



Editorial: “We’ve Got to Get Ourselves Back to the Garden”

When a **VOYA** review opens with “a banned book waiting to happen,” your editors notice. Since reading **The Garden**, we have not stopped talking about it. Seventy-year-old Elsie V. Aidinoff’s debut novel, conceived in church during a reading of Genesis, is the first interpretation of the Eden story that makes sense to me. Like Aidinoff, I always felt that it “seemed wrong that, in religion as in mythology, woman is so often blamed for the introduction of sin into the world,” as she says in her Author’s Note. Aidinoff insists that her book isn’t feminist. Reflecting the patriarchal Old Testament world is her apt characterization of God as “a choleric and impetuous being,” which will disturb those who believe the Bible is the word of God. **VOYA** provides two reviews, from a man and a woman, on page 139.

Aidinoff’s remarkable depiction of an Eden in which I can believe makes me want to share the book with everyone I know. For youth, **The Garden** has enormous potential as an illuminating, life-changing reading experience. It addresses a core element in every youth’s primary goal of defining identity: a search for the spiritual self. What do I believe? What do others believe? Why is there evil in the world? Why am I here?

Yes, **The Garden** will attract censors. We purveyors of books for teens face a challenge. As editor of this intellectual freedom journal, I keep **VOYA** founder Dorothy Broderick’s famous admonition right under my nose: “Every library should have a sign on the door saying: *This library has something offensive to everyone.*” A major cause of offense is someone else’s religion—or lack of it. Young adult library collections must strive to cover all religions with their various interpretations of issues—including conservative forms of sex education. **VOYA** examines religious publishing, from *A Market Coming Alive: Christian Press Literature* by Denise Roberts (February 1997) to *Mormon Fiction for Teens* by Kay Carman and Carol Reich (August 1998). In *I Believe It, I Doubt It: Young Adult Fiction for Questioning Christians* (June 1998), Kathleen Beck found themes of spiritual searching in mainstream YA novels. The appearance of **The Garden** makes me realize that **VOYA** has not recently addressed these themes—and that this book seems especially risky since September 11, 2001.

Attacks on America by religious extremists have revived religious intolerance. We circle Christian wagons to keep those of our majority creed safe. Anyone who believes differently keeps a low profile. Our president is influenced by the religious right with faith-based initiatives, abstinence-only sex education, and inroads on abortion laws. In this atmosphere, YA novels that dare to approach religion differently stand up and shout. Another fine example is **Jake** by Arch Montgomery (Bancroft Press, 2004/**VOYA** review forthcoming), whose title character attends an Episcopal (but ecumenical) boys’ school during the September 11 attacks. When a Jewish student protests his school’s only transgression—that the Christian cross, “a symbol of brutal oppression of my people,” appears on the school crest—he reminds “the Christian majority here that some people see things differently than you, and they have good reasons.”

Although this Christian majority might seem to be in charge, American society is becoming more secularized. Despite the Supreme Court’s removal of prayer from public schools in the 1962 *Engel v. Vitale* case, prayer and references to God remain in many public ceremonies, often in schools. Challenges to those prayers have

increased since the Supreme Court ruled in the 1992 *Lee v. Weisman* case that clergy cannot offer prayers at public school graduation ceremonies. The public’s reactions are both political and polarizing. As I write, three cases affecting schools and the separation of church and state are in progress:

- In February, Steven Rosenauer filed a federal suit to stop his school board in Bradenton, Florida, from opening its meetings with prayer containing Christian references. In April, his Jewish family’s home and truck were splattered with red paint by vandals.
- After two cadets at the state-funded Virginia Military Institute (VMI) successfully sued in the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals to stop daily mealtime prayers, the Supreme Court refused to hear VMI’s appeal in April.
- On March 24, the Supreme Court heard a compelling oral argument from Michael A. Newdow, a California atheist defending his lower-court victory in a suit against the Elk Grove Unified School District, for coercing his six-year-old daughter to say the Pledge of Allegiance containing the words, “under God.”

Only sixteen words of the First Amendment cover these cases: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” This sentence’s two clauses, the “Establishment Clause” and the “Free Exercise Clause,” are often in tension with each other as courts interpret cases.

Newdow’s reasoned responses to the court’s questions make riveting reading (see <http://www.supremecourt.us.gov>). At one point, he veers toward the claims of book censors. As an atheist, Newdow objects to the school’s powerful influence every morning when it expects his child “to stand up, face that flag, and say that her father is wrong” as she utters the words “under God.” Says Newdow, “The issue is whether or not government can put that idea in her mind and interfere with my . . . absolute right to raise my child as whatever I see.”

In his analysis of the Newdow case in *Under God and Over: What America Can Learn from Its Atheists* (**The New Republic**, April 12 & 19, 2004), Leon Wieseltier blasts the justices’ lame “generic” defense of the term “under God”: “[T]he argument that a reference to God is not a reference to God is a sign that American religion is forgetting its reason.” He declares, “It is one of the admirable features of atheism to take God seriously,” quoting Newdow’s “unforgettable” reply: “I don’t think that I can include ‘under God’ to mean ‘no God.’”

Barbara Kingsolver recalls another wartime when President Franklin D. Roosevelt called for worldwide defense of “the four freedoms”: freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from fear, and freedom from want. In her evocative essay, **God’s Wife’s Measuring Spoons** (in **Small Wonder**, HarperCollins, 2002), Kingsolver calls our time “an aberrant moment” when “the four freedoms are not much in evidence. Faith and speech have taken hard blows, as countless U.S. citizens suffer daily intimidation because their appearance or their mode of belief or both place them outside the mainstream of an angry nation at war.”

As Iraq boils over, as we Americans clutch our fortunes and privileges to our chests, let’s pause to fight for one spirited book, **The Garden**, so it can bring courage and creativity and questioning to young people, helping them to discover their own beliefs—and to survive.—Cathi Dunn MacRae.