

# The American Century and Its Evangelical Christian Fiction Legacy

by Marisa Ronan

**Marisa Ronan investigates how the ideology of the “American Century” became enmeshed in the emergence of a distinct evangelical Christian fiction genre. By positioning the End Times narrative within an identifiably American experience, evangelicals sought to locate America’s destiny within a biblically ordained narrative of American Exceptionalism that drew heavily upon the geopolitical developments of the time. The article explores the origins of the “American Century” as a concept, from its earliest appearance in Henry R. Luce’s 1941 editorial, to how it became, for evangelical writers and theologians, a useful entry point into the political sphere and a way to encode their writing with an ever increasing sense of urgency. In focusing on the writings of Frank Peretti, Tim LaHaye, and Jerry Jenkins, Ronan seeks to establish how the novels that found greatest popular success were those which were fully entrenched in the “American Century” narrative.**

Much has been written about the “American Century,” the purported economic, political, and cultural dominance of the United States of America during the twentieth century. The concept of the “American Century,” intrinsically tied to the central tenets of American Exceptionalism, linked the future of the nation with a core belief in the country’s status as a Christian nation. The early years of the twenty-first century, marked by George W. Bush’s triumphalism, the penetration of the nation’s borders, a faltering sense of security, through to the entering into war in Iraq, recoded the very language of Exceptionalism and brought to the fore the question: Will the twenty-first century be American? While the Exceptionalist narrative of the “American Century” has been, if not discounted, at the very least undermined, its central religiosity, the marriage between nationhood, its faith, and futurity recasts the tenets of twenty-first century American Exceptionalism in familiar terms. Nowhere clearer is this seen than in the pages of evangelical Christian fiction.

Traditional scholarship exploring American Exceptionalism and the power and influence of the nation’s Puritan heritage has been slow to dissipate and still influences much of contemporary scholarship. Despite Henry F. May’s call in 1964 for a recovery of American religious history and Daniel T. Rodgers’ observation of the inherent limits of Exceptionalism for American religious studies, at least it has proven difficult to shrug off the link between American religiosity and its Exceptionalisms, so intrinsically are the two tied. While the secularization myth was challenged by Martin E. Marty as early as the 1950s and later by Robert Wuthnow in the late 1980s, there remained a reluctance to transcend the scholarly focus on the primacy of Exceptionalism and secular/religious dichotomies maybe due to the fact that much of evangelical theology and writing, both fiction and non-fiction, defines itself in these very terms. The emergence of the Christian fiction literary tradition drew heavily on the “American Century” belief in national supremacy and the mission of an historic covenant with God, echoing centuries-old American Exceptionalism. The “American Century” marked a defining era of evangelical narrative creation, which saw the growth of a Christian publishing empire that solidified its success and worked as a tactical offense against rising pressures asserted by the canons of secular modernity.

Evangelical Christian fiction is anchored in the “American Century” from whence it emerged with great force and popularity as a distinct Christian literary narrative of religious, cultural, and spiritual warfare that developed in the face of the perceived threat from the secularization of America. Andrew Bacevich suggests that in “its classic formulation, the central theme of the American Century has been one of righteousness overcoming evil,” a narrative that dominated twentieth-century evangelical literary production (1). Evangelicals shored up their faith by “othering” those outside of their belief system. The creation of symbolic boundaries ensured that those who were a threat to evangelicalism were clearly marked as dangerous, a menace to the very trajectory of the “American Century.” The “American Century” was, in Luigi Barzini’s words, defined by a “spiritual wind that drove the Americans irresistibly ahead from the beginning [...] to improve a man’s lot with an all-pervading sense of religious duty, the submission to a God-given imperative, to a God-given code of personal behaviour, the willing acceptance

of all necessary sacrifices, including death in battle” (Coddington 278). For evangelicals, the fate of America would be a battle fought in the name of God and nation.

