People primarily look at the gospels in one of three ways. There are those who view the Bible as the literal words of God, without error or fault. The Southern Baptist Convention’s statement of faith on the Scriptures, for example, says, “The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is God’s revelation of Himself to man. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. Therefore, all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy” (Southern Baptist Convention).

The other extreme would be those who view the Bible as nothing more than a collection of legends with no connection to historical truth whatsoever. The American Atheists organization states that “The Bible story of Jesus is a contradictory and confusing account. The Bible shows that this Jesus fellow spoke and taught many absurd and foolish things, and often believed he was having a conversation with devils” and “Jesus is a myth just like all the other saviors and gods of old” (American Atheists).

In-between these extremes lie a variety of beliefs, ranging from those who believe that the Bible is inspired by God, yet written by men,¹ and, as such, is largely true, but is colored by those men’s impressions, to those who believe that the Bible has some bit of truth in it, but that truth is almost completely inaccessible due to problems with historical distance, absence of manuscripts, and the biases of the authors of the biblical books.

The five authors whose novels are under scrutiny here all question the

¹There are a few scholars, such as Harold Bloom in The Book of J, who believe that women wrote part of the Bible, but most scholars assume it was written entirely by men.
validity of the gospel accounts up to a certain point. Burgess is the most consistent in his acceptance of the gospels, while Mailer questions some aspects, but still remains, for the most part, faithful to the record. Saramago is at the other extreme, questioning most of what is in the gospels, with Ricci and Kazantzakis staking out a middle ground.

Burgess believed that most of the gospels are fairly reliable, but he also believed that the book of John poses problems: “There are four versions of the life of Christ, and the most popular is the least reliable. This is the highly romantic novella written by St. John, too long after the historical events, with a wedding at Cana and the resurrection of Lazarus, of which Matthew, Mark and Luke say nothing. These three evangelists are so like each other that they can be studied as a single book called the Synoptic Gospels” (YH 304). While his position is the most consistent with the gospel accounts, his narrator does call into question legends that go beyond the gospel accounts. When John the Baptist is born, the narrator says,

I think it must be made clear at this point that, despite the legends put about after his death, this child was not a giant. We have all heard the stories of the severed head preserved in a huge wine-jar, how this head was the size of a bull’s and so on, and of the heaviness (this tale was put about by a Gaul) that required two or three men to lift it, but none can say where the head is. The child was a big child who grew into a man of a stature uncommon among the Israelites, who are a small people, but he was no Goliath nor, to keep within the bounds of the faithful, even a Samson. (Man of Nazareth 28)

The same types of legends abound concerning the birth of Jesus, and the narrator dismisses those as well. These are drawn from the more suspect noncanonical gospels, which provides Burgess with the opportunity to attack them when he is discussing Jesus’ childhood. The Infancy Gospel of Thomas, among others, has stories of the child Jesus performing miracles, such as creating birds from clay and striking another child dead. In Man of Nazareth, Jesus “did not make birds out of mud and bid them fly off. He seemed
sometimes to listen to voices that were not there, but this meant merely that he was unusually sharp-eared—a matter of hearing voices afar before others heard them” (64). His childhood is normal in that he fights with the other children, and he breaks dietary laws, much as a child would, but he also is able to read early and naturally. This fact does not set Jesus apart from any other precocious child, and it fits in well with the gospel account of Jesus’ speaking to the leaders of the Temple when he was twelve.

Early in the book, it appears that Burgess is going to take the approach most writers take when dealing with this subject matter. Most writers show the miracles as exaggerations and not having truly taken place. When Jesus is still living in Nazareth, before he has begun his ministry, he supposedly heals a blind man, though the man was not truly blind:

But there had been a notable occasion when an old man shrieked that he had been struck blind—a time of sorrow for him, his wife recently and suddenly dead and his son, according to a letter from a cousin in Jerusalem, taken to such evil ways that he had been thrown into prison—and Jesus, using the spittle of his mouth, stroking hands, gentle words and yet an authoritative manner, had persuaded him that he was not truly blind, only stricken to his soul by calamity, and he had seen again, shouting praise to God and spreading, to the embarrassment of Jesus, words about a young worker of miracles. (83)

People also believe Jesus’ presence prevented robbers from doing them any harm, and his healing miracles are often attributed to curative techniques he learned while the family lived in Egypt to avoid Herod.

