Exploring the Unfamiliar Realm of Religion in Young Adult Literature

Julie Berry. *The Passion of Dolssa.* New York: Viking Books for Young Readers, 2016. 496 pp. Hardcover: $18.99. ISBN: 978-0-451-46992-2.

Jeff Zentner. *The Serpent King.* New York: Crown Books for Young Readers, 2016. 384 pp. Hardcover: $17.99. ISBN: 978-0-553-52402-4.

Reviewed by Jon Ostenson

Modern young adult literature traces its roots to 1967, when S. E. Hinton's book *The Outsiders* was published and subsequently devoured by young readers who were desperate for literature that spoke to them and reflected the realities they saw daily. In the ensuing years, young adult literature has bravely explored controversial topics like class struggle, mental illnesses, drug abuse, and sexuality, all in the name of allowing teen readers a chance to explore the "real" world. One element of teens' lives, however, that has often been overlooked in the literature is religion and spirituality. Despite the results of the recent National Study of Youth and Religion showing that nearly forty percent of teens report actively participating in organized religion, religious characters and explorations of spirituality are rarely treated in young adult literature.

The two titles I review here, *The Passion of Dolssa* by Julie Berry and *The Serpent King* by Jeff Zentner, counter this trend, presenting characters who wrestle with issues of faith and belief as they navigate the challenges of their world. Both titles examine the potential for abuse of authority in organized religion. Both titles feature protagonists struggling to come to terms with the connection between belief and signs of God's approbation or a plan that he has for us. And both, I would

argue, raise broader questions about the role that portrayals of religion and faith should play in literature written for teenagers.

The Passion of Dolssa takes readers back to the time of the Inquisition, when the Catholic Church attempted to enforce orthodoxy through violence. We spend most of the book inside the perspective of Botille, one of three sisters who make their living brewing ale, telling fortunes, and matching up eligible singles in their small village in southern France. Their lives are disrupted when Botille rescues a nearly dead young woman whom the sisters nurse back to health; they soon learn that they've brought in a heretic, a mystic named Dolssa who is wanted by the Inquisition. The sisters' efforts to shield her identity are foiled when she performs several miraculous healings in the village and her fame spreads across the countryside. A showdown between the clergy, intent on eradicating the heresy Dolssa has spread, and the villagers, cowed by the Church but in awe of this young lady's devotion and power, thrusts the sisters into the limelight of an official trial whose outcome serves as the climax of the book.

Based on the mystics of the medieval era, Dolssa proves to be a means for exploring matters of religious belief and the way those beliefs influence life. In intercalary chapters inserted between those written from Botille's point of view, we learn more about Dolssa, a young woman with unwavering faith in Jesus, a man she calls her "beloved" and for whom she feels as a woman might for her love. As the narrative unfolds, this relationship becomes more complicated as Dolssa experiences doubts about her beloved when she finds that, after barely escaping a fiery punishment for her alleged heresies, he ceases speaking to her. Rescued from death by Botille, she must exercise faith and patience before he returns to her, as evidenced in the miracles she begins to perform among the villagers.

Likewise, Botille struggles to understand the nature of Dolssa's faith and the signs that follow her. Not a strictly observant believer, Botille nevertheless has a reverence for spiritual things, and it's this reverence that encourages her loyalty to Dolssa, despite the consequences that are sure to come her way. It's through her eyes that we question the true

nature of spirituality and belief, and how that belief should inform our lives. Berry contrasts the simple, abiding faith in Jesus displayed by Dolssa, and her consequent compassion for those in the village, with the authoritarian, obsessive devotion to orthodoxy of the Catholic clergy and the violence they bring.

Berry's use of the word "passion" in the book's title is fitting. The most obvious connection is to the passion of Christ, a parallel evoked by Dolssa's unswerving devotion to Jesus and the sacrifice she makes at the book's climax. Her story introduces readers to a medieval world where women, shut out from the patriarchy of the Church but desperate to have a relationship with Jesus, framed that relationship in the language of love and marital union. But passion is also central for Botille and her sisters, in the form of fierce sibling affection that unites them in their struggles against a world that first seeks to thwart them for being women and then to demonize them for being caring and compassionate to Dolssa. And this is all contrasted with the Dominican friar who relentlessly pursues Dolssa in the name of the Church and doctrinal purity. Love and loyalty, whether to God or to an ideology or to one's neighbor, are the threads that Berry weaves expertly throughout the novel. Although its events are hundreds of years in the past, the emotional conflicts and spiritual questions of this book will be recognizable to today's young readers, and especially so for those who see themselves as believers.

The setting for Zentner's book draws from the more contemporary snake-handling tradition of certain Pentecostal groups in the southern regions of the United States. In *The Serpent King,* Dillard (Dill) Early, son of the pastor of a "signs church" in rural Tennessee, begins questioning his faith when he finds one Sunday that he cannot bring himself to handle a poisonous snake. Shortly after this failure to demonstrate his belief, Dill's father is arrested for possession of child pornography and, as the book opens, is incarcerated after Dill refuses to lie in court and say that the images were his. At the start of his senior year in high school, Dill finds himself alienated from his church, struggling with his relationship with his parents, and able to count on only two friends,

Lydia, a fashion blogger who is desperate to escape their small town, and Travis, himself a misfit who finds escape in a series of fantasy books.

