

Tebow is top religion author of 2011

by [G. Jeffrey MacDonald](#)

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(RNS) Critics have hammered Denver Broncos quarterback Tim Tebow for everything from his throwing style to his trademark professions of evangelical faith. But this much is now beyond dispute: the guy has a gift for selling books.

Tebow's Christian life story, "Through My Eyes," has become the top-selling new release of 2011 from HarperOne, a leading religion book publisher. With 220,000 copies sold since its June launch, "Through My Eyes" has even outsold Rob Bell's best-seller "Love Wins," which sparked intense debate with its unorthodox views about hell.

As soon as "Through My Eyes" hit bookstores, it was a hit with Christian football fans, especially in the Southeast where Tebow won the Heisman Trophy for the University of Florida. But an uncanny series of late-in-the-game Broncos wins fed a blitz of national attention and fueled curiosity about one of the most outspoken Christian athletes.

Readership "is beyond the evangelical world and NFL fans now," said Mark Tauber, senior vice president and publisher at HarperOne. "There's just sort of a general intrigue about what drives this guy."

With scriptural quotes introducing each chapter, "Through My Eyes" tells the back story of an unlikely athlete whose coaches said he'd never make it as a quarterback.

Home-schooled as a child, Tebow wasn't allowed to watch TV until he'd memorized a

set of verses from Psalms and Proverbs. And because humility was a virtue, boasting was forbidden. The Tebow kids could discuss their playing field feats only if someone asked about them.

Such wholesome tidbits seem to be striking a chord with readers. Despite publishing such big names as Brian McLaren and John Dominic Crossan, HarperOne hasn't had a book do this well since Sidney Poitier's "The Measure of a Man" was anointed by the Oprah Book Club in 2007.

NFL wins, however, can do wonders for religion book sales. When Tebow became the Broncos' starter in October, weekly sales picked up to about 2,000. With win after win, weekly numbers surged to 6,000, then 11,000. For the week ending Dec. 18, sales topped 25,000.

Though the Broncos' winning streak ended Sunday (Dec. 18), HarperOne is betting sales will stay brisk into the offseason, when Tebow will be available for media interviews and speaking events. The publisher now has 475,000 copies in print.

"We've had a number of accounts say, 'We're betting on this guy into January, February and beyond' and their orders are evidence of that," Tauber said. "So I don't think 475,000 is at all where we're going to stop. I know it's not."