

BOOKS

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Series making a mark on millions

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Special to The Times

The jacket of "The Mark: The Beast Rules the World" (Tyndale House, 381 pages, \$22.99) features two blurbs, which, as blurbs do, exhort potential readers to buy the book. But these quotes attest neither to the literary distinction of the writers' previous books nor, indeed, this one.

Their subject is the authors' breathtaking sales record.

Time magazine, for instance, tells us that the authors "are doing for Christian fiction what John Grisham did for courtroom thrillers." What Grisham did, of course, had less to do with elevating the thriller to the realm of literature than with selling a ton of books and making a ton of money.

This, then, is the contribution to Christian fiction made by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. Their names may not be familiar to you, but you're likely to recognize the uniform design of their 12-novel post-Rapture series, "Left Behind."

"The Mark" is the eighth, following "The Indwelling," published last May, and preceding "Desecration," scheduled to hit bookstores in October of 2001. With each volume, the series' profile and sales have risen. "The Mark" was launched with a 2.5 million-copy first printing. To gain some perspective on that figure, consider that the only other writers ever to be allotted a first printing of two million are Grisham, Tom Clancy and J.K. Rowling.

With a Kansas-sized bloc of book buyers rushing out every six months for the latest installment, attention must be paid, even by those outside the target audience for Christian fiction.

The series is a fictionalization of the seven years depicted in Revelation, the final book of the New Testament, a fever-dream miasma of images that would be utterly incomprehensible were it not for centuries of interpretations (some more valid than others) by theological scholars. In contrast to the rest of the Bible, Revelation is without real characters or moral-driven plot lines, and as such, would not seem to readily lend itself to dramatization. But LaHaye and Jenkins (the former does the theologizing, the latter the writing) are doing their darnedest to transform enigmatic, first-person prose into full-blown drama, inventing characters, dialogue and plot to fit genre conventions.

In "The Mark," we're up to the 13th of Revelation's 22 chapters. The authors jump back into their rather jerry-built story, providing a minimum of acclimation — no favor to readers new to the series, of which I was one. So I picked up the introductory book, "Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days," published in 1995.

It turned out to be quite a page-turner (despite the

OVER 30,000,000 COPIES SOLD

THE LEFT BEHIND SERIES



authors' flat prose) thanks to a really great premise, that being that early one morning, every child and devout Christian simply vanishes, leaving behind all his or her worldly possessions — and millions of bewildered neighbors and family members who are forced to deal with the massive absence even as geopolitics begins to reorient along the lines described in Revelation. (The mise en scene echoes that in Stephen King's epic "The Stand.")

At novel's end, our heroes — a reporter, an airline pilot and his daughter — form a "tribulation force" and hunker down to endure the next seven years. The second book, entitled (not surprisingly) "Tribulation Force," is the story of a hardy band of resourceful survivors battling against, and destined to overcome, great evil. It's a workhorse of a plot line

and forms the core of any number of fantasies, from "The Lord of the Rings" and "The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe," to "The Wizard of Oz" and "The Matrix."

Alas, thousands of pages later, the series has become tiresome and outlandish, a stilted, implausible apocalyptic drama punctuated by sermonizing and sanctimony. A succession of cliffhangers and tension-building tricks doesn't help much; "The Mark" is a real chore to read.

By now, the Antichrist, one Nicolae Carpathia, pretty much rules the world, as promised in the novel's subtitle. Since he was assassinated (by the airline pilot) and resurrected three days later, he is now possessed, or "indwelt," by Satan himself. Most of the
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world's citizens have sworn allegiance to him, a la the "Invasion of the Body Snatchers" pod people.

Our heroes are, meanwhile, keeping hope alive, leading a grassroots Christian resistance via the Internet. Like any self-respecting heroes, they barely survive dangerous encounters, extricate themselves from scrapes, rescue hostages, bicker, bond. (They do, perhaps, weep more than your average hero.) All around them, weird things keep happening.

The writers' determination to be faithful to the unconnected images in Revelation locks in the plot outline and demands any number of odd twists and turns that exist solely for the purpose of textual fidelity. When, for example, Carpathia demands that everyone have a "biochip" implanted in either the forehead or right hand, his explanation is that the chip will serve not only as a sign of fealty but as a kind of ... bank card. A *bank* card? Well, Revelation mentions buying and selling in connection with the mark, so there you are.

Conversely, the most fantastic biblical images present in the Book of Revelation are absent from

the novel — as they must be for it to maintain any semblance of reality. For instance, Revelation 13 begins: "Then I saw a wild beast come out of the sea with ten horns and seven heads; on its horns were ten diadems and on its heads blasphemous names. The beast I saw was like a leopard, but it had paws like a bear and the mouth of a lion." A wholly understandable omission, no?

Non-fundamentalist biblical scholars generally agree that Revelation is a product of the times in which it was written (some 1,900 years ago), that its images are symbolic and are, largely, metaphorical references to Roman political history. That is, they do not believe it was ever intended to be interpreted literally. The "Left Behind" books, though, try to have it both ways: While the authors dispense with (and do so without explanation) some of the most surreal passages, they have the Tribulation Force's spiritual leader insisting that we are to take the words of Revelation "as literally as ... any others from the Bible." Some of the words, anyway.

So the question presents itself: For whom is the "Left Behind" series written? I'm assuming that most of the readers who have slogged through the 12-book series are believers, probably of the "born again" variety, but even so, after the promise of

the first book dissolved in what followed, it's unclear to me what has kept them going. (I wouldn't be so jaundiced as to suggest that they're buying the books out of *schadenfreude*, enjoying the sad vision of the unpleasant fate that awaits the rest of us.)

The series' appeal is certainly not literary. Its grim tone is relentless, and its workmanlike writing is devoid of style or grace. The dialogue is testimony to gross editorial deficiency: When two characters begin talking, whether in meeting-in-the-hallway pleasantries or soul-searching philosophical exchanges, we are treated, consistently, to a blow-by-blow, salutation-to-sign-off conversation that can drag on for four or five tedious pages.

The people themselves are of little interest. Saddled with Silhouette Romance names such as Buck, Chloe and Rayford Steele, they have minimal character arcs (e.g. first they were skeptical, now they're "believers") that plateaued near the beginning of the saga. But presumably, steadfast readers are not looking for, pardon the pun, fresh revelations about the inner struggles of Buck, Chloe and Rayford. And some of these people are startlingly dim: We're in the eighth volume of this series, fully three and a half years after the Rapture, and only now are certain members of the Tri-

bulation Force getting it that Carpathia is the Antichrist. A reader with the brains of a turnip will have figured it out on page 113 of the first book.

As a dramatic character, Carpathia is a real let-down. In "Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days," he's urbane, insidiously clever and possessed of a shrewd ability to persuade and change perceptions that is reminiscent of the Force wielded by Jedi knights. With Satan inside him, though, he's something of a buffoon: so solipsistic that he names everything in sight, including his one-world religion and one-world currency, after himself; so vain that he demands that full-length mirrors be installed in his newly-expanded office; so childish that he composes hymns to himself; so unintuitive that he fails to notice that one of his chief deputies spends his days plotting against him.

This is *Satan*? Carpathia sure can't compete with Milton's colorful conception of Lucifer ... but then again, "The Mark" is no "Paradise Lost." Then *again*, "Lost" didn't get a 2.5 million first printing.

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