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CHAPTER 1

*The History  
of Evangelical  
Romance*

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“But your people, Jean?”

“My people all love you and honor you,” said Jean, with shining eyes. “They think you are magnificent! They cannot say enough about you. But, Jasper, listen, if every one in this wide world were against you, even my dear people, I should marry you anyway and stay with you! I couldn’t live any longer without you!”

He looked into her eyes, and he drank in her trust and loveliness, and beautiful self-surrender as if it had been some life-giving draught; then he laid his hand upon her hair and pressed her closer to him.

“Oh, you wonderful woman!” he said.

So when it was announced most informally that a wedding would take place no one was surprised. Indeed, Jean’s girl friends had been embroidering and chattering away over wedding gifts for a week before it was whispered officially that they would be needed.

. . . It was sunset again, gold and ruby sunset, when they went home to his house, after the wedding supper. The sky was broad and clear translucent gold, with a deep heart of pure ruby blazing out behind the rose-wreathed cottage when Jean saw it for the first time. There alone at last together in their own home they stood with ruby and golden light from the sunset windows mingling with the soft flicker of fire light, and looked into each other’s eyes and knew that their heavenly Father had been good to them.<sup>1</sup>

In the closing scenes of Grace Livingston Hill's *The Finding of Jasper Holt*, Jean and Jasper finally surmount the obstacles keeping them apart and marry, secure in their love and the love of God. Kept apart by Jasper's bad reputation (largely undeserved) and Jean's family, the couple reconciles in the last four pages of the novel. Having rescued Jean's nephew from being trampled by a bull, Jasper sustains life-threatening injuries, but redeems himself in the eyes of Hawk Valley and Jean's family. As Jean keeps vigil at his side, Jasper begins to recover and they affirm their love for each other. In the end, their faithfulness to God and each other is rewarded as they wed with the approval of family and friends. For Hill, a successful romance depended upon both hero and heroine having a personal relationship with God. Often viewed as a redeemed or baptized version of a secular romance novel, what is perhaps most surprising about this story is its original date of publication: 1915.

#### *Finding Grace: Remembering the Evangelical Romance*

Frequently overlooked in the annals of American Protestantism, the writing of Grace Livingston Hill (1865–1947) blends faith with fiction in ways that reflect aspects of a Protestant past while revealing glimpses of an evangelical future. Hill's prolific writing and sales success exemplify evangelicalism's long and intimate involvement with various media forms. Simultaneously, Hill's work itself represents the offspring of this involvement—evangelical romance novels—and provides one of the reasons for its emergence as a genre in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Her combination of religion and romance illustrates how evangelical women have navigated the contested terrain of popular culture as creators of products, arbiters of taste, and makers of meaning.

Economic necessity and evangelical desire transformed Grace Livingston Hill from amateur writer into professional scribe. She enjoyed writing from an early age and found inspiration in her aunt Isabella Alden, who authored the "Chautauqua Girls" series. However, it was the deaths of Hill's husband and father, combined with the need

to support her family, that eventually provided the catalyst for her career. Having already authored poems, Sunday School lessons, and short stories, she then turned to her writing with clear goals for her literary future. Hill wanted to find an established company to market her work, an expert editor to improve her writing, and a respected publisher willing to include her salvation message. According to her grandson and biographer, Robert Munce, "At family prayer time each night, the family asked for guidance for Grace in her writing and in choosing a publisher." Their prayers were answered in the form of J. B. Lippincott who began publishing Hill's combination of "religious inspiration blended with boy-meets-girl romance" in 1908. Over the course of her life she wrote 105 novels, which are still published and read today. In 1946, interviewer James M. Neville wrote, "Mrs. Hill's romances hold to a steady 16,000 copies. Her reprint sales are more than double that number, leading the field, according to a recent survey, with a total of 76 titles to date. Each reprint sells 33,000 copies, or more. She publishes three novels a year."<sup>2</sup>

Like other Christian authors, Hill viewed her work as an extension of her religious life. She told Neville, "I have attempted to convey, in my own way, and through my novels, a message which God has given, and to convey that message with whatever abilities were given to me." Crediting God with both her talent and her message, Hill felt obliged to use her skills and employed the romance formula as her evangelistic medium. For Grace Livingston Hill and other conservative Protestants, a God-given gift should not be ignored or disregarded, a belief drawn from interpretation of biblical passages such as Matthew 25, the parable of the talents. In this tale, the master entrusts three of his servants with talents or coins. Honoring their master, the first servant turns his five talents into ten and the second makes two into four. Both servants cared for and built on their gifts and were rewarded accordingly by their master. In contrast, the fearful third servant buried his one talent in the ground and returned it alone to his master. He hid his talent and as a result earned his master's condemnation: expulsion to a place where tears fall and teeth gnash. Like the two loyal servants, Hill, a faithful steward of her abilities, honored her

God and honed her gift through writing religious romance. For her and other evangelicals, the medium, be it romance or radio, remained neutral. The message conveyed shaped the artistic form into a force for good or ill. Implicitly, this attitude, exemplified in Hill's interpretation of her vocation, exhibits a utilitarian attitude toward the arts—"the view," according to J. I. Packer, "that the value of anything is to be found in the extent to which it is useful and productive as a means to an end beyond itself." The end, for conservative Protestants, meant a Christian or more Christian life. Rejecting the notion of art for art's sake, novels like *The Finding of Jasper Holt* served not the gods of literature, but rather, in Hill's view, the God of life.<sup>3</sup>

