

## **Christian Fiction Labels**

This information was collected by James LaRue, Director of Douglas County Public Libraries, who posted the following inquiry to Libnet on March 15, 2005:

Is there anyone out there using "Christian fiction" labels for some of their collection and have you had any legal challenges?

### **Executive Summary**

- Many libraries in Colorado, large and small, urban, suburban and rural, currently use some form of "Christian fiction" or "inspirational labeling."
- Generally, the libraries so doing regard this as a finding aid, not as a prejudicial label to ward people away from the collection.
- Even our State Librarian and various other IF (intellectual freedom) luminaries around the state were inclined to think this did NOT fall under the ALA's guidelines AGAINST labeling.

*-Provided by James LaRue*

<b>Responses</b>
We use Labels that we designed in house. They have a sunrise and "Inspirational Fiction" written on them.... We did not see any available commercially that we liked - most had crosses and other symbols that were representational of specific religions.
We were trying to avoid legal issues and open the genre to many beliefs and interpretations, so "inspirational" fit the bill. We have had no complaints or challenges. Our large community of "inspirational" readers are thrilled to find authors they might have missed otherwise. The decisions about what will be included are made in cataloging according to the criteria developed between Technical Services and Adult Services Staff.
...uses "Inspirational" stickers on the "Christian" books. We do not shelve them in a separate location. They are interfiled with the other fiction titles.
We started using Christian fiction labels in the last year. A large number of patrons were requesting this type of book and it makes it easier for the staff and patrons to have them all together. We are also labeling our Christian fiction audio books. A big percentage of these titles are donated by patrons.
We use them in ... and have not had any comments or challenges.
A quickie subject search of Marmot's catalog under "Christian fiction" yielded over 2,000 items held by our members.... it appears its use as a subject is pretty widespread in Marmot land.

We label Christian fiction. It is treated like any other cataloging subcategory, such as Mystery, Western, Romance, Paperback, Spanish, Science Fiction. Since PW, Booklist, and many other industry journals use the term in reviews, bestseller lists, etc., we felt it was a legitimate subcategory. We do not use genre labels (the ones with pictures) but we give them different holding codes and print the genre section on the label itself, so the genre category shows up in the PAC as well as on the book. We do hope to even pull the section out of general fiction at some point in the future, based on patron requests, just like we did mystery, science fiction and western. We may even look at a horror section, if there is a need.

My purpose as a Technical Services Librarian is to make it easy for our patrons to find the literature they are looking for. If Muslim Fiction becomes popular, I'll do the same thing. They are general labels that are used in the industry. If they want to change it to "Inspirational Fiction" or as one of our patrons likes to call it "Romances without the Dirty Bits" Fiction, fine. But if we don't label, they can't find. Isn't that the whole purpose of having librarians and cataloging?!?!

If ALA asks me to quit labeling my Christian fiction, I'll catalog it in the 200's. Or will they tell us to change the 200's to no longer say "Christianity & Christian Theology" or "Christian denominations or Sects"? Maybe I can move the detective stories to the 364's. That's one way around labeling. Yea--science fiction in the 500's! We'll catalog everything as if it was non-fiction. Should I no longer label the Spanish books as "Spanish"? Isn't that separating by race?

Okay--now I'm ranting. Sorry-- you just hit a button. This concept never even came to my mind. No one has ever complained to us about it. Please keep me up to date about this one. It has my Intellectual Freedom hackles up.

We use both Christian fiction and Christian romance as subject codes in patron records and for patrons to search by on our web OPAC. We also have subject codes for other religious fiction. We don't have sections to physically search so we might be a little different. We have never had people challenge this.

We do have an "inspirational" label that we recently started using in YA.

We just started using labels that say "Inspirational." They are defacto Christian fiction labels but don't say Christian (although I can't say for sure that some of the books might not be inspirational in another religious context). There has been no issue, legal or otherwise, as far as I know. We also have an "Inspirational Fiction" display - probably the most popular display in the library.

