

Christian fiction in a novel form

Catherine Fox could not find a publisher for her latest novel, until she decided to serialise it as a blog. She talks to Sarah Meyrick



CATHERINE FOX fans will seize on her new novel with expectation and relief. The publication of *Acts and Omissions* comes almost 20 years after the publication of her first novel, *Angels and Men*, and the two that swiftly followed it (*The Benefits of Passion*, 1997; and *Love for the Lost*, 2000).

The novels explored big themes around Christian faith — in particular, contemporary Anglicanism — and were loosely autobiographical. *Angels and Men* took as its setting postgraduate life in thinly disguised Durham, where Fox herself was a research student; *The Benefits of Passion* explored the journey of a student at theological college (Durham again); and *Love for the Lost* was about the life of a newly ordained curate (her husband is a priest).

Since then — although she has never stopped writing, including, for 16 years, a weekly column in the *Church of England Newspaper* — she has been in something of a wilderness as a novelist.

The new book has had an unusual genesis, in that it started life last year as a blog — a form that transformed her approach to writing. “*Acts and Omissions* is the book I’ve been trying and failing to write for about ten years,” she says. “A novel is ideally suited to exploring the sort of things the C of E gets itself tied up in knots over. But it turned out that the novel form was inhibiting me — and that’s why my agent kept saying ‘This isn’t working.’”

Frustrated, she set herself the challenge of blogging the novel weekly, one chapter at a time. “What unlocked the project for me, as a writer, was adopting a more playful tone, a sort of spoof Victorian serialised novel. That liberated me from the very correct form I teach my students, that is all about ‘showing not telling’, and absenting yourself as a narrator.

“But I am a comic writer — one of the things I do is notice quirks — and, once I stopped taking myself seriously, I found this form gave me full rein to do that. So rather than having one strong female protagonist, I’m the narrator, with a cast of characters, and a polyphonic narrative.”

SHE was fiercely disciplined. She wrote 2000 words every week, for a year, beginning in January 2013.

The weekly deadline helped, as did the inbuilt structure that the year provided. “I already had the setting, and I also had the church calendar, the school year. . . I just had to get on and do it.”

And she was happy to give the book away free, online, for two reasons: “I’d rather someone was reading it than no one,” she says, “and it was helped by the fact that for the first time I’d got a proper job.” (She teaches creative writing at Manchester Metropolitan University.) “That takes the pressure off having to be paid for everything you write. So I cast it on the water, promoted it via Twitter, and waited to see what happened.

“We got to August, and I was talking about the project at Greenbelt, and the plight of contemporary publishing, and someone asked: ‘Are you getting paid for this?’ and I said, ‘No, but if there are any editors out there, let me know if you are interested.’”

It turned out that Alison Barr, a

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senior editor at SPCK, was in the audience — and that SPCK had a plan to move into fiction. Not only are they publishing *Acts and Omissions*, but they have commissioned a sequel (being blogged at the moment, and to be published next year), and have bought the rights to her back list from Penguin. The signs are that the blog-form has served as a prolonged and productive marketing campaign.

While the primary plot-strand was already fixed before she started (a happily married bishop, and father of four, finds himself in a serious mess over his sexuality), many of the details were not, and they emerged only during the year, as she wrote.

The blog has been lightly edited for publication. Some of the revisions were fed by comments from readers (who averaged 5000 a month), as she blogged.

“I WONDERED online what kind of car the archdeacon would drive, and got a few unsuitable suggestions,” she says. “I’d just decided on a black Mini when, overnight, I got that very suggestion from a reader in Australia.

“This week, I couldn’t track down how many deacons were ordained; so I put something out on Twitter to find out. And when I asked what kind of vestments Fr Wendy would wear, I started quite an argument. That was great fun.”

One reason why Fox’s novels are so plausible is that she is a shrewd observer of the Church of England

— its characters and its many absurdities. Set in a cathedral city, *Acts and Omissions* depicts a world with which she is familiar: her husband is the Dean of Liverpool, and, before that, was a Canon of Lichfield Cathedral.

Inevitably, readers try to recognise the models for her fiction. “I try so hard to avoid similarities with anyone I know, that I think they can accidentally end up rather like someone I don’t know,” she says. “I flatter myself that it is because I have created believable people.”

Although she denies knowingly exacting revenge on anyone, she admits that she draws pleasure from allowing certain characters to “say all the things you don’t if you are married to the Dean”.

As for that aspect of her life, she says that she is a committed member of the cathedral congregation, attends events, and provides a certain amount of hospitality, “but it doesn’t eat me alive”. This is helped by the setting: occasions tend to happen at the cathedral rather than in the deanery. “People at the cathedral have got my measure,” she says. “We’ve had a tremendous welcome in Liverpool, and people here don’t care how mad you are as long as you are genuine.”

ACTS AND OMISSIONS is playful, certainly, although it treats serious subjects. The sweeping scope allows her to present a range of opinions about the Church’s agonies over sexuality. “I really wanted to show to people who are not churchgoers

why it is still so fraught,” she says. “I want to say: ‘If this was simple, we’d have sorted it out a long time ago.’ The book is an apologetic on behalf of kindness and a bit of understanding of why it is all so painful.”

It has a different tone and texture from her earlier novels. She says that she had to restrain her red pen when re-reading them for republication. “I took out a couple of factual errors and typos, but that was all,” she says. “But [the earlier books] speak to that time, and it is almost as if they were written by someone else.”

What went wrong after *Love for the Lost*? “In retrospect, I had used up all my autobiography, and had to go off and do some more living. I did write a fourth book, but my agent said ‘This is so bad it is unpublishable.’”

She says that she cried on the phone, but now knows that he was right. “He showed it to the first editor who had discovered me, and she said the same. It was a huge shock; I hadn’t realised.”

This coincided with a squeeze on “mid-listers” in the publishing world, and editors were proving increasingly reluctant to foster young writers. Penguin also told her that they had a problem marketing her work, and encouraged her to look for a new setting.

“They said: ‘It doesn’t have to be about the Church,’ but I think, for me, it does. I’m interested in theological themes, in forgiveness, in what happens after we die. I can’t just cut that out. But I think, now, the market has changed again — look at *Rev*. Perhaps the Church is not the turn-off it was.”

IN A period of what she describes as “a detour”, she wrote a handful of “larky books” on vicarage life, based on her *Church of England Newspaper* column; and — against the advice of her agent — a book about judo, *Fight the Good Fight: From vicar’s wife to killing machine*. When her attempt to write her next big book about the C of E foundered, she “flounced off” to write fantasy, before coming up with the idea of the blog.

She welcomes SPCK’s stated aim to be publishers of serious contemporary fiction rather than “Christian genre” fiction. “There are some people who have bought my books because they think ‘This is by a Christian’, and then they feel hurt and betrayed, because they think I am not portraying Christians in the best light, and I allow them to blaspheme, for example.

“And they ask whether, as a Christian, I couldn’t have found another way. It almost always turns out that they don’t read contemporary fiction, and although I explain about verisimilitude and observation, and how I try to render this faithfully, they are still disappointed.”

She muses on whether *Acts and Omissions* could have been published by a secular publisher, but admits that it is pretty “hard-core Anglican”. Generally, though, she believes that people want to read intelligent, compassionate writing about human experience. “There’s a hunger for it.”

Acts and Omissions by Catherine Fox is published by SPCK at £9.99 (Church Times Bookshop £8.99). She is serialising her latest novel at <http://unseenthingsabove.blogspot.co.uk>.