The “American Century” and its central exceptionalisms was influential in shaping the narrative production of Christian fiction, mirroring Henry R. Luce’s ideology of America’s redemptive destiny as intrinsically linked to its role as the “vanguard of history, guiding spirit and inspiration for all humankind” (Bacevich 2). In his infamous 1941 editorial, *Time-Life* editor Henry R. Luce, born in China, as the son of a Presbyterian missionary, announced the dawn of the “American Century,” wherein he saw the nation’s destiny as one bound to the post-World War II spread of Christianity, capitalism, and an expansive vision of America’s global influence. His views on American glory were supported even by Winston Churchill, who told the House of Commons at the end of World War II that “America stands at this moment at the summit of the world” (Hoff 94). The term “American Century” became a way to categorize the twentieth century as one of American dominance, linking American Exceptionalism to a distinct era.

The “American Century” became the manifestation of centuries of work, the realization of John Winthrop’s metaphor of a “city upon a hill.” For Luce, American futurity, its position in the global order, had—as the Puritan forefathers asserted—been preordained, and the “American Century” would finally see the nation take its seat at the head of the global table. Luce’s brand of American Exceptionalism was indelibly tied to his Protestant Christianity. He feared that Americans would “postpone or cancel their appointment with [their] redemptive destiny” (McCarragher 89), linking America’s fate to its Puritan origins but with the warning that all could still be lost. This language and a rising fear that America may scupper its preordained destiny feature widely in the Christian fiction that rose out of the twentieth century.

The evangelical literary sphere slowly saw prominence in the early twentieth century with a distinct movement from the publishing of tracts and sermons to the celebration of the fiction form as a new avenue in which to proselytize. The evangelical separatism that classified the early years of the twentieth century was shrugged off in favor of organized political engagement. Just as Luce heralded the United States’ rejection of isolationism as the nation’s only true path to glory, so too were evangelicals seeking a clearer public presence by adopting the monomyth of the Embattled Christian Soldier to instill a sense of urgency in the faithful. The fight for Christian dominance on a national scale was translated into an epic narrative of the embattled searching to enact world change and ensure global supremacy, a genre which echoes the “American Century” ideology of historical duty and the immediacy of the need for action. World War II had given evangelicals the opportunity to denounce German biblical criticism while drawing on nationalistic fervor. While evangelicals successfully moved into the public domain through replacing cultural resistance with cultural appropriation, a movement closer to mimesis than true assimilation. In fact, the challenge of separatism often became the very focus of evangelical narratives that cite a need for greater acculturation when warning their readers of the unmitigated danger of such an endeavor.

## Early Prophecy and End Time Fiction

The trope of a besieged believer in popular Christian fiction can be traced back to Joshua Hill Foster’s *The Judgment Day: A Study of the Seven Years of Tribulation* (1910). Crawford Gribben suggests that Foster established the basic pattern of the prophecy fiction genre and provided it with theological respectability: “confirming its Protestant and evangelical credentials and establishing its stock themes and a number of stock characters” (54). *Judgment Day* charts the progress of Doctor Bland, a New York pastor, who embraces dispensationalism and through measured oration and an emphasis on literal hermeneutics details the perils of the end of days. *Judgment Day* essentially charts the early twentieth-century evangelical subculturism, which later authors would capitalize upon, in what can be viewed as the “culture wars” narrative that occupies much of the genre. The novel’s focus on the present-tense description of the End of Days provides not only Foster but subsequent authors with a radical and immediate concern with the Last Judgment. Moreover, this positioning of the End Times narrative within a distinctly American experience sought to locate America’s destiny within a biblically ordained narrative of American Exceptionalism. In this way America could act as the beacon of Christianity and hope on a global scale: any turning away from its Christian heritage could then be read as facilitating the End of Days. Ultimately, America could be both, a bastion of Christian good— a “city upon a hill”— and a part of the apocalyptic narrative; America’s and Christianity’s centrality, indeed its Exceptionalism is thus confirmed.

