

Don't Talk About What? Religion's Place in YA Fiction

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In 1994, Patty Campbell wrote, "Sex, politics, and religion are the three traditionally taboo subjects in polite American society, and in young-adult literature, the greatest of these taboos is religion" (*The Sand in the Oyster*, Horn Book Magazine, 70 (5), 619).

Twenty years later, how far have we come? What is the place of religion in YA literature, outside of genres such as Christian fiction?

According to Casey Rawson's study of award-winning and best-selling young adult fiction (*Checking the Lists: Protagonist and Author Diversity in Award-Winning and Bestselling Young Adult Fiction*, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, November, 2010):

The overwhelming majority of protagonists (89.6%) across all categories were not identified as religious. Of the remaining 10.4%, 5.4% were identified as Christian, 1.3% were identified as Jewish, 0.3% were identified as Muslim, and 3.4% were identified as practicing some other religion. Among the three main categories of titles, award-winning novels had the highest prevalence of religion among protagonists, with 16.7% of protagonists identified as religious. In the Teens Top Ten and bestsellers categories, approximately 5% of protagonists were identified as religious. All of these categories show a much lower prevalence of religiosity than actual U.S. survey data for children and teens.

The National Study of Youth and Religion (NYSR) found that over three quarters of U.S. teens self-identify as Christian, and only 13% of teens lack a religious affiliation. (National Study of Youth and Religion, 2001)

The question must be asked: what is it that keeps the topic of religion out of YA literature? If we know that teens love literature that they can identify with, why is this important aspect of diversity routinely ignored? Is fear of rocking the boat causing us to do a disservice to our readers?

Join a panel of authors who weave Catholicism, Judaism, Protestant Christianity, Islam, Native American mysticism and Buddhism/Shinto, respectively, into their YA novels and/or short stories. They will interact with audience members and discuss questions such as,

1. If, as a 2009 study reports, 65.3 percent of children and teens ages 6 through 17 participate in religious activities once a month or more (Dye & Johnson, 2009), why is there such a lack of YA titles that address this aspect of teen life?
2. Echoing the question asked by Casey Rawson's study, we will ask, "Why, since authors and publishers seem perfectly willing to feature other, even more sensitive issues such as teen sex, pregnancy, drug use, and abuse, is religion a taboo subject?"
3. How should authors and librarians handle situations of conflict between religions, such as between a defensive minority and the majority of a different religion? For example, Elsa Marston was once taken to task for not including more about *Christian Arabs* in her book, *Santa Claus in Baghdad and Other Stories*.
4. How can authors convey accurate, fair, and helpful information about a Islam, a religion that is little understood yet arouses some negative reactions in American society?
5. What is the best way to address concerns about books that have religion as an integral plot point? Examples:
 - Witches practicing witchcraft: click [here](#) for a list of books;
 - Catholicism mixed with Voodoo in *In Darkness* by Nicky Lake;
 - Judaism in Chaim Potok's *My Name is Asher Lev* and Han Nolan's *If I Should Die Before I Wake*;

- Catholicism in Nolan's *When We Were Saints*; Steve Parlato's *The Namesake*; Christine Kohler's *No Surrender Soldier*; and Elsa Marston's *The Compassionate Warrior*.
6. What's the best way to handle complaints when religion is portrayed as an evil, such as Elisa Nader's *Escape From Eden* about a cult, or the hypocrisy of a Christian in *Big Fat Disaster* by Beth Fehlbaum?
 7. Why isn't religion more depicted as a natural part of the characters' lives, such as Muslims and Christians in Elsa Marston's *The Compassionate Warrior*, and Catholicism and Buddhism/Shintoism in Christine Kohler's *No Surrender Soldier*?
 8. What advice would our panel of authors give to a librarian who has to defend one of our books because someone complains about the religious elements in it?
 - *From Christine Kohler*: On Guam, 98 percent of the people are Roman Catholic. In modern times, at least 95 percent of Japanese practice a blend of Shintoism and Buddhism, and the percentage would have been higher prior to WWII. On both islands, religion is not compartmentalized like how some American Christian families only go to church Sunday mornings. Instead, religion permeates every aspect of life for Guamanians and Japanese. Therefore, Kiko and his family are devout Catholics and Isamu Seto is a devout Buddhist with Shinto practices. Otherwise I would not have been true to portraying realistic characters and culture and practices and thinking (such as the concept of sin, and unworthiness, and guilt, and acceptance of forgiveness). In general, people are triune beings--body, soul, and spirit--and to deny developing the spiritual aspect of characters makes them flat instead of the three-dimensional characters readers deserve in a well-written story.
 - *Olugbemisola Rhuday-Perkovich* suggests pointing out the variety of religious viewpoints and representations in the collection, directing librarians to available discussion questions, blog posts, or lesson plans, invite them to lead or help plan a program around the issues raised in this or other books, and point out other instances where different books illustrate particular point of views around the same subject (race, sexuality, gender roles, etc.).

Olugbemisola sometimes uses this for "turn and talk" discussions or as an in-workshop writing exercise for educators preparing to teach or share literature that involves religion and spirituality:

Determine your own "cultural locations." What images, words, events, people have had power in or affected your spiritual life? What were the highlights/hard times? What do you feel comfortable sharing? (for additional reflection, see the "Exploring Your Faith Background" worksheet in *A Stone's Throw: Living The Act of Faith*, by Claudia Horwitz)

She suggests these links for possible starting points for community discussion or program:

<http://www.firstamendmentschools.org/resources/lesson.aspx?id=13963>

<http://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/09/23/10-ways-to-celebrate-banned-books-week/>

http://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/09/23/are-there-books-that-should-be-banned-from-your-school-library/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0

Panelists:

- Patricia Dunn (*Rebels By Accident*)
<http://www.patriciadunnauthor.com/>
- Beth Fehlbaum (*Big Fat Disaster; The Patience Trilogy*)
<http://www.bethfehlbaumbooks.com>
- Christina Gonzalez (*The Red Umbrella; A Thunderous Whisper*)
<http://www.christinagonzalez.com/>
- Varian Johnson (*Saving Maddie*)
<http://www.varianjohnson.com/>
- Christine Kohler (*No Surrender Soldier*)
<http://www.christinekohlerbooks.com/>
- Elsa Marston (*The Compassionate Warrior: Abd El-Kader of Algeria; Santa Claus in Baghdad*)
<http://www.elsamarston.com/>

- Elisa Nader (*Escape From Eden*)
<http://elisanader.tumblr.com/>
- Olugbemisola Rhuday-Perkovich (*8th Grade Superzero*)
<http://olugbemisolabooks.com/>
- N. H. Senzai (*Shooting Kabul*)
<http://www.nhsenzai.com/>
- Tim Tingle (*How I Became a Ghost*)
<http://www.timtingle.com/>

[Click this link for a bibliography of YA novels with religious elements.](#)