Jesus also does not actually turn water into wine at the wedding at Cana (Jesus’ wedding in Burgess’ work). Instead, it is a game he plays where he jokes with them that he has turned the water into wine, but only those who are righteous will taste the difference. Thus, people come forward and drink from the jars and proclaim it to be the best wine they have ever tasted, when everyone there knows it is not wine. However, Burgess does not state or even
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imply in this passage that Jesus could not have turned the water into wine; thus, he avoids limiting Jesus’ divinity as so many other writers do.

Later in his work, though, Burgess’ Jesus is clearly able to perform miracles, and there is no question as to whether or not the gospel accounts are historically correct. Burgess’ novel simply restates the miracles and does not call them into question at all. Jesus casts out a demon in a synagogue; he raises Jairus’ daughter and Lazarus from the dead; and he rises from the dead on the third day, all just as indicated in the gospel accounts (though with some narrative exposition, of course). From the time Jesus begins his ministry, Burgess’ novel sounds much more like a combination of the three synoptic gospels fleshed out than a new gospel account. Given Burgess’ traditional Roman Catholicism, this approach is in keeping with what he would want to do with this story.

Ricci, however, presents the other extreme and shows that Jesus possesses no supernatural powers, as far as healing is concerned; rather, Jesus is educated in Alexandria to know how to cure many ailments. However, the people who witness these events do not know of Jesus’ education, nor would they understand the methods Jesus uses to cure. Soon after Judas meets Jesus, a young girl is brought to him to heal. From the description of her affliction, most of the people of Jesus’ time would have assumed that she is possessed by a demon. She even lunges at Jesus, which requires both Jacob and John, two disciples, to pull her off of him. Jesus, however, realizes the girl is pregnant and that her father is the father of her child. He has his disciples feed her, and he cleans her up a bit. What heals her is Jesus’ treating her as if she were human rather than how her family has been treating her. The reader can see, though, how this event might be misinterpreted to argue that Jesus has healing powers. In fact, the disciples tell Judas fantastic stories when he joins them, and he comments to himself, “Later, of course, I would hear them recount in these same exaggerated tones the story of Yeshua’s treatment of the young girl in Tyre” (33).

This exaggeration of Jesus’ actions is a theme Ricci returns to time and time again throughout the work, especially in major miracles that Jesus supposedly performs. Jesus is called to help Elazar (Lazarus) after he is
struck on the head during a riot. Simon of Gergesa, the narrator of this section, clearly believes that Elazar is already dead, as do the others around him. Simon even comments that an ember from the fire sparked out and landed on Elazar’s leg, but he did not flinch from the pain.

Jesus, however, continues to work on him, in an effort to cure him. It is getting dark, so Simon admits that he’s not even sure of what he’s seeing, but he believes that Jesus

put his fingers right down inside the man’s skull, right through the bone like that, and after he’d felt around in there for a bit, something gushed out from the fellow’s head into Jesus’s hands, dark and alive. Rachel [Elazar’s sister] was standing close by and she sucked in her breath, surely thinking it was some devil that had come out of him. And I thought the same, because when Jesus tossed the thing into the fire it sizzled and squealed there like something dying. (401)

Elazar lives, of course, thanks to Jesus’ action, and he then says to Jesus, “You must be the son of god himself, if you brought me back from the dead” (402). Even though everyone, including Jesus, laughs at Elazar’s comment, it is evident that this story would later morph into the familiar resurrection-of-Lazarus story.

Ricci admits in an author’s note that he read books by “the Jesus Seminar and of other contemporary scholars who have tried to arrive at an understanding of the historical Jesus” (457). What is interesting, though, is that Ricci does not allow Jesus any supernatural power, though even the Jesus Seminar does concede some miracles. However, this admission reveals that Ricci is trying to present a Jesus of history rather than a Jesus of the gospels, whom he believes is based on exaggerations of what may actually have happened.

