

Faith in Reading

by Megan Lambert

As a calico-clad five-year-old, wearing a rose-colored number I referred to as my “Laura Ingalls dress,” I entered my parochial school kindergarten classroom fairly bursting with pride at going to a real school. Along with my metal Holly Hobbie lunchbox and a

sharpened pencil emblazoned with my name, I had insisted on bringing a book from home because I thought one was *supposed* to bring books to school. Little did I know I’d end up feeling less like Laura Ingalls and more like Scout Finch.

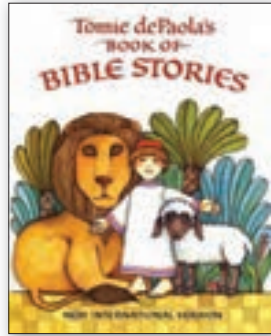
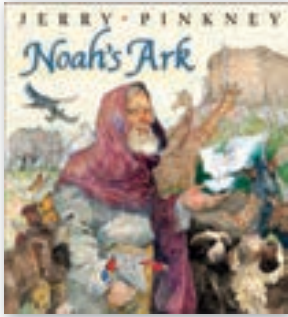
“Until I feared I would lose it, I never loved to read. One does not love breathing,” says Scout, after her teacher forbids her from reading in school. That’s exactly how I felt when my kindergarten teacher (a kindred spirit to Roald Dahl’s Miss Trunchbull) told me I couldn’t read in her classroom because it would make the other children feel bad if I “showed off.” This seems to me now (as it did then) an untenable posi-

tion, and I doubt *Horn Book* readers fall into the Trunchbull camp. But I’d bet my childhood set of Little House books that many adults have had moments in their professional or personal lives when we’ve denied children access to books in one way or another.

Indeed, I need look no further than Little House to see how I’ve curbed my own children’s access to a particular set of stories that was a major presence in my childhood: books with overtly Christian content. When we started reading *Little House in the Big Woods*, I had some trepidation about the elements of glaring and subtle racism. I skipped over certain lines (an entire song Pa sings about a “darkey”



Megan Lambert is an instructor at Simmons College’s Center for the Study of Children’s Literature. For nearly ten years she also worked in the education department of the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art.



Little House in the Big Woods ended up including less discussion about my ideological quarrels and more about the responses the book provoked in my children about religion and God.

for example), augmented others, and paused throughout for my children's reactions. I had Michael Dorris's superb *Booklist* essay "Trusting the Words" (June, 1993) in mind as I recalled his decision to put the series back on the shelf when his daughters were ready to engage with it on their own terms. However, our own shared reading of

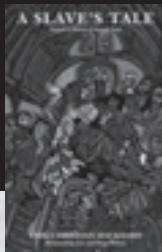
I'd forgotten just how godly the *Little House* books are, perhaps because their myriad references to the Bible, prayer, and so on, washed right over me in a childhood that included saying grace, going to church on Sundays, and praying every night. My children, in stark contrast, have not been raised within any organized religion, and my decision to leave the Church has resulted in what I

Classic Tales for Children and Young Adults

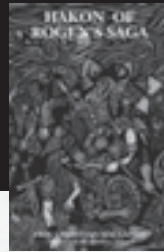


This delightfully illustrated book is the enchanting story of a dauntless Norwegian boy who goes skiing one day and has many unusual adventures before returning home.

From Erik Christian Haugaard, Illustrated by Leo and Diane Dillon

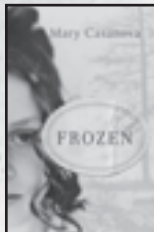


"An outstanding tale for older readers, with strength and poetry in its telling."
—*Chicago Tribune*



A widely acclaimed work of historical fiction.

From Mary Casanova



"A great story of self-discovery, family bonds, perceptions, and strength of character."
—*VOYA*



"A fast-paced adventure story."
—*School Library Journal*



The exciting, thought-provoking sequel to *Moose Tracks*.

University of Minnesota Press

Available at better bookstores or to order call 800-621-2736 | www.upress.umn.edu

MINNESOTA

now see as a conspicuously cross-shaped void in their lives.

At one mention of Ma reading from the Bible, for example, my eight-year-old daughter Emilia exclaimed, “We saw a Bible once!” It was as though she was saying, “We saw a kangaroo once!” Or a person playing the bagpipes, or a Venus flytrap, or some other rarity. We talked about what kinds of stories the Bible tells. I referenced the various Nativity books we read at Christmastime and feebly reminded them that Jerry Pinkney’s *Noah’s Ark* is based on a Bible story. I then thought of the McKissacks’ collaboration with James Ransome, *Let My People Go: Bible Stories Told by a Freeman of Color*, and Tomie dePaola’s *Book of Bible Stories*, and I pulled them off our home library shelves. Apparently, there is such a thing as having too many books—these were titles my kids had never looked at, and I hadn’t made them a priority to share.

I made a mental note to familiarize my oh-so-secular children with some of the stories I grew up with in my Catholic household, but I also knew that there was a major piece of Christianity I would struggle with: the Crucifixion. Above the altar of my childhood church was a bloodied Jesus wearing a crown of thorns and hanging on a cross. I remember staring at it as a little girl, horrified by Christ’s near nudity, by the nails I could plainly see through his hands and feet, and by the gash in his side. My horror grew to sheer terror when I really listened to the

scriptures and understood the story for the first time—that he was nearly nude because people took his clothing and divided it up; that he was killed by the government; that his mother was there to see it all; that it took hours for him to die in terrible pain and thirst. That year, and the next year, too, I fainted dead away in the pew as the priest read the story until, finally, my parents no longer made me attend that particular service.

