

## MARCHER LORD PRESS: OF FAITH AND VAMPIRES

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At the beginning of December 2013, Jeff Gerke (pronounced GURR-key) was tired. It had been five years since he had launched Marcher Lord Press. Marcher Lord, nicknamed MLP, was a niche publishing company dedicated to delivering high quality science fiction, fantasy, and paranormal books to the Christian market. The novels in this overlapping set of niches were grouped under the “speculative” (affectionately nicknamed “spec”) or “visionary” niche of the Christian publishing market, and it was a market Jeff’s small company had received recognition in. One of the most important awards in Christian fiction is the Christy Award. The Carol Award, which is open to members of the American Christian Fiction Writers is also a notable award. In the years between 2010 and 2013, two MLP books had received first place awards in the Christy Awards’ visionary category. Three others had made it to finalist positions, two in visionary and one in young adult.<sup>i</sup> During the same time period, Jeff’s authors had won Carol Awards in the Speculative Fiction category for four consecutive years.<sup>ii</sup> Jeff was proud of the accomplishments of his small company and the authors whose careers he had helped to launch. He enjoyed the sense of community, the family feel, that existed between him and his authors. He was also putting in about sixty hours a week. Nights, weekends, and holidays, he said, were “gone.” Jeff had hoped his publishing venture would do well enough to become a full-time job, but it had not. Like many entrepreneurs who bootstrap their businesses, he had not even paid himself for the first three years. “Can I do this for another five years?” he asked himself. The answer to that question was no. What could he do? Should he shut down the company or sell it, or was there a “magic bullet” solution he had not thought of that would transform MLP into a self-supporting enterprise? After five years of trial and error, he was out of new ideas. He began to look back on his life and the decisions that had brought him to this point.

### Jeff’s Background

Jeff Gerke was born in San Antonio, Texas. His family had lived in Phoenix, Arizona, during part of his childhood, but had returned to Texas later. Jeff attended Trinity University in San Antonio for his first two years of college. His major was theater and acting, which he now considers to have been fairly useless. After his sophomore year, he switched to the University of Texas at Austin where he attended film school. He graduated in 1987 with a bachelors’ degree but did not find his second major to be much more useful than his first. In the late 1980s, the film industry was going through a transition from editing film by hand to digital editing. UT Austin, at that time, had resisted embracing the new technology. Everything he learned about film editing, Jeff said, quickly became obsolete. After graduating, Jeff “bummed around” for a while and tried to build a career based on his film degree. He had decided during college that he wanted to produce Christian films but was unsure how to fulfill those ambitions. He discovered

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Focus on the Family's "Magee and Me" video series for children and met Bill Myers who wrote for the series. Though Focus on the Family is headquartered in Colorado Springs, their film production takes place in Los Angeles, and Jeff did not want to live there. During the summer of 1989, he spent the summer working at a YMCA summer camp. On the side, he wrote film reviews for a local Christian paper. He also started dating the woman who would later become his wife. (Jeff's wife, incidentally, is the older sister of Brandon Oldenberg, one of the co-founders of Moonbot Studios in Shreveport, Louisiana.)<sup>iii</sup>

After working at summer camps and struggling to build a career based on film, Jeff decided to try a different direction. He enrolled in Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth. "I never really felt called to be a pastor or missionary," he explained, "but I hoped for clarity along the way."<sup>iv</sup> Jeff worked at the research desk at the seminary's library while his wife taught school. He graduated in 1994 with an MDiv in theology. He had decided he did not want to be a pastor or missionary or to move to L.A. and write for the film industry, but what could he do? While in seminary, he had considered being a chaplain at a children's hospital. A position came open in Dallas, and he applied but did not get it. After taking an inventory of his gifts and interests, he told his wife, "I think I want to use my MDiv to be a writer." In what he describes as an "unrealistic, uninformed way," he asked his wife to give him six months to get published. He wrote a query letter and three sample chapters for a book we wanted to write and sent them to sixteen publishers. The book was a near-future techno-thriller which was a bit of a stretch for most Christian publishers. Amazingly, eight of the publishers wrote back and said they would like to see more. Jeff had no idea how unusual that was. He also did not realize is that publishers expected the author to have completed an entire book before sending out the queries and sample chapters. All eight of the publishers who responded had asked to see the completed manuscript. By this time the six months were over, and Jeff knew he would need several months to write a book. Not realizing how uncommon it was to get such positive responses from so many publishers at once, he decided it just wasn't God's will for him to be a writer. He now looks back and shakes his head at the methods he, as a younger person, had used in making such determinations.<sup>v</sup>

