Chapter books

THERE WILL BE WOLVES

By Karleen Bradford

Published by Puffin Books, 1998

Synopsis

Ursula is the daughter of the local healer (doctor and apothecary) in Cologne (Germany) almost 1000 years ago. As she has no brothers, her dad teaches his medical secrets to her, which includes her ability to read. Moreover, shortly before his death a monk gave her a book which contains healing lore. All very unusual for a girl in her time. So unusual that some evil (frightened?) folks begin to suspect that she is a witch. Innocent happenings, words, and a pet cat get combined in an accusing package, and Ursula is condemned as witch, meaning being burned at the stake. But when the local count decides to join the first crusade aiming to re-capture Jerusalem for Christians, and compels her dad to accompany him, dad and friend Bruno manage to convince the count to let Ursula join the crusade also. Doing that will give her absolution from her (presumed) witchcraft.

In the second half of this book we accompany Ursula as she travels with the large crusade company on the way to Jerusalem. The troop begins its travels with confidence, sufficient supplies, peace and daily masses. But the closer they get to Jerusalem, the more difficult the journey. When supplies run out and villagers and cities on the way begin to resist supplying the thousands, violence begins, both inside the daily camps, as well as towards those cities and villages. Moreover, non-Christian soldiers from the east begin to attack the Crusade in defense of their own interest. When both dad and the count die, Ursula and Bruno decide to abandon the crusade and make their way back home. There they slowly take up their former life again, but as two very different people.

Potential

It isn't a book about wolves in spite of the title. Yes, a wolf's head hanging in Ursula's home plays a role, and the howl of wolves is mentioned a few times as Ursula and her dad wind their way east. Perhaps the author (or publisher) meant to indicate that there always will be (human) wolves, whose hunger may drive them to acts of destruction. As in this book (see 161).

This book is a historical fiction. It appears to be very well researched. Much has been written about the crusades, and the course of, and events, in this one can easily be checked. We also learn much about daily life in a city like Cologne, crowded, noisy and smelly. Interesting to learn how merchants and artisans of a certain kind work and live together, and have streets named after them. (In 1998 Adrian visited the Chinese city of Shanghai and walked through both the "Street of the Small Appliances" and "The Street of the Textiles!)

We'd like to pursue as major focus the portrayal of church and faith. Most church histories focus on church leadership (clergy) and theology (the development of doctrines and the fights against heresies). In this book we get to see it through the experiences of ordinary folks. That focus gives us less than flattering pictures.

Churches in prominent places were big (also to match the often impressive castles of secular rulers. Snd their walls were covered with many paintings, biblical scenes, for most people could not read Scriptures

for themselves (hand copied, these were very expensive.) Together, building and paintings, were meant to capture visions of God (15-7).

The church then didn't like Ursula. It basically didn't value any women (except as nuns caring for the sick), but Ursula was a special challenge. She could read (when even some priests could not), which is "against nature" as a prominent Cologne woman observes (8, see also 41). She was trained by her dad for a man's job, but "how could a mere girl be a healer?" (61) And "everyone knows that [one cannot cure a dog's broken leg] (10). She owned a book; she loved it (50), but to non-readers it seemed to contain secrets perhaps produced by demons (53). Perhaps it contains curses. When she is arrested, "Pandemonium broke loose" (55 – the word means "the place where demons in hell let loose"). But she is also a stubborn and independent person who easily gives offence, for instance when she flings "demon" in the direction of Mistress Elke (8). "…other girls resented her and found her proud…" (41) After her trial ordeal she feels more and more alone. As she begins the crusade journey she does not share her fellow travelers' optimism, but "No one spoke to her, anyway" (79). However, as they travel she more and more takes over the (survival) leadership from her Dad, whose health and strength is gradually diminishing, but who is also far less suspicious of the motives of others (104-5). She even becomes less than friendly to Bruno, her friend who decided to join the crusade even though he does not believe in its purpose (105). "How can this be, Ursula thought, watching [Bruno]. We were such good friends in Cologne, but now – now it would seem that all we can do is argue" (131).

However, even when the madness of this crusade has just about destroyed her faith in clergy and church as an institution (84), she retains faith in God. Coming upon a woman whose husband has been killed and whose children have been taken from her, Ursula gives her her own cloak.'God be with you,' she whispered. 'The true God – not the God of these wolves we travel with'" (161).

The church, ever afraid of losing its privileged position, also treated Jews with contempt, and often cruelty. Jews could not own land when land was the prominent source of survival and wealth (11-2), And when in desperation Jews used what money they had to lend it, they would readily be accused of usury (excessive interest). (But Christians, especially rulers, were only too eager to borrow money!) It wasn't for the Jews who prominent city Jerusalem had been for so many centuries, that the crusades were undertaken. Instead, they were called "killers of Christ" (28), and sometimes killed by borrowers simply to escape having to pay back loans (43). And after relating the mass killing of Jews in Mainz, the teller observes to Ursula, "'The Jews,' she said, nodding. 'They have been killing the Jews again. It's an odd way to do Christ's work, it seems to me'" (95).

It is mostly through the eyes of Bruno, Ursula's young mason friend, a former serf (slave 30-1), that we get a glimpse of true faith preserved in the midst of madness the church participated in.

The first crusade might not have happened but for the work of Peter the Hermit, a traveling preacher who rides on a donkey (makes one think of Jesus on what we have come to call Palm Sunday). He isn't in it for himself, for he is portrayed as emaciated and he travels alone (102). But he knows how to excite a crowd, and make it into a mob. They venerate him by gradually plucking his donkey's tail bare. Being mad himself, he created the crusade madness (46). And the clergy makes sure that there is a mass for the travelers every day (92).

But he does not convince Bruno. He says, "'A strange man… and strangely compelling. Dangerously compelling.'" "He stirs people up for this Crusade. Saying it is a holy venture, and yet he speaks of killing. True Christians cannot kill. It is a sin.'" "'Our Lord Jesus never took arms against any man, and yet he wrought more change in the world than anyone else before him.'"

Ursula's dad responds with, "'But the pope himself has called for this. Are you condemning the pope?...This Peter is a holy man. He may be a saint! Are you saying he is not preaching God's word?'' But

Bruno replies, "'I am saying I cannot believe that a true Christian should ever kill…It goes against all that we are taught'" (32).

Every time we then read of violence breaking out, (e.g. 85, 123, 136, 139) we are reminded of Bruno's words. Even so, circumstances compel him to be soldier himself (174), and even kill (181). Even so he hangs on this believing that killing is wrong, by observing that "'I think I have no right to ask for forgiveness.'" And, "'I cannot pray'" (182). But he is redeemed, seeing his being made a full carver on his return as a sign that God will forgive him (187-8).

We also read about occasional genuine acts of charity in the name of Christ (106-7).,

We also see glimpses of Bruno's faith in his reactions to the boy whose right hand is chopped off for stealing (18). In response to Ursula's observation that "Stealing is a crime" Bruno pulls her away from the execution. And Ursula remembers, and begins to understand that not all taking is theft (165). (Dome years ago A woman stole loaves of bread from a supermarket. She did it for her hungry children whom she could not feed otherwise. A Catholic bishop lauded her for doing it.) And then Bruno steals two horses (180).

The Church has survived crusades, inquisition, shunning, excommunications and other acts of violence and disrespect that span many centuries. Praise be to God! Seems a miracle.

A SINGLE SHARD (Newbery Award winner)

By Linda Sue Park

Published by Dell Yearling Books, 2011.

Synopsis

Many centuries ago Tree-ear, a boy orphan, lived with adult Crane-man under a bridge near a small Korean village. The two manage to keep alive by scrounging food from forest, fields and scraps found outside village houses. Many potters live in this village, and Tree-ear becomes enamored by beautiful pottery, especially the pieces made by master potter Min. When he accidentally breaks a Min pot he has to repay the damage by working for this potter for nine days. The potter preparation work (collecting kiln wood and river clay) is hard, and he has to learn how to do it properly, but he persists, even though his master is not one to tell him he is doing well. But the master is happy enough with his work to hire him (without pay) after the nine days, which also means that he will be fed by Min's wife, meals the boy shares with his companion under the bridge. In the meantime, bit by bit the boy learns about the intricacies of making beautiful pottery.

The village potters, some more skilled than others, all hope to get a commission from the royal court. One day the court emissary visits the village to scout its pottery for a possible commission. The emissary recognizes the superiority of Min's work, and requests that samples be brought to court. As Min can no longer undertake the long and dangerous journey, Tree-ear offers to do so. With two superb pots carefully packed in a reed basket made by Crane-man he sets out, only to be set upon by two robbers, who take his money and destroy Min's sample pots. But Tree-ear remembers the words of Crane-man, about disasters also offering opportunities, and he rescues the largest shard from the destroyed works, carries them to the place, shows the emissary, and returns with a commission for Min. When he returns home he discovers that his dearest friend Crane-man has been killed in an accident. However, Min's wife asks him to move into the potter's house, and she also gives him a new name, a name that links him to the potter's son who had died young. That means that he will be Min's successor after learning all that Min's knows.

Potential

Even though the story is set in Korea some nine centuries ago, it offers multiple connections with our own so very different culture.

Family and home. Crane-man and Tree-ear are homeless in this sense, that they live not in a constructed dwelling but under a bridge, and in winter in the remnants of a shed. Yet both care for their place: "[Tree-ear] took care to keep the place neat, for he disliked having to clear a space to sleep at the tired end of the day. Housekeeping complete." (10) Their place is a home for them, and the two are also family as they share food and try to help each other (see 34-5, 38-9). On p. 57 Tree-ear shares clothes with his friend. On pp 79-84 we get glimpses of family life as the adult waits up for his young friend and tells him stories so he can get to sleep after a the hard work of the day. The older man also has sage advice for his young friend, for instance about facing difficult tasks like a long journey: "One day, one village. That is how you will go, my friend (93).

Tree-ear has no parents. Crane-man has a physical handicap, a "shriveled and twisted calf and foot he had been born with" that prevents him from earning a regular living and owning a house. Both have their story. All homeless people have their story (7 and 82-4). All homeless people are God's beloved creatures.

And gradually he seems to become part of Min's family. After already caring for the boy in a variety of ways, Min's wife gives him a new name, one that links to the some she and her husband lost many years ago (90-1). Min does not give any overt cause for the boy to think that Min wants him, perhaps as replacement son, but the signs are there, for instance in "Min's response was as close as he would ever come to expressing pleasure at Tree-ear's work" (69, see also 109 and the expectation that Tree-ear will bring some coins back. Yet he also lays his hand on the boy's shoulder.) Of course by the end of the book, after Crane-man has died, Tree-ear does become that son (143ff.)

<u>On being poor and the nature of work.</u>

On p. 4 we are told that "the poor [are] allowed to glean the fallen grain from the bare fields. Which reminds us that the same "law" was in effect among the Israelites of the Old Testament. For instance, Ruth "set out and went to glean after the reapers" (Ruth 2:3, see also Deuteronomy 24:19ff). On the other hand, the poor must act morally. Crane-man observed, "Work gives a man dignity, stealing takes it away." But Tree-ear wonders: "Was it stealing, to wait as Tree-ear had for more rice to fall before alerting the man that his rice bag was leaking? Did a good deed balance a bad one?" (7, 38-9, see also p. 17 in which Min simply assumes that his beggar boy is out to steal). But Tree-ear responds, quoting his friend, "I would not steal. Stealing and begging make a man no better than a dog.") Work can be hard (30-1), but a meal earned is better than a King's banquet (34). Notice also how Tree-ear and Crane-man share the pains and their meager possessions (26-7), including a "cabbage core" (29), and later the meals Min's wife provides when Tree-ear has become an official "employee." (see also pp. 35-6).

(P. 41 made us think of the Gospel stories of the feeding of the 5 (and 3) thousand. Food suddenly multiplied! But, "how quickly one became greedy!" – 47). Also interesting was the reference to "tithe of rice" for the monks (54). There is much in Leviticus and Deuteronomy especially about tithing, the sharing of farm produce with the Levites, who had no land on which to grow their own crops, see Deuteronomy 14 for instance).

Links to Scriptures. The Torah assumes that human beings labour, reflected also in Psalm 104:23. The 2 Thessalonians Epistle has this: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat" and "We hear that some among you are idle…Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat." (3:10, 12). And this in Ephesians: "Ne who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful…that he may have something to share with those in need" (4:28).

<u>On community</u>.

All through the book we see the two as family, but as family part of the larger community. Because of his work, Tree-ear gets to mingle much more with the village people (44-46), and he carries "bits and pieces of new back to Crane-man..."(45). While most of the men were potters, they were of various kinds, some more artistic, some more practical. Reminded us of the Apostle Paul teaching us that a Body (in this case the church) has many members with different functions (Romans 4).

<u>On being creative and an artist</u>

With his first glance at the work of an artist Tree-ear is captivated (15 ff.). Being captivated also means that he is willing to do the most menial preparatory work just to be around Min. And when he observes fellow potter Kang try something new, he begins to dream about his creative possibilities in his own life. And beholding a perfect vases min creates, "A kind of peace spread through Tree-ear. Body and mind, as if while he looked at the vase and its branch, nothing could ever go wrong in the world" (52). And on p. 63 we learn the difference between superb and more ordinary art. "Some things…could not be molded into words" (139), as he shapes a piece of clay with his hands "it was almost as of the clay was speaking to him, telling him what it wished to become (105).

Any reference to art evokes thoughts about God's artistic work, namely his creation acts described in Genesis 1 and 2. Perhaps being created in God's image also includes the human ability to create beauty out of sounds and materials. So much art is a hymn (Bach, Rembrandt), (but some is a curse!).

JULIE OF THE WOLVES

By Jean Craighead George

Published by Scholastic, 1972

Synopsis

The novel has three parts. The first part is focused on the wolf pack, especially on its leader, and how Miyax, an Eskimo teenaged girl, became part of the pack. In the second part, a flashback, we learn why Miyax came to the tundra wilderness. And in the third we follow Miyax on her way back to more western ways.

Miyax, an Eskimo teenaged girl as lived with her dad in the wilderness until the authorities find her and compel her to go to school. She comes to live with her aunt, and at age 13 gets locked into an arranged "marriage". But when she hears that her Dad's destroyed canoe has been found, and her "husband" indicates that he wants to the marriage to become real, she flees the village, meaning to go to San Francisco, to a pen pal. She has taken with her the bare essentials for surviving on the far north tundra. She comes upon a wolf pack, and manages (in her own human way) to become a partial part of it. The wolves help her survive, even when winter and perpetual darkness arrives. But she is also determined to get back to "civilization," and undertakes the difficult journey. On the way the leader of the pack is shot down by hunters from a plane. Miyax manages to reach a village, and hears that her dad is alive, and has become the leader there. But when she meets him she discovers that he had been the pilot of the plane that shot her beloved wolf, and she turns her back on him and his western ways.

Potential

The author describes the survival of Miyax in great detail, a life so different from that in say, an urban centre. Every bit of the tundra environment can serve human needs: plants, animals large and small, and birds. They are food, clothing, but also companions (community) (152). And beauty. When she builds a sod house, "she had made it beautiful by spreading her caribou ground cloth on the floor" (13-see also p. 126). And learns how to carve (148). As her Dad had taught her" "Yes, you are an Eskimo…And never forget it. We live as no other people can, for we truly understand the earth." (81) "the old Eskimos were scientists too. By using the plants, animals, and temperature, they had changed the harsh Arctic into a home, a feat as incredible as sending rockets to the moon" (121). And thus we read her actions on pp. 125-6 as worship, praise for the Maker of her world. So is her singing off and on.

The detailed description of animals, animal behavior, and other aspects of this tundra environment made us think of a number of psalms, especially psalm 104. It reflects the landscape and features of Israel, but it is also a model for the appreciation of any part of the world, from flat Dutch polders to this seemingly barren tundra land. And as in Israel "People go out to work and to their labor" (v.23), so do people everywhere.

And as psalm 104 expresses so clearly, the environment in which human being are placed and work, is created for them by God. Human beings may use its gifts, but in a stewardship way, not as unbridled exploiters. In Miyax we see such a steward. She kills, but only for food. She builds but only for shelter. And she respects all the other parts of her world, especially the wolf pack and its leader, and she "tells" them not to follow her to the village she seeks, for that is not the place for them (138). She is their steward!

But the author does not simply present a black and white contrast between Eskimo life and life as we know it. While living with her aunt she learns how to read and write, and have a pen pal far away. However, she is also forced into a teenage marriage by Eskimo custom. And when she reaches the

village she eats (once again) “bacon, bread, beans, and butter. Miyax had forgotten there were such good things and her mouth fairly watered as she smelled them cooking” (157).

