The Writer of Faith
by Martine Leavitt

So recently I realized that I had run out of things to lecture about.

As it was, when I started teaching here thirteen years ago, I only knew three things about writing.

I felt I had done all I could with those three things.

So when faced with the prospect of having to lecture again, and clean out of ideas, I shared my concern with my fellow faculty. Cynthia Leitich Smith said to me, "Why don't you lecture on being a writer of faith?"

I always try to obey Cynthia. Also I remembered that I had fielded questions in the past from students who were interested in writing a religious element into their stories. They wanted to know, how do they do it well? how do they do it in a way that is not just for a specific religious audience but for a wider audience? how to they treat it respectfully but also realistically? My responses were inadequate… little more than a pat on the head and an "oh you'll figure it out…" I hate it when I give answers like that.

And of course the reason I gave answers like that was because I hadn't any well-formed opinions. This lecture consists of my newly-formed opinions. Whether they are well-formed I will judge in time – I find I am becoming impatient with my opinions as I age.

Before I begin I'd like to stress that I am not speaking for people of any particular faith. Members of my *own* faith would want you to know that I am not speaking

for people of my own faith. They are not to be blamed. This is similar to how, when I talk about writing styles or literary traditions, I'm pulling from a Western European tradition but also my own Martine way of viewing the craft. This lecture constitutes the musings of one soul only, and all the errors and misjudgements and possible offences are solely mine. You can imagine that this subject matter is a mine field – if there are explosions, I invite you to come to me after and receive my apologies. Luckily, over the years I've become a rather good repenter.

I see roughly three categories of books, published by mainstream publishing houses, that deal with faith.

1. Books with general themes of hope and morality.
2. Books that deal with religion but are critical of it.
3. Books that acknowledge Deities and Holy Bings but don't necessarily touch on religion, and books that do deal with religion but in a respectful way.

This third category, which is sort of two categories, will be my focus in this lecture.

Many books that do not directly address faith or religious practice do acknowledge a spiritual dimension of existence. Those include books by writers of faith such as Madeleine L'Engel, Robert Cormier, David Almond, Katherine Paterson, Rita Williams Garcia – who first thing every day reads her Bible because, as she says, "God comes first." Rukhsana Khan, Cynthia Leitich Smith, John Green, among many. And me – I like to think that all my books acknowledge a spiritual dimension to existence.

Katherine Paterson said, "What you are will shape your book whether you want it to or not. I am Christian, so that conviction will pervade the book even when I make no conscious effort to teach or preach. Grace and hope will inform everything I write…." End quote.

I agree with Katherine. My beliefs affect how the world is disclosed to me. When Obiwan says, “May the Force be with you,” I hear that in a specific way. However, my lecture won’t spend a lot of time on this kind of text, just because it is so broad. I suspect it could make a good critical thesis, however.

Relatively more highly represented are books that portray the worst aspects of religion. The poor kid character comes up against fundamentalist villains and cult leaders, parents who are gullible fanatics who persecute their irreligious child, church leaders and members who are hateful and homophobic. Some religious leaders and institutions have a lot to answer for in how they have traumatized the young and the powerless and the marginalized. It’s right that some writers will grapple with their experience on the page, portraying oppressive believers as judgemental, rigid and hateful.

As a child, my exposure to religion consisted of a blessing on the food on Christmas day and Easter Sunday. I remember wondering as a child why it was that these two meals needed the extra help of divinity. Other than that, God, faith and religion were never discussed in my home. I became a rotten and rebellious teenager – not because of that, just because of my perverse nature. I lived a risky lifestyle that brought worry and shame to my parents, and I was killing myself slowly. When I was 21, and she was 11, my little sister Lorraine died, and I embraced religion. Everyone in my world was much relieved, including my irreligious parents.

In my young life, before I embraced religion, I found judgment, gossip, rigidity and hatred alive and well among the unfaithful as well. The real issue, of course, is hypocrisy. As a writer of faith, this awareness may guide you in your treatment of faith in your story and help you understand reactions to content in your book that addresses faith in a positive way. And bonus, it may help us better live our own faith traditions, which universally include love, kindness, tolerance and compassion.

Other than saying this, I won't be addressing at length this kind of more critical kind of text, either, although, again, it could make a good CT. What I'm interested in is how to write a book with an overt, balanced, even positive representation of spirituality. These are the few and far between.

