RELIGIOUS QUESTIONING
IN KATHERINE PATERSON'S AND JUDY BLUME'S FICTION

by

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ABSTRACT

TRINA RUMFELT. Religious Questioning in Katherine Paterson's and Judy Blume's Fiction (Under Direction of DR. MARK I. WEST)

Katherine Paterson and Judy Blume both began their careers as children's authors in the late 1960s and achieved success in the 1970s, a period when the questioning of social norms was on the rise. Both Paterson and Blume were influenced by the societal changes that were swirling around them as they launched their writing careers. One of the ways in which the questioning spirit of the era is reflected in their work is tied to their portrayal of religion and religious institutions in their children's books. Rather than simply present religion as an established given in their children's books, Paterson and Blume wrote books in which the central characters question religion. This religious questioning is especially prevalent in Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia* and *Jacob Have I Loved* and in Blume's *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* and *Starring Sally J. Freedman as Herself*. Paterson and Blume drew on their own religious backgrounds when writing these books.

DEDICATION

This thesis would not have been possible without the love, support and prayers of my family and loved ones. I dedicate this thesis to my husband, Jason Rumfelt, and daughter, Kaitlyn Rumfelt, who encourage me as I seek to continue my educational journey. I also dedicate this thesis to my parents, Nikkie and Larry Seabolt, who would take me to libraries and bookstores for hours so I could be introduced to these books at an early age. Finally, I dedicate this thesis to my grandmother, Zoraida Rodriguez, who would talk with me about the stories and topics I read about which gave me a guided path to also explore my own religious questioning during my childhood years.

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CHAPTER 1: KATHERINE PATERSON AND JUDY BLUME: AN INTRODUCTION

Katherine Paterson and Judy Blume both began their careers as children's authors in the late 1960s and achieved success in the 1970s, a period when the questioning of social norms was on the rise. The civil rights movement, the antiwar movement, and feminist movement were all in full swing. The Watergate scandal caused many people to question the legitimacy of authority figures and social institutions. The world of children's literature was also changing during this period. Children's publishers began bringing out books that dealt openly with topics that had long been taboo in American children's literature, such as sexuality and social problems. (Rollin 197-269).

Both Paterson and Blume were influenced by the societal changes that were swirling around them as they launched their writing careers. One of the ways in which the questioning spirit of the era is reflected in their work is tied to their portrayal of religion and religious institutions in their children's books. Rather than simply present religion as an established given in their children's books, Paterson and Blume wrote books in which the central characters question religion. This religious questioning is especially prevalent in Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia* and *Jacob Have I Loved* and in Blume's *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* and *Starring Sally J. Freedman as Herself*. Paterson and Blume drew on their own religious backgrounds when writing these books.

Religion figured prominently in the childhood experiences of both authors even though they followed different religious practices and belief systems. Paterson grew up in a Presbyterian family while Blume grew up in a Jewish family. By drawing on their own religious experiences, Paterson and Blume succeeded in creating characters with complex inner lives. They ask difficult questions and seriously ponder their religious identities. For these characters,

religion is not the only topic that they care about, but in many cases religion shapes their responses to the other sides of their lives.

Katherine Clements Womeldorf (Paterson) was born in Qing-Jiang, Jiangsu, China, in 1932 to Presbyterian missionary parents. She spent the early years of her childhood living in a compound with Chinese families. Being the middle child of five, Katherine had a severe temper, cried a lot, and often behaved badly. When Paterson's mother introduced her to children's books, Paterson looked to the characters in these books for hope that she could change. As Paterson said, "When I read *The Secret Garden,* I fell in love with Mary Lennox … and because I loved her, I was able to love myself a bit" (McGinty, 9). Characters like Marry Lennox are the types of characters Paterson offers her readers—protagonists who have bad tempers, insecurities and angry feelings. Because of her own childhood struggles, Paterson came to understand that children have complex and powerful feelings about who they are and their place in the world.

Paterson places her characters in real-life situations and "get[s] to write about people who must confront the messy battles of the world as we know it" (McGinty, 10). Paterson grew up in the frightening world of a nation at war. Her family had to evacuate China to escape the dangers of war while ultimately moving many times which left her feeling like an outsider. Similarly, Paterson's characters are often outsiders who are confronting difficult situations in life. We see this in both *Bridge to Terabithia* and *Jacob Have I Loved*. In her writing, Paterson often builds on the experiences she herself has faced growing up. Her later training as a Christian teacher and missionary adds a religious dimension to her novels with most of Paterson's novels including references to Christian ideals and the belief in God.

Katherine Paterson reflects on many questions from her past, particularly when asked, "when did you first know you wanted to be a writer?" (*Gates of Excellence* 1). Paterson

confesses that she cannot remember when she wanted to become a writer because she was "torn between a future as a foreign [Christian] missionary and one as a movie star" … with visions "as a leader of a commando unit that single-handedly wins World War II" (*Gates of Excellence* 1). Even though Paterson would yearn for prospects such as this, she was also writing. Paterson's first language was Chinese so during her childhood years, it was challenging to transition her writing into English. Even with these difficulties, Paterson's desire to write persisted throughout the eighteen moves she made across the globe from China to the United States and back again over the course of her childhood, starting when Japan invaded China in 1937 and continuing well after World War II ended in 1945 due to continuous Communist Party threats against her parents' Christian missionary work.

With the feelings of loneliness that occurred with moving and having to make new friends each time, Paterson developed reading at the early age of five and began to write because of a love for the stories she read. Paterson goes on to explain that "… when I finally began to write books, it was not so much that I wanted to be a writer but that I loved books and wanted somehow to get inside the process, to have a part in their making … with a tendency to adopt the style of whatever literary figure … [and] an apprenticeship imitating the masters of the English language" (*Gates of Excellence* 2). In 1954, Paterson graduated with a bachelor's degree in English from King's College and then a masters in Bible and Christian education from the Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond, Virginia. Paterson hoped to become a Christian missionary in China but, with its borders closed to western citizens, Paterson went to Japan under a teaching recommendation from a friend who lived there. While in Japan, Paterson studied both Japanese and Chinese cultures, and she initially wrote about these cultures in professional academic works. Paterson turned from academic writing to fiction because "that is

what I most enjoy reading" (*Gates of Excellence* 2). When Paterson looks back at her early writing, she can see that her children are the "very persons who have taken away time and space [to write] and who have given me something to say" (*Gates of Excellence* 3). Paterson has a handprinted sign in her office that reads in Greek the following: "Before the Gates of Excellence the High Gods Have Placed Sweat" (*Gates of Excellence* 3).

The religious mindset that Paterson engages with echoes within her many layers of storytelling, writing and beliefs. As Paterson states, "no matter how good the writing may be, a book is never complete until it is read [and] the writer does not pass through the gates of excellence alone …" (*Gates of Excellence* 4). As an author, Paterson seeks to share what it means to be both a reader and a writer that struggles through those gates of excellence—whether here among the human world or in her own Christian mentality that reverberates her questions of belief. Paterson writes, "… that which makes it possible for us to seek truths about the universe and about ourselves has within itself the guarantee that we will never be able to find the Truth. Our knowledge must be forever fragmented because that is the nature of systematic knowledge" (*Gates of Excellence* 11). Paterson believes that one must think for one's self which is dependent upon one's mastery of language and a desire to enrich a life so as to enjoy it.

As a writer, Paterson shares what she cares about deeply for herself and others and believes that we all seek to find a connection with one another. There are countless good books to read because they make the right connections that people need to have in this world and, as Paterson conveys, "[books] pull together for us a world that is falling apart. They are the words that integrate us, stretch us, judge us, comfort, and heal us. They are the words that mirror the Word of Creation, bringing order out of chaos" (*Gates of Excellence* 18). Words can be for evil or for good and authors must take risks to do their best in giving children the words that will help

shape their imagination and minds. Those miraculous leaps into the world of a child's imagination allow for "connections in science, art and in the living of this life that will reveal the little truths. For it is these little truths that point to the awesome, unknowable unity, the Truth, which holds us together and makes us members one of another" (*Gates of Excellence* 18). With the notions of life processes, we are captivated by the metamorphosis of time while our oblivious wonders come to realize that reading provides to us a gift of how grandeur the world really is.

In her book, *The Sense of Wonder*, Rachel Carson writes that if she had influence over the good fairy who gives gifts to children at the christening, she would ask the fairy to give each child in the world with, "a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life, as an unfailing antidote against the boredom and disenchantment of later years, the sterile occupation with things that are artificial, the alienation from the sources of our strength" (42-43). If a child is to keep alive this inborn sense of wonder without any such gift from the fairies, the child will need the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with the child that sense of joy, excitement, and mystery of the world we live in.

Paterson explains that "the best people to talk about a book are not writers, but readers … the work belongs to the creative mind of my readers … [and] I have no more right to tell readers how they should respond to what I have written than they have [on] how to write it" (*Gates of Excellence* 24). It can be a wonderful feeling for writers to have readers realize what the writer is trying to say in the story, and it can be even more delightful for a reader to find something new that the author did not know was there. Paterson reveals that this happens because of who the reader is, not simply because of who she is or what she has done when writing the story. Therefore, there must be something in the story itself to evoke a powerful response from the child reader. For Paterson, "writing and reading are both gifts, neither of which has meaning

without the other" (*Gates of Excellence* 26). The gift of Paterson's writing comes from how she cultivates it through what she reads, thinks, speaks about, looks at, and listens to which is constantly meshing with the love, fear, hate and weeping moments that life throws at her.

