

Moving on from the shack



Five years after the worldwide success of *The Shack*, its author, Paul Young, returns with a second novel, which also features the Holy Trinity. He talks to Sarah Meyrick

THE author of *The Shack*, Paul Young, is beaming. He finds the runaway global success of his first book hugely entertaining. "It's one of the funniest things that God has perpetrated on the human race," he says. "All my family and friends are shaking their heads, and laughing."

Indeed, the story of his phenomenal achievement is the stuff of fairy tales. *The Shack* — written by Young for his children while he was working as a janitor and hotel night porter — was taken up by a couple of enthusiastic friends who believed that the story deserved a wider airing.

Having failed to find a publisher (there were 26 rejections), his friends set about printing it anyway; launched it, in 2007, with a marketing budget of \$200; and dispatched the first orders out of a garage. Five years later, 18 million copies of the book have been sold, in 41 languages.

Young, a Canadian who lives in Portland, Oregon, is in the UK before Christmas as part of a tour to promote his new novel, *Cross Roads*. After covering 20 states in two weeks in November, he has had a punishing schedule in the UK, but, none the less, he is looking forward to getting home to his family — his wife, Kim, six children, and six grandchildren — for Christmas. Kim keeps a strict eye on his schedule, to make sure that he keeps his eye on the ball.

He shrugs off the suggestion that the astonishing sales of *The Shack* might have put him under extra pressure when approaching his

second book. "There's no pressure. I didn't ask for any of this. I see it as God's sense of humour. I live with enough grace for one day. I'm just not that complicated."

THE first book featured Mack, and his life-changing encounter with God after the tragic death of his youngest child. *Cross Roads* tells the story of the multimillionaire Tony, whose huge wealth and worldly success come at a significant personal cost. He collapses with a brain haemorrhage, and, while he is in a coma in hospital, he is given the opportunity to review his life, and make choices about the future. On his inner journey, he encounters God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, rather as Mack did.

The aspect that most divided readers of *The Shack* was his unusual depiction of the Trinity. God

the Father, for example, is portrayed as a large African-American grandmother who calls herself both Elousia, and Papa. The Holy Spirit appears as an Asian woman, Sarayu. While readers in their millions embraced the book as life-changing, church leaders across the US denounced the book as sacrilege. Even Young's own mother declared him a heretic.

In terms of the Trinity, the new book covers similar ground, which, the author says, is inevitable. "The Trinity is about relationship. That's absolutely essential to me — the only thing that gives any coherence to me. Relationship is the character of God. The three persons of the Trinity share absolute oneness, but never lose their distinctiveness.

"I'm not talking about some impersonal 'oneness', or a hierarchy where God the Father is someone we need protection from. And the historical person of Jesus is crucial to me. So, yes, this will be in all of my writing."

His characterisation is not intended to be taken literally, but as part of a long tradition of describing God in different ways. "In Genesis, the Holy Spirit is female, and all the verbs used are female. There's a broad scope of imagery in the Bible, from the inanimate 'rock', to animals like lions, eagles, and a chicken gathering her young.

"But imagery doesn't define God. Every person is unique, and if we are made in the image of God, people will see the manifest character of God in that uniqueness. People struggle with this because

they haven't thought it through, or realised that that imagery is a created one. Think about the image of God as 'shepherd' — a shepherd was an outcast, the dregs of society. But people have concretised that image."

WHAT is different in the new book, I suggest, is the humour. There is also a much larger cast of characters than in *The Shack*. "It's altogether a broader story," he says. "I think it's better written, and it's certainly more community-centred. It's much more communal rather than about one individual. Because I believe in a God of relationships, then relationship is where things happen; so it's a little more realistic."

He talks with great fondness about his characters: Cabby, a young man with Down syndrome, who is based on a family friend, Nathan; Maggie, a nurse; and Clarence, a policeman who has a profound encounter with his elderly mother during the book.

I ask him about the ending — Tony's choice — wondering if it was always part of the game plan. "No, I had no idea," he says, smiling broadly. "I wasn't sure till the end how the issue of healing would be resolved. I just didn't see it coming."

It will not spoil the plot to say that there is no neat ending. "The fact that there's no final resolution is deliberate. I don't like Christian-fiction fairy-tales — that's not real life. So, ten days ago, one of my cousins whom I grew up with, who struggled with schizophrenia, took

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