Spiritual Quest in Young Adult Literature

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Religion and fiction can be a troublesome blend in literature for young people. While the early history of children's literature is rife with message-driven works, secularism predominates in education and hence in literature for young audiences. Can religious concerns be the focus in this literature when prayer in the schools is a regular news item? When classrooms are a garden of skin tones, nationalities and belief systems? Whose truth shall we tell? The evangelical Christians'? The atheists'? The Jews's? The Moslems'? That of the latest messenger of doom? As Yeats put it, "The best lack all conviction while the worst/Are filled with passionate intensity" (qtd. in Gardner 41). Who are we to put forth opinions that might shape young lives in the innermost sense? Shoghi Effendi, a central figure in the Baha'i Faith, pointed out that "moral issues which were clear a half century ago are now hopelessly confused."

Many writers have found it simpler to avoid spiritual issues altogether, to stay with the safe and secular. "[W]e keep ourselves occupied with surfaces", according to John Gardner (60). But as a writer for The Dallas Morning News pointed out, each new year is a time of taking stock, of making resolutions to guide us through the year to come. A new millennium would seem to be an occasion for yet more serious evaluating and resolving (1G). This is no less true for young people who will be saddled with many of the very difficult questions technology continually brings us. If we avoid the questions intrinsic to religion-who are we? why are we here? how should we conduct ourselves-what is there to guide and sustain young readers?

One solution a number of writers have grasped is to portray protagonists as learning to seek the answers within themselves—not bad advice, in many respects. Organized religion, then, is presented as quirky, repressive, even destructive. Wisdom dictates passing it up for one's inner code. For example, in Cynthia Rylant's A Fine White Dust, Peter falls under the spell of a traveling revivalist who breaks his promises to Peter. Rather than reject God along with the preacher, Peter turns to his personal vision of God and spirituality. It is a strengthening message with which to shield oneself from inevitable disillusionment. But what will feed the soul? What will one find when one turns inward if the soul has not been fed?

Lois Ruby's Miriam's Well would seem to be heading in the same direction. The story is told through the alternating viewpoints of Miriam, an ardent follower of an offbeat Christian sect, and Adam, Jewish by heritage if not by commitment. Because Ruby has created a sect wound around the teachings of a fictitious preacher, Christian readers are unlikely to feel offended. Adam stands in for a sort of everyman. On a scale of one to ten, Adam rates his religion as number ten in reflecting his identity (8). Adam serves as a contrast for Miriam in both religion and commitment; his disinterest allows his Judaism to escape critique.

Both characters grow throughout the course of the story. Adam once dismissed Miriam as "the deadest girl in class" (6) and "a religious fanatic" (7). But after being paired with Miriam for a school project and learning that she has cancer, Adam begins to care about the plain, straight-laced girl. Her commitment impresses him. Visiting her church, he notes, "I felt 100 percent sure that she believed" (100). Gradually, Adam, whose thoughts initially centered on sliding through school and on his girlfriend, finds himself becoming more serious. He is offended when his friend, referring to Miriam, crudely says, "Isn't she going to croak anyway?" although he realizes not long ago he "would have said the same thing" (218). When Miriam accompanies Adam to his brother's wedding, Adam easily explains the sights and sounds at the synagogue to her—he has absorbed more of his religion than he realized.
Most readers will share Adam's disbelief and alarm as Miriam, stricken with cancer, fights medical treatment. She soon becomes the focal point of a legal battle, her mother and church represented by Adam's lawyer father on the one side and Adam, the medical personnel, and most of the community on the other. As her pain and desperation grow, the reader assumes Miriam's growth will come through rejecting the restrictions of her faith and accepting treatment. But Ruby does not yield to this frequently-used theme. Miriam remains firm in her commitment though a sort of compromise is reached. She is legally compelled to accept a limited form of treatment. She also experiments with metaphysical healing. And, of course, her church rallies with prayer. Which approach effects her eventual remission? Any or all of the approaches might be responsible. But Miriam credits divine intervention; she has come through a challenging test and remained firm. One final test for her, as presented by her preacher, is to bring Adam into the fold.

This is where Miriam manages to draw a line between her preacher's view of Christianity and her own conscience. The wedding gives Miriam genuine respect and appreciation for an alternative approach to spirituality, making her unable to Many writers have found it simpler to avoid spiritual issues altogether, to stay with the safe and secular. convert him: "...now that I've met the grandmas and the rabbi, and now that I've seen [Adam] stand up there under the wedding canopy, with that purple skullcap on [his] head" (261). This respect is real progress for Miriam, but it comes at a price: she tells him that she can't see him any more. "I'm fish, and you're fowl," she tells him. "We can't live in the same medium" (260), and Adam soon agrees, "We were fish and fowl, apples and oranges. It had to end" (262).