Grace Livingston Hill's goals reflected common evangelical ideas about the utility of media and the arts. Conservative Protestants had long used existing cultural forms and invented new genres in their efforts to evangelize the world. Media analyst Quentin Schultze states that "from the founding of the Plymouth colonies to the present, the United States has been an incredible laboratory in which evangelicals have been able to experiment with every imaginable form and medium of communication" and historian Leonard Sweet documents "evangelical mastery of the media" from the Great Awakening to Oral Roberts. In the mid-eighteenth century evangelicals established the first American religious periodical, *Christian History*, and revivalist George Whitefield helped create the "evangelical newspaper and magazine." In the nineteenth century, technological developments made the printing of novels, newspapers, and magazines more affordable and accessible. With the increasing popularity of the printed word, evangelicals expanded their experiments with publishing. Recognizing the power of print while encountering texts that did not endorse their values or beliefs, evangelicals "entered the very market they feared, and in some ways they mastered it." Fighting fire with fire, evangelicals established publishing houses, tract societies (most notably the American Tract Society) and became "key developers of new technologies of print."<sup>4</sup>

Throughout this history, evangelistic intentions legitimized these media efforts and indeed became a criterion of evangelical aesthetic

judgments. However, in the realm of fiction, literature and religion forged an uneasy alliance. Utilitarian concerns for evangelism governed evangelical literary efforts; nevertheless, even as they experimented with fiction's redemptive possibilities, such fiction remained suspect. Unlike other types of media, novels directly juxtaposed the truth of Christianity with the falsehood of fiction. Departing from truth, unleashing the imagination, promoting idleness (and perhaps even idolatry), fiction was an unwieldy weapon at best in the war for lost souls. Leland Ryken, evangelical literary critic, states: "Christians have traditionally found it difficult to grant integrity to this world of the imagination and have responded in two directions. One tendency has been to discredit imagination and fantasy as being untruthful, frivolous, a waste of time, dangerous escapism and something to be left behind in childhood. The other tendency has been to suppress the imaginary element in literature and to act as if literature is a direct replica of life, in effect abolishing the world of the imagination and merging it with empirical reality."<sup>5</sup> Fears about fiction also reflected doubts about women. Their domination of novel reading raised concerns about the "nature" of woman and her ability to handle imaginative material. In her study *The Woman Reader, 1837–1914*, Kate Flint recounts, "First, the argument ran, certain texts might corrupt her innocent mind, hence diminishing her value as a woman. Second, it was often put forward that she, as woman, was peculiarly susceptible to emotionally provocative material." Flint cites warnings written as far back as 1566 about women reading romance novels and demonstrates how "these Renaissance prescriptive remarks concerning women's reading were remarkably close, in outline, to ones which were repeated during the next three centuries."<sup>6</sup> Despite anxiety about both fiction and women, for some in the early and mid-nineteenth century, evangelistic potential trumped these fears. They began to claim imaginative literature as a vehicle for religious instruction and "the reading of novels crept gradually into the range of permitted activities because the content of many of them indicated the market could be made to respond to moral concerns."<sup>7</sup>

This acceptance occurred, in part, through the work of female au-

thors, including Susan Warner, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and E. D. E. N. Southworth. Many scholars have excavated the importance of this literature. Studies range from examining how these nineteenth-century authors and characters subverted gender roles to analyses of the opposition between women's "sentimental" fiction and men's "literary" fiction. Fewer treatments explore the relationship between this literature and its contemporary counterparts, a relationship that constitutes an important element in the emergence of evangelical romance novels. Drawing on domestic ideology, which touted the power of women's pious influence in the home and in the world, and an evangelical aesthetic, which legitimated fiction through its faith-based message, nineteenth-century women like Stowe and Warner forged simultaneous literary careers and Christian ministries. They wrote, according to literary scholar Jane Tompkins, "for edification's sake," and "the highest function of any art, for Warner as for most of her contemporaries, was the bringing of souls to Christ." To achieve this, they composed sentimental novels for and about women that celebrated conservative Protestant piety as well as love and the home. As Mary Kelly notes of the authors and their subsequent work, "their perspective was private and familial, their allegiance was to the domestic sphere," and they were, Nina Baym adds, "profoundly oriented toward women."<sup>8</sup> While romance did not always drive these nineteenth-century plots, it often remained an integral part of the story. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe narrates the love between George and Eliza and their eventual triumph in establishing a free Christian family. *The Minister's Wooing* even more explicitly celebrates romantic love with the story of James and Mary, and Susan Warner's best-selling *Wide, Wide World* emphasizes Ellen's love with John as well as her growth in Christianity.<sup>9</sup>

Even as sentimental fiction declined in popularity in the late nineteenth century, Hill built on this foundation as she constructed her vision of the Christian romance. Indeed both evangelical and secular romances trace their lineage back to these nineteenth-century novels. In *Fantasy and Reconciliation*, Kay Mussell proposes that "today, romance formulas differ from their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century

predecessors because each era finds its own models for the familiar tale; and yet the fictional world they describe remains remarkably unchanged over time.” The works of each “era,” past and present, center around “the course and culmination of one woman’s love story” or, as another scholar put it, “the formation and assertion of feminine ego.”<sup>10</sup> However, only Grace Livingston Hill and the subsequent evangelical romance preserved the nineteenth-century emphasis on God and Protestant faith. Like those from earlier novels, Hill’s heroines radiate evangelical purity and piety—the hallmarks of domestic ideology—but romance drives the plot as her heroes respond immediately to this feminine influence. For example, upon first seeing Jean, in *The Finding of Jasper Holt*, Jasper thinks: “She was the sudden startling revelation of some pure dream of his childhood, the reality of which he had come to doubt.” The description continues, “Her face was wonderfully pure, free from self-consciousness and pride, yet she looked as if she knew her own mind and could stand like a rock for a principle.” This purity and steadfastness inspires Jasper Holt to convert and live a life worthy of Jean’s love.<sup>11</sup>