Our library does use Christian Fiction labels on books.
We use a preprinted spine label-- surprise, a cross-- and a subject heading "Christian Fiction" in the cataloging. Occasionally we'll get a complaint about one of the "sexier" titles being identified with the shelf label, but that's the extent of dissent.
... uses Christian fiction labels. It helps our patrons identify their location. We also use various other genre labels-mystery, science fiction, thrillers, etc.
<p>We use "Inspirational" labels for a paperback collection. The collection is primarily "Christian fiction" because as you stated in your email that is where the publishing and the demand is. However, there are a few "Jewish fiction" titles (e.g. The Chosen and other works by Potok; Snow in August by Hamill), plus a few nonfiction such as 8 Minute Meditation. I would love to broaden the coverage of the collection by adding more alternatives to just the Christian fiction, but really cannot find much published.</p> <p>We have not had any legal issues.</p> <p>Our response from patrons has been very positive because they can more easily find what they are looking for. Prior to the advent of the Inspirational Paperbacks (3 years ago) many of the titles were intermixed with out Popular Paperbacks. They were always there, just harder to identify.</p>
We have started using genre dots in our teen section to help people find books, and one of the colors we use represents Christian Fiction. This is stated on the sign that serves as a key to what all the colors mean, but not on the dot itself. We chose the dot method of labels as a way to try and both help patrons find genre books if they were looking for them, but not put any obvious meaning on the label so they wouldn't see them as a boundary or cause for stigmatization from their peers. Our Teen Advisory Group were the ones who came up with the idea and the categories, and they have been useful in helping us select books that need dots. We've had the dots in play for a couple of months now without much comment at all from folks, but those who have used them seem to like them.
Some of the libraries in the county use the Christian Stickers. There have been no problems as far as I know.
Some of our member (not branch) libraries have separate "Inspirational" collections, which how it is designated in the online catalog. One library uses red dots on the spine, another uses "Christian fiction" stickers (I think), and another uses an inspirational

<p>sticker. One library uses the genre sticker, but does not have a separate collection.</p> <p>Each one of those collections is actually different in scope. For example, ... has purely Christian fiction, ... and .... have "Family friendly" collections, and ... has the "Inspirational" collection (mostly Christian though).</p>
<p>We are using Christian Fiction labels and have had no legal challenges that I know of.</p>
<p>Our Library uses Christian fiction labels. I debated, but we have a large base of Christian Fiction only readers. Those patrons are now happy and we even keep them in their own area. This seems to please the patrons who choose to read that genre and those who don't. We have only gotten praise from the patrons. Also the Christian fiction label helps us and our volunteers shelve with ease and know where those certain books belong. I really personally don't see a problem with the stickers, although I understand some patrons may be bothered by the word "Christian." So far no one has ever complained. I would really hate to change all those books if some kind of controversy comes up because of the label!!!!!!</p> <p>We do use the genre headings, including Christian fiction or Religious fiction in the catalog.</p>
<p>We use "Inspirational" labels - kind of covers all our bases.</p>
<p>I forwarded your e-mail (sans your name and all the other e-mail clutter) to the Air Force Command Librarians. One has responded that one of the base libraries did mark books in such a way. Another responded: "'NO' and we won't be doing it either?"</p>
<p>Officially we do not use Christian fiction labels. But like many other public libraries, we have some "rogue" staff members at certain branches who apply Christian stickers without the cooperation of the central processing department. This is especially true ... where staff perceive a larger proportion of evangelical Christians among the patrons (although I doubt we have evidence to support that claim).</p> <p>The heads of cataloging and acquisitions have tried with minimal success to discourage this and all other unofficial marking of materials by branch staff.</p> <p>We officially recognize only three fiction genres: Mystery Fiction, Science Fiction and Western Fiction. We regard "Christian" not as another genre that can be labelled, but as bias that can occur in any genre. (There is already enough overlap in the three genres that we do recognize to cause labelling dilemmas.) In addition, "Christian" is fraught with problems of subjective evaluation both at the cataloguing end, and at the reader end. We</p>

see the potential use of Christian stickers as more an implied "seal of approval" by either the library or a special interest group of readers, and in that sense we agree with ALA's discouragement of content labels.

