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# PORTRAYING THE TRUTH IN FICTION: JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES IN NOVELS

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What role, if any, do novels have in enabling us to understand new religions? There is certainly no shortage of novels about Jehovah's Witnesses, and these have proliferated in recent years. Previous examples of narrative writing were autobiographical, purporting to convey the truth about ex-members' experiences in the Watch Tower Society,<sup>1</sup> and notable examples have been William J. Schnell's *Thirty Years a Watch Tower Slave* (1956), Edmund C. Gruss' *We Left Jehovah's Witnesses* (1974), Barbara Grizzuti Harrison's *Visions of Glory* (1978), Raymond V. Franz' *Crisis of Conscience* (2000), Anne Sanderson's *Fearless Love* (2000), and Diane Wilson's *Awakening of a Jehovah's Witness* (2002). Sanderson consists mainly of critique, but includes some autobiographical material in its earlier sections. Much more positive towards the Society is *The Harvest of our Lives* (1996) by Marley Cole, who remained a faithful Witness until his death in 2009.

Ex-member testimony at best has to be treated with caution, and some scholars, such as Bryan R. Wilson and Lonnie D. Kliever, have argued that the evidence is totally worthless. Wilson writes:

Neither the objective sociological researcher nor the court of law can readily regard the apostate as a creditable or reliable source of evidence. He must always be seen as one whose personal history predisposes him to bias with respect to both his previous religious commitment and affiliations, the suspicion must arise that the acts from a personal motivation to vindicate himself and to regain his self-esteem, by showing himself to have been first a victim but subsequently to have become a redeemed crusader. As various instances have indicated, he is likely to

be suggestible and ready to enlarge or embellish his grievances to satisfy that species of journalist whose interest is more in sensational copy than in a [*sic*] objective statement of the truth. (Wilson 1994:4; punctuation as original).

If ex-members' testimony is dubious when they attempt to write non-fiction, it may be thought that by writing fiction rather than purported fact, their content is doubly worthless. In what follows, however, I shall argue that, notwithstanding their ex-member authorship and the fictional character, they can serve as important testimony to life inside the Watch Tower organisation.

One or two comments about Jehovah's Witnesses and fiction might profitably be made at the outset. Jehovah's Witnesses themselves do not write fiction. Mickey Spillane and Gloria Naylor are identifiable as members of the Society who have written fiction. However, Spillane's career as a novelist preceded his decision to become a Jehovah's Witness, and he is said to have regretted much of the sex and violence that featured in his writings. Gloria Naylor, by contrast, began her writing career after leaving the organisation; she was a second-generation member, and her novels reflect other interests. The Watch Tower Society tends to discourage its members from reading novels on the grounds that they take up time that could be more profitably spent on studying the Bible or in evangelising, and romantic novels in particular are criticised for their sexual content, their misleading views of human nature, and their utopian endings, in which the heroes "live happily ever after" (Watch Tower 1983a).

In what follows I shall compare two novels about Jehovah's Witnesses: Ian McEwan's *The Children Act* (2014), and Jennifer LoveGrove's *Watch How We Walk* (2013). McEwan is a well established author, and also an atheist, writing from an external standpoint, while LoveGrove was brought up as a Jehovah's Witness in a rural congregation in Ontario, Canada, but abandoned the Society in her teenage years, without becoming baptised; she now regards itself as an atheist.

Set in England, Ian McEwan's novel *The Children Act* is based on the author's conversations with members of the legal profession, and involves a case over which Sir Alan Ward QC presided. The title refers to legislation passed in 1989 (its correct title is The Children's Act), and its opening lines are "When a court determines any question with respect to ... the upbringing of a child ... the child's welfare shall be the court's paramount consideration." The story follows remarkably closely the incidents in Ward's real-life case. Ward made a Jehovah's Witness child a ward of court (which was still possible at the time of

the case), and visited the boy and his parents personally. The boy was a football enthusiast, which established a point in common with the judge, and the court decided in favour of the hospital. After the boy recovered, Ward took him to watch a football match from the directors' box and introduced him to some of the players. The boy subsequently became ill again, this time having reached the age of majority, refused the needed transfusion and died.<sup>2</sup>