Doubts and fears haunt Dill throughout the pages of the book. He dislikes visiting his father in prison but does so out of a sense of biblical duty; the visits are dominated by his dad's attempts to alternatively manipulate Dill into pursuing the "signs ministry" and stoke Dill's guilt at playing a role in his incarceration. At home, Dill feels torn between familial duty (his mother wants him to drop out of high school and work full-time to help with their legal fees) and his own growing desire to seek out a different, better future away from their small town and out from under the shadow of his father's scandals. But his greatest fears center around Lydia, whose eagerness to leave behind their small town for the chic world of fashion in New York City post-graduation leaves Dill feeling hurt and betrayed.

Told in chapters that shift between Dill's, Lydia's, and Travis's perspectives, the first half of the book centers primarily on Dill and Lydia's relationship. Dill struggles to accept a potential future without Lydia, and she struggles to understand Dill's conflicted feelings about leaving their small town; both aren't sure how to deal with their growing romantic attraction. Zentner compassionately and authentically portrays these teens, and the alternating chapters told in third person give us sympathetic insights into their thoughts and feelings. All three seek escape from their seemingly bleak present: Dill through writing music (a talent that he originally honed in the signs church but is now turning to as a way of dealing with his complicated feelings about Lydia), Lydia through her blog and her applications to colleges, and Travis through an online community attached to the fantasy books he loves. But a startling tragedy that affects all three forces Dill and Lydia in particular to confront the realities of the present.

In spite of his parents' devotion to the ministry, Dill finds little solace in his belief in God, nor does he actively seek God's help in his struggles, except when he prays for calm nerves before performing in a school talent show. Dill's answers to his doubts instead are found in his growing self-confidence from the positive response to his music on

YouTube and in the glimpse of a possible future he gains from applying for college, counter to his parents' selfish objections. Dill's story is one that can inspire young readers who feel plagued by insecurity about the future—a common theme of fiction written for this audience.

Dill's distancing himself from religion and spirituality are not surprising given how foreign the practices of snake handling and drinking poison seem and how his parents use religion as a weapon to guilt Dill into compliance. Yet I can't help feeling that Zentner could have done more here with Dill and his search for answers. I wonder if Dill could have struck out more purposefully and sought God in his own way? Could he, for example, have seen the commandment to honor his parents in less black-and-white terms and reconciled his choices with God's commandment? Could the other adults in Dill's life have encouraged him to find meaning in faith outside the rigid, unforgiving views of his parents? In the novel, Dill often refers to the pithy quotes ("No Jesus, No Peace. Know Jesus, Know Peace.") on the sign of the local Baptist church; the limited depth of what can be posted on a church marquee seems at times to mirror the shallowness of Dill's forays into a meaningful encounter with God. In his bittersweet and moving final confrontation with his mother, Dill claims to have learned important truths about God and his plan, but readers don't get to see Dill's struggle to reach those truths.

Perhaps the betrayal Dill has experienced is too great for this to happen. And my quibble here might place an unfair burden on an author who wants to stay true to his characters. It certainly should not take anything away from the rich characters that Zentner has created, nor from the authenticity with which he portrays characters like Dill, especially, and the complicated tension he feels between a future outside the influence of his father and the love and sense of duty he feels toward his mother. These are characters who have stayed with me after I finished the book and who, I suspect, will continue to provoke my thoughts for a while.

Incorporating religion and faith into books for a teenage audience, typically viewed as vulnerable, is a fraught endeavor. Authors who seek to explore these issues must do so in authentic ways that honor both

the passion that religion can evoke and the rights of readers to not be preached to. Regardless of the challenge, it does seem clear that authors owe it to young readers to broach what might be a sensitive topic in the name of portraying reality. Julie Berry and Jeff Zentner have ably and courageously done so in these books, and readers will find themselves in richly imagined and finely drawn worlds of authentic characters encountering thought-provoking dilemmas.

It is worth noting that here are two LDS authors who do not write about their own religious tradition, even though they write of struggles and crises that are real for LDS faithful, too. Writing about a minority faith could limit the appeal of these books, or it may be that Berry and Zentner don't want to be seen as proselyting for or being critical of their own faith. Patty Campbell, a scholar of religion in young adult literature, has suggested that these concerns often limit the presence of religion in books for a younger audience. In her work, she has also called for more work from writers with "religious literacy" who understand intimately the ways that young people wrestle with issues of faith and who can portray these honestly and sensitively. In the case of Julie Berry and Jeff Zentner, we have two writers who answer Campbell's call admirably and two characters in Botille and Dill who will resonate with readers young and old.

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Just Saying

Stanton Harris Hall. *Just Seeing.* Self-published, 2016. 109 pp.

Reviewed by Mary Lythgoe Bradford

Stan Hall was one of *Dialogue*'s most enthusiastic volunteers back in the '70s when I was its editor. We published some of his poetry then and were sorry when he moved back to his home turf in the Northwest. I