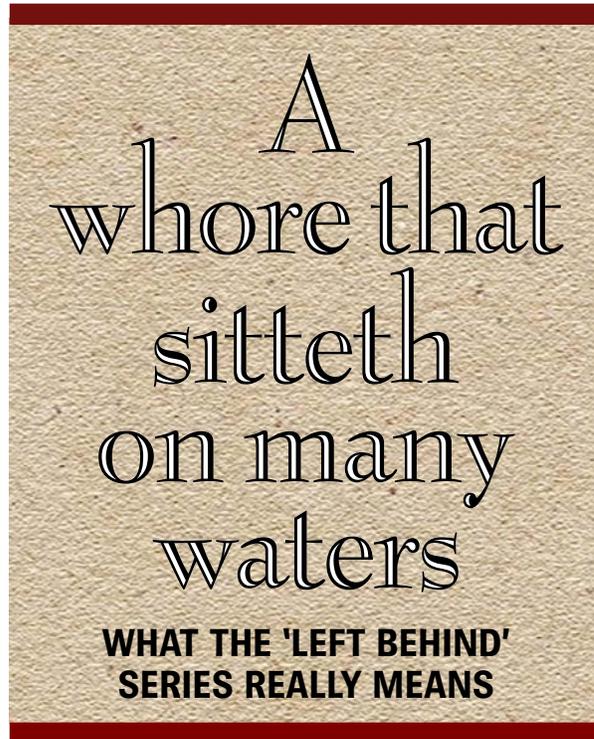


A
whore that
sitteth
on many
waters

**WHAT THE 'LEFT BEHIND'
SERIES REALLY MEANS**

ColdType

JOE BAGEANT



JOE BAGEANT

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from Random House Crown tentatively titled:

**DRINK, PRAY, FIGHT AND FUCK:
Dispatches from America's Class Wars**

due out next year.

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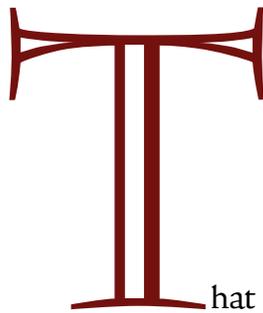
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“Jesus merely raised one hand a few inches and a yawning chasm opened in the earth, stretching far and wide enough to swallow all of them. They tumbled in, howling and screeching, but their wailing was soon quashed and all was silent when the earth closed itself again.”

– From **Glorious Appearing** by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins

The best thing about the Left Behind books is the way the non-Christians get their guts pulled out by God.

– 15-year old fundamentalist fan of the *Left Behind* series



hat is the sophisticated language and appeal of America’s all-time best selling adult novels celebrating the ethnic cleansing of non-Christians at the hands of Christ. If a Muslim were to write an Islamic version of last book in the *Left Behind* series, *Glorious Appearing*, and publish it across the Middle East, Americans would go beserk. Yet tens of millions of Christians eagerly await and celebrate an End Time when everyone who disagrees with them will be murdered in ways that make Islamic beheading look like a bridal shower. Jesus – who apparently has a much nastier streak than we have been led to believe – merely speaks and “the bodies of the enemy are ripped wide open down the middle.” In the book Christians have to drive carefully to avoid “hitting splayed and filleted corpses of men and women and horses” Even as the riders’ tongues are melting in their mouths and they

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are being wide open gutted by God's own hand, the poor damned horses are getting the same treatment. Sort of a divinely inspired version of "Fuck you and the horse you rode in on."

This may be some of the bloodiest hate fiction ever published, but it is also what tens of millions of Americans believe is God's will. It is approximately what everyone in the congregation sitting around me last Sunday at my brother's church believes. Or some version of it. How can anyone acquire and hold such notions? Answer: The same way you got yours and I got mine. Conditioning. From family and school and society, but from within a different American caste than the one in which you were raised. And from things stamped deep in childhood – such as coming home terrified to an empty house.

One September day when I was in the third grade I got off the school bus and walked up the red dust powdered lane to my house only to find no one there. The smudgy white front door of the old frame house stood open. My footsteps on the unpainted gray porch creaked in the fall stillness. With increasing panic, I went through every room, and then ran around the outside crying and sobbing in the grip of the most horrific loneliness and terror. I believed with all my heart that The Rapture had come and that all my family had been taken up to heaven leaving me alone on earth to face God's terrible wrath. As it turned out they were at the neighbor's house scarcely 300 yards down the road, and returned in a few minutes. But it took me hours to calm down. I dreamed about it for years afterward.