We also found the author’s portrayal of language interesting. Do wolves (and other animals) communicate? Yes, as the author demonstrates in many ways, each animal in its own way (38, 78). But should we use “language’ for all communication, or only for human beings? After all, wolves cannot tell stories and write books. There are people whose concern for the environment is so intense that they abhor killing animals for food (pigs, chickens, cattle) or even to lessen annoyance (mosquitoes). Some find justification for this stance in the Genesis creation story which tells us that we can use every plant and tree for food, but doesn’t mention animals (Genesis 1:28-31). As if human beings are not fundamentally different from all other living creatures. But this flies in the face of this same Genesis passage, in which God also appoints human beings to have dominion. Language is one of the gifts that makes it possible for human beings to be so.

THE VERY WORST THING (in tandem with "The Great Gilly Hopkins"?)

By Torey Hayden

Published by HarperCollins, 2003

When first meet David he is boy utterly defeated by life. Unable to read, and barely able to speak (partially because of a stutter but also because he has been abused by life). The only thing he "owns" is the remnant from a favourite blanket, now reduced to "little blanket." His latest foster home is Granny, who looks like an old woman. In his new school he soon is spotted by bullies, who abuse him. But on a walk he finds an old shed, and he declares it his home. However, a girl shows up, who tells him that if it is anybody's, it is hers for her farmer dad owns it, and also owns the land. Carefully the two become friends, especially when they discover an owl's nest. David vandalizes it, but ends up holding one owl egg in his hand. The girl, Mab, knows how to brood eggs in a brooding machine, and the two arrange the brooding together. They also begin to share a King Arthur book, which she reads to him. The owlet is born, and named King Arthur. Mab and David spend a lot of time every day caring for it, catching and cutting up mice. But soon the owlet becomes an owl. Mab is willing to let the animal go back into the wild, but David does not. He takes the bird home and tries to take care of it, but it dies (as it probably would have anyway). That death also threatens their friendship, but when they meet again at school, the two reconcile.

Potential

When we first meet David he is convinced that the world has no use for him. Abandoned by a father, and taken away from an incompetent mother, he has been in foster homes, and is now assigned to "Granny." He does make lists (but only in his head) of "The Very Worst things," and he has no trouble finding items for it. He doesn't trust adults (8), and in his new school can't do the class work (9). Not unexpectedly he immediately becomes the target of bullies (11). He has no social skills.

There are two early positives: his "little blanket" (he loves at least something, 6) and his memory of being read to in one of his previous foster homes, the story of King Arthur (16). But all this raises these questions:

- what is lacking in David's life?
- can he be rescued?
- who can help him, and how?

Every time Christians meet human beings out of sync with "regular" life, they are encouraged (if not compelled) to ask these kinds of questions. Following Jesus who so often paid extra attention to those on the fringes of his own culture: beggars; tax collectors, Samaritans, women; the blind (beggars). And while in this book there is no mention of faith and faith community, several folks in it act in answer to these questions.

David lacks a trusting community, and his lack of experience with any form of those (family, foster homes, schools, friends) has led to him not trusting anything or anybody. He even distrusts his own talk. And when physically abused, abuses the Owl's nest and eggs, which are as defenseless against his violence as he has been to the bullying gang in his school (23-6). He also does not (cannot?) take responsibility for his own actions. He is not good at anything (21-2). Yet some of his actions also betray a longing for normalcy. The shed feels like a home (23). And something in him stops at destroying the last owl's egg. These are signs of hope that he can be rescued.

And of course the author will suggest that he can be rescued, for why else write a book like this?

Granny believes so. She takes him in as a foster child, and cares for him. She does set standards for living in her home (7), and is worried when he runs out of school the first day (18-9). Key is that Granny tells him she was very worried, "very frightened." She also tells him that he should tell himself that he is "as good as any person [he is] talking to" (19). She is the first one in the book who treats David not as a case (foster child, student) but as a person. When his friendship with Mab is under stress, Granny gets him to talk about it (but also gives him time to consider that he might have been wrong). Her gentle but firm support of him gets him to realize that perhaps he has been given a home.

After beating up one of the school bullies, he is afraid that the police will get involved, and social services will move him again. But "He *wanted* to stay [with Granny]. Up until that precise moment, David hadn't realized that…It would be horrible if Mrs. Mellor took him away from Granny and Mab and King Arthur." (75, see also 116-8) And when he stays overnight in the shed and is found by the police, Granny embraces him (even those she is not a hugging person) she tells him: "I was *so* worried about you…Lord have mercy, son [!], you can't imagine what you did to me last night. How could you not come home?" (85-7). (Notice the use of "son" and "home".) She even understands his (fist) fighting his tormentors. "Sometimes when you're on the bottom, folks don't give you no choice but to fight." And while David realizes that he may not merit Granny as a foster mother, Granny reassures him. But also tells him that he must face up to his problems and not run away from them (91). And finally, when he seems to have lost Mab as a friend (who also reads aloud to him) Granny will, but only after David asks. (122).

Mab also believes that he is worthy. She herself lives on the fringes of the school community, being very small for her age and also very smart. But when David shows her the owl's egg he has rescued from his own destructive self, her attention focuses on it (and not on David's invasion of her territory), by suggesting they get it hatched together. (28-30) She takes all kinds of initiatives, something David wasn't used to, and tells him, "I like to do stuff just to see what happens," and then tells him that he better do some research. (33,34). Buy how? He can't read. Does Mab look through his excuses, for she "gave him a funny look"? (35, 6). Yet, if she does, she doesn't abandon him.

What also bonds them is their imagination, barely alive in David with his memories of King Arthur, but fully alive in Mab. Even the old language of Mab's version of the story is no barrier (63). Around that legend their friendship blossoms also. And David's confidence. When comes home with a stick he pretends to be King Arthur's sword, He tells Granny, grinning, "I'm just that smart" (64). So he has found a friend. Not that their friendship is smooth. When David sees his friend abused by the school bullies, he does not come to her rescue. But he and Mab meet after that, David apologizes. He is beginning to take responsibility for his actions, (56) and their friendship continues.

But not without further interruptions. When Mab gets abused again on the school playground, David has an opportunity to help her, but he does not seem to be able to. "I-I wanted to stand up for you,…I-I just didn't know what to do. I was scared of g-getting into trouble again." (104). But, fortunately, they share a love and concern for the owlet King Arthur who needs their constant attention, and that joined concern helps overcome their difficulties.(102-106) *(And there's a hint about a way to help those who need help – beyond talk do something together.)* They both realize how different they are from the other kids in school, but they help each see that different does not mean inferior. (107).

The third creature to help David become the person he could be is the egg-owlet-owl, King Arthur. Sometimes those who find themselves on the bottom of respect and have endured violence sometimes lash out to creatures even "lower" than they are. But sometimes such persons find a creature (pet for instance) to whom they can extend help…and give it. But when David gets clear indication that he must let King Arthur go, all that he has learned from Granny and Mab is called upon for him to do the right thing. But even when he doesn't quite, he has learned enough. Enough to [count his blessings] (and at least this page has Scriptural echoes. (158).

THE GREAT GILLY HOPKINS (in tandem with "The Very Worst Thing?")

By Katherine Paterson

Published by HarperCollins, 1978

Like "The Very Worst Thing", it is a book about a foster child. This one written by a superb author (winner of two Newbery awards, and "Gilly" is a Newbery honor book). She is also a Christian (daughter of missionaries, married to a Presbyterian minister).

Synopsis

Gilly Hopkins has just been placed in a new foster home. Daughter of a "flower child" mother who has never bothered with her, and with no father in sight, she has been in foster homes from birth. She is smart, aggressive, sassy, and not fooled a bit by phone adult help. The new home is run by Maime Trotter, an overweight woman whose house is not the most organized and neatest, but who is highly regarded as foster mother by Miss Ellis, the social worker. In the house also is a William Earnest, a "freaky kid" in Gilly's eyes (6), and at supper time a blind and partially deaf neighbour Mr. Randolph. Gilly has a hard time coping with her new circumstances, and does so by being insulting to her new "family." She also steals money from Mr. Randolph, but for the purpose of buying a bus ticket to see her mother Courtney in California, about whom she keeps thinking as real family. She gets caught at the bus terminal but forgiven for her stealing and running away. Then another old woman shows up, her grandmother Nonnie from Virginia, who did not even know she had a granddaughter. Legally with prior rights, she becomes the new home of Gilly, who now does not want to leave Trotter, W.E. and Mr. Randolph, but has to. But she has gained a lot with those three, to the point where she can tell them that she loves them. She is prepared to cope with her new home with her grandma.

Potential

Unlike David in "The Very Worst Thing," Gilly is determined to be totally in charge of her own circumstances, whatever they may be. She presses not to be called "Gilly" but "Galadriel" (4, 8), but loses that "battle." Even she doesn't though aspects of her new home, "She could stand anything, she thought - a gross guardian, a freaky kid, an ugly, dirty house – as long as she was in charge" (6). She takes charge, with language sprinkled with "hell" and "damn". But soon discovers that this (messy) house has rules to which she has to conform, including respect for William Ernest and Mr. Randolph (10-1). And she needs to pitch in (19).

The problems with deeming yourself totally in charge are serious. For instance it requires a cynical view of adults who are trying to help (25), for instance blind Mr. Randolph and his impressive personal library (34). (But the author lets us know that Gilly still loves her birth mother, and cries about it (29-30), just in case we readers get too impressed with Gilly, That vignette holds out the hope that Gilly may be reached by other adults.) Being and feeling totally in charge of one's own life, and not in the least dependent on others, will take:

- stealing to get what you think you need (41)
- exploiting the weaknesses of others (46 ff.) (But notice how Ms. Harris cannot be manipulated. She "didn't appear to be dependent on her students" – 54).
- lying (75 and others). She does all three.

But the more one behaves in this destructive way, the more tangled one's life becomes. In the meantime, Gilly is being influenced by the lives of others.

By Miss Harris, who thanks for a particularly vile Gilly deed (59) and who teaches Gilly something about her own anger.

By Trotter , who continues to see the good in all people (70), and who thinks that Gilly is helping Mr. Randolph and W.E. even though she isn't. Trotter keeps seeing Gilly for who she is, and sees it as her own duty to give Golly as much space as possible. "Somebody's got to favour Gilly for a little while. She's long overdue". (94)

By Mr. Randolph and W.E. who keeping interpreting Gilly's behavior in positive ways.

Their goodness towards Gilly is rewarded when her "family" gets sick and Gilly had to take care of them. (104 ff.) (As in "The Very Worst Thing" caring for something (the owlet) or other people demands empathy and love.)

This author also writes with a marvelous irony at time. When Gilly's grandma shows up, she finds the house in an even greater mess than normal (because of the illnesses), but what looks like a mess to Nonnie, is actually a scene of great love! (106ff). Moreover, on the next few pages her housemates lie about the products of Gilly's cooking, but one feels that these lies are acts of love (115 ff.)

All these influences have conspired to change Gilly into a different girl (148). She will be able to cope with her new care giver, because she has been loved, and can now love in turn.

It is worth noting is that both books rely on the power of (fantasy) literature to influence the central characters. In Gilly's case it is her discovery that her name Galadriel is derived from a Tolkien character (21). Literature has the power to shift the mind away from one's own troubles to those of others. Literary lives are able to act as mirrors for one's own life. King Arthur and the Tolkien characters are more masters of their own fates than David and Gilly, and show lessen the attention on themselves as victims. That kind of literary influences is a gentle motif in both books.

As is the influence of the Bible, faith and faith community. Both Trotter and Mr. Randolph attend church on Sundays (78 ff.), though two different ones. Prayer is part of Trotter's life (30), and the Bible the "Good book" for both (33). That doesn't prevent Gilly from sprinkling "hell" and "Jeez"(83) in her own language, and she even teaches W.E. (101). Trotter gets furious about that, but when she understands that Gilly is getting W.E. to understand that he doesn't always have to act as a victim, that he can stand up for himself, and that strong language is a sometimes part of that, she accepts the need though perhaps not the specific vocabulary. (102). But Trotter doesn't foist faith on her two wards – she lives it as invitation but not as command.

BLACKWATER

By Eve Bunting

Published by HarperCollins, 1999

This juvenile novel could be a companion to "One-Eyed Cat" (by Paula Fox). It is a similar story in many respects, as it deals with guilt and forgiveness. They also have in common the Dad character is a protestant minister, who thinks everyone is nice (2).

Synopsis

Brodie is a thirteen year old boy who lives close to the Blackwater River, a mean one with a big rock (the Toadstool) in the middle which divides a safe swimming hole on one side from dangerous waters on the other. During the summer of the book Brodie has to look after his cousin Alex who is a boy from Los Angeles and difficult circumstances. Brodie has to be nice to him (7) though Alex doesn't seem to be a nice boy.

Brodie takes Alex to the river for a swim (Alex doesn't know how), and while there spots a girl he is found of in the company of an older boy, and the two of them are on friendlier terms than Brodie likes. Without being seen the boys hide their towel and clothes, and Brodie ends up in a sort of wrestling match with the couple, and on the wrong side of the rock. That's when things go wrong. Both of them fall of the rock and into the river which flows fast towards a dangerous rapids. Brodie does his level best (awith danger to himself) to save the two, Pauline and Otis, but neither one of them survives. Alex promises to keep what has happened to himself. Brodie's actions are interpreted by the town as having tried to safe the two. He is declared a hero. Until the truth comes out.

Potential

The plot is simple, but the motif is anything but. Alex entices Brodie to pretend that he had nothing to do with the two teenagers falling in the dangerous river, and the town believes their story. The trouble is that Brodie knows he is to blame, and as the days progress his guilt comes to weight increasingly heavily. He didn't mean to have them die – he merely did a dumb thing born of jealousy, and didn't foresee the consequences. (Teenagers often don't have the experience to foresee the sad consequences of their actions.)

The rest of this book combines the slowly unraveling of the boys' story with the rapidly increasing guilt feelings of Brodie. At first Brodie is considered not only a hero, but also a boy who has been "taught good" by his dad the Reverend (49). But also right from the start Brodie is tempted to tell the truth: "I tried to say 'No' but the word stuck somewhere." (40) And, I had to tell the truth. But not now." (52) As the author lets us see, once lies have been uttered (or the truth been withheld) life gets more and more difficult. One lie leads to another (59). Brodie feels the pressure. "I was cold and sick and started to shake (62). It gets so scary that the prospect of the boy Otis having survived (and he would know the truth) is a threat (66). And, "My dad says that we are all made in the likeness of God, but I'm pretty sure I'm not." (73). His friend Hannah tells him that when she was younger she did something wrong, and for a time never told anyone about it. But in the end she did. She concludes with "I hate liars. Don't you?" But Brodie does not, cannot respond. (82)

Alex is an interesting figure in the story. Used to a sort of Los Angeles gang life, he is matter of fact about this experience, and eggs on Brodie to keep up the lies. He provides the rationalizing of Brodie's conscience, pulling and pushing his cousin away from telling the truth and facing the consequence. (89-90; 96-98)

The web of evil spreads. Someone knows the truth, and has left a notebook piece of paper with the word “TELL” on it. Brodie almost tells his mother, but an ill-timed phone call from his grandmother closes his lips. Yet someone knows, and in the face of it the lies become thicker (104-5). Someone has seen the two boys, and knows what really happened. Who is it? And when will he/she reveal the truth? So when the town’s school kinds engage in a river side ceremony for their lost friend Pauline, Brodie “felt suddenly hopeless.” (119) Totally caught in the web from which there is no escape. “My dad says God never gives us more than we can bear, but having to go to Pauline’s funeral cut it pretty close.” (124)

134ff. The denouement. He gets to tell the truth, a truth known to his friend Hannah all along. So he confesses to her first. She observes, “It had to come from you.” (138). And she is the first to forgive him (139). But not the last.

A book to savour in a read-aloud, and face the issues it raises together.

THE MIRACULOUS JOURNEY OF EDWARD TULANE

Text by Kate DiCamillio, illustrated by Bargam Ibatouline

Published by Candlewick Press, 2006

Synopis

Edward is a rabbit, mostly made of china but with fur ears and tail. He is the toy of Abilene. One day hi is taken on an ocean liner, but when he is spotted by two rough boys on board, eis clothes are taken off, and he is flung into the sea. In turn he is rescued by a fisherman and renamed by the fisherman's friend as Susanna. But he lands in a garbage dump, is rescued by a hobo and renamed Malone. But the hobo is discovered riding a train illegally, and the conductor flings the rabbit off the train. He is found by an old lady, who nails him to a cross to act as a scarecrow. The lady calls him Clyde. In turn a boy, Bryce, rescues him from the cross, and takes him to his little sick sister. She names him Jangles. But the little girl dies, and the brother takes him on the road to be a dancer to his harmonica music and so make a living. But when Bryce orders a restaurant meal for which he cannot pay, he loses the rabbit, for the restaurant owner swings him so hard that Jangles's head hits the counter and snaps in many pieces. Fortunately, a doll store owner knows how to put the pieces back together again, and Edward (as he keeps calling himself) ends on a store shelf, for sale. But he is there for years and years for people are more interested in human dolls. Until, one day, a mother enters, with a young girl. The woman recognizes him, for she is Abeline.

