

The Strange Saga of ‘Jesus Calling,’ The Evangelical Bestseller You’ve Never Heard Of

-reviewed by Ruth Graham

A ten-year-old devotional written in the voice of God suddenly became a commercial juggernaut. Now, its publisher is trying to reconcile its New Age origins with evangelical orthodoxy.

The seventh-best selling book in America last year was a 10-year-old Christian devotional written by a woman who claims to have written down the words of God. [*Jesus Calling: Enjoying Peace in His Presence*](#) sold more copies in 2013 than the much more buzzed-about titles *Lean In*, the latest Stephen King book, and *50 Shades of Grey*, according to Nielsen BookScan. Overall, more than 10 million copies in 26 languages have been sold since the book’s inauspicious debut in 2004.

Jesus Calling is a devotional, a mainstay genre in Christian publishing and in the daily lives of many Christians. Best-selling devotionals like *Our Daily Bread*, *My Utmost for His Highest*, and *The Purpose-Driven Life* consist of short sections that are meant to be read each day for encouragement and contemplation. Christians who value the idea of nurturing a personal relationship with Jesus—or of the idea of spending time each day in quiet contemplation—often use devotionals as a tool to accompany prayer and Bible-reading.

What sets apart *Jesus Calling* is that it is written in the voice of Jesus Christ, presented as speaking directly to the reader. This Jesus who spouts feel-good mysticisms like, “As you walk along your life-path holding My hand, you are already in touch with the essence of heaven: nearness to Me.” The book’s soothing tone has made it wildly popular among believers, but its apparent claims to contain new revelation from God have also made it controversial.

Jesus Calling is a bona fide phenomenon, but one that is little-read or even heard of outside evangelical Christian circles. Its author, Sarah Young, is a reclusive missionary and rarely grants interviews; both [*the New York Times*](#)

and the influential [evangelical magazine *Christianity Today*](#) had to settle for email interviews when they profiled Young's success last fall. Young's editor at Thomas Nelson, a Christian subsidiary of HarperCollins, told *Times* religion columnist Mark Oppenheimer she has met Young "several times," but few others in the publishing world have done so. Young says vertigo and Lyme disease have kept her seriously ill for years.

Thomas Nelson, the publisher, has clearly heard the complaints that *Jesus Calling* is heretical; the introduction to recent editions of the book includes subtle but significant changes.

Despite Young's absence from the conference and media circuit where so many inspirational books find an audience, *Jesus Calling* has become a veritable industry unto itself. It has spawned apps, journals, calendars, deluxe leather editions, special versions for teens and women, and a follow-up called *Jesus Today*, which also became a best-seller and was named 2013 Book of the Year by the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association. Publisher Thomas Nelson says it sold more than 2.5 million *Jesus Calling* products by 2013 not counting the original book itself. The book has also inspired unaffiliated homages like *Heaven Calling* and *The Spirit Calling*.

If *Jesus Calling* has become a cash cow for its author and publisher, it has also, it's fair to surmise, become something of a headache. Though many evangelicals talk of listening for God's voice and experiencing his presence, the notion of speaking publicly in the voice of God is questionable at best, heretical at worst. Young's book has prompted objections from within the mainstream evangelical community, from people who say the book is misleading, or even dangerous. "She puts her thoughts into the first person and then presents that 'person' as the resurrected Lord," David Crump, professor of religion at evangelical Calvin College, told *Christianity Today*. "I'm tempted to call this blasphemy."

Thomas Nelson specifically requested I not use the word "channeling" to describe Young's first-person writing in the voice of Jesus—the word has New Age connotations—but it's hard to avoid it in describing the book's rhetorical approach. And on the edges of evangelicalism, where alertness to "New Age" influence runs high, concern has bloomed into outrage. Writer Warren B. Smith, who calls himself an "ex-New Ager," wrote a 2013 book

called [*'Another Jesus' Calling*](#), devoted entirely to dismantling Young's claims to orthodoxy. In it, he calls the book "an obvious attempt by our spiritual Adversary to get an even further foothold inside the Christian church."

Thomas Nelson has clearly heard the complaints that *Jesus Calling* is heretical; the introduction to recent editions of the book includes subtle but significant changes.

In early editions, Young's introduction pays specific respect to a book called [*God Calling*](#), a 1932 devotional edited by British writer A.J. Russell, who claimed not to have written the book himself. He said the book was written by two anonymous female "listeners" who wrote down what they thought were messages from God. *The Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs*, a guidebook published by evangelical Harvest House, says *God Calling* is "replete with denials of biblical teaching."

Young's original introduction said that *God Calling* "became a treasure to me," and that it "dovetailed remarkably well with my longing to live in Jesus' Presence." The year after reading it, "I began to wonder if I, too, could receive messages during my times of communing with God." In this version of her introduction, Young uses the word "messages" over and over, strongly implying that she is receiving direct communication with God. "Soon, messages began to flow more freely, and I bought a special notebook to record these words. ... I have continued to receive personal messages from God as I meditate on Him," and so on. "The Bible is, of course, the only inerrant Word of God," she acknowledges. But the casual reader would be forgiven for conflating Young's "messages" with direct revelations from God.

The latest edition of *Jesus Calling* includes some important changes. The paragraph about *God Calling* has been deleted, and references to received "messages" have been changed to the less mystically inflected "writings" and "devotions." In a passage in which Young recounts her early attempts to write down what God told her, the new version characterizes this as "focusing on Jesus and His Word, while asking Him to guide my thoughts." Thomas Nelson refers to the book as "Sarah's prayer journal," emphasizing that Young is not claiming to speaking for Jesus. **A skeptical reader, comparing the two introductions, would see an effort by a publisher to bring**

an increasingly controversial but lucrative best-seller into line with mainstream evangelical orthodoxy.

In an email responding to my questions, the book's publicist at Thomas Nelson, Katie Powell, wrote that the reference to *God Calling* was never meant as more than "a nod," and it was deleted because it had "created some confusion." "The book's theology has always been sound," she wrote. "The changes were made to make the introduction easier to understand, especially since *Jesus Calling* is now being read by such a wide variety of people." Thomas Nelson did not call attention to the changes, Powell wrote, because the introduction's "content did not change" between editions. **But it's hard to square that with the similarities between Young's book and *God Calling*—right down to the title.**

As for Young, she is apparently still listening. She [told an interviewer](#) earlier this year that she is currently working on another yearlong devotional "written in the same format as *Jesus Calling*." It will be published next year.