Since then I have spoken to others raised in fundamentalist families who had the same childhood experience of coming home and thinking everyone had been "raptured up."

The Rapture – the time when God takes up all saved Christians before he lets loose slaughter, pestilence and torture upon the earth – is very real to people in whom its glorious and grisly promise was instilled and cultivated from birth. Even those who escape fundamentalism agree its marks are permanent. We may no longer believe in being raptured up, but the grim fundamentalist architecture of the soul stands in the background of our days. There is an apocalyptic starkness that remains somewhere inside us, one that tinges all of our feelings and thoughts of higher matters. Especially about death, oh beautiful and terrible death, for naked eternity is more real to us than to you secular humanists. I get mail from hundreds

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of folks like me, the different ones who fled and became lawyers and teachers and therapists and car mechanics, dope dealers and stockbrokers and waitresses. And every one of them has felt that thing we understand between us, that skulls-piled-clear-to-heaven-redemption-through-absolute-self-worthlessness-and-you-ain't-shit-in-the-eyes-of-God-so-go-bleed-to-death-in some dark corner” stab in the heart at those very moments when we should have been most proud of ourselves. Self-hate. That thing that makes us sabotage our own inner happiness when we are most free and operating as self-realizing individuals. This kind of Christianity is a black thing. It is a blood religion that willingly gives up sons to America’s campaigns in the Holy Land, hoping they will bring on the much-anticipated war between good and evil in the Middle East that will hasten the End Times. Bring Jesus back to Earth.

Whatever the case, tens of millions of American fundamentalists, despite their claims otherwise, read and absorb the all-time best selling *Left Behind* book series as prophesy and fact. How could they possibly not after being conditioned all their lives to accept the End Times as the ultimate reality? We are talking about a group of Americans 20% of whose children graduate from high school identifying H2O as a cable channel. Children who, like their parents and grandparents, come from that roughly half of all Americans who can approximately read, but are dysfunctionally literate to the extent they cannot grasp any textual abstraction or overall thematic content.

Most of my family and their church friends (mainly the women) have read at least some of the *Left Behind* series and if pressed they will claim they understand that it is fiction. But anyone who has heard fundies around the kitchen table discussing the books knows the claim is pure bullshit. “Well, they do get an awful lot of stuff exactly right,” they admit. Beyond that, most fundamentalists delight in seeing their beliefs as “persecuted Christians” become best sellers “under the guise of fiction,” as the Pentecostal assistant who used to work with me put it. “They show the triumph of the righteous over those who persecute us for our faith in God.” Fer cryin out loud, Christianity is scarcely a persecuted belief system in this country, or in need of a guise to protect itself. Year after year some 60% of Americans surveyed say they believe the Book of Revelations will come true and about 40% believe it will come true in their lifetimes. This from the 50% of Americans who, according to statistics, seldom if ever buy a book.

Fetishizing of the End Times as a spectacular gore-fest visited upon on the unbe-

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lievers is nothing new. But the sheer number of people gleefully enjoying the spectacle of their own blackest magical thinking made manifest by mass media is new. Or at least the media aspect is new. It reinforces the major appeal of these beliefs, the appeal being (to restate the obvious) that they get to pass judgment on everyone who disagrees with them, and then watch God kick the living snot out of them. It doesn't get any better than that.

All my life I have seen these people and there are no more or less of them proportionately than before. It is simply that, A) they have built their own massive media, and B) educated middle class folks are noticing them now because they vote and a major political party is willing to violate the church-state boundary to get their votes. They have always been out here and always in about the same percentages. Think about that. It took me a while to accept it too. But George W. Bush learned the significance of this while campaigning for his daddy back when he was supposed to be at his National Guard meetings. Part of his job was to bring in the fundie Christian vote for Poppy. Come George's turn to play poker for the presidency in that quadrennial rich man's game we call elections, Sparky knew what cards to play. The effete John Kerry had not a clue. Still doesn't. Neither did you. Right? Don't feel bad. I even knew the great unwashed tribes of the faithful were out here, wrote spooky and panicked articles about it before the elections and still underestimated the capability of the death obsessed Christian right.

Lookie here. If you think I'm overcounting, think one more time about those *Left Behind* books which have sold over 65 million copies at this writing. Sold to people who do not even like or buy books. Gore Vidal and Susan Sontag never wrote anything that sold 65 million. That lead-footed prose and numbing predictability that Jerry Jenkins and Tim LaHaye grind out in the *Left Behind* series might not even be called writing. But whatever it is, at least 65 million folks that our nation failed to educate find deep meaning and solace in it. LaHaye has also sold 120 million non-fiction books, which makes him the most successful Christian writer since the Bible.