Paterson knows she has boundaries that help her be a natural storyteller. The first one being that "a book for young readers has to tell a story." The second limitation being the "length of the novel" has to appropriate for a child's attention span. The third being that "I write what I can," the fourth "has to do with the characters—that they must be characters a reader can care about," and the fifth limitation "has to do with theme and the need to write not only a story that is going somewhere but a story about something that matters deeply" (37). Paterson understands that human life is passing and that we must find what we will value in the world by learning how we live in it. Paterson's writing reflects those values which we find in the strong themes of her books for young readers with stories that show the harsh realities of loneliness and suffering but also of love and hope that transcends the hearts of all of her readers.

With themes of loneliness and suffering also comes questioning and Paterson writes about such questioning in her first children's book, a Sunday school text titled *Who Am I?* which was published in 1966. *Who Am I?* unfolds with the young reader dropping into a conversation with the writer revealing their own "Questions about the things that make us who we are. Questions about the world we live in … Questions about ourselves – what it means to be a real person – what death is and eternal life …" (Paterson 7). The first chapter, "Where in the World is God?" sets the tone of the text with its religious inquiry about God and that "everything is definitely not all right with the world" while wondering "*where on earth* God is. That's what the Bible is all about – the presence and work of God in this world [but] if God is at work in the world, why doesn't he do something about the mess it's in?" (*Who am I?* 12). Paterson goes on

to explain her personal religious questioning when she writes, “Many of us are caught between belief, on the one hand, that ‘this is my Father’s world,’ and the knowledge, on the other hand, that there are many things about this world which seem to contradict our belief” (*Who am I? 13).* There are times for many people when they ask the question: How could God let this happen? and one day Paterson asked this question. Paterson’s upbringing allows her to formulate a Christian-based solution that “God has neither deserted [us] nor has he taken away [our] freedom and responsibilities. Instead, God has chosen to do his work through [us]” (*Who am I*? 21). The questions about God and the hopeful explanations she has learned from her early Christian missionary life are what Paterson uses as themes in both *Bridge to Terabithia and Jacob Have I Loved.*

In 1938, Judy Susman (Blume) was born in Elizabeth, New Jersey, and spent much of her childhood reading while developing elaborate characters or stories within her own imagination. Blume claims that her family was a lot like the one she depicts in *Starring Sally J. Freedman as Herself* novel with her mom always being worried that she would hurt herself and her dad being her hero. Blume’s father, who was a dentist like Sally’s father, enjoyed talking with people, especially when his patients would often seek out his advice about personal problems. Blume admits she was never able to talk to her father about her own doubts and curiosities because she believed it was harder for a child to talk to a parent about topics such as her questions about God.

Blume describes herself as a shy, skinny child of suburbia who suffered from eczema, loved reading, drama, dancing, singing, performing, and playing make believe in dark and mysterious places such as her hideout in the attic. While in the attic, Blume would play dress-up, act out stories, and make up adventures while playing with her dolls. Although Blume would spend a lot of time alone as a younger child, her imagination kept her from being lonely. Blume

admits, “I was a great daydreamer … I was a great pretender, always making up stories inside my head” (Tracy 2). Always inventing stories, Blume regularly fantasized about what she would be when she grew up saying, “I dreamed about becoming a cowgirl, a detective, a spy, a great actress, or a ballerina,” because they seemed to live exciting lives (Tracy 2). Blume had no interest in being a dentist like her father or a homemaker like her mother, and never really thought about being a writer even though she loved to read.

The downside of having an incredibly active imagination was that Blume was fearful as a child, especially of the dark and their basement. Blume recalls that her older brother would terrorize her because she believed he delighted in torturing her by taking advantage of her fears. One of those fears was when they relocated to Miami Beach because her brother developed a kidney infection while her father stayed behind in New Jersey. Like Sally, Blume’s mother moved the children with the hopes that the tropical climate would improve her brother’s health. Initially Blume was unhappy in Miami Beach due to not knowing anyone at the new school and being homesick for her father. After a few weeks though, Blume started making friends and now remembers Florida as being a wonderful adventure that became the “most memorable years of my childhood” (Tracy 3). The story of Blume’s childhood parallels the Sally story exactly when Blume reveals that the family rented a tiny studio apartment in Miami Beach with a goldfish pond in the courtyard, and how she and her brother would share the daybeds in the living room while her mother and grandmother also shared a bed. Blume also missed her father terribly and he would fly down to see the family once a month just like Sally’s father. Like Sally, Blume’s fantasy life offered an escape from her real-life fears of losing her father and the deaths that constantly occurred to family members as the war ended.

Blume would use these stories to explore things she did not feel comfortable talking about with her parents or friends, such as issues with religion, the pogroms, the holocaust and her own Jewish identity. In 1956, Blume graduated from Battin High School with honors and enrolled in Boston University but contracted a viral infection that caused her to withdraw. When Blume was finally able to go back to school, she enrolled at New York University because she decided she wanted to become an elementary school teacher and "find a husband … because that's what was expected of most young women back then" (Tracy 13). During her sophomore year, Blume met a law student named John Blume and they planned to marry. With a few weeks before the wedding day, Blume's father died unexpectedly and her lifelong fear of him dying young became heartbreakingly true. Blume felt that her wedding day should have been one of the happiest days of her life, but with her father not there to walk her down the aisle to give her away, it became filled with sorrow.

Blume graduated with a B.S. in education, but she never worked as a teacher like she thought she would because by the time she graduated, she was already pregnant with her first child. Blume was plagued by a growing restlessness and somewhere along the way she admits that her mother's wishes for her about finding a good husband and good provider became her way of life. Blume recalls that she "didn't resent it … [and] only had second thoughts about it later" (Tracy 14). By the time Blume turned twenty-five, she had two small children, a degree in education but never became a teacher. Blume remembers, "I loved my little children, but I was not really happy … It was a nice marriage, but I was dying" with her anxieties expressed in rashes and allergies (Tracy 14). Blume's emotional malaise was exacerbated by not having any close friends live near her in suburban New Jersey. She felt trapped while the world was passing her by. In 1966, everything changed when the 1960s Cultural Revolution happened with anti-

Vietnam war demonstrations, demands for civil rights, a push for female equality and a call for more openness regarding a person's body and sexuality. Blume wanted to become a part of it all saying, "I wanted to go to Woodstock … I wanted to be active in the women's movement and the sexual revolution" (Tracy 15). Just as Blume did when she was a child, she kept her anxieties and problems to herself because she felt she was unable to talk about them to anyone—especially her mother.

It was clear something vital was missing from Blume's life so to fill the void she began considering her career options. By 1969, Blume was able to fully explore her childhood imaginations so that she could tell stories that had been developing in her head. *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* and *Starring Sally J. Freedman as Herself* have the central characters' thoughts and concerns that parallel what Blume remembers around the same age and during her own childhood with questions like: *Will I fit in and be accepted*? and *What religion should I be to gain that acceptance?* Margaret's and Sally's preoccupation with religion and the idea of God allows children a window into how they can also sort out their own feelings about God and religion. When Judy Blume's first books were published in 1970, "young readers were devouring books which treated the dilemmas of the maturation process" (Westwater 5). With this in mind, Judy Blume began her life as a mother and realized that she wanted to be a storyteller who addresses the sort of topics that preteens face during their adolescent years while forming a sense of self and agency.

Blume's commitment to readers, her refusal to compromise her ideals, and her dedication to writing honestly with respect for the intelligence of her audience, have made her an enduring role model and icon for adolescents. Blume's books enjoy enormous popularity, but they are also highly subject to censorship attempts because of their frankness on religious enquiring, lack

of traditional moralizing and sexual content. Attempts at censoring *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* continue with reports that it "denigrates religion and parental authority" while being "sexually offensive and amoral" (Naylor and Wintercorn 32). Blume resists the idea that her books are problematic narratives when she states, "Life is full of problems. Some [are] big and some small" (Naylor and Wintercorn 31). She points out that her ideas for the stories she writes come from her own childhood concerns. Blume claims that when she first started writing for children, she did not know enough to know that she was being controversial; she was just writing from her memories while it was still fresh in her mind.

Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia* and *Jacob Have I Loved* and Blume's *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* and *Starring Sally J. Freedman as Herself* are all widely read stories that impacted the young reading audience in very personal ways. For example, *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* was the *go-to* book for young girls wanting to know more about puberty and their own sexuality but were too afraid to ask about it. In *Bridge to Terabithia* the young protagonist escapes to seek allegorical liminal spaces within the framework of the story. Readers can easily observe how each author's novel progresses in complexity, realism and originality. The emotional approaches by Blume and Paterson not only provide entertainment for the young reading audience to enjoy but also laid out groundwork for questioning what it means to be religious or have religion.

CHAPTER 2: QUESTIONING CHRISTIAN TEACHINGS ABOUT DEATH AND LOSS IN *BRIDGE TO TERABITHIA*

"Jess turned to Leslie in unbelief. 'That whole Jesus thing is really interesting, isn't it? … It's really kind of a beautiful story' [says Leslie]. … 'It ain't beautiful,' May Belle broke in. Jess reached down into the deepest pit of his mind, 'It's because we're all vile sinners God made Jesus die.' … 'Do you think that's true?' [asks Leslie]. … Jess was shocked, 'It's in the Bible, Leslie.' She shook her head, 'You have to believe it, but you hate it. I don't have to believe it, and I think it's beautiful.' She shook her head again …" (108). Jess tries to explain the mystery of the Crucifixion to Leslie whose parents appear to the reading audience as being atheists. This conversation that Jess, May Belle and Leslie have after an Easter Sunday morning at church echo throughout the final events in the *Bridge to Terabithia* novel written by Katherine Paterson. Because the story parallels her own son's journey through faith and questioning, Paterson weaves an intimate source for children to have during their notions of expectant behavior and the mystery of uncertainty or pain they find themselves in when querying through their own faith and religious identity.

