

Inside The Shack: The Trinity makes the best-seller list

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [October 21, 2008](#) issue

Perhaps the validity of a theological proposal can't be properly assessed until it has been kitchified. William P. Young's novel *The Shack*, a runaway success—it's been on top of the *New York Times* best-seller list and has sold 2 million copies—features a particular vision of the Trinity. In theological circles, the vision is called “social trinitarianism”: the three persons of the Trinity are seen as a community of mutual love and a model for social relationships.

The main character is the rustically named and rustically attired Mackenzie Phillips, who sells gizmos for a living and grew up with a mean drunk for a father, but is “totally at home in [his] own skin.” He may even be a bit of a liberal—we're told he admires Bill Moyers. He is at home in boots and flannel shirts—as if right out of the REI outdoor outfitters' catalogue—and is outdoorsy and proudly individualistic. He doesn't care much for church.

Missy, one of Mack's five children, is abducted while the family is camping. Young Missy had loved the story of an Indian princess who gave her life as a sacrifice to head off a plague at her village. And she had once asked her father, in not so subtle foreshadowing, a theological question about why Jesus had to die on the cross: “Why is God so mean?” The serial killer who abducted her leaves a ladybug pin with dots indicating the number of his victims to date. Her story is “not unlike others told too often,” Young writes. I wonder about this—surely our fascination with disappeared cute white kids is at least partly due to hysterical media reaction to exceedingly rare events in a media-saturated age.

The book offers a running polemic against some conservative evangelical themes. Mack had been taught during a sojourn in seminary that God doesn't overtly communicate anymore—a stricture this book tramples upon. He thinks that liberals who read the creation stories as myth commit an error, “but their mistake isn't fatal.” Such observations have led conservative icons like Chuck Colson and Mark

Driscoll to term the book heretical.

The book takes us on a fast ride from Missy's disappearance to the discovery of a torn, bloody dress in an isolated shack, with several maudlin scenes along the way. Soon after the memorial service with an empty coffin, Mack gets a note from "Papa"—the name that his wife reserves for God—telling Mack to meet him at the shack where his daughter died. Is this some sort of cruel trick, perhaps played by the killer himself? Or has the God of heaven and earth dropped a note in his mailbox?

The shack appears at first like a face "twisted in some demonic grimace," prompting Mack to rage against God: "Wasn't it enough to kill my baby? Do you have to toy with me too?" Then he weeps tenderly over the bloodstained place where the dress was found years before.

But in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, everything changes. It's not winter but spring. The shack turns into a welcoming lakeside cottage. The bloodstain is gone. And inside the shack is—God, the holy Trinity.

The Trinity includes a "large beaming African-American woman" who "engulfed him in her arms," saying "My, my, my how I do love you." She tells him to call her Papa. Jesus appears as a blue-collar man with Middle Eastern looks. The Spirit, named Sarayu, is a "distinctively Asian woman" of "northern Chinese or Nepalese or even Mongolian ethnicity." She "shimmers," "sweeps," "wafts" like "a playful eddying wind," and is alternately either translucent or visible only out of the corner of Mack's eye.

The three have an annoyingly chipper air about them for such tragic circumstances: they kiss each other on the cheek for no good reason and habitually answer questions in happy unison. The three lead Mack on a voyage of pain and recovery, allowing him to forgive his daughter's murderer and catch a glimpse of the world as God created it to be.

The highest compliment we might pay to Young's vision of the Trinity is that it's interesting enough to disagree with. The early church never meant its language of "three Persons" to suggest three *people*. As with academic portrayals of social trinitarianism, Young's portrait of God seems a form of tritheism. He also occasionally blurs the three Persons. Ancient Christians were keen to avoid charges of patripassionism—the claim that the Father died on the cross, which would blur distinctions within the Godhead. This Papa has scars on her wrists. A fourth figure

appears in one chapter—a “tall, beautiful, olive-skinned woman with chiseled Hispanic features,” who turns out to be Sophia, Papa’s wisdom. Young seems unaware that Christians have historically identified the Old Testament’s personified Wisdom with the preincarnate Christ.

Young’s multiethnic Trinity raises other problems. God the Father as a big, beaming black woman? The Spirit as a shimmering, wispy Asian woman? Wisdom as a chiseled Hispanic woman? This array seems like a collection of ethnic stereotypes. They are at least no more sophisticated than a Jesus who refers to his big Jewish nose, as this one does.

In the context of conservative evangelicalism, Young’s gendering of God is risky effort. Driscoll accuses Young of goddess worship. But Young has Papa respond to this very charge: “I am neither male nor female, even though both genders are derived from my nature. . . . For me to appear to you as a woman and suggest that you call me Papa is simply to mix metaphors, to help you keep from falling back so easily into your religious conditioning.” Clearly Young has read some theology.

It is not accidental to Young’s story that the Trinity appears in the woods and not in a sanctuary. This Trinity is against institutions, hierarchy, economics and politics and for nature, individual healing, therapy, closure, relationships, cooking and gardening. “Let it all out,” Papa whispers, as Mack cries yet again. If the Trinity portrayed here is social, the human is clearly anything but; Mack serves as the isolated individual on Freud’s couch.

Much of the book consists of conversations between Mack and one or more of the Trinity about the nature of freedom and divine goodness in a world where serial killers get their hands on innocent little girls. The writing is often treacly and preachy. Young passes up more good endings than a long-winded preacher. Yet occasionally his wild, emotional lunges punch through the reader’s defenses. One did for me when Jesus reassures Mack that not only did he never leave Mack’s daughter during her abduction, but that Missy actually prayed for her dad amidst her fear.

The Shack is a relatively fresh portrayal of the nature of the triune God who meets us in the midst of our worst pain to bring about transformation. You’re going to hear more about it, especially with a film deal in the works. We can at least hope that the book’s success will make people perk up on Trinity Sunday.