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Religion in Young Adult Contemporary Realistic Fiction

As part of the elective reading for my Literature for Adolescents class I read *An Abundance of Katherines* by John Green. As I read this book I was struck by specific aspects of the character Hassan-- the main character's best friend and arguably the second most important character in the novel. Hassan is described as being a Muslim and, although not extremely religious, did believe in Allah, pray daily, and hold himself to high standards of chastity throughout the novel. I was struck by how unusual this was— in my experiences with young adult fiction I hadn't encountered many, if any, depictions of normal, everyday characters who have religious beliefs (particularly not Muslim beliefs).

What was even more remarkable to me was how casual all the other characters were about his religious beliefs. Hassan's beliefs came up numerous times and did influence his character and some of the decisions that he and others made, but they were treated by others as normal. No one mocked his beliefs or tried to persuade him to abandon such "old-fashioned" ideas. While Hassan did experiment a little with dating in the book he ends up actually returning to his commitment to not date and remain abstinent until marriage. The book wasn't about his "sexual awakening" or his attempts to gain freedom from an oppressive belief system, parents, or leaders. Hassan's religion and consequent actions were simply a part of his character that didn't need to be a main focus of the novel. The fact that I found myself so surprised by this portrayal led me to wonder why I had not encountered more of this before. Had I simply not read the right books? Or was there really a dearth of positive, casual portrayals of religion and religious

characters in these novels? I decided to further explore the question: how does young adult literature portray religious characters and topics?

As I began researching this question, I discovered in several articles and essays (as well as a few blogs from American readers of Young Adult fiction) that I was not the only one wondering where religion was in YA literature. While the topic does not seem to be addressed very heavily in the academic world, a few scholars have commented on these issues. In an article written for the *Horn Book Magazine* in 1994, scholar Patricia Campbell said:

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 majority of realistic YA fiction projects a world in which both the personal practice and the corporate practice of religion are absent, except for the worst aspects of cults or fundamentalist sects. (619)

My experience with YA novels so far had been consistent with this declaration. The world about which I read was largely devoid of religious characters or topics. In my research I found studies which showed that this was not a result of me choosing the wrong books, but was representative of the genre as a whole.

A study done for the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* in 2009 sampled 59 YA books from lists of award-winners, best-sellers, and those ranked by young adults as favorites. They found that only 24 percent of these books even mentioned anything about religion or religious beliefs (this could be as simple as mentioning that the town had a church, even if the characters in no way attended or interacted with it). Even fewer included religion as an integral part of the story or characterization. As this study included YA novels from all genres, one can assume that contemporary realistic novels depicting religion are even less common (Koss 569).

Another study done in 2011 by *The Journal of Research on Libraries and Young Adults* which looked specifically for religious protagonists in award-winners, bestsellers, and favorite YA novels showed similar results. This study states that, “The need for more titles featuring religious protagonists is confirmed in this study. Across all categories, religious protagonists comprise a small minority; protagonists from non-Christian religions are particularly rare” (Lam).

As Patricia Campbell stated, where there isn't a complete absence of religion in contemporary realistic fiction, religion is often depicted in a negative light (619). When researching young adult contemporary realistic novels that do mention religion, I found that members of church groups and especially church leaders are usually shown as being small-minded, mean, backward, bigoted, and controlling. Congregations and church leaders often act as a negative force in the plot: the arc of the story usually shows the protagonists struggling to overcome their oppressive religious roots, eventually gaining “freedom” or simply losing their faith (which is often presented as a positive outcome by the author). When parents are present, they are often either “gullible fanatics or... obstacles” to their child's search for religious and spiritual truth or meaning (Campbell 621). I found several examples of books which portray religious characters in this way. *Burned* by Ellen Hopkins tells the story of a teenage girl who is shunned and scorned for having a sex dream by her strict and oppressive Mormon parents and community. In Kathryn Lasky's *Memoirs of a Bookbat*, a teenage girl fights against her fanatically religious parents and their church group against extreme censorship. In *Creed* by Trisha Leaver, teenagers get lost on a road trip and fall into the clutches of an evil religious cult leader. In all of these books the religious characters are only portrayed negatively, and the loss of faith and breaking free from any ties to religion are portrayed as a positive outcome. This led me to wonder if today's teens really feel this negative towards religion and religious people.