However, even in Ricci’s illustrating the exaggeration of the gospels, he includes evidence of Jesus’ supernatural love. When Jesus puts a splint on Jerubal’s leg on the way to the cross, Mary the mother is looking on, and Simon comments, “But now she saw him with Jerubal, not just the skill he
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had but the dignity” (442). It is that dignity that Jesus conveys in helping others that attracts people to him, which may be supernatural in its own right. Ricci would probably not argue that this portrayal of Jesus makes him in any way divine, merely a man who goes beyond what most of the men of his day can do, but Jesus’ love for everyone he meets can cause most people to at least view him as a saint.

Ricci also points out other exaggerations people create; however, unlike Burgess, he does so as a way to call into question the gospel accounts, including the basic tenets of Christianity. He focuses on the theme of the exaggeration of the stories of Jesus when it comes to the resurrection, and he uses the occasion to illustrate how all of the stories of Jesus grow out of proportion to what he does:

It was probably the shock of Jesus’s death that started twisting them, and that they had to strain to make sense of the thing, and that in time, with someone like Jesus, things got distorted. Now for every little thing he did when he was alive some story gets put in its place, and if he’d lanced somebody’s boil it turned out he’d saved a whole town, and if there were fifty in a place who’d followed him, now it was five hundred. Then there was the story that went around that the morning after Jesus was killed, Mary and Salome went to the grave and his body was gone. . . . But eventually it got told that he’d risen from the dead and walked out of the place, and there were people enough to come along then to say they’d met him on the road afterwards looking as fit as you or me. (452)

Even though Simon of Gergesa seems to allow that he may be wrong—“For all I know, it might have happened that way—wasn’t I there myself when Jesus brought Elazar back, who’d been dead as stone” (453)—it is evident that he doesn’t truly believe it. Ricci, in fact, won’t even allow Jesus to be killed for a good reason; he has Jesus arrested accidentally. An argument starts in the temple, and Andrew begins to howl, and the Roman soldiers move in and arrest everyone involved. Jesus is then sentenced to die because of his
association with Judas, who is a member of a rebel group, not because he has done anything wrong or is a threat to the Romans or Jewish leaders. This scene also illustrates how Judas is turned into the one who betrays Jesus, as none of the group liked him all along. By providing enough of the traditional gospel story to show how the story may have originated, Ricci illustrates that there is a core truth underneath the gospel accounts. However, he reminds the reader on a regular basis that the gospels are heavily influenced by the agenda of their authors and throws into question the final presentation of the gospels, specifically as they relate to the divinity of Jesus.

Kazantzakis addresses this idea much more clearly. He adds Matthew to the disciples to introduce the theme of the reliability of the gospels, as Matthew begins writing his gospel soon after he decides to follow Jesus. What is interesting is Matthew’s reasoning behind his writing a gospel at all. At first, his reasoning is what one might expect, to spread the gospel so that others might hear of Jesus: “God had placed him next to this holy man in order that he might faithfully record the words he said and the miracles he performed, so that they would not perish and that future generations might learn about them and choose, in their turn, the road of salvation” (The Last Temptation of Christ 326). However, when Jesus is being tried by Pilate, Matthew is not concerned about Jesus’ well-being; instead, he is worried about the events that he is unable to record in his gospel: “Matthew was sitting on hot coals. He wanted to learn what happened at Caiaphas’s palace, what at Pilate’s, what the teacher said, what the people shouted, so that he could record it all in his book” (440). He could be interested in the events merely because he wants to get every bit of information for his gospel, seeking only to make it accurate; however, his arrival at Mary and Martha’s house during Jesus’ last temptation reveals Matthew’s main motivation for writing the gospel: “Think of the magnificence with which I began to write your life and times. I too would have become immortal, along with you” (487).

Regardless of his motivation, though, Matthew is not even reliable in recording the facts of Jesus’ life, partly because of his humanity and partly because of God’s agenda. Peter has a dream that Jesus walks on the water to meet him and the other disciples in the middle of a storm, an event that
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actually takes place in the gospels. Matthew is the only person awake, so Peter tells him of his dream. Matthew takes the dream, and he begins “to turn over deeply in his mind how he could set it down the next day on paper. It would be extremely difficult because he was not entirely sure it was a dream, nor was he entirely sure it was the truth. It was both. The miracle happened, but not on this earth, not on this sea” (343). Matthew’s presentation seems completely disingenuous here, but Kazantzakis seems to present him as honestly trying to present what he sees as the truth. He does not have Matthew admitting to himself that it was a dream; instead, Matthew seems confused about whether or not the event actually happened. Thus, it is the fact that Matthew is a human, with all of his limitations, who is writing the gospel that causes it not to accurately represent historical truth, not the fact that Matthew was maliciously trying to mislead his future readers for his own purpose.

