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# Are You There, Margaret? It's Me, God— Religious Contexts in Recent Adolescent Fiction

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*Are you there, God? It's me, Margaret. What would you think of me doing a project on religion? You wouldn't mind, would you God? I'd tell you all about it. And I won't make any decisions without asking you first. I think it's time for me to decide what to be. I can't go on being nothing forever, can I?*

Judy Blume

With chummy ambivalence, Judy Blume's Margaret Simon in *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret* announces to the deity her plan for "doing a project on religion," her response to her sixth grade teacher's major assignment for the school year. In the next several months, almost-twelve Margaret finds that pressures from loving grandparents, Jewish on one side and Christian on the other, can make the business of choosing a religion pretty distasteful. God, content to watch rather than to pick sides, allows Margaret to find her own way through a maze of competing affections. At the end of the year, Margaret decides not to decide, explaining herself in these terms: "I don't think a person can decide to be a certain religion just like that. It's like having to choose your own name."

Judy Blume has yet to grace adolescent literature with *Margaret II*, so one can only speculate regarding her young heroine's subsequent monologues with God or her connections with organized religion. *Margaret I* was published by Bradbury in 1970 (and in paperback by Dell the same year); a 1983 sequel might well find its protagonist in her early twenties. I for one have trouble seeing a grown-up Margaret as a Jerry Falwell fan on

the one hand or a nun on the other, but I can't envision her as a theological dropout either. If her experience had paralleled that of most Americans today, Margaret II would be likely to judge much of her experience in theological terms, to weigh her actions according to religiously prescribed notions of right and wrong, and to ponder the meaning of life and death. She might consider the possibility that this may not be, in fact, all there is.

Margaret's story deals directly with religious issues, as do several other titles reviewed later. For the past months, though, I have been engaged in a study of religion in adolescent literature that is somewhat different. For reasons noted below, this study focused on the nature of religious elements in works that are by and large about other life experiences and were published either in their original or paperback versions in 1979 or later.

Several related events converged to stimulate a search for religious contexts in these works. First, I struck up with an unusually articulate and thoughtfully conservative group of students in my graduate course in young adult literature. They raised an interesting question: why did the fifty titles on my syllabus deal so little with religion? "Why should they?" I responded.

One teacher clarified the sense of the group. "I like these books. I really do. My students read them, and I want my children to read them, too. What bothers me is that all of them I've read, taken together, teach, between the lines, that religion is not very important, that a handicap or divorce or rape or even a parent's death can be dealt with in purely secular terms. That's not

the way it is for most people, at least not for me, and I don't think it's that way for high school kids either.

I was impressed by what she said. I still am. The ghost of Marshall McLuhan whispered in my ear, "The medium is the message." My students were suggesting that educators should attend to what literature says and doesn't say in larger, forest-not-just-the-trees terms. I found myself wondering if the full range of titles I'd selected were as devoid of religion as my graduate students had indicated. Was my reading list representative of current YA fiction?

A second event added to my curiosity. In the December 1981 *English Journal*, Dean Hughes and Kathy Piehl baited and rebaited the notion "Books for young readers that touch on religious themes do not get a fair shake in the marketplace." Reading the discussion, which like most Bait/Rebait articles ended in a draw, I wondered if adolescent literature writers, conscious of real or imagined sensitivities among publishers, avoided the religious dimension. Were the publishers, in turn, serving up a secular-only diet?

Several weeks later, I was reading a recent collection of essays by Bennett Sims, Episcopal Bishop of Atlanta. Pondering the effect of growing fundamentalism in our society, Sims referred to a 1981 study of American culture funded by Connecticut Mutual Life Insurance Company which highlighted the considerable weight most of us place on our religious beliefs. More than any other factor, the study revealed, religion was identified by a representative sample of more than two thousand Americans as the element affecting most both their values and actions. As reported elsewhere (*New York Times*, March 31, 1982), the Connecticut Mutual study also revealed a sharp contrast between the place of religion in the lives of ordinary Americans and of those in leadership roles. Business, political, and media leaders were significantly less likely to derive values and actions from a religious orientation than the general public.

Here, then, was a three-dimensional base from which to begin a status study of recent young adult fiction: one, the significant role of religion in the average American's life; two, the concern in some quarters, as expressed by Dean Hughes, that religious elements are sidestepped by publishers; and three, the curiosity of my Deep South

graduate students in the apparent absence of a religious context or backdrop in the titles I had assigned them.

Thirty four novels—those by widely read writers such as Judy Blume, Norma Fox Mazer, and Alice Childress as well as a number of somewhat less well-known novelists like Barbara Brenner and Betty Levin—were the focus of the investigation. All except five have a contemporary American setting. Twenty-nine are available in paperback.