To discover if the way religion is, or is not, commonly portrayed in YA fiction is true to the lives and experiences of teenagers today, I looked for recent statistics on the subject. The book *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, published in 2005, provides data from a study conducted by The National Study of Youth and Religion. This group conducted an extensive random digit-dial survey of households with at least one teenager age 13-17 and then 267 in-depth, face-to-face interviews with a subsample of the telephone survey respondents. Respondents were chosen to include a broad range of age, race, sex, socioeconomic status, and geographic spread among these teenagers. Through this study, these researchers were able to shed light on and refute some misconceptions about religion in the lives of today's young adults.

According to their report, NSYR states that 84 percent of teenagers identify with a religious group—by far the majority. Fifty-two percent of teenagers report attending a religious congregation at least two to three times per month. Popular myths about teenagers, as well as depictions of teenagers in YA fiction, would lead one to believe that even if teenagers do identify with a religious group they are probably experiencing many doubts about their faith. However, the survey shows that two-thirds of teenagers report having had very few or no doubts about their faith in the previous year. In fact, nonreligious teens are shown to have just as many doubts about *not* being religious as their peers are about being religious. Rather than being the doubtful, religiously reluctant teenagers people seem to expect, many young adults today are confident in their faith and want to be active in their religious groups.

When asked about specific religious beliefs and practices, teens show that religion is often a part of their daily lives. Over half of US teens pray alone at least a few times per week, 36 percent of teenagers report attending Sunday School (or the equivalent in their denomination)

almost every week or more often, and nearly one-third of US teenagers report attending a religious youth group two to three times per month or more often. Also, 70 percent of attending teenagers report that they feel that their congregations are good places to go to talk about serious issues (such as family problems, substance abuse, or school troubles). These statistics reflect many teenagers' frequent participation in religious practices, groups, or classes and their close relationships with and trust in their religious congregations.

Overall, I found that according to statistics the accurate portrait of a young adult in the United States today would be someone who believes in a personal God (to whom they pray at least sometimes) and who identifies with, attends regularly, and is happy with a religious congregation and youth group. The average young adult also discusses religion/spirituality with family members, and they trust and talk about issues with the members in their congregation and church leaders. There is a large, confusing, and problematic disparity between this image and the ones portrayed in the majority of contemporary realistic fiction for young adults.

Why are there not more books in this genre with characters who reflect this average teenager? As Patricia Campbell said, religion is the "last taboo" in YA fiction (619). It is interesting and puzzling that more and more there seems to be an "any subject goes" mentality in YA literature. Issues such as teen sex, pregnancy, drug abuse, and physical abuse are frequently found in these novels; however, simple depictions and discussions of religion are avoided. There are several possible reasons for this avoidance of religious topics in YA literature. First, librarians could be self-censoring religious books by not adding them to their collections. ALA reports in their annual book banning statistics that religion is one of the most prominent topics that causes complaints ("Frequently Challenged"). Librarians may not want to risk the potential arguments, debates, and attempts at censorship that the inclusion of such books may ignite.

Second, publishers and writers may be reluctant to risk cutting into potential markets by including specific religious beliefs or topics. They may believe that teens will be uninterested in reading about another's beliefs and therefore the publication of such books would limit readership. Third, writers may believe that it is too difficult to write a book that shows religion positively without it becoming "preachy." They may also not want to risk accidentally misrepresenting someone's religious beliefs and offending people and therefore take the easier, safer route by just not including anything about specific religious groups. Margaret Auguste stated in her article "Those Kinds of Books: Religion and Spirituality in Young Adult Literature":

Religious beliefs stem from the most important and revered aspects of our lives... Young adult books that courageously take on this sensitive subject often invoke a uniquely personal and sharp response. Therefore, it is no surprise that books that dare to feature young adults and their exploration of their religious and spiritual identity are at the center of a deeply personal and passionate debate that has become so contentious that many simply find it easier to not speak of it at all. (39)

Since books dealing with religion are so controversial and sensitive, why is the lack of religious novels a problem? If they can ruffle so many feathers, should we just continue to skirt around such topics?

