

THROUGH THE NARROW GATE: CONDUCT, CONVERSION, AND COMMUNITY IN NINETEENTH-
AND TWENTIETH CENTURY WOMEN'S NOVELS

by

KATHERINE LEE JONES

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Supervising Committee:

Desirée Henderson, Supervising Professor
Neill Matheson
Erin Murrah-Mandril

ABSTRACT**Through the Narrow Gate: Conduct, Conversion, and Community in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Women's Novels****Katherine Lee Jones, Ph.D.****The University of Texas at Arlington, 2020****Supervising Professor: Desirée Henderson**

Conversion scenes and the theme of conversion are key in conduct fiction, a genre that developed from the medieval and early modern tradition of nonfiction conduct manuals. Conversion is a character's entrance into the community being developed in and through each novel. The conversion scene gives clues to each author's purpose, reveals the religious basis for each book's instruction, and puts focus on inner piety, or pious thoughts and feelings rather than merely pious actions. Conversion provides a vehicle for authors to critique and/or intervene in broader social issues such as gender roles, racial inequality, and sexual assault. Nineteenth-century conduct fiction by African American women includes both religious conversion and second type of conversion, where the main character recognizes her humanity, that reflects each author's purpose of racial uplift. Evangelical romance, a genre that emerged in the late twentieth century, is a direct descendant of nineteenth-century sentimental conduct fiction, as evidenced by its key conversion scenes and employment of other commonalities of the earlier genre, such as sentimental keepsakes and death scenes, didacticism, and focus on

manners and industry. While early evangelical romance was very conservative, for the most part advocating traditional gender roles, later evangelical romance subtly questions patriarchy and takes on other more controversial topics.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my mom Glenda Jones and my sister Kristin Jones Crews, who believed in me and cheered me on; to my dear friend Lisa Alcorn, who exhorted and encouraged me; to my dissertation advisor Dr. Desirée Henderson, who doled out wisdom, mercy, and tough love at the proper time; to my colleagues at Southwestern Assemblies of God University, who prayed for and inspired me; to Jesus Christ, who walked with me; and to my dad Kenneth Warren Jones, my champion in life and academics, who didn't live to see it but who believed I'd get here one day.

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Introduction

“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it.” –Matt. 7:13 (NIV)

I grew up in a world inhabited by books. My parents and older sister read to me. My dad brought books home from the library for me to read. For he worked in a library—was the director of the local university’s library—and, because of him, I almost lived in a library. Dad had thousands of books, most of them labeled according to the Library of Congress classification system. The Dewey Decimal system I knew from school was too limited, Dad said. Books were exchanged on birthdays and Christmases. And books were treated reverently—not written in, dog-eared, spine-cracked. The book I treated most reverently was my Bible, a beautifully leather-bound navy tome. Dad showed me how to stand it on its spine and then smooth out sections of pages, working from the outside in, to gently break in the spine.

I knew my Bible was for instruction and from childhood I read it often, usually daily. But I devoured other books, too, gravitating early towards stories with young, female protagonists: *Heidi*, *The Little Princess* and *The Secret Garden*, *Anne of Green Gables*, *A Girl of the Limberlost*, the *Little House* series, the *Pollyanna* series, *Little Women*, *An Old-Fashioned Girl*, and anything else I could find by Louisa May Alcott.

I didn’t see these books as instructional, but I did absorb their lesson: an unassuming girl can affect the lives of those around her. In most of these books, the girl-protagonist trusts in God and her faith strengthens the good she does in others’ lives. Heidi shares the story of the prodigal son with her grandfather, prompting him to repent and to give up his hermit ways. The

old-fashioned girl Polly models her faith for Fanny and Tom. Minister's daughter Pollyanna teaches the town to be "glad"—to be thankful for what they have.

None of these books were labeled *Christian* or specifically marketed for Christians, but still it seemed a natural progression in junior high school for me to transition from these children's books to evangelical romance novels—again, books with female, often teenage protagonists who love Jesus and try to help others. The continuity was obvious to me, though it was a long time before I analyzed why there was a continuity. That's what I'm doing in this dissertation. I am showing that nineteenth-century conduct fiction, such as the Alcott novels that I so enjoyed from childhood, is a forerunner of the evangelical romances I discovered as a teen. Conduct fiction is a genre that developed from nonfiction conduct manuals of the Renaissance era and earlier, prescriptive lists of rules regarding behavior, deportment, and spirituality. Conduct novels do the same thing but replace lists of rules with characters who function as exempla. The conversion scenes in novels like *Heidi* and *Old-Fashioned Girl* that seemed quotidian to me as a child are actually much more important to each story and, dare I say, to literary history than I realized back then. In fact, I contend that one key characteristic of sentimental conduct novels by women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is the portrayal of religious conversion, usually but not solely experienced by the main character. Since conversion is the method by which one joins a religious community, each character's conversion is her entrance into the community created in and by the novel. The evolution of evangelical conversion scenes throughout nineteenth- and twentieth-century women's conduct fiction corresponds with the overt and subversive uses of Christianity in the novels and with the types of communities being built through the novels.

My main concern in this project is the role of conversion in sentimental novels, specifically a religious conversion whereby a character goes from not being a member of a religious community to being a member of a religious community. In Christianity, the convert generally professes faith in Christ and/or is baptized. For evangelical Christianity, converts must repent from their sin and place their trust in Jesus Christ for salvation. This is what counts as being “born again”; a public profession of faith and baptism usually follows, but generally the person is considered converted without these outward signs. In this dissertation, I analyze literary representations of Christian conversion by focusing on recurring conversion scenes in nineteenth- and twentieth-century sentimental fiction. By “conversion scene” I mean the episode or set of episodes in the book where a character both considers and actually undertakes the above steps. Sometimes, as in Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World*, conversion is an extended affair with many separate scenes. Sometimes, as in Hannah Crafts’ *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*, conversion is very brief. Regardless of length, these scenes affirm that a true conversion results in a change of character; the genuine convert acts differently after than he or she did before, though at times the result may be subtle. In the following pages I argue that the contemporary evangelical romance is a direct descendant of the nineteenth-century sentimental novel. I contend that the conversion scene in both nineteenth- and twentieth-century conduct fiction is key to interpreting each novel. Additionally, I discuss the fact that conversion scenes allow authors to address sensitive issues, such as racism and sexual abuse. I support these claims by analyzing relevant novels with both a Christian and feminist critical lens.

Nineteenth-century sentimental novels have received a good deal of scholarly attention the last forty years or so, though they warrant continued attention. What hasn't been explored in detail is the strong link between nineteenth-century sentimental novels and twentieth-century evangelical romances. This link underscores how important religion is to a large segment of society. Even in the twenty-first century, evangelical conduct fiction has proliferated and continues to speak to millions in the United States and beyond. As reflected in conduct fiction, religion continues to be a major literary influence, although evangelical fiction, especially romance, is all but ignored by the academy. It is this gap in the scholarship that my dissertation seeks to fill.

Defining Conduct Fiction

Literary critic Sarah Emily Newton provides a definition of conduct fiction that informs my thinking in this project. For centuries, nonfiction conduct literature for women has forwarded the ostensibly biblically based ideals of silence, chastity, and obedience.¹ By the late eighteenth century, these nonfiction prescriptive rule books evolved into seduction novels—cautionary tales of fallen women who, almost without exception, died along with their children as a result of their sin. Eventually seduction narratives were replaced by more cheerful sentimental novels that extolled the same virtues and taught readers a variety of other skills

¹ I say “ostensibly” here because I believe that these three values stem from a misinterpretation of the Bible. St. Paul’s New Testament letters certainly advise obedience for women but do so for men, too. The same is true for chastity, a trait equally important for both sexes, though the manuals claim it is a women’s only value and therefore much more important for her than for a man. Paul does at one point instruct women to remain silent in church, but this injunction is likely a cultural recommendation based upon the specific society to whom his letter is addressed. Cf. Stamps et al., 1 Cor. 14.34n

and values, moving beyond conduct to advocate proper thoughts as well, which I call inner piety. These works often featured negative exempla, characters whose fates readers were to avoid, rather than the prescriptive lists of rules found in nonfiction conduct manuals. According to Newton, conduct literature is most often aimed at either males or females, rather than both, and is “always based on the Christian ethic, intended for the inexperienced young adult or other youthful reader” (143). It is rather ironic that conduct fiction eventually virtually supplanted conduct manuals, for, according to Susan Ashworth, even in the nineteenth century novel reading was considered a dangerous pastime for women because of their fragile minds and bodies, in comparison with men (146). Sentimental novels also teach other non-religious, or at least less obviously religious, values such as industry and social niceties. Yet, feminist critics have noted that conduct fiction also possesses a subversive element, which Newton identifies as women’s ability to direct their own futures, along with the message that “through self-discipline and passivity lies power” (157, 160). Characters in early conduct novels often convert, but the conversion scene itself is often brief and perfunctory, if not omitted. By the mid-nineteenth century, the conversion scene in sentimental conduct fiction becomes much more substantial and important.

While scholars like Newton and Ashworth have initiated a conversation about the history and conventions of conduct fiction in American literary history, there is still more to be done to define the genre and to explain its longevity, popularity, and ongoing influence in contemporary literature. In this dissertation, I contend the conversion scene is the most significant feature of the conduct novel, both in the nineteenth-century and contemporary conduct novels, because conversion is a character’s gateway to that Christian or other religious

community. Looking at conversion scenes sheds light on the nuances of each author's purpose, which is usually but not always evangelical in nature.² Conversion scenes reflect the novels' focus on inner piety, or pious thoughts and feelings, not just pious words and actions. They also reveal the type of community the author seeks to build within and through their novels, generally a supportive body of pious women. While some critics may still not recognize conduct fiction as a genre, my work supports the idea that it is a coherent literary form that can be traced from the eighteenth-century to the present. By recognizing the primacy of the conversion scene, my analysis adds to what Newton and others have done and helps to codify the characteristics of conduct fiction.

I argue that conversion scenes are important for another reason: They help authors critique broader social issues they otherwise wouldn't be able to. The conversion theme makes the subversive element in these texts more powerful because it gives authors a religious imperative. For instance, as insiders, they can critique the faults of their religious communities. They can also speak more emphatically regarding racial injustice through arguing that Christianity is race-blind. The conduct fiction genre creates religious communities of women through a method of instruction that can address issues more effectively than other media—or even issues that can or could not be addressed otherwise. Conduct fiction creates a grace-based community for women based upon Christian concepts of forgiveness and family. This community fosters instruction that goes beyond the surface instruction of nonfiction conduct manuals, offering a pedagogy of grace rather than of threat and fear. Because of this, the medium allows for instruction related to current events and needs, going beyond silence,

² By "evangelical" I mean evangelism-minded, not necessarily evangelical Christian.

chastity, and obedience. Yet these aspects of conduct fiction are not visible if the importance of conversion, inner piety over outward behavior, and belonging to religious community are not recognized as the building blocks of the genre.

Critical Contexts

After years of being ignored by literary scholars, sentimental fiction has received a fair amount of critical attention since the 1970s. Ann Douglas laid a foundation for the study of sentimental literature in 1977's *The Feminization of American Culture*. In this book she argues that sentimental authors "peddl[ed] Christian belief for its nostalgic value" and were not "serious authors" like Melville and Hawthorne (6). She said that sentimentalists and their readers destroyed Calvinism through their "drive . . . to gain power through the exploitation of their feminine identity as their society defined it" (7-8). She laments that, "By 1875, American Protestants were much more likely to define their faith in terms of family morals, civic responsibility, and above all, in terms of the social function of churchgoing. Their actual creed was usually a liberal, even a sentimental one for which [Jonathan] Edwards and his contemporaries would have felt scorn and horror" (7). Douglas's true concern isn't for Edwards' feelings or religion's form but for a loss of intellectual rigor and an increased focus on consumerism (10). She blames Harriet Beecher Stowe and her contemporaries such as Susan Warner for causing America to "los[e] its male-dominated theological tradition without gaining a comprehensive feminism or an adequately modernized religious sensibility" (13). Douglas suggests that so-called feminine sentimentalism is "camp," or "art that is too excessive to be taken seriously" and so cannot co-exist with intellectual theological rigor (4). Even more, she

laments the promulgation of male hegemony, which she blames Stowe and her contemporaries for promoting by seeking power through passive influence, capitulating at the outset by choosing a losing strategy (13).

Jane Tompkins, in 1985's *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860*, responded to Douglas's argument by saying that sentimental literature should be judged by a different standard than works by traditionally canonical stalwarts such as Hawthorne and Melville because it enacts a different purpose: the performance of cultural work, the attempt to effect social change (xvii). Literary greatness is the product not of transcendent qualities but of politics, she claims; in fact, "works that have attained the status of classic, and are therefore believed to embody universal values, are in fact embodying only the interests of whatever parties or factions are responsible for maintaining them in their preeminent position" (4). A work's context influences its reception (7). She asserts that the standards that enshrine works as canonical, that excluded sentimental fiction from the canon, were instituted in a bid to unseat "the tradition of evangelical piety and moral commitment these novelists represent. In reaction against their world view, and perhaps even more against their success, twentieth-century critics have taught generations of students to equate popularity with debasement, emotionality with ineffectiveness, religiosity with fakery, domesticity with triviality, and all of these, implicitly, with womanly inferiority" (123).

Joanne Dobson stakes out a middle ground between Douglass and Tompkins by saying that sentimental writing should be evaluated by "*combining* cultural and literary considerations" (269, emphasis in original). Rather than discounting formalist analysis of sentimental writing, as Tompkins does, she claims, along with Judith Fetterly, that formalist

analysis of sentimental literature needs to be revived because it had not yet undergone the same kinds of evaluation as authors such as Melville and Cooper had long ago (265). Dobson doesn't claim that all sentimental fiction should be canonized; rather, she says "sentimental literature can be 'good' or 'bad'" (268). Dobson also points out the importance of the keepsake in sentimental literature, which she describes as "a vivid symbolic embodiment of the primacy of human connection and the inevitability of human loss" (273). Other commonalities of sentimental literature she names are "the orphan, the mother and child, the deathbed scene" (279). My dissertation is Dobsonian in approach, as I'm assuming the texts analyzed here are worthy of study for both their literary quality and the cultural work they perform. The texts analyzed in this dissertation, I believe, require both formalist and cultural critique. Also, I'm taking into account the conventions she describes. Dobson's middle-ground approach also works well for this study since it marries two seemingly disparate approaches, acknowledging the value of sentimental texts, as feminist criticism does, and calling for literary standards, as Christian criticism does.

In this dissertation, I employ a Christian, feminist analytical lens.³ I believe this approach is particularly apt because I'm analyzing a genre primarily written by females from a Christian point of view. Also, I am a Christian and a feminist and so am interested in analyzing texts from this viewpoint. Leland Ryken and Louis Markos define a Christian approach to literary criticism. One of the basic tenets of Christian literary criticism is a privileging of authorial intent. Ryken writes that authors "have conscious designs on their readers" and then instructs his own

³ By this I do mean both a feminist and a Christian critical approach, not necessarily a critical approach undertaken by Christians.

readers on discerning authors' designs (87). He defends writers, saying they "have a moral right not to have their work misinterpreted" (108). He acknowledges that readers cannot always fully know it but says we should work to "make whatever use we can of a writer's intention" (108).

Related to a belief in the importance of authorial intent is a belief in the integrity of the text. Because Christian critics believe authors have a right to be correctly interpreted, they eschew "certain extreme forms of reader-centered criticism" such as deconstruction, which Ryken calls "an affront to the writer and a violation of a common human right, namely, that our utterances be interpreted in keeping with what we say and mean" (108). According to Markos, Christian criticism closely aligns with the New Critics, whom he says "tended to be both conservative and Christian in orientation" (114). Markos explains the connection between Christians' belief in God's word and in textual integrity: "The Bible means because Christ means, and words mean because the Word [Jesus Christ] became flesh and bridged the gap" (122). Because Christians believe God transmits truth through the Bible, they are positioned to believe that all literature, whether it's secular or not, has "truth-giving potential" (22). However, Markos points out that the language of the Bible is "richly polysemous, able to hold a number of simultaneous meanings in mystical suspension," and so he recommends that Christian critics, instead of rejecting all of deconstruction's claims, "proclaim boldly that language is more meaningful precisely because it *is* slippery—because it can contain, incarnationally and sacramentally, the signifier and the signified" (122).

Christian criticism exhibits a certain anxiety regarding the role of the reader. Ryken writes, "All of our literary experiences involve an interaction between writer and audience, who together 'create' the story or poem or play" (84-5). Current Christian critics, like nineteenth-

century ones did, worry about the corruptive power of the text. As Ryken puts it, "Christians have standards of truth and morality that they regard as absolute. From this presupposition, they have objections to what happens when the persuasiveness of literature influences people away from truth and morality" (104). Unlike critics of 200 years ago, though, current Christian critics express this anxiety regarding both female and male readers, and this anxiety does not necessarily prompt them to decry fiction. At the same time, Christian critics acknowledge readers' role in making meaning; Ryken acknowledges that "our responses to literature are rooted in our experiences in real life" (113). Because they believe literature can be either edifying or destructive, Christian literary critics focus on the need for Christians to read "in the light of Christian experience and a Christian worldview" (130). Ryken reasons, "Christians do not avoid other areas of life simply because a possibility for abuse exists. By the same logic, they should not neglect literature, as they sometimes have, simply because it can be abused. If literature contains much that is untrue, it also contains much that is true" (106). Ryken encourages Christians to read widely and to read things they will disagree with, for in reading widely Christians can compare each work's values with their own. "In this comparative process," he writes, "their awareness of their own world view is sharpened, expanded, and exercised" (150). Therefore, though Christians should try to understand authorial intent, the reader, not the author, determines whether a text is morally valuable.

While I employ these tenets in my practice of Christian literary analysis in this dissertation, on one particular point I differ from other Christian critics, specifically on the value that these critics place on the traditional Western canon and the related devaluing of sentimental literature. For instance, Markos writes that traditional poetic patterns and

structure mirror the order Christians believe God has built into the universe (41). He defends a canonical approach by tying it to human nature: “Our tastes and our cultures and our social-political-economic structures change from place to place and from time to time (sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse), but human nature does not” (62). Therefore, Christian critics tend to believe in absolute standards of literary quality, though they may not always agree on those standards. Markos claims the New Critics didn’t construct the canon by patriarchal fiat but “merely provided a method and vocabulary to help explain *why* those works were felt to be worthy of preservation and study” (116).⁴ Christians believe in objective truth, and so Christian literary criticism believes in objective standards. I, too, believe in objective standards and universal truths, but I also think sentimental women’s novels have been undervalued and understudied and that sentimental traits do not disqualify a work from being literary. Romances, and specifically the sentimental novels and evangelical romances I discuss in this project, are worthy of study, even though they were—or would be, in the case of contemporary conduct works—ignored by the New Critics.

Christian criticism can be further defined by differences with other approaches to literary analysis. It does not reject historicism’s interest in works’ cultural context but instead the New Historicist reduction of the individual to “a product of material and economic forces over which he [or she] has no control,” along with a rejection of universal standards (Markos 118-9). Because of its belief in God as the ultimate meaning and source of truth, Christian criticism rejects deconstruction’s claim that there is no fixed linguistic meaning and, in fact, no

⁴ Markos also writes that the New Critics were not elitist but rather they “wrested control of literary theory away from an academic coterie of researchers with access to special collections and studies and put it in the hands of anyone with a critical mind, an eye for irony, and an Oxford English Dictionary” (116).

reachable ultimate meaning. It rejects the strain of feminist theory that seeks to erase distinctions between males and females; in fact, many Christian critics tend to see feminism as a destructive force, much as many feminists tend to see Christianity as a destructive force (118-121).

By contrast, and as I demonstrate in this dissertation, I believe the two can coexist, that one can analyze from a feminist perspective without adopting all the tenets of Christian literary criticism and vice versa.⁵ From feminist criticism I take an interest in how a female is supposed to act, according to novels and to the world in which they're written. Further, I'm interested in expanding the history of women's writing by adding twentieth-century evangelical fiction to the conversation about sentimental literature. I also look at how the novels create a (mostly female) community—among characters, between authors and readers, among readers themselves. In this quest I'm indebted to Nina Auerbach's *Communities of Women*. Auerbach writes of "a recurrent literary image, a community of women [that] is a rebuke to the conventional ideal of a solitary woman living for and through men, attaining citizenship in the community of adulthood through masculine approval alone" (5). Auerbach's study "remind[s] us that female self-sufficiency is not a postulate of this or that generation of feminists, but an inherent and powerful component of our shared cultural vision," while acknowledging that literature grants women more power than does history (6). This female community counters the notion that women are incomplete without men (7). My reliance on Auerbach's arguments is evidence of the ways that I find feminist literary criticism compatible with Christian literary analysis. Although Auerbach is not engaged in Christian literary analysis, her emphasis on

⁵ Chapter Four contains more on Christian feminism.

female community is, I will show in later chapters, reinforced by analysis that does take seriously the religious content of these novels. The combination of feminist and Christian literary analysis methodologies enables me to analyze a representation of community that empowers women within a Christian framework.

Chapter Summaries

In Chapter One, I consider some classic works of conduct fiction from the apex of nineteenth-century sentimentality: Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* and Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. In this chapter I show how sentimental conventions function in best-selling novels in the middle of the nineteenth century. These novels have long, detailed descriptions of their characters' conversions, very specific wording with steps leading up to the conversion and showing the change of heart and actions afterward, much more so than in early sentimental/conduct novels. *Wide, Wide World's* conversion scene is a conventionally Christian one, as the main character repents of sin and trusts in Jesus Christ for salvation. *Little Women's* conversion scene is, I assert, a secular one, with a similar turning from wrongdoing but without dependence on a deity. In both books, the characters are guided by mentor characters. Other sentimental conventions, such as death scenes and the use of special keepsakes, reinforce and reflect the lessons of the conversion. I argue that these extended conversions reflect the authors' focus on inner piety and on the possibility of fundamental change, both in the characters and, by extension, in the readers.

In Chapter Two, I turn to nineteenth-century novels by African American women: Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* and Hannah Crafts' *The Bondswoman's Narrative*. These works have

much in common with the popular sentimental novels of the time but also with slave narratives, from which they take an epiphany of personhood scene, which I will argue is another kind of conversion scene. While *Bondwoman* is more obviously a work of sentimental conduct fiction, with its pronounced sentimentality and glorification of domesticity, *Our Nig* can also be usefully categorized this way because of its use of sentimental conventions and its religious conversion scene. One of the traits of these novels I underscore is the simultaneous use and minimization of the conversion scene. In both novels conversion is important but also very brief; this trait shows how both authors place a primary emphasis on racial uplift through conversion—individual conversion isn't the only goal. In *Our Nig*, the main character converts alone, on her own terms, rather than how and when the white people around her want her to, as a sign of her independence. In *Bondwoman's Narrative*, the conversion scene, which is extremely short, is brought about by a white woman's witness, suggesting the possibility of racial reconciliation. As I show, close attention to how conversion is represented in these novels reveals how sentimental conduct fiction was employed to address the experience and social impact of slavery and racial injustice.

Just as sentimental fiction resonated with nineteenth-century readers, so twentieth- and twenty-first century evangelical fiction resonates with modern readers looking for stories of romance, for connection with others, and with something beyond themselves. In Chapter Three, I consider a new generation of conduct fiction: twentieth-century evangelical romances, a genre initiated by Janette Oke's novel *Love Comes Softly*. I discuss the connection between this inaugural evangelical romance and nineteenth-century conduct fiction, for *Love Comes Softly* and Oke's other novels, and works by evangelical romance authors that quickly followed,

contain several of the key features of novels by Warner, Alcott, Crafts, and others: a focus on feeling, religious and household instruction and, most tellingly, the religious conversion scene. I chose to focus on Oke because she's a pioneer of the genre with a large body of work. She's still relevant as evinced by multiple imitators, by continued book sales, and by movie and television-show adaptations. She is from Canada but spawned a genre popular in the US, and many of her books are set in the US. This chapter shows how Oke and those who followed her employ conventions similar to nineteenth-century sentimental writers, but for a different purpose. The message of female power is subversive in Christian romance for different reasons than in nineteenth-century sentimental fiction. Modern readers more often encounter a message that women need not be or, more likely, should not be passive. The ideal of quiet influence promoted in Oke's novels is counter to current secular culture not because it appropriates too much power, as judged by prevailing views, but because it accepts too little. Again, my analysis addresses the ways in which the centrality of conversion in these novels is one means by which Oke responds to contemporary debates regarding women's place in society and, specifically, within a Christian society.

In Chapter Four I consider a reworking of the genre birthed by Oke: more recent evangelical romances by Francine Rivers and Jamie Langston Turner. These two authors exemplify the more progressive version of the evangelical romance. In the twentieth century and after, evangelical fiction has followed two parallel tracks: one that is close to secular, with authors such as Deeanne Gist, Catherine Palmer, and Angela Hunt writing novels sanitized of both obscenity and piety. The other track remains more conventionally pious, like Janette Oke; authors such as Francine Rivers, Becky Wade, and Jamie Langston Turner write novels as pious

as Oke's but more authentic. In these novels, Christians face nuanced problems and conversion sometimes isn't from non-Christian to Christian but from needing to repent and/or yield control to trusting fully in God. They are rawer than the earlier novels, portraying darker subject matter and less-perfect, more realistic Christians. With these changes come changes in the conversion scene: it is less formulaic, less preachy, more organic to the story. This chapter shows how current evangelical writers have modified the conventions used by Oke and writers like her to move beyond a focus on characters becoming a Christian to dealing with difficult topics such as sex-trafficking and child abuse.

Women's sentimental conduct fiction is flexible and adaptable to the time period in which it is written. Ultimately, the theme of conversion that carries through these works shows that society longs not just for didactic literature but also for the connection to something beyond themselves—to God or to religion, or to others, or to literature that speaks to their realities.



My dad died a few years ago after an eighteen-month battle with brain cancer. He left behind his thousands of books that lined all four walls in his office, filled boxes in the garage, and punctuated different areas of the house in high piles. When my mom moved in with me, there was no way we could keep them all. There just wasn't room. So we donated some to the library of the university where I worked, gave some to friends, sold many in an estate sale. I'm guessing hundreds were recycled after the sale by the auctioneer we hired—after all, how many people in small-town Texas are looking for, say, fifty-year-old books on colonial Spain? I kept about forty of his books—some bought at historic sites in Italy and England; a few on his

favorite topics of Christopher Columbus and the American Civil War; some on subjects I'm interested in that I didn't know he had, such as slave narratives; and some that I remember seeing on his bookshelf during my childhood. Those are my favorites: James Herriot memoirs, a group of leather-bound Civil War classics, the collected works of Mark Twain, *Mary Chesnut's Civil War*, Dad's well-worn study Bible. They sit on our bookshelves now, all sporting their Library of Congress spine labels. These books are daily reminders of my dad, daily reminders of his rich legacy of character and scholarship, artifacts of an intellect well-developed and a life well-lived. And just as these books are a connection to my Dad, books are a link to our culture's past. The thread of religious conversion that I examine in the pages that follow weaves its way from pre-Revolutionary seduction novels to nineteenth-century sentimental novels and on through to twentieth-century evangelical romance and beyond. It is a literary history that, I will show, is worth preserving and worth exploring.

Chapter 1

“My Arms and My Heart Will Receive You”: Increased Piety in Best-Selling Mid-Nineteenth-Century Sentimental Novels

My introduction to conduct fiction was through Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, which I first read when I was ten or eleven, a yellow paperback copy that took quite a beating from repeated use. I wanted to be like Jo, making friends with the boy next door, playing dress up, and most of all going into a “vortex” as I wrote novels in my own cozy garret. It was Jo who introduced me to Susan Warner's *Wide, Wide World*, a book so touching that it made tomboyish Jo cry. But despite Alcott's mention of *The Wide, Wide World*, I didn't read it until more than twenty years later and then I was enthralled much as young Jo was, though I didn't sit in a tree or wax lachrymose while doing so. The book interested me in a spiritual more than an emotional way, as along with Ellen, the main character in *The Wide, Wide World*, I hoped to please my Heavenly Father. Both Jo's and my responses are understandable, I suppose, even predictable, for in *The Wide, Wide, World*, sentimentalism, with all its pathos and didacticism, finds its fullest expression.

In this chapter I analyze *The Wide, Wide World* and *Little Women*, two nineteenth-century American conduct novels that are delightfully didactic and that illustrate my argument that the conversion scene is key in understanding the genre of conduct fiction. Both novels exemplify the focus on inner piety that I argue becomes increasingly common within conduct novels of the mid-nineteenth century, a focus not just on correct behavior but also on correct thought. Both emphasize conversion although, as I will show, Warner's conversion is more

religious and Alcott's more secular. My analysis demonstrates that Warner's representation of conversion reflects her book's evangelical purpose, while Alcott's depiction of conversion in her novel reflects her premise that humans have within themselves the catalyst for lasting change.

The novels this chapter considers are a subset of one of the most important categories of conduct fiction: the sentimental novel. Before addressing the specific ways that sentimental novels participate in defining and prescribing correct conduct, it is worthwhile to review the general characteristics of the sentimental tradition, particularly in light of the debates that surround this body of literature in nineteenth-century studies, which I outlined in the introduction. Sentimental novels are fundamentally relational, emphasizing the importance of community. According to Joanna Dobson, "Sentimentalism envisions the self in relation; family (not necessarily in the conventional biological sense), intimacy, community, and social responsibility are its primary relational modes" (267). The theme of bonding is the defining characteristic of sentimentalism: It "is premised on an emotional and philosophical ethos that celebrates human connection, both personal and communal, and acknowledges the shared devastation of affectional loss" (Dobson 266). The style of sentimental novels tends to be simple, with "accessible language, a clear prose style, and familiar lyric and narrative patterns" (268). To those who would say that sentimental works are unrhetorical and hackneyed, Dobson counters that the simple style helps make the works accessible to a wide audience (272). The motifs common to sentimental literature may seem trite, but "To the sentimental mind motifs of abandonment, orphanhood, and death do not wall in excessive emotionality; rather, they represent an essential reality and must be treated with heightened feeling" (272-3). The heightened feeling necessitated by essential truths help establish a connection with the reader.

Sentimental fiction and conduct novels have a few other commonalities. These novels often mute denominational markers. They are more likely to champion the practice of Christianity generally than to advocate a particular method of baptism, end-time beliefs, or style of worship service. There is little discussion of specific doctrine, instead focusing on personal devotion. Another staple of the sentimental novel is the sentimental keepsake. Characters in sentimental novels often give and receive keepsakes. These usually serve as memorials, as consolation, as assurance of a reunion in heaven (Dobson 274-5). According to Dobson, the keepsake “resonates with emotional, metaphysical, and political significance, and its violation is resonantly marked as inhumane” (279). Also common in sentimental conduct novels are deathbed scenes. The quintessential sentimental death scene occurs in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which Jane Tompkins calls “the *summa theologica* of nineteenth-century America’s religion of domesticity” (*Sensational* 125). Glenn Hendler writes, “Sentimental death scenes depict a self-loss that in domestic ideology defines femininity” (691). Further, the community is the solution for the death scene, for that self-loss (693). Too, comfort comes from the dying person’s heavenly destination. The result of the death scene, according to Hendler, is a renewed effort regarding “whatever spiritual or social cause the novel is championing, inspired by the example of the virtually angelic deceased” (691).

