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Arts, Sports & Culture

# Off-The-Deep-End Times: Pittsburgh-based author's debut novel is an apocalyptic satire

90.5 WESA | By **Bill O'Driscoll**  
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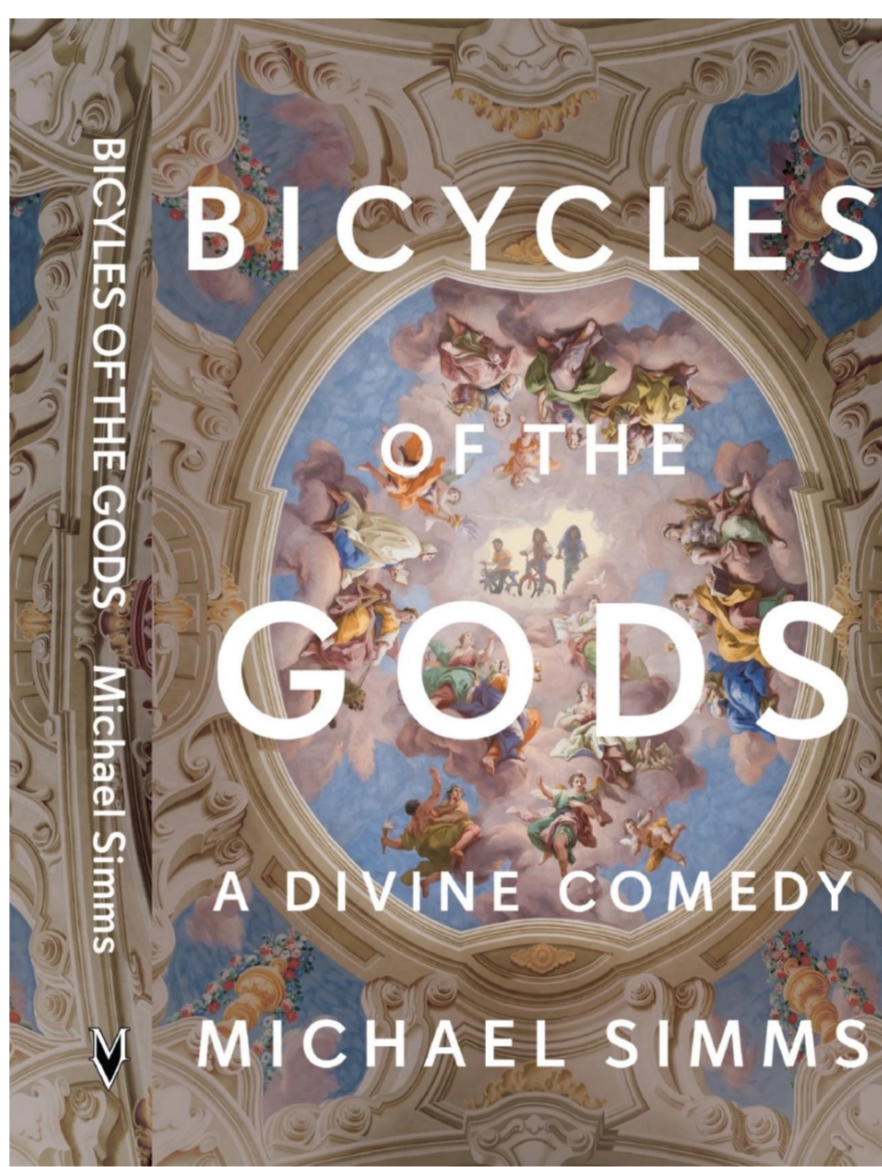
Eva Maria Simms / Courtesy Of The Author

Michael Simms' debut novel features Jesus, returned to Earth as a 12-year-old Latino boy

It started as a pandemic project, as well as a sort of practical joke on his Catholic-theologian brother. But while Pittsburgh-based author Michael Simms' debut novel, "Bicycles of the Gods," is subtitled "A Divine Comedy," it's more than a little serious about the ills plaguing society, from racism to environmental destruction.

