

A closer look at a classic

The Cross and the Switchblade

He was thrown out of the courtroom during a high-profile murder trial and put his reputation on the line. But for David Wilkerson, it was exactly what was needed to establish rapport with the gangs and drug addicts on the streets of New York City.

Wilkerson felt called to reach those rejected by society, but he could not relate to their circumstances and clearly was a misfit in the inner city. Wilkerson knew all things are possible for God, but he kept coming face to face with people who appeared beyond reach and circumstances darker than he ever imagined. His challenge was to believe for the impossible, follow the leading of the Holy Spirit and reach these people with God's love.

When I first read *The Cross and the Switchblade* (Chosen Books) as a teenager, I clung to every glimmer of hope, sank with each moment of despair and found myself burdened to share the gospel. The true stories of gang leaders and drug addicts who encountered Christ through Wilkerson's ministry encouraged my faith. To this day, in part thanks to Wilkerson's example, I realize it doesn't matter who I am so much as that I'm willing to let God direct my steps.

The Cross and the Switchblade is also the genesis account of Teen Challenge, now recognized as one of the most effective addiction recovery programs. Next year Teen Challenge will celebrate its 50th anniversary, and a 45th anniversary edition of the book will be released. The new edition will feature an epilogue by Wilkerson to update readers on the lives of the key characters, such as Nicky Cruz (leader of the Mau Mau gang who became an evangelist himself).

Wilkerson, with co-authors John and Elizabeth Sherrill, repeatedly highlights the importance of the Holy Spirit's guidance, empowerment and provision. First published in 1963, *The Cross and the Switchblade* has sold 14 million copies, been translated into 35 languages and became a movie starring Pat Boone and Erik Estrada. More importantly, God has used the words of this short book to spread His gospel and introduce many to the baptism in the Holy Spirit.

Q&A

David Wilkerson and Elizabeth Sherrill offer a behind-the-scenes look at *The Cross and the Switchblade's* effect on their lives and how the best-seller was never about money.

said the chapters that talk about the Holy Spirit and other references to the Spirit were gone. Since we didn't read the language, that had never crossed our minds. That book did not sell. Later the book did come out with the whole text, and it too took off.

TPE: Did you ever dream the story would become what it is today?

WILKERSON: No, I was so busy on the streets at the time. This was a break for me to go sit with John and Elizabeth and really try to keep focused on doing it. It wasn't just theory; it was something that was actually happening.

SHERRILL: We never dreamed it would have the life it's had. I think you'd freeze up if you thought, *These words I'm writing will be read by millions!* Just write to a single reader. Then if God wants to sell 14 million copies, then OK.

TPE: What were some surprises in the writing process?

WILKERSON: The first draft did not have the two chapters regarding the Holy Spirit. The very week before it went to press the publisher asked for the additional chapters. He had come across a story in a leading magazine about Episcopalian priests speaking in tongues. He said, "Aren't you people Pentecostal? I'd like to have a couple chapters on this baptism in the Holy Spirit."

TPE: Would the life of the book have been different had those chapters not been added?

SHERRILL: We usually try not to know about the sales figures; we knew only that the sales in different countries were uniformly high. The exception was one Scandinavian country. It was just not moving at all. Finally someone who spoke the language looked at the book and

TPE: What role did prayer play?

WILKERSON: We prayed over every page that this would be honoring to the Lord.

SHERRILL: John and I prayed over every page of the book. David didn't know we were doing it, and we didn't know he was doing it. We would pray prayers such as, "Let this story bring healing in someone's life." Or, "Let this incident give someone greater courage."

TPE: What was the writing process like?

WILKERSON: Every Monday I met with John and Elizabeth, I think for almost a year. I would talk about how Teen Challenge started, what was happening, and I'd talk about some of the lives of the people involved, like Nicky Cruz.

TPE: Did David's wife, Gwen, play a role in the book?

SHERRILL: Yes, she often would remember specific details. We would have a whole series of questions each time we got together with him or with them. He'd often say, "Gwen might remember that."

TPE: Who was your intended audience?

SHERRILL: We always have a target reader — a particular person we want to reach. The reader we envisioned for this book was the disaffected young person who thought Christianity was dull and had nothing to offer.



TPE: How did the book affect your ministry?

WILKERSON: It opened doors for our ministry all around the world. There are 620 Teen Challenge centers now worldwide. Also, I conducted youth crusades all over the United States and around the world after the book became popularized.

TPE: How has *The Cross and the Switchblade* impacted your life?

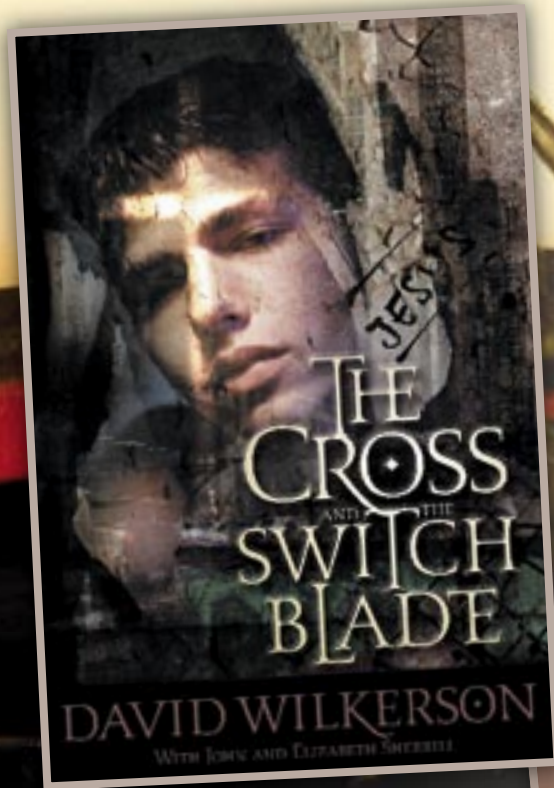
SHERRILL: The impact on us was knowing David. The commitment to prayer, the importance he placed on prayer, and the regularity of prayer — all of those things were not part of our experience until we met David.

TPE: What's your vision for the next decade?

WILKERSON: I'd like to establish in Nairobi a ministry center with a school and clinic that would care for AIDS children. This is probably my last year of conferences. Hopefully I can spend time in Africa after the conferences. I want to finish out my years involved.

Currently David Wilkerson, president of World Challenge, travels the globe preaching at World Challenge ministers' conferences and is active as founding pastor at Times Square Church in New York City. John and Elizabeth Sherrill continue to write books as well as articles for Guideposts and Angels on Earth magazines. **tpe**

E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.



Elizabeth Sherrill



David Wilkerson