One prevailing strain of literary criticism sees sentimental fiction as somewhat sadistic, using punishment to teach lessons and robbing agency of religious converts. For instance, Sarah Emily Newton writes that these novels are “lessons in pain and humiliation” involving a “pedagogy of threat and fear” (152). Both Newton and Marianne Noble acknowledge the availability of gains in agency for sentimental heroines, but they differ on the conditions:

Newton argues sentimental heroines achieve agency despite their suffering whereas Noble argues they achieve agency through suffering. Newton writes that sentimental novels contain the message that “through self-discipline and passivity lies power. By reading the tales of girls punished through the subtext, one discovers that the covert, perhaps subversive message is that women need not be victims, but are able to control their own lives and destinies” (160). Noble, on the other hand, writes that sentimental heroines’ agency may come through the pursuit of sexual pleasure through submission, that is, through masochism (103).

In summary, sentimental fiction revolves around human connections and feelings. Sentimental fiction, a subset of conduct fiction, makes use of character foils and forwards Christian principles, as do other conduct works. Sentimental fiction has other commonalities, too, such the sentimental keepsake and the sentimental death scene, both of which get their significance from the human relationships involved. All of these conventions are adapted to forward the purpose of the novel reflected by the conversion scene, which I contend is a key feature of conduct fiction, and so of sentimental fiction. The conversion scene is a moment in which a character makes a religious or pseudo-religious commitment that is followed by a change in behavior, that is, by increasing inner and outer piety. The conversion reflects what I believe is the central purpose of conduct fiction: to promote conversion and, in so doing, to define and promote a set of appropriate behaviors and beliefs related to that conversion.

As I show the section that follows, in Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World*, the main character Ellen’s conversion is no mere formality. Hers is a process, one started at her mother’s knee and continuing over several miles, weeks, and chapters. Ellen’s Christianity isn’t a matter of rite, or even of right versus wrong, but a matter of relationship with God and with fellow

believers, including characters in the novel and, I contend, readers of the novel. In the next section of this chapter, I focus on Louisa May Alcott's representation of conversion in *Little Woman*. I argue that Alcott's portrayal of conversion is focused on human, not divine, relationships. Both novels' emphasis on and detailing of conversion scenes reflects each author's purpose, especially her emphasis on inner piety, and is reflected by the novels' other sentimental characteristics.

***The Wide, Wide World* by Susan Warner**

Susan Warner's first novel *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) tells the story of Ellen Montgomery, a young girl sent to live with her unsympathetic aunt Fortune, whom she has never met.⁶ The beginning of her journey to her aunt's is also the beginning of her spiritual journey, as she considers becoming a Christian and then, once converting, seeks to live a pious life. Ellen chafes at her aunt's ascetic way of relating but is able to grow in her faith and to make many good friends, most notably the Humphrey family. First Alice Humphrey and then her brother John become spiritual and educational mentors and even unofficially adopt Ellen into their family. Near the end of the novel, after both her parents and Alice have died, Ellen goes to stay with relatives in Scotland, having found out this was her father's desire and feeling duty-bound because of her religion to obey his orders. With these relatives, the Lindsays, she is quite unhappy, not the least because they interfere with her practicing her religion as she believes she should. Though cast into the wide, wide world alone, Ellen finds many friends, improves her

⁶ Aunt Fortune's name is apropos, for her coldness and cruelty suggest what Ellen and others are subject to through fate.

character, influences those around her, and eventually returns to America and, it is implied, marries John Humphrey.

The status of *The Wide, Wide World* as a work of conduct fiction is not in dispute. The novel is based on a Christian ethic, as evidenced by Ellen's reliance on the Bible and on John Bunyan's Christian classic *The Pilgrim's Progress*. It makes use of foil characters, such as Aunt Fortune and Nancy. Keepsakes figure prominently in the novel, notably Ellen's gifts from her mother. Human connection and sentiment are celebrated through sentimental death scenes and other poignant, highly emotional moments. What is in dispute is the importance and location of Ellen's conversion. Whereas, as I showed in the introduction, conversion scenes in early sentimental novels were simple and sometimes only a formality, I argue that by mid-century the conversion scene was a central feature of sentimental bestsellers such as *The Wide, Wide World*. And I contend that Ellen's conversion occurs near the beginning of the novel before her mother has died, a fact that is important because it shapes the rest of her life that we read of, affects her interactions with other characters, and emphasizes Warner's evangelical purpose.

Readers discover in the first chapter of *Wide, Wide World* that although Ellen's mother is a Christian, Ellen has not yet converted. Looking out the window, Ellen sees a lamplighter, someone spreading a light that she does not yet have but is clearly drawn to: "The veriest moth could not have followed the light with more perseverance than did Ellen's eyes" (10).⁷ Ellen

⁷ This symbolism is made more explicit in Maria S. Cummins' 1854 novel *The Lamplighter*, where Trueman Flint, a lamplighter by trade, rescues young Gerty from the streets and teaches her about God, the heavenly lamplighter. It was this novel's popularity that prompted Nathaniel Hawthorne to decry the "d----d mob of scribbling women" (qtd. in Winship 3).

tells her mother, “you know he [God] is not my friend in the same way that he is yours. . . . Oh, I wish he was!” (23). Another day, when reading her mother passages from the Bible about heaven, Ellen realizes that she has no place there, as her mother does (27). Even after agreeing to pray that Jesus takes away the power of sin, Ellen apparently still has not converted, for, on the boat journeying toward Aunt Fortune’s, Ellen tells a kind gentleman who befriends her that she “do[es] not love the Saviour” (70), that she doesn’t know how to become a Christian. And so the gentleman gives Ellen, and thereby readers of *The Wide, Wide, World*, conversion instructions. He even models a prayer for her: “Lord, look upon me—I am not fit to come to thee, but thou hast bid me come—take me and make me thine own—take this hard heart that I can do nothing with, and make it holy and fill it with they love—I give it and myself into thy hands, oh, dear Saviour!” (73-4). Ellen struggles to echo the prayer, asks more questions and receives more advice, studies a hymn recommended by the gentleman, and then finally agrees to try to “follow [her] Saviour” (75). Ellen says yes to conversion and to God repeatedly in this scene, affirmations that more than outbalance her doubts. She answers yes when the gentleman asks if she prays; she says that yes, she wants to know why she should love God; she says that yes, she knows Jesus died to save sinners; she says yes, she will come to Jesus. Moreover, Ellen is moved to tears by her confessions, a sign of conversion, according to Tompkins, for “not words, but the emotions of the heart bespeak a state of grace” (*Sensational* 131). Ellen’s conversion here isn’t just a ritual, nor is it something her mother can directly bequeath or choose for Ellen vicariously. It is individual and personal. It is an acknowledgment of sin, a heart change followed by a thought and behavior change in Ellen herself.

We know that Ellen truly has converted because of her actions afterward. The first confirmation of her conversion comes when she's off the boat and continuing her journey. Her traveling companion Mrs. Dunscombe has been cruel, but Ellen forgives her, believing that "the Bible says if we do not forgive people what they do to us, we shall not be forgiven ourselves" (84). Another proof of Ellen's conversion is her desire to read her Bible. Ellen finds it "pleasant . . . to have a little quiet time that seemed like Sunday" as "the sweet Bible words came, as they now often came to Ellen, with a healing breath" (307). More proof of her conversion is her confession of faults. On Christmas Eve she and some other little girls choose pieces of fabric to make gifts. When another girl complains about wanting the piece Ellen has, she gives up the fabric and confesses that she had accidentally peeked when choosing (293-4). When treated unfairly at Christmastime, Ellen struggles with bitterness. However, "Christian principles had taken strong hold in little Ellen's heart; she fought her evil tempers manfully" (319). Clearly her character is being shaped, as one would expect post-conversion.

Other characters, Ellen's spiritual mentors, confirm her conversion. When Ellen confesses to Alice she's not sure she has converted, Alice tells her, "if you love Jesus Christ you may know you are his child" and that love includes obedience (242). Though Ellen isn't sure she loves or obeys perfectly, Alice replies, "*Perfectly*, none of us do. But, dear Ellen, *that* is not the question. Is it your heart's desire and effort to keep them [Christ's commandments]?" (242). Because Ellen's answer is a yes, albeit an unsteady one, we know that Ellen has converted. She's still in the process of learning to be a Christian, but her friend Alice wouldn't lead her astray. John, too, confirms Ellen's conversion. He tells her that the Bible contains several ways to know one is a Christian, and Ellen, after hearing them, realizes they are true for her: "I didn't

used to like to read the Bible, and now I do very much;--I never liked praying in old times, and now, oh, what should I do without it!—I didn't love Jesus at all, but I am sure I do now. I don't keep his commandments, but I do *try* to keep them;--I *must* be changed a little" (352). And finally, she realizes she loves God (352). Alice and John serve as mentors for readers, too, as readers know not just how to convert but, through the brother and sister, how to be sure they have converted.

There is some dispute among literary critics about the moment of Ellen's conversion. Veronica Stewart, for instance, locates Ellen's conversion midway through the novel, after she discovers that her mother has died (65). Furthermore, Stewart claims that Mrs. Montgomery is an impediment to Ellen's conversion, that she has to die because Ellen has said she loves her mother more than she loves Jesus, in order for Ellen to turn to God (64-5). For this reason Stewart believes that Mrs. Montgomery has failed in her culturally assigned role as spiritual shepherd since she fails to bring about Ellen's conversion (64). Though Stewart rightly points out that Mrs. Montgomery serves a crucial role in Ellen's conversion, she neglects to recognize how crucial that role is (65). Even though Mrs. Montgomery isn't the person who speaks to Ellen just before she converts, she is the main influencer of that decision. Mrs. Montgomery has laid the spiritual foundation that the kind gentleman on the boat, the Humphreys, Mrs. Vawse, and others build upon. Ellen does strongly recognize she's a Christian—that she has converted—after finding out her mother has died, but her life evinces conversion long before, and she realizes she is a Christian before, too. When Mr. Humphreys, Alice and John's father, asks if she knows "what it is to be a forgiven child of God," she answers in the affirmative (278). Losing her mother is a test of faith that proves Ellen's conversion and encourages her continued

piety, not a barrier removed to allow it. All of the evidence of her conversion detailed in the paragraphs above happen before her mother's death.

The conversion Warner details in *The Wide, Wide World* is a discrete event but also the beginning of an ongoing process—sanctification, in theological terms. Ellen is a Christian immediately when she prays on the boat, but she isn't sinless immediately, or ever, during the course of the novel. She continues to have struggles and to make wrong decisions and to have wrong thoughts. But Warner details her becoming godlier, more pious. Not long after arriving at Aunt Fortune's, Ellen becomes angry at her aunt's teasing. She storms to her room and cries out of her mother, but "Then came thoughts of her Bible and hymnbook . . . humbled and sad, poor Ellen sought that great friend she knew she had displeased, and prayed earnestly to be made a good child" (117). After another run-in with her aunt, Ellen wishes she had learned not to speak back, and the narrator remarks that "Ellen had yet to learn that many a prayer and many a tear, much watchfulness, much help from on high, must be hers before she could be thoroughly dispossessed of" pride, "But she knew her sickness; she had applied to the physician;--she was in a fair way to be well" (181). Ellen continues to sin not because she has not yet converted but because, the narrator's comments suggest, being rid of sin takes time.

Ellen's process of sanctification shows the book's emphasis on inner piety. It isn't enough for Ellen—or the reader—just to act right. Ellen must feel and think right, too. When Ellen confesses to Alice that she doesn't like Aunt Fortune, the older girl reminds Ellen that the Bible says love is patient and kind. In response, Ellen says, "I try all the while, dear Miss Alice, to keep down my bad feelings . . . I try and pray and get rid of them, and I hope I shall by and by" (222). Even as she struggles to act respectfully to Aunt Fortune, Ellen also prays to honor God

with her feelings toward her aunt. Alice counsels Ellen regarding Fortune, "Take care, dear Ellen, don't take up the trade of suspecting evil; you could not take up a worse; and even when it is forced upon you, see as little of it as you can, and forget as soon as you can what you see" (184). It's not enough to act and think respectfully; Alice is counseling Ellen to expect good rather than evil from her aunt. Another part of inner piety, according to *Wide, Wide World*, is looking to Jesus for friendship. Mrs. Vawse, a friend to whom they've gone seeking "a lesson of quiet contentment," tells Ellen and Alice, "It is not till one loses one's hold of other things and looks to Jesus alone that one finds how much he can do. 'There is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother;' but I never knew all that meant till I had no other friends to lean upon" (188, 189).⁸

The critical consensus regarding *The Wide, Wide World* is that characters lose agency through religious conversion. As mentioned previously, scholars like Noble hold that Ellen is disempowered by her submission to Christianity and, specifically, to the male figures who embody Christian piety, such as John Humphrey. Noble writes that this disempowerment stems from Warner's "religiously determined belief that salvation requires submission" (103). I agree that Ellen does, indeed, lose agency in some ways after she converts. One of the most stunning examples of lost agency comes when she leaves the comfort of those she loves for Scotland; even though her father is dead, he still has power over her since she believes it is her duty to obey him (490). Ellen is separated from her mother at the behest of her father; though she's not a Christian yet, her mother is and still cannot or at least does not stop their separation. And then, for years, Ellen is at the mercy of Aunt Fortune's whims.

⁸ Mrs. Vawse is quoting Proverbs 18.24 (KJV).

Even though I agree that Ellen frequently lacks the ability to choose her circumstances, such as where she will live and with whom, I contend that through her conversion she has a net gain in agency by acquiring the capacity to deal with those circumstances. Mrs. Montgomery says Ellen can make Aunt Fortune like her by being dutiful—in other words, that Ellen has agency, that she can control her life through religious goodness (21). At first it seems that Mrs. Montgomery was wrong, for Aunt Fortune will not like Ellen or even treat her kindly. But Ellen does receive love from Mr. Van Brunt by being kind and obedient at Aunt Fortune's, and Ellen unwittingly gains Mrs. Dunscombe's gruff servant Timmins' affection this way as well. Too, she finds her de facto family through being good, through demonstrating her character that is becoming more sanctified: Alice, John, Mr. Humphreys, Mrs. Vawse, and many others. In giving her the biblical advice to "overcome evil with good," Mrs. Montgomery is instructing her daughter regarding one of the most powerful tools available with her religion.⁹ Mrs. Montgomery knows she is likely to die before seeing her daughter again and so is aware of some of the evil Ellen will face, and, though she doesn't know the extent of her daughter's coming troubles, Ellen is nevertheless able to apply her mother's advice to situations beyond that of losing a beloved parent.

Another way Ellen gains agency through her conversion is her ability to influence others. Nancy Vawse, a negative foil for Ellen, after knowing Ellen several months actually comes to help with housework when Aunt Fortune falls ill (357). The implication is that Ellen is beginning to have an influence on Nancy, for, though Nancy is "somewhat of a charge ... if she liked any body, she liked Ellen" (359). Ellen also has influence on Mr. Van Brunt, Aunt Fortune's hired

⁹ Mrs. Montgomery quotes Romans 12.21.

man and, eventually, husband. Normally acquiescent, he stands up to Fortune when Ellen goes to live with the Humphreys; when Fortune declares she will bring Ellen back, Mr. Van Brunt opposes her, having been influenced to break his usual passive pattern by both Ellen's and Alice's influence (458). We don't see Mr. Van Brunt convert but Ellen does tell him how to do so, and he promises not to forget what she's told him (414). With Ellen gone, Mr. Van Brunt continues to exhibit the effects of her influence: he acts kindly toward and reads the Bible for Ellen's grandmother, who formerly was treated kindly only by Ellen (487). To Ellen's uncle Lindsay's housekeeper Maggie, Ellen's goodness is visually apparent, for "There's heaven's peace within," Maggie declares (520). Eventually Uncle Lindsay realizes that religion, though he's skeptical of it, has made Ellen a good person; he sees "that if religion had much to do with making her what she was, it was a tree that bore good fruits" (551).

Finally, Ellen gains personal, spiritual agency regarding her relationship with God. Part of that spiritual agency takes the form of comfort when Ellen misses her mother and Alice after they have died. When John Humphrey asks if Ellen believes her mother is well in heaven, Ellen exclaims, "Oh, yes!—oh, yes!" (349). She may be crying, but she is also certain that her loved ones are in heaven and that she will see them again. When Alice is on her deathbed, Ellen receives comfort from Scripture "trooping through [her] mind" (440). John Humphrey compares Ellen to John Bunyan's eponymous character, saying, "My little pilgrim, I hope you will keep the straight road, and win the praise of the servant who was faithful over a few things" (354).¹⁰ From visiting and reading to two elderly women, Ellen learns that "the pleasure of doing good still far overbalanced the pains" (467). Ellen's agency is the ability to win the praise of God for

¹⁰ John Humphrey here refers to Jesus Christ's parable of the talents, Matthew 25.14-30.

being faithful even in small matters. When she first arrives in Scotland, bereft of all her friends, she is comforted with thoughts of God, realizing “that there, not less than in America, she [is] his child” (500). Though her uncle Lindsay forbids her to get up early to pray, her faith in God allows her to do it anyway (541). It is true that Ellen, along with all the Christians in *Wide, Wide World*, must submit to God, but submission brings her comfort, courage, perseverance, and joy.

Ellen’s mother Mrs. Montgomery, too, evinces a net gain in agency, an idea that can be extrapolated from the events in the novel despite that fact that she has converted before the novel opens. Mrs. Montgomery’s agency stems almost entirely from her religion. She cannot prolong her life or keep Ellen near, but she can pass on what is quite obviously her dearest possession: her faith in God. The religion she tells Ellen of is more than ritual; it is a powerful part of her life that centers on a personal relationship with God. Mrs. Montgomery comforts herself with scripture, prays often, and trusts God with the future; and she does all she can to help Ellen have that kind of religion, too. Before they part, Mrs. Montgomery implores her daughter to love Jesus Christ more than her: “I know that the Lord Jesus is far, far more worthy of your affection than I am, and if your heart were not hardened by sin you would see him so; it is only because you do not know him that you would love me better. Pray, pray, my dear child, that he would take away the power of sin, and show you himself; that is all that is wanting” (39). Ellen agrees to seek religion, a decision that will change the course of her life even more than the separation from her parents. Thus Mrs. Montgomery’s influence is more evident in Ellen’s life than is Mr. Montgomery’s, a fact that demonstrates Mrs. Montgomery’s agency. While Ellen’s father separates her from her mother and sends her twice to live with unfamiliar relatives, Ellen’s mother provides her with a spiritual foundation and influence that persist,

even after Ellen has escaped the coldness of Aunt Fortune and the possessiveness of the Lindsay family.

Ellen's conversion and subsequent influence on those around her, as well as her own assurance she'll see her mother and her friend/adopted sister Alice again in heaven, show that *The Wide, Wide, World* is doing the same kind of cultural work that Tompkins describes for Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Though some scholars have argued that Eva's death scene in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is impotent because it does nothing to change the reality of slavery, Tompkins writes it is triumphant because it brings about Topsy's conversion (*Sensational* 130). According to Tompkins, Stowe's novel works to end slavery not by enacting laws but by effecting heart change in the readers (135). Similarly, in *The Wide, Wide World*, Ellen doesn't witness her mother's death, but their separation scene reads like a sentimental death scene. After all, Ellen does taste "the bitterness of death" at their parting, and her mother's final words to Ellen are about her need for salvation (63-4). Equally, this experience helps to shape Ellen's conversion, in much the same way Eva's death affects Topsy and even Miss Ophelia. According to Tompkins, "Little Eva's death enacts the drama of which all the major episodes of [*Uncle Tom's Cabin*] are transformations, the idea, central to Christian soteriology, that the highest human calling is to give one's life for another" (*Sensational* 128). Ellen's mother doesn't die literally in the place of her daughter, but her leaving and subsequent death are catalysts for Ellen's conversion and continued spiritual growth. Extending this influence, Ellen's own conversion affects other characters in the novel and, it seems Warner would hope, produces readers' conversions as well.

The conventional sentimental keepsakes in *Wide, Wide World* are tied to the conversion, too. Ellen's most precious keepsakes are spiritual resources. The first is the Bible, a gift from her mother. She and her mother shop for it carefully. The book has begun to "grow dear" (41) even before the family is separated, its words comfortingly familiar to Ellen from her mother's reading and quoting the text. Mrs. Montgomery sacrifices a keepsake of her own to buy the Bible for Ellen, selling a ring from her own mother, telling her daughter, through tears, that "this use of my ring gives me more pleasure on the whole than any other I could have made of it" (29). Ellen reads her Bible often and carries it to Scotland with her. Ellen's copy of *Pilgrim's Progress* with John's marginal notes is another treasured keepsake, and we see how dear it is to Ellen when her uncle Lindsay takes it away as part of his efforts to sever her ties with her American friends (551). In his actions, we see the violation of a keepsake Dobson describes as "inhumane." Her uncle, in depriving her of the book, is depriving her not only of her connection with her dear friend John but also of a cherished spiritual resource.¹¹ Keepsakes in *The Wide, Wide World* bespeak not just human connection but also, as we see from the emphasis on Ellen's conversion, connection with the divine.

Susan Warner's evangelical purpose in *The Wide, Wide World* is easily defensible and makes sense, considering her own religious devotion. After all, she and her sister Anna hosted Bible studies for West Point cadets for decades (Ashworth 161). And Ellen's conversion process reveals a key detail of the evangelical community she belongs to as a result of the conversion: It is, or at least should be according to the novel, welcoming to outsiders. Both Mrs. Montgomery

¹¹ According to Susan Ashworth, taking the book is an assault not only on Ellen's religious identity but also on her national and class identities, since *Pilgrim's Progress* was so important to the nineteenth-century American middle class (156).

and Ellen's best friends strongly encourage her to join their community. It is not an exclusive club but one that the characters and the novel itself, by presenting conversion instructions, invite others to join. As I have demonstrated in my analysis of *The Wide, Wide World*, Ellen joins the community by converting, though she is welcomed by the community before her conversion. The religion in *The Wide, Wide World* is not inherited. Each person must make the decision to become a Christian on his or her own. That decision, that conversion, is the gateway into the community. That is why the conversion scene is so important not just in each Christian character's life but in each sentimental novel.

***Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott**

One of my first foster sons, Jason¹² was an angelic-looking little three-year-old with light blond hair, deep blue eyes, curly lashes, and a smattering of freckles across his nose. At times he'd crawl into my lap, lay his head against my shoulder, and put his feet over my opposite arm, so that he was cradled like a baby. I'd hold him close, sometimes singing to him, sometimes rocking, sad that he'd not been held enough in his short life. At times like this it was easy to forget how Jason acted when he wasn't sleepy. He threw books at me when he was angry. He tore paper and banged on walls and kicked at windows. He shoved his baby brother to the ground or into walls frequently—he didn't even have to be angry, just desirous of getting his own way. He often yelled in public places, kicked and screamed in the car, and hid in McDonald's play equipment, refusing to come out. I know much of Jason's acting out stemmed from abuse and neglect in his past—from people sinning against him. But he didn't have to be

¹² His name has been changed, as required by the foster system.

taught these things—how to cause his brother pain, how to destroy others' property, how to embarrass the family in public. They came to him quite naturally, much more naturally than sharing a toy, helping with the dishes, or staying put after his bedtime story and prayer. I can imagine that little Jason's behavior would be a clear illustration to Susan Warner of humanity's inborn sinful nature. If he were a character in *Wide, Wide World*, not only would Jason need to change how he acted, but he would need a heart change, a religious conversion that would result in increasingly pious thought and behavior.

Louisa May Alcott came to quite different conclusions about children's misbehavior, as evident in her novel *Little Women* (1868-9). In this novel she calls children "little sinners" in jest, depicting children as innocent and unspoiled by the ravages of sin (576). *Little Women* is, of course, the perennial best-selling story of four sisters coming of age during and after the American Civil War: Meg, the pretty and proper oldest sister; Jo, the creative and impetuous writer who makes friends with the next-door neighbor Teddy, also called Laurie; Beth, the sensitive sister who dies young; and Amy, the artistic youngest sister. Alcott may reference *The Wide, Wide World* in *Little Women*, but she does so almost ironically. Alcott's portrayal of Jo distances her from what may seem, in comparison, the kind of judgmental sentimentality Warner's book typifies. In this section, I argue that the differences between Jo's conversion scene in *Little Women* and Ellen's in *The Wide, Wide World* reveal the different goals of the two books, with Alcott's being a celebration the goodness that humans, specifically women, can achieve through their own effort and the influence of others. Her characters may need conversion, but that conversion is a dedication to goodness without the need for vicarious atonement of sin through Jesus Christ.

The conversion scene in *Little Women* is very different from that in *Wide, Wide World*, but it is still key in interpreting the novel. As I will show, it's a secular conversion, a change of heart not involving a deity. In *Little Women*, literature in general is a connector and touchstone more than the Bible is. Piety is important, but it's a type of piety separated from the idea that humanity is tainted by sin. The book may be based on the Christian principles, but if so it's Christian without Christ and largely without an omniscient, omnipotent God. The main conversion scene in *Little Women* is Jo's. Her conversion begins with her stay at Mrs. Kirke's, an appropriately named character because, as John Matteson notes, her name sounds like the German word for "church" (427n10). Mrs. Kirke's establishment even includes a view of a church tower (431). Jo's conversion isn't a repentance of sin and pledge to follow Jesus Christ, as Ellen's is. However, Alcott's use of religious language and imagery show it to be an equally transformative experience.

Already in sorrow over her sister Beth's illness and her friend Teddy's unwanted proposal, Jo sinks even further into darkness at Mrs. Kirke's, for she writes increasingly lurid stories, a lucrative endeavor that sends her to newspapers, library, and police records seeking inspiration, "introduc[ing] herself to folly, sin, and misery" (453). Comparing her to Jack and the Beanstalk, the narrator says that Jo, in writing "sensation stories," or "rubbish," "scrambled up on the shady side . . . and got more booty, but nearly left behind what was far more precious than the moneybags" (448). Jo is conscious of her guilt even when she first submits her stories for publication, for she blushes and does not purposely admit she's the author (451). Later, having ceased to write dark tales, Jo becomes even more despondent after Beth dies and she is left alone, a twenty-five-year-old spinster amid happily married couples.

It is at Mrs. Kirke's that Jo meets her savior, not a divine being but a very human but respectable man, Professor Friedrich Bhaer. When introduced Professor Bhaer is associated with religion, for Jo writes in a letter to her mother and sister that he is "poor as a church mouse" (433). Professor Bhaer "defend[s] religion with all the eloquence of truth," but apparently does not include Jesus in his defense (457). Though Professor Bhaer will prove to be Jo's romantic interest, he is not the typical romantic hero. Donna M. Campbell writes that "Alcott dutifully provides as her heroine's husband a fatherly mentor from whom she somewhat maliciously removes every trace of sex appeal" (124). But as a consequence of this characterization he is well positioned to offer fatherly, moral direction. Professor Bhaer befriends Jo and eventually scolds her for the unwholesome stories she produces, telling her they contaminate young minds by stating that authors of such stories "put poison in the sugar-plum, and let the small ones eat it" (460). He "advise[s] her to study simple, true, and lovely characters" rather than lurid and sensational ones (453). As Alcott portrays it, Jo doesn't need saving because she has a sinful nature. She needs saving because she is letting her natural good nature be corrupted by the evil that she comes into contact with when researching her stories. Professor Bhaer functions as Jo's moral compass, for when she sees with his eyes, "the faults of [her] poor stories glared at her dreadfully, and filled her with dismay" (461).

Another encounter with Professor Bhaer completes Jo's conversion. Several months later, at her lowest, Jo finds in her trunk of keepsakes a note from him promising to visit: "Wait for me, my friend, I may be a little late, but I shall surely come" (563). This language strongly resembles an Old Testament prophecy about Jesus: "For the vision is yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak, and not lie: though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come,

it will not tarry" (Hab 2.3).¹³ It is when Professor Bhaer, to whom Alcott refers with this messianic language, then does return and the pair confess their mutual love, that Jo's conversion is complete. She has been writing more wholesome pieces even before his arrival and then, when she accepts his proposal, tacitly agrees to shelve her writing—mostly—taking on wifehood, motherhood, teacher-hood instead. Having accepted Professor Bhaer's marriage proposal, Jo has stepped from darkness to light, "turning from the night, and storm, and loneliness, to the household light, and warmth, and peace," religious language without a deity (616).

What I see as Jo's conversion scene has generally been considered just a romantic episode, and it certainly is, though it is barely more romantic than John Humphrey's practical proposal to Ellen in *Wide, Wide World*. But Jo is doing more than merely getting engaged in this scene. She is making a move analogous to Ellen's conversion on the boat. Like Ellen, Jo has been encouraged by her mother to do the right thing. She has struggled to be good as Ellen has struggled to love God. And finally she has answered the call of a savior, albeit a human one. Jo's attachment to Professor Bhaer is less the narrative fulfillment of a romantic love arc and more the consummation of her mother's teaching. Claudia Stokes writes that, in sentimental novels, domesticity is associated with spirituality (195). In committing to Professor Bhaer, Jo commits to domesticity, a life of wholesome writing, education, and other forms of self-control.

¹³ Speaking of the Messiah's second coming is Paul's assurance in Hebrews 10.37 that echoes Habakkuk: "...he that shall come will come, and will not tarry." The language used to describe Professor Bhaer is messianic in another way. The narrator says he is "neither rich nor great, young nor handsome" (453). This is reminiscent of Isaiah's prophecy regarding Jesus: "For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, *there is* no beauty that we should desire him" (Isa. 53.2).

Jo has a net gain in agency by marrying Professor Bhaer and therefore, as I characterize it, by converting. She tells her friend and neighbor Teddy she can't have married him, for he would "hate my scribbling, and I couldn't get on without it" (472). Her marriage choice has allowed her to continue her chosen avocation.¹⁴ While she does give up writing sensationalist stories, she had wanted to include morals in her stories anyway (450). And she plans to take up writing again, eventually. She remarks to her mother, "I haven't given up the hope that I may write a good book yet, but I can wait, and I'm sure it will be all the better for such illustrations as these," indicating her son and nephews (627). With Professor Bhaer and with Aunt March's bequest of her house, Jo is able to fulfill her dream of having a school for boys, something that would have been much harder for a single woman. Jo's romance-conversion with Professor Bhaer gave Alcott agency, too, for she admitted it was her "perversity" that led her to create the scholar, rather than having Jo marry Teddy, as her readers desired (qtd. in Matteson 433n3).

