



## Roses are Red

Taking a Leap of Faith

*Roses are red;  
Violets are blue.  
I'm a Baptist, Muslim, Mormon;  
How 'bout you?*

**W**ith an opener like the one above, you may have guessed the subject of this article: Religion and Young Adult Literature: I began thinking about this topic and about writing this article seven months ago. Truthfully, I had never stopped to think about the duality: religion and literature for teens. Except for reading my own religious texts, I had never considered if there were any young adult titles that centered their plot and characters smack dab in the middle or even on the periphery of religion. Undoubtedly, my lack of exposure to such literature shaped an opinion that it must not be a popular approach. The genre, if you will, was not bursting with titles, so as part of concrete preparation, I thought long and hard about my own adolescent reading. Initially, that led me nowhere. I then visited English and reading classrooms, surveyed young readers, and searched for titles that

seemed religious in nature. I talked with my college students, and I obtained membership in a religious book club. But after months of research and study, I only guardedly believe the situation may not be as desperate as I once thought.

It is true that while craning my neck around library and classroom bookshelves and poring over electronic files, I found only a few books that mentioned a spiritual journey of any kind. Although I understand the difference, that one quality can exist without the other, I found myself referring to “religious” and “spiritual” as synonyms, as there are simply not enough words to describe either of the words. So, after investing this time on “religion” and its books, I was naturally focused on the lack thereof. As a reader and, well, a “seeker,” I became curious about the dearth of spiritual content couched in young adult books. I wondered why. What made this topic, unlike so many uncomfortable topics, taboo? Do students opt out of religious material? Do parents discourage these reading selections? Consider this irony: In my research, I found no books

which explicitly embraced the Sermon on the Mount, yet I found numerous selections with content that might offend even the most liberal parent. It bears investigating that in this extensive world of young adult literature, much that is brimming with controversial subjects of incest, abuse, murder, sex, the supernatural, violence, cutting, inhumanity, and much more, what hinders religious literature from being abundantly produced by writers, and what hinders it from being fully embraced by young readers?

Yes, that would be a whale of a topic for another time, but my interests lie in the here and now. I put on my teacher’s hat and focused on the three most pressing questions on my mind:

- 1) What types of religious literature are teens reading, in and outside of school?
- 2) What in-school reading can be considered (or do students feel) is religious in nature?
- 3) What do teens consider to be religious literature?

I knew straight away that the second question—what in-public-school reading can be considered

(or do students feel) is religious in nature?—was problematic. The question itself had backed me into a corner with prospects of few answers. Why? The answer is found in the First Amendment: *Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.* With this amendment and in terms of text, teachers and legislators are aware of the separation of church; nevertheless, schools continue to remain a playing and/or battlefield in terms of religion, i.e. prayer, devotionals, Bible clubs, etc. For purposes of this study, the question was relevant, but for me to assume students might be universally assigned a book steeped in religious considerations, was, at best, naïve or misguided. I had no choice but to step back and reconfigure my question.

But “of whom” was I asking the questions? I wanted to explore answers from librarians and teachers of YAL, but to know what teens were reading seemed far more useful and informative. Wisely we have learned and accepted that the reading habits of the two are not always synchronized, and to sample one population and not the other might provide a hopeful yet inaccurate assessment of the actual reading situation. Well-intentioned teachers and tutors of reading may suggest titles “until the cows come home,” but if a reader is not tantalized by the genre, the book will probably remain on a dusty bedroom shelf.

### **Anonymous Survey**

My investigation of the situation, I must admit, was far from hard research. I conducted a casual and

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anonymous survey of 500-plus students, which was arguably small-scale, but I was more interested in a spot-sampling rather than one with deliberate cross-cultural considerations and large-scale probability. In other words, I was putting a little Utah-toe into new and national waters, and pursuing tiresome quantitative or rich qualitative research was not my goal. I wanted to poll my community, the kids who live in my town, and the teachers I know and see from time to time. I took heart in the realization that should the question of YAL and religion again surface, deeper considerations can be made by a true researcher. So, with that being said, this was my protocol: A questionnaire was electronically sent to a list serve of approximately 150 English teachers who had recently begun a career in teaching secondary English and language arts. The questionnaire contained six broad questions about reading preferences, and all respondents remained anonymous. Teachers mailed the responses back to me in plain envelopes which prevented me from knowing what schools the responses came from and the names of the participating teachers and students. As merely an

exploratory tool and one that provided answers that allowed me to make inferences, I surveyed the responses and made loose categorizations of answers.