Matthew also sees Jesus’ actions as fulfilling prophecy, as Matthew was well-educated in the Hebrew scriptures, so he makes certain to fit Jesus’ actions to those prophecies. When Jesus rides a donkey into Jerusalem, Matthew sees this action as fulfilling a prophecy from Zechariah, and he decides to determine why Jesus is riding in on a donkey: “Rabbi . . . it appears you’re tired and can’t go to Jerusalem on foot” (405). When Jesus replies that he is not tired, that he merely had a sudden desire to ride instead of walk, Matthew sees this decision as evidence of Jesus’ messiahship. Again, Matthew does not make up events to try to make Jesus fit prophecy; since he is steeped in the Jewish scriptures, he simply sees the events of Jesus’ life in terms of prophecy, and he ignores the ones that might call it into question.

However, Matthew does not even have control over what he writes when he is able to convey the facts of Jesus’ life accurately. When Matthew is struggling over how to begin his gospel, an angel comes to him to tell him what to write. He forces Matthew to write that Jesus is not the son of Joseph, but that he is born of a virgin; that he is born in Bethlehem, not Nazareth;

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2Marianne Fredriksson, in According to Mary Magdalene, complements this idea by having her Mary Magdalene question her own memories: “At home in Antioch, Mary Magdalene was making a supreme effort to recall those difficult images. What is true? What is fiction? Where does the boundary run? How much can anyone remember without falling apart?” (25).
that he is born in a stable, not a house. Matthew resists this information, though: “But Matthew grew angry. He turned toward the invisible wings at his right and growled softly, so that the sleeping disciples would not hear him: “It’s not true. I don’t want to write, and I won’t.” The angel responds, “How can you understand what truth is, you handful of dust? Truth has seven levels. On the highest is enthroned the truth of God, which bears not the slightest resemblance to the truth of men. It is this truth, Matthew Evangelist, that I intone in your ear” (349).

This idea of a higher truth that goes beyond factual, historical truth is reiterated in Jesus’ last temptation, when he is living with Martha and Mary. Paul, formerly known as Saul, encounters Jesus who is now in the guise of a new Lazarus. He begins to tell Jesus about the gospel that he is spreading, about Jesus of Nazareth, who died and rose from the dead on the third day. Jesus corrects him and says that he is Jesus, and he neither died nor rose from the dead. Paul, however, responds that the factual truth does not matter when it comes to providing salvation to the world: “In the rottenness, the injustice and poverty of this world, the Crucified and Resurrected Jesus has been the one precious consolation for the honest man, the wronged man. True or false—what do I care! It’s enough if the world is saved! . . . What is ‘truth’? What is ‘falsehood’? Whatever gives wings to men, whatever produces great works and great souls and lifts us a man’s height above the earth—that is true. Whatever clips off man’s wings—that is false” (477).

Kazantzakis is trying to argue that the historicity of Jesus’ existence does not matter nearly as much as the truth that Jesus preached. Regardless of whether or not Jesus is born in Nazareth or Bethlehem, he preaches a gospel of love that has the possibility of changing people’s lives, like that of Paul. Thus, the fact that Jesus may not have literally walked on the water, that it might have happened in Peter’s dream, ultimately does not matter if it helps people move more closely to God. There is a higher truth than historical truth, and it is that truth that Kazantzakis wants the reader to accept.

Mailer also points out the unreliability of the familiar gospel accounts. Because he chooses to tell the story from Christ’s point of view, not from the past as if Christ is experiencing the events of his life as they unfold, but from
a contemporary point of view, Mailer can also point out how the gospels have later been interpreted. This approach enables his Christ to set the record straight on his life, not just in the facts, but also in the interpretation of those facts.