Potential

This is a wonderful book, and no wonder it became a New York Times bestseller. Deservedly so. It's a book about the nature of love. Edward didn't know what love was in the beginning, but as he "travels" in a variety of circumstances, he almost invariably receives love, and so gradually discovers what it is. Let's follow him on his travels to see how, and how each character who comes to "own" him shows him what love is. For Christians this can be an important book, as love is at the heart of following Jesus, as Jesus himself made clear in words and deeds (see, for instance, John 13:31-35).

When we meet Edward Tulane first he is a rabbit without an obvious soul, feeling entitled to the luxury with which he is treated, especially his costumes. (He is appropriately named Edward for the Edwardian age in England was one of male primping, especially with clothes.) His "owner" (or servant?) has either not clued into that, or is so under his spell that she can't resist. But grandmother Pellegrina knows, even though she was the one who had "ordered his silk suits and his pocket watch, his jaunty hats and his bendable ears, his fine leather shoes and his jointed arms en legs, all from a master craftsman in her native France". (9-10) Grandma has discovered the love-lessness of Edward. She lets Abilene know in the form of a story about a princess which ends abruptly without "live happily ever after." Abilene objects, but Grandma tells her, "…how can a story end happily is there is no love?" (34)

But then Edward, and not willingly, goes on a journey of discovery. It begins (for him) with being thrown accidentally overboard (44). One questions he asks himself as he sinks deeper into the ocean, "Is my hat still on my head?" (47). And that he hasn't got his pocket watch (48). But also, Edward "experienced his first genuine and true emotion. Edward Tulane was afraid."

His sinking to the ocean bottom is not the end of him, for after a long time he is fished out of the sea by fisher Lawrence, and taken to an old woman called Nellie. Who calls him Susanna(!), and plans to dress him anew (for he is naked). However, in girl's plain clothing "so simple, so plain" (67-8). She also keeps sharing with her new companion the stories of her life, some so sad. And Edward was surprised to discover that he was listening…It made him wonder if some of the muck from the ocean floor had gotten

inside his china head and damaged him somehow." (69). The thing is, Nellie loves her Susanna, and she show it in many ways. "Life, for a long time, was sweet." (71)

But Nellie's daughter Lolly isn't so sweet. She manages to drop Edward into a garbage can, from where he is dropped into the dump. He has time to think (for almost forty days and nights – 82 - biblical allusion?), and wonders if he had not loved Abilene enough. He also misses Nellie and Lawrence. "The rabbit wondered if [missing them] was love." (83).

But now he gets into the hands of Ernest, the hobo, who is also known as the king of garbage. Clothed in a dress and crusted with garbage, Edward is held in the slobbering mouth of a dog. "But he was happy." (88). Even though he is renamed Malone. And his dress was "so torn and dirty and full of holes that it barely resembled a dress anymore." (97) Ernest has many hobo friends, and they begin to treat Edward as Ernest does, as a companion. Edward gets to hear many stories, with many names of those the hoboes left behind. "He knew what it was like to miss someone. And so he listened. And in his listening, his heart opened wide and then wider still." (103) But Edward's troubles are not over. A conductor finds him with Ernest who is riding the train illegally, and Edward is flung out of the train.

Next, another old woman finds him. But she finds good use for him, nailed to a cross as a scarecrow, and she names him Clyde. Birds peck away at his clothes. But then a boy named Bryce spots him, and he wants Edward for himself. He takes him off the cross at night, and "when the last nail was out and [Edward] fell forward into Bryce's arms, the rabbit felt a rush of relief, and the feeling of relief was followed by one of joy. Perhaps, he thought, it is not too late, after all, for me to be saved." (120) Bryce does not want Edward for himself but for his ill sister. Another come down for Edward, this time as he hears the boy tell his sister, "I brung you something (125)." That language is far removed from Edwardian grammar. What is new in Edward's live is that she cradles him like a doll (or baby), not a thing he had experienced before. But it does something to him. "It was a singular sensation to be held so gently and yet so fiercely, to be started down at with so much love. Edward felt the whole of his china body flood with warmth." (128) She named him Jangles.

No need to go on. Edward meets a few more people on his rocky journey, and each one demonstrates an aspect of love. One is a girl, called Maggie. Who says, I want him." (197). The thing is, Edward wants her. The end, for those two lived happily ever after. With love.

ONE-EYED CAT

Paula Fox (Author of the Newbery Award honour book in 1985.

Aladdin Paperback (2000), but first published in 1984. 216 pages.

Some recent reviewers have assessed this as a slow read (implying that today's kids won't like it). That may be so judging by recent children's books, but I suggest that when read aloud, most children will become captive of the story. It also links to **Ida B. (by Katherine Hannigan – see next book)**

Synopsis

Ned is the son of an older New York State protestant minister and a mother who is suffering from painful and debilitating rheumatoid arthritis. The family home is not filled with constant play and laughter, and Ned does not get the same attention as he would have with a health Mom and a dad not quite so busy with and giving to parishioners. Ned is often looked after by a housekeeper, Mrs. Scallop, a bit of a nasty number. For his 11th birthday Uncle Hilary (brother of mother and a travel writer) brings Ned a pellet gun. Dad is appalled, and (in his usual kind way) forces Ned to promise that he won't use the gun until he is 14. The gun is stored in the attic.

In the middle of the night Ned retrieves the gun, and shoots from out of the backyard into the darkness…just once would be enough. As he is about to shoot he sees something moving, and as he shoots hears a strange noise.

Ned has a friend, 78 years old Mr. Scully who lives across from them in a ramshackle home and for whom Ned does paid chores. On his next visit they spot a grey cat who behaves a bit strangely, turns out to miss an eye (still bleeding) and is deaf. Ned immediately realizes that he may well have been the one to shoot out the eye, but he doesn't tell Mr. Scully. He tells no one. However, for months he lives with the conviction that he is guilty. This guilt affects everything: relationship with dad and Mom; with his school friends; with his school work. He learns how to lie, and is surprised by how easy that is. In the meantime he and Mr. Scully diligently nurse the cat and feed it, through summer and winter.

But one day Ned finds Mr. Scully unconscious in his home. He has had a stroke, and must spend the rest of his life in hospital and nursing home. At first Ned continues to look after the cat, but when Mr. Scully's daughter appears and puts the house up for sale, he has to let go. Will the cat survive on his own in the wild?

And will Ned receives the forgiveness he has been seeking all these months? From especially Mr. Scully and his parents? That forgiveness requires confession, and in the story confession, at least to his old friend and his Mom, comes when there is nothing else to do but confess. And from both he receives forgiveness. From his Mom he hears her confession of sorts, for something she did when he was a very young child.

Potential

I would consider this an ideal book for the purposes I have outlined, provided both parents (or at least one) spend time with it, either reading it at the same time as their child(ren), or (I would prefer) reading it aloud with ample room for comments and dialogue all along.

Here are some elements to watch for especially.

1. Relationship Ned with his Dad. His dad was a good man, in the eyes of Mom and his parishioners. But was he perhaps too good, and that goodness certainly became a burden on Ned's Mom (p. 26). How can that be? And is the fact that Dad let Ned shoot a gun at the fair

inconsistent with his prohibition to shoot the birthday present (45)? And is it a good thing, Ned having to behave as his dad wants him to (14-15, also 40)?

2. Someone saw him shoot. Mrs. Scallop – and would she blabber? His Mom – but she often has top much pain to get up. God maybe?
3. Ned had convinced himself, to have a good reason to shoot the gun just once (44). "Then he would be able to do what his father had told him to do – take his mind away from it." But two items bring immediate doubt: the moving shadow and strange noise as he shoots, as well as some "shadow" at the house's upstairs window. From then awareness of his guilt steadily increases, especially as he meets the cat, time and time again. The trick for parents is to spot the way the author lets us in on the boy's growing unease, in thoughts and behavior (fight with friends and concentration trouble in school), but not become moralistic. Ask what the author means by this or that event, rather than tell one's children. For instance, why did Ned "feel a touch of fear" (66)?
4. One strand that shows the boy's unease is his lying a variety of circumstance (e.g. pages 101 and 117, also 158). "He didn't know how to stop lying" (118). (Then again, his Dad lies too – 143!)
5. While the author has woven a web which makes readers conclude that at some point Ned will have to tell Mr. Scully (and perhaps his parents), we also come to admire Ned's care for the cat as well as Mr. Scully (especially 150ff). What does this tell us about Ned's character?
6. Having done something wrong, it is so hard to own up to it. "He felt his secret had frozen around him. He didn't know how to melt it" (162). And even when the door to confession seems wide open, he pulls back (164). But the author offers us two moments of confession, one with Mr. Scully, and one with his Mom towards the end of the book. Both moments seemed natural to me, and include Ned's realization that he was forgiven (Mr. Scully's hand and his mother's words.)

IDA B.

By Katherine Hannigan.

Published by Harper Trophy, 2004.

Synopsis

Ida B. Applewood lives on a farm with her parents, a dog, a cat and many trees. Not having any brothers or sisters, she talks to her pets, as well as to the trees and even the farm creek. Fortunately for her, she understands the language in which these talk back to her.

After a disastrous (to her) first few weeks in kindergarten her parents decide to home school her. They do so with success, until Mama gets sick with cancer and has to face energy robbing treatments. Moreover, the treatments exhaust the family's financial resources. So Daddy has to sell some of the land (with some of Ida B's favourite trees), and the parents can no longer take her of Ida B' schooling. She will have to enter school once again, this time into grade four.

But she enters school with a heart set to not enjoy it, not to make friends, not to be nice, and not to respond to kindness, care and concern. She has no trouble with what she has to learn about subjects, and is good enough to be a reader-aloud as well as a tutor for a boy who has trouble with math. However, she does not share her school life with her parents, who are focused on Mama's recovery anyway. And she becomes positively nasty when on the land Daddy sold a family comes to inspect the building of their new home on it. Ida B. has posted nasty notes everywhere, but Claire, the family's daughter and also her fellow student, takes these as jokes. But one day Ida B. bursts out to Claire with hateful and insulting language. At first, while feeling bad about that, Ida (her school name, without the B) goes to school every day expecting Claire to take revenge somehow. But Claire does not, and the absence of revenge makes Ida B. feel increasingly guilty. Her teacher, Mrs. W., after trying in many ways to have Ida become more part of the class, finally gets the girl to share with her loving teacher what is bothering her. Ida now faces having to say "I'm sorry" to Claire, and also to her parents. It is a very difficult, but not impossible, assignment.

Potential

As in *One-Eyed Cat*, this book is about guilt and forgiveness. In *One-Eyed Cat* there are at least hints of guilt and forgiveness as linked to the Christian face, for instance in Ned's Dad being a Protestant kind and understanding minister of the Gospel. But the only faint link in this book is the mention of "church" twice (e.g. p. 42). But in the family's troubles we find no acknowledgement of the Christian faith, a trust in God that makes suffering bearable. Yet is the use of certain vocabulary this book may be even more inviting for Christian readers to reflect on the characters and the story in biblical terms.

One term keeps recurring, namely *heart.* "Heart" is what makes Ida B. act (and not act) the way she does. When communing with her friends the trees, she gets a cold feeling inside her. "And I got a message, but not in words. That [favourite] tree lets you know things, those things go into your heart, then they find their way into your head, and once they get there they turn into words."

That sequence of heart-head-words rings bells for Christians. It is a central Biblical concept, as shown in the many uses of it in the Bible (a concordance listen more than 300 references). Heart in the Bible is where the real me resides. What is in the heart governs what I will say and do. Sometimes this gets interpreted as meaning that the heart is in conflict with the head. The head is about cold calculation, while the heart is about feelings. But (as biblical scholars tell us), that is ultimately an unwarranted contrast, and Ida B's observation is right: heart to head to language (and deeds). Isaiah 6: 10 talks about "understanding with the heart". Here is two striking biblical "heart" examples, the first from Psalm 51, a psalm of penitence (attributed to king David following his sins with Bathsheba and Uriah):

Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

And from here is what Jesus said about the heart (Mark 7:21):

For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts…"

A pure heart produces pure thoughts and good deeds, an evil heart the contrary. And that is what this whole book is about. Here are just some of the "heart" references the author gave us in this book.

86: "But my heart hurt the most."

87: "But as I cried my heart was being transformed. It was getting smaller and smaller in my chest, and hardening like a rock." The smaller and harder my heart got, the less I cried, until finally I stopped completely. Bu the time I was finished, my heart was small enough to fit in the palm of my hand. [Of kind and compassionate people we say that "they have a big heart."] it was so hard nobody could break it and so sharp it would hurt anybody who touched it."

And: "Because when your heart changes, you change, and you have to make new plans."

89: "I could feel the hardness of my heart spreading into my arms and my legs and my head, and it felt fine. I would win."

("Hardening of the heart" is a biblical phrase. You will find it (and equivalent phrases) in the story of the Exodus. For instance, in Exodus 7:13 we read that "Pharaoh's was stubborn," a phrase repeated in 8:19 and other places. It even says in these exodus accounts that Yahweh is the one who makes Pharaoh's heart stubborn (4: 21 and 7:3-4).

100: Ida's heart, now hard and cold, governs her thoughts and her actions. "I stopped in the doorway of Room 130 for a minute, just taking it in so I could do like soldiers do before a battle: assess the enemy, formulate a plan, get armed, and attack."

120-1. Her heart now freezes all her relationships, with her parents and her animals, and even with the trees. Something has to happen.

Her heart had been in the right place. She had had good teachers. Her parents (27- "let's look at the world…", and 29 - "We don't own the earth. We are the earth's caretakers…") She knew that there were "deep and abiding truths" that needed being "still…and listen. (28) "The farm taught her, too, especially the trees (8-10). She had had a life of peace and harmony. "That's how it went for four years, and it was finer than fine. (57)." But the trees warn her of problems to come, and so does her home life. "So, I've learned that even when you think you're in heaven, you need to stay alert and have a plan. (64)."

So the setbacks came: her mother's illness, financial troubles, the loss of her beloved trees. Difficult setbacks. She didn't know how to cope. "'…Mama's not Mama, and Daddy's not daddy, and I miss them, and I miss the life we used to have, and I'm so lonely," I told the tree." (72-3) But as she had been good,

all others had to be bad, even her parents. That's when the heart began to be a different sort of engine for her life.

So what, the book tells us, happened to restore her heart to what it had been (except with more wisdom)?

In the end it is the school (she so disliked) that set her on the road to recovery. Dad knows that "'You need to be with other kids, instead of moping around here all day.'" (84). But she does not want to be in school, where her name is not Ida B. (who she really is), but Ida (105 -who the school thinks she is). Names are so important!

But, surprise, she discovers that this school has "shelves of books that look like real books, not schoolbooks" (101).

Moreover, the teacher, Mrs. Washington, keeps approaching her for sharing what Ida really thinks, time and time again (10f and others).

The kids invite her to play with them (106).

But Ida retains her hard heart (here called "a mighty and unbending will" (108).

But in all her responses, also to her parents (108-9) we as readers realize that she not only sins, but she is well aware that she is sinning. But as she sins more and more, she knows less and less about how to get out of this pickle, but instead "used words that didn't tell anybody" (118). Her imagination, so rich, also gets used in sinful ways, in the making of posters (125-7). Nevertheless, the school keeps inviting her to do so.

Mrs. Washington's kindness and concern is "wearing her down" (128-9, also by enticing her to read good books, and asking Ida to read aloud to the class (147). The teacher is reminding her "what it felt like to be loved" (133).

Her parents come to realize that their own concerns have contributed to their daughter's unhappiness (180).

The whole episodes with her fellow student Ronnie, whom she helps with Math is also an extended invitation to have her heart softened (134 ff.). It causes her to have " a warm glow that was in my belly and my arms and my legs and my head and wouldn't go away" (152). But her heart, for now, "remained horrified" (155)…"beating extra hard trying to keep that happiness down and quiet…" (157).

The crisis arrives when she is utterly and completely mean to Claire (166-`170), with a "cold, hard heart…in top form" (172). But Ida is shocked that Claire does not retaliate. We were reminded of the advice in Proverbs 15: 1:"A Gentle answer [or in this case no answer at all] turns away wrath."

But then, when she finally shares her unhappiness with Mrs. Washington, she hears that what she needs to do is to say, "I'm sorry." The interesting aspect of this denouement is this: when she hears that Mrs. Washington had also sinned the way Ida had, Ida tells her what must have happened in Mrs. Washington's life! That whole last part of the book is worth savouring! Restoring relationships is called "Ida B's Avenue of Atonement" (227) a wonderful (and almost biblical!) phrase. And her old heart was back (230), now perhaps with some bitter experiences to remember. But not to be downhearted about anymore.