Before I do, I'd like to begin with the question, does writing spirituality even matter?

Why, Martine, should I consider giving in to my inclination to write books with reference to religion?

I began my research by reading a book called Spirituality in Young Adult Literature, part of a critical series called Studies in Young Adult Literature, written by Patty Campbell. Campbell is a respected authority in the field, and winner of ALAN and Grolier Awards for distinguished contributions to young adult literature.

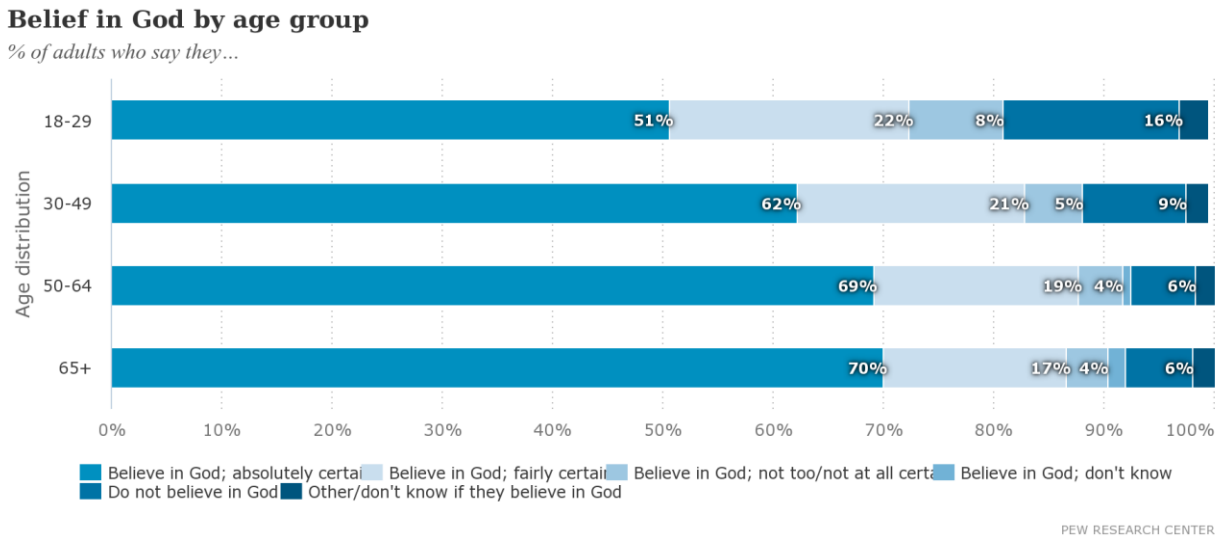
She introduces the subject matter by saying that authors of young adult literature these days thankfully feel free to address virtually any given subject matter, topics that explore all kinds of sexual, ethical, social and psychological issues of the day. But, she declares, there is one last *taboo* for writers and publishers: *spirituality.*

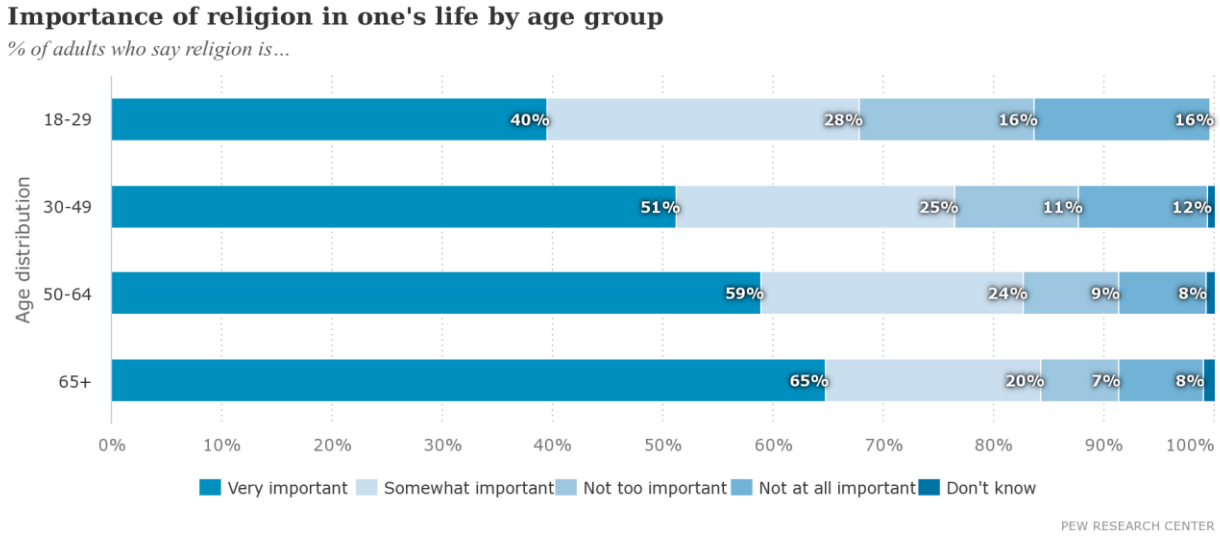
YA author Pete Haufman in a VOYA magazine interview says, "I am not a person of faith, but I think that the topic of religion is underserved in YA literature. Most writers want nothing to do with it because any mention of religion in any context is a sales killer."