To assess religious elements in these works of literature as systematically as possible, a series of questions was framed.

*Religious beliefs and practices:* What characters express a belief in God? In what way(s) is this belief expressed? Do any characters pray? Under what circumstances? Do any characters seek counsel from a "religious advisor"? Have they in the past? If so, how is this experience presented and regarded?

*Religious workers and institutions:* Are any characters, clergy or otherwise, formally associated with institutionalized religion? How are these characters presented and regarded? What perceptions do characters have of churches or other religious institutions? How are these perceptions presented in the work?

*Death and afterlife:* What views do characters profess regarding death and an afterlife, if any?

Following a close reading of the thirty-four novels by me, by graduate students at Columbus College, or both, these findings may be reported: 16 novels reflected *little or no religious context*, 13 provided a *moderate religious context*, and five offered a *strong religious context* or dealt directly with religious issues and themes. In the following discussion, the characteristics of these groupings will be made clearer.

Sixteen titles, nearly half the sample, reflected little or no religious context.

*Iggie's House*, Judy Blume. Bradbury, 1970; Dell pbk., 1981.

*Gimme an H, Gimme an E, Gimme an L, Gimme a P*, Frank Bonham. Scribner, 1980; Scholastic pbk., 1982.

*A Killing Season*, Barbara Brenner. Four Winds Press, 1981; Scholastic pbk., 1981.

*Too Much in Love*, Patty Bricso. Scholastic original pbk., 1980.

*Morelli's Game*, Patricia Lee Gauch. Putnam, 1981; Archway pbk., 1982.

*The Keeping Room*, Betty Levin. Greenwillow, 1981.

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*The War Between the Pitiful Teachers and the Splendid Kids*, Stanley Kiesel. Dutton, 1980; Avon Flare pbk., 1982.

*Taking Terri Mueller*, Norma Fox Mazer. Avon Flare original pbk., 1981.

*Up in Seth's Room*, Norma Fox Mazer. Delacorte, 1979; Dell pbk., 1981.

*The Language of Goldfish*, Zibby O'Neal. Viking, 1980; Fawcett Juniper pbk., 1981.

*Cute Is a Four-Letter Word*, Stella Pevsner. Houghton-Mifflin, 1980; Archway pbk., 1980.

*Counter Play*, Anne Snyder. NAL Signet original pbk., 1981.

*In Love and In Trouble*, Laurel Trivelpiece. Archway original pbk., 1981.

*My Brother Is Special*, Maureen Crane Wartski. Westminster, 1979; NAL Signet Pbk., 1979.

*A Star for the Latecomer*, Bonnie and Paul Zindel. Harper and Row, 1980; Bantam pbk., 1981.

*The Girl Who Wanted a Boy*, Paul Zindel. Harper and Row, 1981; Bantam pbk., 1981.

In these novels, characters neither practice nor reject religion. They do not pray, unless one counts, "Oh God" or "Jeez" as prayers rather than common expletives. The sixteen novels run the gamut of adolescent and/or human problems, including mental illness (*The Language of Goldfish*), child kidnapping by an estranged parent (*Taking Terri Mueller* and *The Keeping Room*) and the death of a parent (*A Star for the Latecomer*). Other less traumatic problems in this group concern homosexuality (*Counterplay*), retardation (*My Brother is Special*), and awakening sexuality (*Up in Seth's Room*).

In these novels, experience is the predominant teacher as young characters gain insight into their problems through living through them and, more often than not, facing their consequences. Through self-understanding, they come to a more mature grasp of others and of the world. In the best of these works—*A Killing Season* and *A Star for the Latecomer*, for example—young adult writers have avoided the pat answers and easy solutions that once marred the genre. These adolescent characters get where they are going on their own. Though unconcerned about religion per se, the Zindels' Brook Hillary, trying to come to terms with her mother's cancer, faces the meaning of life and death uncompromisingly. Inspired by Sartre, she concludes that the dead remain with the living as long as they, in turn, remember and honor a loved one who has died.

These titles, then, illustrate the element which raised some concern among my graduate students. With little or no religious dimension, they present a view of the world that, to some young and old readers, is unrealistic and unnatural. Other novels, on the other hand, provide a religious context these readers might find more agreeable, more normal. These thirteen titles depict a range of conflicts and problems not unlike those in the first group, but in them the reader may observe human responses, beliefs, and practices fairly typical in a society in which religion is a strong element.

*The Last Monster*, Jane and Paul Annixter. Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1980.

*Come Alive at 505*, Robin Brancato. Knopf, 1980; Bantam pbk., 1981.

*All Together Now*, Sue Ellen Bridgers. Knopf, 1980; Bantam pbk., 1980.

*Rainbow Jordan*, Alice Childress. Putnam, 1981; Avon Flare pbk., 1982.