Jeff, by this time, was working as a middle manager for a company that made training videos. He was in charge of the tape duplication machines there and had a team who worked for him. Even though Jeff had written off the possibility of a writing career, others were not so easily dissuaded. Jeff had not been working for the training video firm for long when he got a call from Rod Morris who served as the fiction director at Multnomah Publishing. "I really, really want this book," he told Jeff. "When do you think you could have it?" Jeff was not sure how to answer. He had a full-time job and a new baby. Morris gave him a time and told him if he could have the book written by then, he would take it before the publication committee. On the strength of Jeff's writing, Morris was able to get him a three-book publishing contract. Jeff was not familiar enough with the publishing business to realize, however, that this was not the standard "rich and famous" contract. He expected money to roll in. He was sure he would be sent on book tours and trips to L.A. With those expectations in mind, he quit his job. Unfortunately, Jeff's book did not sell well. The people who actually read it, he said, really liked it, but not many people bought it. At the time he wondered why.<sup>vi</sup>

Even though Jeff's book did not catapult him into a writing career, it did lead to a career in publishing. Rod Morris's company, Multnomah Publishing, in Sisters, Oregon, offered him a job. Jeff and his young family moved to the west coast. While at Multnomah, Jeff championed science fiction and fantasy novels. When he was able to convince the publisher to invest in them, however, most of them did poorly.<sup>vii</sup>

After working for Multnomah for a while, Jeff accepted a job with Strang Communications, the publisher of *Charisma* magazine, in Orlando, Florida. Jeff enjoyed living in Orlando. He and his family had season tickets to Disney World. Strang had a nonfiction line, Siloam, that focused on alternative health and fitness products. They had plans to develop a fiction line. Strang focused on the charismatic segment of evangelicalism, and charismatic Christians tend to have a strong interest in spiritual warfare. Jeff thought fiction line with science fiction, supernatural, time travel, and spiritual warfare novels might just be a good fit for them. The company developed the Realms imprint (In publishing, an imprint is a specialized brand within a larger brand.) to tap into the demand for stories of that nature. Realms, Jeff said, was really an earlier version of Marcher Lord Press. The Realms titles featured good stories, world class cover illustration, and an expensive two-page center spread (advertisement) in an industry magazine. Unfortunately, the leadership of Strang had lost confidence in the Realms line before it even launched. Jeff, by that time, had already left Strang to work as the fiction editor for Navpress in Colorado Springs, but friends back at Strang told him the Realms series did not sell well. The series' disappointing performance forced Jeff to rethink his ideas about the market. His assumption had been, to quote the mysterious voice in Kevin Costner's *Field of Dreams*, "If you build it, they will come." He had assumed fantasy and science fiction did not sell well in the Christian market because the books were often poorly written, poorly illustrated, or poorly marketed. The Realms books had suffered from none of those shortcomings, so *why didn't they sell well?*<sup>viii</sup>

Jeff came to the conclusion that Christian bookstores were only reaching certain substrata of Christianity at large. He described that group as "sweet ladies who want to read about bonnets and buggies—not mutants and vampires." (Jet Marketing's Christian Fiction Reader Survey, conducted ten years later in 2015, showed little change so far as science fiction, fantasy, and horror were concerned. Only 18.2% of respondents indicated that they read science fiction and fantasy and 7.7% indicated that they read paranormal fiction. Interestingly, 35.9% indicated that they read Amish fiction compared to 65.8% who read historical fiction, the most popular category. Their sample was 92% female and only 24% were under 45 years of age, but over 60% said they gave Christian fiction books as gifts to friends and family members.)<sup>ix</sup> Jeff decided what he was doing was comparable to selling books on making rock candy in a gardening store or selling flower pots in a golfing equipment store. As he worked at Navpress, Jeff wondered how he could reach the mutant and vampire crowd who, as he expressed it, did not want to step into a Christian bookstore and come out smelling like potpourri. He knew editors occasionally managed to place science fiction and fantasy books in Christian bookstores but by then, Jeff believed, the people who read those kinds of books had stopped looking. "If I created a publishing house [for that market]," Jeff asked himself, "what would it look like?"<sup>x</sup>