Jo does not need a conversion for religious salvation, nor does anyone else in the world of *Little Women*. In fact, the book mocks the idea of an inborn sinful nature by jokingly calling Meg's children Daisy and Demi "little sinners" for sneaking snacks while the adults are busy (576). This is a stark contrast to *The Wide, Wide World*, in which both Mrs. Montgomery and the gentleman on the boat tell Ellen she is sinful and hard-hearted. When Amy and Laurie are in Europe, Laurie jokes that he hasn't yet gone to his grandfather because of "Natural depravity," another instance where Alcott's novel mocks a religious tenet that Warner's takes quite

¹⁴ Matteson opines that Jo's tearing up of the poem that brought Professor Bhaer to her is Jo's way of showing that she is done with writing (542n5; 613n4). However, Jo continues to write after marriage, although apparently putting writing second to domestic and educational concerns.

seriously (519). In *Little Women*, children are born wise. Speaking of his grandson Demi, Mr. March says, “I am not putting thoughts into his head, but helping him unfold those already there. These children are wiser than we are” (594). In the same conversation, in which Demi tells his grandfather he kissed a girl at school, the narrator says that the grandfather is “confess[ing] the young sinner,” a move clearly meant for humor, not to suggest the boy really is sinful, especially considering the little boy is playfully “exploring the waistcoat pocket” of his confessor while he confesses (597). When discussing the negative influences Jo opens herself up to in researching her stories, the narrator writes that “healthy young minds do not voluntarily indulge” in that sort of “morbid amusement,” in other words, that seeking that kind of negative influence is not natural (453). Jo and other characters may struggle to be good, but their struggles are a result of circumstances, bad parenting, or other outside forces, not their own innate waywardness. As a consequence, changes in conduct are generally represented as personal improvement, not fundamental alterations of the self. Laurie reforms; Amy becomes less selfish; Meg apologizes to her husband John—but these aren’t life-changing religious experiences in the way that Ellen’s is in *The Wide, Wide World*. Jo’s conversion is life changing but not in a specifically religious sense.

Although I see important parallels between Warner and Alcott’s engagement with the conduct literature tradition, Alcott distinguishes Jo’s writing, and thereby her own, from the type of cultural work done by the works of more evangelism-minded writers such as Warner, Stowe, and Cummins. The narrator of *Little Women*, in describing Jo’s feelings about overly moralistic tales that promote a specific set of beliefs, seems to describe Alcott’s own ideas:

as much as she liked to write for children, Jo could not consent to depict all her naughty boys as being eaten by bears, or tossed by mad bulls, because they did not go to a particular Sabbath-school, nor all the good infants who did go, of course, as rewarded by every kind of bliss, from gilded gingerbread to escorts of angels, when they departed this life, with psalms or sermons on their lisping tongues. (462-3)

Neither Jo the character nor Alcott the writer has the same evangelical focus as Susan Warner, at least not in the sense of being religiously evangelical. This difference in perspective and resulting portrayal of conversion can be attributed to the authors' different narrative goals. Warner uses sentimental conventions conventionally, with a heavily emphasized, redemption-based conversion and a narrative focused on overcoming sin. Alcott tweaks the conventions, focusing her narrative on the goodness that humanity can achieve through its own effort, along with mutual support. Both novels are community-focused, but Warner's characters use a deity, the Christian God, as a standard, while Alcott's characters have a reverence but not a need for the Christian God. Alcott seems to have adopted the sentimental traditional somewhat begrudgingly, as it is what would sell, not her preferred genre (Claudia Stokes 8-9). In doing so, though, she turned from the kind of writing Jo decries and embraced less condemnatory conduct instruction.

The lack of strong foil characters in *Little Women* makes sense for a novel that suggests (and an author who believed) that people are not innately sinful. Meg spends a fortnight with her wealthy friends the Moffats, who somewhat serve as foils to the eldest Alcott sister because of their vanity and shallow focus on appearance and possessions. Beth could also be seen as a positive foil for her sisters because of her sweet spirit and patience in suffering. Anne

Boyd Rioux writes that, though Beth is not an exemplar for critics, she was Jo's and Alcott's favorite character (194). The sisters strive to be like Beth, seeing her as a "serene and saintly presence" that teaches them charity and patience (Alcott 535). The girls' main influence is their mother Marmee, who gifts them their copy of *Pilgrim's Progress*, encourages their reading of it, and serves as a gentle inspiration in their lives. In the words of Campbell, Jo does not have to "live up to the saintlike standards of perfection as [*Wide, Wide World's*] Ellen" (120). Alcott replaces the opposing good/bad foil characters common in conduct literature in favor of basically good characters who reform, rejecting the idea that humanity's sinfulness necessitates a vicarious atoning death.

Keepsakes in *Little Women* are sometimes related to religion but tend to be used non-religiously, a reflection of the book's focus on secular conversion. The most referred-to keepsake in *Little Women* is John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, for Marmee has given each girl her own copy. The portrayal of this book can be understood to both be a nod to *The Wide, Wide World* and a revision of that novel because Bunyan's book prompts the March girls to be persistent about goodness but not to be Christ-focused. While they speak of the main character named Christian, they do not talk about following Christ. Some readers and scholars have argued that the book Marmee gives each girl for Christmas at the beginning of the novel is a New Testament, not the *Pilgrim's Progress*, because the girls read chapters, which *Pilgrim's Progress* did not have when originally published. Matteson supports this view by citing the existence of one of Alcott's real-life sister's New Testament at the Alcott museum (22). However, I believe the books to be *Pilgrim's Progress* since Jo and her sisters refer to characters and scenes in that book so often and since they refer to their New Testaments as such; for

instance, Amy has “her little Testament” with her when exiled at Aunt March’s (249). Marmee encourages Jo to continue working to be good, referring to “the well-worn cover of your guidebook” and the friend that she asks for help from daily (154). Campbell seems to agree, saying that Alcott “provides *Pilgrim’s Progress* as a guide for right living” (118). Further evidence that the guidebook is *Pilgrim’s Progress* is the reference to Jo’s subduing her Apollyon a few paragraphs after Marmee mentions the guidebook (Alcott 155). In *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Christian confronts Apollyon, a beast who tries to stop Christian’s journey to the City of Zion.¹⁵ In addition, Beth shares what she “read of in ‘Pilgrim’s Progress’ today,” as if this reading is a daily occurrence (285). Though *Pilgrim’s Progress* doesn’t play a direct role in Jo’s conversion, it does lay a foundation for it. For, in Bunyan’s tale, Jo finds a model for facing her struggles and a daily reminder to continue doing so. For the Marches, *Pilgrim’s Progress* serves as an encouragement to be good but not to seek Christ for forgiveness of sins, as the Bible did for *The Wide, Wide World’s* Ellen.¹⁶

In *Little Women* we see the secularization of the sentimental conduct novel, most notably in Jo’s key conversion scene. As Alcott portrays it, humans don’t need to be saved from sin but do need to choose to pursue their natural goodness, a conversion generally made through the influence of others, as Jo’s is with her mother and Professor Bhaer. In this section,

¹⁵ Apollyon does appear in the book of Revelation, but he is defeated “by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their [the saints’] testimony,” not faced individually by a human, as in *Pilgrim’s Progress* (Rev. 12.11).

¹⁶ Another important keepsake in *Little Women* is young Amy’s painting of the Madonna and child, an overtly religious artifact that helps Amy in “thinking good thoughts” and also praying, though Amy is careful not to adopt the Catholic practices associated with the Madonna and child (249, 257). Too, the painting seems to remind Amy of her own mother as an example more than it does of Jesus, as looking at “the sweet face of the divine mother [brings] tender thoughts of her own” (248). As Amy has a form of Catholic practice with her prayer shrine, rosary, and painting of Mary, so Jo’s conversion fits the practice of religion but is nonetheless secular.

I've shown that Alcott's version of conduct fiction places emphasis on inner piety, one focused on goodness but not necessarily on godliness. I have argued that the sentimental conventions in *Little Women* are rooted in a celebration of human goodness rather than in a belief in original sin. Evidence of Alcott's rewriting of traditional conduct fiction conventions can be seen in the fact that the girls' guidebook is primarily *Pilgrim's Progress* rather than the Bible; in their efforts to be like their mother more than to be like Jesus; and the lack of strong foils, a narrative choice designed to illustrate Alcott's belief that humans are inherently good.



There's something about Warner's and Alcott's novels that endures, something that makes the stories transcend time, location, and even faith traditions. I believe that the conversion scenes in both novels hold the key to this enduring appeal. Despite the differences I have outlined above, both novels show that people can change and have influence on others. Both novels employ the conventions of sentimental conduct fiction but for different ends. *Wide, Wide World's* Ellen learns piety from her mother, her friend on the boat, and several other friends who surround her like family. Through her conversion she turns her back on sin and commits to becoming, as she sees it, more like Christ. *Little Women's* Jo learns piety from her mother, but through her conversion she accepts a mostly traditional female role, leaving behind the world of sensational writing that Professor Bhaer contends will corrupt her and her readers. Earlier analyses of these novels have detailed the instructional aspects of the narratives but have overlooked the importance of the conversion scene and its promises of deep, fundamental change. Through Warner's and Alcott's novels, along with other best-selling sentimental novels from the second half of the nineteenth century, readers are invited to

follow the heroines in converting and, in doing so, committing to a set of principles and finding a new self.

In *The Wide, Wide World*, when Ellen is about to leave for Scotland, she asks her (informally) adoptive father Mr. Humphrey if she may return to his home. "My dear little daughter," he tells her, "you cannot be so glad to come back as my arms and my heart will be to receive you" (497). In both novels I've discussed in this chapter, the heroine receives such a welcome at the time of conversion. Ellen finds forgiveness in Christ despite her doubts. Jo finds redemption and a new calling with Professor Bhaer. These conversions set the tone and purpose for each novel while suggesting that readers can find the same type of renewal themselves.

Chapter 2

“Capable of Elevation”: Resistance and Racial Uplift in Nineteenth-Century Sentimental Novels

by African American Women

I’ve been unearthing family secrets. For decades my dad did genealogy the old-fashioned way, interviewing relatives and writing letters and searching through archives. After he was diagnosed with cancer, I began researching genealogy, too, as a way to connect with him, though I used an Internet-based company to make the search easier as I built upon my dad’s solid foundation. He taught me to be very meticulous with my research; to look for three or four different sources before I wrote down information as fact; to ignore spurious sources that were tempting but that were built on sketchy foundations, such as family trees from organizations that liked to prove their members had royal blood. As I worked, I verified and refined much of my dad’s information and then began to add to his research. And oh! the stories I uncovered. Dad told me his grandfather was born to his great-grandfather’s second wife. What he didn’t know was that his great-grandfather, a Mormon pioneer, was still married to the first wife at the time, and that he eventually married a third wife. I found distant relatives who were tried for polygamy after it was declared illegal, who committed murder, who burned down a neighbor’s cabin. I found a distant cousin who died in Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania, by—you guessed it—slipping off a rock and drowning. More secrets were revealed when my sister, mom, and I sent in our DNA. We discovered that my mom’s great-grandfather, a soldier during the Civil War, was fathered by his maternal uncle or cousin. My dad, who was adopted, met his birth mother and several of her other children, his half-siblings who had known about him all

their lives, in his fifties. The DNA test linked me with that side of the family and also uncovered relatives from his birth father's side. They hadn't known about him, so I can imagine this seventy-plus-year-old information was somewhat of a shock, though I hope not an unwelcome one. Some things I heard from relatives but didn't include in my files. For example, I asked my dad about his uncle. "He was a nice man when he wasn't drunk," Dad said. That uncle's children and grandchildren are still alive. I asked for different information to include. Many of my ancestors and distant cousins were decent, hard-working people—I'm happy to report that not everything I found is sad or scandalous. I don't have much time for genealogical research lately, but sometimes, when I'm especially missing my dad, I'll open up the website and see what I can discover.

Reading the novels I discuss in this chapter, *Our Nig* by Harriet E. Wilson and *The Bondwoman's Narrative* by Hannah Crafts, is like unearthing family secrets, the kind I wish were not true. Wilson and Crafts—the former a free African American woman in the North whose novel was published during her lifetime, the latter an enslaved African American woman in the South whose novel wasn't published until more than a century later—both wrote of a painful period in our nation's history, making almost tangible the racism and slavery taught in school whose aftershocks are still felt today, only these authors don't omit the shameful aspects of the past, like I sometimes do in my family history. Wilson and Crafts were clearly steeped in the literary traditions of their time, both sentimental novels and slave narratives, among others, but these existing genres were insufficient for communicating Wilson's and Crafts' realities. Therefore, these women, along with other African American authors of the period, created new forms by combining, refashioning, and at times inverting the established ones (Gates,

Introduction to *Our Nig* lii; Patton 78). Despite, or even perhaps because of, their innovations, both women still included conversion scenes in their novels, using the differences between their heroines' conversions and those of typical sentimental heroines to further their political cause in representing the plight of black women. I contend that the conversion scenes in Wilson's *Our Nig* and Crafts' *Bondwoman's Narrative* are just as significant as those in traditional sentimental conduct novels, for they indicate the type of community each author sought to build. In this chapter I argue that by straddling the designations of slave narrative and sentimental novel, these nineteenth-century novels deploy the techniques of conduct fiction in order to achieve racial uplift and social reform within and through a religious African American community.

Scholars have debated how to classify Wilson's and Crafts' texts in terms of genre. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., labels *Our Nig* by Harriet Wilson a novel, but Wilson herself did not, as Barbara A. White points out (Gates, Introduction to *Our Nig* xlvj; White ix). John Ernest writes that *Our Nig* "cannot be comfortably classified as either novel or autobiography" ("Losing" 208). Elizabeth J. West writes that *Our Nig* is a reworking of the conversion narrative, one in which the main character does not convert (3). Venetria K. Patton, who also believes *Our Nig* depicts a failed conversion, writes that conventions from slave narratives provide authenticity, while conventions from sentimental novels give artistic license (78). Furthermore, Patton explains, "By using a genre and then revising the key aspects, Wilson appears to be commenting on the form's inability to tell her particular story" (79). The same could be said of Hannah Crafts. *Bondwoman's Narrative* is quite obviously sentimental, with its focus on affect and celebration of domesticity, but even Crafts is engaged in "revising the key aspects" of familiar genres. For

example, she reworks the gothic novel to show the horrors of slavery. From the slave narrative she takes the escape motif and the epiphany of personhood, discussed in further detail below. Gates calls *Bondwoman's Narrative* a novel with an "autobiographical element" (Introduction to *Bondwoman* xviii). Karen Sánchez-Eppler calls it "an extremely hybrid work," citing factual and fictional forms, including "testimonial, sentimental, gothic, satiric, pious, sensational, and more" (257). Both Wilson and Crafts critique racism, especially in the form of slavery or de facto slavery, and false Christians, which they associate with the slave-holding South. The genre debate, however, remains.

I contend that both Wilson's and Crafts' works are novels that hybridize the sentimental conduct and the slave narrative traditions. From the slave narrative they took realistic details, a first-person point of view (only partly in Wilson's case), a focus on learning and self-improvement, and a condemnation of false Christianity.¹⁷ From the sentimental conduct tradition, they took a focus on feeling and affect, a celebration of human connection, foil characters, sentimental death scenes, and sentimental keepsakes. Most importantly, I argue, they take a type of conversion scene from each genre, one that reflects the spiritual purpose and one that reflects the social purpose of racial uplift. By racial uplift I refer to the concept popularized in the period after slavery that advocated for a promotion of the dignity of African Americans in the public sphere, a celebration and modeling of self-improvement, and the edification of the African American community.

¹⁷ Although *Our Nig* is mostly told from the third-person point of view, the preface and some chapter titles use first person.

The key conversion scenes in each novel serve as evidence that these novels are building on both the sentimental and slave narrative traditions. In Chapter One I showed the centrality of religious conversion scenes to conduct fiction. In this chapter I will continue to focus on that aspect of the genre by showing that it remains central in both of these novels. I will add, though, a discussion of what I call a secular conversion, which these authors adapt from the slave narrative tradition. Slave narratives have much in common with American sentimental novels, most notably, I assert, a sort of conversion scene. There is often a moment of insight when an enslaved person recognizes his or her humanity—a moment analogous to a sentimental novel's religious conversion scene—after which that individual seeks freedom. In perhaps the most famous humanity-recognition conversion in a slave narrative, Fredrick Douglass describes an incident where the enslaver Covey attempts to whip him, something which had happened before. Douglass fights the enslaver and, this time, avoids a beating. Douglass writes that, at this moment, "a slave was made a man" (66). Harriet Jacobs writes of a similar incident, involving not only the narrator Linda but also Linda's brother William. William's young enslaver decides to whip him for a made-up offense. William, who "did not mind the smart of the whip, but . . . did not like the *idea* of being whipped," successfully fights back to avoid the beating (31). Though not involved in the incident, Linda is nonetheless greatly affected by it. She says that, in hearing her brother relate the incident and in trying to give him advice, she comes to a realization: "The war of my life had begun; and though one of God's most powerless creatures, I resolved never to be conquered" (31). That resolve allows her to escape her lecherous enslaver by entering a relationship with another man, hiding in an attic for seven years, and eventually escaping North. I believe epiphanies like these in slave

narratives are analogous to religious conversion scenes and can even be properly termed a conversion scene, because they portray a watershed moment in the individual's life. From that moment forward, the individual sees him- or herself in a new way, just like after a religious conversion. The epiphany strengthens the individual, giving him or her the will to escape, setting in motion the defining episode of the slave narrative. I will explore these parallels in more depth in the chapter that follows.

Finding existing narrative forms insufficient for their needs, Wilson and Crafts both crafted a hybrid version of the sentimental conduct novel that depended heavily on the conventions of the slave narrative. Wilson's and Crafts' novels include both conversion scenes, the individual epiphany and the religious conversion, a fact that points to the dual purposes of their novels—both religious and social. The dual conversion scenes allow the novels to function as conduct fiction, to establish the idea that religion is not solely the domain of white people, and to facilitate each author's goal of promoting racial uplift.

***Our Nig* by Harriet E. Wilson**

One of the earliest novels by an African American woman is Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig; or Sketches in the Life of a Free Black in a Two-Story White House North, Showing that Slavery's Shadow Falls even There*, published in 1858. The novel was relatively unknown until a second edition was published in 1983, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *Our Nig* tells the story of Frado, a young girl who is indentured to the white Bellmont family after her black father has died and her white mother has deserted her. Frado endures cruel treatment and even torture there, especially at the hands of Mrs. Bellmont and her daughter Mary. Mr. Bellmont is not generally

overtly cruel to Frado but most of the time will not exert himself to defend her. Spinster Aunt Abby and younger brother Jack are generally kind, while older brother James earns Frado's love and exhorts her to become a Christian. Frado works very hard and suffers physically from the harsh conditions of her indenture, but she evinces an indomitable spirit, standing up for herself—once she has gained the fortitude—when Mrs. Belmont tries to beat her, exploring religion despite obstacles, and in other ways exerting her selfhood. When her period of indenture is through, Frado works to support herself and, eventually, her son, through housekeeping, making straw hats, peddling wares, and other means. Although she struggles from ill health and from racism in the North, she nevertheless finds help through a community of religious women who hire her, teach her new skills, and aid her in other ways. The book ends with a plea to the reader to buy the book to support its author, who seems by the end to be Frado herself, as she has been deserted by her husband and must make a living on her own.

Seeing *Our Nig* as conduct fiction allows us to understand how Wilson works to achieve her dual purpose of instruction and racial uplift. I contend that the main character Frado undergoes a Christian conversion, a fact which allows Wilson to claim religion, particularly Christianity, as the province of blacks as well as whites and, in so doing, to call out religious hypocrites. Through the use of sentimental conduct fiction conventions such as the conversion scene and the keepsake, as well as the use of the epiphany conversion from slave narratives, Wilson affirms a supportive African American community both within and outside of the novel.

Though it may not appear to meet the designation a prima facie, I contend that *Our Nig* qualifies as conduct fiction. Research by Eric Gardner supports my argument that *Our Nig* was used as conduct fiction, for most of the known original owners were quite young (“Attempt”

228; "Of Bottles" 12). Most were white and middle class with no "notable ties to organized abolition" ("Of Bottles" 12-13). These facts suggest the purpose for buying the book was more likely to be for instruction than out of abolitionist sentiment. Some of the instruction provided in the novel is quite literal, including instructions on kindness and church attendance. For instance, Frado's teacher admonishes other students to be kind to Frado, "referr[ing] them to the one who looks not on outward appearance, but on the heart" (Wilson 32). This is a general principle, of course, but the teacher is quoting from 1 Samuel 16.3, in which God tells the prophet Samuel that he, God, measures people this way.¹⁸ The book gives instruction regarding church attendance, too. Mrs. Belmont and Mary attend church but never go to prayer meetings in the neighborhood. Aunt Abby attends these evening meetings, though, and takes Frado with her and teaches her (68). Mrs. Belmont attends church apparently for show, while Aunt Abby "looked within. She saw a soul to save, an immortality of happiness to secure" (69). True Christians in the book let their religion affect their actions, while false Christians, functioning as foil characters, perform rites for show.

Although kindness is a main tenet taught by *Our Nig*, Wilson frequently pursues this goal by showing its opposite, and, in so doing, draws a distinction between true and false Christianity. Kindness is not part of the religion espoused by Mrs. Belmont. She says Aunt Abby

¹⁸ After saying this, the teacher models kindness for the other students and so for the readers. Troublingly, she does seem to "other" Frado here pointing out her racial difference. However, the narrator uses these words to subtly align Frado with King David, the most famous king of the Israelites in the Bible and the first one in the lineage of Jesus Christ. For in the passage alluded to, Samuel is on a mission from God to anoint the next king of Israel from among the sons of a man named Jesse. Samuel thinks Jesse's oldest son must surely be the future king, but God tells him to anoint the youngest son, the most unlikely, the only one not yet tested in battle. Just one chapter later, David saves his people by slaying the giant Goliath. The implication here is that Frado herself is perhaps the mightiest among the students, that though she may look different than they, may not have the same advantages they do, she will nevertheless triumph. Too, Wilson ironically underscores the teacher's benevolent racism in this scene. She is far better than Mrs. Belmont but still not free of the prejudice this book condemns.

does “not live out her religion” because Aunt Abby gives Frado desserts she’s not allowed at home (45). Mary, too, sees this dessert-sharing as evidence of heresy, for she “had often noticed and spoke of her [Aunt Abby’s] inconsistencies” (45). When Aunt Abby advises Mrs. Belmont’s daughter Jane to marry for love, Mrs. Belmont decries Aunt Abby’s “satanic influence” (60). Through their ludicrous judgments, Wilson shows the hypocrisy of their brand of religion. James’s letters further associate true Christianity with kindness, for the messages he sends by post to his younger brother Jack for Frado are, the narrator says, quoting from Proverbs 25:5, “cold waters to a thirsty soul” (52).

Religion’s representation in the novel is complicated. On the one hand, religion is associated with the Bellmonts and their racism. Mrs. Bellmont, the cruelest member of the family, attends church and often talks about religion. She goes so far as to say outright that prayer is only for white people (94). The main character, Frado, struggles with religion largely because she sees it associated with racism and cruelty. However, the narrator distinguishes between good and bad religion, between racist and non-racist Christianity.¹⁹ Too, the book contains sympathetic religious characters. For instance, James disagrees with his mother, assuring Frado that she can be with him in heaven and repeatedly exhorting her regarding religion (95, 76). Frado’s suffering is necessarily tied up with the question of whether Christianity is moral because the one who proclaims it the most loudly, Mrs. Bellmont, is also the cruelest. It is in this context that Frado’s conversions take place, both a religious conversion and a social, humanity-recognition conversion.

¹⁹ In the preface Wilson writes, in Frado’s voice, “My mistress was wholly imbued with *southern* principles,” suggesting the superiority of northern principles (3). Then Wilson continually undercuts this idea, showing that, regarding racism, the North is not much different from the South.

Most critics seem to agree that Frado does not convert, that, although there is a conversion scene in *Our Nig*, it depicts a failed attempt, or at least that the matter is unresolved. Gates writes in his introduction that Frado does not convert (xlix). White refers to “Frado’s near conversion” while West calls it a “failed conversion” and so a “failed initiation into the community of earthly saints” (White “New” vii; West 3). Further, West claims that Wilson tricks her white readers and perhaps some of her black readers into assuming that Frado converts, preventing them from seeing that the book’s true target of criticism is whiteness (8). But Ernest writes that critics are too quick to dismiss religion in *Our Nig*, that we shouldn’t assume Frado does not convert. He points to the narrator’s claim that Frado has relied on God to this point in her life, referring to where she is at the end of the book (*Resistance* 74).

I contend that Frado does convert, though she struggles to do so. The process of her conversion begins when her curiosity is piqued when she hears Aunt Abby and James speak “of unseen glories, and heart experiences” (73). Aunt Abby feels hopeful that Frado will convert, for the girl “seems much affected by what she hears at the evening meetings” they attend together and she “seems to love to read the Bible” (74). James, growing ever sicker, “every day imparted religious instruction” to Frado, who tends him faithfully (76). After the instruction and example of James and Aunt Abby, Frado comes to believe in eternity, but “Her doubt was, *is there a heaven for the black? She knew there was one for James, and Aunt Abby, and all good white people; but was there any for blacks?*” (84). At this point she wants to go to heaven so she can see James again, and she wants to repent but doesn’t know how (85). Not all of her struggles to convert are internal. Mrs. Belmont sees her crying while reading the Bible and

“ordered her to put up the book and go to work and not be sniveling about the house, or stop to read again” (87). And so she repairs to her room to “listen to the pleadings of a Saviour, and try to penetrate the veil of doubt and sin which clouded her soul, and long to cast off the fetters of sin, and rise to the communion of the saints” (87). Frado struggles to believe not primarily because of her own sin and hard-heartedness, as usual in sentimental novels, but because of others’ actions and words. Frado’s difficulty seeing a heaven for people of color not only adds narrative tension but, more importantly, speaks to the failure of the institutionalized religion presented in the book.

The moment of Frado’s conversion finally occurs when her friend James Bellmont is on his deathbed, when we see her in her room “trying to utter the prayer of the publican, ‘God be merciful to me a sinner’” (90). The publican is a tax collector, a character in a short but frequently referenced parable told by Jesus Christ:

And he [Jesus] spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men *are*, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as *his* eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. I tell you, this man went down to his house justified *rather* than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted. (Luke 18.9-14 KJV)

Although earlier Frado has doubted there's a heaven for her race, though she's tried to repent unsuccessfully, here she sincerely repents. The publican "went down to his house justified," meaning his sins have been forgiven. The publican prays in private, evidence of his sincerity. Frado, too, prays in private. Since the narrator links Frado with the penitent publican, we know that her prayers this time have been successful. While the narrator's assertion that Frado is "trying" to pray may make the scene ambiguous, the link to the biblical parable, along with Frado's later actions and other clues in the novel, makes clear that Frado has, indeed, converted.

Frado's actions after this prayer verify her conversion. Shortly after James's death, she testifies of her conversion at a religious meeting (103-4). After studying with Mrs. Moore and learning from the hat-maker, she puts on "a devout and Christian exterior" that "invited confidence from the villagers" (125). Some may argue that this exterior is just for show, as we've seen Frado play-act before, schooling her features to avoid a beating from Mrs. Bellmont, for instance (30, 82). But a preponderance of the evidence suggests her conversion is genuine. She perseveres in prayer, even when Mrs. Bellmont tells her that her prayers are useless since "prayer was for whites, not for blacks" (94). When James, right before dying, exhorts Frado to be good so they'll be together in heaven, she cries (95-6). After his death, she returns to his room "to weep over his remains" (97). Tears at such times are signs of repentance in sentimental novels, according to Jane Tompkins (*Sensational* 131). Frado doubts her faith after James's death, but she continues to long for heaven, to read her Bible, and to be drawn towards prayer (Wilson 101, 103). Even Mrs. Bellmont, who believes Christianity is for whites only, acknowledges that Frado is "trying to be religious" (104). And at the end of the book,

when Frado is a widowed mother, she continues on by "Reposing on God" (130). She may have struggled and doubted her faith, but at the end of the novel she is depending on it, strong evidence of a genuine religious conversion.

The narrator's comments further verify Frado's conversion. Frado considers running away or even killing Mrs. Bellmont but ultimately decides to stay until the end of her indenture; the narrator says that she is "restrained by an overruling Providence" (109). When Frado becomes an invalid and needs a way to support herself, the narrator remarks that "God prepares the way, when human agencies see no path," thus explaining how Frado is able to find someone to teach her to make straw bonnets to sell (124). The narrator's description of Frado's conversion is important because it shows that Frado is accepting religion on her own terms. James and Aunt Abby have pleaded for her to repent, which she has previously tried unsuccessfully to do. And Mrs. Bellmont has tried to keep Frado from learning about or practicing Christianity. Although Mrs. Bellmont has been successful in exacerbating Frado's doubts, such as the fear that there's no heaven for black people, she ultimately fails, for Frado does reach out to God. We've seen her stand up to Mrs. Bellmont before, telling the older woman not to beat her (105). Therefore, we know that Frado has the courage to oppose Mrs. Bellmont again, as she does when she prays to God for mercy. Further, Frado converts alone, with neither the aid of her white friends nor the hindrance of her white nemesis. She is in the "one little spot seldom penetrated by her mistress' watchful eye: . . .her room, uninviting and comfortless; but to herself a safe retreat" (87). Through Frado's conversion, Wilson shows that Christianity is not a religion for whites only.

This idea that Christianity is not race-exclusive is foregrounded by the depiction of Frado's father Jim. He proposes to Frado's mother Mag, a fallen white woman in desperate circumstances, knowing he'll have to convince her to do what mainstream society and probably Mag herself consider an abasement: marrying a black man. He tells her of his merits with what is, in the twenty-first century, cringe-inducing imagery: "I's black outside, I know, but I's got a white heart inside" (12). This statement suggests he has absorbed society's racism, that he is affirming the association of blackness with evil and whiteness with morality. But I think it more likely that Jim is merely speaking in terms that Mag will understand, since, upon marrying him, "She has descended another step down the ladder of infamy" (13). Because Jim's actions speak more loudly than his words, associating blackness with goodness early in the story, this episode sets up the narrative's later claim that not just goodness but Christian goodness is race-blind.

The description of Jim and Mag's relationship underscores the irony of Jim's declaration, for he, the black half of the couple, displays much more goodness than the white half. When Mag is desperate for help, when "no one seemed to notice her," Jim, "a kind-hearted African," checks on her and helps her with fuel (9). And knowing she's hungry, he determines to marry her so he can better provide for her. He obeys the Christian principle of forgiveness, telling his friend Pete vis-à-vis Mag's fall, "She'd be as much of a prize to me as she'd fall short of coming up to the mark with white folks. I don't care for past things" (11). It's true that Jim thinks of his white wife as a prize and delights in thoughts of "the pleasing contrast between her fair face and his own dark skin," but he's also motivated by a "finer principle," love (11, 10). When Jim is dying from tuberculosis, Mag nurses him "only as a means to subserve her own comfort"; while Jim, in contrast, "loved Mag to the last" (15). He displays "Christian patience" and is "truly

faithful" to Mag until he dies (15). The contrast between Mag and Jim is even sharper after he dies, for then Mag has "no longings for a purer heart" and "asked not the rite of civilization or Christianity," instead choosing to live as the common-law wife of Jim's business partner (16). And so, early in her life, Frado sees her father live religion and her mother shun it, and therefore sees racial blackness associated with Christian principles.

The narrator evinces an adherence to Christianity, another bit of evidence that Frado's conversion is genuine since the author/narrator is presumably the model for Frado. When Mag's first child, a baby born out of wedlock, dies, the narrator says that "it passed from earth, ascending to a purer and better life," presumably heaven (6). The narrator laments, after telling of the baby's death, that "pure, innocent children" may inherit the infamy of their parents, along with "a wicked heart of their own" (6), an indication that Wilson, unlike Louisa May Alcott, believed in an in-born sinful nature. Further evidence appears when we learn that James wants Frado's heart to be "purified and transformed by the gospel" (69). He notices her natural talents but believes conversion will "make her worthy the esteem and friendship of the world" (69). It may be troubling to think she must be religious to receive "esteem and friendship," but at least Abby and James already like and esteem her. The narrator shows reverence for God, commenting that "good men" want to please their "Master" (40-1).