"Sales killer" – that does not sound good to me. So why would anyone even consider dealing with religion or faith in their writing? Why risk it?

I came up with what I see as several convincing reasons. First, 1. religious inquiry may very likely be part of many young people's lives, and so it is *relevant*.

The Pew Research Center is a nonpartisan fact tank that informs the public about the issues, attitudes and trends shaping the world. They conduct public opinion polling, demographic research, content analysis and other data-driven social science research. They published these two charts not long ago:





I suppose it was ethically responsible not to poll people younger than 18, but I think the information is compelling, and perhaps we can infer from this chart that at some point religion may become a concern of young readers. And if this is true,

it may be that the picture of American religious life that emerges from YA literature is not representative. And perhaps it should be.

Author Courtney Stevens said this:
"I've spent nearly all my adult life working with teens and here is what I've learned: every young adult has a spiritual life. Some exercise that life through churches or organized religion; some through atheism; some through questions brought up reading *The Kite Runner* or playing *Grand Theft Auto*…" end quote

I love this broad concept of spiritual inquiry. If it is true, and it seems to me that it is, it would make sense to find some positive representations of faith and/or religion in literature for the young, and hopefully to 2. give a young reader of faith the opportunity to find themselves on the page, in a good story that doesn't make them feel ashamed of their beliefs. Or give the opportunity for readers outside a faith community to increase in tolerance and inclusivity. One blogger said, "Today's Muslim children are growing up in a world of rising Islamaphobia, so visibility now carries even greater imperative. It has the potential to save lives." End quote.

Writing about characters of faith can bust up all kinds of preconceptions and move the pieces around in interesting ways.

Adiba Jaigirdar, author of *The Henna Wars*, said about her character who is South Asian, Muslim and queer, that she wanted to write about her difficulties, but, quote, "I also didn't want to play into negative stereotypes often associated with South Asian cultures and the Muslim faith. I had to find a way to balance criticism with love and celebration of my culture and faith." Wow.

Okay, Martine, so there are reasons to include religion in my story – but are there reasons to be wary of doing so?

I read a book called *The Dead and the Gone* by Susan Beth Pfeffer. It's an apocalyptic story based on the premise that an asteroid hits the moon, nudging it

closer to the earth and causing all manner of natural disasters. I can't say this is a book I would recommend to students who are studying *fine art*. But it was a decent story, and I thought the portrayal of the character's religion was inoffensive and believable.

So I was intrigued by some of the comments on GoodReads:

- quote "…the religious fanaticism… was excruciatingly painful… almost unbearable and slowed me down a lot."

- quote "I got tired of all the praying and spiritual interest he and his sisters had."

- quote "This was the worst book I've ever read. So much talk of religion that it was a struggle to keep reading…. It was just too much…"

I personally had no issues with all that praying. If the moon was suddenly closer to me in real life, you can bet I'd be praying. But it was obviously too much for some people. On the other hand, some people felt that the author deeply challenged religion. For one thing, people complained, why didn't God show up to help these poor kids? They were on their own! Another reader noted that the most religious character was essentially killed by her faith. The author got slammed by people who thought it was too religious, and by religious people who didn't think it was sympathetic enough.