## The Fulfillment of Biblical Prophecy

The liberation of Jerusalem by the British in 1917 rallied evangelicals under the banner of a dispensationalist belief system that saw the event as a fulfillment of biblical prophecy. The Bolshevik Revolution that followed further compounded prophecy belief. The rise of Communism created in the evangelical mind an axis that positioned Russia as the enemy from the North that would threaten the newly restored Israel in a narrative that appeared to be plucked straight from the Book of Ezekiel. To make sense of the international climate and the belief that the End of Days was under way, many took to Christian fiction to fictionalize, through a reliance on prophecy readings, what the end might look like. Evangelical writers also used the literary genre of Christian fiction to chastise their flock and warn of the threats within and beyond America's borders. Read this way, the evangelical literary tradition can be seen to have acted as a proponent of national Exceptionalism and as a facilitator of an "American Century" that would, in their eyes, be built by Christian soldiers.

## **Restructuring Mainstream Publishing Genres**

Throughout the early decades of the twentieth century the Christian novel existed within mainstream publishing and was a staple of public libraries. The social gospel, popularized by Charles Sheldon and Harold Bell Wright, characterized early evangelical literary expression depicting often beleaguered Christians on personal missions. The popularity of the novel form allowed evangelical writers to locate and address the concerns of many Americans. By the mid-century, however, the secularization of literature corresponded with the growing dissatisfaction with organized faith, and thus orthodoxy drew Christian fiction into a classification of its own. The emergence of evangelical Christian fiction as a distinct genre acted, through cultural appropriation, to recreate and restructure mainstream publishing genres and narrative motifs to be governed by specific evangelical codes. The 1950s, as a period wherein American faith in progress face the challenges of the Cold War and nuclear proliferation, appeared to manifest geopolitically and technologically the threat of the end times: "The atomic bomb played an indispensable role in the premillennial conception of the world in the Cold War" (Lahr 25). Russia, already a fixture of such fears, became a ready enemy on which to draw. This served to heighten a sense of immediacy for both the goals of the "American Century" and the monomyth of the Embattled Christian Soldier. The premillennial dispensationalist narrative became a powerful apparatus through which to code the tumultuous Cold War era as allied to America's destiny: a threat to America was to entice the end of History itself. While a weakening of faith remained in society more broadly, the uncertainty of the decade compelled many evangelicals to hold on more firmly onto their evangelical Christian faith and to politicize their goals. The politics of the day led to the production of a patriotic Christian fiction narrative that purposely positioned itself against the godlessness of the rising Communist threat. James Davison Hunter argues that the post-1960s period became for evangelicalism a Third Great Awakening.

## **Entering the Political Sphere**

Billy Graham exploited the resolute Christianization of American Exceptionalism by turning to radio stations and television broadcasts to "demonstrate that Fundamentalism was not dead but in fact held the key to the return of law, order, decency and national progress" (McCloughlin 186). He was supported by Henry R. Luce, who provided together with William Randolph Hearst vital media coverage ensuring Graham received favorable coverage in both *Time* and *Life*: "They were also impressed by the combination of his message of spiritual renewal and his strong anti-communist politics. Hearst sent his editors a telegram with the two-word order, 'Puff Graham'" ("Unpublished Photos" #1). Graham achieved not only access to the public domain but also, crucially, entry into the political sphere, thus becoming an unofficial chaplain to Eisenhower and Nixon and gaining admission into the White House that remained for decades. He drew on the Cold War fears of the American public, instilling within his speeches a sense of urgency and responsibility that was entwined with premillennialist dispensationalist overtones. The Red Scare held within it a watershed moment in which evangelical faith stood to take center stage, expounding the virtues of a nation state tied as it was to its historic Christian character, one which provided the ultimate defense against the heathen enemy from the east. Details of the Communist threat were written by an evangelical hand eager to instill the American predestinarian belief once again, seeking to create a distinctly Christian "American Century."