*Accident*, Hila Colman. Morrow, 1980; Archway pbk., 1981.

*Daughters of Eve*, Lois Duncan. Little, Brown, 1979; Dell pbk., 1980.

*Tex*, S.E. Hinton. Delacorte, 1979; Dell pbk., 1982.

*Peace Breaks Out*, John Knowles. Holt Rinehart Winston, 1981.

*There Are Two Kinds of Terrible*, Peggy Mann. Doubleday, 1977; Avon pbk., 1979.

*Did You Hear What Happened to Andrea?*, Gloria D. Miklowitz. Delacorte, 1974; Dell pbk., 1981.

*One Day You'll Go*, Sheila Schwartz. Scholastic original pbk., 1981.

*Angel Dust Blues*, Todd Strasser. Coward McCann, 1979; Dell pbk., 1981.

*A Boat to Nowhere*, Maureen Crane Wartski. NAL Signet pbk., 1980.

In what sense do these novels exhibit a "moderate" religious dimension? None is about a religious topic as such, but in each religion is part of the psychological and social setting for other themes and topics. In *Accident*, for example, Adam DeWitt is Catholic and refers at one point to his mother's "Catholic arrogance." His best friend is Jewish. When Adam's girlfriend, Jenny Melino, is gravely injured, the reader learns that "the Melinos were not churchgoers, but the parish priest came as well as the rabbi from the synagogue." In *Did You Hear What Happened to Andrea?* young Andrea prays in the midst of a

rape attack, and, in *One Day You'll Go*, contrasting religious practices cause a minor conflict between a boy and his girlfriend's parents. These elements are light touches which add reality.

With a firmer stroke, Alice Childress' *Rainbow Jordan* incorporates religion in both plot and setting in numerous instances: in writing a school assignment, for example, fourteen-year-old Rainbow describes George Washington Carver's contributions as a "Christian act"; she recalls a Christmas card from a Georgia relative which reads, "The savior was born to save sinners"; and, midway through the novel, Rainbow counts museums, libraries, and churches as the only places in the world that are quiet.

These titles, then, provide an unobtrusive religious context that renders them more natural, more in keeping with the world of most adolescents. In no sense do they deal with religious topics, but in them young characters and old alike refer to their beliefs, to religious customs and holidays, to prior experiences involving church or synagogue. In moments of crisis, they pray, inexpertly, for understanding or for divine help.

In a last group of five novels, the religious dimension is yet more strongly presented. In two, religion is an important element in facing a conflict or crisis; in the other three, religion or religious beliefs are the primary focus of the work.

*Tunnel Vision*, Fran Arrick. Bradbury, 1980; Dell pbk., 1981.

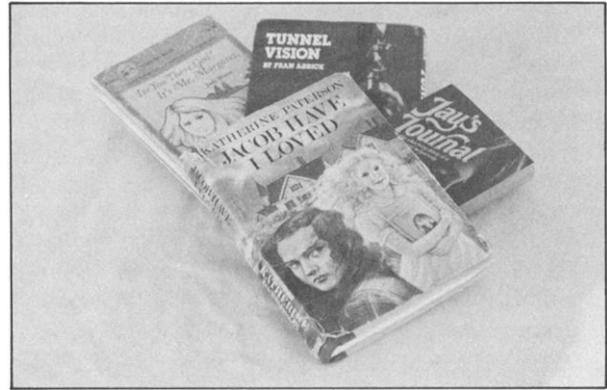
*Jacob Have I Loved*, Katherine Paterson. Harper and Row, 1980; Avon Flare pbk., 1981.

*Jay's Journal*, Beatrice Sparks. Times Books, 1979; Dell pbk., 1979.

*Words By Heart*, Ouida Sebestyen. Atlantic-Little Brown, 1979; Bantam pbk., 1981.

*The Love Bombers*, Gloria D. Miklowitz. Delacorte, 1980; Dell pbk., 1982.

Newbery medal recipient *Jacob Have I Loved*, set on an isolated Chesapeake Bay island at the outbreak of World War II, is rich in Methodist overtones. Family religious values depend on the history of the island, visited by the Wesleys soon after settlement by earlier generations. The central conflict of the novel, the jealousy of one twin for her pampered and talented sister, is drawn from the Old Testament. Religious lore is as important to this novel as the tales of oystermen and crabbers which, together, create in Paterson's novel a rare textural richness.



In *Tunnel Vision*, a family tries to come to terms with the suicide of fifteen-year-old Anthony Hamil. Guilt-ridden, both family and friends attempt to make sense of what has happened and their own inability to see what was coming. Religion is part of their response, part of their groping for insight, for an explanation. In a scene that strikes a chord with many young readers, Arrick describes two of Anthony's close friends:

They sat on the floor of Carl's room with incense burning in a tiny pot between them. They were trying to pray. It was the only thing they could think of to do.