To begin, Mailer has his Jesus question the reliability of the gospels. Thus, in the second paragraph, Mailer’s Jesus comments, “While I would not say that Mark’s gospel is false, it has much exaggeration. And I would offer less for Matthew, and for Luke and John, who gave me words I never uttered and described me as gentle when I was pale with rage. Their words were written many years after I was gone and only repeat what old men told them. Very old men. Such tales are to be leaned upon no more than a bush that tears free from its roots and blows about in the wind” (The Gospel According to the Son 1–2). In case the reader has forgotten the purpose of this story, Mailer has his Jesus return to it at the close of the novel as well when he is discussing his resurrection: “In the lifetime of those who came after me, pious scrolls were written by those who had known me. Gospels were set down by those who had not. (And they were more pious!) These later scribes—now they were called Christians—had heard of my journeys. They added much” (242).

This questioning of the gospel accounts sets up the idea that the reader has been misled by the gospel accounts, and, thus, Mailer’s Christ has to present his own story so that the truth may finally be known. Therefore, Mailer has his Christ set out this distinction at the outset of the novel to make sure the reader understands that the purpose of Christ’s telling his story is, first and foremost, to clear up any misconceptions that might have accrued over the ages: “So I will give my own account. . . . Yet I would hope to remain closer to the truth. . . . It is also true that whether four gospels had been favored or forty, no number would suffice. For where the truth is

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3Christopher Moore takes the same approach in Lamb, as he uses Biff, Christ’s childhood pal, to tell Joshua’s (Jesus’) story. Biff has to sneak a copy of the Bible, as an angel is guarding him while he writes his gospel, and he sees the flaws in the four canonical gospels: “What I’m saying is that these guys, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, they got some of it right, the big stuff, but they missed a lot (like thirty years, for instance)” (317). And, in fact, Moore’s book focuses on the missing thirty years much more than the three years of Jesus’ ministry, where Moore tends to follow the major events of the gospel accounts fairly accurately.
with us in one place, it is buried in another. What is for me to tell remains neither a simple story nor without surprise, but it is true, at least to all that I recall” (2).

Jesus’ insistence on truth here is of importance later in the novel. It is not enough for him to point out that the gospels were written by men with agendas: “Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John were seeking to enlarge their fold. And the same is true of other gospels written by other men. Some of these scribes would speak only to Jews who were ready to follow me after my death, and some preached only to gentiles [sic] who hated Jews but had faith in me. Since each looked to give strength to his own church, how could he not fail to mix what was true into all that was not?” (2). Mailer’s Jesus even singles Luke out specifically when Jesus says that Luke “was not a Jew. So his account is rank with exaggeration; he hated Jews” (64). Mailer, though, goes beyond this assertion and has his Jesus state that to exaggerate the truth is an action that can only come from Satan, thus implying that the writers of the gospels have given in to this temptation, while he will not.

Concerning the gospel writers on this point, Mailer writes, “Yet my disciples added fables to their accounts. When a man sees a wonder, Satan will enter his tale and multiply the wonder” (243). When Jesus feeds the 500 (in Mailer’s work), he refers to the gospel writers’ exaggeration directly and says quite clearly that “Exaggeration is the language of the devil, and no man is free of Satan, not even the Son of God (and certainly not Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John). So I knew that many of my followers would increase the numbers of this feat” (121).

Jesus’ assertion, then, that his tale is as true as his recollection will allow it to be is set off as a foil to the gospel writers’ accounts. This approach heightens Jesus’ comments that he is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6, emphasis added) and that his hearers shall “know the truth and the truth will set [them] free” (John 8:32). Also, when Jesus is brought before Pilate, Jesus tells him that he can “bear witness to the truth” (226), which causes Pilate famously to respond, “What is truth?” (226). Mailer uses this idea of truth during Jesus’ trial to raise the idea of perception again when Jesus thinks of the Jews who are accusing him, “If pious Jews knew nothing else, they
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knew what was truth. And on this morning their truth was that I should be condemned by the Romans” (226). Thus, the Jews have their truth, as do Matthew and the other gospel writers, but only Jesus, in this telling of his story, has the truth of what happened in his life.

