

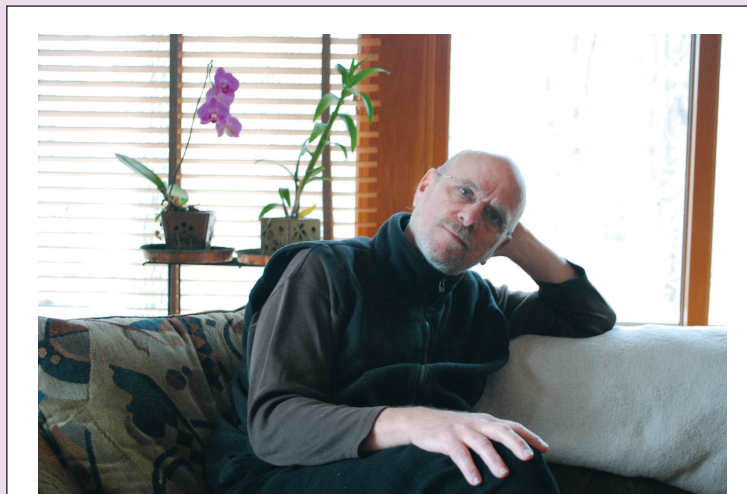
RE-EXAMINING RELIGION: 'DO GOOD. BE NICE. HAVE FUN'

BY VICKY DICKSON

“Writing fiction is as close to being God as you can get.” You might not expect to hear those words uttered by a twice-baptized fellow who grew up attending church five days a week. But James Protzman isn't your average Jesus invocator. Nor is he your average graduate of the United States Naval Academy or your average business writer – although all that appears on his resume. As does his work as a founding blogger on blunc.com and his term on the Chapel Hill Town Council.

Pretty impressive. What's even more impressive is that he's managed to write a fascinating novel, *Jesus Swept*, along the way. A story of encounters between margin dwellers and establishment types that is set in motion by a thousand-year-old silver bracelet, the novel should be especially interesting to residents of Chapel Hill and the N.C. coast, where all the action takes place. A street sweeper called Jesus, the orphaned twins Hook and Sink, a development director at Duke who hears the voices of pelicans and a mysterious old woman called Dog all grab a reader's imagination – and don't let go, even after the last page is turned.

In a way, *Jesus Swept* is a knotting together of the disparate threads of Protzman's life. Business writing taught him tight construction and blogging gave him the opportunity to get instant reader feedback on his writing. The church services he was



James Protzman reflects on organized religion and the ultimate goal of living in his first novel, *Jesus Swept*. PHOTO BY AVA BARLOW

forced to attend at the Naval Academy, with their emphasis on Christian soldiers fighting for God and democracy, inspired Protzman's rejection of his own religious upbringing.

The portrayal of organized religion in *Jesus Swept* might well persuade readers that Protzman has little use for the church. Given that his most unsympathetic character is a preacher – and a randy, not-very-honest one at that

– few readers would expect to see the novelist giving a sermon at a Unitarian church in Hillsborough, as he did one recent Sunday. They'd perhaps be

even more surprised to know that the inspiration for *Jesus Swept* came during a long-ago service, in the form of a bumper sticker Protzman doodled that said, “Do good. Be Nice. Have fun.”

That phrase evolved into a Venn diagram, three circles interconnecting in a “sweet spot” that is, for Protzman, the ultimate goal of living. He's personally pretty comfortable with the “Do good” part, is getting better at “Be nice” – but thinks he has a ways to go with “Have fun.” (Although he admits to loving the work of writing *Jesus Swept* – so maybe he's closer than he thinks.)

And that phrase – “Do good. Be nice. Have fun.” – is the real message Protzman hopes readers will take away from *Jesus Swept*. Given the enchanting characters, fast-paced plot and alliterative word play, “Have fun,” at least, should be a slam dunk.

“Writing fiction
is as close
to being God
as you can get.”

LIT CALENDAR

BULLS HEAD BOOKSHOP

Author Reading — Chapel Hill author Kate Betterton reads from her award-winning novel *Where the Lake Becomes the River*. Jan. 29, 4pm

CARRBORO BRANCH LIBRARY

Ongoing Events — Storytime, Saturdays at 10:30am
Toddler Time, Thursdays at 4pm

CHAPEL HILL PUBLIC LIBRARY

Meet-the-Author Tea — With Louise Hawes, author of *Black Pearls: A Faerie Strand*. Feb. 13 with refreshments at 3:30pm and program from 4-5pm. For information call 968-2780.

Reading for those with low vision — Special program on assistive technology. Feb. 14, 4-6pm

Ongoing Events — Story Time, for ages 3-6; Junior Book Club, for readers grades 1-3; Time for Toddlers, for stories songs and activities; Baby Time, for children between 6 and 18 months.

Dates and times vary. chapelhillpubliclibrary.org

CYBRARY

The North Carolina Roots of African American Literature — A discussion led by the editor of the anthology, UNC Distinguished Professor of English, William L. Andrews. Feb. 20, 6:30pm. 918-7387, www.co.orange.nc.us/library/cybrary

Book Discussions — On Feb. 24 at 7pm, the Contemporary Fiction Book Club meets to discuss *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie; On Feb. 10 at 7pm, the Carrboreaders Non-Fiction Book Club meets to discuss *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* by Malcolm Gladwell.

MARKET STREET BOOKS

Author Reading — Steve Cushman reads from *Fracture City*. Feb. 3, 7-8pm

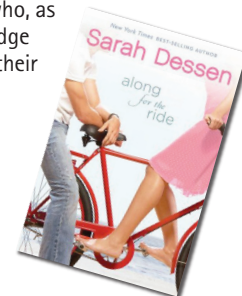
MCINTYRE'S

Author Readings — Abigail T. Pons and Michael Oswalt read from *Investing In An Uncertain Economy For Dummies*, Jan. 30, 2pm; Dr. Barbara Fredrickson reads from *Positivity: Groundbreaking Research Reveals How to Embrace the Hidden Strength of Positive Emotions, Overcome Negativity and Thrive*, Feb. 6, 2pm; Paul Maliszewski reads from *Fakers*, Feb. 13, 2pm; Kate Betterton reads from *Where The Lake Becomes The River*, Feb. 14, 11am

Author Lunch — Luncheon at The Old Granary Restaurant with the mother and son writing team who, as “Charles Todd”, pens the Inspector Rutledge mystery series. The authors will discuss their new book, *A Matter of Justice*, Feb. 25, 2:30pm, \$40

WILSON LIBRARY

Author Reading — Sarah Dessen reads from her new novel, *Along for the Ride*. Reception at 5pm, program 5:45pm



Yunomi by Barbara Higgins

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