

Unilit Brings Light to Spanish Fiction

Larry A. Downs Jr., vice president for Editorial Unilit (www.editorialunilit.com) in Miami, Florida, United States, outlines strategies for publishing Christian fiction.

Is the Spanish evangelical market ready for fiction? What kind of fiction should be published? What standards should fiction books uphold? What price can the market sustain for fiction books? These are invariably some questions that a publisher will confront in seeking to expand sales and serve an ever-growing market. The answers to these questions are very complex.

Market readiness

Spanish evangelical publishers have, from time to time, dabbed in the realm of fiction. When Editorial Vida launched Frank Peretti's *patente oscuridad* (*This Present Darkness*), it had good initial acceptance in the market. However, there was no classification for fiction in Spanish Christian bookstores. The novel was placed with books on prayer.

Unilit has seen a very steady growth in the fiction category since launching the *Dejados atras* (*Left Behind*) series. However, the series could not stand alone. To provide adequate support in the category, Unilit had to publish additional fiction titles right away.

Is this market ready for novels now? It will never be ready if publishers simply wait for it to happen. At the grassroots level in Latin America, many Christians still believe that fiction or novels are, in



and of themselves, a waste of time and that they should not indulge in reading these types of books. Yet, non-Christian fiction is available on the market now, shaping and molding the minds of readers.

Unilit is determined to publish fiction for the Spanish Christian market and create the need and the desire to read more good books for enjoyment. Unilit wants to meet the needs of the market, and appeal to all readers, leaving no one out.

Choosing what to publish

What kind of fiction should a publishing house produce? This depends on who its readers are.

Unilit buys the bulk of the titles produced each year? Are they housewives? Young professionals? Businessmen? Unilit, a publishing house's primary focus consists of 25 to 35-year-old married couples, the editors should find out what topics the readers like, what interests they have, what worries them at night, and what they view on television. The answers will help the editors select appropriate fiction titles. The fiction should cause readers to purchase, read, and return to—because they thoroughly enjoyed and could identify with the characters in the plot of the story.

Editorial Unilit publishes for the family so it has produced all types of fiction. This includes youth and teen fiction as well as numerous choices for adults. Unilit has published more than 40 fiction books, including westerns, science fiction, and historical fiction. Around 85 percent of Unilit's fiction titles are translations. These include the *Left Behind* series and the *Zion Chronicles* series by Bodie Thoene. There are so many good fiction books in English, that any publisher can find books that could appeal to the readers in its niche market.

Unilit has also published several novels written in Spanish. For example, *Ha llegado el tiempo de la canción* (*The Time for Singing is Here*),

by Aarón Espinoza Rincón, features a Latin American pastor dealing with issues that threaten to divide his church.

Standards for fiction

When Unilit began aggressively publishing fiction, the editorial staff knew that a standard to follow for its selections would be very important. There is already too much filth that bombards readers every day. Unilit staff felt that without guidelines, the publishing house would soon find itself straying from the course. The guidelines they developed include:

Communication of the Gospel: There needs to be a credible conversion in each story published by Unilit.

Christian content: The story line must minister to readers, causing them to think and bring Biblical principles to life.

Character growth: The characters in the story must work through the conflicts they face and still maintain their Christian testimony.

Sexual content: Whether sexual situations are implied or explicit, they must be credible and handled with sensitivity so as to uphold very conservative principles.

Literary content: Unilit strives to present only the best works before a growing audience of fiction readers. Each story should bring the reader into the conflict, cause him or her to cry, laugh, and rejoice along with the principal players in each story.

A full set of guidelines for Unilit's fiction is available upon request from Zoer Prada, editor. Her e-mail address is zoer@editorialunilit.com.

Pricing fiction

How does a publisher set a price for fiction? Good fiction will sell, but to create a long term desire for these books, publishers need to hook readers into the "genre." Ensure that today's readers become loyal customers in the future. To build this sector in the bookstores, publishers need to keep the books accessible to the readers and be aggressive in pricing strategies.

Unilit's fiction titles usually do not exceed the \$9.99 price point for Spanish. Unilit is keeping both the price and the size of the book affordable to encourage readers and to create greater market demand for Christian fiction in Spanish.

Working with booksellers

Unilit is working with retailers to promote fiction as a profitable category. Readers of fiction can be some of the most loyal customers that a bookstore can have. Such readers return again and again in search of good novels.

To encourage booksellers to sell fiction, Unilit is providing bookmarks, posters, cardboard display units, and other items to promote its fiction titles. In addition, Unilit is educating booksellers. A recent issue of *Mercado Cristiano*, the premier magazine for the Spanish Christian publishing industry, featured an article from Unilit with tips for selling fiction. Unilit has also invited the authors of its fiction titles to address booksellers at Expolit, the annual convention it hosts with the Spanish Evangelical Publishers Association.

Measuring success

Has Unilit's effort to prime the market been a success or failure? The *Dejados atras* titles have established a new record for sales in the Spanish Christian market, with sales over a quarter of a million copies in 2001. Distributors placed advance orders for over 20,000 copies of the eighth title in the series, *La Marca (The Mark)*, released in November at the same time as the English original from Tyndale House.

One successful series, however, is not enough. Unilit estimates that approximately five more years of strong releases, along with targeted and aggressive marketing, are necessary to create a loyal customer base for Spanish Christian fiction in Latin America. Christian publishers, as an industry, cannot wait until the market is ready for fiction. The time to join the battle for the minds of readers is now.v

SEVERAL PUBLISHERS have experimented with Christian fiction in Brazil, but the category has not grown substantially in the market yet. Probably the best-selling fiction title in Portuguese so far has been Vida's *Este Mundo Tenebroso (This Present Darkness)* which came out perhaps eight years ago. One work of fiction that did do well in Brazil, though it is not a typical work of fiction, is one we published with fear and trembling three years ago. *O Livro de Deus (The Book of God)* by Walter Wangerin, won "novel of the year" a couple years ago, and we sold at least 40 percent of the first edition into the secular market. We were not sure how the church was going to react to it, but it has done very well and is already in its third edition. For the Christian market, however, we think

the best way to get fiction started is to tie it to biblical themes. Therefore, we acquired the Francine Rivers "Lineage of Grace" series, from Tyndale House. We just released the first title, *Tamar—Uma historia de pecado e redenção* (retitled from the English, *Unveiled*). The remaining books in the series are in production.



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