Paterson's novel is haunted by the meaning of suffering, and, for the Christian writer, that includes suffering and pain that are significant within the act of love that culminates in the crucifixion of Christ, the Son of God, the Word made flesh, the supreme Other who was rejected, reviled, and persecuted. Paterson's novel follows the Christian ideological thread with difficult events and divine maturation. The personal basis of the novel includes topics such as loneliness, problems with peers, bullying, restrictive role issues, loss, and grief which have an impact on the children who read them thereby providing them a means to navigate their world.

Paterson portrays the novel with a deep friendship between Jess and Leslie who cross a creek into an imaginary world that includes fantasy, play and a closeness to nature and animals which provides a sense of the sacred. The friendship is almost tangible in that it is genuine, unpretentious, and based on mutual trust, respect, and love. Paterson lyrically foreshadows the captivating alliance between the two children when she captures the essence of their silent oaths to one another as they claim Terabithia as a land of their own:

"I see a land bright and clear

And the time's coming near

When we'll live in this land

You and me, hand in hand …" (39).

Being friends with Leslie changes Jess and opens him up not just to the hidden parts of himself, but to the greater magic of the world around him. Because of their budding friendship, Jess and Leslie are teased at school for being close so they decide to create a make-believe world.

Beyond the creek behind Leslie's house, the two children settle down on a patch of forest and Leslie names it the secret land of Terabithia. Terabithia becomes Jess and Leslie's escape from the human world while it flourishes into a symbol of their enchanted friendship with Leslie declaring, "you and I would be the rulers of it" (50). Leslie creates Terabithia as a way for her and Jess to avoid their schoolmates' expectations of them and, within the world of Terabithia, Leslie lets her mind run free. As Paterson depicts the imaginary world that Jess and Leslie create, her words also parallel Genesis 1:1-30 when she writes, "Like God in the Bible, they looked at what they had made and found it very good" (51). Terabithia allows Leslie to dictate the world she lives in rather than having her behavior, gender expression and friendship constantly being under the threat of oppression or malice from her peers.

At the height of their happiness and relationship, Jess thinks to himself, "Leslie was more than his friend. She was his other, more exciting self – his way to Terabithia and all the worlds beyond" (59). Terabithia becomes Jess's promised land and as Jess and Leslie's friendship deepens, it too becomes a gateway to worlds beyond his own imagination. Jess's strong feelings for Leslie show that true friendship is not just a distraction to a lonely life, but a key to other realms, both imaginary and in oneself. Paterson allows the shining friendship to envelope the reading audience when Jess ponders about their secret world and feels the warmth of their alliance as he thinks to himself, "Just walking down the hill toward the woods made something warm and liquid steal through his body … the more he could feel the beating of his heart … he swung out toward the other bank with a kind of wild exhilaration … taller and stronger and wiser in that mysterious land" (59). This profound moment foreshadows the ways in which Leslie's friendship will continue to guide Jess through the realm of grief when she dies.

Paterson portrays the relationship as such a life-giving thing for Jess that it allows the reading audience to almost parallel the baptism stories found in John 1:32 – as a newness of life for Jess that he is now alive with a sense of renewal to the beauty that Leslie creates for him. Paterson creates the scene in the pine forest reverently when she writes, "… the ground was carpeted with golden needles. 'I used to think this place was haunted,' Jess had confessed to Leslie … 'Oh, but it is,' she said. 'But you don't have to be scared.' It's not haunted with evil things.' 'How do you know?' Jess asks. 'You can just feel it. Listen.' Leslie was right. They stood there, not moving, not wanting … to break the spell" (60). The connection Jess and Leslie share, as well as the sacred place of Terabithia, encourages bonds and alliances Jess and Leslie desire in the real world.

For Paterson, this alliance is the foundation to being a Christian because the Christian finds God in all people, places, events, and experiences. There is a meaning to pain which can never fully be understood, but suffering is somehow made bearable because it is shared with the Son of God - who suffered because he loves humanity. Terabithia becomes this hallowed area to Jess in that it provides the strength he will need to overcome his anguish and allow himself to share the beauty of Terabithia with others. The reading audience obtains a glimpse of this when Paterson has Leslie say, "This is not an ordinary place … even the rulers of Terabithia come into it only at times of greatest sorrow or of greatest joy. We must strive to keep it sacred. It would not do to disturb the Spirits" (60). A last supper is commenced at the end of this intense scene when Jess and Leslie share "a solemn meal together of crackers and dried fruit," which also parallels Mark 14:12-25 and the final meal Jesus had with the apostles when breaking bread and drinking wine the night before his crucifixion (60).

Jess and Leslie continue to visit Terabithia throughout the week, even as the creek continues to rise and flood the banks on either side of it. Jess begins to feel afraid of the rising water each time he must cross it, but Leslie seems fine and shows no concern about it. Leslie believes evil forces have put a curse on their beloved kingdom and says, "Methinks some evil being has put a curse on our beloved kingdom … Let us go even up into the sacred grove and inquire of the Spirits what this evil might be and how we must combat it" (116). Jess follows Leslie into the pines as she addresses the Spirits of the realm and says, "O Spirits of the grove … we are come on behalf of our beloved kingdom which lies even now under the spell of some evil, unknown force. Give us, we beseech thee, wisdom to discern this evil, and power to overcome it" (118). Leslie's plea to the Spirits of the forest parallel forms of Wiccan worship and it is at this point the reading audience can tie the biblical stories of the Great Flood found in Genesis

6:9-22, with Noah and his family being saved from the floodwaters while others perished due to their wicked ways. Does Jess have premonitions of fear concerning the water that foreshadow Leslie's death and his Christian identity?

After Leslie falls to her death while crossing the creek that divides Terabithia from her backyard one stormy morning, Paterson allows the reading audience to recognize how the lessons learned within this great friendship can also soften the loss of that friendship by helping Jess cope with grief and loss. Jess's family try to help him realize that he must confront the fact of Leslie's death when Jess thinks to himself, "… 'No, it's a lie. Leslie ain't dead' … *Leslie – dead – girl friend – rope – broke – fell – you – you – you.* The words exploded in his head … *God – dead – you – Leslie – dead – you*" (132). Jess's father gathers him in his arms as a father does his child and this scene corresponds with the numerous bible stories of how God carries and leads his children (The Bible, Isaiah 40:11, 60:1-9).

Paterson continues Jess's healing process when she writes, "His father pulled Jess over on his lap … 'I hate her,' Jess said through his sobs. 'I hate her. I wish I'd never seen her in my whole life.' His father stroked his hair without speaking. Jess grew quiet. They both watched the water. 'Do you believe people go to hell, really go to hell, I mean?' [asks Jess]. 'You ain't worrying about Leslie Burke?' [his father asks]. '… do you know what God does?' [asks Jess]. 'Lord, boy, don't be a fool. God ain't gonna send any little girls to hell.' [proclaims his father]" (148). Jess questions God and what he believes about the Christian religion with the inquiries he poses to his father about God and Leslie. When Jess says, "… 'Well, May Belle said' …" and his father responds by saying, "May Belle ain't God," it gives the reading audience a glimpse of the uncertainty, conflict and searching that Jess is debating over in his mind about God and

death. Jess never thought of Leslie as a little girl, but he believes that God might since Leslie would not be "eleven until November" (148).

With events taken from real life experiences, Paterson is able to weave the story around what her own son faced and suffered when he lost a beloved friend. Paterson has Jess parallel those abject life events her son went through, as well as the questioning about what he believes concerning the Christian God, but trusts that his friendship with Leslie provides him with the tools necessary to get through his grief. Paterson writes the story with the understanding that only love can heal the painful rupture of losing a friend and that rupture, as painful as it is, must be confronted so that an identity – whether Christian or not - may form.

As the story comes to a close, Jess understands that the lessons Leslie taught him will help him through his present state of mourning, but will it help him through the larger confusions and disappointments that life will surely bring? This is shown when Paterson has Jess choose to commemorate Leslie's death by returning to Terabithia to "do something fitting … [and] make a funeral wreath for the queen" (152). Paterson provides a powerful scene of Christian faith after Jess makes the wreath when she writes, "A red cardinal flew down to the bank, cocked its brilliant head, and seemed to stare at the wreath … The bird hopped about a moment more …" (152). For many Christians, the red cardinal is a symbol of faith and thought to be a messenger of God since it can be interpreted as a representative of one of the departed loved ones attempting contact in the human realm. Jess continues on by saying quietly, "It's a sign from the Spirits … we made a worthy offering" … and begins a prayer with, "Father, into Thy hands I commend her spirit" (153). Jess appears to be walking a fine line on what he believes about the Spirits of the grove and what he has learned over the years about the God in the Bible and

church. In this scene, Jess quietly acknowledges the Spirits, but prays to the "Father" and places Leslie's spirit in "Thy" hands.

