

Art you can believe in: Artists outside the church and within it

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [April 7, 2009](#) issue

In December, the arts-and-faith journal Image published its 20th-anniversary edition, showcasing the work of poets, short-story writers, theologians and essayists as well as visual artists. Under the direction of Gregory Wolfe, Image has become one of the top-ten best-selling literary journals in the U.S. The quarterly is published by the Center for Religious Humanism, based at Seattle Pacific University.

Wolfe also hosts a summer workshop for writers and artists and directs a master's in fine arts program for aspiring writers. Wolfe is the author of Intruding Upon the Timeless, Malcom Muggeridge: A Biography, The New Religious Humanists: A Reader and Sacred Passion: The Art of William Schickel, among other works. He is currently researching a book about Erasmus. A collection of his essays, tentatively titled Beauty Will Save the World, will be published this year.

How did *Image* get started?

Twenty years ago, conversations my wife, Suzanne, and I were having with like-minded friends, including co-founder Harold Fickett, revolved around the ways that Christians were interacting—or not interacting—with culture. By 1989 the culture wars had been raging for nearly a decade.

As we surveyed the cultural landscape, we noted the irony that large numbers of both secularists and religious believers shared an identical notion: great art and literature inspired by faith could no longer be created. Secularists, leaning on Freud, thought that because religion was fantasy and great art was about reality, never the twain should meet. The pious had an almost Gnostic attitude: they believed we lived in an era when art was utterly corrupt, so that nothing good could come from the realm of high art.

To set down our countervision, we wrote what I can only call a charmingly utopian prospectus. It sketched out a sprawling array of programs, including not only a

quarterly journal but a summer workshop, postgraduate fellowships for artists and writers, an MFA program—even an artists’ colony. We stepped back and realized we couldn’t possibly tackle all that. But I knew something about publishing, so a journal seemed the best way to connect people far and wide, to establish community and the sort of cross-fertilization that a publication can foster.

Slowly, over the years, we continued to add elements from that prospectus. Now we have most of those programs in place—the Glen Workshop, the Milton Center Fellowship, the Seattle Pacific University MFA in Creative Writing. The artists’ colony, I suspect, may be a few years away.

What is *Image*’s mission and who is its audience?

To showcase fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction, art, music and other works of art that engage, at some level, with the ancient tradition that Walker Percy once summarized as the “God Jews Jesus Church.” From the beginning we were convinced that *Image* should give primacy to original creative work. There were innumerable journals dominated by political and critical discourse; the creative voice was being drowned out.

Another important element of our vision was that we wanted to freely mingle artists and writers who were at home with creed, church and synagogue with those who felt they were on the outside looking in but who nonetheless seriously grappled with matters of faith.

The goal was to produce a publication that could hold its own with the *Paris Review* and the *New Yorker*—to take its place on the public square. We don’t believe that art informed by faith is the only art worth engaging, but at the same time we feel that that most ancient of connections remains alive and well, even in an allegedly post-Christian world. *Image* exists to demonstrate this.

How is the business of the magazine going—that is, how is it going financially and in terms of circulation? What are the challenges of a literary and art journal in the current economic environment?

Business isn’t the word I’d use! Even before the economic downturn we struggled with the decline of serious reading—the sort of trend chronicled in recent studies commissioned by the National Endowment for the Arts. Sad to say, it’s hard to get many people to believe that reading a 5,000-word short story can be a hugely

rewarding, heart-and-mind-expanding experience.

Another problem we have stems from one of our virtues: *Image* deliberately transcends many of the niches in our society—niches where money and power tend to accumulate. We're neither the evangelical nor the Catholic journal of the arts. We're neither neoconservative nor New Left. We don't advocate realism over abstraction in painting or vice versa. And yet each of these causes and communities likes to support its own. You have to have a fairly broad vision to believe *Image* is worth supporting. So the sort of patrons who make what we do possible come along passing slow.

How have attitudes about art changed in religious communities over the past 20 years?

Though the culture wars are still with us, there has been a widespread reaction to the hyperpoliticization of society. The culturally separatist mentality that created the Christian subculture—with its own publishing companies, record labels, etc.—has been decisively rejected by many younger believers. I get big laughs on Christian college campuses when I describe the ways that the subculture has cranked out knock-offs of pop culture—Christian romance novels, techno-thrillers, hip-hop records and so on. These kids recognize that the attempt to insert Christian messages in pop culture generates nothing more than didactic drivel.

More and more churches, for example, have spawned their own book clubs—and more often than not they read mainstream books. Many churches in North America now have permanent exhibition space for visual art, sometimes within the sanctuary itself. The list could go on and on.

Conversely, how have attitudes about religion changed in artistic communities?

It's hard to generalize, but I would venture that even among doubters and secularists there is more awareness of, and respect for, writing and art that struggle with faith than when we started *Image* in 1989.

Each year *Image* sets up a booth at the Associated Writing Programs convention—it's a huge annual gathering of creative writers, independent literary publishers, and print and online journals. Thousands of people attend AWP. And we do great business there. It's just clear from the way we interact with our peers that

Image is perceived as belonging to the guild.

That's not to say there aren't plenty of pockets of skepticism or even derision when it comes to the way artists and writers perceive religion. But my sense is that *Image's* willingness to embrace a wide diversity of approaches, styles and stances makes it inviting and intriguing. Even in that most hermetically sealed of artistic enclaves—the New York visual art scene—an unabashed evangelical like painter Makoto Fujimura is having an impact. Times are changing.

When you are reading over submissions to *Image*, how do you know when something matches your vision? What do you see in those pieces that evokes an unequivocal yes?

I'm hoping to be surprised. The religious sense is something deeply embedded in human nature. Art involves the exploration of our humanity. In the process, it digs up religious questions.

We decided long ago that we were not going to simply publish short stories about troubled youth ministers and poems about Lot's wife. We once published a dark story about a philandering husband who takes his family on a vacation to a beach in France, where he discovers his daughter *in flagrante delicto* with a local youth. Some questioned our publication of that story, but to our way of thinking it seemed to resonate pretty well with "the sins of the fathers" and the "wages of sin."

Are there signs of a revival in Christian fiction? Where do you find fresh literature emerging that deals with themes of forgiveness or of social injustice? Can you let us know some writers we should look out for?

A strong case could be made that two of our greatest living novelists—Cormac McCarthy and Marilynne Robinson—are either possessed of faith or are haunted by it. Of course, they, along with figures like John Updike, Reynolds Price, Larry Woiwode and Doris Betts, are of an older generation.

Among younger fiction writers I would single out Gina Ochsner, whose stories range from stark naturalism to magical realism; Robert Clark, Alice McDermott and Ron Hansen, Catholic writers who work the tragic vein à la Graham Greene and Georges Bernanos; Erin McGraw and Valerie Sayers, two of our best comic writers; southerners like Moira Crone and A. G. Harmon; and the up-and-coming David McGlynn and Tom Noyes.

Established poets like Paul Mariani, Scott Cairns, B. H. Fairchild and Jeanne Murray Walker are still going strong. And I'd urge readers to search out the work of Martha Serpas, Nick Samaras, Daniel Tobin, Robert Cording and Kate Daniels.

Among writers of creative nonfiction, there are giants like Annie Dillard, Richard Rodriguez, Kathleen Norris, Anne Lamott, Thomas Lynch and Patricia Hampl. But look for David Griffith, Jessica Mesman Griffith, Lindsey Crittenden, Leslie Leyland Fields and Kelly Foster.

Many of these writers have been featured as Artists of the Month on the *Image* Web site, imagejournal.org.