The point (and draw) of contemporary realistic fiction is the idea that readers can find themselves in the stories. These novels are written to reflect the lives, attitudes, and struggles of today's teenagers. There has been a push lately to include more diverse characters so that more readers can relate to these books. However, most of this diversity focuses on race, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and non-traditional families. Diversity in religion is

still highly neglected. As the average American teenager is religious, it seems as though there should be frequent depictions of religious characters (from many different religious traditions) in these novels. We have become familiar with the God-less world of YA literature to the point where we, including myself, often don't notice the absence of such a large part of our lives in the texts we read. We are used to reading about societies where "no one thinks about going to church on an ordinary Sunday" or attending youth group activities, or any of the common, frequent practices that are a part of most teens' lives (Campbell 620). These books seem to tell readers that religion is not very important.

Contemporary realistic fiction usually does a good job of showing the types of difficult issues and experiences that teenagers face, but the way with which they are dealt does not accurately reflect teenagers' lives. In YA literature the characters are able to deal with their problems in purely secular terms, whereas many teens in the real world look to religion and beliefs in a higher power to guide them through hard times and provide a sense of comfort. As the statistics show, teenagers also frequently talk about life's difficulties and issues with their religious congregations and look to fellow believers for advice and comfort. One of these difficult experiences that most teenagers face, which is largely ignored in YA literature, is the idea of questioning, doubting, or seeking for faith and belief. Patricia Campbell states:

Religious inquiry is certainly a preoccupation almost as important as sex for many young people... YA fiction is in danger of leaving each reader with the impression that he or she is the only one with such feelings. The lack of religious awareness in mainstream adolescent literature is a statement that can be interpreted by teens to mean that these matters are not important or not part of other young people's thoughts. (622)

The lack of religious characters, ideas, or issues in YA contemporary realistic fiction is a problematic omission which fails to address the lives and concerns of many of today's teens and leaves teenagers feeling like such a large and important aspect of their lives is weird, not important, or even wrong.

Young adult novels do not have to be didactic to feature religious characters or themes. In fact, I believe that the most effective way to bring more of these ideas into today's literature is not necessarily to base entire plot lines around religion, but rather to include characters for whom religion and belief are simply part of their characterization. Like Hassan in *An Abundance of Katherines*, there should be more characters who have beliefs that affect their actions and personality but in a casual, unobtrusive way. Including a character with ties to a specific religious group and incorporating his religious beliefs into the novel did not ruin or doom this popular, Printz Award-winning book. These elements added depth to Hassan's character and made him seem more realistic without being preachy or overbearing. Another book I found which successfully does this is *Marcelo in the Real World* by Francisco Stork. In this novel the main character, Marcelo, has an interest in learning about many different religions. This interest is not a main element in the book and does not have much impact on the plot, but Marcelo does turn to it for comfort and understanding when he feels confused and hurt. The inclusion of this interest added depth to his character and fit with the idea that average teenagers do look to religious beliefs for help.

However, even books that do include religion in a more pointed way can be valuable to those teens who do not profess to be religious. Books can serve as a forum where teenagers can ask and ponder questions about life and about discovering who they are. These questions, such as "Who am I?" "Why was I born?" "How can I find meaning in life and how can I find my

purpose?’ ... mirror the essential questions of adolescence” (Smith). In *The Namesake* by Steven Parlato, the main character, Evan, learns the terrible truth about the abuse of his father by a Catholic priest. However, even as Evan and his family deal with this betrayal, they manage to keep their faith and separate the bad people from the good things in their religion. Presenting teens with books that feature religions different from their own can also be a helpful tool in fostering understanding, tolerance, and respect for others. In *Does My Head Look Big in This?* by Randa Abdel-Fattah, Amal makes the decision to wear her hijab all the time and stands by her Muslim faith despite the reactions of others. The positive and realistic portrayal of Amal could help readers with different beliefs learn about and gain more understanding for this often misunderstood minority religion.

From my research I have found that my initial surprise at the depiction of a religious character in *An Abundance of Katherines* was not unfounded. There is a lack of novels, especially in the contemporary realistic fiction genre, that even mention religion, and far fewer who depict it in a casual and/or positive light. As the statistics show, this does not accurately reflect the lives of teenagers in the United States today, and can leave many teenagers feeling underrepresented in the books they read. Unlike depictions of diversity in other areas, diverse depictions of religious characters are still few and far between.

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