## The Roots of Christian Fantasy

Defining what a “Christian” novel is can be difficult. In a marketing sense, it is a novel that is written by an identified Christian for an identified Christian target market and written in a way that (hopefully) appeals to Christian sensibilities. Christian novels, in general, lack profanity and explicit sexual content though they sometimes deal with sexuality as a moral issue. Some Christian novels carry strong Christian messages whereas others offer wholesome escape reading that is more faith-friendly than explicitly religious in nature. Speculative fiction, the genre science fiction and fantasy are clustered into, is a special case. Some Christians are uncomfortable with the colorful and often disturbing imagery they find in such novels. Fans of the speculative genres, however, sometimes find other forms of Christian fiction to be too bland for their tastes. In defending their literary tastes, they are quick to point out that some biblical books like the book of Revelation are filled with colorful and disturbing imagery. Most Christian fantasy authors look to C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien as spiritual and literary heroes. Lewis was an Oxford professor from Ireland known by the general public for writing *The Chronicles of Narnia*. A former atheist, Lewis had started his writing career by writing mostly nonfiction books that addressed intellectual questions about faith and doubt. The events leading up to his own conversion had included the reading of novels by Christian fantasy author George MacDonald<sup>xi</sup> and conversations with colleagues at Oxford, including a devout Catholic linguist named J.R.R. Tolkien.<sup>xii</sup> Lewis became a celebrity during World War II when the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) recruited him to deliver a series of talks on the radio to reassure the people of London during a time when bombing raids were common and the future looked uncertain. They wanted a “voice of faith” for the English people who was not strictly identified with any particular religious group there, so they chose a writer/professor rather than a bishop.<sup>xiii</sup> The publication of *The Screwtape Letters*, a satirical set of letters between an old devil who was coaching a younger devil in the fine art of corrupting souls, became so popular with audiences in America that Lewis was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine.<sup>xiv</sup> Lewis wrote *The Chronicles of Narnia* later in his career. He had grown weary of intellectual debates by that time and preferred to address matters of faith in the more peaceful realm of imagination.<sup>xv</sup> Writing the *Narnia* series took Lewis back to the joy he had felt reading George MacDonald’s novels. J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis were members of an Oxford writers’ group called the Inklings.<sup>xvi</sup> They both loved fantasy novels but addressed the question of faith in fiction differently. Unlike Lewis, Tolkien did not like allegorical novels in which certain characters were direct symbols for biblical characters.<sup>xvii</sup> (Aslan the lion, in Lewis’ novels, was a Christ symbol, for example.) Christianity is both nowhere and everywhere in Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* novels. Gandalf the wizard bears an unmistakable resemblance to biblical prophets like Moses and Elijah and even experiences a kind of death and resurrection when he falls into an abyss with a demon.<sup>xviii</sup> The source of Gandalf’s power is never really identified, though Saruman, his evil counterpart, apparently draws his from the spiritual forces of darkness. *The Silmarillion*, a collection of Tolkien’s Middle Earth stories, begins with an Elvish creation story that resembles the biblical one.<sup>xix</sup> Neither Lewis nor Tolkien published exclusively for Christian bookstore audiences, and many readers probably don’t notice the Christian undercurrents in *The Lord of the Rings* or consider it to be a Christian novel in any formal sense.

Where, one might wonder, would Lewis and Tolkien have published their books if they entered the market in the early twenty-first century? Would Christian publishers have rejected them

because of the wizards and fantasy creatures? Would secular publishers have told Tolkien to add more sexual elements to compete with books like *The Game of Thrones*? They would almost certainly have told him to cut *The Lord of the Rings* to about a third of its original length and get to the action more quickly. The film versions of Tolkien's novels strengthened the roles of minor female characters like Arwen and Eowyn (arguably for the better), but the original novels were male-dominated. Where in the twenty-first century publishing scene, then, were the modern disciples of Lewis and Tolkien to find homes for their work? This was a question Jeff and his Marcher Lord Press authors would struggle with over the next few years.

### **New Technology Brings New Opportunities**

In 2006 and 2007, print-on-demand was starting to emerge. High-quality ink jet printing made it possible for publishers and independent writers to print attractively-packaged books one at a time rather than having to produce mass quantities and spend thousands of dollars on inventory. The main drawback was that the printing cost per book was higher. Most retailers take 50% of the cover price of a book. Amazon takes 55%. If a 400-page book cost \$7.50 to print using print-on-demand, and postage was \$1.50/unit, the publisher would have to sell the book through the bookstore for \$18.00 just to cover printing and postage costs. Neither the publisher nor the author would make anything. Printing thousands of books at a time on a traditional web offset press resulted in economies of scale that reduced the cost of printing an individual book to only a few cents for large print runs. (Even a relatively small print run of 2,000 books could run around \$5,000 or \$2.50/book.) For publishers serving small niche markets, however, printing thousands of copies left them with warehouses full of unsold books. For Jeff, building a business model around print-on-demand and internet-based retailing seemed like the best way to reach his target market even though the price per book would be higher. If Jeff could convince enough of his customers to purchase from his own website rather than through Amazon, he could retain a higher percentage of the revenues, price his books competitively, and still make some profit. He would have to sell through Amazon also, of course, but the more he could direct his customers to the MLP website, the more profits he could retain. Kindle, which would offer a less expensive way to distribute books for both publishers and customers, was still a couple of years away.<sup>xx</sup>

After working for three publishing companies, Jeff felt that he had developed a thorough understanding of all of the different aspects of running a publishing house. He believed he understood editing, typesetting, financing, and marketing. With his business plan written, Jeff left his job as an editor at Navpress and went freelance, writing his own books and editing the work of other authors. By that time, Jeff knew enough people to make freelancing work. He had become known in the industry as the go-to editor for speculative fiction, a name that had been given to science fiction, fantasy, paranormal, and other hard-to-peg categories of fiction. Though his experiences with publishing his fiction had been frustrating, Jeff had managed to write and publish six "how-to" books on writing fiction for *Writer's Digest*, the leading magazine for writers. Though he had resigned from Navpress to make time to build his new company, he soon discovered that he actually had less free time after he went freelance. During that time period, several things happened. Jeff and his wife, who already had two children by this time, were trying to adopt a third child from overseas. Jeff's grandfather died and, though it was a sad occasion, Jeff received an unexpected financial boost from the inheritance money. Jeff and his

wife used part of the money to complete the adoption process. The rest went into the launch of the new company.<sup>xxi</sup>