People have been known to forgive others for the wrong done to them. But not always. The remarkable thing is that God always forgives, everyone who confesses and repents. The Bible has many references about forgiveness, almost every Christian church service will give voice to God's forgiving grace. And the Lord's Prayers asks us all to forgive others, in response to God forgiving us.

Psalm 103:

Bless the Lord, O my soul,…

He forgives all your iniquity,…

He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. Etc.

Jesus forgave even crooks like Levi (also called Matthew – Mark 2:14-17) and Zacchaeus (Like 19:2).

A LONG WALK TO WATER

By Linda Sue Park

Published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010

Synopsis

Linda Sue Park calls it a novel, based on a true story. But it does not really read like a novel. The characters are only sketched. We do not really get a sense of how circumstances change them, how they become better persons or not, the aspects that make fiction such a powerful literary genre.

The book has two strands that come together in the end. Nya is a young girl living in Southern Sudan in the years 2008-9, in an area with little water. She has to spend her days walking to a well with an empty container, and walking back with it full, water for her family.

When we meet Salva first, he is a young boy living in Southern Sudan, at a time of civil war between the Muslim north and the (more or less) Christian south. With the north aiming to make the while country live according to Muslim law, the south began to rebel. The war lasted for many years, and cost (perhaps two million lives. Eventually a truth was reached, and a deal made that for six years both areas would be autonomous, until an election in the south would decide whether it would become a country on its own. (That did happen some years ago.)

Salva lives in a village with his family, and goes to school. One day soldiers invade the village. Many villagers, including Salva, flee into the woods. However, he departs without his family. For a long time he travels in company of others, often hungry and thirsty. For a short time he is protected by an uncle, who, however, gets killed by soldiers. He resides in several refugee camps, in Ethiopia, and back in Sudan.

But the United States decides to permit a large number of boys (provided they are healthy) to emigrate to the US. Salva is one such lucky one, ending up with a US family who cares for him, and gets him to get an education. But part of his heart is still in Sudan, hoping that his family is still alive. And one day he finds them. He then also decide to begin a campaign of raising money to dig wells in his old country. By the end of the book he and a crew dig such a well…in the village of Nya.

The title of the book covers the “walks” for water of both these children. Both of them never lost hope that life would get better for them, and Salva never gave up hope, against all odds, that he would see his family again.

Potential

This book does not lend itself easily to the kind of discussions we have pointed to in others. But it may get children a sense of the hunger, thirst, disease, and violence so many children in the world have to endure. Raising the question: what can we far more wealthy western Christians do?

The answer is: not much in the overall scheme of things. But we can do something. The Anglican *Primate’s World Relief and Development Fund* collects funds for these kinds of projects. Many other church denominations support similar initiatives. Some organizations produce catalogues of items we can purchase for use in poor areas of the world: goats, cows, books, and also wells to be dug! Google will have the information.

The Old Testament often talks about widows and orphans in need of help and justice. When dads and husbands died, they would leave their family unprotected and uncared for. Prophets will sometimes call Israelites to task, when they neglect these fellow Israelites who through no fault of their own live in dire

circumstances. Here are two Bible references that shows us that God cares for them, and then so should we.

Deuteronomy 10:18: *[God] defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow…"*

James 1: 27. *Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress…* (orphans and widows are all those who urgently need our help, whether in the Sudan or in Canada.

Several organizations also provide an opportunity to support a specific poor familiy (in Africa and Asia) with a monthly donation, assuring that these families do not starve.

Deborah Ellis's THE AFGHANISTAN TRILOGY:

The Breadwinner, Parvana's journey, and Mud City

We found these book so valuable for the purpose, even though there is nothing explicitly Christian in it. These are stories of bad, bad, bad times. Of children caught in wars they have not chosen nor understand. Most often without shelter, clothing, food, and safety, almost all of them are nevertheless never without hope. As they cope and survive, beyond hanging on to hope, they resurrect from ruins essentials of human life: family, community, trust, caring. Never perfectly of course (how could they), but the essentials are there, time and time again. Life among the ruins.

Many times as we follow the various children we were reminded of those psalms in which the poets cry out for help, surrounded as they are by enemies. Here is one such, Eugene H. Peterson's rendition of psalm 6. Let us at least pray this psalm on behalf of all those children who get caught up in wars like those in Afghanistan.

Please, Yahweh, no more yelling,

No more trips to the woodshed.

Treat me nice for a change;

I'm so starved for affection.

Can't you see I'm black and blue,

Beat up badly in bones and soul?

Yahweh, how long will it take

For you to let up?

Break in, Yahweh, and break up this fight;

If you love me at all, get me out of here.

I'm no good to you dead, am I?

I can't sing in your choir if I'm buried in some tomb.

I'm tired of all this – so tired. My bed

Has been floating forty days and nights

On the flood of my tears.

My mattress is soggy, soggy with tears.

The sockets of my eyes are black holes; nearly blind, I squint and grope.

Get out of here, you Devil's crew;

At last Yahweh has heard my sobs.

My requests have all been granted,

My prayers are answered.

Cowards, my enemies disappear.

Disgraced, they turn tail and run.

THE BREADWINNER

By Deborah Ellis

Published by Douglass & McIntyre, 2000

Synopsis

This book was written well before the invasion of the US, Canada and other allies, an invasion brought on (amongst other reasons) by the cruelty of the Taliban.

In this story we find an Afghani family, well educated, and before the Taliban came well off and living a solid middleclass life, in difficult circumstances. Mother is home all the time, and so are at least two of the girls and the baby, a boy. The father makes a meager living gradually selling off whatever possessions the family still has, and acting as a market scribe, reading and writing for those who don't have the skills. The story revolves around the daughter Parvana. She often accompanies her father to the market, all covered up in cloth, and we see life in Kabul through her eyes.

One day soldiers invade their home, cause a lot of destruction, and take the father away to prison. Mother does not know how to cope and simply sleeps the hours away. But Parvana realizes that she is the only one in the family able to make some money and help the family survive. With the help of a former teacher she pretends to be a boy - her hair is cut off and she wears boys' clothing. At first she earns money doing what her father did, helping others with her reading and writing, and also selling the last few possessions worth any money. But when she discovers that one of the market boys selling tea is actually a former female school friend, the two of them gradually expend their business. They get trays with small items to sell, candy and cigarettes. They also discover that any bones they can dig up from the bomb-scarred cemetery are worth money.

Oldest sister Nooria has received an offer of marriage from a bridegroom who lives in a city at the northern border, a city thought to be free from the Taliban. Mother decides to take the family there, leaving father in jail (if he is still alive). But Parvana wants to stay, and wait for her father to be released. After some debate, the family decides in her favour. And one day her father does come home, in ill health and physically abused. After some rest and recovery, he and Parvana decide to go north as well, in search of the rest of the family likely to be in some refugee camp.

Potential

1. The author gives us a sad picture of what it means to live under enemy occupation (even though the Taliban are from their own people). Life under those circumstances is turned upside down, all normalcy gone. "'These are unusual times' [116] …Mrs. Weera said gently."
- Lots of tension within families (e.g. Nooria always criticizing Parvana [24-5], "Everbody fights all the time" [99]) and "So everybody is grumpy" [124]).
- Everyone always feeling that they are being watched.
- In this country, girls always under threat, or having to pretend being boys.
- You learn to lie.
- Cruel punishments for crimes (e.g. cutting off hands in the stadium [121-2].
- No beauty, no music.
- Such a life makes people tired [130].

2. Life under occupation makes it difficult to do what is right, as the choice is often between two or more imperfect options, Good example in pp 160-1. Parvana's friend wants to leave Kabul, and thus her family, but she also is a human being with "a right to seek out a better life". Parvana couldn't decide who was more right. (*So can we?*)

3. Even under the most difficult of circumstances some of the characters exhibit the kind of love Christians should extend to others. On p. 27 Father reminds his younger daughter that "[the Afghans] are the most welcoming, hospitable people on earth. "A guest to us is a king". On p. 117 we read that Parvana shares her piece of bread with "one of Kabul's many beggars". Linked to this is Parvana's discovery that enemies have feelings to (79-80).
4. Father and also Mrs. Weera resist giving in to their occupiers completely, father with his hidden books, Mrs. Weera with her plans to produce and distribute a magazine for women. "'There are many types of battles,' Father said quietly" [29].
5. Could this be a key question? How should Christians act in circumstances such as described in this story?
6. And this one (p. 14). "…but Parvana's father told her that religion was about teaching people how to be better human beings, how to be kinder." Is that true?

PARVANA'S JOURNEY

By Deborah Ellis

A Groundwood Book, 2002.

Synopsis

At the end of the previous book Parvana's mother and sisters had to attend a wedding in what they thought would be a safe place. Parvana and her dad had initially remained behind, but then decided to journey to find them. But early in this book Dad dies, and Parvana is on her own. After burying her dad she decides to continue the journey. Soon she hears a strange cry, and finds an unattended baby whom she names Hassan and decides to take along. Before too long she encounters a badly mutilated boy called Asif (he is mutilated in body and spirit), who insults her but decides to come along also. Well into the journey, sometimes hungry, always smelly, but not without hope, they encounter a girl who seems to have constructed a home for herself and her grandmother out of ruins. The girl rescues them from the middle of a mine field. The five decide to stay together, and together, with water and food readily available, they manage to shape their togetherness into a family, build a decent home, add beauty to it, But then the food runs out, and they must hit the road to an uncertain future. Just when they have decided, their home is bombed, their home destroyed, and Grandma killed. Hungry, dirty and discouraged again, the four (two "brothers" and two "sisters") come upon a refugee camp, where at least they are guaranteed some food. But when food containers are dropped from the sky in a minefield, Leila is killed by a landmine. But the camp is not without "salvation": Parvana finds her mother and sister.

Potential

Of all three books we found this one to be the riches mine for faith connections, even though there is nothing explicitly Christian in it. (How could it in Muslim Afghanistan, unless the author had somehow injected a Christian missionary into the stories.)

Uppermost the image of "The Kingdom of God" jumped into our minds, shortly after Parvana and her two companions had come upon Leila and her grandmother, and decided to stay, at least for a little while. Leila has somehow managed to find a place of some rest, some food, some safety, and she doesn't mind three more companions. ""I know I'm talking a lot', she said, 'but it's been such a long time since I had anyone to talk to, especially children'" (110). Soon after their arrival, Parvana begins to call their new home "Green Valley" in letters (a sort of journal) to her friend Shauzia (who wants to move to France – see previous and next book).

"Kingdom of God" is a much discussed concept among Christians. Since the life of Jesus the Church has tried to come to grips with its meaning. For Mark (1:14-5) that Kingdom is the central thrust of Jesus's preaching: "After John had been arrested, Jesus went into Galilee. There he proclaimed the Good News from God. 'The time has come…and the kingdom of God is close at hand.'" So what is that Kingdom? The Pharisees asked Jesus about it, and he gave them this answer: "'The coming of the Kingdom of God does not admit of observation and there will

be no one to say, “Look here! Look there!” For, you must know, the Kingdom of God is among you’” (Luke 17:20-1). Puzzling language. What means “among you?”

How the Church has racked its brains to come up with a definite answer, a certainty of understanding. Speculation has wavered between two poles of a spectrum. On one hand finding that Kingdom in the best of human endeavors, for instance in the “Social Gospel” movement. Here is what Wikipedia has to say about it.

The **Social Gospel** movement is a Protestant Christian intellectual movement that was most prominent in the early 20th century United States and Canada. The movement applied Christian ethics to social problems, especially issues of social justice such as wealth perceived as excessive, poverty, alcoholism, crime, racial tensions, slums, bad hygiene, child labor, inadequate labor unions, poor schools, and the danger of war. Theologically, the Social Gospellers sought to operationalize the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:10): **"Thy kingdom come**, Thy will be done **on earth** as it is in heaven."[1]They typically were post-millennialist; that is, they believed the Second Coming could not happen until humankind rid itself of social evils by human effort.[2]

The other pole asserts that the Kingdom of God is ultimately not to be found on earth at all, but has to do with the complete purity of souls which will not happened until after the Second Coming. This-worldly or other-worldly. With many shades of opinion in between.

But what if (for now) we work with this understanding: *The Kingdom of God is about life-as-it-should-be as compared with life-as-it-is.* That understanding may give us a handle on what happened to the life of these four children and the grandmother as they begin their life together.

With the misery of their lives before they got to the Green Valley in all their minds, they begin to build a life for themselves, forming a new family (or village). It begins with Parvana telling Asif, “’I think I’d like to stay here for a while.” (116) And after a bit of the usual verbal skirmishing, Asif says, “’So I will stay…but only because it will annoy you’” (117). And then keep your eye on the letters to Shauzia, fot they are Kingdom sounds.

We’ve found a real Green Valley. It’s a little rough still [a little rough? Hah!] , and it will take a lot of work to make it beautiful, but we can do it.

This is a place where children are safe. No one is hurt or beaten or taken away in the night. Everyone is kind to everyone else, and no one is afraid.

We won’t let the war in here. We’ll build a place that is happy and free, and if any war people come they will feel too good to keep in killing. (117)

And then, like good Kingdom workers, they set to work to make the rough places plain with imagination, a human characteristics to see the Kingdom of God amidst ordinary human life. Thinking about life as is should be takes imagination. The ‘facts” are not always clear. But in this case the combination of elements have created a wonderful life for these five people caught in the midst of chaos and violence. The downsides of the challenges they face are dimmed by the hope each of their achievements produce.

- The yard

- their health (bind wounds – 119-20; get rid of rotting animal flesh – 121; build a latrine - 121)
- preserve their food (122)
- wean and teach the baby (124)
- beautify (126)
- grow vegetables (126)
- construct animal stables (okay, pigeon cages – 127)
- and better care for Grandmother (129ff).
- establish a school (142)

Not without flaws, of course, the Kingdom of God is "among us," and there are other things among us, bad things. Parvana writes her friend, *Maybe another peddler will get caught in the minefield, a peddler with* [lots of things, for themselves but also a false leg for Asif!] (127). And she sort of sighs, ""'I didn't create this world….I only have to live in it'" (128). (Which may invite reflections on how God will let so much destruction and unhappiness happen, if He is good and loving.)

"Days and weeks went by – golden days full of sun and enough food and lots of happy work. The sores on Leila's face completely healed, Hassan grew strong, and Asif stopped coughing" (135).

Kingdom of God? At minimum a signpost pointing towards it, towards "golden days" wherever and whenever, images we find in the Book of Revelation (especially chapter 21).

Kingdom of God? Parvana came to trust her new family, even though she had concluded that It was easier and safer not to trust anyone" (12).

But then a bomb falls into the "Kingdom," and kills the Grandmother. So has it come to an end? Not really. Parvana's (and her remaining "family," hit the road again. Once more on "the Way."

Some further notes

The media have fed us lots of bad news about Afghanistan: violence, bombing, suicide bombing, destruction, betrayals, etc. Not without warrant of course. But Canadian soldiers and others have also told us that the ordinary Afghanistans are wonderful people. Our author alludes to that when she lets us in this: "As a guest, Parvana was given the best spot in the drak one-room house. She sat on the thickest mat on the floor and drank the tea the man's wife brought her" (15). Hospitality is lauded in Scripture. "Practice hospitality," says Paul (1 Cor. 12:13). A good thought also uttered in 1 Peter 4:9, "Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling."

In various spots in this book bombs are dropped. Whose bombs? The book does not mention, except perhaps once (reference to the United States). But who cares, bombs are bombs, and Afghanistan children would not have much awareness of international and domestic politics (158-9, 164).

Children in these kind of circumstances are forced to make survival their priority. In doing so they have to face moral dilemmas. For instance, Parvana has to give up thoughts of helping a girl in dire need. "'Go back inside,' she said stiffly [the stiffly indicates her struggle inside]. 'I

can't help you'" (21). Asif seems like a wild animal, and his language has constant sharp edges. It will take months before his language begins to express his wanting to belong, and gratitude (53ff.) Parvana and Asif contemplate stealing eggs, stealing being an Afghanistan deadly sin (at minimum one's hands get cut of). At first "she couldn't do it" (86). But then they do steal the eggs, and a chicken also. "'People who cheat children deserve to have bad things happen to them'", Parvana said (89).

Afghanistan in the best of circumstances is not (yet?) kind to women and girls. But in all these books girls and women turn out to be creative, competent, able. Many are the examples.