Mailer clearly differs from Kazantzakis, then, as Mailer argues that historical truth is the most important truth. Mailer’s Jesus does not grant that the gospel writers are trying to convey truth in their accounts, merely that they get many facts wrong. His Jesus is not writing his account in order to further the cause of spiritual truth, but to clear up what happened, historically speaking. Kazantzakis’ work presents a view of truth that is more mystical, one that understands that an event need not have happened to convey a spiritual truth that gospel readers (or readers of Kazantzakis’ novel) need to hear.

Ricci expands upon this idea of truth through the narrative structure that he uses for his novel. From the very structure of his book, with four separate narrators of the same events, Ricci calls into question the reliability of any story, but, more directly, the reliability of the gospels. In an interview, Ricci comments, “I got that premise [multiple narrators], in part, from the canonical Gospels, how each of them assumes a very particular point of view. The gospel writers, however, had an agenda; they needed to propagandize this figure as a means of spreading his word. Not that they were trying to deceive people. They were simply using a standard literary technique of the day” (Starnino G1). It is interesting that Ricci argues that the gospel writers have an agenda while he seems to imply that he does not. Of course, if one extends his argument logically, it is clear that he has an agenda of his own, one facet of which is the questioning of the nature of a universal truth. By having Judas give his interpretation of events, then having Mary Magdalene relate many of the same events but with a much different interpretation, Ricci wants to remind the reader of the lenses through which we interpret the events we experience and witness.4

4In According to Mary Magdalene, Marianne Fredriksson takes a similar approach. She includes direct quotes from the gospel of John, I Peter, and Paul’s letters to the Corinthians, but also includes direct quotes from the gnostic Gospel of Mary. She wants to remind the reader that there are always multiple views of events.
Saramago’s novel The Gospel According to Jesus Christ does not deal with many of the events of the Biblical gospels; thus, he does not address the issue of the reliability of those gospels very often. However, he does provide a few hints as to what he thinks about their portrayals of Jesus. When Jesus is thirteen and wandering around Jerusalem, for example, Saramago writes,

There are certain moments in life that should be arrested and protected from time, and not simply be transmitted in a gospel or a painting or, as in this modern age, a photograph, film, or video. How much more interesting it would be if the person who lived those moments could remain forever visible to his descendants, so that those of us alive today could go to Jerusalem and see with our own eyes young Jesus, son of Joseph, all wrapped up in his little threadbare mantle, beholding the houses of Jerusalem and giving thanks to the Lord who mercifully restored his soul. . . . Alas, he has moved, the instant is gone, time has carried us into the realm of memory, it was like this, no, it was not, and everything becomes what we choose to invent. (165)

Given Saramago’s acceptance of relativism, the reader should not be surprised by such an attitude. To Saramago, the world is indeed something we invent, and this approach goes beyond memory. In the first chapter of the book, Saramago describes a painting of the crucifixion, going around and discussing each of the major characters. When he gets to the thieves on the cross, he says that Jesus “only a moment ago praised the Good Thief and despised the Bad Thief, failing to understand that there is no difference between them, or, if there is a difference, it lies in something else, for good and evil do not exist in themselves, each being merely the absence of each other” (6).

Oddly enough, though, Saramago does make one comment early in the work that implies that his work is more factual than those of other writers. When Joseph goes to the elders to tell them of the beggar and the glowing soil, the elders send three envoys to determine what has actually happened.
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Saramago mentions them by name—Abiathar, Dothan, and Zacchaeus—and says that these “. . . names [are] recorded here to forestall any suspicion of historical inaccuracy in the minds of those who have acquired their version of the story from other sources, a version perhaps more in accordance with tradition but not necessarily more factual” (22). Helena Kaufman argues that Saramago ranks his “gospel” with canonical gospels: “Adopting Luke’s words to introduce his own narrative suggests that Saramago would like it to be considered on the same level with the Gospels, as one more version of the well-known story.” She adds, though, that “this does not necessarily imply that the author wants us to see the Gospels as pure fiction. To the contrary, by making his narrative in many aspects faithful to the Gospels’ version and by filling it with historical details as well as freely drawing upon the supernatural, Saramago stresses any narrative’s characterization as subjective, representational, mediated, and, therefore, fictitious in the sense of not being equated with reality” (453). Ilan Stavans agrees when he quotes Saramago as saying that this novel “was never meant to dismiss what others have written about Jesus or to contradict their accounts” (676). By adding another account, Saramago simply wants to remind the reader of the multifaceted aspect of truth and, for Saramago, the impossibility of ever arriving at one truth.

