

Inside Story



Editor turned mystery author builds God's Kingdom

Fictional magazine editor John Smyth gets into situations few real-life editors ever experience—like helping to solve murders. And his creator, James R. (Jim) Coggins, former editor of the Mennonite Brethren Herald, is thoroughly enjoying his new career as mystery author.

The son of “thinking” Christian parents, Jim grew up in Waterford, Ontario, in a home he calls “a haven of peace” where books were prominent. Thanks to his excellent grounding—from parents, church leaders and school teachers—Jim left home with his faith intact, eager to learn as much as possible.

Before going to school, he drew comic strips; in high school he wrote a novel. At McMaster University, he studied English and history, but he was always writing.

After university, he ended up in a number of factory-type jobs. One day, not really expecting an answer, Jim asked God what to do with his life. “The words, ‘Be a writer,’ popped into my head,” he says. “I responded, ‘No, Lord, that can’t be it. That’s what I want to do!’”

Career launches

Not long after, Jim wrote a short opinion piece, contacted an editor with the Hamilton Spectator, and made his first sale. He gave the entire \$25 payment to his church. He did more articles for the Spectator and wrote “The Myth of Finding God’s Will for Your Life” for Les Tarr’s original Faith Today.

A friend connected Jim with Robert Thompson, former leader of the federal Social Credit Party, who needed a research assistant in BC. While there, he helped with a book called From the Marketplace. While in B.C., Jim also met his wife Jackie, who lived next door in Langley.

Soon after Jim and Jackie’s marriage, a non-Christian career counselor suggested Jim “go back to school and become a theologian, because ‘the world needs people who can explain Christianity to intellectuals.’” So Jim entered the University of Waterloo, intending to become a professor of church history. Needing a job while he finished his dissertation, in 1984 he became associate editor of the Mennonite Brethren Herald, a periodical published by the Mennonite Brethren Church. He and Jackie moved to Winnipeg, where Jim completed his doctorate, but stayed on with the Herald. “God wouldn’t let me leave,” he says.

In 1991, the Herald moved Jim to Abbotsford, B.C., where he still lives with Jackie and their two daughters.

Jim’s first John Smyth mystery, *Who’s Grace?*, was published shortly after he left the Herald in 2003.

Kingdom motivation



Why choose a denominational editor as amateur detective? “The characteristics that make a good editor [attention to detail, analyzing issues, listening to people] also make a good detective,” he says.

As the third Smyth mystery, Mountaintop Drive, hits the stores, Jim looks back with fondness on his long career with the Herald. But he also looks forward to a long career writing mysteries. While the form has changed, the mission has not.

“My motivation is still to build God’s Kingdom. The same things excite me—truth, justice, mercy, compassion for people, God’s glory...”

Jim writes his mysteries for people who might never read a Christian magazine. Mountaintop Drive is dedicated to a non-Christian bus driver who asked one day to read something Jim had written. “It struck me that 95 per cent of what we write is sold in Christian bookstores, marketed through Christian radio and magazines and totally unintelligible to non-Christians,” Jim says.

So with John Smyth, Jim tries to “present a normal Christian with God in his life. Positive portrayals of Christians are very rare in our culture nowadays, but you can present Christian truth to a non-Christian audience if you present it in terms a non-Christian will understand,” he says. And many people read mysteries.

More to come

Jim has ideas for three more John Smyth books, as well as a political novel, a book of short stories and four books of Bible exposition. He also writes humour, poetry and devotionals.

Making a living as a writer is tricky. To pay the bills, Jim does some freelance writing and editing, as well as some speaking and preaching. “It takes a great deal of faith to keep following what I understand to be God’s call even when logically there is no guarantee I will make a living at it,” Jim says.

But he has no doubt he is doing exactly what he was meant to do—using the abilities God gave him to serve His Kingdom.

Visit Jim’s website at www.coggins.ca

N. J. Lindquist is the executive director of The Word Guild (www.thewordguild.com). Her mystery, Shaded Light, was released last fall.

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