By my calculations and because Utah teachers usually teach large classrooms, I could have received more than 1500 responses, but as I counted my piles of papers, I had a hand-count of 500 responses. Even so, the number thrilled me, but the caliber of the responses left a great deal to be desired. I began to wish for answers written in volumes rather than “Don’t know” or, sadly, the “I don’t read” response. As I considered the categories and quality of the responses, I was reminded of survey research that speaks to types of responses usually found within samples. Many of my responses appeared to align with the bulleted information below, and like every researcher, I tried to minimize the problems associated with sampling, non-responses, and biased.

- Reactivity—respondents tend to give socially desirable responses that make them look good or seem to be what the researcher is looking for
- Sampling Frame—it’s difficult to access the proper number and type of people who are needed for a representative sample of the target population
- Nonresponse Rate—a lot of people won’t participate in surveys, or drop out
- Measurement Error—surveys are often full of systematic biases, and/or loaded questions (O’Connor).

In addition to a healthy amount of authentic “I don’t know” responses, I enjoyed reading the majority of

responses which gave other thoughtful and explicated responses to the questions. It is their re-

sponses that shed light on the “whys and why nots” of religion and young adult literature. Let’s

consider a sampling of all the informative and representative answers:

<p>1. What type of young adult literature do you read? Why?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* I don’t know.</li> <li>* I like suspense stories, love novels, and all types pretty much except for fantasy books!</li> <li>* Anything that grabs my attention!</li> <li>* Historical fiction mostly because it could have really happened.</li> <li>* I like literature that has an inspiring role model, so usually adventure stories because the main character is courageous, strong, and determined.</li> <li>* Suspense; it keeps me thinking all the time.</li> <li>* Chuck Palanvik. It’s not just another boring story.</li> <li>* I don’t read young adult literature.</li> <li>* All sorts of stuff.</li> <li>* I like to read about war and pretty much anything.</li> <li>* Horror stories. They are addicting.</li> <li>* I don’t like to read.</li> <li>* Anything that doesn’t involve witchcraft.</li> <li>* Stuff that actually relates to me.</li> <li>* <i>Harry Potter</i>.</li> <li>* Biographical cause I like realistic stories, not dumb fake ones.</li> <li>* Fiction. I’m not influenced to believe certain things.</li> <li>* Fantasy: <i>Lord of the Rings</i> type books.</li> <li>* Mysteries, because you are always guessing.</li> <li>* Fictional because I don’t like learning about real things, and they are easy to get more lost in them.</li> <li>* Action and sports, cause that’s what I’m into.</li> <li>* Fantasy, suspense, almost any kind of fiction because reading takes you wherever you want to go.</li> <li>* I like comedy. I like to laugh.</li> <li>* I don’t know. What is young adult literature?</li> <li>* I don’t really like young adult literature. They are too “air-headed.” The conflicts aren’t “deep” enough.</li> <li>* Books about controversial problems (drugs, homosexuality, depression, i.e. <i>Go Ask Alice</i>, <i>A Million Little Pieces</i>).</li> <li>* Um . . . stuff that I deal with gets kinda lame. Everyone goes through a lot of the same stuff, and after awhile, it gets redundant. I like hearing about the kids in other countries . . .</li> </ul>
<p>2. Have you recently read a book that dealt with a religious theme? What was its title? What was the book about?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* I don’t know.</li> <li>* Yes! It’s in Spanish. It’s called <i>Angeles y Demonios</i>.</li> <li>* Yes. <i>I’ll Be Seeing You</i> by Borrowman.</li> <li>* Yes; <i>Wind in the Door</i> by L’Engle.</li> <li>* No.</li> <li>* My college history book is dealing with a lot of the new religions in early America.</li> <li>* <i>Embraced by the Light</i>. It’s about a lady who dies and has an out of body experience. It’s pretty awesome.</li> <li>* Yes, <i>Loves Labor Tossed</i>; it’s about a missionary who hates his mission but learns to love it.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* <i>The Davinci Code</i>. It was about how Jesus had a wife and child.</li> <li>* Yes, <i>The Crucible</i>.</li> <li>* Yes, <i>The Book of Mormon</i>.</li> <li>* No. I hate religious books except <i>Charley</i>.</li> <li>* Kind of. It was called <i>Wicked</i>, and it touched on themes of sin and inherent evil.</li> <li>* Yes, about Quackers (sic)</li> <li>* Sort of: <i>Lovely Bones</i></li> <li>* <i>Ender's Game</i></li> <li>* <i>Devil's Arithmetic</i></li> <li>* No, unless you count the <i>Bible</i></li> </ul>