One prominent motif in all of the books is the preservation of hope (sometimes against all odds). When hope dies, people die. We encounter a clear example on p. 27, in the portrayal of a woman Pavana meets. But…'the eyes were dead. There was no life left in them… [Parvana] had seen people who had lost everything and had given up hope that they would ever have love or tenderness of laughter again. "'Some people are dead before they die,' her father once told her" (28, see also 108). But Parvana's journey is a journey toward hope, with hope dimming at times but never totally lost. Even when she has to talk to herself (62). And she becomes the example of hope, as Asif follows her lead and begins to care for others, notably baby Hassan. And Leila, so long without company, has found a sister and two brothers (110-112, note Leila's are on Parvana's chest!). The book even describes the children at play sometimes, play (64) so much a sign of hope. Hope is what Leila has when she makes a life for herself and her Grandmother, using whatever is at hand (114). (Is hope, rather than necessity, the mother of invention?) It all reminds us of the Christian life, which in the gospels and the Book of Acts is often called The Way, a journey, a pilgrimage. And on The Way we ask others to come with us, as Parvana did. She had no doubt that she was her brother's/sister's keeper!

How cruel is war to children and old people in particular!

Finally, when we read that a stranger woman "came up to Parvana and put her arms around her" we had to think of God putting arms around us as we "travel," especially in tough spots. For God does so through other people (183).

MUD CITY

By Deborah Ellis

Published by Groundwood Books, 2003

Synopsis

The third in the Deborah Ellis series on Afghanistan. In this one we follow the life of Shauzia, a young girl almost on her own (but she has a dog called Jasper), friend of Parvana. We also meet Mrs. Weera again, head of a refugee camp in which Shauzia resides for a while. Shauzia is a feisty girl who is not content to succumb to the sad circumstances in which so many refugee children are caught (wherever they may be in this troubled world). Mrs. Weera does what she can for her, but it isn't enough. The young girl has a picture of a lavender field in France, and that is where she wants to go one day. But she must have money for travel, and the camp cannot provide it. So one day Shauzia leaves the camp to make her own way. First in Afghanistan, and then in the more modern city of Peshawar in Pakistan, she begs, pretends to be a boy, works at whatever jobs she can find, steals, and gradually adds money to the pouch around her neck. But her money is taken from her when she ends in jail. From jail she is rescued by a US family, who takes her in and cares for her. Until Shauzia misunderstands the help these people have extended to her, and in their absence invites beggars and needy people into the lavish home. She is brought back to the refugee camp, still with her dog and her dream. But when Mrs. Weeva decides to return to Afghanistan where conditions have worsened, Shauzia decides to go with her, and use her survival skills for the benefit of others. France will have to wait.

Potential

This book could be read with in mind the tension between being yourself on the one hand, and belonging to the human community on the other (family, friends, and the larger society). It is a tension all human beings face, adults and children, but it gets acute in the circumstances of this book. For being you in these circumstances includes mere survival, minimum food, clothing and shelter. And when that is not provided, it must be gotten, by hook and by crook sometimes. Here are relevant passages that will bring this tension into focus.

Being you

Being you requires some measure of privacy, but in the camp Shauzia "couldn't even have an argument in private" (22). But when gets to sleep in Mrs. Weera's hut, she is grateful, for it "gave her something no other place did – a little bit of privacy" (22). The more because she is an independent soul who does not want to be controlled (21 and 24), this "skinny girl…with her back straight and her head up high" (25). And if it takes looking like a boy, so be it (26).

She leaves the camp, and with her dog Jasper walks to Peshawar, a Pakistani city just over the border. Here she learns how to fend for herself. The ideal is paid work, and she manages to get some. When she can't, she begs (and there are many beggars in this city - 40). One of the saddest lines is uttered by a university educated woman now reduced to begging. "'Do you make much money that way? Shauzia asked. 'Maybe ten roupees a day.' "Is that a lot?' 'It's enough to keep my children hungry'" (36). Not fed but hungry. If the ten roupees were not enough, the children would die! And the girl discoverts that a sandal seller also sells one at the time, for people who have only one leg, victims of bombs and landmines no doubt in this war-torn corner of the world (46). Survival also takes "having to be nice to these people who aren't nice to me" (69-70). So Shauzia is tempted to assault people and simply rob others of what she needs (71). She also discovers that "rich people weren't any more generous than

poor people" (70). Sometimes the poor are driven to steal from the poor (73), for the truth is that "you can't trust hungry people" (75).

To survive you also need to be strong, as Shauzia has learned. While in jail "She concentrated now on not letting her fear show on her face. Anger was good. Fear was dangerous (84). And when a boy offers to share his piece of bread, she refuses. "Shauzia knew that [at least in jail] if she accepted his kindness, she would have to show kindness in return, and that would make her look weak" (88).

Shauzia discovers that the constant struggle for her own survival has made her lonely. After the jail and her stay with the US family she decides to go back to Mrs. Weera's camp. She tells her faithful dog Jasper, "'I still want to get to France. I still want to get to the sea. But I just don't want to be alone anymore'" (120).

Finally, survival takes lying sometimes. But when? After hurting a girl's feelings by telling her that she doesn't want to take her to France, Shauzia reflects, "Sometimes it is hard to know the right thing to do'" (127). Why not lie when it makes a person happy?

Being part of the lives of others

Shauzia may not have a family, but she has her dog Jasper. She regularly talks to Jasper, as if he is her sibling, and the dog understands her, loves her, protects her at times.

In spite of herself sometimes, she is nice to others. For instance, in the camp she tells stories to other children (12-3)

She is also cared for by a number of people. By the refugees' camp Mrs. Weera, who may sound gruff to he (201), but who clearly admires her spunk and her ambitions. Just before she leaves the camp to go back to Afghanistan danger, "She wrapped Shauzia in one of her giant hugs. 'You are a precious, precious child…'" (157). Isn't it the experience of that love and trust that made Shauzia decided to follow her? (158)

All along children just like her share their food and knowledge (48, 60ff.). And children have an uncanny ability to play together with whatever is at hand (the shopping bag on a string acting like a kite – 62). "Shauzia hung back a little, not yelling, but still very glad to have the company (63).

Her rescue from jail and her subsequent stay with the family of Tom and Barbara is interesting. For a little while Shauzia is living a life of luxury she has never known before. But it cannot last. It seems that the author wants us to know that individual acts of charity, however welcome in specific circumstances, cannot solve these problems. True, "'we like to share what we have'" (110), but as the story makes clear, it can only help one person at the time. Outside their beautiful door life of want and chaos goes on. And when that life intrudes, "'We need to just be together as a family'" (114).

So in the end the realization that she needs belonging just as much as food wins out. Shauzia made not have attended any formal school, but she has learned a lot. She has become a good organizer, a wily survival, and by the end of the book she has become a potential leader of people, especially of the poor and hurt ones. She is ready to follow a true heroine, Mrs. Weera, one who is willing to lay down her life for others. (family, friends, and the larger society).

THE DEVIL'S ARITHMETIC

By Jane Yolen

Published by Puffin Books, 1990

Synopsis

Hannah lives in New Rochelle (NY, US) with her Jewish parents and her younger brother Aaron. As we get to know her, she and her family are underway to her grandparents and extended family in the Bronx to celebrate Passover with the Seder meal. Seder consists of food (some of it ritual food like bitter herbs), prayers, a reading from the Jewish Bible (Christians call it the Old Testament), and lots of talk. That talk includes Grandpa Will's memories of World War II concentration camps in which millions of European Jews were killed. Hannah is asked to open the door to "Elijah," the Old Testament prophet for whom a chair is reserved at every Seder. But when she does, she is transported back into another setting, a pre-WW II Polish Shtetl (village) full of Jews including family. She is Chaya now, an orphan girl from another city who will be look after by extended family. But Chaya has memories of the future, and she knows that all of them will be captured and put in a concentration camp, and most of them will die. She, too, becomes one of those, and we follow her as she comes to live (if one can call it that) in a camp.

Potential

"[God] has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into [our] minds, yet [we] cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end." (Ecclesiastes 3:11)

This is a tough book for the purpose we have chosen it, namely as invitation to consider faith issues at home. The reason for writing (and thus reading) this book is to stand in the way of the human tendency to forget past evil on a large scale. For instance, the Christian Church does not like to be reminded of such events as the Crusades, the Inquisition, brutal religious wars between Christians over doctrines, foreign mission activities that showed contempt for the ways of the "heathens," etc. And in Canada the Roman Catholic, Anglican and Presbyterian churches was involved with the residential schools that took Aboriginal children away from their families.

But we have come to recognize that forgetting those pasts tends to let victims remain victims. Healing includes remembering. Voicing memories, in stories and "liturgies," diminishes pain, and at its best helps victims be restored. In Canada that process has been undertaken by the *Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, which has organized forums in which former "students" can tell their stories.

Before we conclude that neither Canada's Aboriginal issues nor the Jewish World War II experience is relevant to our lives today (especially not to our children's experience), we do well to remember that the Christian faith is a historical faith. In liturgy and readings (e.g. the Revised Common Lectionary) we are regularly reminded of important historical events. For instance, the Exodus stories remind us that human beings are constantly tempted by various "fleshpots of Egypt," a metaphor for living life as it is rather than life as it should be, a kind of living St. Paul calls slavery in his Epistle to the Galatians. In every generation Christians are tempted to live by the rules of the current Empire, which in the 21st century are the rules of goddess **The Economy**. And in the stories leading up to, during, and in the aftermath of the Exile, we are reminded that we are travelers, colonists, strangers, pilgrims, as both Jesus and Paul remind us, never quite at home in any human culture. As some Christians writers suggest: when we are asked who God is in our lives, do not come with intricate theologies but answer, "The God of Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Samuel, David, of Jesus, the disciples and apostles, and all the past saints whose stories of courage and obedience we know, including recent saints such as Bonheoffer,

Martin Luther King Jr. and bishop Romero." And the Christian faith is unthinkable without the stories of Jesus whose historical existence in a more or less precise space and time is beyond dispute.

The Bible gives us examples of history reminders being important in knowing who the people of God really are. Take Psalm 78, for instance. Also Psalm 136. Deacon Stephen's speech in Acts 7 is one long history lecture/sermon.

This book lets us dwell in the evil done to Jews during World War II. Most of us will know it as the *Holocaust* (which means offering or sacrifice). But many Jews dislike this term and prefer *Shoah* instead (meaning calamity). When we meet first Hannah (Biblical name, see 1 Samuel 1), her brother Aaron (also a biblical name, see the book of Exodus in particular), and the rest of the family, the author lets us see the ambivalence about remembering in even Jewish families. Young Hannah says, "'*All* Jewish holidays are about remembering, Mama. I'm tired of remembering (4)'" She resents Grandpa Will's strange behavior (8). The author is suggesting that Hannah wants to be a regular US kid, and if allowed will, on her own, gradually forget her ethnic-religious past. (Recent writing about young US and Canadian Jews suggest that this is becoming a real problem. See, for instance, the website of Jerusalem's Daniel Gordon.) And do not overlook the mention of "'my family came over to this country in the early 1900s, second class. Not steerage'" (10). Meaning "we weren't poor like many others on immigrant ships; we are a better class than most." We read that to subtly indicate a distancing from European Jewish history. Finally, as one of the book's characters observes, "'We forget because remembering is so painful'" (119). But the novel's strange twist (Hanna transported back many decades to her family's past) is the author's way of getting the imagination of all readers to experience the pain of memories, direct links or no.

Forgetting is easy in our age. For many people the world begins anew each morning, and they live as if the past is dead on going to sleep each evening. As some writers have pointed out, two tendencies tempt us to believe that. First, the 19th century concept of progress. "Tomorrow" will always be better than "today." It is a concept fueled by the successes of science and technology which had become so obvious in the time of steam trains and mechanization of industry, successes celebrated in the first World Exhibition held in London, England in 1851. Second, that concept is being not only confirmed, but etched into the consciousness of ordinary folks, with their reliance on computers, I-phones and other gadgets that daily spew out a relentless cornucopia of new information. Who has time to consider what happened yesterday, let alone some decades ago? The past is dead.

Yet each of us has a past. Our genes are inherited, but so are our social conditions. We are born into a world we did not craft (God did through our ancestors going back to Adam and Eve). The (mainly American) stories of individual human beings starting with nothing and achieving great success are a certain type of myth. As Obama once observed, modern entrepreneurs often forget that they did not build the infrastructures (roads, airports, sewers, waterlines, etc.) that enable them to entrepreneur. In short, it behooves all of us to know, and honour, our ancestry for the good things they did, and help repair the damage they may have caused.

We suggest that you simply read aloud this book and experience the horrors of Nazi Jewish genocide. Perhaps the question will arise: "How could Jews let themselves be so easily led to slaughter?" It is a question that has agonized many Jews and non-Jews, but they generally have come to agree: most of them were bamboozled and did not realize what was happening to them until it was too late. Only with hindsight were the omens obvious (pp 78ff.). Moreover, they did not have the experience and tools to resist. The folks in our shtetl were simply overwhelmed in short order. They were innocents even of the larger world, of life in much larger Lublin for instance which wasn't that far away (34).

The question the book itself poses in a variety of ways is this: “How does God figure in this sad story?” This is also a question that has kept Jews and Christians busy thinking until now. “’God is everywhere” was the initial trust of many religious Jews. “’It is God before whom we must tremble. Only God’” (64). This implies the faith that God is more powerful than any Nazis, and will thwart their plans. However, God did not. But when shortages loom, the rabbi observes: “’We will share what we have…Are we not all brothers and sisters in God’s eyes?’” And prays, “’Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, The Lord is one’”, the beginning of many Jewish prayers. Faith persisted even when circumstances got dire. “’With God’s help…’” the seemingly impossible will be accomplished (77). But for some the implication that what they are experiencing is somehow connected with “’we are in God’s hand’” is beginning to look unreal. One says, “’This is the Devil’s work, not God’s’” (87).

A key passage is found on pp. 113-4. Hannah, now in the camp, observes. “’God is not here…This is the Devil’s place.’” To which her friend Rivka replies, “’God made the Devil, so God is here, too.’” And Rivka continues: “’I play the man’s game. I play the Devil’s game. I play God’s game. And so I stay alive.’” In other words, she no longer knew how God figures, but has some idea of the *Devil’s Arithmetic*. She does what she needs to to stay alive. And for what reason? “’As long as we breathe, we can see and hear. As long as we can remember, all those gone before are alive inside us’” (113). (In a nutshell, the point of the book.) Another character pleads with Hannah (also known as Chaya – meaning life): “’Promise me, Ghaya, you will remember’” (144).

Points of possible interest.

1. The language of the Jews sounds a bit quaint, but not so strange for people who know biblical language, especially the King James Version.
2. The *Torah* (29) is the collection of the first five Bible books: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. To this day it is the heart of modern Judaism.
3. 39: “carrying straw to Egypt” is linked to the Israelites in Egypt (see the beginning of Exodus). Egypt had plenty of straw!
4. Klezmer music: traditional Jewish music using a clarinet, a fiddle and an accordion. Why these three instruments? Because they are all easy to transport when Jews had to flee from progroms (as they often had to, especially in Eastern Europe).
5. Dire circumstances often force using words in different ways, as a code. “Organize” and “organized” came to mean steal and stolen (115ff, and as Adrian remembers from his own wartime experiences in Holland). And “garbage” can be paradise (117). Keep your eye also open for words like “settle” and “choosing (126, 128).
6. The book contains much Hebrew and Yiddish vocabulary. The context often explains, and also the meanings are added in English.
7. Google will have many websites to explain the Paschal and Seder ceremonies, and much else about Jewish life, even today.
8. Finally, keep in mind that the God of the Hebrew Bible is for Christians the same God as in the New Testament. Ultimately, the Jews are our brothers and sisters, even though we may not be living together as a family. We should be interested in them.

CRISPIN: The Cross of Lead

By Avi

Published by Scholastic, 2004 (Originally by Hyperion Books, 2002)

Synopsis

The central character is a 13 year old boy living in an English hamlet in the 14th century. He does not even have a name of his own; he and his mother Asta have lived at the edge of the hamlet, are virtually shunned by the other hamlet-eers, and the boy is known as Asta's boy. Hamlet life is lived at the mercy of John Aycliffe, the steward of the manor, in service to Lord Furnival who is away fighting the enemies of England. And on page 1 we are told that Asta has died, leaving the boy on his own.

The night of her burial Asta's boy overlooks the steward talking to a stranger, who hands Aycliffe an official looking parchment. Aycliffe spots Asta's boy, and tries to kill him, but the boy escapes. Then the priest lets him know that Asta had carried a secret, a secret the priest will tell him tomorrow, telling him also that he should leave the hamlet. He gives the boy a leaden cross, with some writing on it (but the boy cannot read or write), and also tells him that his real name is Crispin. However, another boy sets him up for capture, and Aycliffe tells him that he has now been declared a "wolf's head," meaning he may be killed by anyone in England's realm without guilt or punishment.