### **Preparing to Launch**

Jeff made the decision to launch in 2007 but gave himself a year to put the company together. During that time, he designed the author contract, found the first novels, designed the covers, and worked out the details of the printing process. He described the year as “a year of craziness.” He had to apply for a business license and a sales tax license and form an LLC. He had to select the first books, learn typesetting (a friend from Navpress taught him), learn Photoshop, do what marketing he could, figure out an accounting system, and figure out an online sales system. The latter, he said, was a nightmare. He had to have an online storefront, and the company he hired had trouble making it work. He launched the website in December of 2007 to announce the upcoming launch of the company. To give the company a promotional boost, he planned a big contest for the opening day which he set for October 1, 2008.<sup>xxii</sup>

Marcher Lord Press was the name Jeff chose for his new venture. As an amateur medieval historian, Jeff had learned about the strongholds built along the wilderness border between England and Wales. Though dikes had been built to establish boundary lines, these had been poorly maintained, and a system of fortresses worked better. Knights, called lords of the march or marcher lords, lived in the fortresses. They dwelled on the boundaries of civilization where wild folks dwelled. As a young person playing Dungeons and Dragons, Jeff was familiar with the image of a keep, a castle on the borderlands. Signs were posted along the border with the warning, “Here there be dragons.” Jeff liked the idea of his company being poised at the border of something new and unexplored. One of the rejected drafts of the logo for the Realms imprint at Strang had been the image of a figure with a flag. The idea had not been a good fit for Realms, but Jeff thought it was the perfect logo for Marcher Lord Press and managed to appropriate it for his new company.<sup>xxiii</sup> A short animated video segment on the opening page of his website told the history of the marcher lords.

### **Launching a Company**

On October 1, 2008, Jeff launched his new company with three books. Two were from authors he had met while working on the Realms imprint for Strang. The third was a book that had come in “over the transom.” (“Over the transom” is a metaphor used by book publishers for unrequested book manuscripts that show up unexpectedly.) Jeff’s original plan was to launch with one science fiction book, one fantasy book, and a third book that did not fit squarely into either category. He ended up starting with a science fiction book and two fantasy books. The covers were designed by an illustrator named Kirk DouPonce. Jeff had met him at Multnomah and had admired his work. “I couldn’t afford him,” Jeff admitted, “but he really wanted Marcher Lord Press to succeed and let me have them for a lot less than he usually charged.” DouPonce supplied about 80% of the covers for Marcher Lord Press the five years that Jeff managed the company.<sup>xxiv</sup>

The day Jeff launched the company turned out to be a stressful one. As noted, Jeff’s internet provider had trouble making his online storefront work. They managed to get it working at 4

a.m. on the morning of the launch day. To build up the launch, Jeff gave away prizes. To be eligible to participate in a drawing, visitors to the site had to sign up for the MLP newsletter. The idea, of course, had been to build as large of a customer database as possible. The way the drawing was set up, however, made visitors not want to tell their friends. If more people signed up for the drawing, it reduced the chances of those who had already signed up winning the prizes. Jeff quickly redesigned the system so that people who got friends to sign up got their names entered into the drawing an additional time.<sup>xxv</sup>

The prizes Jeff gave away were appealing to science fiction and fantasy fans. One was a leather bound fiftieth anniversary edition of *The Lord of the Rings*. There were also fantasy paintings. The grand prize was supposed to have been a trip to visit a historical marcher lord castle in England. Unfortunately, Jeff had not calculated the cost of delivering the prizes. The *Lord of the Rings* book, for example, weighed twelve pounds and postage was not cheap. By the time it was over, there was no money left to send anyone to England. Fortunately, the woman who had won the grand prize said she didn't really need the trip to the castle and let Jeff and his company off the hook, so to speak.<sup>xxvi</sup>

The year that followed was a busy one. In March of 2009, Jeff and his wife traveled to China to meet their adoptive daughter. April 1 was the planned date for the second round of MLP books. Jeff edited one of the books while he was in Beijing. The book he edited was by an author named Jill Williamson who turned out to be one of his most successful authors and marketers.

