



Fiction Speaks Across Cultures

Fiction enables us to identify with and share in the experiences of other human beings.

by Isaac Phiri

What does fiction communicate that nonfiction does not?

Last night a professor of literature at Harvard University was on the radio talking about the power and beauty of traditional Urdu poetry. She read excerpts in Urdu, translated them into English, and provided a cultural context for each poem. Her explanations gave me insights into the life and values of Urdu-speaking people in India and Pakistan.

I heard the radio program when I was thinking about the theme of this issue of *InterLit*—fiction. Our writers approach the theme from different perspectives. John Houghton advocates imagination in Christian publishing. Anna Shirochenskaya

reports that fantasy novels have helped her Russian publishing company grow. Cindy Crosby writes about fiction categories. Finally, Larry

Downs reports on Unilit's experiences in publishing fiction for Latin America.

The process of selecting this theme, acquiring articles and editing them (mostly done by *InterLit* editor Kim Pettit) afforded a chance to discuss the role and power of fiction in Christian communications. Kim, who admits she is an "inveterate consumer of fiction" [see page 13], seemed to have no qualms about the value of fiction. I, on the other hand, am not an avid consumer of the genre and wondered: *Why publish fiction? What does fiction communicate that a well-researched nonfiction work does not?*

I was wrestling with this question when, by coincidence, my radio dial picked up the program on Urdu poetry. The translation and interpretation brought this distant language to life. One poem celebrated beauty. Another love. Another life. Pain. Peace. Joy. Death. It was human experience at its best and worst. I identified. We all identify.

Suddenly Urdu-speakers were no longer a people with whom I had little or nothing in

common. After all, we spoke the same language—the language of the human heart in its search for meaning, for being, for God.

Creative writing can be a powerful way to communicate across cultures. When I was at school, my friends and I studied an abridged version of Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice*. With the encouragement of our teachers, we put on the play for people in rural Zambia. Our performance was in English, but the audience soon picked up the central idea—that some greedy person would not let go of his pound of flesh. Our audience booed at Shylock and expressed sympathy with the victim. They whistled and cheered when Shylock's evil intentions were finally thwarted. This creative work from distant Europe connected with our audience in Zambia because it touched on human experiences common to all cultures.

Later, in high school and college, I was to see again how good creative work gave me glimpses into the life and culture of people in different parts of the world. Chinua Achebe's novel, *Things Fall Apart*, gave glimpses into life in an Igbo village in early Nigeria. *Cry The Beloved Country* captured the pain of apartheid in South Africa. *The Great Gatsby* introduced to me the idea of an American dream. *Old Goriot* revealed the soulless life of an aging man during a certain period in France. Nikolai Gogol's play *Inspector General* gave a hilarious picture of life in Czarist Russia.

Lesson: Effective creative writing allows us to cross cultures and, as much as is possible, enter the psyches of other people. It allows us to learn how they see themselves, and how they see us. This is critical now that world events threaten to take us back to the dark ages, when people were only seen through ethnic, religious, national and racial stereotypes. My brief exposure to Urdu verse reminded me that we are all, in a sin-ridden world, desperate for the Light.v