My point is that, though the work was problematic in certain artistic ways, all the attacks were about the religious element. So there's one reason, probably the most obvious one, why you might want NOT to write about religion. Comedian of faith Jim Gaffigan said, as soon as you stand up to say you believe in something, you open yourself to ridicule. That is something to be aware of, if you weren't already.

Marilynne Robinson's book *Gilead* is both religious and brilliant and won the Pulitzer Prize. Still, the religious elements of the book sometimes got bashed. In response, she said in an interview with the Washington Post, quote: "People say to me '*I'm religious, I'd like to write about religion but everybody would hate it, nobody would read it.'* You're a coward, is what you feel like saying. Faith is one of the great structuring elements in civilization. It has fascinated the best minds of many centuries. If it happens to fascinate yours also, there is no reason to be afraid. Of what, a bad review?" end quote

Of course, she won the Pulitzer prize, which I imagine makes one immune to bad reviews.

At times the critique may come from within your own faith community. I have talked to a surprising number of students who love their religion, who want to write about it honestly and candidly, but aren't sure how to cope with the expectations of people within their own faith community – and not just people, but beloved people: friends, family and spiritual leaders. These young writers have no desire to rebel, and yet in an effort to portray the truth, sometimes fiction offends.

My books almost all deal to one degree or another with faith questions: the afterlife, or the purpose of suffering, or the definition of goodness, or the existence of God. I have never received any negative feedback from critics or readers in general about this. But I have received some negative feedback from people of my own faith – not in any collective sense – influencers in my faith community are enormously supportive. But on a more individual level.

Once I attended a women's meeting at my church in which arose a discussion about the kind of entertainment we consume. It was shortly after my book *My Book of Life by Angel* came out, a novel about a teenaged prostitute. Among the women in the room were two writers, me, and another woman, a friend, who wrote sweet unicorn books for young children that never trod upon moral issues. During the discussion, her unicorn books were praised. Not a word was

mentioned about mine. It sounds childish in my own ears – what about meee? – but the memory is vivid. Until that moment, I hadn't really realized how the women of my own congregation felt about my work. Lucky for them, my religion requires that I forgive them.

Another time, a friend who is of my faith said to me, randomly and without any sort of prompting, "I'm sorry, but I can't allow your books in my home." She did not elaborate, and I didn't need her to.

Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* won the Newbery Medal. Though it is science fiction, it is quite religious in nature. Despite its success, L'Engle had fierce critics among conservative Christians who accused her of promoting witchcraft and the occult. L'Engle was baffled and frustrated by some of the vitriol she faced from fellow Christians.

The thing is, like every choice we make for writers, if it's intrinsic to the story, we sometimes have to go there. How far we go takes time to figure out. I have told students that when I am writing a first draft, it is just between me and God. I don't allow anyone, not my parents or my religious leaders or editors or my children or my neighbour whom I am obligated to love, to interfere with what happens when I am putting pen to paper. I find I can love my neighbor more fully when I don't allow them to look over my shoulder at my writing or dictate to me what I can write about.

My feeling is that, while you will acknowledge the pain of some in regard to religion, and you will support their right to write books that deeply challenge religion, you will also take that as permission to write a truth which finds religion transcendent. You will write your truth, and you will do it with love and skill, and without fear. But you won't be surprised if some on both sides of the issue find your work offensive. The trick, perhaps, is to not do it on purpose.

Ultimately, we must write what brings us joy. And that may, for a reason the story demands, include writing about religion.

Okay, Martine, I've decided to do it, and I'm aware of the dangers, so how do I do it well?

Here are my thoughts, and you will see they are unimaginative:

1. do your best most brilliant writing

This seems to go without saying. And once you say it, it sounds ever so easy, doesn't it? Do your best most brilliant writing. Read and emulate the great writers of faith who wrote the best most brilliant books: classics like Dante and Milton, moderns like Ann Patchett and Marilynne Robinson and Maya Angelou, and of course writers for the young like John Green and Jean Yuen Lang and so many more. You can easily google lists of books for the young that deal with spirituality and religion.

I have met with the odd person of faith who was tempted to think that because their work had a spiritual leaning, that God was going to do the work for them, that it didn't have to be brilliant because it was spiritual.