As the biblical parable clearly defines the publican in contrast to the Pharisee, so does Wilson's reference to the parable serve to delineate between Frado and Mrs. Belmont. Pharisees were known to be religious people, steeped in theology that included compassion for others. The Pharisee in this parable, though, reveals his true self in his prayer. He is selfish, self-absorbed, more interested in his own glory than in seeking God's forgiveness. Publicans were

despised members of society, known for extortion and embezzlement. This publican, though, is truly repentant and receives justification not through his reputation but through trust in God. Frado, too, is despised by society at large, though poignantly not because of anything she has done. Mrs. Bellmont, like the Pharisee, proclaims religion but doesn't live it; she claims to be religious but does not treat Frado according to biblical principles. Even Mag recognizes how evil Mrs. Bellmont is, calling her "a right she-devil" (17). The implication here is that, while Frado is justified as the publican was, Mrs. Bellmont, like the Pharisee, is not. Mrs. Bellmont seems much like the person addressed in Countee Cullen's poem "For a Lady I Know":

She even thinks that up in heaven

Her class lies late and snores,

While poor black cherubs rise at seven

To do celestial chores. (955)

This contrast between the publican and Pharisee, between Frado and Mrs. Bellmont, exemplifies one of the functions of the conversion theme: to expose the hypocrisy of false Christians. For Mrs. Bellmont isn't the only religious hypocrite denounced in *Our Nig*. Mag, after her fall and the death of her child, flees her home because of her disgrace and the town's ill treatment. Here the narrator laments society's false piety and judgmental actions:

Alas, how fearful are we to be first in extending a helping hand to those who stagger in the mires of infamy; to speak the first words of hope and warning to those emerging into the sunlight of morality! Who can tell what numbers, advancing just far enough to hear a cold welcome and join in the reserved converse of professed reformers,

disappointed, disheartened, have chosen to dwell in unclean places, rather than encounter these 'holier-than-thou' of the great brotherhood of men! (7)

The "holier-than-thou" are presumably white, those with whom Mag would most usually hold congress. And so it is all the more striking that the one who eventually takes pity on and loves her is Jim, a black man, clearly not one of the "holier-than-thou."

There is another conversion in *Our Nig*, one more conclusive than the religious conversion: Frado's epiphany of selfhood, the kind of conversion standard in slave narratives. This happens after James dies, when Frado has temporarily decided she's not interested in religion any more since Mrs. Bellmont professes it and threatens if Frado does "not stop trying to be religious, she would whip her to death" (104).²⁰ Mr. Bellmont tells Frado he knows she doesn't deserve to be whipped but that he can't help her and that she'd better try to avoid whippings. Soon after, Mrs. Bellmont raises a stick to whip Frado for not fetching wood quickly enough, and Frado follows Mr. Bellmont's advice: "'Stop!' shouted Frado, 'strike me, and I'll never work a mite more for you;' and throwing down what she had gathered, stood like one who feels the stirring of free and independent thoughts" (105). Frado, for the first time, realizes she has some agency to avoid beatings and further experiences the "triumph" of Mrs. Bellmont carrying the wood into the house (105). This experience has a lasting effect on Frado: "She remembered her victory at the wood-pile. She decided to remain to do as well as she could, to assert her rights when they were trampled on; to return once more to her [church] meeting in the evening, which had been prohibited. She had learned how to conquer" (108). Gates writes that this is a moment of "self-creation with words" (Introduction to *Our Nig* lii). Though not

²⁰ I say "temporarily" here because, after this encounter with Mrs. Bellmont, Frado pursues religion once again.

religious, it is a conversion in the sense of a commitment to a new self, one that will not be so easily “trampled on.”

Books function as keepsakes in *Our Nig* and help to forward the novel’s aims. One of Frado’s keepsakes, a common feature of sentimental conduct novels, supports my claim that her conversion is genuine. Her most precious possession is the Bible kind Susan gives her, which she views as her “greatest treasure” (117). Frado’s schoolbooks are also keepsakes. As she is “striving to enrich her mind” soon before leaving the Bellmonts, the books are “her constant companions” (115). Susan gifts her with other books as rewards (116). Books serve also to confirm Frado’s humanity-recognition conversion. When a benefactress takes in the invalid Frado and teaches her to make straw bonnets, Frado “sought also to teach her the value of useful books; and while one read aloud to the other of deeds historic and names renowned, Frado experienced a new impulse. She felt herself capable of elevation; she felt that this book information supplied an undefined satisfaction she had long felt, but could not express” (124). Books inspire her toward continued self-improvement (124-5).

These two conversions reflect the novel’s dual purpose and focus on community that is both Christian and African American. Frado finds this community after leaving the Bellmonts, women who care for her, read the Bible with her, and teach her a trade. Wilson herself requests help from this community after writing her book. She writes in her preface, “I sincerely appeal to my colored brethren universally for patronage, hoping they will not condemn this attempt of their sister to be erudite, but rally around me a faithful band of supporters” (3). At the end of the novel, she writes that Frado is an invalid and in need of readers’ sympathy (130).

Then several support letters are appended to the book, referring to the author as Frado, testifying to her faith and to her need for support (133-40).

In *Our Nig*, Wilson composes a hybrid sentimental novel/slave narrative for a dual purpose: to teach Christian conversion and to work toward racial uplift. Frado's religious conversion shows that religion is color blind and that racism can be an impediment to evangelism. Frado's humanity-recognition conversion further underscores the evil personified by Mrs. Belmont, while celebrating African American personhood and working to create a community of mutual and self-supporting African American Christians. Frado's self-improvement through both conversions puts debasing racism in sharp relief and also allows the author, who is presumably the character, to ask for "your sympathy, gentle reader" (130).

***The Bondwoman's Narrative* by Hannah Crafts**

My dad was an historian, a specialist in colonial Spain and Latin American history. After his dissertation was approved, he became interested in something quite different—the American Civil War. And so I supposed it was natural for me to share that interest, for his shelves were lined with books on the Civil War, and he himself was like Google for the Civil War before Google existed. He seemed to know everything I asked about the Civil War or the antebellum United States (well, and anything else I asked). By junior high I was reading for myself, along with asking Dad for information, mostly books from the school library rather than from Dad's shelves of scholarly tomes. I perused the shelves of books, mostly Perma-Bound in orange or green, reading Civil War selections and then related books shelved nearby. Frederick Douglass. Booker T. Washington. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Julius Lester's *To Be a Slave* and *Long*

Journey Home. But nowhere on those Perma-Bound shelves was the next book I'm considering in this chapter, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* by Hannah Crafts, another one of the earliest novels written by an African American woman. And there's a good reason I didn't come across it—it had not yet been published.

The Bondwoman's Narrative tells the story of Hannah, her early life as an enslaved woman, her academic and religious training, and her two escape attempts. We first meet Hannah in a classically gothic setting, a plantation seemingly cursed with the blood of tortured enslaved people. After learning to read and write and to become a Christian, Hannah helps her enslaver's wife, who is about to be exposed as mixed race, escape. Although her companion dies and Hannah is eventually recaptured, she retains her faith in God and trusts him to assist her. When her new owners try to force her to marry an enslaved man, a coarse field hand, Hannah escapes again, this time successfully, and establishes herself in the north. The book ends happily, with Hannah married and teaching black children, her faith in God firmly intact.

The Bondwoman's Narrative, like *Our Nig*, is a work of sentimental conduct fiction with elements of the slave narrative. The most important features taken from these genres, I assert, are the conversions, both the religious conversion and the humanity-recognition conversion. Although Hannah's religious conversion has been recognized, what I see as her secular conversion has gone unrecognized. Hannah's religious conversion strengthens her for her first escape attempt and allows her to critique hypocrisy within Christianity. Her secular conversion strengthens her for her second escape and allows her to reach the domestic ideal of home and family.

This novel, thought to have been written a few years before or after the beginning of the American Civil War, wasn't published until 2002, after Henry Louis Gates, Jr., discovered the holographic manuscript in an auction and bought it. He and a group of scholars had the ink, paper, and script authenticated, and combed through census records for parallels to people and places in the narrative. The first print edition of the novel includes an introduction and notes by Gates, but the text is unaltered, unmediated by an editor, save standard punctuation and insertions in brackets to clarify spelling. Gates points out the significance of this last fact, for many other nineteenth-century narratives by African Americans had white editors (Introduction to *Bondwoman* xiii). *Hannah Crafts* is a pseudonym, the surname apparently taken from a family with whom the author stayed in the north after she escaped. Gregg Hercovich's research indicates that the author's maiden name was Hannah Bond (Bosman). Because the usual term is *bondswoman*, not *bondwoman*, it seems that the author found a clever way to incorporate her true surname into the title.²¹

Crafts, like Wilson, blends genres in her novel. Borrowing conventions from the slave narrative tradition, *Bondwoman* shows that slavery hurts both blacks and whites, details an enslaved person learning to read, and her eventual escape, all in first person. But, *Bondwoman* also mirrors several elements from Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*, according to Gates and Hollis Robbins (Gates, "Note" 331-2). The novel includes gothic elements, most notably a cursed plantation and frequent episodes of mental torment. However, it is my contention that *Bondwoman* should also be labeled a work of conduct fiction because it is a sentimental novel

²¹ Crafts' original title, as written in the manuscript, is *The Bondwoman's Narrative By Hannah Crafts A Fugitive Slave Recently Escaped From North Carolina* (1).

that contains instruction for the young or inexperienced reader. In the words of Gates, “Breeding, education, morals, manners, hygiene—these are the values that Hannah Crafts embraces consistently throughout the novel” (Introduction to *Bondwoman* lxvi-lxvii). The narrator includes religious instruction, too. For example, soon after Hannah and her enslaver’s wife have run away and the other woman is discouraged, Hannah exhorts her to trust God; the narrator remarks, “Oh, the blessedness of such heavenly trust—how it comforts and sustains the soul in moments of doubt and despondency—how it alleviates misery and even subdues pain” (58). In addition to such direct instructions regarding proper conduct, the novel incorporates some of the defining conventions of the conduct fiction genre, including character foils. One example of a foil for Hannah is that of her enslaver Mrs. Wheeler, who accidentally blackens her face with cosmetics, due to a bad reaction, before an important social function. The narrator points out the moral lesson in this event: “Very few regarded it as it really was, the deserved punishment of an act of vanity” (169). And of course the novel focuses heavily on feeling and sentiment. One of the best illustrations of this occurs in the last chapter, when we discover Hannah has been reunited with her mother, whom she never knew:

she suddenly rose one day, came to me, clasped me in her arms, and sobbed out in rapturous joy “child, I am your mother.” . . . With our arms clasped around each other, our heads bowed together, and our tears mingling we went down on our knees, and returned thanks to Him, who had watched over us for good, and whose merciful power we recognised in this the greatest blessing of our lives. (238)

Although blending in elements of the gothic novel and slave narrative, *Bondwoman's Narrative* can and should be labeled sentimental conduct fiction because it employs conversion scenes and other sentimental conventions.

Key among the conventions Crafts adapts from sentimental novels is the conversion scene, which, in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, is straightforward and uncomplicated. Hannah hears about Jesus from Aunt Hetty and Uncle Siah, white neighbors who have befriended her and taught her to read. Though they are poor, Aunt Hetty impresses Hannah with "the smallness yet perfect neatness of her dwelling" (8). Aunt Hetty has already talked about her religion and so, from early on, the novel associates domesticity with godliness. Hannah says that Uncle Siah tells her "that though a slave I must be good and trust in God" (9). After visiting the couple regularly and learning to read, Hannah reports this: "They led me to the foot of the cross" (10). There's no evidence of wrestling with the concept of heaven, of doubting whether blacks are allowed in heaven, no struggle to pray, as we saw in Wilson's *Our Nig*. Conversion, to Hannah, seems natural, even mundane. Of course, Hannah has seen Christianity exemplified by benevolent neighbors, not by someone as cruel as Mrs. Bellmont. It may seem strange to characterize one line as a scene, but the use of metonymy here allows a lot to be compacted into a small space. Being led "led to the foot of the cross" implies that Hannah has repented, since she's at the foot, and that she's accepted Christ's vicarious atonement, which in the Christian tradition happened on the cross. "They led" means both Hetty and Siah were involved, that they exemplified Christ to Hannah and taught her how to convert, not that they tried to force or threaten her.

Hannah claims that her life is different after her conversion, proof that her embrace of religion is authentic. She reports that, as she matures, she “was enabled to manifest my good intentions, not so much by words, as a manner of sympathy and consideration for every one” (11). Hannah’s keepsake is further proof of her conversion: “I had a little Bible, one that Aunt Hetty had given me, a plain simple common book, with leather binding, and leaves brown with age. It was well worn and thumbed, too, with neither margin, nor notes, nor quotations, but the precious word itself was their [there] and that was enough” (207).²² Hannah’s frequent reading and quoting of the Bible shows how precious it is to her, how important it is to her post-conversion faith. She also clearly believes in heaven. When relating the enslaved Rosie’s torture and death, Hannah says she will go to heaven, “the place where the weary rest” (23), though later Rosie apparently haunts the plantation (29). After her conversion Hannah places her trust in God. For example, during her first escape attempt, Hannah says that she “could not be utterly forsaken, and hopeless and helpless when God was near” (56). The author’s apparent faith equally suggests that the character Hannah’s conversion is genuine. In the preface, the author says her “pious and discerning readers” will “recognise the hand of Providence” in the story (3), and the epigrams for most chapters are Bible verses. Gates remarks, “Crafts was very familiar with the King James Bible and is drawing from memory” (“Textual” 242).

Despite Hannah’s apparent easy acceptance of Christianity, she is not blinded to the faults of religious people, nor is the narrator. Hannah’s conversion allows her to critique Christianity as an insider, and she sees and points out faults in other Christians. For instance,

²² Gates kept Crafts’ spelling intact. Any corrections or [sic] in my quotations from *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* were added by Gates, not by me.

when Jacob's sister, a fellow fugitive Hannah meets on her final escape north, is about to die, Hannah criticizes Christian ministers who, in the service of sectarianism rather than religion, intrude on a deathbed "striving to elicit something of which to make capital for [their] next sermon" (218). She also criticizes those who use religion in the service of slavery. She says religion has "become gall and wormwood" to Jacob's sister because of how ministers have abused prayer. In Jacob's sister's words, "They mostly prayed that we the slaves might be good and obedient, and feel grateful for all our blessings, which I know was fudge. It hardened my heart, I could not bear it" (220). The narrator criticizes Christians whose legalism interferes with doing right. Mrs. Henry, who helps Hannah recuperate during one of her escapes, has the means to redeem her but says she can't because she promised her father she'd never buy or sell an enslaved individual. Mrs. Henry says her father "conjured me if I desired a death-bed of peace, and an immortality of blessedness to avoid the hedious traffic in every form" (127).²³ Hannah doesn't chastise Mrs. Henry for the vow, but she reports in the narrative that her "heart rose against the man, who in a slave-holding country could exact such a promise" since purchase was sometimes necessary to gain an enslaved person's freedom (127). The Henry family actually owns enslaved people, and Hannah sees them apparently treated kindly but wonders if they really can be happy, "wondered if no dark shadows of coming evil never haunted their minds" (120). Through her wondering, Hannah points out the incongruity between being a Christian and owning slaves and questions the sincerity of the Henrys' Christianity. In the words of Brian Sinche, in *Bondwoman*, "those who purport to be religious must prove it" (177). Hannah doesn't doubt the faith, but she does doubt some of the faithful.

²³ This spelling of *hideous* is so written in the text.

In *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, the conversion scene's simplicity does not indicate that the conversion is insignificant. On the contrary, the conversion, occurring in the book's first chapter, informs the narration of Hannah's story and, more importantly, the trajectory of her life. The shortness of the conversion scene—just one sentence—reflects the novel's hybrid purpose of both instruction and racial uplift. Although conversion is key to entering the novel's community, it is just a starting point, not an end in itself, as in best-selling sentimental novels of the time. Hannah's conversion scene not only serves to shape the narrative and to act as instruction for readers but also is an act of resistance, showing that Christianity is for blacks as well as for whites and that God is against slavery. Most importantly, the religion and inner piety Hannah gains by converting help her lay claim to the identity of domestic goddess, an ideal generally associated with middle-class white women, as mentioned previously. This is somewhat analogous to Frado's claiming religion as her province, in opposition to what she's been told by Mrs. Belmont and even by her own fears in *Our Nig*. Rather than claiming motherhood without a husband, though, in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, Hannah claims all the trappings of domesticity, including children. At the end of the novel, Hannah has been established as part of a family, reunited with her mother, and married. She lives "in a neat little Cottage" and, though childless, is able to "keep a school for colored children" (237). Her family is part of a larger community, one with neighbors and a "little church where we all go to meeting" (239).

I believe that Hannah experiences the epiphany-type conversion, too, one that aids in her happy ending. After her enslaver Mrs. Wheeler becomes angry with Hannah, she makes Hannah work in the field and also says she is to marry an enslaved man who works in the fields.

Hannah is horrified by the thought of association with the enslaved field workers. She says of them, "Degradation, neglect, and ill-treatment had wrought on them its legitimate effects. All day long they toil beneath the burning sun, scarcely conscious that any link exists between themselves and other portions of the human race. Their mental condition is briefly summed up in the phrase that they know nothing" (200). Her condescension towards the enslaved field workers is troubling and critics have called out her class prejudice. Gates states that Crafts writes about class tensions between African Americans with rare openness in this novel and that Hannah is a "snob" regarding class distinctions (Introduction to *Bondwoman* xxiii, lxvi). He may be right. But I propose that more is going on here. Hannah isn't just looking down on the enslaved field workers. She is seeing the degradation brought about by slavery. For one thing, she recognizes that the fault is the institution, not the victims of the institution, "that faulty system which bestows on position, wealth, or power the consideration only due a man" (200). Looking at the plantation's slave quarters, she sees that "The greatest curse of slavery is it's [*sic*] hereditary character," that generations have no hopefulness to bequeath their offspring (200). Hannah determines at that moment not to allow herself to be married and forced into having children, thereby perpetuating slavery. And since she won't be forcibly married, she must escape—evidence that this episode is, indeed, her epiphany. It is after this escape that Hannah finally finds freedom and happiness.

Tweaking the conventions of the sentimental conduct novel by incorporating characteristics of the slave narrative, Crafts achieves her dual purpose of evangelism and racial uplift. By putting the religious conversion early in the novel, Crafts allows her heroine to critique Christianity from the inside. By putting the humanity-recognition conversion late in the

novel, she allows her heroine to achieve the domestic ideal usually attainable only by white women of the time. Hannah's experiences show that both Christianity and, by association, domesticity are for blacks as well as for whites.

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As I have shown in this chapter, African American women used the conventions of sentimental novels, creating hybrids with conduct fiction and slave narratives to achieve their dual purpose: religious conduct instruction and social reform. Though Wilson and Crafts have some goals in common with books by white women writers, including those I discussed in Chapter 1, they add to the usual religious, national, and women's issues in conduct fiction by focusing on African American struggles and identity. Crafts deploys conduct fiction techniques and characteristics, including the conversion scene, with a focus not just on religious community but on African American community and racial uplift. Wilson uses these tools to pointedly critique northern racism. The novels by Wilson and Crafts show that conduct fiction isn't limited to white, middle-class readers and that the genre can be deployed for the purpose of social reform. Nineteenth-century African American women novelists, though few in number, together achieve something the more common white-authored sentimental novels could not and the more abolition-focused slave narratives do not, at least not as clearly: They proclaim that religion is not solely the province of whites and create a community for those affected by slavery's legacy.

Chapter 3

“You Cannot Possibly Go Without Proper Clothing”: Janette Oke and Modern-Day Conduct Fiction

For a get-well present someone once gave me a copy of the novel *When Calls the Heart* by Janette Oke. After reading it, I was delighted to learn it was part of a series, *The Canadian West*. I added to my collection a book at a time until I had read all four in that series, and then I moved on to Oke’s *Love Comes Softly* series.²⁴ I remember visiting the tiny Christian bookstore in my hometown when I’d saved enough money to buy another book. The store was dominated by a whole wall of Bibles and several shelves of books on Bible study, financial planning, and parenting. I usually skipped those and went straight to the tiny Christian fiction section, which at the time was only one shelf with three authors: Janette Oke, Gilbert Morris, and Grace Livingston Hill, the last author popular one hundred years ago but repackaged by companies capitalizing on the incipient Christian fiction trend. For Janette Oke, with the publication of her first novel *Love Comes Softly* in 1979, had birthed a still-growing new version of the conduct genre, the evangelical romance, which is largely unknown in academia despite its popularity, social function, and, at times, quality.

Oke’s first novel *Love Comes Softly* was quickly followed by *Once Upon a Summer* and *When Calls the Heart*, along with several sequels for each. Other authors, mostly women, followed, and the genre grew exponentially over the next four decades. Publishers call this genre CBA (Christian Bookseller’s Association) and recognized it as a genre only in the late 1990s. However, a group of evangelical romances with similar characteristics existed by the late

²⁴At the time the *Canadian West* series had only four books. Oke later added two more.

1980s. These books, which this project defines more narrowly than CBA, share the following characteristics: a lack of explicit sexual content despite their classification as “romance”; a dual plot, one involving an external conflict and one involving an internal, spiritual conflict; an evangelical view of Christianity but muting of denominational markers (rarely discussion of baptism method or speaking in tongues, e.g.); and authors who are almost all white and almost all female. Many of the works also employ other characteristics common in nineteenth-century conduct fiction, and discussed in previous chapters, such as sentimental keepsakes and sentimental death scenes, narrative intrusions, and a privileging of affective experience. Too, these novels establish a connection between the readers and the author through emotional content and through means such as sequels, author biographies, and letters to the readers from the author included in the book. Although some CBA novels have reached a wider audience, even appearing on the *New York Times* Best Seller List, the main audience for evangelical romance is the evangelical market.²⁵

I contend that the evangelical romance genre is a direct descendant of the conduct novel tradition popularized by Susan Warner, Louisa May Alcott, Maria S. Cummins, and others in the nineteenth century. The defining scene of evangelical romance is the conversion scene, which is not only part of the plot but also described in enough detail for readers to follow in their own conversion experience. This scene shows each author’s evangelical purpose and also informs the story and the conduct instruction contained within the novel. As one might expect

²⁵Best-selling CBA novels many non-evangelicals would recognize include Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins’ juggernaut the *Left Behind* series and *The Shack* by Wm. Paul Young.

from evangelical writers, the lessons provided within evangelical romance tend to be more conservative than the dominant culture.

Critics have noted the instructional purpose of evangelical romance. Jan Blodgett writes, “the authors and publishers of these inspirational novels are purposeful gatekeepers creating specific images of an evangelical universe. Characters and plots embody not only an evangelical perspective but also advocate appropriate behaviors and solutions to problems” (1). John Mort remarks that “All of Janette Oke’s novels are good young adult selections for girls” (308). His words connect Oke and her fellow evangelical romance writers with sentimental novels that now are recommended only for girls and that were intended to instruct young people.²⁶ The evangelical romance readers and writers surveyed by Lynn S. Neal agree that the novels are used as devotion as well as entertainment (117). Blodgett’s belief that Jane Tompkins’ assertion about cultural work is true for evangelical novels—that they give “powerful examples of the way a culture thinks about itself” (Tompkins qtd. in Blodgett 1)—supports this connection between late-twentieth-century evangelical romance and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sentimental novels.

Conversion scenes in evangelical romance, which I see as the defining trait of this genre, serve several functions. First, they identify contemporary Christian romances as evangelical because within each narrative conversion, along with self-identification as a Christian, is the gateway to membership in the Christian community. In evangelical Christianity, it is thought that conversion must be followed by action to be proven genuine, and contemporary Christian

²⁶Cf. Anne Boyd Rioux, who cites some representative educators’ opinions, including a secondary teacher who declares she “would not assign [*Little Women*] to preteen boys,” instead recommending *Tom Sawyer* without, Rioux notes, worrying about preteen girls’ opinion of *Tom Sawyer* (163)

romance shows the main characters taking this action. They are often guided by an older, more mature Christian who offers advice about Christian living and instructs the neophyte on how to read and apply the Bible, and how to listen to and apply church sermons. Blodgett writes that the conversion in evangelical romance tends to focus on a fulfilling earthly life more than on an eternal life after death (78). I think Blodgett is unintentionally underscoring an important characteristic of evangelicalism: the point of conversion is not just to go to heaven or to escape hell; it's more than "fire insurance," as many an evangelical pastor would say. The point is to have a relationship with God now that carries on into eternity. Therefore, religious instruction for the new convert within the story—and thus the reader generally—continues after the conversion scene. Even so, the conversion scenes in Oke's novels and other early evangelical romances do tend to be more formulaic than personal, a recipe anyone can follow rather than something more specific to the plot, an indication of her novels' focus on outward signs of Christianity, of performing ordinances as part of a community of believers.

Of course, Christian fiction existed before Janette Oke, though mostly it was just called *fiction* before World War II and did not generally emphasize conversion. Grace Livingston Hill is credited by some with having invented the Christian romance, churning out sweet, didactic romance novels in the 1920s and 1930s (Tischler xiv). Her works functioned as a sort of bridge between the nineteenth-century sentimental novels and twentieth-century evangelical romances. According to Blodgett, "Hill was a master of the sentimental novel" (45). But Janette Oke is the granddame of evangelical romance, a more specific and more explosive category than the broader categories of sentimental or Christian fiction. Neal writes that Oke "inaugurated the contemporary form of evangelical romance" (29). Not all critics agree that

Oke birthed a new genre. Mort, with a tone akin to Hawthorne's complaint about the "d---d mob of scribbling women," writes that evangelical publishers "reinvented—a moribund genre" with their publication of *Love Comes Softly* and the similar evangelical novels that have since flooded the Christian publishing market (x). Anita Gandolfo says Oke merely "confirmed" the market, downplaying the surge in Christian fiction following Oke with the comment that there has always been Christian fiction (131-2). Just as sentimental novels were a reaction to the American Revolution, according to Cathy Davidson, so evangelical romance novels were a reaction to social movements in the 1960s and 1970s and to a decline of Christianity in the US (Blodgett 41-2; Mort 2). Oke has named several female authors as her influences, namely Louisa May Alcott, fellow Canadian L.M. Montgomery, Laura Ingalls Wilder, and Catherine Marshall, twentieth-century author of Oke's favorite book, *Christy* (Tischler 234). And so Oke's books, which seemed to emerge on their own, actually grew from a long-established tradition of female conduct literature. Oke once described her purpose as one quite different from instruction, though: "Society is searching for a deeper, more committed type of lasting love" (qtd. in Tischler 234). Of course the two aims are not mutually exclusive; Oke writes of how to find lasting love—primarily with God, but also with a romantic partner—through the medium of conduct fiction. Oke's works energized a new generation of conduct authors. Writes Nancy M. Tischler, "Later novelists adopted Oke's focus on the family, the traditional roles of mother and father, the attention to details of food, clothing, work, and worship, easily shifting the setting, the period, and the cast of characters" (xvii).

With *Love Comes Softly* and her other novels, Janette Oke established a pattern that proved popular with readers and that many other writers followed, especially over the next

twenty years. Her novels are didactic in matters not only of faith but also regarding etiquette and social mores. They evince strong evangelical beliefs. They reinforce a traditional gender hierarchy, in the church especially but also in home and society. Most evangelical novels are part of a series, bringing a loyal readership; some have obvious setups for a sequel at the end that seem stuck on, while others have more organic connections with the books to come.

Blodgett attributes the success of Bethany House's fiction line to "their commitment to developing authors. Starting with writer Janette Oke, Bethany House focused on series fiction," through which readers develop a sort of relationship with the writers (68). Unlike mainstream romances, their heroes "rarely ha[ve] a sinister cast," and "the barrier to love is a lack of faith; the heroine, and occasionally the hero, must learn to trust God before finding happiness in love" (Blodgett 78). These novels eschew swearing and avoid politically or socially divisive topics. Perhaps the most notable characteristic of evangelical romance, at least to those who don't read them, is the lack of explicit sex, given that these scenes are arguably the defining trait of mainstream romance.

There is a small but growing body of scholarship focused on evangelical romances. Unfortunately, much secondary material regarding evangelical fiction, especially evangelical romance, involves describing the readers in belittling terms. Those who read evangelical fiction are described as mostly middle-aged woman who are sexually repressed and who are unable or at least unwilling to face the reality of worldly struggles and so they read escapist literature (Neal 86, 38). Another criticism is that readers of evangelical romance are unsophisticated regarding academics in general and literature in particular. For example, Gandolfo criticizes "Conservative Christians' literal reading of novels that condemns Twain's *Huck Finn* and

Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* without appreciating the overriding values in those books" (80). There is no qualification here, just a blanket assumption that no conservative Christians can be nuanced readers. Gandolfo writes, "As the sales figures for Christian fiction indicate, this is literature that does not require advanced education or literary knowledge to enjoy" (147). She seems to assume these consumers read only evangelical romance and also that no evangelical romance can be literary. Mort labels several evangelical titles "sentimental" in the "pejorative" sense but remarks that "what makes one reader ill is noble and fine to another" (242). These novels are no more likely than other evangelical romances to contain sentimental conventions but, Mort seems to say, do draw readers without taste. Gandolfo adds this assessment: "Since the [evangelical] reader has been conditioned by the formulaic nature of the novels to anticipate the inevitable resolution, there is a sense of satisfaction in reading the various stories that ultimately vindicate the Christian worldview, a complacent satisfaction that supports conservative Christians' certitude in the righteousness of their beliefs" (119). She also writes that, in evangelical fiction, "a sudden manifestation of God," such as the conversion scene in *Love Comes Softly*, "liberates the author from having to develop any depth in characters" (119). These critics refuse to understand that Christians believe God has won, so happy endings can, in fact, be realistic for us. We know that trusting in God doesn't make life instantly trouble-free, in evangelical romance or in life, and most evangelicals do believe in science, though many don't accept theories and terms that change with political and social trends. Rather than being complacent and unthinking, many evangelicals do think, have thought and investigated, and still accept the Bible as truth. It is unfortunate, in my opinion, that critics dismiss such a large body of literature and its readers because of prejudice.

Stunningly Mort, who is overall highly critical of CBA novels in general and evangelical romance in particular, praises Oke, though somewhat guardedly, as not overly preachy; in fact, he says her “religious message is clear and uncompromising, but never seems like an uneasy appendage to the story” (122).

As a literary scholar, a prolific evangelical novelist, and an author of an instructional manual for writing Christian fiction, Penelope J. Stokes offers an interesting perspective on the evangelical novel:

The purpose of fiction—even evangelical fiction—is not to convert readers, but to draw them into a world of our creation, to connect them with the joys and heartaches of our characters and to let them decide for themselves what spiritual applications are appropriate. We may have high and noble visions of spreading the gospel to the world, but in most cases evangelical novels are read by other evangelicals; only rarely does a religious novel find an audience among the unconverted. (9)

Her view is in direct contradiction to those of authors like Oke, who do aim to convert readers, though it seems Stokes has a good understanding of what actually is versus what Oke and other writers would like to be true. Stokes writes that CBA publishers differ in the amount of didacticism expected but all “demand a certain level of theological rectitude: characters who are identifiably Christian . . . a biblically based representation of God and a worldview that reflects the justice and mercy of God, where the good get rewarded and the evil get punished”

(16). If Stokes is correct, in my view publishers prefer biblical fiction that misrepresents the Bible or at least greatly oversimplifies it.²⁷

My argument that contemporary evangelical romances are forms of conduct fiction helps us to understand how these texts function and provides a corrective to Stokes' characterization of the genre. As conduct fiction, evangelical romances help evangelical women live their faith. These novels help to build and sustain an evangelical community of female readers and reinforce essential "evangelical" behaviors that are social requirements rather than religious ordinances (Neal 52, 62, 12). Gandolfo writes that non-evangelical readers won't understand "the immediacy of the evangelical's spiritual experience" of God as a real, constant, personal presence and thus why "the evangelical spiritual experience is both idealized and reinforced through these Christian romances" (70). Like nineteenth-century conduct fiction, evangelical romances serve as religious primers, as reflected by their conversion scenes, and they serve as a communal link for modern evangelical women.