Dan Brown, in The Da Vinci Code, seems to agree with Saramago’s skepticism concerning the reliability of the gospels. When Teabring is explaining Da Vinci’s views of the Bible to Sophie, he tells her, “The Bible is a product of man, my dear. Not of God. The Bible did not fall magically from the clouds. Man created it as a historical record of tumultuous times, and it has evolved through countless translations, additions, and revisions. History has never had a definitive version of the book” (231). However, much like Kazantzakis, Langdon later argues that, while the Bible is very much a fabrication, it still is useful and necessary: “Sophie, every faith in the world is based on fabrication. That is the definition of faith—acceptance of that which we imagine to be true, that which we cannot prove. Every religion describes God through metaphor, allegory, and exaggeration, from the early Egyptians through modern Sunday school” (341). He makes it clear, though,
that the stories are true only as metaphors: “Should we wave a flag and tell the Buddhists that we have proof the Buddha did not come from a lotus blossom? Or that Jesus was not born of a literal virgin birth? Those who truly understand their faiths understand the stories are metaphorical” (342). Thus, for Brown, the gospels are reliable in that they tell part of the story, and they are effective metaphors that help “millions of people cope and be better people” (342), but it is also clear that none of them could even possibly relate what actually did occur. Thus, the ideas that Mary Magdalene and Jesus were married, that Mary had his child in France after his crucifixion, and that located at the feet of Mary’s bones is actually the Holy Grail are just as likely to be true as what any reader can find in Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. Both Saramago and Brown use their novels to undercut the truth of the gospels and set up the idea that all truth is equally valid.

Margaret George, in *Mary Called Magdalene*, shows how seemingly reliable eyewitness testimony progresses to the circulation of stories that are clearly untrue during one lifetime. In a nod to the gnostic Gospel of Thomas, Thomas tells Mary that he is “writing down some of the things Jesus has said. You know, here and there. I’m afraid I’ll forget them otherwise. I’ve already forgotten so many.” And when she tells Thomas that she never heard Jesus say anything Thomas has written down, Thomas responds, “He says different things to each of us. . . . It depends on whether you were standing near at the time. You could compile your own list, I’m sure” (461). Thus, even though this is an eyewitness account of Jesus’ sayings, Mary doesn’t accept it as true. After Jesus’ death and resurrection, Mary realizes that she should have been writing down Jesus’ teachings herself, as she knows that “we will make mistakes, we will forget” (555), though she does not write anything down until she is just past ninety. And in her story we find the lack of reliability that is already creeping into stories about her: “How did he know my story? How accurate was it? But after I died, how could I go

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5Since the Gospel of Thomas is merely a collection of Jesus’ sayings with no narrative backbone, George has her Mary say to Thomas, “You ought to explain when and why he said these things. . . . It’s hard to understand otherwise,” Thomas merely responds, “It’s only for me. . . . I won’t forget” (461). Of course, the reader knows that it ultimately was not just for Thomas and that we do not have the benefit of his knowledge when we read them today.
They Love to Tell the Story

about correcting all the false stories? Even now, it would be an impossible task. The false stories about Jesus, about Peter, about James, about John, about Jesus’s mother, about me. . . . No, already it was not humanly possible” (596, author’s ellipses). Even though George hews more closely to the gospel accounts than does any other contemporary author, save for Reynolds Price, whose work is more of a translation of the gospels than a re-telling, she is also quick to call their reliability into question.

Though all the authors acknowledge some sort of supernatural element in their re-tellings, even if, as with Ricci, it is merely through the way Jesus is able to love those with whom he comes in contact, they also all question the reliability of the gospel accounts. Rather than allowing for the idea of spiritual truth that goes beyond that of historical truth, most of the authors question the gospels’ historicity and work to expose the agendas of the authors of the gospels. As they are all writing in an age where relativism has become commonplace, it is not surprising that they present reality as being shaped by individual perceptions, not as a universal truth that God conveys to people through the Bible. Though not quite representing the entire range of modern belief, they do capture a range from the more accepting of the gospels to the nearly complete denial of them.