As a ten-year-old boy returning to school and the ordinariness of life, Jess continues to struggle with his beliefs and Paterson portrays this brilliantly with Jess having silent sayings to himself using the word "Lord" as if he needs to gather strength when trying to comfort another person (159). The Jess that *was* before Leslie would not have been able to console another person let alone a teacher at school. Leslie took him from the cow pasture into Terabithia and it was in that sacred land that Jess grew strong. Paterson portrays Leslie as the one who pushes Jess to see beyond "the shining world - huge and terrible and beautiful and very fragile … [but] it was time for him to move out. It was up to him to pay back to the world in beauty and caring what Leslie had loaned him in vision and strength" (161). Over the painful months following Leslie's death, Jess realizes that the love of his friend changes his life and helps him understand the paradox of despair and loss. Jess will continue to form his identity as he grows older but his questioning about God and his ways may always be persistent in his mind.

Paterson brings the bad experience of death and respects its power because "she knows … [that] the contest between good and evil or hope and despair will go on long after she has [departed this world] and puts her trust in the idea that there is an infinite order which demands that human life prevail" (Westwater 70). Paterson's son and her own experience of loss allows the *Bridge to Terabithia* novel to be a positive influence because it prompts the reading audience to study their own feelings of religious estrangement and questioning during a sense of identity frustration. As Mark West writes, "authors … often write with the intention of perpetuating their moral values. Similarly, when adults provide a youngster with a children's book, they may hope that the child will absorb the moral dictates that it contains" (Rollin and West 152). Paterson's

story allows not only the reader but also the author herself to enter into a process of becoming and developing themselves through the transforming power of writing literature that explores and seeks the meaning of the human experience which permits us to respond to the religious questioning we may encounter ourselves.

CHAPTER 3: QUESTIONING CHRISTIAN TEACHINGS ABOUT LOVE IN *JACOB HAVE I LOVED*

"During the summer of 1941, every weekday morning at the top of the tide, McCall Purnell and I would board my skiff and go progging for crab … Call was a year older than I and … being fat and nearsighted, he was dismissed by most of the island boys. Call and I made quite a pair. At thirteen I was tall and large boned, with delusions of beauty and romance … We were a good team on the water. I could pole a skiff quickly and quietly … and he could spy a crab by just a tip of the claw through grass and muck" (Paterson 5-6). Louise reminisces about the easy-going, automatic-like friendship she and Call had before he enlisted in the Army to join the fight in World War II and when they did not have any other friends but each other on the crabbing shores of their hometown island. Louise's rendering of her life when she was young and living on Rass Island takes place as she, now an adult woman, is returning to her childhood home to help her elderly mother move off the island while waves of questioning and sorrow come floating back to haunt her.

Those disturbing memories of being able to pray to God envelope her when she recalls, "That night I lay in bed with an emptiness chewing away inside of me. I said my prayers, trying to push it away with ritual, but it kept oozing back round the worn edges of the words … But that night 'Now I lay me' came back unbidden in the darkness … 'If I should die …' It didn't push back the emptiness. It snatched and tore at it, making the hole larger and darker … There was something about the thought of God being with me that made me feel more alone than ever" (Paterson 41). These words from Sara Louise Bradshaw resonate throughout her reflections of past childhood events which sets the tone of how Paterson's *Jacob Have I Loved* is written in a first-person narration with a substantial gap between the actual time of the story and the time

when the story is narrated. The narrator has greater knowledge and life experience than the Louise character, who happens to be herself at an earlier age. Louise reminiscences of a time when she was young and struggled with prayer while she examined the world she lives in – just like Paterson did as she was growing up within her own Christian family during World War II.

As the narrator, Louise reveals to the reading audience a susceptible young girl who recalls hymn songs while continuously practicing a form of *self-defense* against jealousy that borders on hate toward her pretty, talented, and admired twin, Caroline. Paterson weaves the sisterly relationship brilliantly when she writes, "I was sitting there … thinking how pleased my father would be to come home … and smell his favorite [she-crab] soup … bathing my sister and grandmother in kindly feelings that neither deserved, when Caroline said, 'I've decided to write a book about my life. Once you're known … once you're famous, information like that is very valuable' … She said all this in that voice of hers that made me feel slightly nauseated … the one she used when she came home from the mainland for her music lessons, where she'd been told for the billionth time how gifted she was. I excused myself from the table. The last thing I needed to hear that day was the story of my sister's life, in which I, her twin, was allowed a very minor role" (17). Caroline, who has always received more attention because she was born weak and almost died, has Louise feeling as if she is being treated unfairly by her parents and grandmother. Louise criticizes the moment of her birth as compared to Caroline when she says to herself, "I was the elder by a few minutes. I always treasured the thought of those minutes. They represented the only time in my life when I was the center of everyone's attention. From the moment Caroline was born, she snatched it all for herself" (19). The feelings of sibling rivalry are evoked, and the reading audience cannot help but feel that this dissension hinders Louise's ability to step away from the voluminous glow of her sister that she creates.

The most revealing part of the novel is when Louise constructs her character as an object in relation to her sister, her parents, and all other characters of the narrative. Louise patterns her young life according to the Jacob and Esau Bible story, which Paterson creatively composes as part of the title of the novel, by making herself appear to the reader as the unloved twin. For Louise, the transformation from the adolescent rebel against the perception of herself as Esau in the biblical Jacob and Esau tale allows for the book's title to be derived from a biblical quotation, "Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated" (Malachi 1). Louise thinks everyone from God down to even the feral island cats show a preference toward her twin sister, Caroline, as she reminisces "When my mother and grandmother told the story of our births, it was mostly of how Caroline had refused to breathe … 'But where was I?' I asked. A cloud passed over my mother's eyes and I knew she could not remember. 'In the basket,' she said. 'Grandma … put you in the basket.' 'Did you, Grandma?' I asked. 'How should I know?' she snapped. 'It was a long time ago.' I felt a cold all over, as though I was the newborn infant a second time, cast aside and forgotten" (20). Louise continues to bring back memories of how the stories always left the other twin, the stronger twin, washed and dressed and lying in a basket with feelings of being "clean and cold and motherless" while asking "… 'Grandma … tell me about when I was a baby' … 'How can I remember? It's been a long time' … My mother, seeing my distress, said, 'You were a good baby Louise. You never gave us a minute's worry.' She meant it to comfort me, but it only distressed me further. Shouldn't I have been at least a minute's worry? Wasn't it all the months of worry that had made Caroline's life so dear to them all?" (21). The premise of the story is a metaphor with Louise mentally comparing herself to Esau which represents Louise's understanding of herself as being mistreated with ongoing questions of why. In an interview with Jack Wilde, Paterson reveals that, "… story is paramount … [and] writing …

answers a genuine question of your own … if you have a question … the book represents the struggle with the deepest questions of your life" (Rief and Barbieri 51). In the novel, Louise continues her struggle with prayer, as well as her personal thoughts about her sister and how she is wrestling with her relationship with God, which parallel Paterson's own religious questioning during her young adult years.

Louise recalls childhood memories of gatherings wherein Caroline is "tiny and exquisite, her blonde curls framing a face that is glowing with laughter" and Louise being the "fat dark shadow … [with] eyes cut sideways, thumb in mouth [and] pudgy hands" (21). The way Louise illustrates how the twin girls appear to the reader is reflective of how she sees herself as being filled with a darkness of sin compared to her sister as a radiant light. Louise continues to struggle with memories of childhood events and remembers issues of extreme sickness both girls had, especially when she recollects times when Caroline and she were months old, sick with whooping cough. Louise thinks about how "everyone remembers that Captain Billy got the ferry out at 2:00 a.m. to rush Caroline and my mother to the hospital … we went that way through all of the old childhood diseases except for chicken pox … we both had a heavy case of that, but I only sport the scars … once my father referred to me teasingly as 'Old Scarface' and … I burst into tears. I suppose my father was used to treating me with a certain roughness … differently from the way he treated Caroline" (22). Because of the way her father treats her and his need to have a son help him on the waterman's boat to catch crabs for a living, Louise prays to God to turn her into a boy so she can join her father on the Chesapeake Bay. Louise berates herself with the knowledge that, "He needed a son and I would have given anything to be that son, but on Rass in those days, men's work and women's work were sharply divided, and a waterman's boat was not a place for a girl" (22). Louise keeps praying for God to turn her into a boy with such

passion that when her prayers seem to be unfulfilled, she loses hope with the God she has been taught to have faith in.

During her diminishing ideas of faith, Louise reveals that "Caroline is the kind of person other people sacrifice for … I was proud of my sister [for her talent of singing], but that year, something began to rankle beneath the pride. Life begins to turn upside down at thirteen … I thought the blame for my unhappiness must be fixed – on Caroline, my grandmother, my mother, even on myself … soon I was able to blame the war" (27). Even though Louise has been raised to be a good Christian girl, she believes something is not right about how she feels and continuously wonders why God would make her the inferior sister in her family. The thoughts hinder Louise from any chance to mature and overcome her struggles of feeling inadequate when she compares herself to her sister Caroline.