Critics have previously drawn a connection between nineteenth-century conduct novels and twentieth-century evangelical romances, though without exploring the connection in detail, as I do in this chapter. Janice A. Radway makes an implicit connection in writing that twentieth-century women read (secular) romance not only for "the pleasures of the act itself" but also for instruction, though Radway believes the readers claim to gain knowledge as a way to assuage their own guilt or loved ones' judgment regarding their time and money spent on

²⁷ Jesus told his followers, "In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world," and that God "maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust" (John 16.33; Matt. 5.45 KJV). Clearly the Bible doesn't promise a trouble-free life or one where every problem is easily overcome.

books that might otherwise be seen as frivolous (86, 107). Neal claims that Oke's first novel, at least, "reflects the heritage of sentimental fiction" (27), and compares twentieth-century evangelical romance authors to Harriet Beecher Stowe, Susan Warner, and other nineteenth-century sentimental authors who "forged simultaneous literary careers and Christian ministries" (20). Sarah Robbins makes an explicit though minor connection between nineteenth-century conduct fiction and twentieth-century evangelical romance in *Managing Literacy, Mothering America* (31). She gave an example when I had a chance to ask her in person about this connection: evangelical romance often includes excerpts of diaries or letters that allow the narrator to act as a guide through the character's voice. Robbins also exemplified the academy's amazement that modern people still live by the Bible—helping support the idea that evangelical romances are, in a way, subversive ("Catherine"). I agree with her assessment regarding the narrator and would like to build on her idea of a connection—specifically by affirming that evangelical romances tend to be didactic, like their literary predecessors, and to employ many of the same techniques, in addition to the narratorial guide: keepsakes, focus on affective experience, sentimental death scenes, and more. The books are also communal; as Neal writes of the books' readers, "As women, as evangelicals, and as evangelical romance devotees, these readers 'know their way of doing things; they know a customary mode of thought and performance.' United in their vision of the novels, these readers and writers have created a community of women bound together by their interpretive strategies and more" (118). The best place to see these traits used in a new version of the conduct genre is with the originator of that new version: Janette Oke.

***Love Comes Softly* by Janette Oke**

Janette Oke's prototype of the genre of the evangelical romance, *Love Comes Softly*, tells the story of a marriage of convenience that, in time, becomes a union of love. Although Oke is Canadian, she set her first book in the United States. Marty is a young, pregnant widow just arrived in the West. Clark proposes to her and marries her on the day of her husband's funeral because the minister is in town only temporarily, and because she has no home and he, also widowed, has no one to care for his two-year-old daughter Missie. Over several months, while the two sleep in separate rooms, Marty comes to admire Clark for his gentleness and his faith in God, while Clark admires Marty for her spunk and for her care of Missie and her new child, the son of her late husband. Marty, enveloped by a loving community of Christian women and guided by Clark, becomes a Christian. By the end of the novel, she realizes that she has slowly come to love Clark, too. He returns her love, and they consummate their marriage after they make their feelings known—and also after the book ends, as the narrator merely hints on the last page what will happen next.

Love Comes Softly shares many characteristics with nineteenth-century conduct fiction beyond the conversion scene and related religious instruction. The first shared trait appears in the preface, in which the author directs her readers. Oke addresses readers who have never seen this genre before, the contemporary Christian romance. Oke's letter to her readers may make them think instead of the eighteenth- or nineteenth-century conduct fiction they've read. But even those who see no connection will now have instruction directly from the author on how to read the book. She tells us that the characters "have much to share with us" and that,

through them, she hopes readers “will catch a glimpse of what human love was truly meant to be” (7, 8).

Another of *Love Comes Softly*'s commonalities with nineteenth-century conduct fiction is the double love story: the romance between Clark and Marty, of course, but more importantly the religious conversion of Marty—the love story between Marty and God. When she first meets Clark, Marty knows little of religion. She seems shocked when she first hears Clark pray before a meal, for “she had heard of people like that, who had a God outside of church, who had a religion apart from marryin’ an’ buryin’, but she had never rubbed elbows, so to speak, with one before” (24). She believes in fate more than in a deity early in their marriage, worrying that Clark won’t be able to “sneak past” an uncaring fate when he goes to town in a snowstorm (97). And Marty doesn’t accept Clark’s religion for herself right away. Her conversion is a process. She listens to Clark’s praying and Scripture reading, longing to have the kind of religion he does: “Could Clark’s God be a comfort to others like he had been to the writer [of Psalms] David?” she wonders (82). At Christmas she finally works up the courage to ask Clark to read the Bible more, after hearing him read about the birth of Jesus, a story that “held much appeal” for her (119). She even reads the Bible herself after this. Clark continues to teach Marty about Jesus, telling her, for instance, that Jesus fulfilled the Jewish prophecies of a Messiah and that he (Clark) can trust God even when he doesn’t get what he prays for (149).

Marty’s conversion occurs several months after her marriage and near the end of the novel, though the entire plot has been building towards this key moment. It is an event that “demonstrates the steps to salvation and fulfills . . . evangelical aesthetic demands for witnessing” (Neal 27). Easter morning the preacher shares a simple gospel message, prompting

Marty to realize that Jesus “personally took the punishment for her sins, as well as for the sins of all mankind” (166). Marty cries for her sins, apologizing in silent prayer, and then feels a “surge of joy” when the preacher says that Jesus rose from the grave (167). She realizes now that she has “given herself to be a knowin’ Clark’s God” and wants to tell someone right away (167). And she does this without hesitation, a fact that shows what impact the experience has had on her. She tells a fellow wedding guest the same day “that God can clean up folks’ hearts and change their ways” (168). Gandolfo discounts Marty’s conversion, saying it is “epiphanic,” that it doesn’t involve “soul-searching” (116). She seems to suggest that the conversion isn’t realistic, not an actual model of human experience. Her assessment may be narrowly true, as Marty does have an epiphany during the Easter church service, but it ignores the months of questioning and wonder Oke describes before the actual conversion event. It is my contention that Marty’s conversion is more than an epiphanic event, as readers can see the influence of her newfound religion, as she “draw[s] her faith from the God who’d made the woods” when she goes there to pray after a friend has died (18). She prays instinctually when her baby son is choking and thanks God once he’s again able to breathe (183-5). Christianity has now become an integral part of her life. She also stops what she sees as cursing (“Dad-burn,” e.g.) and instructs young Missie to avoid these words as well (182). Further, Marty realizes she’s no longer at the mercy of fate, as she understands Clark is right when he points out that their baby survived choking on a button because of God, not because of luck (185). Because Marty’s conversion is portrayed as genuine, it is a model that readers can follow. Her conversion also points to the societal order the book is teaching; according to Blodgett, “The pattern of a man

guiding his future wife to faith clearly reflects the Evangelical community's ideal of husbands serving as the head of the family in all matters" (78).²⁸

The dual love stories indicate that *Love Comes Softly* is meant for more than entertainment: It functions as a primer on how to live the Christian life. This characteristic is another link to the conduct-fiction tradition. As Marty is taught about God and about Christian practice, so is the reader. One thing that Christians do, according to the novel, is pray often, as Clark does before breakfast the first morning of their marriage, provoking a "wide-eyed" stare from his new bride (24). (The Bible requires believers to give thanks in all circumstances [1 Thess. 5.18] but doesn't mandate the before-meal prayer.) Christians also pray at night, Marty discovers. Clark regularly prays with Missie at bedtime (57). Clark prays when Marty is in labor with his stepson, not just a brief prayer but an open-ended conversation with God: "He continued it [his prayer] on as he went through the trying day" (131). Instead of despairing after his barn burns down, Clark prays, trusting that God will replace what they've lost or "make us able to do without" (155). These episodes suggest that prayers can be—even should be—uttered at all times, not just at regularly set intervals. The novel also shows that Christians can question God, as Marty does after her young friend dies: "what be it all 'bout? I don't understand much 'bout ya" (179). Evangelical prayer customs come through strongly here, as the characters pray often, without the assistance of a priest, book of prayer, or iconography and directly to God rather than to a saint or other intermediary.

²⁸ In this case, Clark and Marty are already married, but they're still in their courtship phase since they married out of convenience.

Another normal Christian practice that *Love Comes Softly* coaches its readers in is having a devotional—reading the Bible and praying—each morning. Although at first Marty’s mind wanders as Clark reads aloud and prays, she accepts “morning reading and prayer” as a usual discipline (43). Clark leads the devotional even after battling a barn fire all night (156). Eventually Marty looks forward to hearing Scripture daily. The practice Oke portrays is cultural, not entirely scriptural. While the Bible commands Scripture reading and prayer, it does not contain the word *devotional* and doesn’t mandate this nevertheless-popular format. The Bible does say to “pray without ceasing” and to meditate on Scripture continually, so it’s stricter than every morning but not as prescriptive (1 Thess. 5.17; Josh. 1.8, e.g.).

Another thing Christians do, Marty learns quickly, is observe the Sabbath. When the preacher is in town, the family goes to church. When he is not, Clark explains that “it don’t seem much like the Lord’s Day with no meetin’, but I try an’ hold to it as sech the best thet I can” (63). Though at first she works on Sundays, Marty “conceded that perhaps a day of rest was not such a bad idea” when she’s exhausted from Christmas preparations (113). The Bible definitely mandates observing the Sabbath and congregating with fellow believers (Exod. 20.8; Heb. 10.28, e.g.), but the method of doing so is decidedly cultural as portrayed in *Love Comes Softly*.

Oke’s writing doesn’t prescribe only what women should do; her work includes some expectations directed at men. Clark’s thoughts and actions suggest that Christian men are to provide for and protect their families. After buying fabric, unasked, for Marty to make herself warm winter clothing, Clark does not think he is “doing something special for her in getting the things that she needed . . . He was simply providing what was needed for those under his roof,

a thing that he had been taught was the responsibility of the man of the house. He had learned this when he was but a 'young'n' tramping around, trying to keep up to the long strides of his own pa" (62). Concerned for her safety, he tells Marty not to go outside if a storm comes (98). In addition to idealizing a husband's roles, according to *Love Comes Softly*, women should obey their husbands in a Christian marriage. Marty learns this early in her relationship with Clark, who, though gentle, expects her submission. When Ma Graham, a friend, asks Marty to visit, Marty "look[s] at Clark for his reaction" before accepting the invitation (72). Female submission in the novel does not bring cruel treatment, however. Clark often helps Marty with traditionally female chores, cleaning the kitchen, for instance, after a particularly trying morning, though he also instructs her to dress their daughter at the same time (30). Clark also cares for the children so Marty can visit a friend and helps plant the garden since she doesn't know how (165, 171). Marty's assessment of Clark once she realizes she loves him sums up this type of husband: "This man who comforted her when she sorrowed, understood her joys, gave her strength when her own strength was spent, shared with her his God" (187). Marty's approval of the type of man Clark is seems like the narrator instructing readers what kind of husband to look for. This type of narratorial instruction is common in conduct fiction. The depiction of a loving husband tempers *Love Comes Softly's* dictate that wives should obey their husbands. Even before Marty converts, she subscribes to this belief, a suggestion that it's the natural order, not just a biblical mandate.

More Christian conduct prescribed by Oke is gratefulness and forgiveness. Clark demonstrates proper Christian gratefulness when he gives God credit for their land, crops, and livestock when describing their financial state to Marty (34). He even thanks God when their

Christmas company is thwarted by a storm, grateful the storm came before the expected visitors would have left their house (118). Converted Marty evinces this gratefulness after her son's near-death experience (185). Gratefulness is a biblical command, as referenced earlier. Marty learns that Christians forgive. When her friend Ma Graham's teenage daughter announces she is pregnant out of wedlock, Ma Graham blanches but does not erupt in anger but instead "pulled her [daughter] gently into her arms, holding her close" (162). She even hurriedly sews items for the daughter's trousseau, determined to show love in a tangible way (163). This aspect of Oke's narrative seems to be a major difference from earlier conduct works, by presenting the message that no sin is unforgiveable. The message is undercut, though, by Laura's mysterious death—was she murdered by her abusive new husband? did she commit suicide to escape her husband?—just a few chapters later (176). Forgiveness is definitely a biblical mandate, perhaps one of the hardest to follow.²⁹ Laura's fate suggests that forgiveness is more difficult than Ma Graham makes it look, since although Laura receives her mother's forgiveness the author doesn't allow her to live until the end of the book. Oke may also be drawing a distinction between forgiveness for sin and cultural sanction; her mother and, we presume, God may forgive Laura, but sexual sin does not go unpunished in an evangelical romance. Laura's death scene serves two other functions: it is an implicit warning against premarital sex and precipitous marriage. It also shows the positive potential of the female community, as the newly converted Marty goes to Ma as soon as she hears of Laura's death to comfort and to help with funeral preparations (176-7). Later evangelical romances, even

²⁹ cf. Jesus' command to forgive "Until seventy times seven" (Matt. 18.22)

Janette Oke's later romances, generally are more forgiving of "fallen" women while still showing the potential of a strong evangelical community of women to support each other.

Oke's Christian primer conflates religious practices with social and cultural ones, many of which reflect what are characterized as middle-class values. Neal writes that Oke's novels not only "provided readers with an alternative to increasingly sexual secular romances, [but also] maintained the subcultural boundaries surrounding evangelicalism" (29). For instance, the idea that women should be homemakers is promoted in *Love Comes Softly*, not surprising given its nineteenth-century setting. Homemaking is tied to faith, though, and not just depicted as the norm for the time period.

Marty's conversion in *Love Comes Softly* defines the community she joins peripherally when she marries Clark and more officially when she converts. This is a supportive group of women who encourage each other in personal and spiritual matters. They give both emotional and material support. They pray for each other and share each other's griefs, as seen when Ma Graham's daughter dies. They're not perfect, as we see with, for instance, a gossiping store clerk. They welcome those who don't share their faith, as we see with Marty's immediate welcome. And just like Marty, readers are invited to join because the advice Marty receives presumably applies to them, too; because Marty's conversion gives them instructions on conversion; and because seven and eventually eleven sequels follow. In this way readers are given a concrete method to manifest their participation in the community, as "sequels tend to draw on the devoted fans" (Tischler 234). The community in Oke's novels and those modeled on her work center around evangelical beliefs and values, a common focus for evangelicals, perhaps because, in the words of Randall Balmer, those beliefs function "as the basis for

whatever cohesion exists among them” (qtd. in Neal 9). And because of the use of sentimental conventions, including the conversion, and this community-building function, Oke’s novels fit well within the long conduct fiction tradition.

Other Novels in the Vein of *Love Comes Softly*

“Hey, what are you doing?” It was my friend Alan, calling to see if I wanted to go get a Coke while I was home from college.

“Reading,” I said. “What are you doing?”

Alan loved to read and we shared many favorite titles, including Eliot’s *Middlemarch* and Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. That’s probably why he didn’t answer my question and instead asked a follow-up of his own. “What are you reading?”

I didn’t want to answer him. I knew he was expecting me to name some impressive title, something by a Victorian stalwart, perhaps. But I did blurt out the title. “*Love Is a Gentle Stranger* by June Masters Bacher.” And then, before he could say anything, “But it’s much better than it sounds!”

After that we did go get a Coke, and Alan did give me a hard time about the embarrassingly titled book I was reading. And I don’t blame him—didn’t then; don’t now. What a horrible title! But it’s a pretty good book, good enough that I still own it and have even reread it from time to time.

A few years after I fell in love with Oke’s writing, I discovered Bacher, one of several CBA authors who followed Oke, modeling their evangelical romances after hers. Bacher’s first novel, 1983’s *Love Is a Gentle Stranger*, is almost comically similar in essentials to *Love Comes Softly*: a

young woman finds herself in the West after losing the love of her life (though jilted rather than widowed); a Christian man, her romantic interest, leads her to faith (though she marries him at the end of the novel rather than at the beginning); and she realizes that love can come in softly—wait, no—gently, like a gentle stranger. Most writers who followed Oke’s lead did so less obviously than Bacher did in her first evangelical romance; the plots are less similar, but the defining characteristics—conversion scene, didacticism, evangelical beliefs, lack of explicit sex, avoidance of social and political controversy, reinforcement of traditional gender roles—remain. Rather than focusing on a single novel in this section, I will discuss several titles, in addition to Bacher’s *Love Is a Gentle Stranger*, to illustrate the evangelical romance sub-tradition within the larger literary tradition of conduct fiction. The works I focus on include the following: *When Calls the Heart* (1983), *When Breaks the Dawn* (1986), *The Calling of Emily Evans* (1990), *The Measure of a Heart* (1992), and *A Bride for Donnigan* (1993) by Oke; *A Place Called Home* (1990), *Sean Donovan* (1993), *Donovan’s Daughter* (1993), *Where the Wild Rose Blooms* (1996), and *The Princess* (1999) by Lori Wick; *Only His Kiss* (1999) by Sherrie Lord; *Prairie Rose* (1996) by Catherine Palmer, *The Stranger’s Wife* (1992) by Hilda Stahl, and *The Indentured Heart* (1988) by Gilbert Morris.³⁰

One of the things that unites these texts is the reproduction of the conventions of conduct fiction I have outlined in this project, including the significance of the conversion scene. The typical conversion in an early evangelical romance involves an ingénue/young woman,

³⁰ Gilbert Morris, like Penelope J. Stokes, earned a PhD. In fact, he was my high-school youth pastor’s English professor. I mention this to counter the perception that evangelical authors are anti-intellectual. And also because I’m excited that someone I know knew him.

often one who has been hurt in the past. Mort remarks that Oke's heroines are usually "teenage girls and young women barely out of adolescence" (121). The heroine may have bitterness to overcome. She isn't usually angry at God for the hurt but is often ignorant of God. She may be independent, perhaps sinfully so. Her conversion more obviously brings emotional healing than redemption from sin. She learns to forgive or to accept herself for who she is or to be brave in the face of a trial. She is less likely to need salvation from "big" sins like murder, prostitution, kidnapping, or thievery. Once she is converted, she is likely to find love. Mort writes that "often the blindness of the heroine to true love is the same as her blindness to the will of God" (133).

Heroes who undergo conversion, on the contrary, tend to be swashbuckling, heroic figures with rebellious streaks who must yield themselves to God. The eponymous character of Lori Wick's *Sean Donovan* grew up in a Christian household but left the faith and is nearly hanged for his part in robbing a stagecoach. He's a sinful figure but still an attractive one because of his bravery, gregariousness, and muscular figure. Adam Winslow, from Gilbert Morris's *The Indentured Heart*, becomes friends with Benjamin Franklin and other eighteenth-century luminaries, executes trans-Atlantic business before the Revolutionary War, and rescues Molly, a young girl who utterly admires him, from the streets of London. Often, as in both *Sean Donovan* and *Indentured Heart*, the swashbuckling non-Christian hero converts independently from his love interest. Even if she becomes a Christian first, the woman is unlikely to be a spiritual mentor to the man, and the hero, once converted, is still the relationship's spiritual leader. In this way, evangelical gender roles are preserved. Morris's Molly prays for Adam to convert, but she is not the agent of his conversion. As Mort writes, evangelical romances often

“portray love between a believer and an unbeliever; the unbeliever must be saved for the romance to succeed” (144).

There is a definite gender difference regarding conversion scenes in evangelical fiction, particularly in the portrayal of the path available to “sinful” characters to achieve forgiveness. Fallen women typically are not main characters. Often fallen woman who are minor characters convert, though. A notable apparent exception appears in Sherrie Lord’s novel *Only His Kiss*, where readers know the unmarried heroine Sonja isn’t a virgin because she’s pregnant, but eventually we discover she was raped, so she isn’t perceived as fallen after all. She turns out to be the fairly typical ingénue with hurt in her past, a girl who blushes and who, until she meets the romantic lead, has never been kissed. I’d like to be happy that Lord features a non-virginal protagonist, but tucked into this sweet romance are some troubling features. First, Sonja’s husband Thad not only has been divorced but also had sex outside of marriage before he met Sonja. He receives forgiveness when he repents, but does this aspect of the plot show that broken people can be healed, or does it suggest that one soiled dove only deserves another? To be fair, the romantic partners see each other as worthy and desirable, not as damaged goods, but I do wonder if their pairing is a concession to readers the author feels need to be reminded that rape victims aren’t culpable in their own attacks.³¹ Also, when Thad and Sonia first kiss, Sonia is impaired by the laudanum he gave her as part of her medical care (46). The scene reads as sweet and gentle, but the idea that romance can begin while one of the parties is impaired

³¹ In her “Author’s Note” at the end of the book, Lord writes that victims of rape/sexual assault “aren’t ‘asking’ for it,’ and they say no. They just aren’t heard, believed, or valued by the men who maneuver and manipulate them into a situation where they will feel powerless. Please relieve them . . . by believing them. No victim ever asks for the crime committed against them . . . or to lose the trust they fight so hard to regain” (345; ellipses in original).

seems like a foolish truth to teach young girls reading the book for religious or romantic instruction. This is especially clear when Thad tells Sonja about that first kiss months later as proof that she really is attracted to him, so we discover for sure that she wasn't aware of the kiss and, apparently, isn't aware of her own feelings and needs a man to set her straight. Most troubling to me is the fact that Sonja's firstborn child, the one conceived in rape, dies before he's a day old (240). By the time he is born, Sonja and Thad have married, giving the child a name and a father, but he still dies. In his eulogy for the child, Thad tries to say, comfortingly, that God doesn't like a child's death "any more than we do. Some things we bring on ourselves, and some are just logical results of natural laws that were perfect in their design but corrupted by sin" (241). This would be a good place for the narrator-as-guide to step in, to clarify that Sonja hasn't sinned in giving birth, that the child doesn't sin in existing. But no narrator steps in, and so the message is unclear, and little Lars's death is reminiscent of eighteenth-century seduction novels that couldn't separate the child from the parent's (here, the father's) sin.

Though evangelical romances tend to be, not surprisingly, overtly evangelical, they continue to follow Oke's pattern, and thus that of nineteenth-century conduct fiction, by generally eschewing references to specific denominations. Blodgett writes that, "In contrast to mainline Protestant religions with their strong emphasis on denominational loyalties, evangelicalism has traditionally operated across denominational lines" (7). This fact may account for evangelical romances' overwhelming emphasis on the authority of Scripture and humanity's need for redemption through Jesus Christ while excluding ordinances that can be controversial, such as methods of baptism (immersion vs. sprinkling) or standards for communion (every Sunday or just occasionally; open only to church members or to all

Christians in attendance). While these ordinances are often seen in Christian denominations as entrances into and markers of community membership, in evangelical romances the ordinances are largely replaced by social norms. While conversion is an entrance into the novel's Christian community, a character's actions afterwards, rather than observances of these specific ordinances, confirm her conversion.³²

Many of these novels, following the pattern of Oke's conduct fiction, suggest that being Christian means adopting middle-class mores. The main character Elizabeth in Oke's *When Calls the Heart* and its sequels places great importance upon serving tea properly, making sure to reserve the best (least cracked) teacup for her guest. Later she gives teacups to her friends as remembrances—keepsakes—when she says goodbye (160). Although she lives alone and works as a teacher, Elizabeth devotes herself to being an angel at home as best she can; after several hours of housework, she reports, "It gave me great satisfaction to see gleaming cupboards restored to their proper order. I was tired at day's end but deeply pleased with my labors. It was good to be home . . ." (108). She does her best to cook good meals for herself; "No matter

³² Most evangelical romances, in muting denominational markers, completely avoid depictions of Pentecostal phenomena. A notable exception is the author Gilbert Morris, who occasionally depicts Pentecostal phenomena but does not depict them as usual, required, or even recommended. Also, these don't appear in his earliest novels; he already had a well-established following before any of his characters spoke in tongues. This happens in at least two of his novels. For example, in the *Wakefield Dynasty* series, a young woman is praying alone when she suddenly finds herself uttering syllables she does not recognize. However, she doesn't speak in tongues as a regular practice after that, nor do other characters in the book (or even in the rest of the series). In *The Indentured Heart*, from the *House of Winslow* series, set during the Great Awakening, the main characters attend a meeting with George Whitefield where they observe audience members fainting, not from heat or locked knees but from being confronted with the power of God (23-4). Adam even experiences this phenomenon for himself during his conversion many years later at another Whitefield meeting: "He felt himself falling . . . When he hit the ground there was no sensation of shock . . . He lay there praying and calling on God for mercy" (246). No other main characters are slain in the Spirit, the modern term for this phenomenon, or question him about it, but this experience serves to characterize Whitefield's meetings as especially historic and unusual. Blodgett points out that references to the Holy Spirit are rare in evangelical fiction and "that overtly Pentecostal views are rarely given voice in this fiction" (123).

one's education or other abilities, a woman should be able to hold her head up proudly in her own kitchen," she tells herself (71). Elizabeth even sews her own throw pillows and upholsters her own footstool (79). So important is hospitality to the eponymous character in Oke's *The Calling of Emily Evans* that she risks malnutrition by using grocery money to buy tea and cookies for her visitors (207). In Oke's *The Measure of a Heart*, minister's wife Anna makes diapers using the stuffing from her side of the quilt, risking her health in the winter because she must be the ideal housewife/household manager, though she eventually realizes she needs to tell other Christians that she needs help (208).³³ Oke and the novelists that follow here include not just religious but religion-adjacent instruction, as with housekeeping.

In the books in the vein of Oke, new converts, or those who will become converts, generally have a mentor who leads them to accept Christianity and/or disciples them after conversion, as in early works of sentimental conduct fiction. For the heroine, this is an older woman who befriends her or a romantic interest, a man who is usually older with more life experience. In Catherine Palmer's *Prairie Rose*, the heroine Rosie is an orphan who gets a job as a housekeeper/nanny for a widowed father several years her senior. Her conversion makes possible her marriage to her boss. In Wick's *Donovan's Daughter*, the teenage eponymous character is already a Christian, but she re-devotes herself to her faith after a marriage of convenience to the town doctor. In Morris's *Indentured Heart*, Molly is a child when she meets the man she admires who teaches her about Christ; he is her master who eventually becomes her husband.

³³ In *The Calling of Emily Evans*, Emily, interestingly, seems to learn an opposite lesson. When her future mother-in-law protests she would have helped more had she known how hungry Emily had been, Emily says the circumstances have taught her to trust God more (207).

In evangelical romance, male converts and potential converts are more likely mentored by a fatherly figure or a friend than by a love interest. In Wick's *Sean Donovan*, Sean is rescued from execution by a woman several years her senior, but he still comes to faith—actually, returns to the faith he once had—before his wife. His main spiritual mentor is a man, the sheriff of the town who arrests him and, thinking Sean will be executed, shows concern for his soul (46). And for his wife, Sean still functions as a mentor, teaching her to read, helping her break social and emotional barriers, and most significantly leading her to faith for, even early in their marriage. “Sean . . . believed in Someone. Charlie [his wife] could see that. He didn’t seem to be the type of man who prayed without belief” (80). *Only His Kiss's* Sonja is more spiritually mature than her love interest Thad, who remarks “You certainly schooled me in Scripture. I feel like I’ve been to church” after he hears her quote Bible verses and sing hymns during her long hours of labor (228). But the next day at the baby’s funeral, he’s the one explaining theology in the eulogy, and, before he returns fully to his faith—for he is a lapsed Christian when they meet—Sonja’s pastor-father arrives to be his spiritual mentor. The patterns of conversion and discipleship in these novels reinforce the social order they advance.

Evangelical romances by Oke’s contemporaries serve as Christian primers for readers as well, for the mentors teach not just the characters but also the readers. Morris, for example, defines Christianity for his readers by depicting a sermon from Whitefield: “All who are here are *Christians*—believers in Christ, men who have overcome by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimonies” (18). Later sermon excerpts and conversations among the characters elucidate the definition. And the novel includes a test of conversion, too, when Jonathan Edwards (yes, that Jonathan Edwards) tells the newly converted Adam, “*A new birth will always*

make a man love Jesus more!" (252, italics in original). This instruction is less obviously related to conduct than some of the other characteristics but serves to help both the character and the reader verify his or her conversion. As I discussed in Chapter One, similar tests for conversion are evident in sentimental fiction such as in Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*, when John Humphreys schools the main character Ellen on what it means to truly convert (352).

Crucial aspects of Christian conduct are prayer and church attendance, and authors following Oke's model include instruction regarding how to pray and how to interpret sermons. Wick does so often in her novels. She includes direct quotations of sermon excerpts. Afterward, the mentor explains the sermon. *Sean Donovan* includes a long sermon and then an altar call (119-20). Sean monitors his wife Charlotte's reaction to the sermon and then, knowing she's thinking about it a few days later, asks, "Is there something in particular you're questioning?" (123). Thus he initiates a spiritual lesson for Charlotte and for the reader. Wick also includes prayers, not just the fact that characters pray but also the words they say, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly. For example, Sean's older sister Kaitlyn asks God to help her brother, God having brought him to mind: "She prayed that Sean would make wise choices and seek God's will above his own. She also prayed that God would be glorified in Sean's life, even if it meant her beloved brother would have to know a season of pain" (34). Wick doesn't merely instruct readers to pray and go to church; she participates in the conduct fiction tradition by showing them how to do so.

Despite the muting of denominational markers, the "plan of salvation" is typically clearly described, whether or not it fits well in the plot. In Oke's *When Calls the Heart*, one of her earliest romances, the main character Elizabeth is already a Christian. However, she overhears

her brother explaining sin and repentance to his young son (148-9). This moment does cause Elizabeth to search her heart and to repent from some minor rebellion, but nevertheless the scene seems forced, an obligatory move rather than an artistic one. In Wick's *Sean Donovan*, the narrator quotes a pastor's altar call; it's an invitation to readers, perhaps, but isn't integral to the plot (120). In Lord's *Only His Kiss*, both the main characters have already converted, but the hero tells the heroine's rapist, on his (the rapist's) deathbed, how to become a Christian (323-4). The fact that the authors shoehorn in these scenes shows how important the conversion scene is within the genre.

Wick's books especially emphasize the importance of wifely obedience, often in simpering terms: wives aren't just obedient; they are, at times, almost childlike in their unquestioning submission to their husbands. Some of this emphasis can be explained by the books' settings, for most of Wick's novels are set before 1900. However, her novel *The Princess* depicts an arranged marriage set in modern day and, in that novel, the eponymous character Shelby determines to obey her new husband Nicolai, not because he is a prince but because he is her husband. With this focus on wifely obedience, Wick both prescribes wifely conduct and reinforces common evangelical mores.

