I know the law, I know the South and I know the life of faith.”

— Sam Hodges '77

The author is book editor for The Charlotte Observer, where the original version of this story appeared on November 15, 2003. Reprinted with permission.