<p>3. Would you like to read a young adult book that dealt with the issues of religion, beliefs, morals, etc.? Why or why not?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Don't know.</li> <li>* Sure. I'm always opened to any type of story that can teach you something.</li> <li>* Yes because I usually read books like that anyway and I enjoy them.</li> <li>* Not really because I like to leave my religion at home and out of school.</li> <li>* Yes, because it applies to everyone.</li> <li>* Most likely not, because we talk about it all the time in school, church, etc., and I don't want to read about it.</li> <li>* Yes. A lot of times in school we avoid discussing religion. It's something I'd like to talk more about.</li> <li>* Maybe.</li> <li>* Yes, because as a teenager that is what I'm dealing with in life. I could relate to it.</li> <li>* Yes, as long as it isn't <i>Huck Finn</i>.</li> <li>* Sure. I'll read whatever.</li> <li>* No; I'm sick of people trying to change my beliefs.</li> <li>* Yes, because that is something I deal with every day.</li> <li>* Yes, as long as it's a good book, I don't care what it's about.</li> <li>* No. The public education system only talks about abstinence.</li> <li>* No, because I believe that everyone should have their own, and I don't care what others believe.</li> <li>* Yeah, sure, because it might be cool.</li> <li>* No, cause that's boring.</li> <li>* Yes, because those are the things that have the most debate nowadays.</li> <li>* Maybe, it could be interesting. If I thought it was boring, I would stop reading it.</li> <li>* I would because I like to keep an open mind about different things. Although I may disagree; everyone is entitled to their own opinion. Something in the novel may also help to change my particular beliefs.</li> <li>* Yes and no, because school is a time for literature about past, future, and fictional things, and there are other times for religion.</li> <li>* No, I don't like people being a part of religions cause they think they're better than others.</li> <li>* I suppose. It's always interesting to read about things that are more than just the staunch black and white.</li> <li>* No, cause it doesn't excite me.</li> <li>* Beliefs and morals: yes. Structured religion: No.</li> <li>* Not of Christianity; we know that, but of hedonism</li> <li>* I don't want to ruin my beliefs by reading something else.</li> <li>* Heck no! Sports!</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Sure, I'll give it a try.</li> <li>* Not really. It doesn't sound interesting, at all.</li> <li>* Yes, because life deals with these issues sometimes every day.</li> <li>* Yes, if it related to my religion.</li> <li>* Depends on my mood</li> <li>* Not until I'm older; I don't think I would enjoy it now.</li> <li>* Sure; you can always learn from others</li> <li>* Yes, I enjoy controversial books.</li> </ul>
<p>4. Would your parents like you to read a young adult novel/book that dealt with a religious topic? Please explain.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* I don't know. They like business books.</li> <li>* Probably, but my parents aren't big readers so I'm not sure. I think they'd be fine with it because they knew I was reading a good book.</li> <li>* No; they believe in no religion in school.</li> <li>* Probably; they are religious, but they wouldn't make me.</li> <li>* Maybe if it helped me be a better person.</li> <li>* Probably yes . . . to help me, I guess.</li> <li>* No. They hate it when you try to change my beliefs.</li> <li>* Yes; they like me to be well-rounded.</li> <li>* No. I don't live with them, so their opinions don't matter.</li> <li>* I'm sure they wouldn't mind because they trust me.</li> <li>* It depends on the type of religious topic; they would if it related to my religion.</li> <li>* My parents like me to be well-cultured, and they don't really force books upon me.</li> <li>* Sure; I'm sure they wouldn't care, but it wouldn't kill them if I didn't.</li> <li>* Yes, so I can learn what I need to take care of.</li> <li>* Yes. They try and force religion on me all the time.</li> <li>* I suppose they're indifferent, so long as I am not disturbed by its content.</li> <li>* Depends on what religion</li> <li>* My parents wouldn't care because we don't go to church.</li> <li>* I don't know what they want.</li> <li>* They don't like religion being taught in school, as do I.</li> <li>* My parents could care less what I read. My dad recommended the teaching of the Dalai Lama, but that isn't a young adult book.</li> <li>* I don't think they would mind, but they would have to approve.</li> <li>* They don't care what I read, as long as it is a good book.</li> <li>* My mom doesn't really mind what we're reading. She's just proud when we read.</li> <li>* Most likely; my mom has two very rebellious kids (I'm not one of them), and they hardly ever talk to me</li> </ul>
<p>5. What book have you recently read IN SCHOOL that taught you a moral or lesson about life? Please explain.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Dunno</li> <li>* <i>Holes</i>, because you learn that if you steal things, you have to pay for your decision.</li> <li>* None</li> <li>* I read <i>The Crucible</i> and <i>Anthem</i>, and others that taught me how to handle trials and treat others.</li> <li>* <i>Huck Finn</i>; it taught that you need to own up to your own doings in the end.</li> <li>* I haven't read any books yet.</li> <li>* <i>How To Kill a Mockingbird (sic)</i>; it teaches that bad things happen to good people.</li> <li>* <i>Beowulf</i>; it's basically saying 'be brave,' I guess.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* <i>Mississippi Trial, 1955</i></li> <li>* Umm . . . the closest one I can think of is <i>Man in the Water</i>. It is about the man that saved everyone's life by giving them floatation devices instead of taking it himself.