Some people believe the term *evangelical romance* is an oxymoron because they believe romance novels always contain explicit sensuality. A defining characteristic of early evangelical romance, however, is the lack of explicit scenes. These books instruct Christians not to have sex outside of marriage. Heroines are almost always virgins, even if they're not Christians when the book opens. Heroes are more likely to be sexually promiscuous before they convert. As in *Love Comes Softly*, most novels show that sexual transgressions are forgivable,

but somehow the main characters still seem to be guilty of less scandalous-to-other-characters-and-to-readers sins. Oke and many authors who followed her give other marriage instructions, for “she moves beyond courtship into the hardships and rewards of marriage itself” (Mort 121).

Evangelical romances don’t just instruct believers to save sex for marriage; they often include suggestions for how to do so. Courting couples avoid extended physical contact and don’t spend too much time alone together, especially if they are feeling tempted. Some characters don’t even kiss until they are at least engaged. Sometimes the sexual tension is so tame—or so nonexistent—that characters seem more like siblings than romantic partners, according to evangelical romance author Peggy Stoks, who admitted to feeling stifled by publishers’ guidelines (Neal 83). In Wick’s *Where the Wild Rose Blooms*, a young woman’s mother advises her it’s okay to kiss her beloved now that they are engaged but cautions against further physical contact (56-7). Later in the same novel, Wick depicts the thoughts of the husband on his wedding night, nervous at first about consummating his marriage but then grateful to God that he overcomes the nervousness, and that God has honored his commitment to save sex for marriage, an assurance that seems aimed at virginal readers (124).

Early evangelical romances require wives to submit to their husbands. A particularly nauseating example of wifely submission occurs in Oke’s *When Breaks the Dawn*, when newly married Elizabeth balks at her husband Wynn’s orders the morning after their wedding. Wynn orders her to wear men’s pants and boots, because they plan to go hiking. She wants to go hiking in a dress, something that makes her feel pretty, but he tells her, “you cannot possibly go without proper clothing” (46). Although Wynn makes no effort to understand Elizabeth’s point of view, although he issues his order unkindly, and although he makes this order without first

explaining why it is necessary, it is Elizabeth who is depicted as being in the wrong. When Wynn remains calm and talks to Elizabeth as if she's a child, she grows angry and storms away like a child before realizing she has sinned. She repents, asking God to forgive her of her sin, and then apologizes to Wynn. She wears the pants; they have a great time; she realizes she never should have questioned him. *Wick's A Place Called Home* has a similarly nauseating pants-related scene, only in this instance the wife must apologize to her husband for wearing pants. Mac and Julia, friends of the main character Christine, have an agreement regarding Julia's jeans while she rides her horse: Explains Julia, "If I go right over to the ranch and back, I can go alone" (127). What she doesn't admit is that she has agreed to ride with her husband or brothers-in-law. When she rides away from the family's ranch in jeans with only Christine, where non-family members might see her, her husband calls out her infraction in a scene that, as in *When Breaks the Dawn*, seems to infantilize the wife. Mac accuses Julia of making excuses, though his voice isn't angry. Then Julia confesses and cries and asks for forgiveness, and Mac comforts her with an embrace (133-4). In this genre, proper conduct means unquestioning wifely obedience, even in matters as small as clothing.

Evangelical romances often center on marriages between two people who are not in love, as with *Love Comes Softly's* marriage of convenience. In *Wick's Donovan's Daughter*, Marvail must marry because, having taken shelter at the doctor's house during a storm, her reputation will otherwise be irrevocably soiled and she'll lose her teaching position. In *Wick's Sean Donovan*, a spinster marries Sean to prevent him from being hanged. *The Stranger's Wife* by Hilda Stahl requires an even stronger suspension of disbelief: her main characters get married in a shotgun wedding, not because the woman is pregnant but because an outlaw

riding through town forces the minister to marry them at gunpoint. In Oke's *A Bride for Donnigan*, the title character imports a bride from Scotland; in a departure from the usual evangelical mail-order bride pattern, Donnigan and his wife consummate their marriage right away, something only obliquely referred to in the narrative. In Lord's *Only His Kiss*, Sonja marries Thad in what is initially a business arrangement because she's pregnant and has nowhere to live, while he proposes because his bachelorhood prevents women from trusting him as a doctor. In all these cases, the couples eventually fall in love and, in most cases, remain celibate until they fall in love.

Why are there so many mail-order brides and marriages of convenience in evangelical romance? I think both allow readers a mischievous thrill, as the characters can have sex without sinning as soon as they're in love, or even as soon as they're in lust. According to Gandolfo, "The novels of Christian romance are the ultimate wish-fulfillment fantasy; the protagonist finds true love and God at the same time" (69). I'll add physical consummation to her wish-fulfillment fantasy definition in this type of plot. There's no need to marshal self-control to stay sexually pure; there's no need for chaperones or carefully guarded behavior. There is the thrill of instant gratification without the guilt of extramarital sex. Of course evangelical romances don't include overt sex scenes, but they do depict physical affection that will obviously lead to it.³⁴ Some writers, like Wick, dance right up to the line, going farther than my parents would have allowed me to see if the scene had been on TV when I was a child. While Clark and Marty

³⁴ *Redeeming Love* by Francine Rivers is a rare exception to this rule. Rivers gained fame as an author of secular romance, but when she converted to Christianity in the mid-1980s, her fiction converted, too. *Redeeming Love* was her first evangelical romance, a nineteenth-century retelling of the Old-Testament book of Hosea that Rivers' editor describes as PG-13. I will discuss Francine Rivers' work in Chapter Four.

in *Love Comes Softly* merely decide to share a room after mutually declaring their love, Wick's characters kiss and caress, feel tingly, and get into bed. The evangelical version of the sex scene isn't nearly as graphic as one from a mainstream romance, but it still provides the fantasy. Marion Rust's observation about sentimental novels can apply to evangelical romances, too, especially to Wick's: these novels "might teach precisely by thrilling [and] the pleasures of the text might educate without severing the reader from the social fabric" (34). In this way they seem to sell chastity using sex, as Christine J. Gardner notes about chastity campaigns such as *True Love Waits*, which promise a near lifetime of fulfilling sex if only its disciples are celibate until marriage but that, during their events, talk constantly of sex (61). According to Neal, evangelical readers see sensuality as the main difference between secular and evangelical romance—both its explicit portrayal and characters' moral choices regarding it (77). They see evangelical romance as countercultural, "as a way to redeem romance and at the same time combat the world's distortions" (76). By contrast, I believe secular and evangelical romances are not so different regarding their treatment of sex as readers may think. According to Radway, readers of secular romance may enjoy reading explicit sex scenes, but they generally want sexual relationships to be monogamous and to lead to marriage (74). These readers don't like their heroes to be sexually promiscuous, and sexually liberated women tend to be punished (169). In this one regard evangelical romance from Oke's era may actually be less "conservative" than secular romance of the same time, since Oke et al. often allow mercy for sexually promiscuous characters who repent.

In their conduct instruction, evangelical romances blur the lines between Christian/biblical requirements and cultural requirements. There's no mandate in the Bible to

pray before meals, for example, or to serve tea and cookies when friends visit, but the Christian (female) communities in these novels nevertheless expect and reinforce these values. Oke and her set emphasize modesty, a trait that is not extra-biblical but certainly subject to interpretation—who determines what modesty is? In Oke's *Calling of Emily Evans*, the eponymous character must wear a bonnet as a marker of her profession—a (non-ordained) minister. Clearly modern readers aren't being told to wear a large bonnet, but Emily's bonnet, careful attention to modest dress in general, and modest behavior suggest a quiet, unassuming deportment is de rigueur for female believers. In Bacher's *Love Is a Gentle Stranger*, the main character pins a brooch on the "high neckline" of her sister's wedding dress (175).

Evangelical fiction has a strong communal component, as mentioned above. In Oke's *Calling of Emily Evans*, Emily has many friends but Shad's mother, a fellow Christian, is her closest female friend. In Oke's *When Breaks the Dawn*, the trader's wife is Elizabeth's best friend, their common religious beliefs overcoming a racial barrier. It is a whole community of friends through whom Christine in Wick's *Place Called Home* comes to Christ. The support of the town and, more specifically, the church members helps Sean fulfill the requirements of his parole in Wick's *Sean Donovan*. Beyond this, the books work to create community with and among readers. The majority of the books discussed in this chapter are part of series with repeating characters, so readers can follow beloved characters beyond the first book where they're introduced. Because characters who get married in one book appear with their families in following books, married readers, too, will see themselves in her pages. Because of the instruction regarding Christian practices, the books purpose to help readers strengthen their relationships with God. Gandolfo writes that evangelical readers value identifying with "strong

Christian families” (74). Neal similarly claims that the books validate their readers’ experiences and familial roles (12). And of course readers tend to share books. I became friends with my college roommate Christine when we shared books from Janette Oke and Gilbert Morris. I learned about Lori Wick and Francine Rivers from my friend Emily. Lisa, one of my most bibliophilic friends, and I exchange evangelical titles more than we do secular. These books touch a chord with their readers who can indulge in romance without offense, who are both challenged and encouraged by the conduct instruction, and who draw strength from the affirmation of their faith through the conversion scene.



In this chapter I have argued that the twentieth-century evangelical romance is a direct descendant of the nineteenth-century sentimental conduct novel, featuring the same commonalities of keepsakes, sentimental death scenes, privileging of feeling, narratorial intrusions, and, most importantly, the conversion scene. I have shown that the conversion scene is key in interpreting the evangelical romance, as it works to shape both the plot and the conduct advocated in the novel. The evangelical romance began with Janette Oke’s novel *Love Comes Softly* in 1979 and quickly blossomed, with novelists following in Oke’s footsteps, writing sentimental conduct fiction of their own.

Conduct novels often contain countercultural ideas, and those from the nineteenth-century novels are generally more liberal than the culture at large. By contrast, as I have argued in this chapter, twentieth-century conduct novels are often markedly more conservative than the culture at large, as they contend, for instance, that wives should submit to their husbands, that prayer should precede both small and large decisions, or that people can date without

having sex. These ideas were widely considered moral a century ago but now are counter cultural, in that modern society views them as backwards, old-fashioned, unnecessary, or even intolerant. Yet, as the evangelical romance genre develops in the twenty-first century, ideas that are countercultural within evangelism have begun to emerge, a phenomenon I discuss in the next chapter.

Chapter 4

“A Precarious and Even Dangerous Meeting”: Francine Rivers, Jamie Langston Turner, and
Evangelical Feminism in Contemporary Christian Conduct Fiction

“Feminist and horrible!”

That’s the only comment I remember from my student evaluations one fall, the first semester I taught Shakespeare’s *Much Ado about Nothing* in my sophomore literature class. There were several positive comments, too, but somehow those don’t have the same exquisite staying power as the negative pronouncement.

At first I wondered what earned me the feminist label. I had taught my students about the Renaissance expectations for women, that they be silent, chaste, and obedient. We then compared the play’s two female lead characters to the Renaissance ideal and saw that the one who did not fit the ideal (Beatrice) fared better than the one who did (Hero). We discussed how Shakespeare’s play shows the inherent weaknesses of the ideal, most notably with Hero’s inability to defend herself, despite her adherence to the ideal standards, when she is falsely accused of fornication.

In retrospect, I think that’s why I was labeled “feminist and horrible.” I considered the female viewpoint. And I suggested that a certain set of patriarchal values was flawed. Doing so at an evangelical Christian university—one I still hold in high esteem, by the way—made me, in my students’ eyes, a radical.

What’s sadder than my students’ criticism—for others that semester had labeled me *feminist*, though they’d not included the term *horrible*—is the fact that my department chair—

whom I also hold in high esteem—defended me in my annual evaluation by saying that she knew I was not a feminist. She emphasized the word *not*.

What’s perhaps even sadder still is that I didn’t contradict her, not then and not for the next several years I taught there. For I knew that feminists are *personae non gratae* at that university and, even if the institution’s stance hadn’t been an issue, I still wasn’t ready to embrace the designation for myself. I knew, of course, that feminism isn’t monolithic, but for me the movement carried with it a lot of baggage and uncertainty. Could I be both Christian and feminist?

The answer, I have since discovered, is yes.

One of my favorite authors, Francine Rivers, helps show me how.

In this chapter I analyze two evangelical romance authors who entered the market in the 1990s and are still writing today: Rivers and Jamie Langston Turner. Both authors write evangelical conduct fiction, drawing on the same nineteenth-century conduct tradition as Janette Oke, whom I discussed in Chapter Three. However, as I show, Rivers and Turner, along with other authors who followed them, use the conduct genre not only to advance evangelical ideas of proper conduct but also to challenge patriarchal standards.

Rivers entered the evangelical romance market less than two decades but somehow a lifetime after Janette Oke. Rivers first gained fame as a writer of mainstream romance of the bodice-ripper variety.³⁵ She experienced a religious conversion in the 1980s and then wrote

³⁵ Rivers seems to have included less bodice-ripping than her peers, even before her religious conversion. Early in my relationship with Rivers, when I’d read all her evangelical romances currently published, I went looking for her older material because I loved reading her work so much. I found *The Outlaw’s Embrace* from 1986 at a used bookstore and eagerly began reading. I noticed two things. First, the book wasn’t very interesting. I think she was a better writer post-conversion. Second, there wasn’t very much sex in the book. I encountered only one graphic scene, and it was after the main characters got married.

Redeeming Love as her statement of faith. At first published by Bantam in 1991, *Redeeming Love* was cleaned up—"redeemed," according to the later version's copyright page—and then repackaged for the evangelical audience by Multnomah in 1997. This latter publication marked a sea change in the evangelical fiction market. Though there was then and still is a market for what Rivers describes as "innocent love stories that touched little on the sins of man" (qtd. in Sharbrough 72), Rivers and those who came after her have found increasingly enthusiastic audiences for her type of fiction. Rivers is certainly part of the conduct novel tradition because, like Oke, she includes religious instruction, moments of conversion, and a focus on affective experience. But her Christian characters are more fallible. Her women are less submissive. Her issues are grittier—prostitution, rape, abortion, racism. Her novels move beyond the basics of Christian disciplines to explorations of how to live out these disciplines in the real world. And after Rivers have come others writing more in her lane than in Oke's: Anne Tatlock, Jamie Langston Turner, Gina Holmes among them. Rivers describes the change in her genre in a 2014 interview: "The genre is more realistic now than it was decades ago. It seemed to me the conflict in early romances was being tempted to be tempted but never slipping into sin. Now, writers acknowledge the brokenness in people, the anguish sin brings, the longing for answers and meaning to life" (qtd. in Sharbrough 72). Critic Jan Blodgett agrees with Rivers' assessment, observing that, in the early novels, "characters strongest in faith often have to overcome a sinful past, but the stories place limited stress on evil" (81).

In this chapter I discuss what I see as the most significant difference between novels by Rivers et al. and those by Oke et al. Novels by Rivers and her set negotiate the boundary between evangelical faith and feminism. These novels show that there is a porous boundary

between these two worlds, which appear to some to be contradictory; they show that evangelicalism and feminism can coexist while giving some instruction on how that is possible. I will focus on two novels, Rivers' *Redeeming Love* and Turner's *Some Wildflower in My Heart*. I will show the connection between these works and Oke's novels as well as nineteenth-century sentimental novels to demonstrate that Rivers and Turner continue to build upon the conduct tradition that I have discussed in previous chapters. I didn't think in terms of feminism when first I read Rivers, and I am not claiming that these authors and their readers accept the label of feminism, but I do claim the books do feminist work. Just as nineteenth-century sentimental novels provided a forum for female community and identity formation, so some evangelical novels have evolved to allow a space for the discussion of a type of Christian feminism. What might be termed a feminism with compromise uses sentimental and evangelical novel conventions to challenge patriarchy within the church while upholding and even working to codify evangelical morals and cultural values.

Christian Feminism

It's worthwhile to review the historical and social debates that inform these novels. No publishing house markets "feminist" novels to evangelicals. Even the idea that evangelical Christians can be feminists has invited ridicule from not only from the right, as I experienced at work, but also from the left. The title of Ellen Fluornoy's 2013 article demonstrates this fact: "No, It's Not a Joke: The Christian Right's Appropriation of Feminism." Fluornoy writes that "conservative feminism is a precarious and even dangerous meeting of two ideologies" in the eyes of both conservatives and feminists (351). Fluornoy accuses those who claim the title of

Christian feminist of actually just finding an underhanded way of ensuring female submission by telling women they must submit to God as Jesus Christ did. She says that Christian feminists refuse to acknowledge sex-, race-, or class-based discrimination, while herself mocking the idea that Christians are ever persecuted. Christians who claim persecution are really experiencing confrontation, she says (352). Christians use the Madonna/whore binary, with figures such as Sarah Palin as the Madonna, to demonize true feminists, according to Fluornoy (364). Self-described evangelical feminist Rebecca M. Groothuis, too, writes about the evangelical opposition to feminism, blaming it on evangelicals' belief that feminism precipitated the decline "of Christian moral values and sexual norms" (18). She writes that the idea that being a full-time mother and homemaker is a biblical mandate for women is false and has made that idealized role an idol to many of today's evangelicals. Rather than drawing evangelicals toward God, this ideal actually separates them from him, she claims (25).

Although today's evangelicals and feminists often aren't cognizant of the connection, the fact is that Christianity, even evangelical Christianity, has long been associated with the fight for women's rights. Scholars like Rebecca M. Groothuis in *Women Caught in the Conflict: The Culture War Between Traditionalism and Feminism*, Marga Buhrig in *Woman Invisible: A Personal Odyssey in Christian Feminism*, and Nicola H. Creegan and Christine D. Pohl in *Living on the Boundaries: Evangelical Women, Feminism, and the Theological Academy* identify the main points of similarity between these seemingly opposing viewpoints. Groothuis quotes Ruth Tucker, who explains that "well-reasoned books articulating Christian feminism have appeared since the Reformation. . . . Biblical feminism is not simply a by-product of secular feminism. It is deeply rooted in Scripture and has been publicly articulated for centuries" (qtd. in Groothuis

63). More recently, nineteenth-century Christians launched many efforts to reform society, including efforts to gain equal rights for women (Groothuis 43). For instance, Sarah Grimké said the purpose of the women's right movement was to allow women to serve God in the way he desired. She believed that a faulty interpretation and misapplication of Scripture had been used to subjugate women (Groothuis 51). Antoinette Brown, whom Susan B. Anthony praised as "lovely, modest, and womanly," believed that the Bible was a useful tool for the cause of women's rights (Groothuis 8, 52). Frances Willard, a minister and fighter for women's rights, in 1888's *Woman in the Pulpit*, wrote that those who exclude women from ministry misinterpreted the Bible (Groothuis 53). The Pentecostal revival of the early twentieth century had many female leaders such as Aimee Semple McPherson. Today Christian organizations, evangelical and otherwise, prioritize women's causes; for example, Project Rescue is at the forefront of fighting sex trafficking, having taken up the issue long before mainstream society acknowledged this issue's widespread existence. Secular media is not a reliable gauge for women's rights within the Church—when Southern Baptists add the requirement for wives to obey their husbands to the official statement of beliefs, reporters notice; when the Assemblies of God defends women in ministry, they do not.

Despite this history, evangelical feminists acknowledge that women face marginalization and sometimes outright opposition in the church. Part of this inequity stems from the fact that, traditionally, men have been the theologians, and "they passed judgment on the place and role of women" (Buhrig 8). The Bible has been "used as a weapon," though, according to Buhrig, "expositions of biblical texts hostile to women do not correspond to the real intention of the texts" (36, 39). Creegan and Pohl agree that the problem is not the Bible but male-centered

interpretations of biblical passages about women (68). Evangelical feminists might be tempted to ignore Bible passages that seem anti-woman, but Buhrig argues what is needed is feminist hermeneutics that examine the “socio-historical context” of these passages in order to “reclaim the history” of biblical women (50). Parts of the Old Testament depict “narratives of women being treated more as property than as persons, even to the point of being brutalized and dehumanized,” but Groothuis says these passages evince not divine approbation of the ill treatment but merely an historical record of the events (100). Buhrig points out that Jesus himself “called men and women to his service, not in pairs, but as persons” (103); in other words, a woman’s call is equal to a man’s and doesn’t require that she be married to be of use in God’s kingdom, despite the suggestions in some evangelical circles, both explicit and implicit, to the contrary. The Church suffers when it marginalizes women, “rob[bing] itself by hindering women from contributing their actual gifts, not to mention those that are surely still to be developed” (Buhrig 112).

Yet, while evangelical feminists and mainstream feminists agree on many aspects of the problem, they don’t agree on the solution. According to Groothuis,

While feminists in both centuries are alike in what they want women to be liberated *from*, they are unlike in what they want women to be liberated *for*. Both early and modern feminists have recognized and objected to the double standard of sexual behavior for men and women. But while the early feminists sought to hold men accountable to the high moral standards to which women themselves were obligated, the modern feminists have sought to level the moral landscape by allowing women the same sexual license that convention has traditionally allowed men. Modern feminists, of

course, have been more successful in their campaign than the early feminists. It is always easier to allow sin than it is to enforce righteousness. (45)

Evangelical feminists blame patriarchal oppression on humanity's sin, on the selfish tendency that all people have, rather than on male prejudice; they argue that women's physical limitations and family responsibilities are what have generally kept them from oppressing men (Creegan and Pohl 72-3; Groothuis 60). Because the root of the problem is spiritual, the solution is also spiritual. Within the church, evangelical feminists believe, the solution to the erosion of women's rights is spiritual renewal, not just more accurate hermeneutics, according to Groothuis (61). Creegan and Pohl agree, saying, in society, "Patriarchal prejudice can stop only when God—perhaps through the efforts of a dedicated minority—interjects his dynamic of grace, love, and forgiveness into the social system" (74).

It is useful to know a few more characteristics of evangelical feminists before turning to works with these traits. They tend to have more in common with nineteenth-century feminists than with twenty-first-century feminists (Groothuis 44). They are sometimes called "biblical feminists," for they seek answers in the Bible, not in personal experience (109). Biblical feminists resist efforts to control women through selective use of Scripture but also efforts to "add liberating voices" by their own selective use of Scripture (Creegan and Pohl 164).

Evangelical feminists are generally pro-family, pro-traditional marriage, and advocate more restraint for men rather than more sexual liberation for women (Groothuis 61-3). They are pro-life, seeing abortion as "an instrument of male oppression rather than as a means of women's liberation" (46). For abortion allows men to escape responsibility for a family, financial and otherwise; is used by sexual predators to cover up their crimes; and

disproportionately prevents births of females and other protected groups, such as minorities and people with disabilities (Groothuis 82). Evangelical feminists share feminist goals of affirming a woman's personhood rights (44). They see their purpose as seeking equal opportunity for women, not equal outcomes as some current feminists do, according to Groothuis (71). Nevertheless, negotiating the evangelical feminist terrain can be tricky, scholars acknowledge: "This will require naming and addressing constraints and power dynamics that undermine women's voices and women's leadership; it will mean taking risks in allowing controversial topics to be addressed" (Creegan and Pohl 178).³⁶

One forum for addressing these controversial topics is a traditional one for identity exploration and formation—the novel. The novel is an important mechanism for exploring and resolving tensions between evangelicalism and feminism, even if neither the novels nor the novelists use these terms, because it is hypothetical. It is safe. And evangelical romance novels explore the topics within a Christian context. Generally women must choose between an evangelical and patriarchal point of view or a feminist point of view that discounts faith. Francine Rivers and other later writers of evangelical fiction explore what it might look like to retain the belief in powerful prayer within a less patriarchal society. Burhig writes that "Women today are readier than most men to make a connection between their own entirely personal experience and major world problems" (115). Whether or not this comparison is true, evangelical romance novels provide a space for women to make that personal connection.

³⁶Just as feminism is not monolithic, neither is evangelicalism. For many evangelicals, gender roles are not necessarily as rigid as non-evangelicals may assume. More central to the identity of evangelicalism and those within the movement is conversion. More important than gender roles, too, are religious practices such as church attendance, personal Bible study and prayer, fellowship with other Christians, and evangelism.

According to Groothuis, “The real issue, of course, is not whether the gender roles prescribed by traditionalists are truly traditional, but whether they are beneficial and prescribed by God” (24). Narratives provide a non-threatening—or at least less-threatening—way to probe these issues, to discuss what aspects of evangelical culture are biblically mandated and which are merely cultural. And finally, according to Cregan and Pohl,

In the boundary between feminism and evangelicalism, the interaction between Scripture and experience can be affirmed. Scripture is not accepted out of the blue. It is accepted because our relationship with God is bound to our coming into the Scriptural story and because we recognize in the biblical narratives a truth and a story that preceded us, rather than something of our own construction. Experience and narrative then become a common and unlikely bond between feminism and evangelicalism. (165-6)

I propose one of the best ways to fuse experience and narrative is the evangelical conduct novel, particularly those written by Rivers, Turner, and others in the late 1990s and the early twenty-first century.

Secondary material about evangelical fiction tends to be mostly biographical sketches of the author, book reviews, or general assessments of quality rather than true literary criticism. Critical assessments of Rivers’ evangelical writing are generally more favorable than those for earlier evangelical authors such as Janette Oke. Several critics acknowledge the quality of her writing (Gandolfo 71; Tischler 273). John Mort believes her writing possibly qualifies as literary, saying that “Rivers, basically a romance writer, writes hauntingly and movingly no matter her subject” (218). Nancy M. Tischler groups Rivers’ work with “realistic” fiction. She points out that

Rivers' writing is inspired by her own life and relatable because she deals with pain and with real issues that appeal to a broad group of women. In describing her writing process, Rivers has said, "I always start from a place of pain or question and use writing as a tool to go before the Lord and find out what to learn—like the atonement I had to do with my abortion" (qtd. in Tischler 272). Tischler claims Rivers' writing is often anti-feminist, but she (Tischler) links feminism with "the belief that one's primary loyalty is to self and to one's own pleasure and independence" (271). I think Tischler misunderstands either Rivers or feminism or both, as Rivers shows how women's rights can be upheld within mutual compromise. Christian Scriptures and beliefs are integral to Rivers' writing (271). Although didacticism is usually prized in religious fiction, both secular and evangelical critics have censured her novels' didacticism (Tischler 272; Mort 72). Rivers uses accurate historical details in her writing and reads widely and pays attention to society, so her writing isn't insulated. Rivers is willing to present Christians in a negative light, as she does with the advancement-hungry minister in *And the Shofar Blew* (Tischler 272). Rivers mutes denominational markers, though the religion portrayed in her novels is clearly evangelical (273). Of the third book in Rivers' *Mark of the Lion* series, which is set during the early years of Christianity, Mort writes, "Sex isn't far beneath the surface when Rivers pits the fierce, menacing Atretes against the widowed, passionate Risdah, nor is violence, but eventually the animosity between the two becomes attraction, and Atretes's hard but wounded heart melts into love for his new wife and for God" (49). I agree with these reviewers that Rivers is franker with matters of sexual temptation and attraction than are the earlier writers of evangelical romance, but she still does not include sensuality solely for the sake of titillating the reader. In fact, Lynn S. Neal observes that Rivers "acknowledg[es] sexual

desire and temptation while addressing it in an evangelical context,” which, for some readers makes the novels not only more entertaining but also more spiritually edifying (158). James Calvin Shaap writes, “A vast chasm separates evangelical Christian books from the mainline readership—something that threatens those readers who profess the Christian faith but who see a world much less sanitized than the one prescribed and enforced by CBA [Christian Bookseller’s Association] censors” (qtd. in Mort 2). Francine Rivers has a way of presenting a “less sanitized” world, acknowledging the darkness of rape, temptation, sex trafficking, and more, while retaining her faith in an ultimate happy ending.

Jamie Langston Turner, whose first evangelical novel *The Suncatchers* was published in 1995, has also been received positively though sparsely, for she is much less popular and prolific than Rivers. Tischler calls Turner “one of the best writers in the Christian market” according to critics, citing “her well-crafted characters and genuine humor” (302). Turner’s works are character-driven, with characters whose conflicts involve “the spirit, the mind, and the heart” (302). As with *Some Wildflower in My Heart*, Turner’s narrators are usually not Christians (302). Mort writes that Margaret, the narrator of this “exemplary novel,” “has a quirky charm and dignity” (232). Further, he praises the subtlety of *Some Wildflower*, writing that “the slow blooming of the wildflower in Margaret’s heart is a thing of transcendent beauty” (224). Tischler describes the novel’s style as “clear, rich with allusion, frequently funny, moving, and firmly rooted in reality” (302). According to *Publisher’s Weekly*, Turner’s writing, though at times ponderous, “is proof that a faithful Christian witness can come packaged in a quality Christian novel” (Review of *A Garden to Keep*).

Although Rivers and Turner have received little scholarly analysis, it is worthwhile to consider how they fit into the conduct fiction tradition. In this chapter I examine how they, beyond writing biblically-based, arguably character-driven novels, perform the cultural work of exploring, though their versions of the conduct novel, how to be both Christian and feminist—with an acceptable compromise. Their novels suggest that, if religious conversion is giving up agency, then Christian feminists do so willingly, knowing they gain a different sort of agency in the exchange, the power of God to live a Christian life. According to Rivers, “We crave. And craving, by nature, is insatiable” (“Graves”). One aspect of the agency Christians gain is freedom from the tyranny of their cravings. The concept of evangelical feminism is not fully realized in *Redeeming Love* or in *Some Wildflower in My Heart*, but these writers set the stage for continued exploration and expression of feminism within the evangelical romance through adapting the conversion scene and other conventions of the conduct novel.

***Redeeming Love* by Francine Rivers**

I love Francine Rivers. I admit it. I love her. Not just her books. I love her and her books. One of my favorite Christmas presents last year was a stack of Francine Rivers books from my friend Lisa: *And the Shofar Blew*, *Leota’s Garden*, *The Scarlet Thread*, and two or three others. I viewed these books as old friends, partly because I love Francine so much—I feel that she and I should be on a first-name basis—and partly because I’d owned all these books before. Because I’d loved them so much I’d lent them to my friend Lisa, and because Lisa loved them so much, she lent them to another friend I’ll call Ashley. That was more than ten years ago. Ashley moved

away for a few years and then came back but stayed aloof, and she never returned the books. I think she forgot about them. But Lisa and I never forgot.

Occasionally the missing books would come up in conversation. "I should read *Leota's Garden* again," one of us might say, and then, "Oh, yeah, Ashley has it." Then we'd remind each other to let it go. We couldn't hold onto bitterness. Francine would definitely not want her books to cause bitterness, a danger she writes about in several of her novels, *Redeeming Love* included.

Now my friends are back home, and I thank Lisa for restoring them to me. I'm also a bit amused, for, though Lisa is an ardent Rivers fan now, she was initially reluctant to read Rivers' work. I told Lisa for a couple of years how wonderful *The Mark of the Lion* series and *Redeeming Love* and *The Atonement Child* were, but she didn't read any of them until her (male) Sunday school teacher recommended *Redeeming Love*. I've been her close friend since seventh grade, but she trusted this man's recommendation, though she'd known him only a short time, over mine.

That's okay, Lisa. At least now you've seen the light.

So have hundreds of thousands of other readers, even those who, like Lisa, aren't typically drawn to romances.

