

label's artists at author events. The imprint's offices are in Miami.

A fan of Atria author Wahida Clark, Birdman "wanted to be with the company that published her," Atria publisher Judith Curr says. "They wanted to publish with us because we have a strong and committed African-American publishing program; 25% of our list is African-

American. And they have a deep relationship within the community of potential readers that we do not have as publishers."

Both Birdman and Curr also pointed to an important presence behind the scenes of their partnership: literary agent Marc Gerald, whose long association with urban lit includes a stint as head of

the ABA Award-winning Old Scho Books, an imprint formerly at W.W. Norton, credited at one time with reviving an interest in black genre and publishing authors from the 1950s and 1960s. "I was excited to get him to play a major role," Birdman declares.

Gerald, currently v-p of the Agency Group, whose literary department h

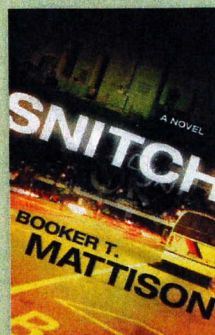
Christian Fiction for African-Americans: A Dilemma

Along with the general popularity of the Christian and inspirational fiction genre, the visibility of African-American authors who write Christian-themed stories has increased. But some authors and editors complain that the category can present a dilemma. While African-American readers often actively search out Christian fiction, readers of other backgrounds may reject books with a blatant religious slant. And some black writers looking to attract nonblack readers feel stuck in a double bind, noting that often those readers are not only turned off by the "Christian fiction" label but sometimes feel uncomfortable looking for titles in the African-American section of the book store.

Both up-and-coming authors like Kimberly Cash Tate and Booker T. Mattison, and veteran authors like Victoria Christopher Murray, Vanessa Davis Griggs, and Sharon Ewell Foster say they love writing uplifting stories, but they are sometimes frustrated by what Mattison calls the "Christian fiction moniker." Whether African-American writers are technically writing for the Christian market (often termed "CBA," after the Christian retailers association)—which prohibits graphic sex and profanity, for instance—matters less than readers' classification.

"Whoever embraces a book is what determines its genre, because too often labels don't adequately represent whom a story will appeal to," says Mattison, who has published two novels—*Snitch* (2011) and *Unsigned Hype* (2009)—with Revell, an imprint of the Baker Publishing Group. "Christian themes are part of the moral and philosophical fabric of who [African-Americans] are as a people," so that even in the general trade, faith-based and inspirational fiction for African-Americans is rarely rejected outright.

But authors and editors say that the Christian fiction label turns some readers away from storytellers, whether they are published by Christian houses or not. Murray, who wrote and self-published *Temptation* in 1997, before the Christian fiction genre existed, says she loathes the Christian fiction label. "I think it limits our readership," she says. "I'm not writing for people who



are already in church. If I had to say who I was trying to gain, it's people who never entered a church."

African-American writers targeting a more evangelical, if multicultural, audience don't necessarily have an easier road. Foster, a Christy Award winner who most recently wrote a two-part historical novel, *The Resurrection of Nat Turner* (Howard; Vol. 1, Aug. 2011; Vol. 2, Feb. 2012) first published with Christian publisher Multnomah in 1999. "There were no black editors, graphic artists, or salespeople, so there were cultural challenges," she says. "I quickly accepted that writing in Christian publishing was as much about being a cultural ambassador as it was about writing." Foster says she has been told Howard Books, an imprint of Simon & Schuster, has no advertising and publicity budget for the title except what she generates herself, a situation not unfamiliar to authors of any kind these days.

Bonnie Calhoun, owner of the Christian Fiction Blog Alliance and president of the Christian Authors Network, said it takes years of practice to become a CBA author, while novelists who want a broader audi-

ence can write God-centered narratives that are marketed and published with more ease in the general African-American market. "Why would someone spend years trying to be acceptable to a small entity, trying to fit into this tiny round hole," Calhoun says, "when they have this big, large square peg over here and they don't really have to fight anyone to get into it?"

Besides, says Patricia Haley, author of *Chosen* (Gallery, Aug.), readers ultimately decide. "They don't care if you're CBA or ABA," she says. "They just want to know if they can walk into a store and get your book."

More often than not, these authors' books end up in the African-American fiction section, a challenge for Foster, whose novel is mainly historical, and for Griggs, who says that a significant number of her readers are white, "and they can't find me in the Christian fiction section and they don't usually want to go over to the African-American section."

Voicing the dream of both authors and publishers, Haley said her ideal situation would be to have her books shelved "in several categories; that way my book would be in all of them so people could find [it] all over the bookstore."

— Joshunda Sanders