As news of the war reaches the island community, Louise finds out about the machinations of the German dictator and his Nazi army's plan to take over whole countries as well as the horrors of the Japanese powers with the attack on Pearl Harbor. The family is thankful for her father's World War I handicap that keeps him from being drafted with her mother saying, "Thank the Lord" (28). Although her mother does not often use the religious phrase, it is one that reveals it to be the true island expression because Rass Island has "lived in the fear and mercy of the Lord since the 19th century … [with attending] Sunday School and Sunday service morning and evening and Wednesday night prayer meetings where the more fervent would stand to witness the Lord's mercies of the preceding week and all the sick and straying would be held up in prayer before the Throne of Grace" (29). These revelations allow for the reading audience to acknowledge the depth of faith the community has while understanding the full immersion of religious practices the islanders attend on a weekly basis.

Paterson exposes the extremely strong religious tradition on Rass Island when she has Louise say to herself, "We keep the Sabbath. That meant no work, no radio, no fun on Sunday" (29). In view of this Fourth Commandment rule that is taken seriously, the reading audience is made aware of God's order when the scripture says, "Remember the sabbath day … keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work … for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore, the LORD blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it." (Exodus 20:8-11). Louise, filled with extreme boredom, tries to abide by the holiness of the sacred day but cannot endure it so she decides to listen to the radio on that fateful day of Sunday, December 7, 1941. As news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor is announced, Louise and her sister "were caught off guard by the tone of fear the announcer's voice could not conceal. Caroline's eyes went wide, and, as we listened, she did something she had never done before. She took my hand [and] we stood there, squeezing each other's hand to the point of pain. This is how our parents found us. There was no remonstrance for having broken the Fourth Commandment. The crime of the Japanese erased all lesser sinning" (31). With the events of the attack at Pearl Harbor creating a sense of purpose within the United States to enter the war, Louise realizes that her own secure and ordinary world would never be the same.

On the rare occasion when Louise thinks of herself in terms other than as an objectified human, an animal, or an inanimate object, she still manages to deny some degree of her own humanity as when a friend reaches out a hand to help her and she thinks he is acting "as if I were a lady" (177). Although Louise is a young girl in love with her budding feelings for the older Captain, she cannot perceive herself as an actual lady. Paterson's development of the Louise

character in this way allows the novel to function as a comparable story that hits below the surface and creates "the deepest part … reaching in … and because you are a storyteller you answer it by means of a story" (Rief and Barbieri 51). Paterson is a writer and novelist so answering struggles with a story allows the struggle to be the story – even while questioning and wondering if any of the internal battles will be true to the characters she writes about. With Louise, Paterson unveils that struggle about a God who gives and takes within the Christian religion by having Louise's feelings of being judged and damned shattered when Caroline's voice of light purges "the darkness [and sings]

> "I wonder as I wander out under the sky,
> Why Jesus the Savior did come for to die.
> For poor, ornery people like you and like I,
> I wonder as I wander - Out under the sky." (37).

Caroline's voice comforts Louise for moments at a time, but the sibling rivalry comes back to haunt her when she settles back to the ordinary life of living within Caroline's overwhelming brightness. Louise continues in her thoughts believing, "[Caroline] was so sure, so present, so easy, so light and gold, while I was all gray and shadow. I was not ugly or monstrous. That might have been better. Monsters command attention, if only for their freakishness. My parents would have wrung their hands and tried to make it up to me, as parents will with a handicapped or especially ugly child … But I had never caused my parents a 'minute's worry.' Didn't they know that worry proves you care? Didn't they realize that I needed their worry to assure myself that I was worth something?" (42). Louise longs for the day when her parents will have to notice her, give her all the attention and concern that she feels is her due. The desire for attention fills

Louise's daydreams with fantasies of Caroline being forced to bow down on her knees to her like the biblical story of Joseph and his wish for his brothers and parents to bow before him.

Fantasy plays a small part in Paterson's writing, but the formation of it within the story helps the reading audience feel where the emotional limits are within Louise's mindset. "Fantasy can draw a clearer line between good and evil … in realistic fiction, good and evil are mixed together in each person … fantasy didn't give me that deep comfort, it was too different from experience; realistic fiction let me read to know I am not alone … my characters … are part of my emotional experience" (Rief and Barbieri 52). While the title of the book signifies to the reading audience about the abnormal sibling rivalry between Jacob and Esau, Paterson writes with Louise's remembrance of those hateful thoughts about her sister which are indicative to the same level of sibling rivalry found in the Hebrew Bible Book of Genesis. Paterson elaborates the hostility Louise feels when she writes, "Hate. That was the forbidden word. I hated my sister. I, who belonged to a religion which taught that simply to be angry with another made one liable to the judgment of God and that to hate was the equivalent of murder. I often dreamed that Caroline was dead … Always there were two feelings in the dream – a wild exultation that now I was free of her and … terrible guilt" (80). The feelings are ones of damnation toward Caroline and Louise believes that she might go to hell for hating and wishing she was dead. Louise also begins to feel anger towards God because she cannot let go of these bad thoughts that filter in her dreams about her sister. Paterson portrays this vividly when she has Louise reveal her innermost thoughts,

> "Sometimes I would rage at God, at his monstrous almighty injustice. But my raging always turned into remorse. My wickedness was unforgivable, yet I begged the Lord to have mercy on me, a sinner. Hadn't God forgiven David who not only committed

> murder, but adultery as well? And then I would remember that David was one of God's pets. God always found a way to let his pets get by with murder. How about Moses? How about Paul, holding the coats while Stephen was stoned? I would search the Scriptures, but not for enlightenment or instruction. I was looking for some tiny shred of evidence that I was not to be eternally damned for hating my sister. Repent and be saved! But as fast as I would repent, resolving never again to hate, some demon would slip into my soul …" (82).

Louise's faith in God makes it tough just to be a normal teenager. With these thoughts, Louise worries about sinning and going to hell until she cannot stand it anymore and decides to abandon what she considers to be the holy traditions of the community. Paterson writes about difficult topics that are important to appreciate because they combine the accuracy and literal truthfulness readers expect when reading forms of historical fiction along with another kind of power that readers can associate with themes of ethics and religion.

A big religious turning point for Louise begins to take shape when she believes that all of the terrible things that are happening to her are because God hates her. Paterson demonstrates how the scene unfolds for Louise when she writes,

> "Since the day we were born, twins like Jacob and Esau, the younger had ruled the older. … 'Jacob have I loved …' Suddenly my stomach flipped. Who was speaking? … I took my Bible … and looked up the passage Grandma had cited. Romans, the ninth chapter and the thirteenth verse. The speaker was God. I was shaking all over as I closed the book … There was, then, no use struggling or even trying. It was God himself who hated me. And without cause. … God had chosen to hate me. And if my heart was hard, that was his doing as well" (195).

The idea of God speaking to Louise and her belief that he hates her allows for Louise to stop believing in God. Here Paterson touches on a deep need for truth that depicts the simultaneity of alienation and integration in our relationship to the facts of existence and our humanity. Telling the truth in terms of our time on earth as well as in reference to her private beliefs, Paterson writes how children can move from a state of flawed and bitter experience to one of coherence and insight about the ultimate nature of human life. Paterson explains Louise's frame of mind when she pens, "I did not pray anymore. I had even stopped going to church. … One Sunday morning I just didn't come back from the crab house in time for church. My grandmother lit into me, but … my father quietly took my part. I was old enough, he said, to decide for myself. When she launched into prophecies of eternal damnation he told her that God was my Judge, not they. … I did not miss church, but sometimes I wished I might pray" (201). With this admission, Louise does not have any use for God so she just stops going to church and praying as she believes that even if she did pray, God would not listen to her prayers to keep her best friend Call safe.

As the story comes to a close, Louise finally understands God's plan for her all along – that one must walk through valleys to be raised into God's heaven. M. Sarah Smedman elaborates this journey when she writes, "Almost imperceptibly, step by tiny step, she begins her ascent from her spiritual dark night through encounters with those closest to her, sacramental encounters because they are the occasions of insights that lead her ultimately away from her rancorous obsession with herself and her sister to understanding and faith and hope" (182). The spiritual journey of trust and acceptance of herself as one of God's children envelopes Louise as she creates a new life of her own. Paterson has Louise's future husband say to her something she must acknowledge to be true when she writes, "… 'God in heaven,' – I thought at first it was an

oath, it had been so long since I'd heard the expression used in any other way – 'God in heaven's been raising you for this valley from the day you were born' …" (256). Paterson's message to the reading audience is eloquently provided because Louise realizes that God does care for her and has a plan for her – He always did – every time she "wanders out under the sky …" (263). Paterson shapes Louise's story for the reader to acknowledge that God loved Louise since the day she was born. As Paterson responds in her interview, "I want stories to do … what they do for me … to meet new people and journey alongside them with questions and curiosity about who they are and what they do and say … to examine carefully those events that seem unclear, that create tension, that knock against what they know to be true" (Rief and Barbieri 194). In her story, Paterson has the reading audience inquire about the thoughts and feelings we all have when examining our own path in life and religious identity. Paterson wants us to use the information we gain to inform and enrich our understanding about how we grasp what it means to have religion and the identity it creates within our own families.