McEwan's story is that Adam, a 17-year-old Jehovah's Witness with leukaemia, needs a blood transfusion in order to survive. The judge – an unhappily married woman called Fiona Maye – has to decide whether he is “Gillick competent”. This legal term is derived from a legal case involving Victoria Gillick, who lost a test case relating to the prescription of contraceptives to minors: it was ruled that, if minors were sufficiently mature to understand their actions and their consequences, they should be treated as if they were adults. Fiona decides, unusually, that she should go to visit Adam in hospital. Adam is not a football fan: McEwan wants to raise the tone of the novel by creating as a backdrop the ambient high culture which he attributes to judges. Fiona is an accomplished singer and pianist and the story begins with her learning a Bach partita on the piano to play to her husband as a birthday present. Hence, instead of being interesting in football, Adam writes poetry, and is learning to play the violin. Fiona asks Adam to play his instrument, and he plays Benjamin Britten's setting of Yeats' “Down by the Salley Gardens”. Fiona suggests she sings the song while he accompanies her. They establish a rapport, but Fiona nonetheless judges that he is too young to understand fully what death involves, and rules in favour of the medical staff. Adam receives his transfusion and recovers. Soon afterwards, Adam's leukaemia returns. This time he refuses the transfusion and dies. He has left a somewhat enigmatic poem, in which he writes about cross he has to bear, and how Judas has betrayed him.<sup>3</sup>

Jennifer LoveGrove's *Watch How We Walk* (2013) does not purport to be based on any particular set of events, although she has stated that its setting is not unlike her home town. The book's point of view is that of Emily, a young girl who has not yet reached puberty, and the opening scene is a surprise presents day – an event that some Jehovah's Witness families celebrate in lieu of Christmas and birthdays. Emily receives a book about circuses, and is particularly captivated by the funambulist (high wire artist). The story is set in Canada, and title alludes to a song,<sup>4</sup> now disused but popular in the 1980s, in a previous Jehovah's Witnesses songbook – “Let's watch how we walk”. Emily likes this song: it is the only one that is sung in her Kingdom Hall which she says is not boring. (Certainly when I have

mentioned this song to those who have been in the organisation during this period, they remember it well, and can even sing the tune to me.)

The idea of walking a tightrope provides the central motif for the novel for, as the story progresses, Emily is faced with the choice of whether to conform to the values of the congregation or to accept worldly standards. Her elder sister Lenora is already on a tightrope. She has been baptised a year previously, but has become involved in “worldly” company, and is leading a double life. When she is not with her family she smokes, swears, and wears sexy underwear, which she hides in her wardrobe. Emily finds problems growing up as a Witness. She is the odd one out at school, not being allowed to celebrate Christmas and birthdays, sing the national anthem, or to take part in extra-curricular activities. Emily and Lenora’s authoritarian father Jim keenly wants to become an elder, but he is subject to violent rages. He also has a kind of double life: we finally learn his dark secret, that he was responsible for his brother’s death in a car crash. The children have an Uncle Tyler, who belongs to congregation, but whose behaviour is somewhat outrageous. He secretly has some gay friends, with whom he drinks beer and smokes cannabis, but leaves copies of *The Watchtower* with them so that he can claim publishing hours. Finally, he is brought before a judicial committee, and his disfellowshipping is announced. As the story unfolds, a serious quarrel between Jim and Viv her mother causes Lenora to storm out of the house. When she does not return, the parents organise members of the congregation into conducting a search. Emily finally finds Lenora, who has shot herself. She had become pregnant, and had been subject to a judicial hearing by the elders. Illicitly she had taken notes afterwards, and passed them on to Emily.

One might think that McEwan’s plot, being based on real-life, would give more of an insight into the Watch Tower Society than those of ex-members, whose perception of their abandoned faith is often alleged to colour their accounts. However, one discovers little about Jehovah’s Witnesses from McEwan’s novel, and there are several substantial errors that he makes.<sup>5</sup> Kevin Henry, Adam’s father, asks in court to take the oath on the New World Translation – something that a Witness would be unlikely to request, since issues of translation are not relevant in a courtroom. He refers to God as “the Lord”, when a fundamental Watch Tower teaching is the importance of using the presumed personal name Jehovah rather than generic names such as “God” or “Lord”. It is unlikely that a Jehovah’s Witness youth would be learning the violin or writing poetry – although not impossible – but he also tells Fiona that an elder in his congregation is attempting to place one of his poems in

*The Watchtower*. (*The Watchtower* magazine is produced by the Society's Writing Committee and does not accept contributions, only the occasional reader's question, on which the Watch Tower position is given.) The poem's opening line mentions carrying a cross – again a fundamental piece of ignorance on McEwan's part, since the Watch Tower Society is adamant that Jesus did not die on a cross but on a torture stake.<sup>6</sup> Even if the distinction may seem insignificant to the outsider, the Society is at pains to correct what it regards as an error on the part of mainstream Christianity, and has gone to considerable lengths to ensure that words like “cross” and “crucify” do not appear in its New World Translation.