Kafka considered writing a form of prayer. "He was God-drunk," a critic wrote of Kafka, "but in his intoxication his subtle and powerful intellect did not stop working."

Flannery O'Connor said: "If writing is your vocation, then, as a writer, you will seek the will of God first through the laws and limitations of what you are creating; your first concern will be the necessities that present themselves in the work."

How do you write a spiritual book well? The same way you write any kind of story well. You do not begin with an agenda. You do not set out to moralize. You set out to explore, to ask honest questions. To tell a good story.

One writer of faith said in an interview that she writes stories of faith to quote, “inspire children, deepen their faith, or help them live a better life.” End quote. I do not think that way at all. I leave the deepening of faith for better people than I, and I claim no right to knowing how to define a better life. I feel my job, as perhaps I cannot say too many times, is to tell a good story, and if that includes the truth of my faith, then well.

I give my character a strong desire line, which they must pursue against great obstacles, and at high stakes… there’s that Western European tradition I mentioned earlier… As I wrote, I acknowledge that the very definition of faith implies not knowing; I acknowledge that that paradox implies possibility; I acknowledge that ultimately I don’t *know* everything, or maybe even anything, except how to tell a good story. And then I begin.

2. remember that your protagonist dealing with spirituality, even in a sympathetic way, may realistically have a complicated relationship with their faith, and that other characters in the same book may realistically have an antipathetic relationship with faith and/or religion

John Green is a self-identified Christian. He majored in religious studies in university, enrolled at Chicago Divinity School, and meant to become an Episcopal priest. He served as a chaplain in a children’s hospital. He said once of *Fault in Our Stars,* “It seems to me that different characters in the book find various degrees of secular, religious, theistic and atheistic ways to confront the reality and injustice of suffering, that the book is more an exploration of the variety of responses to suffering than an argument in favor of one over another… I do not believe the job of a novelist is to thrust his or her belief system upon a reader.” End quote.

In *Mystery and Manners* by Flannery O’Connor, who was a devout Catholic, you can find this quote: “It is when the individual’s faith is weak, not when it is strong, that he will be afraid of an honest fictional representation of life…”

Emily Dickenson said, “We both believe, and disbelieve a hundred times an hour, which keeps believing nimble.”

The most believable characters in books that deal with religion or faith are characters who acknowledge the conflicting feelings most people of faith experience at one time and another.

Liz Garton Scanlon’s wonderful book *The Great Good Summer* is about a girl named Ivy whose mother runs away one summer after fires cause devastation in her state. She runs away with Hallelujah Dave to the Great Good Bible Church of Panhandle Florida. Here is a book to read if you wish to see how to skillfully write a book that deals honestly, realistically, *and* sensitively with religious belief.

In the story, Ivy sees the hypocrisy of her mother’s decision to go seeking for God with an itinerant preacher when it brings so much pain to her and her dad. On the other hand, she sees her father, a man of faith, behaving in Christian ways that eventually make it possible to reunite the family. Ivy defends God when she’s talking with her scientific boyfriend, but in her mind she calls God to task for allowing the whole mess to happen in the first place. She comes right out and says she’s mad at God, while allowing that there is a God to be mad at. Ivy is a complex and authentic character who has a complex and authentic relationship with deity. She, like many young people of faith, experiences times of doubt and disillusionment, and also times of sublimity.

An easy technique is to give your characters lives and concerns outside their faith. Gene Luen Yang, author of *American Born Chinese*: “I’ve always struggled with how to incorporate my faith into my comics in an authentic way.” He seems to succeed, however, by giving his characters complete lives in which faith is only one element.

Another straightforward technique is to have two characters of the same religion but who practice their faith in contrasting ways. Members of similar faith communities interpret their religion differently, and showing that can help a

writer avoid stereotypes and portray a faith with more fairness and accuracy. I had a wonderful student do that once, to good effect.

In my books, I try to give the theists and the atheists equal opportunity to express their opinions, though I admit to making the more trusted character the theist. It's my book, after all.

I believe that faith can survive an honest fictional representation of life. Remember "show don't tell" – let your reader come to their own conclusions. You don't have to protect faith from the truth, and it isn't your job to sell it. Never, never, never propaganda-ize.

3. create a Rosetta Stone

I like to use the Rosetta Stone as a metaphor for how we can translate our faith vocabulary into something understandable and palatable for all readers. Or perhaps what I'm saying is that metaphor is a Rosetta Stone for opening the meaning of my spiritual themes to a wider audience.