Jill was a New York-educated fashion designer who had grown up in Alaska in a home that had not always had electricity or running water. After getting a job at a Los Angeles-based fashion design firm, she found that work in the fashion design industry was not what she had expected and began to look for new career options. Her husband was a church youth minister, and she had thought about trying to become a writer and speaker for Christian conferences. Around the time she was considering a career in writing, one of the girls in her husbands' youth group lent her some of the young adult novels she had been reading. Jill was disturbed by the irresponsible ways the authors portrayed teenage sexuality. Around that same time, she saw a news story about Christian parents burning Harry Potter novels. She did not think those parents were treating J.K. Rowling's books fairly but thought she could write books that young readers would enjoy without upsetting their Christian parents. After she became an experienced writer, Jill still thought writing books with Christian values was a worthwhile pursuit, but thought she was naïve to believe she could please everyone.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Jill had written several books and had tried unsuccessfully to pitch them to publishers before she met Jeff Gerke at a writers' conference. She was impressed by his insights as an editor, and Jeff was impressed by her gift for writing. Even though he had not envisioned Marcher Lord Press as a young adult publisher, he was impressed enough with Jill's work to publish it anyway. Jill proved to be a valuable asset to Jeff in his publishing venture. In addition to her gift for writing, Jill also turned out to be a savvy marketer.<sup>xxviii</sup>

"After I signed my contract with Jeff," Jill said, "I asked if we could try and submit to review periodicals. Jeff said we could if I figured out how to do it. So, I did research and learned how to write letters that accompanied advance reader copies. I had some good examples from all the

book reviewing I'd done, so that helped. Jeff made advance reader copies for the three books that were releasing and shipped them to my house. I boxed them all up and mailed them out. I did that for the next three years for Marcher Lord Press. *By Darkness Hid* got a Library Journal review and I cried, I was so happy and relieved. I'd done a lot of work, and I was so thankful it had paid off.<sup>xxix</sup>

Ms. Williamson's first book, *By Darkness Hid*, won the 2010 Christy award in the Visionary category. Her second book, *To Darkness Fled*, won the same award the following year.<sup>xxx</sup> Jeff's new company was well received in the publishing industry. The religion editor of *Publisher's Weekly*, the publishing industry's leading journal, gave his authors generally favorable reviews. He wrote the following about one of Jill Williamson's fantasy novels: "Christian fantasy is the wee niche in which this fat book fits, and here's hoping its quality helps enlarge the niche. Williamson pens an imaginative second installment in the *Blood of Kings* trilogy." He apparently thought some of the religious elements were handled a too heavy-handedly, referring in one spot to a "dramatically unnecessary" conversation, but gave the book a positive review otherwise.<sup>xxxi</sup> John Otte's book, *Failstate*, also received a positive review. "Otte, a pastor, balanced fantasy with teen hormones in a clever and page-turning debut," it begins. "Otte nails the concept—what kid hasn't wanted to be a superhero?—and fleshes it out in a way that speaks sympathetically to teens' struggles." Toward the end, he wrote, "Those allergic to Christianity might be put off by religious elements," he wrote, "but they are organic to the plot."<sup>xxxii</sup> Otte's book was a finalist for the Christy Award in 2013.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Jill Williamson described the role she and other MLP authors played in helping their company succeed: Us Marcher Lord Press authors wanted to enter the Christy Awards, but since MLP had no budget, we agreed to pitch in and help each other enter. I went through a phase when I sent letters to the head librarians in my state, sharing news that I had a new book out and any reviews it had received. I've always just tried things. If they worked, I did more. If they didn't work, I ditched the idea.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

### Experiments and Adjustments

Jeff and his team tried a number of experiments over the course of six years. For the first three years of the company's life, MLP launched a new slate of books every six months. This was based on the purchasing cycle of bookstores. The October 1 launch was meant to coincide roughly with the launch of the Christmas season and the April 1 launch was meant to target the summer reader. He wondered later if December 1 and June 1 might have been closer to the pulse. Three years into the life of his company, he changed strategies and started launching a new book almost every month. The idea was to give more attention to each individual book. After trying it for a while, he decided the strategy was not as effective as launching a new slate of books every six months. Contrary to his intentions, the monthly launches made the release of a new book seem like less of a big deal.<sup>xxxv</sup>

Though MLP continued to struggle financially, its authors supported each other and helped Jeff with the administrative aspects of running his company. They served as his board of directors and assisted with the acquisition process. One of them handled his newsletter. Jill Williamson played an important role in MLP's 2010 entry into the e-book market. "My husband gave me a



Kindle,” she said. “I think it was the second generation one. I asked Jeff if we could put the Marcher Lord Press books for sale on Kindle. He said that I could if I figured out how to do it. So I did. They were not pretty at first since it took me a while to learn how to format them, but I learned, and we sold eBooks. I was thankful when Kerry Nietz came on board and started making ePub files. They were much nicer than my plain text.”<sup>xxxvi</sup> Jill remained in charge of MLP’s Kindle books for several years.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