</li> <li>* <i>Billy Budd</i>. The characters had to decide between the law and what they knew in their hearts to be right.</li> <li>* <i>Go Ask Alice</i>—It taught me about addiction and pain.</li> <li>* <i>Old Yeller</i>—Live life to the fullest.</li> <li>* <i>The Outsiders</i>—be good.</li> <li>* n/a</li> <li>* <i>The Pearl</i> taught me valuable things aren't as valuable as thing you value in your life.</li> <li>* <i>A Child Called It</i>.</li> <li>* <i>Les Miserable</i> taught that you can't judge somebody based on past experiences.</li> <li>* <i>The Great Gatsby</i>; it taught about rich, snotty people</li> <li>* <i>The Chosen</i>. I liked how it showed we can't be forced into careers/choices by anyone but ourselves.</li> <li>* <i>The Scarlet Letter</i> is about a woman who has committed adultery and the lessons she learns from her sins.</li> <li>* <i>Ender's Game</i>: not to let power get to our heads.</li> <li>* <i>The Only Alien on the Planet</i>. It taught me about how much people different and what could happen to someone after a tragic event.</li> <li>* <i>Animal Farm</i>; it teaches how tyranny is so possible.</li> <li>* I haven't read one.</li> <li>* Last year I read <i>Gifted Hands</i>. It taught me that even the smallest, ghetto kid can become successful.</li> <li>* <i>Where the Red Fern Grows</i>; it taught me to watch out for my dogs.</li> <li>* The one thing I can remember saying to myself, "Holy crap! This is freakin' questioning my thoughts," would have to be the <i>Diary of Anne Frank</i>, making me ask myself "what would I do if this or that happened to me or my family."</li> <li>* <i>Hatchet</i> because it tells me that I need to work on how I live.</li> <li>* <i>Fahrenheit 451</i></li> <li>* <i>Romeo and Juliet</i>: taught me to get along</li> <li>* Haven't been in school long enough to read a lesson on life</li> <li>* <i>Princess Bride</i>—love conquers all</li> <li>* I don't usually read the books teachers give me.</li> <li>* Most of the books I read don't teach lessons.</li> </ul>
<p>6. How comfortable would you be reading a book about all types of faith? Please explain.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Don't know.</li> <li>* I'm very curious about all types of faiths, cuz I'm secure about my beliefs.</li> <li>* I think I'd find it really interesting because I'd be able to see why other people act the way they do.</li> <li>* Well, not very. I don't like to read about religions.</li> <li>* I would be fine with it. I am very open.</li> <li>* Comfortable</li> <li>* Very because I have friends of other faiths than me and I want to understand more.</li> <li>* It wouldn't bug me.</li> <li>* I wouldn't read it! I don't have time.</li> <li>* I'm OK learning about faith, as long as you try not to make me believe it.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Perfectly comfortable. People need to respect and understand other religions to really appreciate their own religion.</li> <li>* Very comfortable, because I find it is interesting to see how similar and different religions are, but I would not choose to read it outside of school.</li> <li>* I wouldn't ever read a book like that.</li> <li>* I haven't really figured out what I believe in, but I think it would be cool to read about some teen who struggled to figure out what they believed in, in life.</li> <li>* Not very. I am only interested in my own faith. I'd rather be learning something I would use than reading something to quench my curiosity.</li> <li>* I would be fine because I don't question my faith.</li> <li>* Not comfortable.</li> <li>* It would be interesting, but I might get sad or mad of how different people say about the things I believe.</li> <li>* It depends on the level of controversy it contains, really.</li> <li>* Good if it had people of different religions as friends, but not all just facts or how it came to be. It has to be interesting, but I would love to know.</li> <li>* I would read it if the style of reading is not so hard.</li> <li>* Um. I think I'd be fine with that, as long as they were depicted correctly.</li> <li>* I think it would actually open my eyes to see their point of view.</li> <li>* Why do you keep talking about religion? School and religions are supposed to be separate . . . shut up!</li> <li>* I wouldn't mind, but I probably wouldn't be able to get into it.</li> <li>* I would like reading about all types of faiths. Different religions interest me. I like to see why people do the things they do.</li> <li>* I think it would be fine.</li> <li>* I really wouldn't care, as long as it has a good plot.</li> <li>* Pretty comfortable, living in Utah as a Catholic makes you understand how each race and religion is different, not to say you should believe them, but that they are entitled to what they believe in and us judging them.</li> <li>* I wouldn't mind it, but I'm not gonna go out of my way to do so. I'm interested, but not that much.</li> <li>* OK if it's not racist</li> <li>* Yawn; I'd rather die</li> <li>* If the book were against mine (religion), I would throw it away.</li> <li>* . . . it would need to be entertaining. Not like textbook—belch!</li> </ul>
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## Reactions

