

Prophecy, Politics, and the Popular: The Left Behind Series and Christian Fundamentalism's New World Order.

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Prophecy, Politics, and the Popular:

In the fall of 2001, about six weeks after the events of September 11, a novel called *Desecration* was released. The book was part of the pathbreaking *Left Behind* series written by conservative evangelist Tim LaHaye and writer Jerry Jenkins, which describes the "end of times," the rise of the Antichrist, and the final battle of Armageddon, all of which figure prominently in Christian apocalyptic theory. *Desecration* went on to become the best-selling hardback book of the year, moving John Grisham out of the number one spot he had held every year since 1994, and it did so after only three months on the shelves.¹ *Desecration* built on the remarkable success of its predecessors. To date, eleven books of the planned fourteen-book series have been released, and the last five have all debuted at number one on the bestseller lists. In total, they have sold more than thirty-two million copies (excluding graphic novels and children's versions) since the first book appeared in 1995.²

The *Left Behind* novels are unabashedly fundamentalist fiction, based on literalist interpretations of the "end of time" as understood through the prophetic books of the Bible. Although the [End Page 773] popular success of the series was already well established before September 11, the events of that day spurred a new interest in the books and the larger field of biblical prophecy. For many fundamentalists in the United States, the terrorist attacks were more than simply horrific political crisis or personal loss; they were also further proof that the end of times predicted in biblical prophecy was imminent. Those who mine the apocalyptic books of the Bible for signs of the Second Coming of Christ often argue that "wars and rumors of wars" as well as great sorrow and tribulation are key indicators of the quickening of God's plan.³ When that plan unfolds, the Middle East will be the stage and Israel will be at the heart of the story, as Jesus Christ himself returns to fight on the side of his Chosen People against the Antichrist.

The *Left Behind* novels describe the experiences of a group of newly committed Christians who live through the terrible events leading up to Armageddon and Christ's return. In accordance with biblical prophecies, these believers must face the rise of the Antichrist, who will persecute Christians and Jews, take over as dictator of a one-world government, lead a global crusade against Israel, and eventually bring the world to Armageddon.⁴ LaHaye and Jenkins have constructed fast-paced and plot-driven stories that are also generic hybrids, combining traditional evangelical homily with science-fiction-like threats and action-adventure thrills, complete with plenty of male bonding and high-flying capers.

Until recently, the series was all but invisible in liberal and intellectual circles, though that is changing. In 2002, LaHaye and Jenkins were the center of friendly interviews with CNN, ABC, NPR, CBS, CNBC, and *Time* magazine, among others.⁵ Despite extraordinary newspaper and television coverage, however, each account of the *Left Behind* phenomenon finds it necessary to introduce the books to an audience who presumably finds their very existence to be news. Evangelicalism itself appears as a novelty to the major media, yet approximately one-third of Americans define themselves as "born again."⁶ (Fundamentalists are best defined as a subset of evangelical Christians, who are generally more literal in their biblical interpretations and often more interested in prophecy than other evangelicals or mainline Protestant denominations or Catholics.⁷) The popularity of *Left Behind* is no doubt connected to the much broader growth in the sales of religious-themed cultural products in the United States, ranging from books on New Age spirituality and Jewish dating to Christian T-shirts and Hindi lunch boxes. Sales of religious items have grown by more than a third in..

Melani McAlister

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In the fall of 2001, about six weeks after the events of September 11, a novel called *Descension* was released. The book was part of the pathbreaking *Left Behind* series written by conservative evangelist Tim LaHaye and writer Jerry Jenkins, which describes the "end of times," the rise of the Antichrist, and the final battle of Armageddon, all of which figure prominently in Christian apocalyptic theory. *Descension* went on to become the best-selling hardback book of the year, moving John Grisham out of the number one spot he had held every year since 1994, and it did so after only three months on the shelves.¹ *Descension* built on the remarkable success of its predecessors. To date, eleven books of the planned fourteen-book series have been released, and the last five have all debuted at number one on the bestseller lists. In total, they have sold more than thirty-two million copies (excluding graphic novels and children's versions) since the first book appeared in 1995.²

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