Sales figures aside, it is entirely possible that the *Left Behind* series is as important in our time and cultural context as was, say, Harriet Beecher's Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in its time, wherein Lincoln called it "the little book that started the big war." The truth is that LaHaye is among the most influential religious writers America ever produced and is the most powerful fundamentalist in America today. He is the founder and first president of the eerily secretive Council for National Policy, which

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brings together leading evangelicals and other conservatives with right-wing billionaires willing to pay for a conservative religious revolution. He is far more influential than Billy Graham or Pat Robertson and was the man who inspired Jerry Falwell to launch the Moral Majority. He gave millions of dollars to Falwell's Liberty University. He's the man without whom Ronald Reagan would never have become governor of California and the man who grilled George W. Bush, then wiped the cocaine off George's nose and gave him the official Christian fundie stamp of approval. He created the American Coalition for Traditional Values that has mobilized evangelical voters, putting neo-conservative wackjobs into political offices across the nation... In short, he is the Godfather of Soul, fundie style. When the man lays it down, his peeps doo dey duty.

Scratch LaHaye and you'll find an honest-to-god surviving John Bircher. In the 1960s when LaHaye was a young up-and-coming Baptist preacher fresh out of Bob Jones University, he lectured on behalf of Republican Robert Welch's John Birch Society. We are talking about a man who believed Dwight Eisenhower was an agent of the Communist Party taking orders from his brother, Milt Eisenhower. Along the way LaHaye extended his paranoid list of villains to include secular humanists who "are Satan's agents hiding behind the Constitution." And the only way to destroy them is to destroy their cover.

I have asked preachers about the *Left Behind* books. They all claim to have reservations about them. Fundie preachers are snarky about any beliefs that do not precisely mirror their own, and no two ever agree completely. They publicly find fault with the apocalyptic *Left Behind* books even as they privately enjoy the books' popularity. Most say the series overestimates the number of people going to heaven. Which figures, given that their stock and trade is the divine exclusivity of a club called "The Saved." No sense in ruining the brand by franchising it too cheaply.

Same goes for television as for the Christian pop-lit. Fundamentalists delighted in the NBC series *Revelations*. Admittedly it was a bullshit job from network people who had not the slightest understanding of the subject, but could smell more money the closer they got to it. They were right. Xian fundies sucked it up. Coolly as if butter wouldn't melt in their mouths, the fundies I know denied they enjoyed *Revelations* at all because the producers "got some things wrong," (as if it were possible to be wrong regarding dire predictions made centuries ago by superstitious mystic fanatics about something that never came to pass.) They say the main thing

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wrong was having Christ return as a little child. Most hardcore fundies preferred their vision of a Rambo Jesus arriving to beat the fuck out of everybody who ever disagreed with Him or them – sinners’ eyeballs turning to putrid jelly, blood flowing everywhere, etc. (In *Revelations* Jesus arrives on horseback wearing a blood soaked robe.)

These media products are more than harmless American Christian kitsch culture or just more American religious swill. Swill it may be, but it is also dangerous propaganda and the writers know damned well that propaganda value. Just as the propaganda value of associating Jewish people with rats in Nazi Germany helped the German populace accept persecution of the Jews, the *Left Behind* books foster a morality that excuses horrors done to “non-believers.” Forget about sanity and reason. Christian fundamentalist media promotes a hermetic worldview cut off from reason. From the standpoint of those who consume such media messages, it is not so much propaganda as it is an abundant offering so complete as to be a parallel biz-zaro world of its own. It gives answers to questions not even asked.

It is a world in which the Secretary General of the United Nations is the anti-Christ (*Left Behind*) and the “Clinton Crime Family” deals in cocaine and is linked to the Gambino family (Joshua Project, and other sources.) It is one in which abortion doctors are microwaving and eating fetuses according to testimony given by anti-abortionists before a Kansas House subcommittee (WorldNetDaily, of course) and where crowds of good folks get teary-eyed as Rev. Pat Evans, of the NASCAR “Racing for Jesus Ministries’ rumbles onto the track. Evangelical NASCAR? Yup. What ABC called America’s “unapologetically evangelical sport.” I can see you dear reader, running and holding your head and screaming at the thought. Yet it’s true. At Bristol and Talladega the earth is shaking for Jaaaayzus! Now that we have Evangelical NASCAR, what, I ask you, can ever go wrong?