I was fascinated with the breadth of these responses, and yet even after I considered the maturity level of the students, I was surprised by answers that remained superficial or logically flawed. Even within my liberal view that any type of meaning may be derived from a book regardless of its pre-designated

genre, student answers stumped me. I have never categorized such novels as *Go Ask Alice* or *Old Yeller* as books written to specifically teach morals, ethics, or religious principles. In the responses to question #5 seen above, we see that many students muddle the distinction between a book with religious content and one that includes a theme that encourages

readers to live reflective and compassionate lives. In fairness to the respondents, public schools are not the venue for religious materials, but even when given the opportunity to share titles of books with a religious slant, many students struggled to remember the names of any such book. It seems apparent that either spiritual or religious books are rarely in the

hands of our adolescent readers or that teens don't make the fine distinctions among religion, ethics, or morals. A book that emotionally speaks to an individual's quest for life-meaning can most certainly be regarded as a book that is profound and a guide. Experience as a reader can help label those distinctions.

## Breaking Trends

In my search for YAL situated within a religious context, I came across several new-to-me books that unquestionably fell within the parameter. These texts were not easy to find and were not on the top of popular book lists, yet each book made for a thoughtful and pleasant read. My reactions to the books were positive, and I was immediately attracted to the stories, the characters, the dilemmas, and the unmistakable religious context. When I questioned university readers in my YAL course, no one had heard of the books. When I also questioned literacy teachers who are familiar with young adult literature, the books were also unfamiliar. Perhaps the suggestion of a few titles will help open the door to a faith-genre that has been pushed aside, forgotten, or untapped for whatever reason.