Other errors are perhaps less serious. McEwan uses terms like “hymns” and “sermons”, instead of “songs” and “talks”, and he envisages flowers and wreaths at Adam's funeral, when Jehovah's Witnesses prefer to avoid tributes of this kind, since the dead are reckoned to be asleep, awaiting the resurrection – unless they belong to the 144,000 – and would therefore be oblivious to such marks of respect. The cumulative effect of these errors, most of which could have been avoided even by consulting Wikipedia, creates a portrayal of the Watch Tower Society that anyone who has come to know it would not recognise.

The contrast drawn between these two novels raises the question of how much accuracy one should expect in a work of fiction. If a story does not purport to be factually true, does it really matter if there are inaccuracies? It is a reasonable assumption that a reader buys a book because he or she is interested in its topic, and therefore wants to learn something more about it. As one writing tutor points out, books are a doorway to the world, and thus it is important that the author provides good information rather than misinformation (Allen 2013). In both the novels under discussion, the Jehovah's Witnesses are more than just background or “wallpaper” to the plots: they are essential to them. Authors, of course, are not scholars, and it is possible that undue attention to detail could make a novel seem pedantic or cumbersome, but the advice often given to aspiring authors is that information need not be detailed, but at least must be accurate. This does not rule out some freedom to speculate; for example, McEwan makes the interesting speculation that the judge's ruling makes Adam's parents relieved – their son has been saved (at least temporarily), yet they have not been unfaithful to their Society's principles. (McEwan: 144).

LoveGrove, by contrast, is much more thorough. She does not simply rely on childhood memories: at one point the author refers to a *Watchtower* article entitled “Exposing the Devil's Subtle Designs”, which is a genuine article from the magazine and the contents of which are accurately described, and this serves to provide the reader with a precise date –

1983 – in which the novel is set (Watch Tower 1983b). Not all of LoveGrove’s material is altogether believable, however. One memorable example is Lenora’s account of her judicial hearing, which she recorded as notes for her sister.

I told them what they wanted to hear, and more. I told them everything. I just didn’t care anymore. What did I have to lose? When they asked me what underwear I was wearing the first time with Theo, I didn’t just tell them ‘black lace’ — I showed them. I made them look. They didn’t even try to stop me. Eventually they said, ‘Lower your skirt, Sister Morrow’ in that same condescending voice they all have. But not until each of them took a good look. (LoveGrove: 305-306).

Although such an incident is inherently improbable, it serves to highlight a number of truths about congregational life. As LoveGrove points out, the proceedings are undisclosed; the accused may not be represented or accompanied; no recording devices are permitted, and one may not even take notes. Furthermore, since only men are eligible to be elders, this can involve an all-male judicial committee asking female members about intimate and sometimes embarrassing details, often about sexual activity. This is a scene that the author may have liked to see, but yet it highlights these aspects of judicial hearings.

What functions do these two pieces of fiction serve? From the researcher’s standpoint, ex-member novels such as *Watch How We Walk* have significant value for a number of reasons. The ex-member provides an emic perspective, and thus reveals aspects of the organisation that the scholarly researcher cannot penetrate. To undertake fieldwork by attending Kingdom Hall meetings and Conventions is, in Ervin Goffman’s words, to see the front stage. Researchers like myself see the finished performance of a Kingdom Hall meeting. Inevitably we meet the faithful members who attend regularly, contribute answers to officiant’s questions, and our gatekeepers are office bearers who are the respected ideal exponents of “the truth”. We cannot readily go backstage and meet the lapsed members, or those who have not adequately satisfied the Society’s requirements about hours to be put in for publishing. While it is possible that such members may be present when researchers are conducting their fieldwork, they lack visibility, and would not normally be introduced to the researcher. The researcher will hear the polished Bible talk, but will not readily gain access to

the Society's outline that is provided for it, and thus it is not immediately apparent what material is derivative, and what is the speaker's own contribution.

