

Publishers in seventh heaven with near-death memoirs

by [Craig Wilson](#) in the [March 20, 2013](#) issue

Do people really see a light at the end of a tunnel when they have a near-death experience? And could that be heaven up ahead?

That light is shining brighter than ever these days. Heaven is hot. Hotter even than that other place. Just ask any bookseller in America.

Folks have been going to heaven with amazing regularity lately. They look around—one even sat on Jesus' lap—then come back to report on the trip. It's a lucrative journey.

Three of these tales have ascended to heavenly heights on *USA Today's* best-seller list recently, and more are on the way:

- Colton Burpo, then almost four years old, “dies” during an emergency appendectomy, travels to heaven and reports back how “really, really big God is.” *Heaven Is for Real: A Little Boy's Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back*, Todd Burpo's 2010 tale of his son's round trip to the Pearly Gates, has sold more than 7.5 million copies after 22 printings. It has been on *USA Today's* best-seller list for 117 weeks and reached no. 1 eight times in 2011.
- Eben Alexander, a Harvard neurosurgeon who was in a coma for seven days in 2008, encounters an “angelic being” who guides him into the “deepest realms of superphysical existence.” His *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Afterlife*, published last fall, peaked at no. 4 in December and is now no. 8.
- Mary Neal's *To Heaven and Back: A Doctor's Extraordinary Account of Her Death, Heaven, Angels, and Life Again, a True Story*, published in May, tells of the orthopedic surgeon's celestial journey after a kayak accident in Chile in which she was pulled underwater for so long that even she thought she was dead. It has been in the top 150 for 33 weeks and reached as high as no. 14 in July.

Can you hear the publishing angels singing? “Once word of mouth took over, there was no stopping” the *Heaven Is for Real* phenomenon, said Matt Baugher, senior vice president and publisher at Thomas Nelson, Burpo’s publisher. “That got people talking about heaven and their own experiences and opened up the door to other stories as well.”

(A recent book in this genre, published in February, was written by longtime Episcopal priest John W. Price, a pastor of several parishes in Texas and London, England, and currently spiritual director at St. Luke’s Hospital in Houston. His *Revealing Heaven: The Christian Case for Near-Death Experiences* was published by HarperOne, which says Price specializes in helping people understand the spiritual side of the reported phenomena.)

Christianity Today editor Mark Galli gave the phenomenon a serious look in December as the magazine’s cover asked the question on many minds: “There and Back Again: What are we to make of all those stories of visits to heaven?”

Neal, who says she was not particularly religious before her journey, says even she at first didn’t have an answer to what happened.

“I didn’t seek out people to talk to,” she said. “I put everything on the back burner until the day that God threw me out of bed and said, ‘OK, now is the time you are going to write this.’ And from that point on, this has been an incredible lesson in obedience, because I said, ‘OK. I’m doing it.’”

Alexander was a skeptic of such near-death experiences until he came out of his own coma in 2008 with a story to tell, which he shared with Oprah Winfrey at the end of last year. The trip, which he calls “a great and beautiful revelation,” changed his life.

“What’s most shocking is that I spent all these years not getting it,” he said. “I had all the clues about the reality of this kind of thing, but science is mute on this issue. . . . What I bring to the table now is that I can help people with the [dying] process. That death is not the end, it’s just a transition.”

Phyllis Tickle, founding editor of the religion department of *Publishers Weekly*, is energized by these discussions. Not to be left behind, she even owns up to her own near-death experience 50 years ago. “But 50 years ago, you didn’t talk about such a thing,” she said. She acknowledges that now, at age 79, she may have missed her

opportunity, although her doctor husband wasn't buying any of it at the time. And still doesn't.

"There's got to be an element of hope here," she said. "We want to hear from someone who has gone there, done that, seen it. That there is something beyond this life, which is miserable, even for those of us who are happy."

More than hope, she believes that buyers of these heaven-and-back books are just seeking "something reassuring."

Carol Fitzgerald, president of the online Book Report Network, agrees.

"In uncertain times, which is what we're experiencing now, people look for comfort," Fitzgerald said. "The concept that people have seen 'what's next' and shared what it's like gives hope and a feeling that life on earth is part of a journey with a greater reward." —*USA Today*

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