

A little bit awed

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [July 4, 2001](#) issue

Frank Slaughter, M.D., was a pretty good, which means not really bad, novelist who often dealt with biblical themes. His *New York Times* obituary (May 23) reminds us that he published 56 books that sold 60 million copies, most of them decades ago. He was 93 when he died.

The obituary paid due tribute to the virtues of Slaughter's writing but mentioned that it was sometimes unintentionally comic. An example comes from an episode in Slaughter's novel about Simon Peter, *Upon This Rock*: "This was the first time Peter had raised a person up from the dead and he could not help feeling a little bit awed by it."

We could not help feeling a bit awed by Peter's mere modicum of awe. But maybe Slaughter was preparing us for our present day, when teens say "awesome" a lot but are bored by the miracle stories celebrated in sanctuaries; when the descendents of the saints and apostles are Garrison Keillor's "pretty good" Lake Wobegon churchpeople; when Hollywood "special effects" so dull sensibilities that everyone yawns even at the spectacular. Perhaps Slaughter's books were pioneering revisions of sacred texts for our time.

Moses, in the King James Version, sees a burning bush that remains unconsumed and hears, "Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground." Slaughter would say, "So Moses loosened his sandal thongs a little so he could stroll away more comfortably."

In II Kings 2 "there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted [the two prophets Elijah and Elisha] asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. And Elisha saw it, and he cried, . . ."

Cried what? Before he can utter his biblical line, "My father, my father, the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof," the director shouts, "Let's rehearse that again; the special-effects people don't think it's jazzy enough."

Speaking of whirlwinds and awelessness brings us to Job 38, where “the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind.” In a Slaughter-type response to that five-chapter declaration of God’s mystery and power, Job might have answered, “I’ll take all that into consideration, and perhaps send a memo, form a committee or lead a spiritual retreat.”

Luke 2 describes the shepherds’ part in the nativity story as follows: “The angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.” Slaughter, adapting the text for our yawning times, might have said, “The shepherds could not help feeling a bit sore, having craned their necks to notice the skies that night.”

Mark 16 recounts the visit of Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome to Jesus’ tomb, where a young man in white tells them, “Be not affrighted . . . [Jesus of Nazareth] . . . is risen; he is not here.” Mark says of the women, “And they went out quickly, and fled from the sepulchre; for they trembled and were amazed: neither said they any thing to any man; for they were afraid.”

Slaughterized for our times, the sentence might be, “And they strolled away, pondering the market for the grave-cloth, thinking, ‘We could call this the Shroud of Turin and peddle it,’ and planning a press release.”

Raise the dead and feel “a little bit awed.” Or go to a church service—a service which should be designed to raise the dead, the unawed, the bored, the listless. But find no divine elemental roar of an organ or stunning soft riff of a flute. Be met not with a Te Deum or an awe-inspiring invocation, but with a chatty “Hi-ya, seekers, let’s have a friendly time today.”