CHAPTER 4: QUESTIONING RELIGIOUS AFFILIATIONS IN *ARE YOU THERE GOD? IT'S ME, MARGARET*

Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret ushered in the age of realism in fiction for young people when it was published in 1970 with the novel being a depiction in the life Judy Blume had known as a preteenager. Blume explained, "*Margaret* was the first book I wrote where I said, 'Ok, now I write from my own experience,' …" (Weidt 48). Blume was a young wife and mother in her late twenties when she wrote *Margaret* as she reminisced her own childhood experiences. In the novel, the central character's fears, anxieties, thoughts, and apprehensions are what Blume remembered when she was twelve and asked herself, "Will I be accepted? Will anybody ever know the real me?" (Naylor and Wintercorn 31). Young Margaret is also twelve years old and has just moved to Farbrook, New Jersey, with the same worries Blume had at that age. Margaret soon makes friends with other girls who like to share secrets, gossip on the phone, fuss about boys, talk about religion, discuss their developing bodies, and worry about when they will get their periods. Blume's childhood encounters with the preoccupation of religion and having to make new friends are threaded throughout the story. Because the story resembles her own journey through faith and questioning, Blume weaves a conversational experience for children as they navigate their own sense of religious identity when questioning God and the ambiguities they find themselves in when conversing with a God they have anxieties about.

In the narrative, Margaret has a Jewish father and Christian mother, so Margaret tries to have talks with God about her parents and events that happen around her. These conversations that Margaret has with God reverberate throughout the book. Although she keeps these conversations to herself, Blume writes, "My parents don't know I actually talk to God. I mean, if I told them they'd think I was some kind of religious fanatic or something. So I keep it very

private … My mother says God is a nice idea. He belongs to everybody" (Blume 16). Margaret's dialogues with God help her sort out her feelings about religion as well as ask for help with her other problems. In the process of constructing this novel, Blume tells the story that deals with a preteen trying to discover a religious identity. Along the way, Margaret engages in thoughtful religious questioning.

In the story, Margaret discovers something astonishing and unexpected. Unlike in New York, everyone in Farbrook socially classifies people by their religion. Because of this, Margaret becomes disoriented with how to belong in her new friend group and her new school. Margaret responds to her new teacher, Mr. Benedict's questions about herself and writes that she "likes long hair, the smell of rain … hates pimples, … when my mother is mad and religious holidays … [while] in school I want to have fun … and … learn enough to go to seventh grade" (Blume 32). Because Margaret's Dad and Mom have purposefully raised Margaret without religion, this poses a problem for her when her friends ask her about it. Even though Margaret talks to God privately, she does not tell her parents or friends that she has these personal conversations, nor does she attend any kind of religious services on her own.

Margaret tries to fit in with her new peer group and finds out that in order to seem *normal,* she will need to join either the local Young Men's Christian Organization (YMCA), if she is a Christian, or the Jewish Community Center, if she is going to be Jewish - according to her new friends, Nancy, Janie and Gretchen. Blume sets this up beautifully when she writes how Gretchen has to go to Hebrew school and cannot meet for their secret club on certain days with Janie asking, "'What about you Margaret? Do you go?' … 'No, I don't go,' [responds Margaret] with Nancy adding 'Margaret doesn't even go to Sunday school. Isn't that right?' … 'I'm not any religion' [replies Margaret, with] Gretchen exclaiming, 'You're not!' … (Blume 39).

Awkwardly Margaret tries to explain the religious identities of her parents when she says they are, “Nothing … my father [is] Jewish and uh … my mother [is] Christian” with this being the first time they were interested in anything she had to say while at the girl’s first secret club meeting (Blume 40). Margaret believes that since neither parent decides to be either religion, then she does not have to do anything with religion until she is asked about it further and replies, “Well, my mother’s parents … told her they didn’t want a Jewish son-in-law … [that] if she wanted to ruin her life that was her business. But they would never accept my father for her husband …” and “… my [other] grandmother wasn’t happy about getting a Christian daughter-in-law, but she at least accepted the situation” (Blume 40). Margaret goes on to tell her new friends that her parents decided not to conform to either religion and ended up eloping which is the reason why her and her family are not a part of the Jewish or Christian faiths.

These revelations pose a problem for the young Margaret though because her friend Janie creates an abyss of challenging thoughts for Margaret when she asks, “But if you aren’t any religion, how are you going to know if you should join the Y or the Jewish Community Center?” (Blume 40). With Janie’s question setting an unfamiliar stage toward a religious identity within the Farbrook community, Margaret is at a loss and replies, “I don’t know … I never thought about it …Maybe we won’t join either one” (Blume 40). Nancy informs Margaret that “*everybody* belongs to one or the other” with Margaret guessing that it “will be up to her parents” while wishing the girls would change the subject (Blume 41). These notions of worrying about how to talk to her parents and decide what religion she should choose creates the first of many conversations with God about religious questioning. Margaret begins hesitantly, “*… You know God, my new friends all belong to the Y or the Jewish Community Center. Which way am I supposed to go? I don’t know what you want me to do about that”* (Blume 42). These

kinds of questions to God formulate the basis of religious searching as a form of identity for Margaret which parallel the way Blume questioned her own religious identity as she recalls that "I don't think … I ever really admitted what I was feeling or what life was like or what … [my] hopes and dreams were" while living in suburban New Jersey during the fifties (Weidt 5).

Unlike Blume during her childhood, how Margaret feels about the idea of religion and religious holidays reveal themselves when her teacher, Mr. Benedict, inquires about her responses on the "getting-to-know-you paper" and asks, "why do you hate religious holidays?" (Blume 43). Margaret tries to compose herself and feels stupid about writing what she felt at the time claiming, "I really don't hate them at all" with Mr. Benedict replying that she "must have had a reason" to write it (Blume 43). Mr. Benedict promises that Margaret can tell him in confidence and that he will not share her explanation. Margaret tries to distract Mr. Benedict from his inquiry so as to avoid the conversation but Mr. Benedict waits and says to her, "I'm sure you have a perfectly good reason for hating religious holidays" (Blume 44). Margaret realizes that Mr. Benedict is not going to forget about her responses and his probing so she decides to get it over with quickly by announcing that "None of those holidays are special to me. I don't belong to any religion," Mr. Benedict then asks, "And your parents?" and Margaret replying "They aren't any religion. I'm supposed to choose my own when I grow up. If I want to, that is" (Blume 44). Following the conversation with Mr. Benedict, Margaret hopes he believes she is normal because no one has ever asked her about her religion before. The events leading up to this point in the story allow for Margaret to be aware that she never really thought about religion until moving to Farbrook and going to a different school while trying to make new friends. Margaret decides to think about what religion means to her since "all of a sudden, it [is] the big thing in my life" (Blume 45).

As part of Margaret's quest to fit in her new school, she embarks on a yearlong school project to research different religions and figure out which religion she wants to be. Blume portrays Margaret's child-like analysis vividly when she writes, "I mean, I couldn't come up with a year-long study about … my feelings … about God. Or could I? I mean, not God exactly – but maybe about religion. If I could figure out which religion to be I'd know if I wanted to join the Y or the Jewish Community Center. That was meaningful …" (Blume 60). Margaret talks to God about it just to make sure, "… *What would you think of me doing a project on religion? You wouldn't mind, would you God? I'd tell you all about it. And I won't make any decisions without asking you first. I think it's time for me to decide what to be. I can't go on being nothing forever, can I?*" (Blume 60). With Margaret's mind made up to contemplate what religion means to her, she embarks on a path toward where she thinks God might be.

Margaret beings her journey by examining the Jewish faith and asks her Grandma, "Can I go to temple with you sometime?" explaining to her that "I'd like to go to temple and see what it's all about" (Blume 62). Knowing how her son and daughter-in-law feel about bringing religion into Margaret's life, her Grandma asks, "… 'Does your mother know?' … I shook my head. 'Your father?' … I shook my head again. Grandma slapped her hand against her forehead. 'Be sure to tell them it's not my idea! Would I be in trouble!' … 'Don't worry, Grandma.' (Blume 63). Margaret asks her mother if it is ok to go with her Grandma to the temple, but her mother is not happy about Margaret deciding to inquire about what religion means and fervently responds, "… 'That's ridiculous! You know how Daddy and I feel about religion' … 'You said I could choose when I grow up!' … 'But you're not ready to choose yet, Margaret!' … 'I just want to try it out' … 'I just think it's foolish for a girl of your age to bother herself with religion'…" (Blume 64). Margaret talks to God about what happens and how she is

going to the temple with Grandma to figure this religion stuff out by telling him that "*... father thinks it's a mistake and ... mother thinks the whole idea is crazy, but I'm going anyway. I'm sure this will help me decide what to be ... I'll look for you God"* (Blume 64). When Margaret goes to the temple, she realizes the rabbi says a lot of things she does not understand, especially the prayers, readings from the prayer book and the sermon given by the rabbi. Margaret expects something while in the temple but cannot figure out what it is that she is searching for – like "a feeling" of God's presence (Blume 67). Since Margaret cannot sense anything, she believes that maybe she will "have to go more than once to know what it's all about" with the rabbi saying "Get to know us, Margaret. Get to know us and God" (Blume 67-68). Margaret talks to God about her experience and tells him, "*I'm really on my way now. By the end of the school year I'll know all there is to know about religion. And before I start junior high, I'll know which one I am. Then I'll be able to join the Y or the Center like everybody else"* (Blume 69). With this prayer, Margaret believes she can figure out this religion questioning in order to obtain her goal of social identity within the Farbrook community and school friends. As Margaret continues her journey, the reading audience becomes aware that Margaret is overcome with a sense of bewilderment while she tackles the internal problem of knowing what religion is and what it means to her – a decision she feels she needs to make alone and not have it made for her by others.