We do, however, use "Christian fiction" as a genre label in the OPAC according to "Guidelines on Subject Access to Individual Works of Fiction, Drama, Etc." (GASFD), but this can be one of several labels for any individual title. Subject and genre headings in the catalogue provide more intelligent and deeper access to materials, whereas a single label (other than a tried-and-true classification scheme) on the shelf tends to typecast material and thereby restrict readership.

In the five years I have been in this job, I am aware of only one patron request to institute Christian labels (which accompanied a gift of some non-fiction geology titles with a creationist bias). I am not aware of any legal challenges to the (unofficial) labels that do exist in some of our branches

We use Christian fiction labels. Our patrons love the fact they can easily locate their favorite genre. No legal challenges yet.

We use the Christian fiction labels on our books.

What I observed during the year ... is that the patrons who sought Christian fiction liked/appreciated the labels. Other than the fact that the labels contain the word Christian, what does make them different from other labeling?

Perhaps the ACLU and ALA should look at it from the point of view that there are other patrons would not be happy with the faith-content, and the labels would steer those patrons AWAY from the literature.

When I began working in this position (2 yrs ago), I put out a question (on our listserv) about labels and stickers. As I recall, a CO librarian on the front range said their T.S.dept had stopped putting stickers on everything - to save time and get titles out on shelves. Someone else said they'd stopped using the long labels too. Be nice, wouldn't it, if we could survey our patrons to get their feedback on stickers at least. I would argue that excellent signage in the library and occasional displays to highlight parts of the collection, could preclude sticker use. Sometimes our shelvers complain that they can't read the title and author on the spine of the book b/c some or all of that info. is covered w/stickers. Do patrons have the same trouble?

Our library does in fact use an "inspirational" sticker to label books that are of a more "Christian" variety. So far there have been no complaints and many of our patrons

appreciate the distinction.

Do you have a reference for the ALA's position on the matter?

As far as I can determine the only action the ACLU has taken was in 2000 against a library district in Olathe, Kansas.

I spoke to the ACLU attorney who initiated the action in Olathe and received the following information:

1. If the Olathe library board had not backed down the ACLU would have considered legal action. 2. In answer to the question "why not go after a bigger library district and establish a general precedent" his reply was that he is not aware of any larger library in his area (Kansas and Western Missouri) that use the labels. 3. His feeling was that nationwide the ACLU would be prepared to initiate action against any library following a complaint from a patron once it had been refused by the library board.

On the ALA page, "LABELS AND RATING SYSTEMS: An Interpretation of the LIBRARY BILL OF RIGHTS" it states:

"Labels on library materials may be viewpoint-neutral directional aids that save the time of users, or they may be attempts to prejudice or discourage users or restrict their access to materials. When labeling is an attempt to prejudice attitudes, it is a censor's tool. The American Library Association opposes labeling as a means of predisposing people's attitudes toward library materials.

Prejudicial labels are designed to restrict access, based on a value judgment that the content, language or themes of the material, or the background or views of the creator(s) of the material, render it inappropriate or offensive for all or certain groups of users. The prejudicial label is used to warn, discourage or prohibit users or certain groups of users from accessing the material. Such labels may be used to remove materials from open shelves to restricted locations where access depends on staff intervention.

Viewpoint-neutral directional aids facilitate access by making it easier for users to locate materials. The materials are housed on open shelves and are equally accessible to all users, who may choose to consult or ignore the directional aids at their own discretion.

Directional aids can have the effect of prejudicial labels when their implementation becomes proscriptive rather than descriptive. When directional aids are used to forbid access or to suggest moral or doctrinal endorsement, the effect is the same as prejudicial labeling."

Note, ALA does not discount the use of all labeling, but rather supports "viewpoint-

neutral directional aids" (e.g., genre labels) and warns against labels that are "prejudicial" in nature and restrict access. If we accept "Christian fiction" as a legitimate literary genre, than it seems to me that the labels would be directional in nature, not an attempt to discourage/restrict access.

Thanks, I appreciate the official citation. But ALA, in its position on this, is (I believe) guilty of profound internal contradiction. What is the intellectual labor of librarianship? Classification. What is classification? The process of assigning categories or labels to content. Why? To group like materials together. And why do that? To save the time of the reader (with apologies to Raganathan).

