Whisper (Book Review)

Pam Adams
Dordt College
BOOK REVIEWS


If you are looking for an excellent novel for a high-school-aged reader, here’s a science fiction book for you to consider. Chris Struyk-Bonn’s Whisper is set in a dystopian world similar to ours, where disabilities are very common but there is seemingly little grace for the disabled. The novel centers on a Reformed Christian call for distributive justice. In this, the novel reminds me of Nicholas Wolterstorff’s proclamation in Hearing the Call: Liturgy, Justice, and World, in which he declares that justice ought to be the work of all Christians: “We are to live with the outcasts, we are to console the brokenhearted, we are to heal the lepers, we are to release the captive, we are to liberate the oppressed.”

The novel features one of these brokenhearted outcasts in its protagonist, Lydia (aka Whisper), who was born with a cleft palate and was almost drowned by her father. Early in the story, she has to leave the city where her biological family resides and live in a community of disabled people. Her second “family” is nurtured by a man named Nathanael and includes a number of children. In the story, Whisper learns of her mother’s death and is given a final birthday present from her mother, a violin. She learns to play by following Nathanael’s directions, by listening to the wind and the rain, and by hearing others’ music. The violin becomes a major component of her existence.

Years go by before Whisper is forced to leave her home deep in the woods with her acquired “family,” and she travels back to her biological home where her father and siblings live. Yet her father rejects her because he fears her disability. Celso, Whisper’s uncle, takes her to a workhouse where she spends her days begging. Eventually Whisper and her roommate, Candela, work out a routine for begging; Whisper plays the violin, while Candela draws caricatures of the interested passers-by.

After an incident in a department store, where Whisper is treated as a “reject,” she is forced to escape from the police. During her hiding, Whisper is approached by a respectful stranger, Solomon Woodson, a professor at the local university and a strings teacher who has watched Whisper’s playing from the local cafe. Woodson offers Whisper a scholarship to the university and lessons on the violin, which Whisper accepts.

Eventually, Whisper finds her “family” from her days as a cast off. This changes Whisper’s life. Nathanael, their leader, was killed and their home destroyed. She must take care of three other disabled people. Shockingly, it was Whisper’s biological father and her friend’s father who killed Nathanael.

From here, Whisper has many things to think about and work out in her life and her friends’ lives. She is grounded in helping them and, as the book progresses, she grows more mature and capable of making decisions. The book draws a satisfying conclusion.

The book presents several major issues all at once. As I’ve suggested, the novel’s main issue is negating another person who is different in some physical or mental way. The issue of the proper placement of children in adoptive homes is a related discussion topic, since Whisper’s society does not seem to care about the “rejected” children.

Given its serious subject matter, Whisper is appropriate for readers fourteen years old and older. The publisher’s suggested age of twelve might be an acceptable one if the reader is ready for the cruelty depicted in the book, especially the cruelty shown to those with disabilities. Struyk-Bonn’s Christian perspective is implied throughout the book and shines through. The disabilities in Whisper’s small village include those of physically disabled children: those with missing or half-missing limbs, webbed feet, broken lips, and cleft palates. In this context, Struyk-Bonn reminds us of Christ’s words in Luke 4:18-19: “He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of the sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4: 18, 19, NIV)

For some Pro Rege readers, Struyk-Bonn’s name may be familiar. Chris Struyk was a student at local Northwest Iowa Christian schools and Dordt College, and she was in my fourth-grade class during my first year of teaching. That was in 1979-1980, but I remember Chris as a very creative and imaginative person. Her excellent young-adult novel shows that her creativity has grown and that she had developed a fine writing style. My hope is that she will publish a second novel very soon.

Because I know Chris Struyk-Bonn, what follows is a short interview with her so that you will have some sense of who she is as an author.
What did you do after graduating from Dordt?

After graduating from Dordt College, I waited tables in a couple of restaurants, built picture frames in a framing shop, and managed an apartment building. I realized that none of these jobs gave me the focus on literature that I really wanted. I decided to return to school and earn my MA in education. I became a high school English teacher and have been hanging out with teens and young adults ever since.

What is the most important thing in your life?

My family is an enormous element in my life. I have two boys who like to play soccer, play guitar, stick darts to all of the windows in the house, and torment the cats. They are wondrous and amazing, and I am blessed to have them in my life.

You are a high school English teacher. What school do you teach at? How long have you been there?

Currently I teach at The Metro East Web Academy and have been there for five years. It is an online middle school and high school, catering to alternative students who have discovered that the bricks-and-mortar traditional school is not a good fit for them. We have many home-school students, many credit deficient students, and many students with social anxiety disorders. They are a high-needs group of kids, and my heart goes out to them. These students are also the inspiration for much of my writing.

Did your mother, who was a special education teacher, create the climate where you choose to write about "rejects?"

My mother and father, who were both instructors at Dordt, taught me about acceptance and inclusion in all walks of life. I was raised in a family that worked to avoid judgment or stigmatization of all people. I remember many a Sunday dinner when we gathered around the table with students from Dordt, many of whom didn’t have families they could readily eat Sunday dinner with. That time in my life was about acceptance and understanding and greatly influenced who I am today and what I choose to write about.

It says a thesis advisor at the back of your book? Was this part of a degree completion?

Yes, Whisper was my thesis for the MFA program at Portland State University. I graduated from this program in 2011, and Tony Wolk, my thesis advisor, was a positive and supportive factor in finishing the book and moving it towards publication. He patiently and diligently read my thesis again and again and again. Without his tutelage and honesty, it would not be the book it is today.

Does being a Christian influence how you think, act, and write? In what way?

This question brings to mind Micah 6:8: “And what does your Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” To me, this passage is about social justice. It is about inclusion and acceptance. It is about being merciful and kind. I believe that Whisper embodies many of these ideals and I work to include these principles in future writing pieces as well.

I understand you are writing another book. What is it about?

My next project, My Feet Are Beautiful, is again about a main character who is not accepted in society. She has beautiful feet, sings like an angel, and is a calm and patient person, but she is judged by her appearance and teased because of it. Through the course of the book, she finds her voice and decides that she is proud of who she is, and if others only judge her on appearance, then they are the ones who need to adapt and change.


Few topics are thornier in Christianity today than that of human origins. Some churches and denominations take adamant stances, stressing or even requiring certain views on the historical Adam, the right way to read Genesis 1-3, and the age of the Earth and universe. Some positions on these issues, including young-earth creationism, seem quite reasonable. If the universe was not created in six 24-hour periods, how do we read Genesis 1-2? If Adam was not a real person, how do we reconcile his non-existence with the traditional doctrine of the Fall and origin of suffering and death? If humans and their ancestors suffered and died eons before Adam could have existed, does the Gospel lose its potency?

Like many of you, I—a layperson on all aspects of this debate—have long wrestled with these issues. Watching recently the 2014 Cosmos series and walking through the magnificent Omaha Zoo stirred up dozens of critical questions for me. Their message is clear: “Adam” and the rest of us share a common ancestor with all other living beings. Moreover, “Adam and Eve” were really an ancestral population of 5,000-100,000 Homo sapiens in East Africa some 50,000-100,000 years