Evangelical Christian fiction centers upon a theological methodology that structures the narrative in pursuit of a specific end, that of conversion or the espousal of evangelical doctrine. Lawrence Moore highlights how the "ebullient, moralistic, paternalistic language of 'The American Century' echoed in many ways a missionary credo

[...] of America's late twentieth century global missions" (10). Luce's early editorial on the "American Century" contained a religiously infused language of imperialism, prestige, destiny, and redemption that mirrors the construction of an evangelical literature that would call forth the pressing cause of the war on secularism. Here, American evangelicals would rebuild the world order in their image through an American Christian system of faith, mimicking Luce's language of expansionism and preordination that had taken flight. Stephen J. Whitfield highlights how "[t]he American Century had to reckon with the shock of the economic devastation of home and with military peril from abroad. By formulating a definition of national purpose, [Luce's] editorial exemplified the wider struggle to celebrate the nation's virtues and to reclaim its past" (90). As such, it set the tone for how the "American Century" would be codified, drawing on a long history of American Exceptionalism that could be recoded by evangelical writers and theologians for a contemporary audience.

The national anxiety and lassitude depicted by Luce in his essay is reflected in Christian fiction concerned with the religious state of America. Luce, writing in *The National Purpose* (1960), an anthology he himself had commissioned, highlighted what he perceived to be a national malaise, asking, "What shall Americans do with the greatness of their nation? And is it great enough? And is it great in the right way? From all over the land, there is evidence that this is what Americans are worried about" (19).

## Cold War Threats and Frank E. Peretti's Christian Fiction

These questions echo concerns of evangelical Christian fiction author Frank E. Peretti writing in the 1980s. Peretti's novels reflect the Cold War fears of a nation threatened by a secular force that would seek to impinge upon their righteous century's long ascent. Peretti's, *This Present Darkness* (1986) and *Piercing the Darkness* (1988), both supernatural tales of spiritual warfare, pushed the boundaries of evangelical fiction to send out a battle cry to Christian America. What was at stake was Christianity's, and thus America's, hold on the twentieth century. The novels were shaped by the politicization of evangelical concerns, for in modernity evangelicals "find themselves locked into a period of rapid change, facing the potential loss of time-honoured values" (Shuck 59).

The narrative of the embattled Christian soldier struck a chord with an American evangelical readership by now familiar with America's and Christianity's place in the global context and the historic moment they found themselves in. The success of Peretti's *This Present Darkness* (1986) "struck like a thunder-bolt, spilling the 'concept of spiritual warfare' even into the mainstream" (Mort 3). Unlike the *Left Behind* series that would come later, Peretti's narrative did not draw on dispensationalism, his novels were, however, "among the first to suggest that evangelicals unite to actively—even violently—resist the values of the secular mainstream" (Gribben 111). Moreover, his insistence that the "spiritual condition of America could be changed" (as observed by Gribben), fully employed the growing belief nurtured in the Cold War era that evangelicals must reengage with the political sphere. This belief paid heed, it would seem, to Luce's warning that the dereliction of one's historical duty would lead to national and spiritual decline. Peretti cites a New Age plot to take over the small town of Ashton, which "looked so typically American—small, innocent, and harmless, like the background of every Norman Rockwell painting" (5).

Crucially, Peretti magnified the threat from within, an internal menace on the home front that drew comparisons with the Red Scare, conveyed in the novel as the secular plot by The Universal Consciousness Society (UCS) to take over the local college. The language with which Peretti depicts the agents of the UCS clearly illustrates this link:

It's a secret society, a club, a whole network of people. Nobody has any secrets from anybody else. The eyes of the group are everywhere; they watch what you do, what you say, what you think, how you feel. They're working towards what they call a Universal Mind, the concept that sooner or later all the inhabitants of the world will make a giant evolutionary leap and meld into one global brain, one transcending consciousness. (5)

Many powerful evangelical figures became involved with the anti-Communist movement of the 1950s, actively working with Senator McCarthy to rid the nation of its enemies. Rev. Billy James Hargis established his own organization, the Christian Crusade, a television and radio ministry with the clear aim of ending the conspiracy he believed was taking place against America. The anti-communist movement focused on key foreign policy causes such as a defiant opposition to diplomatic recognition of China that included Henry R. Luce, who argued that the

Christian faith could have prevented China from falling to communism.