Asta's boy takes off, dodging people and especially soldiers clearly looking for him. Underway he meets a bear of a man, a singer and juggler who travels from village to village to entertain and make a living. Bear (as he is called) takes the boy under his wing, and teaches him to juggle and play a recorder. But everywhere they go danger lurks. Moreover, Bear seems to have his own secrets, and is not too fond of people in power, be they priest or civil authorities. But as they travel, Bear, originally so scary to the boy, seems to care for him, provide him with food and protection. They make their way to Great Wexley, a bustling city. But even in this busy place Crispin discovers that he is being hunted still. But it is not he, but Bear who is captured. However, the boy discovers that Bear is a prisoner only because his captors are after him. And he finally discovers the secret: he is the illegitimate son of Lord Furnival, who has died, and because of it Crispin may well be able to claim the inheritance. He has it in his hand to claim that inheritance, but decides that it isn't worth the love he has for Bear, so he trades this option for the freedom of his friend.

Potential

This book is a wonderful read. A mystery story with many plot twists and turns.

But what makes this a splendid book for our purpose is the religious atmosphere that pervades the whole story. For instance, each day is not regulated by clocks and watches, but by the "hours," daily prayer times. Remnants are still with us, especially in Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Anglican liturgies. Here are the names of the "hours." Monasteries and convents tend to maintain these as daily cycles of prayer, Scripture reading and contemplation (silence)

6.00 am: (First hour): Matins (also called Lauds, and Morning Prayer)

9.00am: (Third Hour): Usually reserved for the Lord's Prayer

Noon: (Sixth Hour)

3.00 pm: Ninth hour (also known as None)

6.00 pm: (Known as Vespers or Evensong)

9.00 pm: (Known as Compline – it gets regularly mentioned in the book, also as a curfew.)

Midnight (But in the book Compline is “the last prayers of the night” (5).)

(Faithful Muslims have their own cycle, praying five times a day with their faces to the east, to Jerusalem and Mecca. The east is also important in some Christian church rituals, especially baptism and burials – see p.2 . We wondered: wouldn’t it be a good thing for Christians in this secular culture to follow the lead of Muslims in this?)

We also get a good glimpse of the living conditions of the rural folks in medieval times. Asta, her son and all the villagers were serfs, virtual slaves of nobility. They belonged to the regional lord (in this case Lord Furnival), as well as to the Lord (19). If they obeyed the lord, they would be rewarded by the Lord with a place in heaven. Heaven loomed much larger in the minds of folks then, for (as the book makes clear) most lived a miserable existence, with barely enough daily food (meat a luxury), and no prospects that life would get better during their lifetime. Kings, lords and their ruling servant (like Aycliffe, and sometimes priests) would be quick to point out the sins of their slaves, urge confession, and hold out forgiveness as if these were the privileges THEY had in their possession. In this way they held on to their power. Only heaven would bring relief, and so heaven was an intense living hope. In our days, lives of utter luxury in comparison, heaven no longer hold the same longing, and many Christians give it scant attention. (But in this book Bear and some of his friends do not accept this view of life and society, and they get together trying to find ways to break the power of those in authority, be they laity or clergy.)

The impact of this rigid system tended to make those at the bottom feel totally unworthy. Here is Crispin’s prayer (21). “’O Great and Giving Jesus, I, who have no name, who am nothing, who does not know what to do, who is all alone in Thy world, I, who am full of sin, I implore Thy blessed help, or I’m undone.’” And on p. 48: “God, I was certain, had completely abandoned me.” Echoes of Psalm 51? But Psalm 51 was composed by a King David who has committed adultery with Bathsheba and had caused her husband Uriah to be killed. But what has Crispin done? Nothing really. But he had been indoctrinated to believe that he was a nothing. Scripture tells us that we never need to feel that way about ourselves. We are all worthy in the eyes of God, however poor, oppressed by others, and perhaps handicapped we may appear to be. Of course we are prone to disobey God, lack sufficient love for Him and our neighbor, so constant confession and repentance is required. But we need never feel as unworthy as Crispin felt in this prayer.

Linked to the above is the general reliance on oaths, not as swearing but as ppledges. In this book they are voiced in different ways, invoking saints, Jesus, and family. Here is an example (117):

“’Do you truly vow?’

‘By the bloody hands of Christ,’ He said.”

Even Aycliffe, evil man that he is, holds back a bit from his ultimate betrayal at the end, sufficiently long for Crispin and Bear to escape his clutches.

The framework for all this was a view of God as the great Judge. Hear Crispin: “I fell to my knees and prayed with deep-hearted, sobbing word. In these prayers I acknowledged my great unworthiness to my Lord Jesus and searched my heart for every sin which I could confess – The truth was – I no longer wished to live…” (53-4). For “No soul can escape His wrath” (59).

That view had dominated Christianity for many centuries already, reflected in the theology of Anselm (of Canterbury 1033-1109), who formulated what we know as “substitutionary atonement”, sometimes called “penal substitutionary atonement”. God, as the Great Judge, needs sinners to be punished for, pay for, their misdeeds. But human beings (sinner) are incapable of paying God sufficiently. God therefore sent his Son, loaded humanity’s sin on his shoulders, and punished him on the cross, thereby

mercifully freeing human beings from the consequences of their sin. (Not all Christians accept this view as being prescribed by Scripture, though many do, and certain texts may be read as supporting it.)

One another major difference between Crispin's time and ours is in the power of the law. His days also had laws, but these were too easily interpreted by local law enforces, like Aycliffe. We have courts, and defense lawyers and constitutions to protect the rights of even the most powerless in our society. Not perfection of course (we are human), but we're ahead of the folks in Crispins' time. We are also helped by virtual universal literacy. The story would have had different twists if Crispin had been able to read the inscription on his mother's leaden cross!

The absence of schools and a system of learning also created a society of superstitions. And people who showed to have certain insights were soon looked upon with some suspicion. Take Peregrine, upon whom Crispin "looked upon with fear and fascination" (39). Stories set in medieval times invariably contain characters like her, stories of witchcraft and misunderstood practical wisdom. Everything was looked upon as good OR evil, emanating from God or Satan. Hence some natural phenomena, plants and animals, rock formations and woods, were seen as belonging to either realm. Example: owls are "The Devil's own bird" (50). And the plague, that scourge that killed about a third of all Europeans, was seen as the wrath of God.

But not all folks succumb to these pessimistic views of human nature and the enduring status of current conditions. Bear is in opposition, as articulated on pp. 64 ff. Here is the summation: "'It is as it is' is [the king's] motto. Mine is, Let it be as it *may* be.'" And he doesn't trust the church either. When Bear hears about Father Quinel (and we have gotten to know him as a righteous priest), his immediate reaction is contempt: "''A *priest*,' he said mockingly, gripping me tighter. "I might have guessed. And you believed him?'" (67). Yet he does not *not* believe in God (70-1), but not in a god only as stern judge (see also 96-7). He believes that what people do can make a difference, and he slowly convinces Crispin that it can (106). Slowly, for "'both wheat and trust take a full season to grow'" (88). He becomes Crispin's teachers, in what specifically he teaches in skills (music, juggling), more importantly in what he teaches about what it is to be human. (In all this Bear is a prophet, already pointing to what we have come to understand that, for instance, the plague was not the wrath of God but a preventable disease (see also 99). We are God's co-workers. Learning and the arts are good.

As for opposing the terrible conditions opposed on the serfs by their masters, Bear is acquainted with John Ball. John Ball is a historical figure, a priest moved by the terrible social conditions all around. Here is part of a sermon (he must have preached regularly, and he was very popular.

"'Ah, ye good people, the matters goeth not well to pass in England, *nor shall not do till everything be common, and there be no villeins* [serfs] *nor gentleman* [he means nobles and rich landowners], *but that we may be all united together, and that the lords be no greater masters than we be. What have we deserved, or why should we be kept thus in servage? We be all come from one father and mother, Adam and Eve: whereby can they say or shew that they be greater lords than we be? Saving by that they cause us to win and labour for what they dispend.'" (*Cited in "Medieval Panorama" (p. 81, by G.G. Coulton, Cambridge University Press, 1938).

But in the meantime both must endure society as it is. Each town has two imposing buildings (123). In Great Wexley an imposing cathedral sits on one side of the town's square, and a second imposing building, Lord Furnival's palace, sits on the other. One pointing up, the other rooted in the earth (164). But different as they are, the two together often were in cahoots oppressing ordinary folks, the church seldom protecting the poor and downtrodden from oppression. The Reformation would not only call a halt to the abuses of church, but also to the power of civil tyrants who pretended that God had given them the power to be whatever they wanted to be, Lord Purnivals most of them.

Finally, Bear has taught Crispin more than skills, or even insight in human nature and the contemporary world of politics. When it matters, Crispin becomes Bear's friend in the fully biblical sense of the word. Jesus taught his disciples, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). And it gave him true freedom (262)!

THE VIEW FROM SATURDAY

By E.L. Konigsburg

Published by Scholastic (school edition only, 1996). Originally published by Atheneum Books.

Synopsis

A book synopsis can be very useful as invitation for reading the whole of it. Moreover, capturing the narrative in a paragraph or two will remind readers what it was about some time after.

But sometimes the central heart and joy of a book cannot be captured in a synopsis. For some books telling the story falls too far short of capturing what the book is really about. Sometimes the author doesn't really tell you, but lets you come to your own conclusion. In fact, the best fiction makes readers more than spectators, and invites them in as participants. This is one of those (we think). Also, a book is so full of gorgeous language use that lingers in the mind.

So with these caveats in mind, here is the "story."

There are these four kids. Each lives his/her own, virtually lonely, life: four "aliens" in the school they attend together in the same grade six. For some, parents are divorced, and grandparents have re-married. Confusing. One comes from a highly sophisticated ethnically mixed-marriage and a "foreign" background. Their new teacher also is unusual, a paraplegic rolling through class in a wheelchair. All are easy targets for ridicule and dismissal.

But somehow the four kids are drawn together. And then drawn to their new teacher. They decide to help her, give her "a leg up so to speak." By forming a "one for all and all for one" quartet called "The Souls." By becoming knowledgeable above expectations. And by winning the state-wide "Academic Bowl" in competition with kids as much as two grades higher, mostly to honour and defend their teacher.

But as we said, the how of all this overshadows the what. So let's look more closely at the "how."

Potential

From a Christian point of view (though never expressed in Christian vocabulary), this is a book about being one's neighbour's keeper (Genesis 4:9). In two major ways. These kids, all on the fringes of their classroom "community," and seemingly randomly thrown together, begin to see one another's needs and positively respond to them. And together they sense the teacher's needs, and positively respond to them. But almost always in language that dances around vocabulary precision. Here is a good example, which, read without its context, may come across as putting the teacher down.

On Mrs. Olinski's first day in sixth grade, her first teaching year after her automobile accident, she makes no bones about her being a paraplegic, though nervous about it. "Her voice held steady but, but her hands did not, and the O of Olinski was the rough shape of an oil spill" (94). Her writing can only reach a certain blackboard height, and immediately one of her students draws attention to that, and thus to her handicap. And when she returns to her classroom after lunch, she finds the word "CRIPPLE" written on the blackboard (95), with one of the four (Julian) right there. Did he write it or was he on the verge of erasing it? She can't be sure. And at that point neither can we, though we may well lean to the second possibility, given what we already know of Julian.

But on pp. 96-7 that question gets answered, if not for Mrs. Olinski than certainly for us readers. The new club (The Souls) is meeting after their Saturday afternoon tea and begins to look for things to do.

"'Mrs. Olinski?' Noah repeated. 'Mrs. Olinski? What?'

'I think that Julian wants us to help her,' Ethan explained.

'Help her do what?' Noah asked.

Nadia said, 'Stand on her own two feet. Have you never heard that expression, Noah?

'Of course I have heard that expression, but fact: Mrs. Olinski cannot stand on her own two feet and further fact: she obviously…' Noah's voice trailed off as he understood. 'I get it,' he said. 'I get it. It is scary to stand on your own two feet especially when you don't have a leg to stand on, so to speak.'… 'There are some in the school who try to get her off balance. Some are in our homeroom.'

'We can give her some support,' Ethan said.

'Better than that,' Nadia said, 'we can give her a lift.'

They all turned to Noah. 'What do you suggest?' they asked, knowing Noah would have an answer. And he did.'"

The rest of the book contains that answer: It's their determination, effort and practice with Mrs. Olinski in mind that, though being students in the lowest grade in middle schools (6-8), gets them to reach the state finals of the annual academic bowl. And after they win "She waited until they were all in their usual place, and then asked, 'Did I choose you, or did you choose me?' And The Souls answered, 'Yes!'" (160)

That observation is the echo of what we find on page 1.

"The fact was that Mrs. Olinski did not know how she had chosen her team, and the further fact was that she didn't know that she didn't know until she did know… And for Mrs. Olinski that was not until Bowl Day was over and so was the work of her four sixth graders."

But we (readers) know. The kids were not just smart, they each also had battled being rejected by "normal" kids, and respond to the needs they see in each other. With the help of some adults, notably Julian's father. They had gotten glimpses of each other's souls, and bound their own soul to the souls of the others.

Who are these kids, two boys and two girls?

Noah.

A bit of a weird kid, who lives in Epiphany (NY) where is mother "sells more houses than anyone in the world" (5). We get to know him as he spends his summer with his grandparents in a seniors' village in Florida. He is surrounded not by children but by folks who expose him to skills now seemingly lost, like calligraphy which requires nibs and (wet!) ink (10); and being able to "'add a column of figures with the best of them'" (11). "Almost everyone who lives [in this village] is retired from useful life" (7). But they seem to have lots of skills, and willingness, to make a seniors' wedding a success. Noah gets chosen to be master of ceremonies when the villagers organize their shopping list, using the many coupons they have in their possession (11). And offers to be "best man" (15). Not what one would call a normal boy's vacation. But that summer he learned to serve others in their needs.

Nadiah

A beautiful redhead who in the first few weeks of school "hardly spoke", and when she begins to speak addresses her teacher (not her classmates - 23). Her parents are divorced, and she is shuttled between Mom and Dad, between Epiphany (NY) and Florida, close to her newly married grandfather (see above).

There is a sadness about her story, a loneliness in the aftermath of her parent's divorce which made her life so much more complicated. But as with Noah, the author lets us know that she is not connected with kids her age, but more with adults.

But as with Noah, she learns to focus on the needs, in this case turtles. Yet she is lonely. "Inside me there was a lots of best friendship that no one but Ginger [her dog] was using" (42).

Ethan (Potter)

Another loner. Whose body language and actions tell all the other school bus kids: stay away from me (61-2). His problem is his older brother Luke, one so perfect that any subsequent Potter cannot possible stand in his shadow (63, also 105). So he deliberately lives in shadows, on school bus and in school. He likes Nadia a lot, but from afar (69). His dream is to work in theatres (but, typically, behind the scenes) (74), and nobody knows.

Julian (Singh)

Son of an American mother and an (East) Indian father who were (respectively) entertainer and chef on Cruise ships. Has been in boarding schools, and been trained to be British in manners and language (67). He was not normal, for "No normal person would continue to be cheerful and wear short pants (71).

The Souls

However different they may be individually, they have this in common: they crave fellowship. Julian, who has somehow sensed possible kinship, invites the other three to a most unusual (especially for kids) Saturday afternoon event: tea at his B&B house. Noah expresses his delight this way: "For the first time I started school – no, even longer than that - for the first time ever, I was looking forward to a party" (78). "'*For tea?'* his mother asked, a broad smile breaking across her face*. 'Tea?'* she repeated.

I wished I could bit off my tongue. How in the world had I let that piece of information escape? 'Yes,' I said. 'For tea. It's a tea party, and tea is always at four'" (81).

Each of the other three have brought a present. Which reminds us that there are two essentials for community: food and presents. These children understand. "Something had happened at Sillington House" (89). And the next Saturday they pledge their togetherness in the name they decide is right: The Souls. Their bickering (101) only serves to cement their friendship.

But while their project is helping Mrs. Olinski, the teacher does not know that.

"With the success of her team, Mrs. Olinski was asked more and more often how she had chosen them, and she continued to give several good answers, varying them as the need arose. They worked well together. They were willing to take time to drill. They understood the rules. They were quick. All these answers were true, but not the whole truth. The whole truth was that Mrs. Olinski did not yet know the whole truth (133-4).

Language

There are many wonderful sentences and phrases sprinkled through this book. Their impact is always dependent both on context, and the reader's alertness. For instance, "Sometimes silence is a habit that hurts" (70) takes a bit of time to absorb. Is it true? When?

And, "Guests lists are just a way of choosing sides (78)" Ouch!

The book is full of irony, and the author lets us know we should be looking for it.

"Allen Diamond kept saying, 'Isn't it ironic? My father is getting married just as I am getting divorced.'…No one knew what to say after that. Some cleared their throats and said nothing. Others

cleared their throats and changed the subject…I didn't know the meaning of *ironic*. So I looked it up…'the contrast between what you expect to happen and what really happens'" (13).