Margaret then chooses to ask Janie if she can go with her to her Presbyterian church so she can see how the service was like and continue her personal examination of religion. Margaret realizes that the Presbyterian church is just like the Jewish temple with its practices and readings by how the people "read from a prayer book that didn't make sense" and when the minister's sermon began, she "could not follow [it]" (Blume 71). Margaret is introduced by

Janie to the minister with Janie saying, "… 'This is my friend Margaret Simon. She's no religion.' … [to which Margaret] almost fainted [and wondered] what did Janie have to go and do that for [while] the minister looked at [Margaret] like [she] was a freak" (Blume 72). Margaret tries to sense God while there but again "didn't feel anything special" so she talks to God about it and says, "… even though I wanted to. I'm sure it has nothing to do with you. Next time I'll try harder" (Blume 72). Margaret speaks to God as if he is a friend that she can chat with when she wants to which allows the reading audience a glimpse into seeing how she relates to God as a person and not the deity her family and friends believe God to be.

During the beginning of the holiday season, Margaret sees her mother addressing Christmas cards with her mother explaining that she doesn't "call them Christmas cards [but] holiday greetings [since] we don't celebrate Christmas exactly … [and Margaret thinking] we give presents but my parents say that's a traditional American custom … and her greeting cards have to do with her childhood (Blume 84). During this time, Margaret discovers that her mother sends a Christmas card to her parents in Ohio – even though she knows they do not visit or call them on the phone due to their religious reasonings. Even though Margaret does not participate in Christmas events at home, she does at school with her fellow sixth graders having to put on a "Christmas-Hanukkah pageant for the parents" by practicing and "singing every day with the music teacher" (Blume 86). The preparation causes some classmates to raise issues in singing the songs with Blume revealing to the readers that, "Alan Gordon told Mr. Benedict that he wasn't going to sing the Christmas songs because it was against his religion … then Lisa Murphy raised her hand and said that she wasn't going to sing the Hanukkah songs because it was against her religion" (Blume 86). Blume goes on to describe to the reader that "Mr. Benedict explained that the songs were for everyone and had nothing to do with religion … [but] Alan brought a

note from home and from then on he marched but didn't sing … and Lisa marched but didn't sing the Hanukkah songs" (Blume 86). Margaret processes the events at school internally by talking with God about it that night when she says, "*I want you to know I'm giving a lot of thought to Christmas and Hanukkah this year. I'm trying to decide if one might be special for me. I'm really thinking hard God. But so far I haven't come up with any answers*" (Blume 86). Blume discloses that when she was young, she "made endless deals with God … [which] became extremely ritualistic" (Weidt 6). Blume explains that "I write from my own experience" and creating Margaret's conversations with God are portrayed with an emphasis on how there "is no distance between Margaret and God" with a "kind of informal, rushed way, the way people talk, the way people think" (Weidt 49). These casual and unceremonious conversations Margaret has with God reveal to the reading audience that there can be a relationship with God without the religious practices or forms of worship that social structures create.

Finally, Margaret asks Nancy if she can join her and her family when they attend the Methodist church's Christmas eve service. Margaret realizes that it does not have a sermon and is mostly singing so she is able to enjoy most of it. Margaret is still in a state of uncertainty, so she talks to God about it and reveals to the reader, "*I just came home from church. I loved the choir – the songs were so beautiful. Still, I didn't really feel you God. I'm confused more than ever. I'm trying to understand but I wish you'd help me a little. If only you could give me a hint … which religion should I be? Sometimes I wish I'd been born one way or the other*" (Blume 109). This finding religion project does not go according to the plan Margaret has in mind while researching the different religions and the reading audience recognizes that Margaret is still in an unsettling position about what religion means to her. Blume expounds Margaret's flustering thoughts when she tries to think about her religious choices and says to God, *"Life is getting*

worse everyday … I know it God. Just like I'm the only one without religion. Why can't you help me? Haven't I always done what you wanted? Please … let me be like everybody else" (Blume 116). Margaret is at a crossroads with God and feels desolate because of it as she nears completion of her research for the religion project she must finish for class.

Though Margaret is not able to draw any conclusions about her own religious identity by the end of her sixth-grade year, Blume writes the novel to ultimately suggest that attending religious services is not necessarily the same as being religious or spiritual. Margaret feels despair when she hurts Laura's feelings and asks God about it crying, *"…Why did you let me do that? I've been looking for you God. I looked in temple. I looked in church. And today, I looked for you when I wanted to confess. But you weren't there. I didn't feel you at all. Not the way I do when I talk to you at night. Why God? Why do I only feel you when I am alone?"* (Blume 138). Margaret discovers that attending the religious services allows a person to find a different way to fit into the Farbrook community, but the story reveals to the reading audience that a person's personal connection to God is far more meaningful and important than an association with a Christian church or Jewish temple.

For Margaret, announcing which religion to choose is not something she wishes to engage with and she vehemently dismisses the notion of needing to have a form of religion at this time with Blume portraying Margaret's feelings, "I didn't want to listen anymore. How could they … Didn't they know I was a real person – with feelings of my own! … 'Stop it! … All of you! … Who needs religion? Who! Not me … I don't need it. I don't even need God!' … I was never going to talk to God again. What did he want from me anyway? I was through with him and his religions!" (Blume 154). While deciding on the notion of religion, Margaret

makes it clear that she does not see religion as a defining factor in her own identity or in anyone else's character.

Margaret shares her experiences with Mr. Benedict by writing him a letter that says, "I have not really enjoyed my religious experiments very much and I don't think I'll make up my mind one way or the other for a long time. I don't think a person can decide to be a certain religion just like that" (Blume 164). This outlook is the kind of mentality that Margaret's parents want for their daughter as they see religion as something untrustworthy that can tear families apart. Because of the harshness Margaret witnesses when family members try to convert or have their ideas forced upon her, she finds that forming a sense of religious identity within a certain group causes friction between her and a God she is still learning about.

Blume's writing about Margaret's attempt to find a church or temple community allows the reading audience to realize that Margaret misses the point of religion and that her personal relationship to God is actually more important. Margaret's conversations with God help her unpack her desires and fears about family, friendships, adolescence and growing up. As Margaret researches and tries out the different religious communities, she implies to the reader that she does not think her private relationship to God is valid or meaningful. It is with this understanding that Margaret believes that she must seek God in a church or temple in order to have a real relationship with him. When Margaret starts talking to God again and resumes her private conversations with him, she learns that she does not have to go to somewhere to be spiritual or have a relationship with God. Margaret's connection with God might not help her fit in with her peers, but it does offer Margaret a unprejudiced open space where she can voice her fears and say things she might never say to any of her friends or family. Blume's story inspires readers to appreciate that spirituality does not have to be tied to a certain belief system or house

of worship to be significant or acceptable while providing children a window into forming their own sense of self and identity.

CHAPTER 5: QUESTIONING ORTHODOX JUDAISM IN *STARRING SALLY J. FREEDMAN AS HERSELF*

Starring Sally J. Freedman as Herself is a milestone in Judy Blume's career, but not in the same way as *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*. *Starring Sally* is notable in that it is the only one of her books that is a story for children and not set in the present. As a little girl growing up in Elizabeth, New Jersey, "a blue-collar predominately Catholic community, Blume had no idea her experiences would one day help other kids better navigate through the complicated, confusing, and sometimes unnerving years of childhood" (Tracy 1). Blume has spoken of both *Sally* and *Margaret* as being closely autobiographical and referred to them as her favorites out of all of the novels she has written. In an interview, Blume said, "*Sally J. Freedman* is my most autobiographical book … It's the book I've been waiting to write … I had to get ready … I feel all the other books were a rehearsal for this one" (Weidt 49). *Starring Sally* is a story about the family and family situations that are the closest of any of her books to her own childhood with the narrative being a harmonious blend of imagination, reality and ponders what it means to have a Jewish identity.

In writing *Starring Sally J. Freedman as Herself,* Blume incorporated events that occurred during her own youth. Blume stated, "I was just seven years old when World War II ended, but the war colored my early life [and] it was hard to think of anything else … never mind that Adolf Hitler was supposedly dead. I knew that he'd wanted to kill all the Jews of the world … and I was a Jew" (Blume 377). Blume used her childhood experiences when creating the character of Sally and confessed, "I was a lot like Sally – curious, imaginative, a worrier … always making up stories inside my head … Sally's world is the world as I perceived it at age ten … a world of secrets kept from children, a world of questions without answers" (Blume 378).

Blume's coming-of-age story opens a window into Sally's young and innocent life filled with drama, adventure, and self-fulfilling fame as well as uncertainty, anxiety, and doubts that she must navigate to discover her Jewish individuality and sense of self.

The *Sally* novel begins at the end of World War II in 1945 when Sally is also seven years old. Mrs. Sternberger and Ma Fanny, Sally's grandmother, are arguing in the kitchen of the rooming house the family is renting by the boardwalk in Bradley Beach, New Jersey, when suddenly the radio announcer says, "We interrupt this program to bring you a bulletin from our newsroom … the war is over!" (Blume 7). With this declaration, everyone becomes quiet and wonders if they heard the announcement correctly. Sally and her grandmother listen carefully as the announcer repeats the news, "… '*The war is over!'* [the announcer exclaims] … 'Thank God … thank God' Ma Fanny cries" (Blume 7). Everyone begins to shout for joy with hugs and kisses all around saying, "It's over … it's over … it's over!" and dance around the kitchen (Blume 7). For Sally and her family, this meant the "end of blackouts" and Sally's daddy, who she named "Doey-bird" because he could whistle like a bird, would not have to "patrol the streets anymore wearing his white air raid helmet" (Blume 8). That night, they all marched on the boardwalk waving small American flags as they shared their excitement of not having to worry about threats of war coming to America and no more blackouts along the coastal city.

