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Jennifer LoveGrove: On Jehovah's Witnesses and writing

By Jennifer LoveGrove, Special to National Post

I grew up as a Jehovah's Witness. I've encountered a lot of misconceptions, myths, and curiosities about this insular sect of Christianity, about...

Jennifer LoveGrove[1] is the author of two poetry collections, *The Dagger Between Her Teeth* and *I Should Never Have Fired the Sentinel*. Her debut novel, *Watch How We Walk*, was recently published by ECW Press. LoveGrove, who divides her time between Toronto and Haliburton, will be guest editing The Afterword all this week.

I grew up as a Jehovah's Witness. Not a lot of people know this about me. I've now been an atheist longer than I was a Jehovah's Witness, and once I reached my thirties, my unusual, isolated upbringing seemed distant enough to examine and write about. Since doing so, I've encountered a lot of misconceptions, myths, and curiosities about this insular sect of Christianity, about this religion's effect on my evolution as a writer, and about the circumstances of my own presumed loss of faith. Since most "worldy" people (non-Jehovah's Witnesses) are reluctant to ask JWs about their beliefs directly because they assume – rightfully so – that it puts them at risk for a conversion effort, I will answer some of these FAQs for you. My answers will be solely through the skewed lens of my childhood and unreliable memory; they are not to be taken as well-researched and carefully cited sociological facts.

Jehovah's Witnesses believe that the end of the world is approaching, right? And that they're the only ones who will go to heaven?

Not quite. Armageddon is indeed a driving force in the doctrine, and has always been characterized as imminent in this relatively young religion. God (Jehovah) is gearing up to unleash destruction upon the world at any moment, sparing the lives of the faithful (JWs) and resurrecting deserving dead JWs. These faithful would then live forever in paradise on earth, free of disease, war, and worldly people. They do not believe, as other Christians do, that the pious will ascend to heaven after death (with the exception of 144,000 specially-chosen, primarily male JWs). The catch however, is that the surviving benefactors of eternal life actually have to spend hundreds of years cleaning up the post-Armageddon planet and converting it into paradise *themselves*, which always struck me as a) really hard and b) a pretty significant loophole in the whole deal.

So it's a doomsday cult, then?

Jehovah's Witnesses discourage association outside of their membership. A significant amount of time is devoted to attending meetings and actively ministering to non-JWs. Dissent and questioning beliefs is forbidden and punished with ostracism. Elders counsel members on dating, relationships, jobs, money and similarly private matters. Persecution is assumed, and an us-versus-them attitude pervades. Elders and overseers are not accountable outside of the Watchtower Society (watch the CBC W5 episode on JW sexual abuse as an example). Monetary donations are expected. Education and commitment to career is discouraged. Conversion efforts are central. Inside the organization, they refer to their religion as "The Truth." I could go on; most ex-JWs I know have consulted any number of "cult checklists" and can check most off most characteristics.

What's the deal with you knocking on our doors on Saturday mornings? When I was a kid, my parents made me turn the TV off and be quiet until you went away.

We were there to tell you about everlasting life in paradise on earth, and offer you the chance to survive Armageddon. If there was a kid with the adults at the door, that kid had rehearsed his speech for hours the night before, and was probably so nervous she puked up her Cheerios on the sidewalk. If you pretended you weren't home, thank you. Even though the moving curtains, the hastily shushed thuds that less-than-subtly emanated from your open windows gave you away, I was grateful. And sorry you missed the climax of Super Friends or whatever.

Why didn't you celebrate Christmas or birthdays? How did it make you feel to not be able to celebrate these holidays?

Many people believe that Jehovah's Witnesses are forbidden from celebrating Christmas because it is a distraction from worshipping God, that it would detract from His honour, which is not entirely inaccurate. Birthday celebrations were perceived as a form of idolatry, akin to worshipping a human rather than God, and Christmas is basically a big old birthday bash for Jesus, so no Christmas either. Not only that, but the current version of Christmas is rooted in the pagan celebration of Saturnalia, and anything pagan was definitely forbidden.

I didn't grow up with birthday parties and Christmas trees as a regular part of my life, so I didn't really feel like I was missing out. From a material perspective, I didn't feel deprived in January when other kids came back to school with new clothes and toys because I had a worldly grandmother who spoiled us and made sure we got turkey and presents.

More awkward was all the Christmas-themed school activities leading up to the holidays. I would have to remind my teachers that I wasn't allowed to draw the Christmas tree or sing carols and my face would redden and some teachers would get exasperated. This conflict – pleasing your parents and not pissing off God, versus pleasing your teacher and fitting in with classmates – creates a lot of pressure that kids internalize. A kindergarten teacher recently told me that one of her students, a Jehovah's Witness, was terrified to break the rules of her faith and was very stressed. She would slap her hands over her ears if anyone mentioned Christmas or Halloween, and she wouldn't go near a treat that someone had brought in for a birthday. She was four years old.

What do JWs get out of this religion? What's the incentive?

The goal is to get through The Great Tribulation and Armageddon, and then achieve everlasting life in paradise on earth. That's the reward, on an abstract level. On a more tangible level, the incentive for obedience is avoiding ostracism. If you're "disfellowshipped," you can have no contact whatsoever with your community, and this includes your family. They must shun you. And remember, you weren't allowed to have meaningful contact outside of your community before then, so you're left with no one.

Is *Watch How We Walk* autobiographical? Why didn't you just write a memoir?

Watch How We Walk is not autobiographical, though I get why you'd think so. Truth is, my own story is boring. I'm sure no one would publish it. There was very little tension or resonant conflict in my departure from the religion. Neither the story nor the characters in *Watch How We Walk* are autobiographical, but the context, the setting – the stylized language used by Jehovah's Witnesses, the lifestyle – is familiar to me.