Certainly, the respect, appreciation, and commitment demonstrated in Miriam's Well are qualities that will serve young people well into the new millennium. But this separate but equal sort of toleration shortchanges a generation described as "the most racially and ethnically diverse generation in the country's history" (Times Picayune A22).

The Samurai's Garden by Gail Tsukiyama takes multiculturalism a step farther. The time is World War II. Stephan, a 20 year old Chinese student is sent to his family's beach house in Japan to recuperate from tuberculosis. The forced exile becomes a time of retreat and introspection for the young man. He finds he has much empty time to fill in sparsely populated Tarumi. At first, walks on the beach, letter writing, and painting occupy him. "Even the light [in Tarumi] is revealing," he notices. "[Y]ou can't miss the smallest nuance, the slightest sound" (20). With this heightened sensitivity, Stephan looks toward the few people that make up his new world for company. Matsu, the reclusive caretaker of the beach house, is a man who has worked for the family most of his life, yet Stephan feels that he barely knows him. Matsu quietly assumes the role of Stephan's caretaker. After Stephan learns that his father has been having an long-term affair, Matsu takes him to a Shinto shrine. "You never struck me as the religious type," Stephan comments. "There's still a lot you don't know about me," is Matsu's cryptic response (87). Stephan reports, "My parents had never placed a great emphasis on religion. What I learned during my childhood was through attending St. Matthew's, a Catholic primary school in Hong Kong" (87). But as a budding artist, Stephan is drawn both to beauty and to the worlds that exist within people; he is a searcher.

The rituals of the Shinto religion seem foreign and awkward to Stephan. Still, he approaches the shrine, as Matsu demonstrates, claps three times, and pulls the braided rope to ring the bell because, as Matsu explains, "You must let the gods know you are here" (90). Then Stephan attempts to pray, reaching out to God for the first time, perhaps, in many years.

Matsu's effort is to awaken and comfort, not to convert. He sees no conflict in recognizing the spirituality inherent in every religion. He easily follows the shrine visit with the gift of a Christmas tree so that Stephan won't feel homesick. The same openness Matsu embodies allows Stephan to discover the spiritual aspects in the Japanese observance of New Year's, just as Miriam discovers the richness of a Jewish wedding. Says Stephan, "Having grown up in Hong Kong with the firecrackers and vibrant colored celebrations of Chinese New Year, I find there's something more spiritual in Japan on this day of renewal" (95). But, unlike Miriam, Stephan does not feel the need to separate himself from what is different. Nor does the fact that the Chinese and Japanese are at war turn him away.

Further awakening him to the life of the soul is Sachi, the once-beautiful friend of Matsu's younger sister, Tomoko. Stricken with leprosy, the teenaged Tomoko killed herself with her father's fishing knife rather than bring the
Stricken with leprosy, the teenaged Tomoko killed herself with her father’s fishing knife rather than bring the dishonor of disease to herself and her family. Then Sachi began to show signs of the rash. Her father let her know that the Samurai “maintained their honor by committing” such a suicide as Tomoko’s (131). But Sachi could not bring herself to that. Her inability to kill herself was yet another blow to her parents.

Telling her “[it] takes greater courage to live” (139), Matsu conducted Sachi to the remote mountain village of exiled lepers, Yamaguchi. There she began a new life, forging new purposes and strengths. Matsu insisted that she cultivate a garden. “He showed me that life is not just from within, it extends all around you whether you wish it to or not,” she says (43). “I am thankful for any kind of beauty that may find its way to Yamaguchi” (127). This affirmation of life is a common theme in books that touch on religion.

But unlike Sachi, Stephan is only a temporary exile. His health steadily improves, and his life in China awaits as tensions between the Japanese and Chinese increase. It seems everything stands between Stephan and the world he has discovered in Japan: nationality, war, religion, culture. Just before he returns home, he pays another visit to the Shinto shrine, performing the rituals as if they were his own. He holds no false hopes:

I knew all the praying in the world wouldn't stop the war from continuing, or make my parents love each other again. I wanted to leave a message on the wall by the altar . . . so that even if I never returned to Tarumi, something of me would remain. (209)

The wish is doubly fulfilled the next day. When Stephan tries to express to Matsu his fear that the war will change things between them, Matsu replies, “It is another life. It will never have anything to do with us” (211). The sense of interconnection is cemented when Stephan opens Matsu’s parting gift-two blank books. As he begins to write, the reader senses that Stephan's openness and wisdom will spread beyond himself, just as Matsu and Sachi’s has. It is a quiet, accepting spirituality that draws in rather than excludes.

Books that mention religion often present it as this sort of backdrop—a part of the characters’ landscape, though not a driving force. Sometimes the characters’ religious and cultural training creates the central problem for the protagonist. This is the case for Shabanu, by Suzanne Fisher Staples. This young Pakistani Muslim must confront the powerful dictates of family, culture, and religion propelling her into an unwanted marriage in order to be true to herself.