I know picture books exist that deal with the Crucifixion (Gennady Spirin and Brian Wildsmith have published such titles with mainstream publishers, and Christian presses have many such offerings), but my children associate Easter with chocolate, bunnies, and the little springtime toys that typically fill their baskets. Their favorite children’s book about the holiday was a favorite of mine, DuBose Heyward and Marjorie Flack’s *The Country Bunny and the Little Gold Shoes*, and I’ve only ever talked with them very briefly about the Crucifixion in response to questions they’ve asked about cross-shaped necklaces and the like. I feel ill-equipped to address



Bunnies, candy, and springtime toys for Easter.

this major element of Christianity because I can't faithfully deliver on the happy ending of the Resurrection. "Some people believe...", I hedged in one conversation with Emilia, and I felt like I was lying to her.

In her book *Tiny Beautiful Things*, Cheryl Strayed writes about her own children's fascination with the Crucifixion:

My children were both horrified and enthralled by Jesus' crucifixion. It was the most appalling thing they'd ever heard. They didn't understand the story within its religious context. They perceived only its brutal truth. They did not contemplate Jesus' divinity, but rather his humanity. They had little interest in this business about him rising from the dead. He was not to them a Messiah. He was

only a man. One who'd been nailed to a cross alive and endured it a good while.

Did it hurt his feelings when they were so mean to him? my son repeatedly asked. *Where was his mommy?* my daughter wanted to know.

As a teenager, my fixation on Jesus on the cross and the Roman government's complicity in his persecution took root in a way that its corollary of the Resurrection did not. I was appalled by Jesus' very human suffering and by the very human failings of those who persecuted and betrayed him, a feeling that led me not to deeper faith in the godly but to a crisis of faith in humanity and to a precocious political radicalization that transformed me into a rather insuffer-

SIMMONS COLLEGE



DEGREE OFFERINGS

Children's Literature (M.A.)

Writing for Children (M.F.A.)

Dual Degree in Children's Literature and Writing for Children (M.A./M.F.A.)

Dual Degree in Children's Literature and Library Science (M.A./M.S.)

Dual Degree in Children's Literature and English (M.A./M.A.)

Winter 2013-2014 Open House Dates:

Sunday, December 8, 2013 at 12:30 pm at The Carle
Saturday, February 1, 2014 at 10:00 am at Simmons College

BOSTON CAMPUS
Simmons College
300 The Fenway
Boston, MA 02115

For more information or to RSVP, contact the
Office of Graduate Studies Admission
at 617-521-2915 or gsa@simmons.edu,
or on the web at www.simmons.edu/gradstudies.

AMHERST CAMPUS
Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art
125 West Bay Road
Amherst, MA 01002

able teenaged know-it-all who spoke out against, well, everything. I protested the Gulf War at fourteen, used babysitting money to subscribe to *The Nation* and *Ms. Magazine* at fifteen, joined NOW at sixteen, and eventually renounced my faith in the Church as being a patriarchal institution. I was a good Catholic girl whose encounters with a particular story sowed the seeds for a fierce desire to question and to grapple with all sorts of ideas, ideologies, and stories. In short, it led me to faith not in God but in reading.

As I grew from being an idealistic teenager who thought she knew everything to a mother daily humbled by her children's questions about the world, that most holy of childhood questions—"Why?"—could bring me to my knees. It came up often when I read the chapter "Sundays" from *Little House in the Big Woods*:

On Sundays Mary and Laura must not run or shout or be noisy in their play. Mary could not sew on her nine-patch quilt, and Laura could not knit on the tiny mittens she was making for Baby Carrie. They might look quietly at their paper dolls, but they must not make anything new for them. They were not allowed to sew on doll clothes, not even with pins.

My six-year-old daughter Caroline asked *why* they couldn't do all of those things on Sundays, a day of the week she associates not with going to church but with going swimming at the YMCA with her other mom, and I tried to explain the idea of Sunday as a day of rest devoted to worship. Her

older brother Stevie piped in, "I'm glad we don't live back then with all those Sunday rules."

In the absence of those particular Sunday rules, I realize that I've imposed a different sort of order on my children—one that is less about forbidding than it is about omitting. I may not have forbidden my children to read religious books, but I realize with some chagrin that my general omission has restricted their knowledge about Christianity.

The conversations that *Little House in the Big Woods* provoked about the Bible were a reminder of how much control adults can wield over children's (reading) lives. My kindergarten Catholic school teacher abused that control out of some misguided attempt at egalitarianism. My intention is to cede that control to my children as they grow up and assert their independence. Along the way, I desire to instill in them a sense of entitlement to books and knowledge. Yes, I want to protect them from hurt that might arise from encounters with racist or otherwise objectionable content, and I know that my agnostic worldview is shaping theirs in some ways. But I don't wish to build them libraries akin to Rapunzel's tower, closing them inside of narrow shelves populated only by books that I hope won't somehow, some way, do them harm, or lead them astray, or pull them away from my personal worldview. I have more faith in my children than that—and I have more faith in books themselves. n

Copyright of Horn Book Magazine is the property of Media Source, Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.