As for questions of autobiography in fiction, what matters is whether a text works, if the world of the book is convincing. A writer can base fiction on "a true story" but that in itself doesn't make it any more believable or captivate the reader more fully. The "truth" or successfulness of the text is in the writing, not whether or not it "really happened."

But questions around autobiographical fiction are interesting. There's an implied hierarchy of creativity in that line of interrogation, like a narrative that is entirely imagined is somehow inherently "better" than a text that attempts to transform a lived experience. Does it matter? It does to many writers. It matters to me, but I don't trust that, so I'm ambivalent.

As for memoir, it's a genre that rarely interests me. I prefer well-written fiction to poorly structured or weakly written memoir, and much of it is rushed in order to be topical and current, and rushed writing and editing leads to weak books. Excellent writing interests me; "the truth" is less relevant to me. Real truths come more from fiction and from poetry than from anyone professing a "true story."

Why did you stop being a Jehovah's Witness? How did you lose your religion?

I was 14. My parents' marriage was in the latter stages of slow dissolution. After a gradual decline in attendance, my mom stopped attending meetings. My father – a keener, a Ministerial Servant who strived, unsuccessfully, to become an elder – kept going. I didn't get along particularly well with either one of them at the time, so I felt no allegiance either way. The deciding factor, as influences many teenagers, was my best friend. She was still a Jehovah's Witness, and if I left, we couldn't be friends anymore. So I stayed, sitting with her family during the meetings as often as possible. Then we had a falling out. I don't remember the details anymore, but it ended the friendship. And as such, it unceremoniously ended my piousness. If I didn't have her anymore, what incentive did I have to attend three meetings a week? Who would I pass notes and giggle with? Who would I chase boys with at the summer conventions at Copps Coliseum?

I wasn't baptized, so leaving was relatively easy. For many, the loss of faith is much more profound. Informed, bold questioning of doctrine was construed as apostasy and while brave, led to rigid ostracism. My departure was nothing; there wasn't much at stake. I felt relief, and some exhilaration at having made a choice for myself, and my integration into worldly teenage life was as awkward and messy as for most, but not much more so.

But what if you're an adult, maybe 40-years-old, and disfellowshipped for some serious transgression, like smoking, or sex with someone you aren't married to? Suddenly you're cut off from your family, your friends, your community – no one you're close to is allowed to speak to you. You have no career, no education beyond high school, and no other friends outside the congregation. But you have doubts, you know this religion doesn't stand up to vigorous (or even flimsy) analysis. Yet you leave, and enter the terrifying world you've been isolated from. These are the truly brave ex-JWs: strong and smart and traumatized, people who risked everything, and lost, and still held on to their belief in their own critical thinking, their own independence.

I was a kid who had her feelings hurt and so excised her best friend. The loss of religion was just collateral damage.

Did you have to avoid the national anthem in school? Stand out in the hallway during morning announcements, segregated from the other students?

Yes, from grade one through nine. With each September, it never felt less awkward. In primary school, there was the national anthem (sung, not recorded), followed by the Lord's Prayer, and then a bible reading. I hovered patiently in the hallway until they were finished and the teacher opened the door to let me back in. Sometimes they forgot about me, which was awkward.

The teachers I remember with the most fondness are the ones who had some empathy and tried to make this experience a little smoother. One teacher, when I was about eleven, let me wait in the art supply room across the hall so as to be less conspicuous. He didn't want me to be idle though, so he tasked me with sorting and tidying the art materials. He was obsessed with legal-sized paper in dozens of colours, and for much of the year, my job was to sort out the damaged sheets from the perfect ones. I hid all the slightly torn or bent pages in a drawer and used my morning half hour in the supply room (for an atheist, he took way longer for Bible story than the other teachers) to secretly write stories and plays.

How did you cope with the restrictions? Did you like the feeling of being different, or hate it?

I often felt awkward or embarrassed. Terms like "insular" and "weird" and "other" are often used to describe JWs even now, and while I grew to value being perceived as different in my teens, I may have been more proud when I was a kid if I felt I had a choice.

A high school English teacher relayed how his JW student requested that she read something other than Macbeth because the witch content was against her religion. He wondered if she wished she could read it, was it a sacrifice on her part, or was she proud to denounce it? It's impossible to answer. I don't know what I would have done. I'm grateful that I was free to read all the Shakespeare I wanted by high school. Even in my JW days, my parents never tried to keep me from reading worldly books, as long as I stopped sneaking them into meetings and reading them between the pages of my *Watchtower* magazines.

How has being an ex-JW helped you as a writer?

First, it equipped me with a built-in persecution complex. Adversity is assumed, and thereby met with stoicism. I grew up clutching a dowdy handbag full of *Watchtowers*, getting doors slammed in my face – an experience particularly useful for a future as a poet. Similarly, I grew accustomed to being perceived as an inconvenient outsider at a young age. This is useful for artists of all kinds.

I read a lot, both for the religion and because I liked to, so like many writers' childhoods, my life consisted largely of escaping into imagined worlds full of imagery and drama. The elders actively quashed any sign of critical thinking, so

when this combined with my intrinsic distrust of authority, I rebelled by having existential dilemmas. An insular, isolationist, gossipy community is also pretty fertile ground for growing writers, so that probably didn't hurt either.

Did all of this help me become a writer? I'll never know. But when you're expected to get up before a room full of adults with a microphone in your hand and talk about the bible at age ten or twelve, it can't help but prepare you for your first open mic reading in front of the literary community. At least the latter includes the option of downing a beer first.

References

1. jenniferlovegrove.wordpress.com

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