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Duval author extends reach in breakthrough

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Known as a Christian writer, he's now in the mainstream market.

By Charlie Patton, The Times-Union

From the outside, this would appear to be Charles Martin's moment.

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Where the River Ends, Martin's sixth novel, is out in bookstores this week and for the first time he can walk into mainstream bookstores and find one of his books on the general fiction bookshelves "just south of Michener."

Martin's first five novels were published by West Bow Press, which specializes in "fiction told from a Christian world view for the culture at large."

The books won critical acclaim - his novel *Chasing Fireflies* won a Christy Award this week as best contemporary novel in Christian fiction. The books also sold reasonably well -about 200,000 copies altogether.

While the Jacksonville native is a devout Christian, he has longed to escape the niche of "Christian novelist."

Now he has. His new book is being published by Broadway Books, an imprint of Random House, which Martin describes as the "800-pound gorilla" of the publishing world. It's the first book in a three-book contract for which Martin, a 38-year-old father of three, received a six-figure advance.

Plans are for a first printing of 150,000 copies, with the expectation that the book can become a mainstream best-seller.

So Martin, who spent five years and endured more than 100 rejection notices before his first novel was published, finally has it made.

'I don't feel like I've made it'

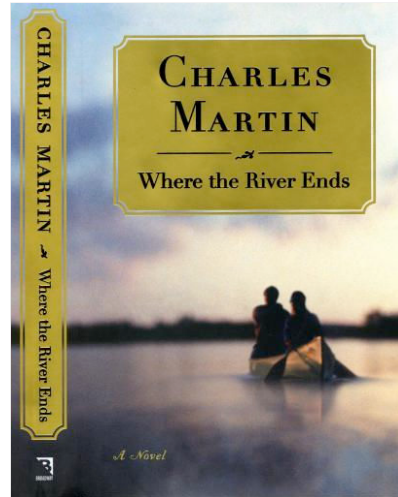
But that's not how Martin sees it. He confesses to a high level of angst that has kept him distracted for months.

"I'm a lot like a kid from the Jacksonville Suns who gets called up by the L.A. Dodgers," Martin said during an interview at his office, a converted storage shed behind his Miramar home. "I don't feel like I've made it. ... There are a lot of really great books that don't sell."

Martin said he'll know he has made it as a novelist when he makes the New York Times best-seller list, sells a million copies and has a book made into a movie. His first novel, *The Dead Don't Dance*, was optioned for a Hallmark Hall of Fame TV movie, but the project fell through.

Martin is beginning a promotional campaign and will do two book signings in Jacksonville this weekend. He will be at The Bookmark in Atlantic Beach at 7 p.m. Friday; then he and his wife, Christy, will host a reception from 7 to 9 p.m. Saturday in the lobby of Riverplace Tower. Both events are open to the public.

After that, he'll tour through October, mostly in the Southeast, though his first stop will be Monday in Boston. In late fall, he goes to Italy. Next



"Where the River Ends" is a lyrical account of a journey a struggling artist makes with his dying wife down the St. Marys River to fulfill her last wish. While researching the novel, Charles Martin made six kayak trips down the river, which rises out of the Okefenokee Swamp and forms the Florida-Georgia border as it flows toward the Atlantic Ocean.

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springs he will promote the book, which is being published in 14 countries, in Germany and the United Kingdom.

Research in a kayak

Where the River Ends is a lyrical account of a journey a struggling artist makes with his dying wife down the St. Marys River to fulfill her last wish. While researching the novel, Martin made six kayak trips down the river, which rises out of the Okefenokee Swamp and forms the Florida-Georgia border as it flows toward the Atlantic Ocean.

A graduate of The Bolles School and Florida State University, Martin earned a master's degree and a doctorate from Regent University. In 1999, Martin gambled on his future, turning down an offer to become an executive with American Heritage Life Insurance Co. so he could concentrate on writing novels, while supporting himself with odd jobs. His first novel was published five years later.

It was a gamble that seems ready to pay off handsomely. But Martin, who is trying to work on his next novel despite the various distractions, isn't celebrating yet.

"At this point," he said, "the only thing I have control of is the next blank page."

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