

Inside the

# Mind of a Writer...

Philip  
Yancey

It was true when a giant of a man like Billy Graham said about Philip Yancey, "There is no writer in the evangelical world that I admire and appreciate more." I find these words true to the last letter both as a reader of Yancey's books and as one who spent a day dining, driving and and dating hahahah, nay, interviewing with him. I felt like a kid exploring a treasure mine with a seasoned explorer sighing, 'wows and good heavens' at each answer he answered me with to my curious questions.

Join me in a rewarding walk with Philip Yancey an enigmatic writer who is a mystery of a man especially as a writer. The very selection of the titles like, *Where is God when it Hurts*, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, *Disappointment with God* and many such iconoclastic titles are just a few examples of what must be the mind of such a magical writer.

Sunny Joseph  
for Fountain of Life



face a 'face an interview

**SJ:** At one point of time you have sympathized with a gay friend and also joined the street marches with/for him. What was your perspective in identifying yourself with the gays and how did you handle this?

**PY:** I saw the whole thing from entirely a different eye instead from a human eye. That experience proved to me as a huge turning point. I mentioned this in one of my books about a friend by David Malek who really struggled with this issue though he never practiced homosexuality but struggled with this temptation in that direction even though he was a fine Christian author. The Bible talks about the woman at the well in John chapter 4 who had five failed marriages who was living with a man who was not her husband. This is about an immoral woman; kind of a moral out cast and how Jesus treated her. Her support came from Jesus who sensed she was thirsty. I learnt to see such persons who are thirsty which became really important for me. Now when I see someone who is clearly immoral, a prostitute for instance, I will say let me see that person as a thirsty person. Jesus saw and felt He was satisfied after He saw the thirst of the woman satisfied which was about offering the Living waters.

It was a life changing experience for me to know someone so close as David Malek. If you are a mother or a father and if your child declares someday, 'I am a homosexual,' you will see him differently than reading about the issue in a book or even in the Bible. And when you see how Jesus handled and treated people like this woman who was immoral and who was caught in an act of adultery, He never let the issue get in the way of the person. He saw the person first. I think of these people whom Jesus would approve though He may not approve of their sin.

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**SJ:** What do you see is missing in the post millennium Christian literature?

**PY:** I would say that that Christian fiction is still in its infancy. There are some Christian novels but they are not very good by the standards of how Christian literature must go about. Of course there are a few good ones too. I believe there is a need for fiction writing and there is not much out there. Some that are there, they tend to be very message oriented novels and usually a message oriented novel is not a good novel. A novel is something that portrays real life rather than an idea. Indians have produced some good novels recently. I would say novels are works of art.

**SJ:** Having said that there is no good Christian fiction writing, do you think you

might one day write one?

**PY:** No. Though I took a university course on fiction writing, I feel fiction writing is not my cup of coffee. I like doing essays. The memoir that I hope to write would be more like a fiction, a story that will have dialogue, narrative. It would not be about something but it would be a rendering. I have been reading a lot of memoirs. So, it would be not a fiction but fictional or fiction like.

**SJ:** What is your opinion on Indian Christian literature and writers? What do you think is missing or excellent?

**PY:** There is very good writing here in India though not



Philip Yancey with wife Janet

Philip Yancey (born 1949) is an American Christian author. Fourteen million of his books have been sold worldwide, making him one of the best-selling evangelical Christian authors. Two of his books have won the ECPA's Christian Book of the Year Award: *The Jesus I Never Knew* in 1996, *What's So Amazing About Grace* in 1998. He is published by Zondervan Publishing.

In 1971 Yancey joined the staff of *Campus Life* magazine—a sister publication of *Christianity Today* directed towards high school and college students—where he served as editor for eight years. Yancey was for many years an editor for *Christianity Today* and wrote articles for *Reader's Digest*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Publishers Weekly*, *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, *Eternity*, *Moody Monthly*, and *National Wildlife*, among others. He now lives in Colorado, working as a columnist and editor-at-large for *Christianity Today*. He is a member of the editorial board of *Books & Culture*, another magazine affiliated with *Christianity Today*, and travels around the world for speaking engagements.



much in the Christian literature. It is impressive. There are subjects being addressed and unless someone is doing this for a living free lancing, it really does not pay off much and so the seriousness would be less. (Laughing)...unless they are doing for a magazine like you. There is more that Indian Christian writers could do for Christian literature.

**SJ:** What significant observations have caught your attention during your visit in India?

**PY:** What strikes me about India is it is not a mono culture. Compared to my earlier visits, there were a restricted number of automobiles then, but now you have every kind of automobile. What interests me is, even the animals seem to be competing with the automobiles on the streets and the high ways. A good company while you drive through on the streets (laughs). Well this is on the lighter side. I go out jogging daily as I have done this morning. The hotel I am staying is a very fine hotel in a neat locality. But just one block away from the hotel is a narrow alley where I could see people cooking on the side of the street while some were washing their clothes and motor bikes. Compared to the other cultures you have a bonding in the family. It is different in here to see such bonding which is difficult to see in our country where people live in isolation and privacy. So it is different, it is a people oriented country. I live in Colorado where there is a lot of room and not many people. I live among trees and do not have internet security because not many live close by.

