

The Greatest Story Ever Told

By Karen Green

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Let's start with a couple of premises.

When people think of superheroes, it's natural to think of Superman, the first superhero. (I'm sure that's a matter for debate, but for argument's sake let's just leave it there.) And when thinking of Superman, it has not, historically, been an enormous stretch to conceive of him as a Christ-like figure—whatever those two nice Jewish boys from Cleveland may have intended—sent by his powerful father to Earth to save mankind. (Did you know that if you look up "Superman and Christ" in Wikipedia you get 150 hits?) Traditional superheroes tend to have a calling—they can't *not* be what they are, whether by birth, accident, or circumstance—and that fits well with the Gospel story. So, given these premises, why not cut out the middleman, cut the "figure" off of "Christ-figure" and go directly to the Greatest Story Ever Told?

As you know if you've been reading this column regularly, I've been thinking a lot about the various ways comics can be used in the curriculum. I'm a fan of any curricular use, believe me, but I especially like the notion of gradually incorporating comics into existing syllabi, assigning pertinent titles as just another text to read in a given subject discipline. And one of the disciplines I find particularly fruitful for this approach is religion. Which leads me to Mark Millar's and Peter Gross' *Chosen*.



I had been idly poking around in our catalog recently, trying to figure out what titles in our collection would be of interest to students of religion. Garth Ennis would be an obvious place to start, with *Preacher* and *True Faith*, as would Steve Ross' two novels, *Marked* and *Blinded*. Doug Rushkoff's *Testamentis* another option, and there are quite a few more, but for some reason my eye kept drifting back up my list to *Chosen*. And, as I read it, I could practically feel the lesson plan forming in my head....

Chosen is the story of 12-year-old Jodie Christianson (I know! Subtle, right? He's also got a "girlfriend" named Maggie...), a Peoria boy who, while out with his friends one day, looks up to see a massive truck falling on his head from an overpass. Astonishingly, Jodie survives this catastrophe unmarked (the truck driver's in a coma) yet somehow...changed. Suddenly, he can name JFK's entire Cabinet and the formula for solving quadratic equations, although previously he hadn't been doing so well in school. People begin to whisper about him. His friends are looking at him funny. He decides to see if he can turn water into wine, multiply loaves and fishes, and heal the blind.

He can.

He turns to the local priest, Father Tom O'Higgins, whose own crisis of faith has yielded only a dwindling congregation, but finds neither solace nor solutions. Jodie turns at last to his mother, who urges him to read Revelation 13 and 14 in the family Bible (i.e., regarding the Beast of the Apocalypse, the Lamb of God, and the trampled vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored), upon doing which he has his own revelation.



Throughout the story, small visual cues in the art and quirks in the writing create a growing sense of unease in the reader—well, in this reader, certainly—and a suspicion that something's a little...off. And that's really all I'll say about the story. I didn't know which way the story was going before I started it, and I'm very glad I didn't; I wouldn't want to deny anyone else the same experience.

So, what's so interesting about this book? What makes me want to see it on a reading list one day?

Well, let's follow up our premises with a sweeping generalization: people are curious about Jesus. Even people who don't believe he was the Son of God are curious about Jesus. What kind of kid would Jesus have been? What would it be like, gradually coming to believe one is the Messiah? What was he doing during those missing years between the ages of 12 and 30? How *does* one reconcile the human and the divine in oneself? What would it be like to found a religion that ruled an empire, a religion that's lasted two thousand years?



Once western civilization cooled off enough to make it safe to speculate about such things, writers obliged. Tom Robbins' first novel, *Another Roadside Attraction*, for example, postulated that Jesus had never actually resurrected, and that the Vatican had been hiding His miraculously preserved corpse for centuries in order to keep the Christian religion—and the institution of the Vatican—from collapsing. The turning of the millennium seemed to spark a rash of such stories. Christopher Moore wrote a clever and hilarious novel, *Lamb: the Gospel According to Biff, Christ's Childhood Pal*, that suggested how Jesus spent his 18 lost years, in an attempt to explain the contrast between the Jewish doctrine in which he was raised and the doctrine he would later preach (basically, it's the ultimate origin story: if you loved *Batman Begins*, you may well love *Lamb*).

About a year or so before *Chosen* appeared, Russell T Davies, still a couple of years away from re-imagining the "Doctor Who" franchise, wrote "The Second Coming," a mini-series starring David Eccleston as a rather meek video-store clerk who, on his 33rd birthday, suddenly realizes he is the new Messiah. (It's just fantastic, by the way—I highly recommend it, if you can manage the Mancunian accents.)

Is this blasphemous? Some would certainly say so, but I'm not convinced that was the intent. It says something about the power of the Gospel story that Jesus is the ultimate character around whom to weave a story. It's an attempt related, perhaps, to that of Jack Miles, a former Jesuit, whose book *God: a biography* looks at the "character development" of the Lord in the Hebrew Bible. And Jesus' near-universal fame also means that his story comes with built-in allusions that nearly any reader can recognize (I mean, you all got why it was appropriate that Jodie's girl neighbor was named Maggie, right?), which automatically adds levels of texture to the narrative. There are already countless college-level courses on the Bible as literature; what about turning that around and injecting literature into Bible characters? It could certainly make for some interesting term papers.



And here's the thing: in my opinion, what's most important about a book on a reading list is what it adds to informed discussion, to the learning process, to the development of critical thinking. As I scanned online reviews of *Chosen*, some felt it was a little...anvilicious (I believe one referred sarcastically to something like, "All the subtlety you'd expect from Millar"). Me, I liked it. But for all I know, I liked *it* because it made me start thinking about what it was accomplishing, how it handled the Biblical allusions, within what narrative context it existed, and so on. Some of the allusions worked below the surface—I knew that Lilly B., on the name-tag of the nurse above, rang a bell, but it was more of a sudden scent of something hinky than a full-blown recognition of narrative direction.

As I mentioned above, Millar and Gross plant a lot of clues to the nature of the story, and sometimes half the fun is in trying to figure them out (as in this *New York Times Magazine* piece of a few years back, which suggests that shows like "Lost," with its complex story lines

and buried clues, are actually making viewers smarter). They play with the number 33—the age of Christ at the Crucifixion—in interesting ways; apparently the 33rd panel in each of the 3 issues has significance (I didn't go back and count yet, but I respect that *gematria*-like devotion to detail.) In Jodie's "Holy Shit" scene above, I picked up on some of these hints, but misinterpreted their intent; others, as in some elements of the scene with Nurse Lilly, I didn't pick up on at all. Happily, the trade edition of *Chosen* includes a conversation with Millar and Gross in which they point out many of these almost subliminal signposts.

One that did catch my attention was the name of the hospital where Jodie and the truck driver were taken: Thyatira Hospital. Thyatira is the name of one of the seven churches in the book of Revelation. It's nice to have the learning to recognize such references and it's nice to have a narrative that rewards that learning. That's one of the rewards of education. And hey, like it says in Revelation II:29: "He that hath an ear, let him hear."

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