

Carte Blanche

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The Last Taboo?

Not so many years ago, celebrated author Jane Yolen remarked that religion was the last taboo in young-adult literature. Her comments were occasioned by the 1998 publication of *Armageddon Summer*,

which she cowrote with Bruce Coville. A well-reviewed and thought-provoking work of fiction, it examined the inner workings of a millennial cult that believed the world would end on July 27, 2000. A year after *Armageddon's* publication, Susan Dove Lempke, in her *Booklist* review of Stephanie S. Tolan's *Ordinary Miracles*, asserted that "well-written fiction exploring Christian themes is rare, and many libraries will want to snap this up."

Why "taboo"? Why "rare"? Well, of all the hot-button issues in our contentious society, religion may just be the hottest. Even writing these words has me sweating like a sinner at a Billy Sunday revival! Who knows who may take issue with my innocent, well-intentioned observations? Understandably, publishers, too, tend to avoid controversy as if it were one of the seven plagues of Egypt. Sometimes, however, even cautious publishers are surprised. Who would have thought that the Harry Potter books would wind up among the most challenged titles of the late 1990s and early 2000s? And, yet, though J. K. Rowling had published only the first two of the series by 2000, she wound up as the seventh most challenged author of the 1990s, according to ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom. And not for sex or language but for featuring wizards and magic, the stuff of wonder!

The problem, of course, is that religion remains a matter of faith, "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen," as the Apostle Paul so famously defined it. Faith is not a matter of empirical evidence but of personal belief—very personal, which is why I remain so nervous about discussing it, despite living in an age when the best-seller list is routinely chockablock with controversial works by Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and others, all offering what they contend is scientific proof that faith is delusional.

For many, those are fighting words, though I'm not sure I'd go so far as my *Booklist* colleague Will Manley, who, in his last thought-provoking column, said these writers "have launched a literary crusade against God." On the other hand, I wouldn't deny that they have certainly stirred the pot of controversy until it's come to a fine old boil.

"Sociologists have speculated about a new atheism in the U.S.," Christine Wicker writes in the October 4, 2009, issue of *Parade*. "No such thing," she then stoutly asserts in her report of a recent *Parade* survey of 1,051 respondents age 18 and older. In that survey, only 5 percent of respondents said they *didn't* believe in God, though another 7 percent weren't "sure" about his (or her) existence.

"What Americans are doing today," Wicker explains, "is sepa-

rating spirituality from religion. . . . In fact," she continues, "24 percent of respondents put themselves into a whole new category: 'spiritual but not religious.'"

This is bad news, I guess, for those who toil in the vineyards of organized religion, but what an irresistible invitation such a seismic shift is to further investigation.

But reading what? Didn't I say a moment ago that there is a lack of well-written YA books about this subject? Well, yes, and may we hope that the media attention being currently given to religion and spirituality might promote the publication of many new titles. In the meantime, however, there are already at least a handful of excellent writers and individual books that address aspects of this bewilderingly diverse topic with courage, energy, imagination, and art. Madeline L'Engle, C. S. Lewis, Chaim Potok, and Katherine Paterson remain four of the most prominent names in the former category, but three others who now indisputably belong in their company are Han Nolan, David Almond, and Philip Pullman. As for individual titles, how about Cynthia Rylant's *A Fine White Dust*, Myron Levoy's *Alan and Naomi*, Aidan Chambers' *NIK*, Michael Morpurgo's *The War of Jenkins' Ear*, Rosanne Parry's *Heart of a Shepherd*, Anne Provoost's *In the Shadow of the Ark*, Pete Hautman's *Godless*, R. A. Nelson's *Days of Little Texas*, and (another tip of the hat to a *Booklist* colleague) Ilene Cooper's *Sam I Am?*

And, of course, "inspirational fiction" continues to grow in popularity (and is reviewed regularly in these pages). Religious publishers also continue to produce endless series of "gentle reads" for teens

written by the likes of Melody Carlson, Robin Jones Gunn, Shelley Adina, Stephanie Perry Moore, and others.

Most recently—thanks, surely, to the extraordinary success of genre fiction featuring vampires, werewolves, and zombies—we are beginning to see a spate of quasi-religious novels featuring similarly undead demons and fallen angels. Some of these include Sarah Rees Brennan's *The Demon's Lexicon*, Michelle Rowen's *Demon Princess*, Becca Fitzpatrick's *Hush, Hush*, Timothy Carter's *Evil?* and Lauren Kate's *Fallen* (another new one, Amber Kizer's *Meridian*, is about a "Fenestra," i.e., a being who is half-human and half-angel).

Such trendy stuff can be mildly intriguing, but it doesn't satisfy any kind of deeper hunger for spiritual challenge and stimulation. For that, I remain particularly thankful for Almond and Pullman. For in their work, it is the most mysterious things that are the most important (to paraphrase Almond). And it is in their work that we find a summons to reexamine the sacrosanct (no wonder Pullman has been called "the most dangerous author in Britain"). Yet I would not describe *this* summons as an aspect of the New Atheism, for it is suffused with spiritual, even metaphysical, concerns. So, definitely *not* the New Atheism; instead, perhaps, the New Wonder?

And, one hopes, a new opportunity for others in their wake to explore these imperatively important and taboo-no-more thematic considerations.

Michael Cart is, most recently, the author of *Talking Animals and Others: The Life and Work of Walter R. Brooks* (Overlook).

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