When I read LOTR as an 18-year-old, it became my first spiritual experience, but I had no idea Tolkien intended it that way. He did – he said it was a specifically Catholic work – but he let the religious element be absorbed into the story and the symbolism. The magic Gandalf wields, a magic of light and fire, is a metaphor for the power of God. His fantasy world is what I would call a Rosetta Stone for his religious themes.

Another example is Yann Martel's *The Life of Pi.* In an interview with *The Guardian*, Martel talked about the revelation that led to this book, one of my favorites of all time. At the end of 1996, as a hard-up writer with two little-known books to his name, he backpacked to the Indian subcontinent and was, he says, "dazzled" by the richness and abundance of religious symbols everywhere. He

visited Hindu temples, mosques and other churches. In India he realised he was "tired of being reasonable" and "fell in love with faith."

His book begins with a prologue in which the fictional writer is told, "I have a story that will make you believe in God." Some readers may have felt at the end of the novel that the promise had not been kept, but they read every word hoping it would be.

The central metaphor of the book came to Martel one day like a revelation: "the animal will be divine … and the lifeboat crossing the Pacific will be … an odyssey of the soul across existence". The animal is, of course, a Bengal tiger called Richard Parker, the fearsome companion of Pi, an Indian boy in a boat adrift on the ocean for 227 days. The story is, in Martel's words, all about "discovering life through a religious perspective". He has summarised the novel's subtext in three lines: "Life is a story; you can choose your own story; a story with God is the better story."

That is a Rosetta Stone.

My Book of Life by Angel is a book that has in it both a prostitute and an angel – in this way I found the means to offend almost everyone at once. I loved my Angel, and by the end of the book she was going to know she was God's little girl and have her real angel if it killed me. When a beta reader suggested that the angel might be a delusion on the part of my character, I said, well, then I haven't done it right yet.

As I began, the story was in constant conversation with the Genesis story of Adam and Eve. But I felt the Old Testament was freighted with too much religiosity for a wider audience. I felt I needed a way for my readers without faith to feel comfortable. I needed a bridge between the religious and the secular. I needed a Rosetta Stone.

I visited Vancouver's notorious Downtown Eastside to do research for Angel. It is a tragic place, a ghetto for the addicted and the poorest of the poor. It has the highest per capita rate of HIV in the world. I visited when I was researching, and found at the heart of the area an old sandstone library called the Carnegie Library. On its outdoor steps were people sleeping, drunk, or high, openly paying for drugs, and openly using them. Next to me on the stairs of the library, a fight broke out in which someone lost a tooth and bled onto the stairs. I saw another woman inject herself into her thigh through her jeans. The library is more of a shelter now, but inside it still retains some of its former glory. High on the south wall of the second floor are three stained-glass windows, each one a tribute to a grand master of literature. One of them is John Milton, and it was his *Paradise Lost* that became my story's Rosetta Stone. It's not scripture. It became a way for my readers to connect the spiritual questions about the nature of the fall of man with the so-called fall of a young woman. *Paradise Lost* became a tool of translation, a bridge, between the literary and the spiritual. It helps the reader out. I had no delusions that my young readers had read *Paradise Lost,* only hopes they might.

4. revise religiously

Revise critically. Katherine Paterson said, "The challenge for those of us who care about our faith and about a hurting world is to tell stories which will carry the words of grace and hope in their bones and sinews and not wear them like fancy dress." End quote. We revise away the fancy dress, and leave behind the grace and hope.

When I'm writing edgy or gritty stuffy, I'll ask myself if I really need it. I do the same for spiritual stuff. I ask myself, is this self-indulgent? Does the story really call for it? Is it too heavy-handed?

First draft, like I said – no other voices are allowed to intrude, except God's if I find He has an opinion. I find He understands awful first drafts – many aspects of my character have first-draft issues, and he seems quite willing to revise me in the gentlest of ways. But we revise our *stories* with a cold and calculated eye. I confess I have struggled with this in my current project, and it has been painful for

me and for my editors. I don't want to understate the difficulty of this. Nevertheless, it must be said. Particularly, we cut moments that might be preachy, or are written with the intent to convert. I like to remind myself of the admonition of the Dowager Countess to her son when she said, "Why must you always pretend to be nicer than the rest of us."