The town being called Epiphany. A religious term, indicating revelation, coming clear, making obvious.

Nadia's difficulty in coping with her changed life after her parents' divorce is captured this way: "The storm in our private lives had picked [dad] up and put him out of place. Me, too" (55).

Summary

Many are the references in both Old and New Testament of God's urging for us to be always conscious of the needs of our neighbor, and use our personal gifts to help them. They may be gifts that get wrapped (as in this book), but they represent the gifts inside of us, our words and deeds. The kids lived those references, even if the book does not describe them in biblical terms (157). (And is Mr. Singh a prophet, a seer?) In fact, the Bible is only mentioned once, and then only as literature, as history (145). (Or is this one of the author's ironic observations?)

The book of everything

By Guus Kuijer, translated by John Nieuwenhuizen

Published by Arthur A Levine Books, 2004

Synopsis

Thomas Klopper is nine years old, and unhappy. His father beats him up when he misbehaves (according to his father), and also hits his mother. But Thomas has three friends. Eliza, a beautiful girl much older than he is. Neighbour Mrs. Van Amersfoort who loves Beethoven and is a witch. And the Lord Jesus. All three in their own ways teach the boy to be happy, and as a vital step towards happiness, not to be afraid, not even of his dad.

Potential

This is one tough book. Some parents believe that children should not be exposed to tough books. We disagree. (See also our references to Neil Gaiman and Geraldine Vandekleut in our "Faith Formation: Where and How?") Like Thomas, children live in a world often not pretty, and there is lots to be afraid of in many children's worlds. The Holland world Thomas lived in was a scary one, one still reeling from the effects of World War II (some Dutch people worked in the resistance, and others collaborates with the occupiers).

Thomas's father is afraid, especially afraid of not being holy enough in the eyes of his God, a judgmental and demanding God. Thomas hears "Musical God" instead of "Merciful God" in church, as children often incorporate religious language and ideas into their own world in their own ways for a time. But Dad hears any deviation from his own ideas as disobedience, and so his son must be punished (in God's name, he believes). But Jesus is portrayed as taking issue with that kind of God Father, and there is enough in all four gospels to make that kind of Jesus believable. This book offers us a presence of Jesus sure to invite conversation. Who is Jesus to a child, an adult, a church member?

One interesting point: the father of Thomas is not abandoned and rejected, but loved, even by his wife and two children whom he has abused. He is invited to be part of the party at the end. For they have all come to know: father is afraid, of many things abut also of God.

So who is God? Who is Jesus? This book raises the issues, perhaps the most important issues in the life of Christians (and even of agnostics and atheists).

A COMPANY OF FOOLS

By Deborah Ellis,

Published by Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2004

Synopsis

We highly value this book for the purposes we have outlined. First, on the inside back cover of the edition we used one reviewer lauds the book as a "perfect novel or *read aloud"* (our emphasis). Moreover it is set in a time when the presence of God in daily life was taken for granted, in the language people used as well as in the overwhelming presence and routines of church and church folks. It is also a book that invites, but does not force, discussion. The story itself sets minds to reflect on life as it is, and life as it should be.

This story is being told with Henry as narrator (observer, journal writer). Henry is an orphan being cared for by monks in a 14th century monastery close to Paris. He is learning Latin (and other matters) as well as serving in the boys' choir, a busy choir as the monastery is devoted to daily worship (as many as 7 services or "hours", from very early morning to eveining. One day a new boy shows up, Micah, escaped from being hanged in Paris. He (also an orphan) may be untamed, but he has the voice of an angel. Micah, Henry and the other choir boys are full of life and pranks, tolerated by the monastery's abbot ("boss"), "persecuted" by the prior (second in command), and looked after in various ways by the other monks, especially loving brother Bart.

But then the Plague comes near. No one (then) knew what caused it and how it travelled all over Europe. But it did capture the streets of Paris, and eventually also jumped the walls of the monastery. To bring some joy to sufferers, the boys and monks formed a "Company of Fools," a choir dressed up in funny costumes, singing all kinds of songs, not only religious ones, with Micah as lead singer. Just to bring some cheer to dark times, especially in Paris. But then Micah's voice cheers up a sick little girl, and also her rich nobleman's father. The girl recovers, and the nobleman believes that his voice was the cure, and in grateful response offers the monastery riches in return for Micah and the Company of Fools acting as if they bring cures. Before too long (and after the Abbot's death with the connivance of the prior) this becomes a money making enterprise. The original purpose of the Company (bringing relief to sufferers) is being lost. Micah at first lets his fame goes to his head, but then comes to realize that he is no more than a boy with a good voice.

Potential

This is story with enormous potential for reflection and discussion. We'll only draw attention to some major elements.

First, a look into 14th century life in Europe.

We now know that caused the Plague (and pp. 185-6 tell us as well). Hygiene wasn't what we are used to. "The monks practiced strict rules of cleanliness, *bathing four times a year* (our emphasis)" (18). No flush toilets (an invention of the 19th century), but "neccessariums" (latrines) and "cesspools."

The Church was very dominant in every corner of society. Bishops and heads of monasteries acted not only as church authorities, but with power beyond church walls, especially with the threat of the Inquisition at their disposal (pp. 164-66). The Inquisition was an ecclesiastical court determined to keep doctrines pure and people obedient to rules. (These days the Inquisition is remembered as a dark chapter in the history of the church, like the Crusades.) When the plague comes, the regional bishop,

used to the good life (68), abandons his flock. "'The Bishop has retired to his estate in the countryside, to wait out the Pestilence… He will send out his prayer from there" (89). The Abbot, though not an unkind man, becomes seduced with the prospect of fame, and after his death the Prior has an opportunity to exercise his personal greed power.

But the book also lets us see the good side of church. Patience, courage and faith in the face of danger and uncertainty. "In this time of Pestilence, His Holiness Pope Clement has ordered those of us in the religious life to go out among the people in devout processions" (89). But many did more than that. Many monks and nuns diligently looked after the sick at the risk of their own lives. These days the Church is easily criticized for its many failings. It often sought power instead of service, forced faith instead of inviting it, amassing wealth instead of sharing. But often forgotten is its positive contributions. For many centuries it only provided medical are, in hospitals and hospices. And hospitality for wanderers and travelers. Education for the young. Brother Bart seems to have been especially the face of Jesus, as he cares for his pupils, even Micah. Bart understand that this difficult boy has goodness in him, and understanding. The book never gives us Micah's thoughts, only his words and actions (someadmirable, some not so). Readers are invited to infer these. For instance, "I saw Micah looking at boys our age, dressed in rags, the way he had been when he first came to the abbey. I could not tell what he was thinking. I never remembered to ask him" (70). And when Micah has become a greedy and an exploiter of his voice and presence in the lives of suffering people, "Then I did something I never, ever imagined I would do. I punched Micah right in the nose. I'll never understand why he didn't punch me back" (151). So why didn't he? (Note that in this section of greed and exploitation there are no references to God as graceful presence in the lives of people!)

The book tells us that awareness of God was part of the daily lives of people. Just a few starter examples.

"Heaven be praised" (15).

"In the cathedral, you'll be singing to please God…" (24).

"…I was terrified that God would strike him down…" (26). (see also pp. 36-7, 41, 45, 47, 55, 57, etc.)

But then God seems to have been both a loving presence, but also a scary one, a god who needed to be pacified with gifts of money and goods . As many writers have taught us, the God of the Middle Ages was above all a stern judge, who demanded strict obedience, also to the Church and its rulers. Clergy (priests, monks and nuns) were the first layer of "holiness", a wall with on the one side God and the angels, and on the other the people in their miserable circumstances, full of sins and ignorance, and the various forms of clergy acting as doors to let grace and judgment in, and required confessions and sacrifices out. Hence the many "hours" of prayer and song, and the boys' choir. Notice also references to the "labyrinth" (54), a pattern on the floor of a church, chapel, or monastery garden, an opportunity for people to walk it while in contemplation. (Some Christians in some places still use this invitation to have the mind focused on God.)

The final page points us to a profound truth (and we don't need to know for sure whether the author shares our convictions). It is the truth of the Kingdom of God ("life as it should be"), a Kingdom both here ("near us" or "among you" see Luke 10:9), as well as coming. "I feel certain, too, as I write, that the world has learned a great lesson from the Plague. Having seen so much suffering, we will never again cause others to suffer. We will not let people go hungry when there is food to be had. We will not let people be cold when we have means to build shelter. We will talk to each other, and learn from each other, and never again will we kill each other in wars. We have seen enough death" (183). These are the words of Henry, the narrator, who has learned all that and who feels part of the Kingdom Jesus came to preach and establish. But these words are also a call to (spiritual) arms for all his readers us.

Hatchet

By Gary Paulsen

Published by Scholastic, 1999

Synopsis

13-year-old Brian Robeson is underway to his Canadian Oil patch working Dad, in a single engine plane. He carries a secret, one which not even his dad knows, namely that his Mom had an affair which led to the divorce that separated his parents, and caused Brian to move from one to another.

The pilot suffers a fatal hard attack, and the plane goes down in the wilderness, with Brian surviving the crash. All he has is a hatchet, one his Mom had bought for him at the last moment (and it made Brian feel a bit foolish at the time). But the hatchet proves to be the instrument of his survival. He has lake water to drink. But he also needs fire, and he finally figures out how his hatchet can help him get warm and dry, as well as shelter. His initial food is berries, and then turtle eggs, but with the help of his hatchet he manages to corral fish, then catch birds, and also jack rabbits. He learns not to be attacked by bears and wolves, although a crazed moose doesn't seem to like him much.

A tornado rips through his "territory", and it bares the plane's tail, and that enables Brian to hatchet his way towards the survival pack, which provides him with luxuries. One of those is an emergency beacon signal which alerts a pilot, who lands on the lake and rescues him.

Potential

What makes this survival story interesting is the portrayal of a human being as if he is Adam and Eve, the biblical first people. This novel could be read as an anthropological portrayal, a picture of what it is to be human. The author doesn't include in his "painting" of Brian much thought of God. Nevertheless, Christian readers could fill in some of the faith blanks as they read (and discuss).

When he finds himself alone in the wilderness ("the garden") he must learn how to care for himself. He must find water, food, and shelter, things that until now had been provided for him. (Genesis: plants and fruits to eat.)

He soon discovers that life isn't peaches and cream as portrayed on TV (38, 49) and in movies (44, 47). An experienced teacher recently told us that these days US and Canadian children seem to be bathed in "positives", with the ugly and brutal sides of life hidden from them. This book is an antidote to that poison. (Genesis: thorns and thistles abound, and sweat to produce bread.)

But for Brian to succeed he must retain hope. For Christians hope resides in the faith that God only wishes good for his creatures. Hope is embodied in the notion of the Kingdom of God, the central message of Jesus according to Mark (1:14-5). The Kingdom of God is life as it should be, as compared to life as it is. Hope does not drown in "as it is".

Paulsen does not use Christian terms, but the book could be read as his language implying it. Take, for instance, the brief discussion of "luck" (40- also 58). But luck needs a companion, namely hope. Paulsen's hope gets expressed in Brian counting his major asset, the advice one of his teachers kept repeating: "You are the most valuable asset. Don't forget that. *You* are the best thing you have (50-1). But where does that asset come from, if not from having been created by God with gifts and a task?

The gifts unfold as Brian slowly but surely learns to survive in this "garden." God having created us "in his image" invites us to be creative. As Brian demonstrates step by step. Bit by bit he gains dominion.

But the “garden” is not without “thorns and thistles.” When a search plane flies overhead without spotting him (117) Brian is ready to abandon all hope (122). But then the sun comes up (123), that beacon of hope and life in the sky, that evidence of God’s faithfulness, and he regains hope. “But hope in his knowledge. Hope in the fact that he could learn and survive and take care of himself. Tough hope, he thought that night. I am full of tough hope” (127).

Men and women do not live by bread alone. The author also pays attention to the mysteries that are part of human life. For instance, page 120: “Something came inside and stopped him” when he would have run into a mother bear and her cubs. (What is that ‘something’? God’s providence? Already on p. 83 his dreams turn out to be some sort of revelation. (In the Old Testament, as well as in the experiences of people today, God often comes to people in dreams!) Moreover, “so much of [human life is] patience – waiting and thinking and doing things right” (145). And even though there has not been an overt word of Christian faith in the book thus far, on p. 156 we find this about our character: “he couldn’t think, just held and knew that he was praying but didn’t know what the prayer was – knew that he wanted to be, stay and be…” (see also 159 – “didn’t know any religious words” …but nevertheless!)

And finally, including in the more than bread alone is the human capacity to appreciate 9and create!) beauty- see page 170.

An author we know wrote this about reading novels.

There is stuff the characters know.

There is stuff the author knows (more than the characters).

There is stuff the reader knows (more than the characters and the author).

This book demonstrates that theory very well.

(Paulson wrote a sequel of sorts, called **Brian’s Winter**. It is an alternate “ending,” Brian not being rescued before the winter, but having to learn how to survive it. I good story, but it doesn’t add anything to what **Hatchet** gives us.)

Sadako and the thousand Paper Cranes

By Eleanor Coerr

Published by Puffin, 1997

Synopsis

A very simple story. Sadako was born at Hiroshima shortly before the 1945 atomic bomb was dropped on the city, destroying all of it, killing thousands, and injuring almost all of the other citizens, most of them fatally. Sadako is one of those. It took many years for the radiation poison to become evident, but this active and gifted (running) girl did become sick with Leukemia. And in the end she dies.

Potential

The book's emphasis is on the Japanese legend, namely that when you craft 1000 paper cranes you will live (34-5). That task, and the belief in the legend, keeps Sadako, her friends and also her family, going, and soon many hands craft paper cranes.

But that legend is only a symbol for the hope that sustains Sadoka, and all those who love her, right until the end. Which raises this question: "How do Christians deal with the prospect of a disease, especially a fatal one, especially of a young, active and gifted person. What is our hope in those circumstances? Food for thought and conversation!

The book also portrays Sadako's family as one in which love and support are on top of the family list. Right up to the end. A model for us all. And Sadako also has the support of many friends, even pen pals. They all pitch in to make paper cranes, racing against time as it were.

The other issue the book raises is that of the use of the atomic bomb in the war against Japan in 1945. Defenders claim that the use of it shortened World War II and saved many lives of allied soldiers. But given the aftermath for many years, will that argument hold?

Thiis book is based on a true story, and a book about Sadako published in Japan. Sadako became an admired person in Japan. So one more question: what in Sadako is there to admire?

ISLAND OF THE BLUE DOLPHINS

By Scott O'Dell.

Published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (1960, 1988)

Synopsis

Karana lives alone on (what is now called) San Nicolas Island, a piece of rock well off the coast of California. Once her tribe lived with her, but when an opportunity arose, her people decided to look for a better place. Karana was accidentally left behind, and now she has to survive on her own. For years she does, making a life for herself using the island's resources of food, and materials for clothing and shelter. She even has a wild dog pet. But when at long last she is invited to leave the island, she does so as well.

Potential

This award winning novel (Newbery Medal winner, 1961) may be read as an exploration of what it is to be a human being. For Christians such an exploration can never be done apart from what Scriptures tell us about the human condition. Even though this author does not explicitly forge any link with the Christian tradition, and the lonely island woman would not have heard about the Christian faith, the book provides links nevertheless.

"No man (*human being)* is an island," so said poet John Donne. Okay, so says Scott O'Dell, let us see whether that is true.

Had Karana been born and abandoned shortly after she would have surely died. Why? Because human beings are born helpless, and in need of constant care. They cannot provide their own food, clothing and shelter, the latter two protection against crippling cold and stifling heat. In due time they have to learn to walk and talk, and with those skills master other skills that will make them fully contributing members of their communities. Their initial needs (food, clothing and shelter) are met by families, who in turn are supported by communities (tribes, bands). Genesis 2 captures this communal nature of being human in God saying, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." (2:18). (This text does not need to be interpreted as pointing to marriage only.)

So long before Karana is on her own, she has already learned many practical skills from her parents and others. And she is not a dreamer like her brother Ramo. "While you gaze at the sea," she tells him, "I dig roots. And it is I who will eat them and you who will not." (2).

Even this early page invites another look at Genesis 1, one of the two biblical creation stories. First, in it we are told that we human beings have been provided with the necessities of life, with sun and moon, water and earth, plants and animals (those who walk, crawl, swim and fly). All of those play vital roles in Karana's life on the island. That chapter also tells us that human beings may freely use these gifts ("have dominion"), but having received them (and not created them ourselves), we must not abuse them. And the whole of it is good, and as for being human, it is very good.