The “embattled Christian soldier” narrative was thus reignited by what many evangelicals perceived to be America’s failure to actively engage with the nation’s historical mission. It was a persuasive narrative fixture with the power to convince an alienated majority to believe that Christian America was threatened, creating a clear and identifiable evangelical cause. This narrative of the evangelical clash with secular society encapsulated a pervasive sentiment that a culture war must be fought, one that would engage with the political arena, seeing Ronald Reagan gain office in Peretti’s era and George W. Bush in LaHaye’s and Jenkins’.

## **The Christian Right’s Basis in the Christian Publishing Industry**

The 1980s witnessed a boom in Christian fiction with the genre coming into its own, supported by a Christian publishing industry that recognized the financial and spiritual possibilities in the popular format. The long-term editorial perspective cultivated by many of the top Christian publishing houses ensured that new fiction writers were invested in and promoted. Articles from *Christian Retailing* magazine in the late 1980s focus on the “The Fiction Explosion,” “The Power of Fiction,” and “A Case for Fiction,” tracing the burgeoning movement away from prescriptive non-fiction that had come to define Christian publishing, itself hugely successful, to more accessible popular fiction that would build upon the conversion narratives of early Christian fiction. Within literature, the ideology is compounded through the use of a specific scriptural reading, validating fiction through a referential treatment of the Bible. If the word of the Bible is inerrant, by-proxy Christian fiction is similarly sacrosanct. The publishing network was part of a wider evangelical movement; heavily organized, it served as a foundation for the growth of the “Moral Majority.” American evangelicals had entered the political arena, embodied by Ronald Reagan who declared that “religious America is awakening.” Reagan’s presidency reinstated a belief in the “American Century” that had been lost in the tumultuous years of the Vietnam War, which had led a disaffected populace to champion isolationism. Reagan’s vision of reform, of a strident foreign and domestic policy, rallied America anew and, in the face of a familiar Cold War enemy, a redefinition of America’s international standing was triumphantly claimed. At the Republican National Convention in 1992, Ronald Reagan noted that his life had coincided with the “American Century” and promised “America’s best days are yet to come” (qtd. in Judis 1).

In the latter decades of the twentieth century, Christian fiction witnessed a growing number of renowned evangelist theologians securing their audience through a more informal yet equally instructive genre, highlighting the political and social power of Christian fiction. The emergence of the Christian Right had its basis in the Christian publishing industry. Third Century publishing house championed evangelical political action to a growing audience, counting Bill Bright, head of Campus Crusade for Christ, and Republican Congressman John Conlon among its supporters. Pat Robertson, a failed presidential candidate, founder of the Christian Broadcasting Network, and host of the television show the “700 Club,” sought to access the American nation by popular cultural means. On publishing his novel *The End of the Age* (1995), Robertson followed many other evangelists who turned to Christian fiction to assert a biblical morality and further his public influence. In *The End of the Age* 2007 marks the date of Armageddon when a meteor strike eliminates most of the western coast of America and leaves a compromised U.S. government, which necessitates the intervention of Christian America. The political agency of evangelicals is thus vaunted. The cultural force of evangelicalism made its way to Washington and politicized the pages of Christian fiction. Both Robertson and Jerry Falwell, founder of the Moral Majority, entered into the literary sphere to further proselytize to an American public weary of the decay of the morality of the nation. Charles Taylor contends that:

In a sense, part of what drove the Moral Majority and motivates the Christian Right in the U.S.A. is an aspiration to re-establish something of the fractured neo-Durkheimian understanding that used to define the nation, where being American would once more have a connection with theism, with being ‘one people under God’ or at least with the ethic that was interwoven in this. (243)

Moral Majority alumnus and evangelical theologian Tim LaHaye, was the most successful of the three in this literary enterprise, redefining the genre and instilling in his novels an easy to read redemption narrative that built on prophecy beliefs from the Scripture.