At the same time that Hill drew on the past to augment her literary success, conservative Protestantism looked to an uncertain future. Foes, in the form of “higher criticism” and Darwinism, forced evangelicals to define and defend the fundamentals of their faith. Gender norms and popular culture provided the battlegrounds for this emerging conflict. Even as these “militantly anti-modernist Protestant evangelicals”—to quote historian George Marsden—upheld Victorian gender ideology, they sought to diminish women’s power in the church and discredit the dominance of their emotional piety. In this war with modernism, the emerging voice of fundamentalists “promoted a manly Christianity to replace the perspective and practices of feminized evangelical Protestantism.” Armed with the doctrines of biblical inerrancy and premillennial dispensationalism, conservative Protestants shifted the focus of faith from women to men, and from heart to head. Deeming women’s faith too emotional and unintellectual, this militant and manly Christianity sought respectability even as it retreated from previous ways of engaging with “the world.”<sup>12</sup>

After 1925, as many scholars have documented, the once prominent and respected evangelicals became the parochial and ridiculed fundamentalists. They built their own institutions—publishing houses, Bible institutes, and Christian colleges—and created, according to Joel Carpenter, “a distinct religious movement,” one concerned about women and wary of the arts. “Fundamentalists of the first half of our century,” argues Roger Lundin, “wrote almost no essays of significance on the arts. When the arts are mentioned in fundamentalist works, either their value or their use is called into question.”<sup>13</sup> During this period of retreat and regrouping, the “material Christianity” so pervasive in the previous century became a liability. Colleen McDaniel writes, “What in the nineteenth century was considered tasteful and pious, in the twentieth came to be seen as tacky and irreligious.” Associated with women, owning Christian things signaled a believer’s weakness, and perhaps even her worldliness.<sup>14</sup> Advocating “muscular Christianity” and a “Christ against culture” position, fundamentalists became increasingly suspicious of women, fiction, and the arts in general. Grace Livingston Hill, however, while remaining a committed conservative Protestant, continued to write her brand of fiction. Evangelistic goals and her call from God superseded fundamentalist fears.

Hill honed the evangelical romance formula, boy plus girl plus conservative Protestant Christianity equals a happy marriage, and navigated her way through the less-than-hospitable waters of the era. In writing salvation into her stories, Hill’s work complied with the demands for evangelism. However, her novels contained elements of the formulaic feminized faith that made fundamentalists afraid for their masculinity and modernists anxious for the arts. Her emphasis on women’s faith challenged the rise of a more manly Protestantism. The power of pure heroines, like Jean, over less pious heroes continued the nineteenth-century tradition of elevating women’s spiritual status over that of men. At the same time, Hill’s formulaic style defied modernist concerns. In an artistic world where novelty, intellect, and realism increasingly guided aesthetic taste, Hill’s novels constituted an unhealthy diet of predictable plots and happy end-

ings. Invariably Hill's novels end happily with the couple, like Jasper and Jean, united in faith and matrimony. As one woman described it, "When I found the stories, in the early 60s, I thought them terribly quaint; to the modern reader they may seem hopelessly so. Still, there's something about them." Hill's literary critics were not so impressed. Quaint for some readers meant escapist and unrealistic for others. Too sentimental, too predictable, and too saccharine, Hill's work embodied the "kitsch" of womanly Protestantism, in contrast to the "art" of manly Christianity.<sup>15</sup>

In the 1940s, during the twilight of Hill's career, fundamentalism became increasingly divided over its rigid separatism from the wider culture, a position that novels like *The Finding of Jasper Holt* defied. A more moderate evangelical leadership, including Harold Ockenga, Carl Henry, and Billy Graham, emerged with a vision of Christianity as "engaged orthodoxy." Sociologist Christian Smith describes these new leaders thus: "In keeping with their nineteenth-century Protestant heritage, they were fully committed to maintaining and promoting confidently traditional, orthodox Protestant theology and belief, while at the same time becoming confidently and proactively engaged in the intellectual, cultural, social, and political life of the nation."<sup>16</sup> With the formation of the National Association of Evangelicals in 1942, the establishment of Fuller Theological Seminary in 1947, and the increasing popularity of Billy Graham, these new evangelicals created an infrastructure to advance their cause—a cause that Hill's work had always embodied. The new generation of leaders "called for a holistic gospel that would make a difference in every realm of one's life" and they used radio, television, and the book to do it.<sup>17</sup>

In 1950, these new evangelicals took a step toward the creation of this gospel and established the Christian Booksellers Association (CBA) as a "trade association for anyone selling Christian literature."<sup>18</sup> Building on postwar economic growth and the evangelical tradition of media usage, CBA supported the "holistic gospel" through the marketing of Christian books as well as other religious products. Just as their nineteenth-century predecessors used technology to advance

the gospel, CBA provided an organizational resource for producers and retailers to do the same. As a result, many publishers today belong to CBA and view their products as a ministry that generates profits to fund yet other evangelistic and devotional endeavors. For example, Bethany House, which emerged in 1956 from Bethany Fellowship International (a ministry-training and missionary-sending agency), declares that their goal “is to help Christians apply biblical truth in all areas of life—whether through a well-told story, a challenging devotional, or the message of an illustrated children’s book.” The president and CEO of prominent Christian publisher Zondervan (established in 1931 and now a division of HarperCollins) frames the company as a provider of “resources for people of every age and in every stage of life as they seek a richer, more fervent, more enlightened relationship with Jesus Christ.”<sup>19</sup>