So here's a challenge to the IF committee: When librarians assign the subject heading "Christian fiction" to materials, is this prejudicial labeling? Is a sticky dot somehow MORE prejudicial than a call number?

When librarians pull together a display of materials on a similar theme or perspective (murder, fantasy, ecology, local history), the better to promote or highlight access to a collection, are they then guilty of predisposing people's attitudes toward library materials?

Repeat: cataloging IS labeling, and in public libraries adhering to Dewey classifications, is also inherently prejudicial toward Western (and against mid- and eastern) world views.

Shall we then eschew cataloging altogether?

Regardless of whether or not we choose to go with the "Christian Fiction" arrangement, public libraries --- our included --- have, for more years than I care to remember, separated certain groups of popular materials via genre, e.g. romance fiction, mysteries, sci-fi, westerns, etc. And these segregated collections have (gasp) labels on their spines so that patrons can actually find them! I mean, we are in the business of helping people find stuff... are we not? What a concept. Just one more mixed-message from our good friends at ALA.

How do you tell the difference between prejudicial labeling and directional labeling? My sense of "Christian fiction" is the same as romance, fiction, or mystery. Those who like it want to know how to find it easily. Those who don't like it want to know how to avoid it?

Actually, I agree ... that "Christian Fiction" is a directional label & acknowledges the demands of the marketplace. My interpretation ... is that these labels substantially agree with ALA's policy. In my original post on this subject the last paragraph said: "If we accept "Christian fiction" as a legitimate literary genre, than it seems to me that the labels would be directional in nature, not an attempt to discourage/restrict access." I'm guessing

the phrase "if we accept" was misinterpreted to imply we should not accept it as a genre.

I don't disagree with your characterization of Christian fiction as a legitimate literary genre, or that the spirit of these labels is directional and not prejudicial. I'm just trying to point out the possible consequences of going down this road.

We use spine labels & have not had any legal issues. We decided to use them to help people find this type of fiction, or to avoid it.

I was involved in the last revision of the labeling statement, so perhaps I can shed some light on this subject. If you want to skip all the philosophical stuff, I offer a compromise at the end, so scroll down until you see "Compromise".

Please note that all opinions are my own and don't necessarily reflect those of my employer, CAL, ALA, or anyone else (except perhaps my dog, as we've discussed this at great length).

As we tried to explain in our descriptions of prejudicial vs. viewpoint neutral, one is meant to deny access based on content, while the other is meant as a finding aid. Examples of the former would be to use MPAA ratings (a private system) on videos and DVDs to restrict access to minors, while the genre labels are examples of the latter. Besides groups like the MPAA, other groups have attempted to endorse or disparage books and films based on their own standards. An example that comes to mind are the movie ratings issued by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, who use language like "morally offensive" and "troubling" in their ratings. While they have every right to offer such reviews, I think most libraries would hesitate to use the USCCB rating system in their libraries, nor would they begin to label books as being recommended by either Focus on the Family or by the Covenant of UU Pagans.

Let's say that you decide to use Christian fiction labels. In the interest of balance, would you need to create labels for Jewish, Islamic, or Buddhist fiction? Though this might be harder to do, some people might say that the act of limiting your religious genre labels to Christian implies that only Christian fiction is worth identifying, thus giving the appearance of subtle approval or endorsement of that religion from the library.

Which books or films get a label for Christian content? Only those that are self-identified as such? (i.e., those books that are labeled by the publisher as Christian fiction, often through small print on the back cover?) Or will catalogers start having to determine if a novel's moral universe is Christian, even if it's not explicitly marketed as such? What are the standards for such classification?

Having said all that, let's turn to another ALA statement: expurgation. I've included a



longer excerpt at the end of my message, but will give you a quick snippet:

"Expurgating library materials is a violation of the Library Bill of Rights. Expurgation as defined by this interpretation includes any deletion, excision, alteration, editing, or obliteration of any part(s) of books or other library resources by the library..."