MLP author Kerry Nietz, mentioned by Jill, was a computer programmer who had worked for Microsoft. Nietz, Jeff says, became MLP’s resident e-book expert. “I think we put all of our e-books as \$3.99,” he says. “We played around with higher and lower, and we did a few free or 99-cent promos.” They also made the first book of several of their series permanently free, hoping people would read the first book and then buy the second and third. “Kindle was our only e-book platform of consequence,” he said. Before it was over, 80 to 90 percent of MLP’s total sales were in the Kindle format.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

### **Struggling**

After four years, Jeff admitted to himself that his marketing simply was not working. It had been easy to find writers who wanted to write for his company. His email list, in fact, was almost entirely filled with the names of other writers, but he had not been able to attract the legions of readers he needed to make MLP financially successful. Ted Dekker, a popular Christian fiction author, often sold more than 100,000 copies of his speculative fiction books. Jeff had struggled to sell over 300 copies of his best books. He had hoped the process would get easier, but it had not. Each book, he had found, was like launching a new company all over again, and he wondered why.<sup>xxxix</sup>

Looking back, he wondered if he should have adopted a strategy more like the one Dekker had used. Though some readers did not consider his books to be science fiction or fantasy, many of them had an element of the fantastic to them.<sup>xl</sup> Dean Koontz, an author who wrote for the mainstream market, had been similarly successful at crafting cross-genre books. A Koontz novel might have aliens, time travel, ghosts, or demons, but they were not considered science fiction or fantasy in the strict sense. Koontz had actually started his career as a science fiction writer but found that science fiction books sold better if the science fiction elements were less obvious.<sup>xli</sup>

Marketing was not the only area Jeff was struggling with. Accounting was also a problem. Jeff said he thought he was effective at about eight out of ten of the jobs a publishing company needs to be successful. Marketing and accounting, he said, were his areas of weakness. The biggest struggle he had with accounting was calculating royalties for his authors. He contacted the University of Colorado and was put in touch with their business computing department. He wanted them to assign a team of students to figure out his royalty system. Neither the students nor their teachers could untangle Jeff’s royalty system. They ended up recommending that he purchase a (costly) computer program that would do it for him.<sup>xlii</sup>

Around this time, Jeff began reexamining his business model. Though he had gone without pay for the first few years of his company’s existence, he finally decided to start paying himself. That choice changed the financial dynamic of his company. His books did not break even as quickly.

This led to authors having to wait longer before receiving royalties. They were kind about it, he said, but, as a group, they were not as happy as they had been at first.<sup>xliii</sup>

### Amish Vampires

*Amish Vampires in Space*, one of the last books Jeff published, probably received more media attention than any of MLP's other titles though not all of it was positive. It was mentioned twice in *Publisher's Weekly* and twice in *Library Journal*. Jimmy Fallon talked about it on *The Tonight Show*, and syndicated columnist Dave Barry mentioned it in his blog. "Do we really need another *Amish Vampires in Space* book?" Fallon asked, displaying the cover as the audience laughed and applauded. "If you read no other book on this topic this year," Dave Barry joked, "make it this one." Some people who did not read the novel saw it as an attack on the Amish and their way of life, but it was really meant to poke fun at the Christian publishing industry's infatuation with the Amish. Jeff had formed his company to offer Christian readers an alternative to the "buggy and bonnet" fiction that many Christian bookstores had adopted to cater to middle class female readers. There was a running joke at his company that the only Amish novel MLP would publish was *Amish Vampires in Space*. After hearing the joke, author Kerry Nietz took it as a challenge and began toying with the idea of writing a real book by that title. In light of the popularity of secular titles like *Pride, Prejudice, and Zombies* and *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Slayer*, it made sense. Nietz began to ask himself questions like why the Amish might be in space and how vampires would enter into the story. He started with a space colony formed by an Amish community that had wanted the freedom to practice their way of life without the corrupting influences of technology. When solar flare activity from the sun of the new world threatened the safety of the colony, one of the men, Jebediah, used forbidden technology and called for a ship to evacuate the colony. Though he probably saved the lives of his fellow colonists, Jebediah was shunned by the community. To make matters worse, the rescue ship had just returned from a recovery operation at a research facility. The scientists had all died as the result of an experiment gone wrong, but something deadly had survived that failed experiment, and it was on the ship.<sup>xliv</sup>

According to an article in *Publisher's Weekly*, *Amish Vampires in Space* was optioned for a movie.<sup>xlv</sup> Nietz's novel is an illustration of the thin line Christian fiction publishers have to walk, especially with the combined science fiction-fantasy-paranormal-superhero genre they now refer to as speculative or visionary fiction. The people who attend science fiction, comic, and anime conventions are attracted to quirky humor and stories they perceive as being "on the edge," but some segments of the Christian market (probably those who are unfamiliar with science fiction, fantasy, and horror and never heard of *Pride, Prejudice, and Zombies*) are a bit more cautious. The cover design, which showed a pretty young Amish girl with strange eyes wiping blood from the corner of her mouth, would probably not attract the typical Christian bookstore customer.