Despite evangelicalism’s newfound theological and entrepreneurial commitment to the “holistic gospel,” Hill’s novels remained one of the only sources of Christian romance during this time. However, the broader market for religious books experienced growth and these books sold well in the 1940s. One industry observer reported, “Ink has been a favorite and powerful weapon of religion through the centuries. Ever since the first printing of Gutenberg’s Bible, religion and the printing press have been inseparable allies. That historic alliance has never been more productive than during the year 1949, and, indeed, during the decade just closed.” This success continued in 1950s with Norman Vincent Peale’s *The Power of Positive Thinking* and Billy Graham’s *Peace with God*, but fiction remained secondary and parochial. In contrast to Grace Livingston Hill’s focus on the laity and love, many of the religious novels of the 1950s revolved around ministers and Bible stories. For example, *The Brand New Parson* by Sara Jenkins tells “the story of a young preacher,” Victor MacClure’s *A Certain Woman* revolves around Mary of Bethany, and Faith Baldwin’s *The Whole Armor* chronicles a young pastor’s first year of ministry.<sup>20</sup> Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, religious books continued to meet with success, but during this time Catherine Marshall was one of the few to join Grace Livingston Hill in the field of evangelical romance.<sup>21</sup>

Catherine Marshall (1915–83) had successfully published her late husband's sermons in *A Man Called Peter* and had published some other nonfiction titles as well before McGraw Hill issued her novel *Christy* in 1967. The book chronicles the love story of Christy Huddleston, a young woman called by God to teach school in the Appalachian Mountains of North Carolina. In this isolated mountain area, Christy encounters superstition, hostility, and two handsome men. She endures the hardship of the mountains, grows in her faith, and eventually chooses the fiery Doctor MacNeill over minister David Grantland. This combination of religion and romance, like Hill's, met with success. By December 1967, *Christy* occupied third place on the bestseller list with 121,000 copies in print.<sup>22</sup>

### *Emerging Love: Reclaiming the Evangelical Romance*

Despite the reprinting of Hill's novels and *Christy's* popularity, romance, and fiction as a whole, remained a small segment of the Christian bookselling industry. The rhetoric of "engaged orthodoxy" lauded by this new brand of conservative Protestantism would seemingly embrace inspirational romance, but in reality many evangelicals remained suspicious of fictional formulas and their female authors and fans. Author Carol Gift Page recalls of the mid-1970s, "I knew the Lord had called me to write Christian fiction, but there were no Christian novels, there were virtually no publishers, no Christian publishers that were publishing fiction."<sup>23</sup> Not until later in the decade did this begin to change.

In the late 1970s, evangelical publishing houses established in the 1950s and 1960s, including Bethany House and Tyndale, began to grow and gain success in selling the holistic gospel. For example, Tyndale's publication of *The Living Bible* reaped huge sales; by 1978, it had sold over twenty-three million copies, while Bethany's *The Christian Family* sold a modest one million.<sup>24</sup> An increase in the number of Christian bookstores supported this growth. In the late 1970s, the number of religious bookstores rose to 2,751 (by 1985, they totaled 4,142, and by the mid-1990s, the number leveled around 4,000).<sup>25</sup> The

1970s also saw the unprecedented success of six evangelical books. John P. Ferré reports that “each sold over two million copies, one of each to at least every one hundred Americans. Those remarkable best sellers were *Prison to Praise* and *Power in Praise* by Merlin Carothers, *The Late Great Planet Earth* and *Satan is Alive and Well on Planet Earth* by Hal Lindsey, *Angels* by Billy Graham, and *Joni* by Joni Earekson.” The success of these entrepreneurial endeavors reflected a desire to infuse every part of one’s life with religious meaning. As scholar Colleen McDannell explains, “Christian retailing is possible because consumers refuse to separate the sacred from the profane, the extraordinary from the ordinary, the pious from the trivial. For these consumers, Christianity is intimately bound up in the day-to-day life of the family and its goods.”<sup>26</sup> However, while the above list contains no fiction titles and only one female author, this “boom in evangelical book publishing” provided an opportunity for change. It paved the way for new evangelistic and entrepreneurial endeavors, in areas as diverse as bumper stickers, rock music, and love stories.

The 1970s also witnessed a rise in the popularity of secular romance novels and forced publishers (both secular and Christian) to recognize women as powerful consumers. In 1972, Avon Books published *The Flame and the Flower*, by Kathleen Woodiwiss, and changed the face of the romance industry. Janice Radway reports that “the house’s extraordinary success with Woodiwiss’s novel soon caused industrywide reconsideration of the possibilities of paperback originals as potential bestsellers.” Rather than a gothic romance where the heroine can never quite be sure if her protagonist is hero or villain, Woodiwiss wrote an epic historical romance of the tumultuous love between Heather and Brandon. Full of unwitting misunderstandings, murderous intrigue, and love scenes, her book sparked romance sales and more than previous romances opened the door to graphic sexuality.<sup>27</sup>

It was during this time that evangelical Janette Oke moved from reader to writer. At the age of forty-two, after much prayer and with four teenagers in the house, she transformed her lifelong love of writing into a career. She describes the transition this way: “There wasn’t

much being done in fiction in the Christian market at all. In fact, this was one of the things that sort of spurred me on. I was a reader of fiction, and I really wasn't finding anything to read on the secular shelves." In response, she wrote *Love Comes Softly*. Always interested in the settlement of the West and impressed by the "deep religious faith" of its early settlers, Oke wove this history into the novel. Like Grace Livingston Hill, she combined evangelical Christianity, the Western prairie, and a romantic plot. She wrote of the love between Marty and Clark, a story that contained an evangelical message as faithful Christian Clark shared the gospel with and prayed for his wife, heroine Marty. Her eventual conversion demonstrates the steps to salvation and fulfills, like Hill's earlier work, evangelical aesthetic demands for witnessing. In the preface, Oke writes, "I have shared my thoughts with you in the hope that you will feel inspired to reach out to the all-knowing God."<sup>28</sup>