## **Tim LaHaye’s and Jerry Jenkins’ *Left Behind* Series**

There emerged, under the influence of the Moral Majority, a championing of evangelical interventionism, a removal from the isolationism that had classified the earlier decades of the twentieth century—a movement that mirrors the nation's own trajectory from isolationism to interventionism. A call for radical action began to define evangelical writing drawing on the monomyth of the disenfranchised, embattled Christian soldier that by now was a Christian fiction staple. Tim LaHaye saw great opportunity within the fiction form and sought to access a greater readership through its use. Struggling to write a novel about the Rapture, he was encouraged to seek a ghost writer. Jerry Jenkins, chosen by his agent, would join LaHaye to install within the popular fiction genre the detailed insight into scriptural prophecy, the vaunted Christian soldier, and a vibrant imagining of the End Times. The *Left Behind* series, twelve novels plus two prequels, sold over 100 million copies, reaching the top of the *New York Times* best seller list on several occasions. The significance of these books to evangelical culture is immeasurable, serving for many as an introduction to the evangelical theology and solidifying its mainstream cultural trajectory. The novels are imbued with the cycle and recycling of religious rhetoric that fastens America's destiny firmly to its Christian origins, asserting evangelical faith into American politics, and proving at the fin-de-siècle that not only was the twentieth century American, it was Christian.

The *Left Behind* series deal with the Rapture, the sudden ascendance of good Christians into heaven, and the seven years of Tribulation which follow for those who are left behind. The novels' characters deal with their moral and religious failings while battling the returned Antichrist, the rise of a one-world order and the many punishments dealt from the pages of the Book of Revelations. Emerging in the mid-1990s, the series fits firmly in the narrative of spiritual warfare and through its narrative suggests some key American Exceptionalist assumptions. The plot's preordained and biblically sanctioned trajectory, a threat from outside secular forces that must be vanquished, mirrors the American evangelical sense of impending loss at the close of the "American Century" and two terms of a Democratic presidency. Both LaHaye and Jenkins wish the reader to acknowledge that a spiritual war for America is being fought and that just like the protagonists Captain Rayford Steele and Buck Williams, the reader too has a vital part to play in the trajectory of history.

LaHaye and Jenkins position American evangelicals as being the center point of the biblically prophesized End Times, solidifying the historic lineage of Americans as a chosen people. Within the novels, the American-led Tribulation Force acts as the central point of the offensive against the powerful Global Community (GC) organization, the successor of the United Nations, headed by the Antichrist Nicolae Carpathia. The GC governing of the Enigma Babylon One World Faith mirrors the real fears experienced by evangelicals when, post War, an ecumenical movement, the World Council of Churches, was established. Just like Peretti's Universal Consciousness Society, the GC denotes the universalization of global systems that would essentially unseat America as superpower, the outcome of which many perceived to be written in End Times prophecy. LaHaye's and Jenkins's narrative looks to reinstate America's and Christianity's position in the global order. They achieved within the *Left Behind* series an amalgamation of all aspects of Tim LaHaye's non-fiction writing and political aspirations, unifying within a single narrative issues of evangelical self-actualization, politicization, and identity production which mirrors America's own twentieth-century success. Here, LaHaye's confidence in evangelicalism's place in American society demarcates the long history formed on the cultural imaginary of America as the exemplar of Christian nationhood.