The premise: After a long time away, Jesus returns to Earth as a 12-year-old Latino boy named Jesse. He and his adolescent buddy, Xavi — you know him as Shiva, god of destruction — scoot around on electric bikes, but they haven't come to play. Their mission, assigned Upstairs by Jesse's dad, is to annihilate human civilization. But Jesse, in keeping with his character, has his doubts: He wants to help people, not wipe them out. Nonetheless, after he's fed the homeless not with loaves and fishes *per se* but rather with tuna sandwiches, the story builds toward an Armageddonish battle with Satan's army, if not quite the one foretold in the Book of Revelation.

Simms said he didn't intend to write a whole novel — just enough of a sketch to "piss off" his brother. But, he said, "I liked it, so I just kept writing it and it turned into a novel, and I revised it. And then I sent it to my brother. ... And he loved it. That really surprised me. And so I thought, 'Well, maybe I've got something here.'"



Simms, who lives in Mount Washington, is a fixture on Pittsburgh's literary scene. In 1998, the poet and Texas native founded Autumn House Press here to help compensate for the downturn in poetry published by big presses. Autumn House became likely Pittsburgh's most prominent independent publisher, later expanding into fiction and nonfiction. And Simms, who retired in 2016, has continued publishing collections of his own poetry, most recently 2021's "Nightjar" (Ragged Sky Press).

Now, at age 68, comes his first novel, out Aug. 16 on Madville Publishing. The supporting cast of "Bicycles of the Gods" is filled out by characters including a homeless military veteran, a social worker, a young trans prostitute, and Jesse's mom, Maria Nazarene, a Mexican activist who turns out to lead a leather-clad, motorcycle-riding, special-ops-trained posse called the Nuns with Guns, who play a key role in the climactic showdown with evil.

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Lest anyone miss Simms' satiric intent, Satan embodies himself on Earth as a mogul named Luke Ferris, who rails against immigrants and whose followers wear red caps. And that big showdown is sparked by Maria's plan to bring 30,000 migrants north across the border.

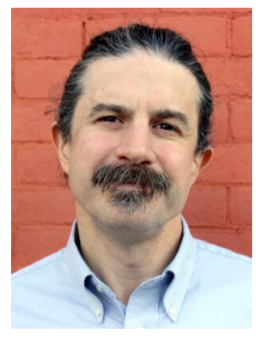
The whole thing plays out against a backdrop of wildfires, floods and more, straight out of Revelation. Readers who gather Simms is suggesting the End Times, Biblical or not, are upon us, are on his wavelength.

"The Western half of the United States is on fire," he said. "The Eastern half is being flooded. Hurricanes, tornadoes, right-wing takeovers in the United States and other countries. Migrant refugees, whose countries are no longer inhabitable, surging towards the United States and Europe. The apocalypse has begun, and I don't think most of us realize it. And you don't have to be religious. You don't have to believe the Book of Revelations or be a Christian or anything to see that we are at the end of our civilization. The large-scale systems by which we survive, enable our our Western lifestyle, are collapsing."

But Simms still expresses hope for humanity, and so does "Bicycles of the Gods." While he doesn't consider himself conventionally religious, he does think we'd do well to follow some core teachings of Jesus, as they are laid out in his novel.

"Jesus said that we should love one another," said Simms. "So I would suggest that Christianity needs to return to those roots."

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**Bill O'Driscoll**

Bill is a long-time Pittsburgh-based journalist specializing in the arts and the environment. Previous to working at WESA, he spent 21 years at the weekly Pittsburgh City Paper, the last 14 as Arts & Entertainment editor. He is a graduate of Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism and in 30-plus years as a journalist has freelanced for publications including In Pittsburgh, The Nation, E: The Environmental Magazine, American Theatre, and the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. Bill has earned numerous Golden Quill awards from the Press Club of Western Pennsylvania. He lives in the neighborhood of Manchester, and he once milked a goat. Email: bodriscoll@wesa.fm

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Dan Scifo | Associated Press

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Bill O'Driscoll

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