Initially wanting to market the novel beyond the Christian subculture, Oke sent it to Bantam Books, who promptly returned it. Not deterred, Oke decided to learn more about publishers and publishing. During this period, she recounts, "One day in my devotional time I drew a prayer promise from a little promise box, asking the Lord for direction, and the verse was a very common verse that I had learned as a child. But on the flip side was a little four-line poem, and in the middle of that poem was the word fellowship, but the strange thing about it was that it was capitalized." Unable to understand why it was capitalized in the middle of a sentence, Oke searched for publishing houses with the name fellowship. She found Bethany Fellowship (later Bethany House Publishers) and editor Carol Johnson.<sup>29</sup>

Oke attributes her success to God, an important belief to understand; however, historical developments also explain why Bethany House was willing to take a chance on her prairie romance manuscript. The long history of evangelical media usage, its unprecedented achievements in the 1970s, and the rising popularity of secular romances all contributed to Oke's success. *Love Comes Softly* reflects the heritage of sentimental fiction, the legacy of Hill's religious romance, and the commitment of evangelicals to using media for ministerial

# LOVE COMES SOFTLY

JANETTE OKE

A tragic accident, a grief-stricken young widow, a lonely father and child—a tender story of two hearts broken by despair finding wholeness through patience, loyalty, and faith in God.



Cover of *Love Comes Softly* (1979), by Janette Oke. Reprinted by permission of Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group.

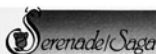
purposes. In addition, Oke's evangelical romance offered publishers a way to build on the existing sales boom, provided readers with an alternative to increasingly sexual secular romances, and maintained the subcultural boundaries surrounding evangelicalism. Bethany's Carol Johnson recalled, "Our first fiction piece that really got attention was Janette Oke's *Love Comes Softly*, which we published in 1979. When it came to us, we were not seeing much happening in Christian fiction in the CBA market. Some Grace Livingston Hills had been around for awhile, and some Catherine Marshalls." With the house's literary efforts dominated by male authors and theological topics, Oke relates that editors Carol Johnson and Jean Mikkelson "had to do a real sell job to get the other members of the committee, which were basically men, to agree to give this book a try." She continues, "It was not the type of thing they had been doing at all, and at that point, no one knew if Christian fiction would sell well." It did. To date, Oke has written over two dozen books and sold over sixteen million copies. Just as Kathleen Woodiwiss revolutionized the secular romance novel industry, Janette Oke transformed the landscape of Christian fiction as she inaugurated the contemporary form of evangelical romance.<sup>30</sup>

In many ways Oke's prairie romances echo Grace Livingston Hill's earlier stories with their handsome heroes, pious but struggling heroines, and happy endings, but unlike Hill, Oke met with a success and popularity that paved the way for other women to enter evangelical romance writing. The difference, it seems, between these two women's impact is time. Hill wrote her novels espousing conservative Protestantism while fundamentalist leaders grappled with the arts and struggled to rebuild their identity. She penned her stories without the benefit of a religious subculture theologically or institutionally committed to her vision. In contrast, the holistic gospel promulgated in the late 1940s had met with unprecedented success by the late 1970s when Oke went to market her manuscript. Not only was the movement growing, but its rising political power and economic potential harked back to the prefundamentalist days of public prominence. These achievements fueled further endeavors in popular culture and growing confidence in its redemptive potential. Consequently, Oke,

unlike Hill, found the theological and practical support that helped make her work successful and allowed other women to follow in her footsteps.

In the wake of Oke's success, other publishers began to venture into evangelical romance and target female readers. Bethany House continued to publish Oke's novels, as well as edited versions of George MacDonald's historical romances, including *The Baronet's Song* in 1983. In 1985, Harvest House began publishing the prairie romances of June Masters Bacher, and Victor published George MacDonald's *The Vicar's Daughter*, "edited for today's reader."<sup>31</sup> However, in 1984 Zondervan took the lead with the launch of their Serenade romance line. Featuring both contemporary and historical novels (in the Serenade/Serenata series and the Serenade/Saga series, respectively), Zondervan set out to publish "romance with a difference." Emphasizing the exotic locales and glamour of "Serenatas" and the evangelical simplicity and courage in "Sagas," Zondervan assured publishers and readers of their "solid Christian standards" and how the novels "radiate the love of God . . . and reveal the harmony of lives united in Him." As seen in their advertisements, Zondervan touted their reasonable prices, attractive characters, and many titles.<sup>32</sup> Other publishers in the late 1980s and into the 1990s followed this pattern and established their own evangelical romance lines—Palisades by Multnomah, HeartQuest by Tyndale, and Heartsong by Barbour.

As these companies embraced the genre and met with success, they carefully integrated inspirational fiction into their corporate and Christian publishing visions. Publishers' statements articulate a rationale for evangelical romance and echo the evangelistic utilitarianism of the past. For example, Tyndale House is animated by a corporate aim "to minister to the spiritual needs of people, primarily through literature consistent with biblical principles." However, their justification of evangelical romance goes into more elaborate detail as it combines specific views about women, evangelization, and fiction. According to their Web site, "the form [of romance] has several characteristics that make it a natural vehicle for conveying Christian



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truths and ministering to women readers. Women are relationship-oriented, and romance novels are about relationships.” The rationale also lauds the optimism of romance novels and explains that “the romance novel with a Christian foundation and worldview provides a wonderful opportunity for sharing biblical truths about love (both human and divine), relationships, family, and the necessity for a person to have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ.” Rather than merely baptizing secular romance novels, Tyndale desires to infuse their books with “clear Christian content that will minister to [readers] in a specific way.”<sup>33</sup> Setting themselves apart from the competition and drawing on a heritage of evangelistic media usage, as well as Hill’s earlier endeavors and Oke’s more recent efforts, Tyndale and other houses successfully tapped this emerging market—evangelical women who read romantic fiction and buy Christian products.

