

An Interview with Mimosa Books & Gifts (Madison, WI)

Did this story actually originate from a real-life conversation in the car?

Yes and no. After Susanna's mom and I divorced when she was three years old, I picked her up in Madison every three or four weeks and we made the 3½-hour drive back to Decorah for the weekend. Along the way Susanna did—always—ask me to tell her a story ... several times each trip. So I told her countless stories over the years; usually stories about when she was a little girl, or when her brother was a little boy, or even when I was a little boy. Eventually, we began to tell more fanciful tales that we made up together, and these were often “creation”-themed, but never quite as elaborate as this one. But father-daughter stories unfolding during a long ride was our pattern for at least five or six years.

You describe yourself as a “freelance theologian.” Where do you feel you fit within the Christian community?

I suppose you would say “at the edge” ... which is fine with me. I grew up Lutheran, and I continue to worship in the Lutheran tradition, though I'm definitely at the left edge of the tradition. My parish in St. Paul was the first Lutheran church in Minnesota to grant equal membership to African Americans—in 1953—and the first in the United States to be openly affirming of and welcoming to LGBT persons—in 1981.

Personally, I think of God as an unwavering energy of love that pulses like a sort of cosmic heartbeat. I regard Jesus as one embodied image of holy living; in him we see a person who sought to unconditionally open himself to that energy of love. I don't think he's unique in that sense, but his life is startling vivid, and since I've known his story since I was a little child it has particular power for me.

Do you write this book to fill an unmet need?

Yes—several of them, actually. As a parent who's also a theologian, I often found myself cringing at the simplistic way that most children's “bible stories” are told. They typically retell the biblical story by simplifying the language but missing much of the inner richness.

*In fact, for a while I was teaching Into to Bible classes to college students, I would assign them to read several children's bible story books and critique them on how well they actually captured the richness of the story as we studied it in our class. For instance, in the original Hebrew of the Genesis story, God takes some adamah (the Hebrew word for dirt) and fashions an adam (which we translate as the name Adam, but would be much better translated as “an earthling” made from earth.) It's clearly a wordplay intended to remind us that we are *kin* to the dirt beneath our feet.*

That's why in my tale I have God take some rich dark dirt—humus—and use it to make humus beings. Of course, it's playful, but it's also profound: the earth's soil is our distant cousin, and we ought to treat it with reverence and kindness. That's an echo of the Genesis tale that we desperately need to hear today. And I carry that theme further by explaining why we name the animals in the garden—not to control them, but to befriend them. This idea is also in the Hebrew, where the purpose of naming is to establish relationship.

The Genesis creation tales were never intended to be science, but rather to be rich in symbolism, and kids are as conversant in symbol as adults—so this tale tries to recapture some of that symbolism and offer it to children.

Joan Lindeman's illustrations depict God in many races, but all show her as a girl. Was gender an important factor in this choice, or did it come about simply because the story is about a girl?

Very intentional—as a man who's been deeply shaped by feminist theology, I'm convinced that the way we image—and gender—God affects the way we value gender among humans. A God who is always portrayed as male does harm girls (and women!) by suggesting that the most holy and whole “Person” is

male. It absolutely gives femaleness a second-class value. I wanted my daughter to know in her imagination, which is where our deepest truths reside, that she, too, was fully in the “image of God.” And, because Susanna’s childhood joy was art projects, I wanted her to know that the exuberant joy she felt while creating art was one moment in which she knew God’s own exuberant joy.

Beyond this, I also use the story to challenge two other damaging biases we often hold. At least over the last several hundred years, darkness has come to be “coded” as threatening, deficient, even evil. That devaluing of darkness undergirds racism, and fills our language with lots of metaphors that inevitably spill over onto the skin and into the souls of persons of color. So in my story, when Susanna says that Love was the color of darkness, she reclaims the dark for Good.

Similarly, whenever a creation account concludes with the first two human beings it implies that somehow these first two—whatever color or size they were—were somehow the “best” against which all of us either measure up or fall short (sort of the way that media images of girls and women today leave most many feeling impossibly inadequate). So in my story God creates “whole bunches of them” from the very start—in all hues and all sizes—and they’re all called “very good.” Diversity and difference are there from the start, as part of God’s plan for the world.

Of course, I don’t spell all of this out, but it’s there, peeking out from within the richness of the story. And as the story is read and re-read it does plant seeds of these ideas in the imagination of both children and adults, and some of these seeds will bear fruit.

Finally, of course, Joan brings the diversity, the joy, and the tenderness of this tale vividly to life in her stunning illustrations. It was her idea to portray God as a little girl with differing ethnic features (and at different ages) in the story, inviting that many more girls to find reflections of themselves in its pages.

Is it tough to market a book with “God” in the title?

Well, it’s tough to market this book, for sure. Most Christian bookstores tend to be more conservative in tone, and the book’s feminist tilt isn’t exactly in sync with most of their customers. But many general bookstores and children’s bookstores also don’t quite know what to do with it. It’s got too much “God” to fit with the general picture books, but not quite the “right” God to be at home in the “religious” picture books. I guess you’d say it’s a hidden gem. Actually the two bookstores where it has done the best are the Ten Thousand Villages (Fair Trade crafts) store in St. Paul, where it appeals a customer base that is largely progressive and female—and here at Mimosa, where religion is honored for its richness that spills over many boundaries.

What was it like to win a Nautilus Award?

Oh my, my eyes filled with tears when I told my wife, and my voice broke with emotion when I called my parents. This is a self-published book, crowd-funded by a Kickstarter campaign. The odds of us winning a national book award in which we were competing with books published by major publishers were long indeed. But the Nautilus Awards were founded 15 years with the express purpose to identify and lift up “books that inspire and connect our lives” offering “spiritual growth, green values, and positive social change.” That is exactly what we set out to create in When God Was a Little Girl, and Joan and I are both so very pleased that the Nautilus Awards saw these very things in our book. We would have taken great pride in our book no matter what, but it is a truly sweet joy to see its richness recognized by others.

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