So, according to this statement, if you were to mark out the words "Christian fiction" on the back cover of a novel, you're violating the Library Bill of Rights. Likewise, if you remove an MPAA rating from a DVD cover, you're doing the same thing. Now, you may be thinking that I just contradicted myself, since I earlier said that you shouldn't use MPAA ratings to restrict access to minors. Here's the difference: it's one thing to have a rating on a DVD box that's been included by the publisher. It's another thing to use that label as the guide for who can check it out (hence the "restrict access to minors"). Do we label books as being appropriate for preschoolers vs. teens? Sure we do - it's our job to present library materials in a way that helps readers find what they need. However, we've gone away from the practice of restricting kids from checking out books from the adult section, thus (in my opinion) rightly leaving this decision of what's appropriate to each family. If you don't want your kids to check out R-rated movies, tell them that & tell them why. This is an example of the intricacies of our profession. We want to help people find what they need, but ultimately must let them use their own judgment.

!!!!COMPROMISE!!!!

Back to expurgation & Christian fiction: as stated before, it would be a violation of the Library Bill of Rights to mark out "Christian Fiction" on the back of a book. Therefore, if a book is coming from the publisher with this identifier on the back, it's already labeled as Christian fiction. If you wanted to help the reader by making these words more prominent through a spine label, you could say that you're just repeating information that's already on the book's cover. However, I'd suggest getting a whole bunch of labels for other religious groups. Otherwise, you're opening yourself up for charges of favoritism or promotion. If the religious labels are a hit, then perhaps identifying fiction for other "affinity groups" like African Americans or gays and lesbians will come next. I'd better stop there.

Expurgation of Library Materials: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights (an excerpt)

Expurgating library materials is a violation of the Library Bill of Rights. Expurgation as defined by this interpretation includes any deletion, excision, alteration, editing, or obliteration of any part(s) of books or other library resources by the library, its agent, or its parent institution (if any). By such expurgation, the library is in effect denying access to the complete work and the entire spectrum of ideas that the work intended to express. Such action stands in violation of Articles I, II, and III of the Library Bill of Rights, which state that "Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation," that "Materials should not be proscribed or

removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval," and that "Libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment."

The act of expurgation has serious implications. It involves a determination that it is necessary to restrict access to the complete work. This is censorship. When a work is expurgated, under the assumption that certain portions of that work would be harmful to minors, the situation is no less serious.

Expurgation of any books or other library resources imposes a restriction, without regard to the rights and desires of all library users, by limiting access to ideas and information.

Further, expurgation without written permission from the holder of the copyright on the material may violate the copyright provisions of the United States Code

Always a pleasure to hear from you and your dog....

First, I used to work in a library where we broke out our paperbacks by all kinds of genres: mystery, romance, historical fiction, and western, of course, but also Nurse, Gothic (no kidding), Fantasy (as opposed to science fiction), and I think a couple more. Did we have trouble figuring out which was which? Sure, sometimes. But with the paperbacks, it really had more to do with the covers: nurse with perky hat? Nurse book. Extreme décolletage? Historical fiction. Woman in white nightgown fleeing down gloomy heath one cloudy but moonlight night? Gothic.

In short, extremely finicky professional judgment. Often performed by our shelveers.

We did NOT break out all those extra ones in our hard back collection, however. We did have Westerns, Mysteries, and combined SF/Fantasy. Why didn't we have Nurse and Gothics pulled out? Because (a) we didn't have enough of them and (b) we didn't really have that much demand for them.

Second, Christian fiction is the same, I think. With the huge expansion of that publishing genre, there are both a lot of them (as opposed to a huge expansion of UU Pagan publishing, more's the pity) and there are lots of people asking for and checking out such Christian titles. So a "section" of such titles might indeed make sense for some libraries.

But because ... is my hero, I too would like to offer a compromise. The "finding aid" logic still makes sense. But rename the label to "Inspirational" (as indeed, many libraries do). This embraces clean living, multiple faiths, and a clean, politically correct conscience.

Resources:

For more information on labels and rating systems, visit the ALA site at:

<http://www.ala.org/Template.cfm?Section=interpretations&Template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=72556>

For more information on expurgation of library materials, visit:

<http://www.ala.org/ala/oif/statementspols/statementspolicies.htm#expurgation>