In the world of evangelical popular culture, women wield the almighty dollar. They constitute the overwhelming majority of Christian bookstore consumers. John P. Ferré reports, “The typical reader is a married evangelical woman, 25–49, who lives in the Sun Belt from California to Georgia.” Colleen McDannell’s statistics on Christian retailing yield similar demographic data. Women between ages twenty-five and fifty-four comprised 75 percent of Christian bookstore customers. In addition, these women are usually white, married, and attend church at least once a week; half of them had an income between \$20,000 and \$40,000. For these women, Christian products, including evangelical romance novels, provide a way to bolster their faith, a way to cultivate Christianity in all areas of their lives. Historian Michael Hamilton’s breakdown of evangelical spending further demonstrates women’s commitment to the “holistic gospel.” He found that “for every dollar evangelicals spend on political organizations, they spend almost \$12 on foreign missions and international relief and development; they spend another \$13 in evangelical book and music stores; they spend almost \$25 on evangelical higher education; and they spend almost \$31 on private elementary and secondary schools.”<sup>34</sup> Hamilton’s statistics show just how much of evangelicals’ funds go toward instilling faith in one’s family. Through products and

schooling, parents hope to enhance their own beliefs and pass them on to their children.

As the religious bestseller lists attest, conservative Protestant women read and evangelical romances sell. In March 1987, despite competition from popular male authors such as James Dobson, C. S. Lewis, and Charles Swindoll, Janette Oke's *When Hope Springs New* occupied first place among paperback religious bestsellers. Similarly, in 1989, Janette Oke occupied second and fifth place with her novels *Love Takes Wing* and *Winter Is Not Forever*. The genre's success continued in the 1990s. The religious book publishing industry saw a 6.3 percent increase in sales between 1987 and 1996, a 4 percent increase between 1997 and 1998, and another 3.3 percent increase in 1999.<sup>35</sup> While the growth rate may have slowed during the 1990s, the industry continues to do well. In 1994, coinciding with the advent of the *Christy* television series, consumers purchased over a million copies of the reprinted novel. In 1995, Oke's *A Gown of Spanish Lace* sold over 100,000 copies; a year later sales of her *Drums of Change* totaled over 200,000, and *Return to Harmony*, co-authored with T. David Bunn, sold more than 180,000 copies. In 1996 Lori Wick also reached a measure of popularity as readers bought over 100,000 copies of *Where the Wild Rose Blooms* and 80,000 copies of *Whispers of Moonlight*.<sup>36</sup> In 1997 Beverly Lewis joined Oke and Wick at the top of evangelical romance sales with *The Shunning* (over 100,000 copies sold). *The Confession*, also by Lewis, sold in excess of 75,000 the same year, and another 178,000 in 1998, a number matched by her novel *The Reckoning*. 1997 also saw the success of Francine Rivers's *Redeeming Love*, as readers purchased more than 55,000 copies. And in 1999, two of Lori Wick's novels, *Princess* and *Every Little Thing About You*, passed the 100,000 mark. Furthermore, Janette Oke, Beverly Lewis, and Lori Wick all had titles among the top ten best-selling Christian fiction books of 2000.<sup>37</sup>

### *Negotiating Faith: Reexamining the Evangelical Romance*

Despite the popularity of evangelical romances, in many ways they remain, like Hill's earlier work, overlooked or invisible in the evan-

gical subculture. For example, an examination of *Christianity Today* reveals numerous articles relevant to evangelical women's lives, including marriage, abortion, genetics, and homosexuality, but few treatments, other than brief reviews, of evangelical romance. Even though Oke had been published for over ten years, a 1991 review of her novel *A Woman Named Damaris* seemed unfamiliar with and uncertain about her work. Struggling to categorize the novel, the reviewer calls it "a sort of woman's western" and spells Oke's first name incorrectly (Janet instead of Janette). Further, in an April 2002 article on the success of evangelical publishing, entitled "No Longer Left Behind," the genre is virtually absent. Oke's work garners only one paragraph in an eight-page spread. Overshadowed by the male-authored "Left Behind" series, as well as the works of Frank Peretti and Bruce Wilkinson, female authors and evangelical romances barely merit a mention. The genre receives equally little attention in the evangelical periodical *Today's Christian Woman*. Despite numerous articles on sex and marriage, including "He's Lost that Lovin' Feeling" and "Five Questions Women Ask About Sex," there is scant mention of evangelical romance novels.<sup>38</sup>

In addition to enduring industry silence, the genre also faces a stigma. Evangelical romance authors have expressed their frustration with how other conservative Protestants view their literary endeavors. One author simply states, "Romance is just looked down on." Another refers to it as the "stepchild" of Christian fiction, and Janette Oke relates, "I think there are a number who still feel that what we should be spending our time reading is nonfiction, self-help, and devotional study books." Similarly, when asked what she would change about the Christian romance-publishing industry, author Robin Jones Gunn answered: "the perception of the genre." She continued, "We got mail, verses quoted at us, what a degradation we were to the industry." This stigma also revealed itself as she led a CBA workshop featuring a panel of evangelical romance authors. According to Gunn, one workshop participant asked author Lori Wick why she was on the panel, implying that her work was not romance, that it was "too good for that." Although Wick replied, "My books are romances, they're love stories,"

the participant responded to the effect of, “No, we highly value you, and we wouldn’t lower you to that genre.”<sup>39</sup>