*The Tent* by Gary Paulsen is a story that unfolds squarely within a religious context. A down-and-out dad named Corey and his 14 year-old son Steven find themselves without employment. After stealing a motel Bible and getting an old army tent, father and son set out to provide tent revivals to the local Texan believers. Even though Corey is anything but a minister, he has a knack for giving sermons, perform-

ing faith healings, passing the collection plate, and making a living as a religious sham. As their riches and Bible-reading sessions increase, so do their consciences. Father and son turn their lives around, and in parable style, the story shows readers how faith and honesty can grow when we listen to the Word of God.

Using beautiful poetic free verse, Nikki Grimes has written a book that juxtaposes the biblical story of Hagar, Ishmael, and Abraham with a modern story of African American Sam, his father, and the father's new Caucasian wife and child. *Dark Sons* is a captivating novel that speaks to a modern conflict by using the Old Testament story of mother Hagar and son Ishmael who are exiled by Abraham when a child is finally born to Sarah, Abraham's first wife. Religion is more than just a theme found in this book; it is the central backdrop for this story, and it would be impossible for readers to miss the Old Testament parallel. The on-going parable of Sam and Ishmael explore their lives within the context of both God's relationship to them and with their earthly father who has "replaced" them with a new family

*Send Me Down a Miracle*, by Han Nolen, is a riveting novel that reminded me of my impressionable adolescent years. I loved reading about the daughter born of an Alabaman preacher. Perfectly named for her perfect behavior, Charity Pittman had always believed her father was infallible. But at age 14, after an eccentric and artistic young woman with crazy ways moves into town, Charity finds herself at odds with her father

and his God. She befriends the new girl, Adrienne, over her father's objections. After a self-imposed deprivation experiment of three weeks of solitude, no food, and meditation, Adrienne emerges with the confession she has seen Jesus sitting in her living room chair. Soon the town is in an uproar. Predictably, Pastor Pittman believes Adrienne is the devil, or at least controlled by the devil. In contrast, Charity is overcome with faith; she believes in the heavenly visitation and in the power of the Jesus-chair, and she defiantly stands up to her father. In this book, one which asks readers to question the depth and security of our belief systems, a young girl is required to test and then stand by her own religious convictions. A great read!

In an action-filled story told by 9th-grader Genevieve, *Fallout* by Trudy Krisher packs a punch that will invite all teens to examine their social and religious beliefs. As a destructive hurricane nears North Carolina, and as a suspicious McCarthy-loving father prepares to fight communism, Genevieve meets Brenda Whompers, a California girl whose radical social beliefs and atheism oppose all that Genevieve has ever known. By the book's end, fallout occurs for everyone. Brenda becomes interested in faith, and Genevieve realizes she must live by her own convictions.

*Buddha Boy* by Kathe Koja (2003) examines the unlikely friendship between a hip teen and bald Buddhist teen who goes to temple after school, begs lunch money like a monk, and wears no coat in the winter to build inner discipline. Out of awe and wonderment, Justin befriends Jinsen as

they work together on a school project. When peer pressure affects them both, readers learn how Karma works for both boys and how Buddhism calls upon a “god inside” and eliminates “hungry ghosts” to make living more moral and peaceful.

**Kindness: A Treasury of Buddhist Wisdom for Children and Parents** by Sarah Conover (2001), wry and interesting short stories of traditions in India, Japan, and Tibet are told in fable form. Each story is prefaced with words of wisdom, and adolescent readers read through lyrical and delightful voices that share an ethos of Buddhism that relates to everyone’s life journey.

**Does This Thing Make My Head Look Big?** by Randa Abdel-Fatthah (2007), readers are introduced to the struggle of Amal, a normal yet faithful Muslim teenage girl. Knowing she will set herself up for discrimination at school and with peers, Amal decides to show her unwavering faithfulness by wearing the hijab everywhere everywhere she goes. This powerful book for teens, regardless of their beliefs in any religion, shows the strength of Amal. She is ridiculed, loses friends, and upsets the dress code of the school. Nevertheless, Amal remains true to her convictions. As a great role model for teenage girls, readers identify with Amal’s struggle to courageously stand in a world of peer pressure, the allure of television, and designer clothing trends.