To be saved is to fall into the ludicrous and satanic flippancy of false piety, kitsch. – Trappist monk Thomas Merton

Forty years later Merton is still right. Like most American liberals, not to mention all of Europe and the rest of the world, I learned through education to write the U.S. born-again literature off as kitsch religion, merely bad theology in an unholy marriage to bad writing. Another product of the American Jesus industry. If we liberals

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can name it, assign it to some appropriately vulgar and sentimental corner of our degraded culture, and then remain tolerant of it, then we feel we have dealt with the damned thing. After all, it is the comparative worldview of the teeming red state masses. But there is certain arrogance in such pop cultural erudition and thin worldliness, isn't there? In itself, our attitude is too flip.

It took coming home to a born again red state to realize how cultural documents such as *Left Behind* or the movies *Revelations* and *Passion of the Christ* do great harm, and at a critical time when we are facing economic upheaval, fighting illegal wars and suffering deep religious antipathies across the planet. "Aw," my liberal New York and West Coast friends tell me, "That is overstating the case. The Democrats will eventually be back in power." We cannot afford to wait a few more years and see. No matter if the Dems actually can be elected back into powerlessness, they will have needed at least some of these people's votes to get there. Next election we will find out if it is possible to be elected without the fundamentalist Christians. So far the Democratic political elite, who only take their thumb out of their ass to change thumbs, has not been able to stop the religious right's relentless push. And I think it is because, at least from where I sit right now, the democratic establishment has not offered, much less delivered, and is incapable of delivering what my people really need – decent educations so they will not be prey to three thousand year old superstitions. The left has yet to demand for all Americans a genuine absolutely free education, an opportunity to enjoy a life of the mind, or to even know such a thing exists. Hell, you got yours and I got mine, right? So screw'em. We progressives have failed. We were always and still are our brother's keeper and now the throw-away Americans, the ugly little dickhead at the car wash and the truck driver and the guy who delivers the bottled water to our offices are coming to get our asses, even though they aren't quite sure why. My Random House editor told me not to get on a soapbox about this, but I cannot help it. (Sorry, Rachel)

I am not trying to be smart-assed, but to indicate the fear of what is unfolding around me as a person living in the belly of the beast. The reality gap between fundamentalist and urban liberals is unfathomable. Liberal observers watching from a safe distance in New York or San Francisco conclude it is pure stupidity that caused millions of Americans to continue support of the Bush junta in the face of overwhelming evidence of lies, deceit and contempt for the constitution, even as the fat

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cats raided their retirements and picked their pockets at every turn. Others think it is just plain meanness that attracted them to Bush. And so do I sometimes, because stupidity (the Jesus stockcar entries should be proof enough) and meanness are surely part of the attraction to a certain type of conservative...that poisonous toad Karl Rove being their chief deity of meanness for meanness sake.

There remains one nagging problem. Despite their masochistic voting patterns, fundamentalists are very ordinary and normal Americans. People who often as not go out of their way to help others and endorse most American values. So how do we reconcile the warmth and good nature of these hardworking citizens with the repressive politics, intolerance, nationalism and warmaking they support? Why do such ordinary people do such awful things? The Germans have been wrestling with that one for 60 years, and sixty more years from now they still will have not solved the riddle in any meaningful way for the rest of the world. Barring ecological and cultural collapse, historians will say America suffered under the same sort of extraordinary delusion, a national hallucination of God and empire and exceptionalism. The thing about a hallucination – and take it from a person who has enjoyed many fine ones on various chemicals and herbs – is that it is a convincing reality in its time. Try talking to a fundamentalist about politics and God for an hour. You will see the spell that holds sway. Let us be thankful for pro sports or we would have nothing whatsoever to talk about on those rare occasions when a fundamentalist and a liberal ever bother to speak to one another.

Allow me to get down to the nub of this and say what urban liberals cannot allow themselves to say out loud: “Christian majority or not, the readers of such apocalyptic books as the *Left Behind* series are some pretty damned dumb motherfuckers caught up in their own black, vindictive fantasy.” There. I said it for you. Let us proceed.