*Amish Vampires* had attracted more attention than most MLP books had up to that point. Around the same time, however, another MLP title that Jeff had been very excited about "fell in a hole," selling only six copies. Jeff believed the author had a terrific story, and the cover had been designed by a professional illustrator, but the author had virtually no "platform." Platform is an industry term for the network an author uses to promote his or her work. Some authors write blogs, have hundreds or even thousands of friends on Facebook, have large numbers of Twitter followers, etc. The prospect of establishing such a network can be intimidating to new authors,

especially those who are not already recognized experts in some other area. Political figures, actors and actresses, newspaper columnists, and pastors of large churches typically have built-in followings that are not as readily accessible to people whose careers are less glamorous. A fiction author faces the “chicken or the egg” dilemma of needing to already be famous before his or her books have even been published yet. Some authors do a better job of rising to this challenge than others.<sup>xlvi</sup>

On a brighter note, Jeff was pleased to have gotten permission to republish Kathy Tyers’ *Firebird* series.<sup>xlvii</sup> Tyers was an experienced science fiction author. In addition to her Christian fiction, she had written two licensed *Star Wars* novels: *The Truce at Bakura* and *New Jedi Order: Balance Point*.<sup>xlviii</sup>

As Jeff reflected on his struggles, he spoke to people who were not in publishing and began to consider new ideas. One was an imprint (another label owned by the same company) in which new authors would pay to be published. As he was thinking this over, he made arrangements to meet with literary agent Steve Laube (pronounced LAW-bee). Laube had a reputation in the Christian publishing industry as a supporter of speculative fiction. It was Laube, in fact, who had served as Kathy Tyers’ editor when the *Firebird* series was published the first time by Bethany House.<sup>xlix</sup>

### **Changes in the Book Retailing Industry**

The era Jeff chose to enter the publishing industry was a time of great change in both publishing and the industries connected to it. In the early millennium, the book retailing industry had been very fragmented. In 2003, the “big four,” Barnes and Noble, Books-A-Million, Borders Group and Crown books Corporation dominated the retail bookstore industry. Amazon had entered the book retailing industry in 1994, but only controlled a small percentage by 2003.<sup>1</sup> There were also specialized niches of the book retailing industry. Family Christian Stores, the leader in the Christian niche, owned 356 stores 39 states in 2000.<sup>li</sup>

Amazon’s entry into the bookselling had already begun to reshape the writing and publishing industries in 2008 when MLP launched, but it was the introduction of the Kindle e-book reader the following year that had rapidly accelerated the changes. Some predicted that it was only a matter of time before the Kindle would wipe out the need for paper books entirely.

### **An Unexpected Offer**

Jeff met with Steve Laube on December 7, 2013. As he was discussing his struggles, Laube asked him if he would ever be interested in selling MLP. The offer took him by surprise. Was this the lifeline he had been praying for? As they conversed, Jeff could see that Laube’s approach would probably be closer to that of a traditional Christian publisher. He wanted to try to get MLP books into Christian bookstore chains and to use traditional printing techniques. If he could get sales volumes up, he could get economies of scale on printing costs, and the company could actually start making a profit. He also wanted to change the name of the publisher from Marcher

Lord Press to something less obscure. In purchasing the company, he would be able to decide which books he wanted to keep and which he was not interested in. *Amish Vampires in Space*, for example, was unlikely to be retained by the new company. It was fairly well-written but a bit too controversial. Because of his track record in the industry and his understanding of both accounting and marketing, Laube seemed like the ideal buyer for MLP, but would a Laube-owned version of the company retain the creative edge and the family feel of Jeff's original company? The company would certainly change—change was inevitable anyway—but in what ways? Jeff had to consider whether he was letting exhaustion influence his decision-making too much or whether he had taken his company about as far as he could take it, and it was time to turn it over to someone else.

**Table 1:  
2013 Adult and Juvenile Fiction Sales by Category (in Thousands)**

Genre:	Units	Rank
Adult Fiction		
Action Adventure	2,619	11
Classics	7,817	6
Fantasy	8,615	5
Graphic Novels	7,659	7
Mystery/Detective	14,884	4
Occult/Psychological/Horror	4,474	9
Religion	4,925	8
Romance	34,585	2
Science Fiction	4,448	10
Suspense/Thrillers	22,161	3
Western	2,088	12
General Fiction	36,314	1
Total Adult Fiction	150,590	
Juvenile Fiction		
Animals	9,430	6
Classics	9,664	5
Concepts	8,916	7
History/Sports/People/Places	13,686	4
Holidays/Festivals/Religion	7,420	8
Science Fiction/Fantasy/Magic	32,900	2
Social Situations/Family/Health	23,777	3
General Juvenile Fiction	51,895	1
Total Juvenile Fiction	157,707	

From: Jim Millot, "The Hottest (and Coldest) Book Categories of 2014," Publishers Weekly, (1/23/15 <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/bookselling/article/65387-the-hot-and-cold-categories-of-2014.html>) (Accessed 9/29/16).

