

Baylor prof explores ‘big issues’ through novel’s characters

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Author Greg Garrett explores themes of faith, prejudice, violence, love, forgiveness and healing in his latest novel, *Bastille Day*, just as he does regularly in his roles as professor, preacher and cultural critic.

For more than three and a half decades, Garrett has served on the faculty of Baylor University, where he is the Carole McDaniel Hanks Professor of Literature and Culture.

Garrett has written more than two dozen books—critically acclaimed novels, spiritual memoirs, scholarly works, and reflections on the intersection of pop culture and faith.

He also serves as Canon Theologian at the American Cathedral in Paris, where he periodically preaches and teaches. The city—and the cathedral itself—provide much of the setting for *Bastille Day*.

Garrett was in Paris on July 14, 2016, when a terrorist drove a 19-ton cargo truck into crowds of people at the promenade in Nice, France, who gathered to celebrate Bastille Day. The attack left 86 dead and more than 400 people injured.

The tragedy prompted nationwide mourning. People in the largely secular nation who seldom attend church gathered in sanctuaries throughout the country the following Sunday, which happened to be Garrett’s turn to deliver the homily at the American Cathedral.

The event left a deep impression and became the seedbed in which the novel germinated. While Garrett said he is accustomed to writing about

“big issues” in his nonfiction work, he wanted to explore terrorism, interfaith struggles and prejudice through a novel.

He chose to probe the deep questions those issues raise through the fictional characters he brought to life in *Bastille Day*.



Plus, he acknowledged, many of the authors he admires most used Paris as a setting, and he wanted to accept the challenge of following their lead.

“Being a storyteller is an essential part of my life. ... And I’m at a stage in my life where I want to be swinging for the fences every time out,” he said.

Through the novel’s characters, Garrett examines the “hateful myths” behind prejudice—a major research topic he has explored through a three-year grant from the Eula Mae and John Baugh Foundation.

Since the novel is set in Paris, it’s also—inevitably—a tragic love story. Garrett’s narrator and protagonist is Calvin Jones, a former war correspondent who returned from Iraq to spend 10 relatively quiet years working on a local news job in Texas.

After a violent event in Dallas brings back nightmares from his time in Fallujah, a friend offers Cal a job in Paris. There he meets Nadia, a beautiful Muslim woman from Saudi Arabia who is days away from entering

into an arranged marriage she dreads.

Character inspired by a Baylor student

Garrett loosely based Nadia on a Baylor student by the same name who was from Saudi Arabia and who faced a similar situation.

“She would come in, sit in my office and just weep,” he said. “The choice presented to her—like Nadia’s choice [in the novel]—seemed insoluble.”

He recalled her saying: “If I don’t go home, my family will be ruined. And if I do go home, I will disappear forever.”

In the middle of the semester, the student disappeared from the Baylor campus.

“I don’t know if she fled. She had bought a motor-scooter,” which Garrett characterized as a “radical act of defiance” for a Saudi woman in the 1990s.

“I don’t know if she got on her bad motor-scooter and rode off into the night and is out there somewhere happy and fulfilled. That is my hope. Or if she was grabbed and taken back to Saudi Arabia in the middle of the night,” he said. “Either of those things seems possible to me.

“So, one of the things that drove this book ... was that I wanted to write a story about my Nadia that gave her more agency than she ever had in real life. ... I wanted there to be choices all around.”

Overcoming fear, moving toward faith

Garrett also deals with a thwarted suicide attempt in the novel—a subject that hits close to home for him. In his book *Crossing Myself: A Story of*

Spiritual Rebirth, he wrote about his own chronic depression that led to a suicide attempt, as well as how he returned to faith through the faithful witness of a historically Black Episcopal church in Austin.

He explores a similar faith journey through the characters in *Bastille Day*.

“When we are afraid, we make bad decisions,” Garrett said, noting Jesus’ repeated admonition to “fear not.”

Bastille Day debuted as the No. 1 “Christian novel” on Amazon—a distinction Garrett finds ironic, given the books’ mature subject matter and its often-salty dialogue.

“I’m a little ambivalent about that,” he confessed. “I look first at some of my competition. This is not an Amish romance—not to cut people who read or write Amish romances.”

Nevertheless, *Bastille Day* deals seriously with faith issues and gospel truth.

“The movement away from fear in spiritual terms is one of the big things this book is about,” Garrett said, noting the important impact people of faith can have in the lives of others at critical times.

“Our love and our willingness to be the hands of Christ and to manifest the peace of Christ are the only things that might keep somebody going on a day-to-day basis,” he said.

Another key theme, Garrett noted, is helping people discover how forgiveness allows them to make peace with the past and to move forward toward healing from brokenness.

“It’s not extravagant wisdom to know that if we are carrying around poison from our past, it’s hurting us and nobody else.”