Genesis is not the only source for creation stories. Many cultures have them, and in Karana's memory resides one. But the Genesis 1 and 2 stories (two varied creation accounts) differ from many other which have violence at creation beginnings. On p. 71 we find an example, of two gods quarreling (see also p. 98) and parting ways, each now dominating a separate territory, the one the world of the living, the other the world of the dead. But the Genesis stories are not about violence and gods quarreling, but about God bringing order to chaos, and goodness.

However lonely and isolated Karana may have been, she does break through the barriers that may have kept her tribe's women less than fully free. She has to do a lot of "men's" work, most of all using a weapon (52). Her ("religious?) barrier must be broken through or she will not survive.

Goodness is captured regularly in this book. Ramo may be a dreamer, but in his dreaming he reflects the goodness God created. "But Ramo's eyes missed little in the world." (2). In other words, he is full of appreciation…and of play. "My brother likes to pretend that one thing was another (i.e. metaphors)."

Pp. 72ff. give us Karana hard at work making a life for herself after her tribe has left the island, using all that she has learned from others, for instance her sister (73), and using her creative intelligence. However, she comes across something her ancestors had left her, namely, art! (p. 85). Amongst others, art is a way of expressing gratitude for the gifts God gave us, a way if echoing "it is good." It takes Karana a little longer to perhaps her brother the dreamer to learn this, but learning it she does. Her cormorant dress is more than useful, and so are her earrings, which are "very pretty" (130-1, and 144). She even makes a flower wreath around his neck (111).

The point is also made in her relationship with her dog Rontu. She doesn't kill him when she has a change, but nurtures him back to health after exercising her "dominion." (90 ff.) She learns to live in peace with this former enemy. If she can't have human beings as companion, she can at least have this dog. "I did not know how lonely I had been until I had Rontu to talk to" (97). And she tames some birds (110), and gives them names (an "Adam" task).

Language is so important to human beings. Pp. 131 ff. give us the story of a visiting girl Tutok, and their efforts to bridge their language gap. These pages also prepare readers to realize that when the time and opportunity will come Karana's way, she will leave the island and join a human community. Having (re-)learned about human community, she now longs for it (138-140, also 171 ff.).

ONION JOHN

By Joseph Krumgold.

Published by HarperTrophy, 184 (1959).

Synopsis

Caveat: As many other books written decades ago, its style makes for excellent reading aloud, but may strike today's kids as a little slow in development.

Andy Rush is a twelve year son of the local hardware store owner. A typical small town boy, living in a town called Serenity. He goes to school, plays baseball (well), has friends, is well looked after by his parents, and even works at his Dad's store off and on. However, he is not so typical in his range of friends. For his includes the town eccentric. Onion John lives of what he grows in his small piece of land, off the town dump that provides him with the materials and furniture for his self-built home, and he earns cash with the odd low-paying jobs that come his way. He doesn't speak English, but when Andy begins to spend time with him, the boy gets to understand Onion John (who grows beautiful onions, and eats them others eat apples - 25). Andy understands the man, and also appreciate his strange, mysterious ways, the way he sees spirits everywhere for instance (e.g. 28).

When Andy's Dad learns about his son's "success" with Onion John, he jumps into a helping mode. Onion John deserves better than living in a "dump," and so Dad persuades the local service club to build Onion John a new and comfortable home, with modern appliances. The whole town gets involved, and the day the house keys are handed to the eccentric becomes a town holiday and festival. But all is not well, for Onion John does not seem overly happy with his new home. And then the new home catches fire and is destroyed, and while Onion John is not hurt badly, he disappears. It appears that the town's good deed has unforeseen and not so happy consequences.

Potential

So what is the problem? Why is Onion John not happy with the changes the town makes in his life? Are the people not generous? Do they not have his welfare in mind? Is Onion John simply ungrateful for all the good deeds that come his way?

Many good deeds. It begins with Andy's making every attempt to understand Onion John's language (22) and enter into John's strange world. Listening to other people, really listening, takes more than having ears that work well. Real listening takes love and respect for the speaker, a willingness to make an effort to really hear what the speaker is saying, the words and the intention. As Andy explains to his Dad, "We've just gotten to be friends. And it would make him happy" (36). Dad has his doubts about the "it", which to him sounds like magic. He'd rather stick to facts, for instance about new ways of making rain (38ff.) based on logic and science. But when the boy presses his Dad, Dad admits, "Well, I don't know if [scientists] can ever be absolutely sure." That's enough for Andy to conclude that "there could be as much coincidence to it as with Onion John, hanging rocks up for his apples." (39-40).However, Andy does not want to argue with his Dad. "But I saw …that the best way to handle any questions about Onion John, with my father, was not to talk about it. And it worked out all right, handling it that way, for a while." (60).

But Onion John remains a valued presence in Andy's life, and to a lesser extent, in the lives of Andy's friends. Sooner or later Dad will get drawn into Onion John's life as well. The turning point comes when Dad visits Onion John on Hessian Hill (86), and discovers how that man has built a home for himself. Not a home the town's people are used to. So Dad, full of good will towards that man, sets a plan in motion, to have Onion John live in a "decent home," just like all the town's people do. Onion John becomes a

town's project. As Dad tells Andy, "we can bring John up, to where we live today" (93). (Just like the organization "Habitat for Humanity" building a home for folks that could never afford a home of their own without such help. Edmonton has an active group that gets into the news off and on.) To live like Onion John lives now is "not proper, or right, or civilized" (104).

But here is the problem, first voiced by Ernie Miller, the editor of the local newspaper. "Ernie though that Onion John, so far as anyone could see, was pretty happy as he was….The new house would mean a different way of going at things, for Onion John, and Ernie didn't know how good that was" (95). The town's good intentions are not taking into account Onion John's wishes for himself. Warning signs go up during the construction of his new home. Onion John wants to keep his wood stove and his four bathtubs (used as closets), but these don't fit into a modern town home. (102-3) Nor do his objections fit "the schedule" (114) and "the program" (113). But Dad is undeterred. "Once he starts living differently, you can never tell. He might end up a completely different kind of human being, Onion John" (119). The strange man does his best, in response to the town's kindness. "I think he's trying to act like everyone else. The way we want him to. Just to please us" (118). But as the story unfolds, we discover: Onion John cannot ever become a folk like all the others in town.

The story points to a dilemma Christians face when encountering people who live differently. Often the impulse is to make over the "stranger." As the story goes, a group of typical middle-class women became active in addressing the needs of folks living in a run-down area of a major US city. One young single mom living in poverty became a special "project." In spite of all the good deeds showered on this woman, she refused all invitations to come to church on Sundays. Finally one of the helping women asked her why she didn't want to come. "Because every time you visit you clean up my house," the single mom said.

Loving one's neighbor includes lending a helping hand. But the helping hand better not be an implicit or explicit rebuke for the different way that neighbor may live his or her life. Or change his name (131). For then "There's no telling how he'll end up" (131, 135). Yet, Onion John received "warm hearted good will and the generosity of the town of Serenity" (144).

It is one thing to urge a sinner to "sin no more" (as Jesus did with folks like the woman who drenched his feet in tears (Luke 7), and with tax collectors Zacchaeus (Luke 19) and Levi (Matthew – Mark 2 and Luke 5). Even Jesus urged in kindly and forebearing manner. But Onion John does not live a life of sin – he is simply different, coming from a different culture, with a different language, and he harms no one. On the contrary, he has added spark to the life of Andy and his friend.

Loving your neighbor does not mean making over his or her life. It means respecting differences and valuing "other." Not easy to do in practice. It is easier to rank other people along some value line. Some of us are smarter, richer, better looking, stronger, more athletic, more popular, than others. But when it comes to "loving our neighbour as we love ourself," none of that matters. The other may well have strange ideas, be irritating even, but when it comes to publicly treating him or her, he or she is equal. Equal before the law. Equal when he or she needs help. And why6? Because of God who created human beings in his image. We may never settle on what, precisely, that means. But one conclusion seems absolute: every human being is equal in God's eyes, equally loved and cherished.

The town tried its best, but in the end it drove Onion John away, for Onion John wasn't consider of equal value. The town lost by letting him go (247). (But will he be gone forever (248)?

This book's respect motif is re-inforced by the changing relationship between Andy and his Dad. His Dad dreams that his son may one day achieve what he had not been able to, become an engineer and build a more interesting future. Andy is torn between the love for his Dad, and his need to make decisions for himself.

The Summer of the Swans

By Betsy Byars

Published by Puffin Books, 1996 (1970)

Synopsis

Sara is 14 years old, and she lives with Aunt Willy, older sister Wanda, and younger brother Charlie. Mom died many years ago, and Dad works away from home but even back on weekends is not much of a Dad. Charlie is mentally handicapped because of an illness that affected his brain at age , and he doesn't talk. This is the summer of Sara not feeling very good about herself. She's not as pretty, smart, or popular as everyone else. But she looks after Charlie as best she can, and with him enjoys looking at the swans in a nearby pond. And then Charlie gets up in the middle of one night and wanders away. He falls down a ravine, and is lost for many hours, until Sara finds him.

Potential

Is Sara part of a family? On the one hand, the answer is yes, for every one in it is blood related to the others, and they all live under one roof. On the other, the author portrays each one as living in his or her own world. They each have their own agenda and focus, and see the others more as a hindrance to their own lives than a part of themselves.

Aunt Willy has many rules, and is devoted to her favourite TV programs (and postpones sewing a button on Charlie's pajamas - 44). "Only one thing more imore important than Charlie. Only one thing – that debil television there" (64).

Sara's attention is almost totally on herself (39), and on the orange tennis shoes that should be puce (44). But she does care for Charlie (9-10), and she loves watching the swans with him (12, 30ff).

Wanda is focused on boyfriend Frank, who (so Sara notices) isn't the least bit interested in Charlie, and who treats Wanda like a doll toy (37).

Dad is away, and even when he's home he is away. Mind you, he has had a hard life (70 and 75).

Also part of the mix is Sara's dislike of Joe Melby (who she thinks once stole Charlie's watch). Sara broods about revenge (68 and 86), is not able to forgive, and doesn't even want to hear any defense of Joe, or entertain the possibility that he may not have been a thief.

But then a crisis occurs, when Charlie wanders off and is missing for a day and night. The crisis has a profound effect on the members of this disjointed famil of individuals each living in their own world. Especially on Sara.On her way back home, having found Charlie, "Sara could not understand why she suddenly felt so good" (119). Perhaps we readers can. We remember the parable of Jesus whose shepherd found a lost sheep. And of the widow who found a lost coin. We human beings were created as part of community, and when we are part of restoring a cracked community, we feel happy. On the whole people love caring for others, for we are created to be our brother's and sister's keeper. "She had wanted to fly away from everything, like the swans to a new lake, and now she didn't want that anymore." She is also ready to forgive Joe Melby, and apologize for thinking badly about him. Aunt Willy realizes how much she loves Charlie, and Sara, and Wanda. And Dad tells Sara that he would have come had Charlie not been found (128). The family is being glued together.

Philip Hall Likes Me. I Reckon Maybe

By Bette Greene

Published by Puffin, 1999 (1974)

Synopsis

Beth Lambert is growing up, and we follow her for a whole year. She is smart, accomplished, member of the loving Lambert family growing up in the country with animals and friends. She loves her schoolmate Philip Hall who has his own friends, and the two of them compete in almost everything. At first Philip wins most of the time, but gradually Beth comes in first, sometimes with the help of her girlfriends. Gradually, she learns also that sometimes besting others can jeopardize valued friendships.

Potential

There is a lot to like about this book.

Dialect books are usually fun to read aloud, for they bring to mind the pleasure and power of language, a pleasure and power we too often take for granted.

The simple story is mostly about growing up and discovering who you are. Beth is so fortunate, as she is member of a loving family (relatively money poor though the Lamberts may be). Beth also has friends – which include even the boys that seem rivals so often. So she is given time to discover who she is within that framework of family love and community friendships. Family and community: two pillars of rich human life.

There is a lot to learn about life, and not all learning occurs in school. In the "turkey" chapter Beth becomes a "detective," trying out one hypothesis after another. Her older brother Luther helps her discover learning: "As [Luther] walked toward the pig pen, he called over his shoulder, 'When you is really old enough to know, you already will'" (23).

Life also offers disappointments, darker sides human being have to learn how to live with. Like Beth's allergy to all dogs. "In this life you got to be happy about the good things and brave about the bad ones." So says her mother (52).

This book portrays a family living with the ongoing presence of God. They may be simple (un-learned) members of a simple rural church, but God is around all the time. Here are some examples.

Ma tells Beth, "The Lord Jesus has [ambition] aplenty" (57). (But is that true? What could Ma have meant by that? Could it be working for the Kingdom of God on earth?

Several times the characters refer to God-given abilities. "Ain't no hawk with the sense God gave him gonna mess around with no twenty-pound turkey" says Pa (18). "…when the good Lord was passing out brains…" (58). "…one of God's own revelations!" (82). "…God's own soldiers against the world's injustices…" (85). "…Jesus is a-listening… " 96).

Most of these observations (there are more – worth drawing attention to) link to Creation, something the family seems well aware of. Not Creation as events in time and space, but Creation as gifts of God. Beth observes, "…you is the prettiest thing since the dawning of creation" (58). Whatever Anne is, God gave it to her. On p. 91 the though is repeated in "…[Anne] happens to be the prettiest thing since Salome…" (91). (Salome, the daughter of Herod who danced for the head of John the Baptist – Matthew 14:6)

Worth also to look up the words to the hymn "The Old Rugged Cross", the name of their church. A hymn fallen out of favour perhaps, but long a favourite.

But the presence of God is more than words. It is expressed in the last words of Beth. [Contests] (life!) "is for partners. Win or lose together" (135). Linking to Hebrews 12:1-4, about Christian life being a race, but not a race to best others but to please God.

Both of us grew up in families who, when making plans, short-term or long-term, would add something like, "God willing" or its Latin version *Deo Volente*. They were taught, amongst others, by the parable of Jesus about the farmer who finished building a bigger barn to host his riches, only to die that night.

The following book is not yet in our HTAC library. An excellent choice for our purposes, however.

Nightjohn

By Gary Paulsen

Published by Bantam Doubleday Bell, 1993

Synopsis

Sarny is a slave girl, whose birth mother (a "breeder") has been sold long ago but whose plantation assigned "mammy" looks after her as best she can under dire circumstances. One day a new slave arrives, an expensive one with many scar stripes on his back, evidence of whippings. He brings a gift: he knows how to read and write, and is willing to teach other slaves. Sarny learns that he had successfully escaped from slavery, but had let himself be re-captured so that (at night) he can teach other slaves to read and write, for knowledge gives power, the power to resist and escape.

Potential

Gary Paulsen is one tough writer. He never guilds any lily he chooses to pick. His description of slavery conditions in this novel unpacks any romantic notion we may have had of "good masters." The dedication hammers the point: by all accounts first US president Thomas Jefferson was a reasonable master of his slaves, but Paulsen deliberately employs *used* to describe the slave woman with whom he father a child.

So why use this book? First, it is a wonderful read-aloud in the hands of a skilled reader. Unusual rhythms. "It happened. How it came to be was that Nightjohn he came and it wasn't me, wasn't nobody one or the other brought him except maybe it was that God did it, made Nightjohn to come." (14)

Was it God who "did it?" Then he came in the person of a slave who laid down his life for others, and used his gift (of reading and writing) in the service of others. That would already be enough to have this book speak to Christians.

But there is more. By the end of this book Sarny hasn't even learned the whole alphabet, and other slaves are trailing her own mastery. But there is hope here. In small beginnings, but Christian life is full of small beginnings, hope never dying even though sin and circumstances dim the sight of the Kingdom of God.

We are reminded if at least two examples of hope in small packages.

In 1 Kings 19 Elijah, after a rather triumphant besting of false prophets, feels the wrath of Queen Jezebel. "he asked that he might die" (4-5), but the Lord won't let him. He has more work to do, and thre Lord needs to talk to him about it. But the Lord is not in a great wind, an earthquake and a fire (in the spectacular, so to speak) , but in "a sound of sheer silence" (wonder translation in the New Revised Standard Version!). That silence is the sign of hope, for the Lord will speak.

And in Jeremiah 1 the Lord asks the prophet, "Jeremiah, what do you see?" And the prophet responds: 'I see a branch of an almond tree." A sign of hope. In Israel the almond tree was the first tree to blossom in Spring. Simple white blossoms, easily damaged by night frost. But a herald of spring, and other

blossoms. Even though (as the rest of the chapter makes clear) destroyers will come from the north of Israel to wreak havoc.

But why would learning a few letters of the alphabet be a sign of hope? As Nightjohn says: “Cause to know things, for us to know things, is bad for them. We get to wanting and when we get to wanting it’s bad for them. They thinks we want what they got.” (Note: it’s not that slaves actually want “what they got” but that the slave owners think so. The real reason is found on p. 58.)

Hebrews chapter 11 is also relevant, especially verse 32 ff. which talks about those “of whom the world was not worthy”.