Particularly with regard to children, there are obvious problems in eliciting a child's viewpoint. Not only are there problems relating to institutional ethics committees and possibly obtaining DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service) clearance in Britain, as well as parental permission; it is inherently difficult to elicit reliable information from minors. LoveGrove, together with other ex-members, provides interesting testimony about life as a child in a Jehovah's Witnesses congregation. She thinks the talks are tedious and repetitive, and the songs are boring (with the exception of "Let's watch how we walk"); we receive testimony about relationships between Jehovah's Witnesses and "worldly" people and the tensions this produces, and difficulties about taking part in the educational system. The author also acquaints us with phenomena to which the outsider has no direct access, for example the judicial committee, the steps involved in preparation for baptism, and popular beliefs that demons can inhabit physical objects. (LoveGrove recounts how a Ouija board keeps finding its way back to Brother Richard's home despite two attempts to destroy it.) Contrary to Kliever and Wilson, LoveGrove's ex-member status should not be disparaged or written off as worthless. Ex-members have a distinctive voice, which ought to be heard; they are also difficult to locate in any systematic way, since one does not find them in a Kingdom Hall or on house-to-house work. Ex-member authors form a distinctive category, of course, and may not be typical of ex-members in general, but they offer a perspective that informs our understanding of the Watch Tower Society.

McEwan, by contrast, has not gone backstage. The novel's somewhat unoriginal ideas are gleaned from a judge, and it is doubtful whether he has even seen the front stage of a Kingdom Hall, preferring to gain his information about Jehovah's Witnesses at third hand. By contrast, LoveGrove has thoroughly experienced the back stage, and can write about it with authority and conviction, as well as humour. Of course, caution must be exercised in using any piece of fiction as a source of firm information. Due regard also needs to be made about the dating of the incidents described, and a novel that describes the Watch Tower Society in the 1980s may not accurately reflect the organisation some thirty years on. It is a common criticism of Jehovah's Witnesses that the organisation makes "adjustments in view" – that is to say, changes in its doctrinal position through time. It is fairly widely acknowledged, for example, that the Society's authoritarian stance on sexual intercourse has

become less prescriptive, and that announcements to one's congregation regarding disfellowshipping a member have become more discreet and less detailed.

If we can learn anything about Jehovah's Witnesses at all from McEwan's novel, it is about popular perceptions of the Watch Tower organisation. His writing provides unwitting testimony to the popular belief that their ideas are transparent, that they have intransigent and unreasonable ideas about blood, and that further probing into their ideas is unnecessary. While McEwan bases his plot on fact, LoveGrove makes an interesting distinction between fact and truth. Commenting on her own novel she writes:

I'm not sure who said it first, but truth and fact are not necessarily the same things. Unfortunately, some assume that they always are, whereas in reality, fiction may be a more direct and more powerful route to truth. (LoveGrove; quoted in Moran 2015).

Whatever the facts on which these respective novels are based, McEwan does no more than highlight the prevalent perceptions and misperceptions of Jehovah's Witnesses, and the popular complacency that assumes that little further enquiry is needed to appreciate the superiority of educated classes to the Jehovah's Witnesses' firmly held religious convictions. LoveGrove's fiction, however, more effectively captures the truth about the Watch Tower organisation, and demonstrates the need for the researcher to take both fiction and ex-member testimony seriously.

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<sup>1</sup> For ease of reading I have abbreviated the name to “Watch Tower Society”, instead of the more cumbersome official names “The Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania” and “The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York”.

<sup>2</sup> McEwan Ian (2014). Ian McEwan: the law versus religious belief. Accessible at [www.theguardian.com/books/2014/sep/05/ian-mcewan-law-versus-religious-belief](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/sep/05/ian-mcewan-law-versus-religious-belief) Accessed 20 June 2016.

<sup>3</sup> In fairness to McEwan, the plot is somewhat more complex, and the author seeks to highlight a difficult moral dilemma rather than provide detailed insight into the Jehovah's Witnesses.

<sup>4</sup> Jehovah's Witnesses invariably use the word “song” rather than “hymn”.

<sup>5</sup> Other critics have also found errors in McEwan's understanding of English law. See Gardner 2014.

<sup>6</sup> This may seem a point of fine detail, but The Society regards the cross as a pagan symbol, and the New World Translation has systematically removed references to the cross and crucifixion.