Despite the novels’ popularity and their embodiment of the holistic gospel, the genre remains suspect, its authors ignored, and its readers absent. Why have industry observers focused on the success of “Left Behind,” rather than *Love Comes Softly*? Why is the genre ignored in *Today’s Christian Woman*, and why must its authors defend their vocation? A quick answer might simply invoke the gender hierarchy that pervades evangelicalism. Whether in charge of the pulpit or the pen, men continue to occupy the visible and audible leadership roles in the subculture. As a result, a genre dominated by women as authors and readers remains unnoticed and seemingly unimportant. While compelling on one level, this explanation obscures the complicated ways that art, theology, and gender combine to make the genre at once successful and suspect.

Uncertainties about the arts as a whole do not account for the suspicions facing the genre, as evangelicals—from their mid-century emergence as a subculture—have used the Bible to establish a positive view of the arts. Prominent evangelicals, including Frank Gaebelein and Francis Schaeffer, established a theology of the arts that continues to guide the movement today. The arts, they argued, are biblical. From the beginning of the Bible, God showed himself to be a creator. God made the world and it was good, beautiful, and functional.<sup>40</sup> Further, humanity, as a part of creation and a reflection of God, shares in this ability. Gaebelein wrote, “Art belongs to the only creature made in the image of God, the only creature to whom is given in a limited but real extent the gift of creativity, even though the gift is marred in fallen human nature.” He continued, “The image of God in us has its ‘creative’ or ‘making’ aspect.”<sup>41</sup> These theologians argued that a doctrine of stewardship also justifies artistic endeavors. The idea of stewardship—caring for and cultivating that which one has been given—governs a believer’s talents and time. As a result, *imago dei* demands the nurture and use of one’s gifts, whether preaching sermons or writing poetry, just as the faithful servants of Matthew 25 multiplied their talents. Further, recognizing that involvement with

the arts generally accompanies the presence of free time, evangelicals insisted upon the goodness of leisure and the necessity of using it wisely. In this, they again appealed to Genesis, specifically to God's rest during the seventh day. According to Leland Ryken, "God's rest after creation sanctified the aesthetic acts of celebration and enjoyment." However, given humanity's fallen state, faithful Christians need to use their time and talents wisely: "Always there goes with stewardship the inevitability of finally giving an account of what has been committed to us and being judged on how we have used it."<sup>42</sup> This mandate demands, according to these evangelical upholders of the arts, the best of one's self. "The compelling motive for Christian action in the field of aesthetics lies in the nature of God. Christians are obligated to excellence because God himself is supremely excellent."<sup>43</sup>

Evangelical excellence, however, is not an uncontested terrain. While many conservative Protestants revel in the plethora of products that affirm or expand their faith, others within the subculture find it a morass of mediocrity. Franky Schaeffer, in *Addicted to Mediocrity*, laments the present state of evangelical popular culture and indicts its betrayal of Christian obligations to excellence and stewardship. He writes, "One could sum it up by saying that the modern Christian world and what is known as evangelicalism in general is marked, in the area of arts and cultural endeavor, by one outstanding feature, and that is its addiction to mediocrity." He continues, "The price is the ludicrous defacing of God's image before the world. The price is abusing and manipulating God-given talents by turning them into mere useful tools." Similarly, Frank Gaebelein asked, "Where are the first-rate Christian novels and poems?" He continued, "If there is, as we have seen, tension between many evangelicals and the aesthetic aspect of life, the reason lies in a contented ignorance of much that is aesthetically worthy and satisfaction with the mediocre because it is familiar."<sup>44</sup> According to these standards, contemporary evangelical romance novels represent mediocre literature, one more example of evangelicalism's artistic weaknesses.

For these aestheticians, artistic failures point to even more serious spiritual flaws. Whether criticizing “second-rate” rock and roll or “formulaic” romantic fiction, evangelical theologians of the arts claim that these endeavors not only deny God’s excellence, but also God’s truth. First, they argue, “All truth is God’s truth,” and its manifestations may not always occur through Christians and their artistic endeavors. Accordingly, the so-called evangelical ghetto, the tendency to partake only of the subculture’s products, at least implicitly denies the universality of God’s truth and the integrity of God’s revelation: “There is no Christian world, no secular world,” writes Franky Schaeffer, “these are just words. There is only one world—the world God made.”<sup>45</sup> Second, evangelical critics argue that substandard art is inherently a lie. Not only does mediocrity inhibit excellence, but it also falsifies and misrepresents reality. “Art that distorts the truth is no more pleasing to God than any other kind of untruth,” Gaebelein argued. He went on to state, “We must see the real distinction is between the true and the false, which means in the arts the distinction between what has integrity and so speaks truly and what is pretentious or sentimental, vulgar or shoddy, and thus is false.”<sup>46</sup>

For critics, evangelical or otherwise, the combination of a romantic formula and an optimistic faith mean sentimentality, a “perverse perfection” that denies the realities and complexities of life. At best, this combination exhibits a lack of aesthetic taste; at worst it represents a failure of moral judgment. In his article “On Kitsch and Sentimentality” Robert Solomon explores the relationship between these two concepts and cites six main criticisms of sentimental kitsch. According to Solomon, four of the six indictments revolve around emotion, ranging from claims that sentimental kitsch manipulates emotions to charges that it provokes excessive, false, and easy emotions. Criticisms five and six charge that sentimental kitsch is “self-indulgent and interferes with appropriate behavior” and that it “distorts our perceptions and interferes with rational thought and an adequate understanding of the world.”<sup>47</sup> In this view, popular culture becomes an agent of pacification and oppression.