The novels champion a clash of civilizations, which inculcates a sense of entitlement and attitude of invincibility through an intractable faith in the word of the Scripture. Henry R. Luce believed that America's redemptive destiny could be rendered void by those unwilling to challenge "the virus of isolationist sterility," a challenge the United States could not undertake as "Good Samaritans of the World" without "the blood of purpose and enterprise and high resolve" (McCarragher 89). LaHaye's and Jenkins' *Left Behind* series similarly evokes the need for immediate action and a globalized network of the faithful as seen in the Tribulation Force, a group of left behind evangelicals who scramble together to defy the Antichrist in the years of Tribulation. There is a distrust of global enterprises that unite nations under a single leader or currency. In this way, LaHaye and Jenkins call for global action but decry any universal agency or organization that threatens American sovereignty or ability to govern international decision making. The creation of a one-world currency post-Rapture is seen as the first step in America's loss of power.

The novel's president, Gerald Fitzhugh, the American head of state, is usurped by the Antichrist, Nicolae Carpathia, the United Nations Secretary General. President Fitzhugh, convinced by Carpathia to destroy 90% of U.S. military weapons and hand over the rest to the U.N., goes against the very blueprint of U.S. international dominancy

achieved in the “American Century” and a history of twentieth-century foreign policy that continued to identify the nation’s international standing with its military might. The authors make it clear to their readership that the American president’s removal from office is evidence of the impending crisis of Tribulation. The Tribulation period and the rise of the Antichrist, the very End of Days, are linked with America’s unseating as a global superpower. The lesson is clear, just as Israel must remain a state for the Second Coming to be realized, any threat to America’s position of power signifies the impending apocalypse. The End Times sees America “headed for obsolescence” with the center of global activity moving to the East where New Babylon, the headquarters of the Global Community, will be based in Iraq, further suggesting that the dislocation of America as a superpower will upset the natural order.

Melanie McAlister contends that the *Left Behind* series is a commentary on America’s role in the transnational era. She describes the series as an “imperialist fiction in its apocalyptic mode” offering its readers a way to see the “aggressive action of the United States as part of a divine plan” (194). Within the series, American oil production in Alaska and the Middle East is commandeered by the GC, which controls and raises the oil prices. Carpathia claims that “our destiny is a utopian society based on peace and Judis brotherhood,” and his promise to distribute all supplies equally elicits a Communist ideology, the straw man against which evangelical America has always held fast. Finally, free speech, the ultimate emblem of American freedom, is discounted by the Antichrist Carpathia, who contends that the “unchecked freedom [of the press] led to excesses that stifled the ability and creativity of any leader” (Nicolae 128). This is followed by a repression of free enterprise and democracy itself, a stark warning by LaHaye and Jenkins against U.N.-type organizations that may engage in a redress of American autonomy.

Carpathia’s final words on the changes to be enacted, including a curtailment of the population through the promotion of abortion and works to abolish care for the handicapped, drawing obvious parallels with Hitler’s Germany. In spiritual terms, the *Left Behind* series acts as an alternate present, suggesting that a future devoid of America’s benevolent hegemony would be bleak—rewriting the gains experienced by all nations at the hands of American imperial power and its history of humanitarianism. In this way it solidifies America’s place as international heavyweight for the series’ readers and expresses in fictional terms the tenets of the “American Century.” The series’ overarching narrative of a fight for survival and its sense of “history in the making” marries well with not only notions of American Century Exceptionalism, but also the rhetoric used by George W. Bush after 9/11. The clearest insight into the novels’ overarching American Exceptionalism comes in the final addition to the series, *The Glorious Appearing*, where Enoch Dumas, a “Tribulation Saint,” searches for answers:

If only believers would be left in the United States, with scriptural prophecy seeming to ignore America, it was going to be one sparsely populated country. The various groups of believers might find each other, but what were they to do? Would there be enough of them to start rebuilding the country as, finally for real, a Christian nation. Was this why God was going to purge it of the unredeemed and had already levelled it, making the entire planet as flat as Illinois? (148)

God’s reply to Enoch is that he would “transport” His people to be with Jesus in Israel where He ushers in the thousand-year reign, a paradise where those characters previously martyred return to earth. The readers are made aware that while America no longer exists in the way they once knew it, its historically cast-out children have once again embarked upon a Great Migration in a de novo recoding of the narrative of the exiled Jews once used by evangelicals’ Puritan forefathers.