In The Return, by Sonia Levitin, religion is presented as the reason for persecution. Desta, a Jewish Ethiopian, flees her home for the Promised Land. While religious issues are not directly addressed, Levitin portrays a young person remaining firm in her faith despite great pressure to turn away.

For Tony of Bless Me, Ultima by Rudolfo Anaya the task is to face hatred, ridicule, and misunderstanding within his Catholic environment in order to reconnect with the positive aspects of traditional mystical beliefs. Religious issues are presented, though they are somewhat obscured by the mist of childhood; Tony is only six when the novel begins. But the lesson he learns is one of affirmation of life and good works, and so the novel serves to reinforce the common thread running through all religious systems, a vital message from the past in coming to terms with the diversity of our futures.

The War of Jenkins Ear by Michael Morpurgo confronts the reader with a still more direct question: would you recognize the messiah’s return? Toby, the unhappy inmate of an English boarding school, finds his world turned upside down while walking in the woods with a new student, Christopher. Christopher faints; when he comes to, he reveals that Jesus instructs him during these spells, that he, in fact, is Jesus. “You will be my Peter, my Rock, my first disciple,” he tells Toby (43).

Sensing Toby’s need for proof, Christopher promises a miracle. Christopher’s first “miracle”, though persuasive to Toby, can be easily dismissed as luck or coincidence: a valued rugby player is injured and unpopular Toby finds himself on the team and suddenly part of the inner circle. “Bit of a miracle, really” one of the boys comments (50), and suddenly Toby believes.
The idea that Jesus should reappear among seemingly ordinary schoolboys seems fantastic to modern sensibilities. The physical presence of God or His prophet seems to many a picture from a distant past or a shadowy vision far into the future, certainly not part of day-to-day life. The reader waits for the moment in which Christopher is revealed to be a charlatan like the preacher in Rylant's A Fine White Dust or at least a confused, perhaps emotionally disturbed, child. That moment never comes.

Christopher is unwavering in both humility and conviction. His words hauntingly echo those of Christ. When he and Toby become blood brothers, Christopher states, "You are in me . . . and I am in you" (55). Toby asks him if he can heal, and Christopher responds, "If you believe I can, then I can" (57). When war between the boarding school and the town boys threatens, Christopher takes an unpopular stand for peace, advising that "[o]ne of us has to offer a hand across the river" (149). He lays hands on Mr. Binley's critically ill daughter, Jenny, and he foretells events. Toby goes through the usual testing of faith. As Christopher's only disciple, he is bursting with the good tidings and longs for someone with whom to share his knowledge. But when the second disciple, Hunter, joins them and then adoring young Benedict Swann, Toby misses his unique position and Christopher's undivided attention. He wavers between doubt and certainty. His biggest test comes when the headmaster reveals Christopher's claim before the school, insisting that both Christopher and his followers recant. Christopher confirms his belief in the voices that tell him he is Jesus and is expelled. Hunter recants and so will remain at the school. The school awaits Toby's decision. Toby weighs release from the hated school against his parents' disappointment. He turns from self-interest to issues of truth. He believes in Christopher still—yet Jenny is still desperately sick, despite Christopher's efforts to heal her. Toby recants.

Now, the reader thinks, as Christopher departs amid the derision of his peers, and Toby and Hunter sink into embarrassed isolation—now Christopher will be revealed as a false prophet. But the book closes with the sight of Jenny frolicking in the field with her parents.

"My God," Matron whispered, "she's up. She's better. That's the first time that child's been on her feet in a year." Swann looked up at Toby and smiled. "See?" he said. (171)

On this note, the Biblical words "And a little child shall lead them" ringing in the readers' thoughts, the novel ends, leaving the question of Christopher's true identity hauntingly open. With it, the reader is forced to ask, would I recognize the appearance of a messiah amongst us? Would I have the courage to stand apart from the rest, to be one of the faithful?

The questions are often particularly pressing for young adults. As the chair of a religious studies department notes, "There's an absolute thirst for spirituality" (Katz qtd. in Wheat 1 ) They don't want to be told what to believe. But they do want to explore issues, and we owe them this opportunity to explore with us. The accent is on explore. Novelist Frederick Buechner, describing his works, says

If you're preaching from a pulpit or otherwise grinding an ax, you only let the things happen that you want to have happen. (56)

Then he indicates the place from which authentic writing comes:

... insofar as fiction, like faith, is a journey not only forward in space and time but a journey inward, it's full of surprises. (56)

Even those of us who feel we've found truth are still seeking—or should be. When search ends, faith becomes static. Search should never end because there are always those nagging doubts and confusions, the unsettled feeling of imperfect understanding, deeper levels of understanding to explore. When writers turn to these areas, readers can discover with them.

**Works Cited**