**Making a Difference: Putting Jewish Spirituality into Action, One Bar Mitzvah at a Time**, by Bradley Shavit Artson (nonfiction, 2001) asks and answers universal

questions from adolescents: in this faith, what will my life be like when I grow up? Stating that the Torah teaches that God made a sacred promise to the Jewish people, young readers can learn how to make a commitment between themselves and God.

## A Final Word

The consideration of this question—to read or not to read spiritual/religious YAL books—has not only been fascinating but also a bit problematic. If we subscribe to the philosophy of theological professor Vigen Guroian who believes “the moral imagination needs to be cultivated like the tea rose in the garden. Left unattended and unfed, the rose will languish and a thistle will grow in its place” (178), then we must as literature teachers consider the role literacy plays in our moral development. Many of us have been raised on some “good soup” for the soul, but many of us, including today’s teens, have not. It is also natural that we further acknowledge that many teens are seeking spiritual indicators. Can they turn to a text for lessons on faith, repentance, or of multiplying their talents? Indirectly and if they read with a desire to know, I believe they can.

Nevertheless, with so many parties at play—parents and friends; teachers and pastors; creationists and evolutionists; Democrats and Republicans; Christians, Jews, and Muslims; and liberals and conservatives—I would never assume to know religious literature that would please all people. At face value, an enlarged understanding of how any religion

works in the lives of others sounds innocuous enough, but for a Born-Again girl to be swept away by Hare Krishna literature would likely upset any set of Christian caregivers. I would, however, encourage going the first mile: ask each of us to re-examine the value of text, all text, and their abilities to accompany an adolescent on a spiritual quest. What lessons can be learned? What human attributes did we see evident in the story, and can we attribute those to our or any other value system? This is a bold but earnest statement: moral development can and does occur outside the context of organized religion, and teachers can, no, we must, use literature to support the spiritual quests.

As a final thought, we should read once again the important words of M.L. Mendt, “Spiritual Themes in Young Adult Books,” printed in the spring 1996 edition of the *ALAN Review*.

. . . many young adults are dealing with new understandings of concepts such as death, their own mortality, spiritual transcendence, and the soul. Young adulthood can be a time of loneliness, emotional turmoil, and confusion. However, it can also be a time of spiritual growth, introspection, and values clarification, especially when young adults can exercise their capabilities for formal operational thought through spiritual themes in young adult literature. Through such literature, their experiences are enhanced by exposure to information about various belief systems and the humans who subscribe to them, to characters in search of spiritual understanding or knowledge, and to characters integrating various beliefs into their emerging adult identities. All too soon, the crises of adulthood will be upon today’s young adults; they need now to begin building the spiritual foundations that

will sustain them through the uncertain future. Staying within the safe and secular genres does not always make for a smooth ride through life. In adolescence, when days are filled with self-doubt, loneliness, anger, feelings of betrayal, and any number of real or perceived emotions, there must be self-help somewhere. I believe the help can be found on a bookshelf. As adults, we have known that for a long time, and may we have the courage to dig deeper in the shelves and suggest a spiritual book that highlights the teen's world and the challenges inherent in young adult culture.

In conclusion, let's return at this point to teen response from the anonymous survey. In question 5,

when asked what school book has taught a moral or lesson in life, the final response illustrates our duty as teachers: "Most of the books I read don't teach lessons." Fortunately, we know this is not the case. Much of what we teach and read is grounded in social and religious mores, and as teachers, we must make those explicit text connections that engender qualitative changes in the way young individuals think and then act. We have accepted a moral duty to care for our children. We are bound by this concern, and undoubtedly

many of us are bound by the promise of an ancient theologian: "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you" (Mathew 7:7).

#### **Works Cited**

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## **ALAN Foundation Research Grants**

Members of ALAN may apply to the ALAN Foundation for funding (up to \$1,500) for research in young adult literature. Proposals are reviewed by the five most recent presidents of ALAN. Awards are made annually in the fall and are announced at the ALAN breakfast during the NCTE convention in November. The application deadline each year is **September 15th**.

## **The Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes**

The Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes seeks nominations for its 2009 awards. The Barron Prize honors young people ages 8 to 18 who have shown leadership and courage in public service to people and our planet. Each year, ten national winners each receive \$2,000 to support their service work or higher education. Nomination deadline is April 30. More information is available at <http://www.barronprize.org/index.html>.