Redeeming Love by Francine Rivers is a retelling of the biblical story of Hosea, set in gold-rush California. The heroine, Sarah, is the daughter of a New England prostitute, rejected by her married father, who is herself sold into prostitution when her mother dies. Fifteen years and two forced abortions later, she makes her way to California, where, known as Angel, she

draws a high price as a beautiful, specially trained escort—although she dreams of escape.³⁷ Farmer Michael Hosea sees her on the street one day and hears from God that she is to be his wife. After she's been cruelly beaten, he buys her from her madam and then marries her, though she is so sick she doesn't seem to know what is happening. Michael takes her home, nurses her to health, and then attempts to woo her while also introducing her to Christianity and to a conventional life. He goes after her when she runs away twice, paying to redeem her yet again. During this time of relative peace, Michael and Angel become friends with the Altman family, a Christian couple older than Michael and Angel with several children, one daughter near Angel's age. Angel begins to fall for Michael and, scared and feeling unworthy, runs away a third time. This time Michael, wounded, doesn't go after her but waits and prays, believing she won't ever stay if she doesn't make the choice to return. Angel is again forced into prostitution, but God pursues her and she turns to him while in captivity. God sends a man to aid in her rescue and she, in turn, helps rescue other trafficked girls. Eventually she hears that Michael is still waiting for her and she returns, stripping off her clothing as she approaches him as a sign of repentance and an act of shedding the hurts of her past.

Redeeming Love follows in the conduct novel tradition that I identified in previous chapters. *Redeeming Love* is an important work to analyze because it is one of the best-selling contemporary evangelical romances by one of the best-selling evangelical novelists and so one of the most influential. It is also Francine Rivers' first evangelical romance and one of the

³⁷ I shall refer to the character as Angel throughout this discussion partly because she has used this name the majority of her life but also for simplicity, although she goes by several more names before finally returning back to Sarah at the very end of the novel.

earliest evangelical romances to oppose patriarchy. Viewing *Redeeming Love* as a work of conduct fiction allows readers to see that it is more than a love story; it actually tackles fairly gritty social issues while also challenging aspects of patriarchy. *Redeeming Love* contains less direct instruction regarding Christian practice than the earliest evangelical romances but does include some, affirming its role in confirming cultural norms, most of it as Michael either directly instructs his new bride or else lives out his faith before her. Michael models being a servant, even washing Angel's feet that are dirty and wounded after her first time of running away (163), a startling example of Christian servanthood. Angel notices early in their marriage that Michael reads his Bible often, sitting "silent before the fire reading the same old worn book he took all over the place" (110). He also reads from the Bible aloud for Angel's benefit. He prays for understanding each time before reading the Bible, telling Angel "he never read until his mind was open enough to receive" (343). Michael shows when to read the Bible (daily and often) and how to read it (prayerfully). At Christmas he reads aloud of Jesus' birth, a story "full of beauty and mystery," his actions a lesson about the purpose of the holiday (364). He prays regularly, before meals and even about sex, talking to God about when to consummate his marriage (142). Prayer, too, the novel instructs, should be daily and often. One unique lesson of *Redeeming Love* is that prayer is a two-way conversation. Many evangelical romances show the characters praying to God, but few show God talking back. Michael argues with God about marrying Angel after she rejects his initial proposal (79). Many evangelical novelists create characters who never doubt and very rarely sin. However, refreshingly, Rivers' Christians are not perfect, as we see when Michael not only hesitates to follow God's commands but actually argues about doing so.

Another primer-like lesson of *Redeeming Love* is about forgiveness and/or God's character. While Angel thinks of God as an impersonal force meting out severe punishment ("I don't want any part of some great eye in the sky who's waiting for a chance to squash me like a bug!" she declares), Michael presents a different view: "God doesn't condemn. He forgives" (227). In Rivers' world, Christians are not perfect. Michael questions God after Angel leaves the final time and even ceases, for a time, his usual praying and Bible reading. Yet the narrative is clear that God has not left him: "***Beloved, I am always with you, even to the end of time***" (383).³⁸

Although I have argued that *Redeeming Love* can be classified as a work of feminist evangelical conduct fiction, the treatment of Angel's rape by Michael's brother-in-law Paul is just one instance that demonstrates feminism hasn't found full expression in *Redeeming Love*. Paul encounters Angel on the road as she leaves Michael early in their marriage. He offers her a ride and then tells her she owes him. Alone, without other transportation, she accedes. It's true that Angel doesn't see Paul's assault as rape; she seems to think she's prostituted herself for a ride to town. Afterwards she is angry at and afraid of him, as is Michael when he figures out Paul had sex with Angel, but neither uses the term *rape* to describe what Paul did. Perhaps this is because Angel's self-worth is so low at this point that she believes she deserves that kind of treatment. Michael doesn't know the whole story, so he possibly doesn't know the true character of the encounter. But it's troubling that the narrator also does not use the term. The novel falls short in its characterization of this scene but, at the same time, does not condone Paul's actions. I contend that this book is still, overall, feminist in bent, despite the rape scene.

³⁸ The emphasis is Rivers'. God's dialogue is bold and italicized throughout *Redeeming Love*.

Paul is clearly cast as a sinner in need of repentance for his actions and Angel as a victim of his rapacity. The portrayal of this event shows that Christians like Michael and even Christian authors like Rivers are not infallible.

Beyond showing that Christians aren't perfect, *Redeeming Love* acknowledges the presence of hypocrites within the church, teaching correct conduct through its opposite. When Angel tells Michael how badly her mother had been ignored by a priest and scorned by other parishioners when she went to Mass, Michael expresses sorrow over the ill treatment and does not attempt to excuse the behavior. Also, he insists these people were not acting in God's will: "God had nothing to do with it," he tells her (229). It is a religious hypocrite who insists upon marrying a virgin, though he himself is not one: Paul wants to marry Miriam because "This girl would come to his marriage bed a virgin and stay faithful to him to death" (323). Michael didn't seek a sexually experienced wife, until instructed to do so by God, but neither does he hold others to a standard he himself does not uphold. Rivers shows Paul's shallowness while not downplaying the value of saving sex for marriage. Thus the novel acknowledges the suffering that results from Christian hypocrites, especially how women suffer. In some evangelical circles women aren't allowed to criticize men, or at least have no accessible avenue to do so, but this novel acknowledges the real danger of Christian male selfishness.

It is true Rivers' strong Christian man at times seems overbearing, another fact that seems to contradict my argument that *Redeeming Love* is a feminist work. There is an element of violence in Angel's relationship with Michael, even though he assiduously resists her sexual advances before they are married and immediately after. He marries her when she's nearly unconscious; he issues strong orders; he retrieves her from the brothel forcefully after her first

escape. This is another aspect of the narrative that shows feminism has yet to be fully expressed in *Redeeming Love*. However, Neal's investigation shows that evangelical women are drawn to his character (165). And Michael is by far the kindest man in Angel's life, the one who controls her the least. I think Michael is a transitional figure, showing the development of conduct fiction, that it can be and is adapted for the times in which it is written. He retains some of the machismo of the romantic hero of Oke's and Lori Wick's novels, discussed in Chapter Three, while also affirming the spiritual value of women and stepping aside, by the time of Angel's third escape, to let her make her own decisions regarding their marriage and her spirituality.

Other conventions of the conduct novel tradition are evident, too, showing continuity with the earlier genres even while the genre is evolving and exploring feminist issues. Angel's mother models religion for her somewhat, taking her to services and teaching her "a few Latin chants from mass," for instance (17). The mother prays for forgiveness but doesn't seem to accept it: "Forgive me, Jesus. I did it to myself. Mea culpa, mea culpa" (32). Someone gives Angel the rosary her mother held when she died—it's a rejected keepsake, though, for Angel throws it into the garbage, believing the religion associated with it to be ineffectual (36). A true keepsake is the wedding ring Michael gives his new bride Angel. It was his mother's, and he wore it "on a chain around his neck" until his wedding (100). Angel leaves the ring behind when she runs away but Michael puts it back on her finger upon her return, and so this second keepsake redeems the first failed one: a mother's jewelry that mocks young Angel with its evocation of failed religion is replaced by another mother's jewelry associated with faithfulness and life-changing faith. As the ring redeems an ineffective keepsake, I see Rivers' work as

redeeming the work by Oke and her contemporaries. While early writers of evangelical conduct fiction told good stories that affirmed evangelicals' faith and challenged, by their existence, that women can preach, Rivers deepens the challenge by taking on weightier topics, including a more direct challenge of overstepped male authority.

Like earlier conduct novels, *Redeeming Love* models manners, though not to the extent that nineteenth-century novels or even Oke and her set do. When Michael's Jewish friend visits, for instance, "The two men talked politics and religion. Neither agreed with the other's viewpoint, but the conversation continued amicably unabated" (222). Troubling is the fact that Angel takes no interest in the conversation, but perhaps that's because she's tired that day and, more significantly, still recovering from extreme trauma. The suggestion isn't necessarily that women have no interest in politics or religion. In another scene, readers discover that Angel finds the Altman women "new and fascinating": "They spoke no harsh words, were clean and neat without being preoccupied about their appearance, and talked about everything *but* sex" (245). This description seems like a defense of Rivers' new writing format, as well as instructions for the neophyte Christian.

Following in the conduct-novel tradition, *Redeeming Love* illustrates the merits of industry, but unlike many earlier novels, does so in both private and public spheres. Angel's early lessons in marriage involve working in the household, although, as mentioned earlier, the narrative makes clear that such work does not earn grace. Industry can help with the process, though, it seems. During Angel's penultimate escape from Michael, she works in his friend Joseph's store. After her first day there, one filled with physical labor, she realizes that, though she has earned less in one day than from one brothel client, she feels deeply satisfied with

herself: “she had never felt so clean and proud” (300). Honorable work brings satisfaction, even if it does not bring much money. Noteworthy in this scene, too, is Angel’s business acumen. For instance, her second day at the store she devises a way to make the fabric display more functional, and she discovers, once back home, she “has her mother’s gift for growing things” when her flower garden develops into “a grand profusion of color” (300, 340). She is adept at bargaining, able to negotiate very good prices when shopping (426). The novel may champion women’s domestic work, but it nevertheless shows they can be effective in the business arena (albeit in woman-oriented facets of the business arena here), an affirmation of women’s role in the public sphere without denigrating the domestic. This seems a message particularly apropos for evangelical women, who face a unique pressure to be good mothers, for doing so is seen as a spiritual requirement for evangelicals, while also granting significance to those who cannot or choose not to be domestic goddesses.

The sentimental death scene in *Redeeming Love* ties to literary ancestors such as Susan Warner while underscoring the evangelical belief in eternal life. However, the scene does not serve to inspire another character towards deeper spirituality, as in nineteenth-century conduct novels, since Angel converts in adulthood, long after her mother dies. When Angel is eight, her mother contracts an unknown illness. Growing weak, she asks her current male companion to care for her daughter. When she dies, she has “the first sunlight of spring on her face and her rosary beads in her dead-white hands” (35). Angel hugs her body and pleads with her to wake up, then begs God to take her, too. Later some men remove the body without ceremony. Having witnessed her mother’s death, Angel is later haunted by details surrounding it, such as “the men sewing the shroud closed over her mother’s stiffly smiling face” (84). This scene is

short, more like early sentimental novels than those from the mid-nineteenth century, but the fact that Angel sees images from that day even years later underscores the scene's impact. Too, Angel's imploring God to let her die with her mother shows that her mother has begun Angel's religious education, another link with the conduct tradition.

Redeeming Love shows the importance and nature of female community within the Church. Afraid the women of the Altman family she has just met will reject her when they learn of her past, Angel blurts out her secret. But the oldest daughter Miriam says, "You needn't have said anything" and explains the reason she wants to be friends with Angel: "Because I like you" (237). Through the women of the Altman family, Angel and the novel's readers gain additional understanding of biblical love and grace. Further instruction comes from Michael, as he explains to Angel the Altmans' kindness: "Sooner or later you'll learn there are people in the world who don't want to use you" (238). It's worth noting here that *Redeeming Love* argues that Christians can be both interesting and fun. Angel had been told that "good" girls were not worth knowing, but she sees that her new friend Miriam is "neither dull nor critical. She had poked good-humored fun at her father all evening while seeing to her ailing mother. Her sisters and brothers clearly adored her" (239). This scene seems to be a sort of apologetics for women who have been sheltered in the way Miriam has, an invitation into the community of women for those with prosaic conversion stories.

Part of *Redeeming Love's* evangelical-feminist community-building power lies in its portrayal of women as spiritually significant. Michael works to convince Angel she is worthy of a place in the church community by describing the indiscretions of several women in Jesus Christ's lineage: "Rahab was a prostitute. Ruth slept at the feet of a man she wasn't married to,

on a public threshing floor. Bathsheba was an adulteress. When she found she was pregnant, her lover plotted the murder of her husband. And Mary became pregnant by Someone other than the man she was betrothed to marry" (228). Both Altman parents nurture their children spiritually. For example, during the family's devotional time, the father reads the Bible but "settled back to smoke his pipe" while the mother fields the children's questions (245). The pipe smoking is significant here because it shows how comfortable Mr. Altman is with his wife's involvement: He relaxes rather than remaining vigilant should he need to intervene. It is noteworthy that Miriam, a seemingly ideal Christian woman, is tempted to have premarital sex in the scene where she asks Paul to marry her, that she does the proposing, and that she marries a "fallen man." This shows that the rescuers aren't always male. The change from the tradition, wherein the male is the rescuer, supports what I see as the feminist bent of the novel. Of course, it's easier to see that women are spiritually (and otherwise) equal with men if one sees that men are not perfect. This is one reason why it's so significant that Michael is not a perfect, dashing rescuer. Despite Michael's sometimes seeming imperiousness and religiosity, he knows he is not Angel's superior. He tells her he's not a saint and admits to himself that "he had denied love and God himself and even longed to kill his own wife. What was the difference in murder by hand or thought? His fleshly nature had relished thoughts of retribution, even lusted for it" (207). Michael may be Angel's primary spiritual mentor, but he doesn't set a standard that she, by virtue of being female, cannot reach.

Another aspect of the novel's community building is its confrontation of the misconception propagated by evangelicalism that motherhood is a woman's *raison d'être*.

Pastors, Facebook prophets, and women's-conference speakers regularly tout motherhood as a

woman's highest calling, ignoring or perhaps misunderstanding the biblical injunction to love and serve God first. Many evangelical novels reinforce this misunderstanding, and the admirable Miriam believes it, too: "It's a woman's reason for being, isn't it?" she remarks to Angel, whom readers know is barren (355). Miriam is lovable but naïve, so her declaration seems call this idea into question. How can motherhood be "a woman's reason for being" if Angel, whom the narrator and Michael repeatedly declare to be worthy, cannot achieve it? Both Miriam, who is unmarried at this point, and Angel long for children, but neither is portrayed as spiritually incomplete because of her lack. Part of the freedom Angel gains through Michael is the declaration of this fact. She tells sex-trafficker Duke, "I told Michael I couldn't have children and why. He said it made no difference to him" (396). According to Groothuis,

writings from conservative evangelicals who consider woman's highest call and "true throne" to be Christian ministry rather than motherhood seem startling to those of us who are used to seeing the shelves in Christian bookstores crowded with how-to manuals instructing women to find fulfillment solely as wives and mothers. But Jesus himself—back in patriarchal Palestine—had ideas similar to these. . . . Luke 11:27-28 records that a woman, full of the traditional belief that a woman's highest accomplishment in life is to give birth to an outstanding son, cried out, 'Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.' (57)

Rivers' feminism with compromise aligns with Groothuis's, acknowledging the very real idea that many women long for children but not requiring motherhood for female personhood.

Rivers' feminism with compromise includes a franker discussion of sex than is found in the works by Oke and most of her set. Michael does his best to connect sex with love for Angel, another idea championed by evangelical feminists. Lascivious dialogue involving Angel as a child shows the depravation of her abusers. Mildly erotic language after her marriage shows the development of her relationship with Michael. For example, Michael will "explore [Angel's] body," suppressing his own desire in an attempt to please her (243). Anita Gandolfo speculates that Michael Hosea's overly obvious last name is both a reference to the biblical source material and a way for the writer and/or the publisher to justify to the readers the inclusion of "the sordid details of Angel's life" (146).³⁹ Still, Gandolfo acknowledges that "Rivers is able to convey the horrors of Angel's life . . . without resorting to extremely lurid details or salacious images that would violate the conventions of Christian fiction" (70). Critics may insult evangelical fiction and its readers for being naïve, but Rivers shows that "lurid details and salacious images" are unnecessary. Neal writes that Rivers' more realistic approach, as compared to other evangelical writers, appeals to readers because her novels "acknowledge the issue but place it within Christian boundaries" (84). Perhaps, as Marion Rust suggests of earlier conduct fiction, the novel teaches by thrilling, not in spite of doing so (34). I think the frank intimacy of Angel and Michael's marriage, rather than thrilling, paints a strong portrait of their love, part of the novel's strategy to depict God's love for humans, as in the biblical book of Hosea.

³⁹ In other words, if it's in the Bible, it's okay for evangelicals to read it (similar to how evangelicals who avoid obscenities will still say "ass" when reading about a donkey in the King James Version).

Rivers' more frank approach to sex allows her to use a sexual encounter to depict healing and to underscore the evangelical feminist value of mutual support and compromise. After Angel confesses all her worst sins to Michael and stops fighting the idea that she loves him, they have sex again, and Angel, for the first time, feels sexual pleasure: "It had never felt like this, warm and wonderful, exciting and right. None of the old rules applied. . . . She was dry ground soaking in a spring rain, a flower bud opening to the sun. Michael knew and gently coaxed her with tender words flowing over her like the sweet balm of Gilead healing her wounds" (285). Though she runs away again the next morning, this scene shows that Angel is open to receiving love. This scene may be titillating compared to Oke's writing, but it is hardly gratuitous. It connects marital sex to biblical faith. It tells readers that marital sex can be blissful and that God approves of it. Michael even "prayed aloud, giving thanks for the pleasure they had taken in one another" after he and Angel make love (319). And it demonstrates the evolution of Angel's character, from emotionally closed off to vulnerable. As such, this is a key moment in Angel's journey to religious conversion, for her ability to accept love from Michael leads to her ability to accept love from God.

The conversion scene in *Redeeming Love* is consistent with the conduct fiction tradition but is importantly rewritten by Rivers in order to present a critique of patriarchy. When Angel marries Michael, she rejects both his and God's proffered love, for she feels unredeemably dirty. She appears clean and presentable as a married woman, but "The foulness was inside her, running in her blood" (132). After her first escape she tries to earn forgiveness: "Forgiveness was a foreign word. Grace inconceivable. Angel wanted to make up for what she had done, and she sought to do it by labor. Mama had never been forgiven; not even after a thousand Hail

Marys and Our Fathers. So how could Angel be forgiven by a single word?" (211). At this point she doesn't understand that Michael's love isn't conditional: "She hoped to please him by working like a slave when all he wanted was her love" (212). Rivers' portrayal of Michael's love and grace exemplify the evangelical view of God's love and grace: unmerited favor. Though Angel rebuffs Michael's and God's attempts at relationship, both of them pursue her relentlessly, Michael's literal rescue and repeatedly going back to retrieve her mirroring God's spiritually doing so. Once Angel accepts Michael's love, she begins to open to God's love. She even hears his "still, quiet voice fill[ing] the room. *I am*" (345). Back in prostitution after her final escape from Michael, she continues to hear God's voice and finally calls back to him, "*Oh, God, make me believe!*" (413). It may seem that religious conversion is giving up agency, but Angel has a choice here. God calls her repeatedly but doesn't force her to choose him. Also, once she calls out, he sends someone to rescue her, a man named Axle whom God has compelled to walk into the brothel at just the right time. Angel in turn rescues someone else, a child recently forced into prostitution (414). At this point Angel has responded to God and acted in belief, and she now is more interested in him than she has been previously. But four weeks later, after living with the Axle family and going to church with them, Angel's conversion becomes certain. Responding to an altar call at church, she declares her belief in and "give[s] her life to Jesus" (428). Rivers portrays Angel's conversion as a kind of marriage. Not only does Angel walk down an aisle to the altar, which is not at all unusual for an evangelical conversion, but she answers "I do" when the pastor asks if she wants to give her life to Jesus. Angel realizes these are "Words meant for a wedding ceremony" (428). Gandolfo writes, "Contemporary

Christian fiction is religious romance, applying the conventions of the romance genre to

spiritual experience” (116). She opines that this romanticized conversion is often sudden, “epiphanic,” and unrealistic (116). I do not share Gandolfo’s view and instead argue that Angel’s conversion, although it does have elements of the typical romance, has been anything but sudden—it’s taken more than half the novel. Further, such an obvious comparison to a wedding ceremony is appropriate for Angel’s conversion since her entire story is a retelling of the book of Hosea, wherein Hosea’s experience with his adulterous wife serves as an allegory of the relationship between God and his people, meaning Angel and Michael’s relationship is an allegory for the God-humanity relationship, too. Since Angel finds freedom in her marriage to Michael, the comparison of her conversion with a wedding suggests she will find freedom in her relationship with God, too, though both relationships will require some compromise.

Significantly, Angel gains agency through her conversion. Blodgett writes that conversions in evangelical novels reinforce patriarchy because a man leads the heroine to Christ (75). I agree that Michael is the primary human agent of Angel’s conversion. However, several women also help lead her to faith. Angel’s conversion is a result of her mother’s early influence, her friendship with the Altmans, and her life with the Axle family, in addition to Michael’s instruction. Also, Angel is hours away from Michael when she finally converts. God, not Michael, is the main figure in her conversion. This could still be seen as patriarchal because Angel yields to God, but Michael has to yield to God, too. After her conversion, Angel has the self-acceptance to receive love from Michael, and she can choose what to do with her life, though she looks to God for guidance. After her conversion, she asks her host Mr. Axle what to do next. He tells her, “That’s up to you. . . . And God” (421). She asks Axle for guidance, but he doesn’t dictate her next steps. He lets her know she can choose. This choice while yielding to

God is part of the acceptable compromise for evangelical feminists that these evangelical romance novels are intended to promote.

Another feminist aspect of *Redeeming Love* is the agency Angel gains—in the form of freedom through conversion. After she has returned from her first escape, Angel tells Michael what she truly longs for, her own rural cabin, because “I want to be free, Michael. Just once in my whole life. Free!” (198). Michael’s answer is that she already has the freedom she seeks, though she’s not yet aware of it. Angel and Michael clearly have differing ideas of freedom at this point. She believes freedom means no accountability to anyone, total control of her own life. Michael means freedom from sin and freedom to belong to an evangelical community. This community typifies the feminism with acceptable compromise depicted in Francine Rivers’ works.

Part of Angel’s freedom is the ability to love. She realizes, soon after returning from her first escape, that she’s falling for Michael, though she resists (201). Part of the acceptable compromise is the ability to choose with whom to fall in love. At first Angel doesn’t want to fall in love because it “meant you lost control of your emotions and your will and your life. It meant you lost yourself” (215). But Michael wants Angel to benefit from love—physically and otherwise—not just to yield: “I want your love . . . I want you to feel the pleasure I feel when I touch you. I want to please you as much as you’ve pleased me” (215). For Angel, love is a zero-sum game. For Michael and, Rivers suggests, for acceptably compromised feminism, both marital partners yield to each other while also benefitting from each other. “You always thought you owned my soul,” Angel tells Duke. “Michael showed me no one does” (396). In the feminism with compromise, marital partners yield to but don’t dominate each other.

The freedom to love applies not just to earthly relationships but also to the relationship with God. Before Angel runs away the final time, Michael knows she is about to leave. He lets her go, though. Having redeemed her from the brothel more than once, he ultimately gives her the choice whether to stay with him. He does this largely because God tells him to: “*Let her go, beloved*” (368). God gives Angel agency to choose whether she’ll have a relationship with Michael and whether she’ll have a relationship with the God to whom Michael has introduced her. This plot point aligns with the evangelical belief that the religious conversion is a choice.

Though clothing is a tool of oppression in the lives of many of Janette Oke’s characters, Rivers’ Angel, after being oppressed with clothing, uses clothing to gain agency—at least, agency with an acceptable compromise. In fact, clothing features strongly in Angel’s conversion process, showing how central to the narrative feminism with a compromise is. At first, clothing is used as oppression. When Michael first sees Angel, she is wearing fancy clothing to attract her elite clientele. The clothing is a reward, of sorts, from her manipulative madam, but it still renders her an object. The men who pay her for sex know nothing of her personally; “All they saw was her beauty, a flawless veil wrapped around a frozen heart, and they were enthralled” (50). When Duke recaptures Angel after her final escape from Michael, he costumes her as an obvious prostitute: “Angel was dressed in a pink satin and lace confection. Though the gown fit her slender body perfectly, Angel hated it. She hated having every curve revealed to Duke’s perusal. He was checking out the merchandise, deciding how to display it to the best advantage” (403-4). The child that Angel has rescued from Duke is dressed in a sexually provocative manner, too, her clothing a tool to steal her childhood innocence (414).

When Michael rescues Angel, he dresses her in his late sister's modest clothing. This may seem to be further control of Angel, and it is at first, but she feels free in these clothes, despite their shabbiness: "The fabric was thick and unrevealing, covering her completely. She had never worn anything so simple, so sweet" (117). She goes nude in front of Michael on purpose to seduce him, to force his hand, as she sees it—she still believes he just wants to use her—and he compels her to cover up. But these clothes offer her a measure of protection from others and even from Michael, who suppresses his physical desire early in their marriage, wanting to prove to her he didn't marry her just for sex.

Angel's conversion and her human romance both find fulfillment in the novel's final scene when she returns to Michael, thanking God for him and fully devoting herself to him. Arriving at his farm, she walks towards him, hoping he will approve of her and accept her back: "She wanted so desperately to be clean for him, to be new. . . . She wanted to strip away her past" (460). Even though she has converted to Christianity and received God's forgiveness, residue of her guilt remains. In this scene, her clothing is associated with that guilt, so "With trembling hands, she removed the trappings of the world. She dropped her shawl and took off the woolen jacket. She worked at the tiny buttons of the shirtwaist. She shrugged it off and let it drop as she walked. She unhooked her skirt and let it slide down her hips and to the ground. She stepped out of it" (460). For most of her life so far, others have told her what to wear—pimps and madams to make her a sex object; Michael to convince her she's not one. She finally is completely nude for "one single, abiding purpose: to show Michael she loved him, and she peeled away layers of pride one by one until she was humbled by her own nakedness" (460). In doing so, she accepts her God's cleansing and she presents herself to Michael as a new

creature. She doesn't come to him in a prostitute's clothing, as when he rescued her, nor in his sister's clothing, nor even in clothing she's bought with non-prostitution earnings. She comes without what others have made of her and instead what God has made her. She herself has decided to yield to Jesus Christ, giving up some agency, as all Christians must submit to God and to each other, but free from sin and others' expectations and even her own self-loathing. Angel has converted before this scene, but here she seems to fulfill or consummate the conversion. It's true she's removing her clothes as a message to Michael, but for the first time she has been able to use her clothes for her own purpose. She gains the agency of Christianity, an agency of acceptable compromise available for today's Christian feminists.⁴⁰

Gandolfo, damning Rivers' work with faint praise, writes, "It is undeniable that reading *Redeeming Love* can be an inspiring experience for a relatively unsophisticated reader" (147). Gandolfo not only creates a false dilemma, suggesting books that are inspiring to the general reader can be nothing else; she ignores the importance, especially for evangelical women, of the issues addressed in the book. Valerie Weaver-Zercher writes that non-evangelicals often do not understand the importance, for instance, of chastity for the evangelical reader (69). True, *Redeeming Love* is escapist fiction, as romances tend to be, with sometimes facile religious instruction. It's a compelling story with drippingly romantic and even sexy scenes. But it also gives instructions for escape from an evangelical perspective: escape from the oppression of sin. Escape from weighty, unrealistic, extra-biblical ideals sometimes propagated by evangelicals. In updated versions of the conduct novel, both *Redeeming Love* and the

⁴⁰ Rivers continues to explore heavy topics with her 1997 novel *The Atonement Child*, mentioned above. This modern-day conduct novel centers around rape-survivor Dynah's decision whether or not to have an abortion.

evangelical novels that follow it, Rivers and her contemporaries writing in the same strain continue to explore the issues of interest to evangelical women, whether they are “unsophisticated” readers or not.

***Some Wildflower in My Heart* by Jamie Langston Turner**

I ate lunch at Chick-Fil-A one day and was struck with the thought that it’s the evangelical world *in parvo*. Most of the customer groups included children; and children’s picture menus, special family parking, self-adhesive children’s table mats, and an indoor playground proclaimed the restaurant’s approval of and welcome to families. A woman wearing an “Embrace Jesus” t-shirt walked by. At a nearby table, a young couple held hands to pray before their meal. Instrumental versions of worship songs played through the speakers, though a group of teens who had stopped for lunch on the way home from church camp drowned out most of the music (“You idiot! You’re supposed to be kind! We learned that at youth camp!” “Taylor just tried to put sauce in my milkshake!” “Can someone buy me a milkshake?” “I got you, bro!”). I kept hearing people address companions named after Isaiah, Jeremiah, and other Old-Testament prophets.

I recognized the Chris Tomlin song playing over the sound system.⁴¹ Any moment I expected to see someone I knew, probably someone from church or from the evangelical school where I taught. I prayed before my meal, too. I was fairly comfortable in that world because I grew up in it. Yet I also realized that much of what happens there—and in the

⁴¹ Chris Tomlin is one of the most-sung artists in the United States, though he’s virtually unknown outside the evangelical world, because his worship tunes are standard Sunday-morning church fare (Lunscombe).

evangelical world as a whole—happens because of custom, not because of biblical fiat. The culture is not the same as the faith. Jamie Langston Turner's novel *Some Wildflower in my Heart* recognizes this truth in a way that early evangelical romance novels did not and so provides an ideal space for exploring the intersection of evangelicalism and feminism. *Some Wildflower's* narrator is the heroine and a very recent convert, an unusual point of view for this genre. This allows the narrator to detail, without prejudice, both the harm and the kindnesses done her by church members, including the damage done by patriarchal structures.

Published seven years after the original version of *Redeeming Love*, *Some Wildflower in My Heart* is the painfully beautiful conversion narrative of lunchroom supervisor Margaret Tuttle. Margaret was raised by her grandfather, a nominally religious man who abused her sexually and otherwise for years and who illustrates that religious customs are not the same as spiritual transformation. Before the opening of the novel, Margaret gives birth to and then loses a son fathered by her grandfather. Margaret sets out to narrate the changes that have come about in her life since she met a new friend Birdie Freeman, who came to work for Margaret in the cafeteria. Over the course of several months, Birdie, who is homely, cheerful, loving, and seemingly naïve, befriends Margaret and allows her to accept friendship and begin to turn loose years' worth of pain. Near the end of the novel, readers discover Birdie has died and that Margaret began writing the story to memorialize and reflect upon Birdie's friendship. While writing, Margaret softens towards others even more than she had while Birdie was alive and realizes she loves her husband, whom she married out of convenience and who has a separate bedroom.

