



## Books Still Matter

By Jana Hlatka

*Jana Hlatka is the managing editor for Porta Libri. She attended the May 2004 Editorial Management International Christian Publishing Institute held at Cook in Colorado Springs, CO, USA.*

For a young girl growing up in communist Czechoslovakia, Christian books were free, distributed in church. They were smuggled in, handed out and handed on—and oh, so precious. They may have been cheap and unappealing on the outside, but we craved what we found within the covers.

I remember reading a children's book about a young girl who wasn't afraid to sail during a storm to save her friend. The girl from the story dies saving her friend's life. The book was small, used, the cover black and white—it was not a very attractive book, but it changed my life.

The book ended with an invitation. It urged me to pray and ask Jesus to come into my life and heart. I knelt by my bed and prayed and cried. They were tears of happiness as I knew and felt the Lord Jesus come into my life.

The Velvet Revolution of 1989, when the Communist regime fell, is long ago. Smuggled Bibles and forbidden Christian literature are a faint memory. Cheap paper and black and white covers are nearly incomprehensible today. In this age of mass media and global access to information, Christian publishers have to compete. To sell our books, and the ideas they bear, we now produce brightly packaged, well-printed Christian literature. It is available in

every book shop and most department stores. One reality has given way to another.

In this era of 30-second sound bites and easily consumed messages, it is not easy to shift and slow down to the pace and concentration that books require. Unlike their competition, a book forces the reader to think, rethink and sometimes go through painful processes of understanding the times and oneself—and being challenged to change. Still, we find that the greatest competition of books is not television or film or music, but bad books with cheap messages, easily swallowed with no nutritional value.

It is easy to forget why we do this. We get lost in deadlines, the ongoing rush of the day with their crises and problems and frustrations. We are besieged by the forces of the marketplace and the culture. We in Christian publishing forget why we do what we do. As publishers, our goal is not only to publish books that will entertain people, but books that bring about individual, congregational, and societal changes in thinking, values and attitudes. For Christians, publishing books is not about money; it is about helping people bridge the gap between the perceived reality of life and the reality of Christ. It is about meeting deep longings, equipping and strengthening women and men. It is about finding the

Source and learning of Him and His life and applying it. What we in Christian publishing should remember is that we are offering encouragement and tools, a hand up to our brothers and sisters.

I just had a long conversation with one of our customers. He went on and on while I kept looking at the clock behind him, thinking of all I needed to do and how much time I was losing. And then, it dawned on me. This customer was trying to tell me how books play an important role in his life and in the life of his church. And even though I 'lost' an hour, I was encouraged. I realized that our effort is not in vain. What we do really does matter.

That young Slovak girl remembers the books that changed her life. Following a revolution, the birth of a new nation, the rapid swing from the East to the West, now I edit and publish Christian books in my language for my people here in Slovakia. I publish because books matter.

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**ChristianTrade Association International**  
PO Box 62187 • Colorado Springs, CO 80962-2187 USA  
TEL +1 719 432 8428 • FAX +1 719 325 7001 • [info@ChristianTrade.com](mailto:info@ChristianTrade.com) • [www.ChristianTrade.com](http://www.ChristianTrade.com)