I have one last caution:
avoid appropriating a faith tradition not your own

A blogger I read said this: "Nothing makes a believer cringe like seeing a commonly-believed but incorrect religious trope trotted out as if it were incontrovertible truth and then having to explain to their friends that their church actually contains very few murderous, self-flagellating albino monks."

When I attended Bath Spa, one of the books the Brits chose as our shared texts – texts that were supposedly exemplary texts – had characters in it from my faith, though the author was not of my faith. My faith was dealt with so insultingly, it sort of took my breath away. A reliable character in the book stated that people of my faith looked like penguins. I admit, I could see that the author was trying to be funny, and I also admit that I'm getting more and more penguin-shaped as I get older, but here's a picture of me with all my kids and grandkids, and not a penguin among them. Well, maybe that little guy down front. This book declared that people of my faith don't have washing machines or cars, and came right out and stated that we were liars and murderers. I wondered how many children of my faith had read that book in schools and been hurt by this representation.

More importantly I worried about children *not* of my own faith, who would have no idea at all how inaccurate and insulting it was. We all know how easily escalated is this sort of dismissiveness and mockery.

I remember thinking, before I got to the Bath Spa residency, what kind of people would choose a book like this? When I arrived, I found out: perfectly lovely, intelligent people, that's who. They simply had no idea how hurtful it was. The

book never came up in our book discussion, so I never said anything. But I learned a personal and poignant lesson about own voices.

Patty Campbell noted a book called *Burned* by Ellen Hopkins, which was so popular she wrote a sequel called *Smoke*. Ostensibly these books were about my faith tradition. Jewish novelist Jeff Gottesfeld, critiqued its harshly negative portrayal by pointing out that the blurb on the cover says it's about a traditional latter-day saint family – in which the father is alcoholic and abusive. I think I can say with confidence that this would *not* be considered a traditional family in my faith. But *Burned* clearly implies, according to Gottesfeld, that the bishop and the members of the congregation know about the abuses and ignore it or condone it, and that the church itself is "complicit and the faith is at the root of all this evil." "Mis-impression at a young age," he says, "can lead to a lifetime of prejudice."

His point can be both a guide and a caution. In every faith, and among atheists as well, you will find people who perpetrate evil on others. But a line is crossed when it stops being about a character and starts being about a belief system.

Even if you want to write sympathetically about a religion not your own, it can be challenging to get it right. Research will only go so far. When I look at outsider information about my religion online – information even sympathetically written – it is mostly inaccurate or incomplete. It tries to simplify for consumption complex or subtle principles, and in the effort becomes reductive and even at times ridiculous. Even if you research the doctrine of the religion, it's almost impossible to know the unique culture that it is.

Kaley Whaley said – not about portrayals of religion, but it applies – "Even when portrayals of diverse characters by majority-group authors are respectfully and accurately done, there's an extra degree of nuance and authority that comes with writing from lived experience." End quote.

Having said all that, I would be the last one to set limits on a writer's imagination or suggest arbitrary constraints on what they can write about. But be aware, and

ask yourself, “What are my motivations for choosing to write outside my own belief system?” If it is for sensationalist reasons, or because religion or religious people are an easy mark these days, you may wish to reconsider.

Marilynne Robinson once said “A lot of people who actually believe in the sacredness of life, they write things that are horrible, desolating things, because, for some reason, this deeper belief doesn’t turn the world… It comes down to fear, the fear of making self-revelation of the seriousness of ‘I sense a sacredness in things…’”

Perhaps, as writers for the young, we should not fear saying, “I sense a sacredness in things…”

Terry Eagleton, the guru of critical theory, said in his recent book*, After Theory*: “Cultural theory has been shamefaced about morality and metaphysics, embarrassed about love, biology, religion and revolution, largely silent about evil, reticent about death and suffering… and superficial about truth objectivity and disinterestedness.” Eagleton believes that the era of theory is changing and it is time to focus on significant truths denied by postmodernism. Religion and spirituality are among those significant truths.

So bravely write, if it is your inclination, for that reader who longs for transcendence, who hungers for the real that is realer than reality. Consider, if you wish to, feeding this hunger by breaking the last taboo.

Thank you.