Some Wildflower portrays women as spiritually significant rather than reinforcing patriarchal standards by having her husband model Christ for Margaret. This is a break from the conduct tradition in which there are often female mentors but where the agent of conversion is a man. Margaret's conversion is mostly a result of her friendship with Birdie, not because of a man. In fact, the biggest impediment to Margaret's conversion is the trauma inflicted upon her by a man, namely, her grandfather. Because of her grandfather, who showed her "firsthand the dark underside of religion," Margaret harbors disdain and even disgust for religion, even "feel[ing] a churning of physical revulsion" when she remembers the religious maxims he used to repeat and the Old Testament passages he quoted like weapons (16). She describes her grandfather as a "fiendish arch-hypocrite and upstanding elder of the First United Bible Missionary Church" (39)—no wonder she had a negative view of Christianity. "I detested the church, I suspect" she writes, "because of its high esteem of my grandfather. . . . I viewed it as an altogether ignoble institution because of its failure to see and judge him for what he was" (153). A relative's invitations to church she sees as attempts to "proselytize" her (16). Of course this is technically true, but the negative word choice is certainly more clinical than her uncle-by-marriage's approach. After a tragic life that included losing a wife to suicide, Uncle Mayfield underwent a "religious transformation" and shared with Margaret and her husband "the numerous rewards of being 'born again'" (16). Yet Uncle Mayfield is not the inspiration for Margaret to convert. Her friend and coworker Birdie is more successful because of her gentle, relationship-based approach. From her first time meeting Birdie, Margaret is thrown off balance, for she sees in Birdie's "eyes something kind and gracious, something akin to mercy or devotion" (28). This is a quite a different reaction than she had to her uncle Mayfield, who was

sincere but also seemed very sad. Margaret's "unremitting antipathy toward all things religious" starts to fade as Birdie demonstrates the abstract concepts of "*mercy, grace, love, forgiveness, benevolence*" each day (129). Margaret takes a big step towards conversion when she thinks her husband has had a heart attack. "Birdie had already begun her patient work" at this point, and, fearing she may lose Thomas, Margaret sees her feelings for him were stronger than she had thought (143). She sees her fear as "evidence that I was capable of feeling and of reentering life as a participant" (143). Although this incident is not overtly related to faith or religion, it does show that Margaret is becoming open to relationship. Conversion is a relationship with God. Margaret's changing view of religion is evident in her word choice when referring to evangelization efforts. While Uncle Mayfield proselytized, Birdie evangelizes.

Margaret explains,

Birdie's method of evangelization—it was no secret to me that such was her life's objective—was seductive, whether by design or timidity I know not. She spun a silvery web of crafty, ingratiating kindness in which to catch her prey unawares. No sermons by way of speech, not in the early stages of beguilement, at least, but only strand after sticky strand of ensnaring good works, beautiful and shining, especially to those whose lives were sullied and worn with defeat. I was wary, however, and saw her tricks for what they were. (168)

Margaret's ambivalence is quite evident here, as Birdie seems to be setting a trap but a "beautiful and shining" one; Margaret claims she has been vigilant but clearly is allowing herself to become ensnared. Her overwhelmingly positive descriptions of Birdie show she eventually is glad she has been ensnared, for Margaret prides herself on being forthright and would not shy

away from saying negative things about Birdie if she believed them. Although initially resistant to Birdie's friendship, Margaret realizes Birdie's "kindness of soul . . . opened up the way before her into my life" (261).

It is a keepsake, one of the conventions of sentimental conduct fiction explored in previous chapters, that brings Margaret to the brink of conversion. Several months into the school year, when Margaret and her husband frequently visit with Birdie and her husband, having each other over for meals, for instance, Birdie gives Margaret a set of dishes that Margaret had once spoken admiringly of. Unaccustomed to such shows of affection, Margaret asks the reason for the gift. Birdie's "answer was swift and unflinching. 'Because I love you, Margaret. That's why'" (269). Birdie here models God's love—unmerited, often unexpected. And Margaret as a result comes even closer to being able to accept God's love, for "at the sound of her words I felt a sudden wrenching within my heart, a nearly visceral sensation, like a great healing stab of pain that brings long-awaited relief" (269-70). Margaret now realizes not only that she needs a friend but that she now has one (270). She now knows someone who claims the title *Christian* who does not hurt her. The same day Margaret realizes Birdie is her friend, she also realizes Thomas has to sleep alone (280). She has known this during their entire fifteen-year marriage, of course, but now she actually thinks about him with concern—another part of her heart is opening. A hallmark of sentimental conduct fiction is a focus on affect. Interestingly Margaret tries her best to suppress feelings, not only in the events she relates but even in the relating of them. This keepsake and the love it represents helps her to begin to feel the emotions she has long suppressed.

Another result of Margaret's friend realization is her recognition of her own sin, though she doesn't use the term just yet. She realizes that, overwhelmed by her own pain, she has been blind to the suffering of others: "In all honesty, an insidious form of pride had crept into my heart and taken up residence: the pride of suffering" (297). The novel does not at all deny or minimize Margaret's trauma, but it does argue that trauma is not an excuse for walling oneself away from others, including from God. She realizes that all suffer ("though I had considered myself the prima donna of sufferers, I was simply one of a vast troupe") and all are blessed (315). Margaret is learning to look beyond herself. Some may question how *Some Wildflower* qualifies as a feminist work if it minimizes the sexual violence that women experience. I would answer that the book doesn't minimize Margaret's experience but instead offers hope that there is healing from trauma. In fact, much of Margaret's healing comes through her association with Birdie, showing how a female community can be therapeutic. And one aspect of the agency Margaret gains from conversion is, as also seen in *Redeeming Love's* Angel, in the form of freedom of past hurts.

Margaret finally converts at Birdie's funeral, near the end of Margaret's account. As the pastor reads Birdie's favorite Scripture passages, a way for her influence to continue after her death, Margaret "felt the falling away of a doubt—not that God sent his son, not that his son must die, not that man must believe in Jesus, for indeed from childhood I had never balked at these truths, but that God *so loved the world*. Oddly, that had been my stumbling block—not God's plan for man's redemption, not the vicarious atonement itself, but the motivation behind

it" (359-60).⁴² Margaret's conversion reflects the rest of the novel, not a climactic experience but a slow unfolding.

Because its narrator is a very recent convert, *Some Wildflower in My Heart* contains few of the Christian-primer type elements found in other evangelical novels in the form of direct instruction. However, the character of Birdie is a primer, of sorts, who functions as an example not only to Margaret but also to readers, albeit a nearly impossible one to emulate and one who mixes domestic accomplishments with Christian acts of service. Private disciplines are not exemplified, but loving thy neighbor is. Spiritual lessons are more conceptual than step-by-step instructions, as with Margaret's realization that she has been proud of her own suffering. Unlike previous examples of this literary tradition discussed in this project, in this novel, the primer inspires the heroine to convert but not because the heroine idealizes her. It's true that Birdie exemplifies many ideals of an evangelical woman: She's kind and polite. She cooks and does needlework. She attends church and volunteers often. But she also lacks the outward trappings of ideal womanhood: She is not pretty. She has no children and is barren. She does not have breasts, having lost them to cancer. But her character development depends on her relationships, not her outward appearance, adherence to convention sexual attractiveness, or achievement of apotheosized Christian motherhood. Birdie's identity has developed absent from this societal expectation. And she serves as an example, not for Margaret to imitate but as an example of how to love and to accept love. Evangelical feminism recognizes the value of women apart from motherhood.

⁴² Margaret quotes John 3.16.

There are other traits of the sentimental novel in *Some Wildflower*. One that stands out is the mother as a guider of reading. Margaret's mother raised her in a literary environment despite their having a somewhat nomadic lifestyle, which Margaret later realized must have been an attempt to stay away from the abusive grandfather. Margaret recalls, "Mother and I read together in the evenings—a great variety of works in all genres—and so cloistered was I that I truly believed that every child knew Hawthorne, Shakespeare, Melville, Tolstoy, and the King James Bible as intimately as I" (32). To Margaret the King James Bible has been just another work of literature, not an inspired text, though she learned to revere it along with other literary giants through the influence of her mother. As a result of her mother's efforts, Margaret is a voracious reader, peppering her narrative with literary allusions. The lasting, positive influence of Margaret's mother shows the power of a woman's influence. Margaret works very hard—she's industrious—but this characteristic is somewhat of a defense mechanism. She's driven to be perfect, to be better than others, to have no weaknesses or vulnerabilities.

Turner uses keepsakes, another convention of the sentimental conduct genre, though she uses them rather differently than earlier works. They serve a spiritual function, as is usual, but since Margaret hasn't converted when she receives them, they do not perform the usual function of reminding her to live out her religion. Instead they aid in actually bringing her to religion. Keepsakes in *Some Wildflower* come mostly from Birdie, who expresses love and friendship partly through giving gifts, most notably the set of dishes that precipitates Margaret's realization that she has a friend. Most of Birdie's gifts are much smaller. One is a wildflower, which Margaret keeps pressed in the dictionary on the page with the word *friend*

(339). These gifts are significant in Margaret's spiritual journey because she has such a tough exterior. She remarks, near the beginning of the novel, that her "reserve has been allowed to grow hard and bitter, like the pit of an unripened fruit" (31). The gifts function to break down that reserve, part of what Margaret calls Birdie's "unrelenting *nearness*" (75). Once Margaret accepts Birdie's friendship, she is primed to accept Christ's friendship, that is, to convert.

One of the strongest feminist positions the book takes is to point out the damage done by corrupt power structures. Margaret's grandparents should be the ones to protect her, but the grandfather's treachery not only scars Margaret for more than forty years but also renders the grandmother powerless to act. The grandfather's church was impotent at best in failing to see the abuse perpetrated by one of its leaders, complicit at worst. Margaret's experience begs the question of why no one in the church intervened. Instead they respected the grandfather, "who was an elder in charge of financial disbursements" (153). Margaret's child, who was born of rape and incest instead of a loving relationship, died in his early years, likely because Margaret was a young, single mother on the run with limited resources, although this is reminiscent of the early sentimental tradition wherein children of illicit relationships die. Margaret's mother had to live as a nomad probably because of her father's abuse, Margaret realizes later. Turner pulls no punches in portraying the treachery of some within the church and even lesser peccadilloes of Christians, as when Margaret observes churchgoers' awkwardness, anger, and other faults.

Some Wildflower also defends the marginalized. Even Margaret's child, although a product of rape, is portrayed as a blessing, the one mercy arising during the time of Margaret's continual suffering. Birdie, an unattractive, unskilled technically, unschooled worker is the

novel's hero. Margaret remarks of Birdie, "What a nondescript person God had chosen for his emissary . . . What a small, light vessel for the vanguard of his heavenly fleet" (329). Margaret and Birdie's working-class colleagues in the school cafeteria are sympathetic characters whose value is made clear by Birdie's love for them. She brings them gifts and invites them to her house, just as she does with Margaret.

Margaret seems like an unlikely figure through whom to explore feminist ideals. She prides herself on womanly pursuits such as keeping a clean house and cooking well. She has a career, but it's in an elementary-school cafeteria, hardly the place to break a glass ceiling. She even declares, "I care not one whit for feminism" when her husband's cousin Joan asks her thoughts (101). Margaret seems utterly serious in this pronouncement, but I think the statement carries a dramatically ironic wink. It's kind of a defense mechanism from the author (I'm not feminist, so don't protest when I do things that look like feminism, okay?). In walking the line between evangelicalism and feminism, *Some Wildflower* creates a community of the non-elite, of the marginalized, elevating their concerns and showing their value, especially in the context of evangelicalism. The novel teaches: It's okay not to be perfect. It's okay to question God. It's okay to face more temptation more than the women in Oke's evangelical novels did. (While Oke's heroines are tempted with seemingly minor sins like gossiping or being unkind, Turner's heroine struggles with murderous anger, for instance.) It's okay not to marry a man who insists on being in charge. It's okay not to possess the religious pedigree of the flawlessly coiffed, white-toothed mothers who bring their biblically-named children to Chick-Fil-A.

The supposed “low” quality of Christian books, movies, and music is a joke, even among the target audience for those books, movies, and music. A recent headline on the Christian satire website *The Babylon Bee* reads “Lost Kirk Cameron Wanders Across Set of Good Movie.” And another: “Thrift Stores, Landfills No Longer Accepting Rapture Fiction.” It’s no secret that much Christian media is bad. I believe the novels discussed in this chapter do not fit the negative stereotype, but arguing for the literary quality of works by Francine Rivers, Jamie Langston Turner, and other writers of feminist evangelical conduct fiction is outside the scope of this project. Instead, I have argued that these works are valuable as evidence of the on-going relevance of the conduct fiction tradition in American literature. These works are significant for the cultural work they perform in promoting Christianity, as well as wrestling with difficult topics such as sexual abuse that earlier evangelical romance novels shy away from. And I would like to argue that they shouldn’t be disqualified from the literary label because they are Christian. Other scholars agree with this assessment. John Mort writes that, although Rivers sometimes has a “sanctimonious tone,” her “style is agreeably unadorned, and her passion shines through” and that “always, she’s worth reading” (36, 150). Mort describes several problem romances, a designation that includes some of Rivers’ titles, in which “any problem the world presents, no matter how enervating or physically difficult, is a problem of faith: One must be strong enough, through belief and prayer, either to overcome or accept” (146). Some critics say that evangelical romance simplifies such problems by portraying God as the solution to all, a charge that enables them to exclude evangelical romances from the category of literature. But Francine Rivers and others address issues with nuance, depicting God as the solution without denying the difficulties of life. The fact that God talks directly to Michael Hosea and to Angel

doesn't mean *Redeeming Love* isn't literary, if one accepts as fact that God really does speak to his people, and does so often. In this case, audible words from God aren't *deus ex machina*. They're simply *Deus*. Happy endings shouldn't be a disqualifier for literary quality, either. For those who believe in heaven, the ultimate happy ending, happy endings in novels can be authentic. This doesn't mean evangelical believers, in the words of Patrick Henry, "shut our eyes against a painful truth" of life (par. 2) but that we believe, even when all the bad things happen, we'll have victory. There is a divine purpose to our lives. A powerful, benevolent Someone is ultimately in control. Evangelical novels can—should—reflect this powerful conviction.

When I was in college I scorned feminism, churning out several papers in freshman composition about how the movement had outlasted its usefulness and so should gracefully bow out. Partly I was swayed by a smooth-talking friend (who is now a district attorney!). Partly I was pushing against the college culture that criticized my conservative upbringing and my faith. Largely I was acting out of ignorance, unable to see the variations in feminism—or more properly, feminisms—that so many of my classmates and professors could similarly not see in evangelicalism. Much life experience and education stand between those naïve years and today. So do many evangelical novels, first the squeaky-clean, perhaps naïve romances of Oke and her set; and later, more and more novels by Rivers and her contemporaries. I'd like to think both groups of books played their part in making me who I am and, even still, help me and my community of believers explore matters not only of faith but also of social relations, politics, and trauma. Resistance to feminism and feminist ideas is still a strong force in evangelicalism. According to Creegan and Pohl, "Because gender issues are so significant within evangelicalism,

feminist critiques will rarely be uncontested, even where they are possible. Nevertheless, numerous feminist concerns and insights offer a source of ongoing challenge and thoughtful correction to many assumptions and practices within evangelicalism” (180). Rivers, Turner, and other evangelical novelists, by building upon the conventions not only of nineteenth-century sentimental conduct fiction but also of earlier twentieth-century evangelical romance, provide a space for their readers, especially but not exclusively evangelical women, to work out such challenges and corrections in the context of their faith community while also providing the conduct instruction that so many readers still desire in a dynamic demonstration of the genre’s power and flexibility.

Conclusion

“And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony...”

--Revelation 12.11 (KJV)

“Those who tell the stories rule the world.”

--Native American proverb

In the preceding pages I made a case for a continued lineage from nineteenth-century sentimental novels to twentieth- and twenty-first-century evangelical romance novels. In Chapters One and Two I established the conventions present within early sentimental fiction: a focus on feeling and relationships, sentimental keepsakes, sentimental death scenes, character foils, a muting of denominational distinctions, and the all-important conversion scene. In Chapters Three and Four I made a case that modern evangelical novels use the same conventions for similar purposes, while also navigating the complex relationship between feminism and evangelicalism. In each chapter, I explored the interconnections between these conventions, for the conversion scene affects the other conventions. The connection I established between nineteenth-century conduct works and those written today confirms that society has a continued appetite for didactic texts and that the genre itself is flexible and adaptable.

In this dissertation, I argued that conversion scenes are key traits of conduct fiction. In Chapter One I demonstrated that mid-nineteenth-century conduct fiction emphasizes the conversion scene much more than earlier conduct fiction. The conversion is not merely a formality or a plot point in these novels but a life-changing decision for the character. The

importance of the conversion scene mirrors the novels' focus on inner piety, on thinking and feeling according to a standard, not just acting according to a standard. In Chapter Two I demonstrated that conversions scenes may be muted but, even so, are key elements of nineteenth-century sentimental novels by African American women. I also argued that an additional aspect of conversion, one adapted from slave narratives, appears in these novels, a sort of secular conversion where the narrator or character has a recognition of her own humanity and resolves not to be subjugated. The combination of these two versions of conversion enables these authors to address the specific social and political impact of slavery on African American women. In Chapter Three I showed that conversion scenes are also central in Christian romance novels, where they are instructional for the characters and the reader. These conversions set the standard for conduct and they establish the community. For evangelical Christians, conversion scenes establish the main goal in life—to glorify God. In Chapter Four I argued that conversion scenes continue to be central in more recent evangelical conduct fiction, although the characters who convert are more relatable than in the earlier evangelical romances. I also showed how these books demonstrate the possibility for evangelicalism and feminism to coexist, largely through the reconciliation conversion brings. The centrality of the conversion scene across this long literary history is evidence that humans long for reconciliation, for redemption, for community.

Ultimately, I have argued that conversion scenes give authors the power to make interventions in social issues and debates that otherwise would be very difficult or impossible to address. In Chapter Two I showed that even muted conversion scenes allow authors to advocate for racial uplift and racial reconciliation, while they also demonstrate that Christianity

is for everyone, not just for white people. In Chapter Three I showed that, even while enforcing a gender hierarchy, Janette Oke and her contemporaries challenge that same hierarchy by detailing conversion scenes—in essence, by preaching. In so doing, these authors are challenging the tradition in many evangelical circles that keep women from holding prominent church positions. In Chapter Four I showed that conversion scenes allow authors of Christian romance to confront sexual abuse, even that done by so-called Christians, and other controversial topics. Also, because the conversions in more recent novels are brought about either partly or primarily through women, the conversion scenes themselves challenge patriarchy by demonstrating that women are spiritually significant. Although characters may lose agency in some ways by converting, overall in these stories there is a net gain in agency, including the ability to endure and even to fight hardships and injustice.

Throughout my dissertation I've been guided by both Christian literary criticism and feminist criticism. Despite what many evangelicals and feminists may think, evangelicalism and feminism are not mutually exclusive. This combination of methods has allowed me to focus on works that have been underappreciated—the nineteenth-century texts—and unappreciated—the twentieth-century texts—in academic circles. It has allowed me to consider not just textual intent but also authorial intent and enabled me to analyze the texts themselves, assuming their meaning is directly available to and impactful upon the reader.

I believe the theme of conversion in conduct fiction is worthy of continued study. I would especially like to spend more time exploring the connection between the two types of conversions in nineteenth-century African American women's conduct fiction. Most evangelical romance writers are white women, but there are a several contemporary evangelical romances

by African American women. Sharon Ewell Foster, Angela Benson, and Michelle Stimpson all write from a female African American subject position. I would like to know if novels by these authors contain a second type of conversion analogous to the humanity-recognition conversion, as I identify in nineteenth-century African American fiction. I would also like to see more analysis of contemporary evangelical romance in general. I believe much of it does qualify as literary and would like to see a more in-depth Christian feminist critique of these literary works. Jamie Langston Turner, Anne Tatlock, Gina Holmes, and Foster all write evangelical romance that would qualify for this type of analysis.

I have employed personal criticism throughout this dissertation to frame my discussion of these literary texts and the issues they represent. I have employed this technique as a feminist act—to integrate life and story with scholarship, guided by Jane Tompkins’ admonition that women scholars should avoid the “public-private dichotomy” that “is a founding condition of female oppression” (“Me” 2131). In this vein, I conclude with another story in order to connect my life more directly with the conduct fiction I have defined, historicized, and analyzed throughout this project.



My dad, Kenneth Warren Jones, was a colossus of a man. Not physically, though he was well over six feet tall, sturdily built, with powerful arms and strong, large hands. It was his character that had magnitude. He proved the truth of Proverbs 20.7: “The just man walketh in his integrity: his children are blessed after him.” He was smart, strong, loving, manly, respectable, trustworthy, even quirky. He had a Ph.D. in history and two master’s degrees but never lorded his intelligence or education over others, and his employees were instructed to

call him “Ken,” not “Dr. Jones.” Learning for him was a scepter, not a bauble. He was a loving and supportive husband and father. Dad did service projects with the Rotary Club. He delivered Meals on Wheels—which he referred to as “Mealie Wheelies”—for years. He taught Sunday School for decades, and he studied extra, bringing in materials outside the denomination-provided resources. He wore black dress socks with tennis shoes and didn’t care what anyone thought about it. He was a loving grandfatherly figure to my four foster sons and then became a Court-Appointed Special Advocate or CASA for foster children in his county. He sang in the church choir and in community choral productions, anchoring them with his beautifully deep bass voice. He posted over 50,000 pictures of headstones on FindaGrave.com, spending countless hours photographing obscure cemeteries, transcribing the engravings, and matching markers with memorial pages or creating the online memorials themselves.

At seventy-four my dad received a death sentence in the form of glioblastoma, the deadliest primary brain cancer. He went from someone who was strong enough to heft a loveseat up and around the corner of a flight of stairs by himself to using a walker in just over a year. And eighteen months after he was diagnosed—four months longer than the median survival time for people over sixty-five—came the last night of his life.

I had gone to visit my parents, who were both in a rehab center at the time, Mom recovering from a bout of pneumonia that nearly took her life weeks before my dad died. Though Mom was getting slowly stronger, Dad was getting weaker. He could barely talk now, and he was having multiple seizures throughout the day. I had called my sister in Hawaii just two days before to tell her that she needed to come visit, that Dad wouldn’t last very long. But I was still shocked when he went into respiratory arrest that afternoon around 4:00, not long

after I arrived. I called a nurse, who came to check on him. Soon other nurses converged around him, hooking him up to oxygen, shaking his shoulder to rouse him. "Mr. Jones? Mr. Jones!" Someone called 9-1-1, and an ambulance came quickly, for the hospital was just down the street. Mom and I sat there praying and trying to stay out of the way.

Soon Dad was being wheeled out on a stretcher and I was instructed to wait a while before coming to check on him. Then the hospital called, maybe ten minutes later, maybe an hour later, to ask about the DNR. Dad had filled out a Do Not Resuscitate order just days before but the doctor hadn't signed it yet, so it wasn't active. Mom and I were against the DNR, hadn't known Dad was going to make one. But he did, and here was some hospital official asking if they should honor it. His heart hadn't stopped beating yet; they wanted to know just in case. I stood crying in the hallway, caught between my mom, who didn't want the DNR but also was too sick to realize how serious Dad's condition was, and my dad, who'd wanted to avoid extreme life-saving measures. I was his voice. And so I told that official to honor the document because, as horrifying as it was to me, it was what my dad wanted.

After the call I went to the hospital. Mom was too weak to get into a car, but a nurse said someone would wheel her over later. So I went by myself. When I got there I couldn't see Dad yet. He was in the ER, behind a closed door labeled *Trauma*. Medical personal came and went but couldn't tell me anything. Someone brought me a chair and a box of Kleenexes. A doctor came to talk to me. Aside from the DNR, she asked, how aggressive did I want them to be? "Very aggressive," I said. Finally Mom came, wrapped in a coat and shawl to ward off the January chill. It took me a moment to recognize her, for she looked small and frail after so many weeks of illness.

Dad was still unconscious when we first saw him. He was on a narrow gurney inclined towards his head, his face covered with a Bi-PAP (bi-level positive airway pressure) mask. The tattered remains of the blue plaid shirt he'd been wearing lay off to the side. Dad tried to talk when he came to, but the nurse, whose tattoos told of his military service in the war in Afghanistan, leaned over him. "Hi, Buddy. Don't try to talk." How I wish he'd let Dad finish speaking! For I never heard his voice again.

Mom and I each held one of Dad's hands. Though he couldn't talk, he told us he loved us by holding our hands tightly, the strength in his fingers a surprise considering the deterioration of the rest of his body. I leaned forward to look into his blue, blue eyes while mine flooded with tears. "You've been the best dad," I said, a sob catching in my throat. I leaned back before the tears could fall on his face.

We had to leave the room temporarily while a surgeon inserted a PICC (peripherally inserted central catheter) line to administer medication the doctor would use to try to save Dad's life. Out in the hall Mom asked the surgeon, "Will he have to stay overnight?" She still didn't realize how grave the situation was. I couldn't look at her. I was screaming inside, though: *He's going to die!*

The doctor stammered and then said, "Um, yes, one way or another he won't be going back tonight."

A different nurse came to take Mom back to the rehab center for a test that was previously scheduled. When I got back in the room with Dad, I had to explain why his wife of fifty-two years wasn't there anymore. I didn't know if he'd get to see her again before he

died—was pretty sure he wouldn't—but I told him where she was and that she'd be back later. I figured it would be true if he lived long enough.

I texted some friends and family while I waited. Cherè, a close friend from work, offered to come sit with me. At first I said no, but I knew I needed someone. She brought me a Diet Coke and a snack and kept vigil with me.

I updated my sister Kristin, thousands of miles away, by phone call and text. Twice she talked to Dad while I held the phone to his ear, first when he was still conscious and then again when he was unconscious and we knew he was going to die. "You've been the perfect dad," she told him that second time. "There's nothing else you need to do. You've done everything we needed. There's nothing else you need to do."

I put the phone back up to my ear. "Do you think he heard me?" Kristin asked. We were both sobbing.

How could I know that? But how could I not answer affirmatively? "I do. I believe he heard you," I said, hoping it was true.

The emergency-room doctor told me she would administer up to four different medicines to try to revive my dad. At one point, well before midnight, she told me the medicines were as high as they could go. They might sustain him as long as the whole night, but there was nothing else she could do to revive him. My dad was going to die that night. I sat holding his hand, absorbing the information, and also taking time to inform a few friends and relatives. I thought about Dad just lying there, unconscious, his body wracked with cancer and now with infection. I thought about the DNR he'd signed. I asked the doctor what would

happen if we removed the four medicines. He would pass away in a matter of minutes, she told me.

I knew my mom and sister were against the DNR, as I had been until that night, when I saw my daddy so frail, hooked up to all those machines. I didn't want his poor body subjected to any more trauma, even as I fought with myself to let him go.

"He's so tired, Katherine," Cherè said. I knew she was right.

I called my sister. I was afraid she would hate me for giving up on Dad. But she told me to do what I thought was right. I called my uncle, my mother's brother, who cried with me on the phone and said the same thing as my sister. I squeezed my dad's hand. "What should I do, Daddy?" I asked. I now believed I needed to ask the doctor to remove those medicines. Dad could linger until dawn if I didn't.

I didn't know what my mom would say. I tried calling her, but she didn't answer her phone. I'd have to go ask her in person. Cherè went with me, back down the street to the rehab center. I explained to Mom what was going on and she agreed, as Kristin and Uncle Dale had, that we needed to let him go. But then a nurse came to the room. "Are you Katherine?" she asked. "This is the hospital. They've been trying to reach you." She handed me a phone.

A voice on the phone told me my dad had died. After sitting with him for seven hours, I'd been gone less than fifteen minutes. And he'd died while I was gone. He died alone, except for a nurse, a woman who'd come just before midnight to replace the military veteran.

I went back to the hospital, with Cherè's support, to see his body. I collapsed into a chair when I saw him, pale and still, all the machines removed. "I've seen this so many times," the

nurse told me, when I lamented that I'd been gone when he died. "They hang on while their loved ones are in the room and then let go when you leave."

"But it's not him," I said. "He's not here."

"Was he a believer?" the nurse asked.

"Yes, yes he was."

Yes, he was, and so was I, and that was the knowledge that comforted me even as sorrow ripped through me in ever-increasing waves. I knew right then that Dad is in heaven, and that he is with Jesus, all his pain and sorrow gone. And I knew I will see him again one day. That was the moment when I was more sure of my conversion than of any other time. I'd not experienced a dramatic conversion, like *Redeeming Love's* prostitute Angel. I'd not even had the struggle to believe like Ellen Montgomery, who'd been cast upon the *Wide, Wide World*. But at that worst point in my life, when one of the people dearest to me was taken, I knew what and, more importantly, Whom I believed in. I also had a dramatic demonstration of the power of my community.

It was another friend, Kelley, whose mother had died of the same pernicious form of cancer a week earlier who had told Cherè I shouldn't be alone and that I should have some food, so Cherè had ignored my telling her I didn't need anything. And I'm glad. She was my pastor that evening.

My good friend Melissa asked me if there was anything I needed, and I am so grateful to her for bringing a phone charger when my phone was about to die. She had always admired my dad. Melissa also contacted my church. The pastor's wife and a couple of other friends texted me and prayed.

Shirley and Alva Rothell, friends who are like family, called me and prayed from across the country. My dear friend Lisa, who is like a sister to me, did the same.

The support didn't stop after Dad died. The next day Cherè and another work friend Amy cleaned my house and shopped for groceries in anticipation of the relatives who would soon arrive. My childhood friend Michelle came to visit my mom in the rehab center while I went to my hometown to plan the funeral. Lisa met me there and stayed with me while I chose burial clothes, sorted through pictures for a slide show, and planned the funeral. Many friends and relatives came to the funeral itself to celebrate my dad's life. My colleagues covered my classes for a week. People made donations to the Rotary Club, CASA, Gideon's International, and to my parents' church in memory of my dad. They shared favorite memories of him in letters of condolence. After I returned to work my students and colleagues continued to pray and to give me notes and small gifts. Once a class even laid hands on me and prayed for me at the beginning of class one day I was about to lose my composure, and afterward I was able to conduct class. Shirley texted every single day the first three months to check on me. Others called and texted and visited. My family and I were never alone.

I've met religious people who know the exact date and time of their conversion. I'm not one of those people. I'm not even sure of the year. But I am sure of my God, and I've never been more sure than the night my dad died. And it's a story I'm compelled to tell, much as I imagine the authors of conduct fiction I've long admired felt compelled to share their stories.

Susan Warner's faith compelled her to hold Bible classes for West Point cadets and to tell of her faith in *The Wide, Wide World*, even as she tried to earn a living.

Louisa May Alcott's belief in the goodness of humanity and in the strength of women is evident in the characters of *Little Women's* Jo even as the author herself apparently felt contempt for sentimental stories.

Religious faith in Harriet Wilson's novel puts in sharp relief the hypocrisy of the heroine's persecutors, more a pointed and poignant homily than an easily dismissable harangue.

Hannah Crafts, too, uses religion and story to show the evils of racism while, through the portrayal of her heroine's conversion scene, hinting at the possibility of racial reconciliation.

Janette Oke writes in order to share her faith, preaching through story to evangelicals who, in the main, don't have women preaching from the pulpit. She has inspired a legion of other women writers who joined in to share not only the basics of the faith but to tackle thornier issues, such as abortion and sex-trafficking in Francine Rivers' *Redeeming Love* and sexual abuse in Jamie Langston Turner's *Some Wildflower in My Heart*.

I'm compelled to tell the story of the night my dad died, though the pain of that event makes me want to avoid it. I have written about it, talked about it in a church service, told my friends and a few students, and I write about it here. Because it matters. My dad matters. The community that surrounded me then matters. Much more, my faith matters because my God matters. And because of Him life still matters. That's what these novels are for, to share the things in life that matter. They resonated with nineteenth-century readers, and they resonate today.

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