Beyond that, there is a more mundane aspect of the success of the *Left Behind* books. It is fair to say that *Left Behind* readers are happy to discover a pop-lit phenomenon that they can participate in at all – popular literature that doesn’t conflict with their insulated and armor plated world view. At last they have something else to read besides *Guideposts* and *Readers Digest*, both of which pass as highbrow lit in most fundamentalist households. Aw come on. You know it is the truth the same as I do. If you go into the homes of most fundamentalists, you will not find many books

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at all, much less books that contain real ideas. Now they have the *Left Behind* series, the huge sales of which, as they see it, validate their beliefs. I know I am painting with a mighty wide brush, but so what? It's by and large true. Considering that by no means do all fundamentalists believe in The Rapture, and that the whole Rapture thing is a cult within a larger cult, the popularity of the *Left Behind* series says something about the sheer scale of apocalyptic Christianity in the American heartland today. Do the readers believe the books? Again, I would say most do. Here are a couple of typical reader testimonials for the books:

“This series of books is the best I have ever read. I have looked long and hard to find a resource that put scripture into easy to read, and understand format. Many people I know get frustrated when they try to read scripture because they have trouble understanding the language.... Now after reading these books I have a better understanding of where I stand at this moment.”

“I started reading the *Left Behind* series in 2000 with the first book in paperback. ... I read it and was impressed with how well written it was and have read or own every book. In impact, it has gotten me closer to God than where I was before. ... I grew up in church, but was always afraid of what was supposed to happen at the end times. I was afraid of the Book of Revelation, because the thought of all of the evil that had to be fought terrified me. While reading the *Left Behind* series, I followed along with my Bible, and I am so excited that I am understanding and learning more than I ever have. I am no longer afraid of the fight against evil, because I know that I am on the side of the greatest and most powerful force. Thank you for getting me started on this path of learning.”

These people may not be your neighbors or friends, but they are ordinary and typical Americans. If you the reader are a college educated middle class person, then folks like those above outnumber you roughly three to one in this country. If that is not reason enough to drink, then I don't know what is. No matter what happens, in the next election, we are going to be dealing for a long time to come with millions of

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voters who think *Left Behind* is great literature, spiritual guidance and a political primer all in one. Do we really think that cartload of bloated hacks called the Democratic Party knows what to do about this? Do you really think Howard Dean has a clue about how to deal with this entire class of Americans. Hardly. And besides, even if the Dems can get elected again and restored to the impotency they have come to represent, they will have needed these people's votes to get there. Or they simply will not get there. So let's not expect the Democratic political elite to save us from watching the fundie takeover attempts escalate in the future (In which case, assuming my book makes some real dough, I will be watching from abroad, thank you.) Essentially it comes down to the fact that a very large portion of Americans are crazier than shithouse rats and are being led by a gang of pathological misfits, most of whom are preachers and politicians. We are not talking about simple religious faith here. There is a world of difference between having religious faith and being a born-again zealot who believes in his heart that he is thumping Darwinian demons out of classrooms and that Ted Kennedy is the anti-Christ. Trading down to the Democratic party of the pussies really will not save us. It will just buy a little time. But we have whipped the hell out of this dead horse before, haven't we? Forgive me.

Meanwhile, we are left to contemplate communication with these folks, people whose leaders deliver unfathomable pronouncements such as the following one regarding family finances and the national economy from a Christian radio broadcast.

The mystery of the harlot of Jerusalem is solved, people! Praise the Lord! Deuteronomy 15:6 says plain as the nose on your face that "For the LORD thy God blesseth thee, as he promised thee: and thou shalt lend unto many nations, but thou shalt not borrow; and thou shalt reign over many nations, but they shall not reign over thee. Therefore, the harlot is NOT the gentile nations! "The harlot controls and rules over the gentile nations, sitting on them." Rev 17:1. And there came one of the seven angels which had the seven vials, and talked with me, saying unto me, Come hither; I will shew unto thee the judgment of the great whore that sitteth upon many waters: Rev 17:15. And he saith unto me, The waters which thou sawest, where the whore sitteth, are peoples, and multitudes, and nations, and tongues. NOW IS THAT NOT PROOF ENOUGH?

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Get that?

Me neither.

But what the hell. It makes sense to millions of voting Americans. So do I hear a great big Amen out there?

AMEN!

I get reminders of fundamentalism's dark magical thinking every day. And it is always the little unexpected ones that slap me hardest with the reality that these people are in the grip of their mass delusion 24 hours a day. A couple of weeks ago I loaned my brother my old truck until he could get his engine rebuilt. A week later he returned it with much sincere thanks and a smile. On the vent window of my truck is a 4-inch decal, a silhouette of two square dancers (my father-in-law, who gave me the truck, was a square dancer.) When I climbed into it the next day I noticed that the square dancers were covered over both inside and outside the glass with two layers of duct tape. After all, we cannot be riding around in trucks with demonic emblems blasting out invisible rays of Satan's "Power of the air," can we?

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