The same is with all the religions where you have many of them with several social distinctions. In America there is a lot of demand for 'my rights.' But here people live in dire poverty and they seem to accept and live by it. I think it was the legacy of the caste system.

**SJ:** What is the conventional methodology you apply when you have to write a book or an article?

**PY:** For example when I do an article for *Christianity Today* magazine which is a lengthy article with approximately 5,000 words I take about 5 days. Two days to get ready to write the article that includes, reearching, interviewing, outlining, deciding what I am going to write about. Then I take one day to write and two days to clean it up. This means forty percent, twenty percent, forty percent...second draft, third draft, fourth draft fifth draft.

Now coming to book writing, the same goes for book writing. It again takes forty percent of the time before I write a word and twenty percent of the time writing the book and the next twenty percent of time improv-

ing and editing the book. I usually start with a file folder for extra notes to be added. If I have a topic on my mind I start taking note of everything from what I read, notice and observe. Then I go to the library to do a lot of research and read all the books I can on the subject. Then, there comes a point where I sit and go through all the material I have gathered which would be a huge pile of material usually running into thousands of pages. Later, I basically format an outline in my mind like the 4th chapter, 10th chapter, 12th chapter and whatever. Then I start moving stuff into different chapters. Because I have been thinking about the book for the past couple of years, and now that I have collected all the relevant material material, I sit down and plan how I structure each chapter. I plan how to start each chapter and how I end it and what I hope to accomplish while thinking if there are any stories that I need to fill them with...and things like that.

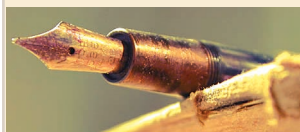
**SJ:** How do you want the world to remember Philip Yancey as?

**PY:** I would say, 'someone who was truthful, honest about hard things, who would leave you with a sense of hope and mercy.' There is a saying, 'We should comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.' Sometimes I do afflict the comfortable. I am one of those comfortable ones and so I usually turn the questions on to myself. I try not to be a propagandist. There are not Christian propagandists out there and books that say 'Oh it is easy.' No, it is not easy. There are a lot of easier ways to live. Christianity does not make my life simpler; rather, it makes it harder. It is easier to go with the flock. It cost Jesus His life. It calls for a cost to live a Christian life like the apostles. And so, I want to be truthful about that and not claim myself as a person with all the answers but at least willing to ask questions and look for answers and help where I can and admit where I do not have more.

**SJ:** Are you taking back home any raw material from India for a future book?

**PY:** Well, my wife and I make 4 international trips a year which is part of our commitment. We enjoy seeing our country from a different perspective. My books are read in a lot of countries and translated into other languages and so I need to write them in a way that a non-American can read them. I see how people live in some hurting conditions and so I need such information to write. While we give out a lot through my writings I also gain a lot.

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Sold to a dance troupe as a girl by her widowed mother, Golu\* finds her way to and from a flesh market of sorts...a revealing lifestyle of one girl out of the many living in the shadow of men drunk with lust for dancers and the dime they earn...

Golu's Destiny with the Stranger at the Well, an encounter that saved her from the pit of a dehumanising profession.



## A Dancer's Date with Destiny

As told to *Fountain of Life*

**L**ike the Woman at the Well, it was a divine appointment for Golu with her destiny, divinity and God himself.

Golu was born to Krishna and Lakshmi who come from the community of dancers in the streets and on the stages during festival seasons. In a way the profession is considered immoral by the society and it carried a stigma for the life style they lived especially the women folk. Krishna married Golu's mother after his first wife failed to give him children. One day Krishna was beaten badly by some unknown goons and was thrown on the railway tracks in an unconscious and drunken state when a running train ran over him severing his two legs apart and his head. Golu was a young girl at that time. The body was so mangled that his mother refused to see her husband's mortal remains. That was Golu's last memory of her dead father.

In Golu's own words:

My brother and I were interested in education but due to our financial situation my mother never allowed us go even to the government school. And so I ended up doing odd jobs when one day my mother suggested that she would loan me to a dance company against some bulk amount while I was her deposit or surety with the dance company. She assured that she would redeem me when she gets the money at a later stage. I protested the idea. I knew what would be the plight of the girl who lives in the dance company. I heard of such dancers' reputation, their suffering and their lifestyle. It was a flesh market with another name. But my mother insisted that I joined the troupe. The more I protested the more I was scolded, harassed and beaten. I was even denied food. When I could