"... and please let his soul rest in peace, God, even though it was a sin what he did," Ditto was saying softly. "Because he really was a good person . . ."

"Yeah, he was," Carl interjected.

Anthony, as revealed in a paper written for school prior to the suicide, concluded in his despair that death was the ultimate peace. "Death," he had written, "wraps itself all around, keeping out wind and bad voices. Death can be a piece of luck. It should be celebrated."

To the sixteen-year-old protagonist of *Jay's Journal*, death is more than luck, more than celebration. Caught up in drugs, then in white and black witchcraft, Jay finds death through suicide the only way to avoid a terrifying existence in which he and the reader both doubt his sanity. In the course of his eighteen-month journal, Jay turns in fits and starts from the elements which once sustained him—parents, brother, friends, and a sense of divine presence in his life. Through experience with witchcraft, he begins to confuse religious faith with belief in occult powers.

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What's the difference between what we were doing [witchcraft] and faith? The church teaches faith! . . . I know faith works! I've personally seen it heal the sick and other things. . . . I literally know *both* these strange but uncomprehended power sources work. Or are they both extensions of one?

In his final three months of life, Jay continues to flip-flop between the depths of despair—his “our Father which art in Hell” prayer exemplifies this—and the heights of joy in life.

*The world is mine, your gift to me,  
THIS DAY IS MINE, and I am free—  
Dear God, what will I make it be?  
A thing of love, of joy, and care?  
Something wonderful and fair?  
. . .  
Dear God, this I hope I can do!  
For me!—and you.*

Less than one month after this outburst of religious fervor, Jay takes his own life.

*Words By Heart* captures, through the eyes of a child, a black family's attempt to live by New Testament values rather than harsher, eye-for-an-eye Old Testament concepts of justice. In the powerful opening chapters, Lena Sills takes on her entire elementary school in a contest to determine who can quote the most Bible verses. She wins, to the distress of the white community. Ben Sills, her father, is engaged in a more serious contest, that between his own basic Christian values and the mounting bigotry and violence directed toward his family. Ben's principles cost him his life at the novel's conclusion, but, through his sacrifice, his family is accepted in Bethel Springs.

A controversial novel, *Words By Heart* has been much praised on one hand and, for Ben Sills' acquiescence to the injustice around him, much criticized on the other. Nonetheless, as an account of religious values in action, it will appeal to readers who recognize the gap between beliefs which are superficial and those which, through practice, have truly been learned “by heart.”

*The Love Bombers*, the last of this group, is a courageous look at religious cults, courageous in the sense that Jeremy Gordon's decision to remain with the Church of the World rather than return to his family is plausibly if not sympathetically presented by Gloria Miklowitz. In the first half of the novel, focused on sister Jenny's attempt to trace him, the cult—closer to the moonies than anything else—is seen through highly skeptical lenses. Jenny's goal is simple: to rescue her brother

from brainwashing fanatics. Miklowitz shifts gears in the second half of the novel, however, told from Jeremy's point of view. Described by him, the cult's tactics seem as unprincipled as ever to the reader. But Jeremy's deep-seated need for a purpose in life is met by the cult in ways unavailable from his ambitious, middle-class parents. Conventional religion fails Jeremy. Uneasily, the reader is drawn to conclude that the Church of the World might succeed.

What conclusions can be drawn about religious contexts in these thirty-four novels and in other recent adolescent fiction? Nearly half the titles evidenced no religious elements. Thirteen provided a moderate and unobtrusive religious dimension; in those works, religion is a given, a part of adolescent and family life. These characters, in no sense pious, come to terms with problems and conflicts in ways similar to young heroes and heroines in the first group. With five other works, religion is an important element, in two instances with stories dealing with jealousy and guilt (*Jacob Have I Loved* and *Tunnel Vision*), in three, the plots directly concern the difficult search for religious values (*Jay's Journal*, *Tunnel Vision*, and *Words By Heart*). The inability of Jay and Jeremy to accept whole the mainstream religious values of their parents mirrors the skepticism of more normal adolescents.

Adults who feel that the religious dimension should be part of adolescent literature can take heart from these works. It is there in more than half of them. Some adults would prefer a higher proportion, perhaps, and some would not, but there can be little doubt that young readers like Judy Blume's Margaret Simon will find meaningful reading in recent young adult fiction. Given the degree of ambivalence many adolescents sense toward religion, it is only natural—even suitable—that these works incorporate the honest doubt of their young protagonists. To present religion in this light will not give heart to some conservative critics, to be sure, but to many more adults, people who've had their share of “projects on religion,” the religious context of current books for adolescent readers will be at least familiar if not comfortable.

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