For the Christian Right the restoration of Jews to Palestine has been a leading goal of foreign policy endeavors for decades. Much indeed has been written even about the *Left Behind* series’ Christian Zionist overtones. In the final pages of the twelfth novel, long after the prophesized conversion of 144,000 Jews, including the reluctant Chaim Rosenzweig and the rabbinic scholar Tsion Ben-Judah, the battle for Israel witnessed throughout the series sees Christ Himself appear in the Holy Land. The fight is not against a Palestinian army unwilling to forgo a claim to land, but against the Antichrist Carpathia and Lucifer himself. At this point, the centuries-long Middle-Eastern conflict is reduced to but a footnote. The real war underway is a battle for Christian supremacy, a victory for the one true God, a Christian God. This realization of a Christian covenant with God facilitates a narrative that can be read as an American restoration, a return of the exiled Protestants to a new homeland. In this way Winthrop’s “New Jerusalem” becomes simply Jerusalem and America’s destiny, tied to Christianity’s itself, triumphs.

## From the Vietnam War to the Global War on Terror: Christian Fiction and Nationalism

Ending in 2004, the series not only worked much of the post-9/11 fears into its narrative but also proved that evangelical America and the Christian Right had always spoken in terms of a clash of “good versus evil.” The threat against America’s moral order was already underway within the early pages of the *Left Behind* series, Peretti’s *This Present Darkness*, and even *The Last Judgement*, long before the Twin Towers were targeted on September 11. Jonathan Vincent accuses the *Left Behind* novels of being “complicit with two seemingly contradictory features of the “new militarism,” an American dispensation toward violence and national identity recast in the wake of the Vietnam War and implemented during the so-called ‘Global War on Terror’” (46). The political rhetoric that emerged in the early years of the twenty-first century found root in a distinctly evangelical sense of nationalism and the passages of popular Christian fiction novels by then on sale in Walmart and airport bookshops. Such rhetoric can be read within a Christian literary heritage that had shored up the symbolic boundaries between the Christian good and the religious or irreligious “other” for over a century. The language used to come to terms with America’s darkest hour mirrors the “American Century” generation of writers who in colorful terms were already fighting against a powerful, unseen enemy. Bush’s tired tropes of a distinctly Christian American Exceptionalism, a vocabulary all presidents and their speechwriters are versed in, entered into a public vocabulary, uttered by political pundits and appearing on poorly written protest signs in the Obama era. However, it remains to be seen if the twenty-first century will be American, since the voice of its first decade retains a remarkably familiar tone.

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**Marisa Ronan** undertook a PhD and Postdoctoral fellowship in the UCD Clinton Institute for American Studies where her thesis provided an intellectual and literary history of American Evangelicalism. She has over a decade of university program delivery experience, lecturing at both graduate and postgraduate level in University College Dublin and Trinity College Dublin in the areas of American Literature and American Studies. Dr. Ronan is currently based in Trinity College Dublin where she is leading a STEAM initiative, which will test bed ideas and projects that support the STEAM philosophy, moving from a focus on the STEM fields (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) to include the Arts in its widest spectrum of creativity (Design, Digital Arts, Visual Arts, Craft, Creative Industries and the Humanities etc.). She has an established track record in creative academic innovation, successfully developing two university cultural programs, Dublintellectual in Trinity College and Cultúr Lab in University College Dublin. With an emphasis on Humanities advocacy the projects sought to connect the university and the city, promoting the concept of a porous university, knowledge exchange and the development of new pathways to make humanities scholarship more meaningful to others outside the University and discipline.