Previous studies of the romance novel reveal traces of these criticisms. On an aesthetic level, scholars have never lauded the literary excellence of contemporary romance novels, and on a practical level, many have argued that they may inhibit women's power and prevent social change. For example, Kay Mussell maintains that through reading romance novels women "escape from powerlessness, from meaninglessness, and from lack of self-esteem and identity." Their escape, however, is limited: "Romance novels work as a conservative force, palliating and ameliorating the effects of chaos and change by portraying traditional modes of being and aspiration as more fulfilling and exciting than they may seem in reality." Similarly, Tania Modleski writes, "Women escape, disappear into the world of Harlequin Romances, which, like the real one, insists upon and rewards feminine selflessness." And early in her monograph, Modleski states, "In exploring female romantic fantasies, I want to look at the varied and complex strategies women use to adapt to circumscribed lives and to convince themselves that limitations are really opportunities."<sup>48</sup> Further, in *Reading the Romance*, Janice Radway gives a careful and balanced interpretation of romance reading, but concludes that "the women who seek out ideal novels in order to construct such a vision again and again are reading not out of contentment but out of dissatisfaction, longing, and protest." She goes on to suggest that reading itself "may be cathartic" but "it is tempting to suggest that romantic fiction must be an active agent in the maintenance of the ideological status quo because it ultimately reconciles women to patriarchal society and reintegrates them with its institutions."<sup>49</sup>

These criticisms and explanations illuminate one dimension of the complicated story that is evangelical romance. The novels do not exhibit literary excellence, embrace a feminist politics, or encourage a liberal faith. Rather, they rely on formulaic plots, reaffirm heterosexual marriage, and revere evangelical piety. However, it is the unique combination of these very components that sets the genre apart within evangelicalism (and from other types of romance) and demands our attention. In contrast to other more unisex products,

such as contemporary Christian music or children's Christian videos, and unlike the religio-artistic ideals proposed by men like Frank Gaebelein, the evangelical romance offers a distinctly female devotion in both its form and its faith. Not only is the genre written and read by women, but it also utilizes a fictional formula and a sentimental piety designated as feminine. It is this combination that makes the novels problematic for evangelical aestheticians and some academics while simultaneously popular with many evangelical women.

The stories, like their nineteenth-century predecessors and Hill's transitional endeavors, focus on women's lives and experiences. They foreground the ideals and institutions that, while contested, continue to shape the lives of American evangelical women: romantic love, heterosexual marriage, and conservative piety. While perhaps predictable in their plots and pedestrian in their execution, the novels appeal to women by affirming the reality of heterosexual love and happy endings. Overlaying this plot with sentimental piety further encodes these narratives as feminine. Just as the love story ends happily, so too does the religious plot end triumphantly. Sinful heroes convert, bitter heroines forgive, and struggling Christians succeed. Erling Jorstad describes the pattern this way: "The key virtue seems to be patience with the understanding through religious faith that all things will work to the good of those who follow God's way for them."<sup>50</sup> In effect, the novels apply Romans 8:28—"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him"—to the romantic and religious lives of evangelical women. The genre upholds the belief that in the end everything will work out.

Throughout the history of these combinations of Christianity and romance, a religio-romantic happy ending has remained constant. For example, in nineteenth-century sentimental novels, the heroine has "the guarantee that God will provide her with inner strength if she turns to him." Similarly, when questioned about her ever-optimistic endings, Grace Livingston Hill replied, "I feel that there is enough sadness in the world. So I try to end all of my books as beautifully as possible, since that is God's way—and the best way."<sup>51</sup> Even as Hill ac-

knowledged the reality of sorrow, and experienced it in her own life with her first husband's death and her second husband's desertion, she wrote novels that celebrated temporal happiness and an eternal hope. Such a vision likewise permeates Janette Oke's *Love Comes Softly*. Not only does Marty convert, but together, Marty and Clark rear their family in the faith and see their children find Christian spouses—a journey readers can follow in subsequent volumes in the series, including *Love's Long Journey* and *Love's Unending Legacy*. For these authors, the very aesthetic condemned by critics is the one they feel called by God to convey.

The theology of “all things work for good” conveyed through romantic fiction may also explain, in part, why some women do not read the novels. For some evangelical women, the novels simply do not appeal to them artistically or theologically. It seems a divide exists between those who read romance novels and those who do not. As secular romance author Jayne Ann Krentz writes, “No one who reads or writes romance expects to be able to teach critics to appreciate the novels. As any romance reader or writer will tell you, a reader either enjoys the novels or she does not.”<sup>52</sup> In addition, the genre's commitment to religio-romantic triumph may explain, in part, the racial divide that characterizes the genre's authorship and readership. Evangelical romance, as well as evangelical popular culture as a whole, is predominantly white. Not surprisingly then, many of the African American churches I called and African American women I talked with did not know that evangelical romances existed. However, for many of those African American women who do frequent the Christian bookstore, the genre's emphasis on success and triumph, as well as its covers featuring white heroes and heroines, may simply be too unrealistic, too divergent from their experiences.<sup>53</sup>

Some have never heard of evangelical romance, some criticize it, while others refuse to read it. In light of these varied responses and the stigma characterizing the genre, the question remains: why do some evangelical women choose to read these novels? The following chapters address this question as they explore the complicated rationale for my consultants' fictional devotion. Rather than condemn the

novels for their literary weaknesses or feminist failings, this study examines how and why women read evangelical romance novels. Taking their answers to these questions seriously illuminates not only the complex relationship between reader and text but also how these women negotiate everyday evangelical life through the act of reading.