**Table 2:  
Christian Fiction Preferences by Genre**

Rank	Type	% Selecting
1	Historical Fiction	65.8%
2	Romance	52.1%
3	Contemporary	51.0%
4	Romantic Suspense	49.8%
5	Suspense/Thriller/Legal Thriller	46.9%
6	Mystery/Espionage	45.5%
7	Biblical Fiction	39.2%
8	Family Drama	35.9%
9	Amish	28.9%
10	Literary/Classical/Allegorical Fiction	22.0%
11	Fantasy/Sci-Fi	18.2%
12	Futuristic/Prophecy	16.4%
13	Paranormal	7.7%
14	Other	8.1%

Christian Fiction Readers Survey, Produced by: Jet Marketing, May 2015.

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<sup>i</sup> Christy Awards Website: [www.christyawards.com](http://www.christyawards.com), (Accessed 7/7/16).

<sup>ii</sup> ACFW Website: [www.acfw.com](http://www.acfw.com), (Accessed 7/7/16).

<sup>iii</sup> Jeff Gerke, Personal Interview, June 30, 2016.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>ix</sup> Christian Fiction Readers: Worth Pursuing, Worth Keeping. Research Report. Produced by: Jet Marketing, May 2015.

<sup>x</sup> Jeff Gerke, Personal Interview, June 30, 2016.

<sup>xi</sup> C.S. Lewis, "Introduction by C.S. Lewis," in George MacDonald, *Phantastes*. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmann Publishing Co., 1981), xi.

<sup>xii</sup> Alister McGrath, *C.S. Lewis: A Life* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2013), 149.

<sup>xiii</sup> Ibid., 213, 215-218.

<sup>xiv</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>xv</sup> Ibid., 213, 260.

<sup>xvi</sup> Ibid., 197-200.

<sup>xvii</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, Author's Foreword to *The Lord of the Rings, Part One: The Fellowship of the Ring*. New York: Ballantine, 1973, 11-12.

<sup>xviii</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, pp. 429-430 and J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings, Part Two: The Two Towers*. (New York: Ballantine, 1973), 125.

<sup>xix</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*. (New York: Ballantine, 1977) 3-28.

<sup>xx</sup> Jeff Gerke, Personal Interview, 6/30/16.

<sup>xxi</sup> Ibid.

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xxii Ibid.

xxiii Ibid.

xxiv Ibid.

xxv Ibid.

xxvi Ibid.

xxvii Jill Williamson, Email Interview, 4/12/18.

xxviii Ibid.

xxix Ibid.

xxx Christy Award Website. [www.christyaward.com](http://www.christyaward.com), (Accessed 7/7/16).

xxxi Publisher's Weekly. Religion Book Review: *To Darkness Fled* by Jill Williamson, Author, Marcher Lord Press, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/978-0-9825987-0-2> (Accessed 7/7/16).

xxxii Publisher's Weekly. Child Publisher's Weekly. Children's Book Review: *Failstate* by John W. Otte, Marcher Lord Press <http://www.publishersweekly.com/978-1-935929-48-2> (Accessed 7/7/16).

xxxiii Christy Award Website. [www.christyaward.com](http://www.christyaward.com), (Accessed 7/7/16).

xxxiv Ibid.

xxxv Jeff Gerke, Personal Interview, 6/30/16.

xxxvi Jill Williamson, Email Interview, 4/12/18.

xxxvii Ibid.

xxxviii Jeff Gerke, Personal Email, 7/1/16.

xxxix Jeff Gerke, Personal Interview, 6/30/16.

xl Ibid.

xli Katherine Ramsland, *Dean Koontz: A Writer's Biography*. (Harper Prism, 1997).

xlii Jeff Gerke, Personal Interview, 6/30/16.



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xliii Ibid.

xliv Kerry Nietz The Official Author Website, “Amish Vampires in Space,”  
“<http://www.nietz.com/AViS.htm>, (Accessed 7/11/ 16).

xlvi Andy Butcher, “PW Select November 2013: Christian Retail Adapts to Self-Published Books,” Publishers Weekly Website. <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/authors/pw-select/article/60061-pwselect-n> (Accessed 7/7/16).

xlvii Jeff Gerke, Personal Interview, 6/30/16.

xlviii Jeff Gerke, Personal Interview, 6/30/16.

xlix Kathy Tyers, Personal Website, <http://kathytyers.com/about/author-bio/> (Accessed 7/11/16.)

l Jeff Gerke, Personal Interview, 6/30/16.

<sup>1</sup> SIC 5942: Bookstores, The Encyclopedia of American Industries, Gale Publishing, 2003.  
<https://www.referenceforbusiness.com/industries/Retail-Trade/Book-Stores.html>.

<sup>li</sup> Family Christian Press Release (Cited in Wikipedia but no longer available. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Family\\_Christian\\_Stores](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Family_Christian_Stores))