

The Shack

Well, it's popular as a secular novel, and has been celebrated by Christians on both sides of the Atlantic. Eugene Peterson puts it on a par with *Pilgrim's Progress*. Chuck Colson bids us not to enter. It has been fiercely criticised by conservatives in the States because the theology it propounds is dodgy. It has been welcomed by more liberally-minded evangelicals because it's a warm, emotional encounter with God.

The Shack is a story of how one man, suffering desperately from severe grief, encounters the Trinitarian God in... not surprisingly ... a shack!

A long conversation ensues, which sounds rather like the kind of theological debate you might have in the pub – except of course, the author's views are presented as God's. But it is playfully written, the portrayals of the Trinity refreshing, and the picture of how the Trinity interacts are superb. The narrative, though rather crude in structure, is extremely well written, and fun to read. As an antidote to dark, dry, one-sided theologies that still dominate many of our churches – this story of a playful God works extremely well. And it is hardly surprising that its theology has invited such widespread criticism from conservative sources.

Of more concern that the picture of God that is deliberately presented, however, is the picture of God that is accidentally portrayed. This is a God whose primary concern is with the healing of one man. So far, so good. But this one man's personal journey takes place at the expense of the personal journeys of others. This recipient of God's love is encouraged to forget about the world's injustices – its economics, its politics. Those problems are for the Holy Spirit to sort out. Instead, this man simply has to focus on loving those nearest to him.

When confessing that he doesn't know how to put the world to rights, Jesus assures him, “all I want from you is to trust me with what little you can, and grow in loving people around you with the same love I share with you.”

In this sense, the book depicts a God who gently and quietly and lovingly endorses the principle evils of our age. When one wealthy, privileged man's personal journey eclipses the state of the world God so loved he sent his only son – idols are being worshipped. Individualism is dutifully obeyed.

Although J. John endorsed the book as 'emotional', a better description is 'sentimental'. Sentimentalism allows us to enjoy all of the gooey feelings of an emotional response, with none of the cost. It's just about you and God and your nearest and dearest. The book tells us next to nothing about the man's life after this encounter with God. Just that it was a nice happy ever after...

But surely, this is just a story. Surely it is not claiming to give a comprehensive view of God? Surely, we don't have to accept it as the final word on who God is? Not quite, because the author, in trying to answer too many theological questions, has unwittingly presented his picture as *the* picture of God, a picture that is unwelcome to those with an opposing view of God. However, if you are a rampant individualist, obsessed with your own self-improvement, unaware of your false humility and not wanting to be troubled by the nasty world beyond your doorstep – and – if you want to worship a God who will not interfere with any of that, then this book is for you!