After much excitement and celebrations with her family, Sally's throat begins to feel sore and her tummy begins to get sick as the night progresses with her telling her mom, "… 'I don't feel so good' … 'What is it?' her Mom asked … 'my throat hurts and my stomach feels funny' [responds Sally]. Mom touched Sally's forehead [and said], 'You don't feel warm … it's probably just all of the excitement … let's stay out just a little longer … tonight is special … think about peace instead … think about Tante Rose and Lila … maybe now we can find out

where they are … they are somewhere in Europe' …" (Blume 10). This opening scene of the book is based on an incident in Blume's past with her explaining, "I was in a rooming house at Bradley Beach on the night the war ended … I did get sick that night … my mother was very angry with me … I didn't understand her anger at the time" (Weidt 51). During this eventful night, everyone across America and beyond was joyfully celebrating the end of the war and thinking about relatives returning home from Europe. Blume brings back the memory of that night into the *Sally* story which parallels her own childhood event filled with sickness and the uncertainty about their family's future.

After moving to Elizabeth, New Jersey in 1947, Sally is nine years old and truly believes she is the star in her real and imaginary world. When Sally's older thirteen-year-old brother, Douglas, gets in an accident, Sally is not happy about all of the attention he receives from the family. Douglas develops nephritis, a severe kidney infection, and becomes extremely sick. Blume expounds the near-death experience when she writes how Sally responds to her brother and his illness, "Douglas … was very sick and had to stay in bed. Ma Fanny moved into the spare room to help Mom take care of Douglas. Every Thursday afternoon a lab technician would arrive to take some blood" (Blume 26). Because Douglas is sick, Sally is not allowed to see him which makes her feel alienated from him and her family.

Sally begins to wonder if Douglas is going to die because of his continued sickness that lasts all through the summer which makes her parents cancel their vacation plans to Bradley Beach. Sally thinks, "If he did [die], she'd be an only child [and] could have his bicycle" (Blume 28). Sally dislikes that Douglas is getting all of the attention from her parents but also believes that she should not be worrying about it if he dies saying to herself that "she knew she shouldn't be thinking that way … God could punish her for such evil thoughts" (Blume 28).

Sally does not think of God as a friend or someone she can talk to but does believe that he exists. Blume elaborates on her relationship with God when she claims, "I grew up making all kinds of bargains with God … I never told anyone about this … it was a heavy burden for a child" (Tracy 4). Blume's relationship with God mirrors Sally's in that it is portrayed outwardly with sitting shivah when the family practices the funeral rites, but not inwardly as when orthodox Jews practice the Sabbath every Friday at sundown until nightfall on Saturdays. Because the family practices unorthodox Judaism and does not engage within its strict readings, disengagement, and formalities, it leaves a child continuously questioning the role God plays in their life.

Sally happily remembers a time when her aunt, uncle and Granny Freedman had died and the family gathered together. The reading audience becomes aware of how Sally reflects on her enjoyment of shivah, the seven days of mourning that Jewish families observe after the burial of a family member, when she recalls, "… after their funerals they'd sat shivah for a week at Sally's house. It was a Jewish custom … [and] Sally enjoyed sitting shivah very much … every afternoon friends and relatives would come to visit, bringing cookies and boxes of candy … they'd sit around and talk" (Blume 29). It seems to Sally that shivah allows for family members and friends to come and visit often by permitting those people she had never seen before to come and pay condolence calls. These sad events allow Sally to believe that the family receives nice gifts from visitors such as "baskets of fruit, homemade cakes, cookies and boxes of candy" which are looked upon as positive offerings but without the sorrowful meanings attached to them when presented to the family (Blume 29). Even though the shivah events allow Sally to meet and get to know who her extended family and longtime family friends are, while giving her an insight on the Jewish custom her family practices, Sally fails to understand the formalities and delicate nature of respecting shivah. Sally soon realizes that the observance of shivah requires

that mourners stay at the home of the deceased, sit on low stools, cover all mirrors, put on no new garments, not shave, as well as take no part in ordinary business affairs such as working outside of the home. To Sally, it seemed that someone in her family was always dying "but they were much older or very sick and she didn't know them well enough to really care" (Blume 29). The maturity level of Sally at this age portrays a young girl who lives within an insular childhood because she does not know much about the outside world, or the Jewish religion her grandmother practices, which allows for her to have little understanding of other people and the devastating loss of family members that the rest of the family mourn about during this time.

When Ma Fanny, Sally's grandmother, receives a letter telling her and the family that Tanta Rose, Sally's aunt, and Lila, her cousin, were taken to one of Hitler's concentration camps and killed there, the family conducts another gathering of friends and family during a form of shivah. Sally wonders about it in a revealing way that illustrates her lack of empathy and the focus she has on herself. Sally speculates that if "Douglas [died] … would it be different? … it wouldn't be like a party … everyone would cry and they would forget all about her … it would be even worse now … she wished Douglas would hurry and get well so the family could have some time for her too" (Blume 30). The thoughts of self-centeredness and notions of being the center of attention during worrisome and sorrowful events allow the reader to acknowledge that Sally is very childish in her ways of not having compassion for others within the family household.

Because Sally knows about the war and has family members who were killed during it, she develops her own episodic war-torn scenes when she suggests to her friends, "Let's play War … [or] if you don't want to play War … we can play Concentration Camp … [where] … Alice, you can be Lila … and Betsy, you can be Tanta Rose, Lila's mother …" (Blume 34). Being a

young girl allows Sally to be imaginative in her pretend play with friends even though she favors make believe playing to have conflict and murder in it. Blume creates an imaginative story for the reading audience brilliantly when she writes, *"Sally Saves Lila"* [the title to the story during her visionary playtime by herself],

> *"It is during the war. President Roosevelt asks for volunteers to go to Europe to help. Sally is the first in line … 'How old are you?' the Head of Volunteers asks. 'I'm ten,' Sally tells her, 'but I'm smart and strong … and tough' [Sally claims]. When she arrives in Europe … she hears someone crying … Sally investigates … it is a woman, huddled on the ground … she is dressed in rags … Sally goes to her [and] holds out her sandwich [to her] … 'Where do you live?' [asks Sally]. 'I have no home … no family … no friends … all gone … gone' [the woman responds]. Finally she turns around and faces Sally … [its] Lila! She pulls a knife from her pocket and aims it at her heart. 'No!' Sally says [and] wrestles the knife away from Lila. 'You don't understand … I'm here to help … I'm your cousin' [Sally exclaims] … 'You mean you're Louise's daughter? [Lila asks] … Sally nods … 'You're Tanta Fanny's granddaughter?' [Lila questions]. Sally nods again. 'I can't believe it … just when I'd given up all hope.' [Lila reveals] … Sally and Lila embrace … 'Where is Tanta Rose?' [Sally asks] … they caught Mama and sent her to the showers [Lila cries] … 'It's all over now' Sally tells Lila, 'you're safe and I'm taking you home with me' … the next day, she and Lila board the ship for New Jersey …"* (Blume 38-41).

Blume writes how Sally finds out about Dachau being a concentration camp for Jews and that the Nazi soldiers utilize gas chamber ovens to kill the Jewish prisoners, so she incorporates these

events into her fantasy with the reading audience realizing that Sally fails to understand the scope of the despicable annihilation the European Jewish people face as well as the humanity factor and loss of life during the war. Blume illustrates Sally in this way explaining that she never felt free to talk about such things with her parents or brother stating, "We didn't talk about problems in our family. We kept our feelings to ourselves …like most children, I sometimes felt alone … [with] a world of secrets kept from children, a world of questions without answers … Sally's family is based on my own … I was a lot like Sally – curious, imaginative, a worrier … in my stories I was brave and strong. I led a life of drama, adventure and fame. I think the character of Sally explains how and even why I became a writer" (Tracy 4). In his novel, Mark West expounds about how Blume "spent much of [her] childhood in [areas] where [she] was exposed to a wide variety of cultural influences" (*Children, Culture & Controversy* 78). These forms of escapism allow Blume to gain a preliminary sense of agency during a time of uncertainty which allows her to overcome her childlike shyness and become more outgoing with friends filling in the center of her world.

As the summer starts to wind down, Sally's mother tells her that the "doctors think it would be very good for Douglas" to move to Miami due to the "winter being worse" for him and "we don't want Douglas to be sick anymore" (Blume 32). Sally's parents find a place to live at in Miami Beach, Florida, so they can move her recovering brother with the hopes that it will allow him to heal better from his sickness. Sally, her mother, brother, and grandmother all move into a small apartment complex that also has Jewish residents with Sally's father staying "at home [in New Jersey] to work" (Blume 31). Blume describes how the absence of her own father when they moved to Miami was horrifying for her when she explains, "A lot of kids grow up without dealing with death, but death played a very important part in my life … My father had

six brothers and sisters, almost all of whom died while I was growing up … two of his brothers died at forty-two years of age … so when my father was forty-two [in 1947], I was scared" (Naylor and Wintercorn 35). Like Sally, Blume leaves New Jersey to spend the school year in Miami Beach, and, just like Sally, she is writing letters to 'Doey-Bird,' her father, telling him how much she misses and loves him.

Living in the apartment complex with many Jewish residents allows Sally to realize the different levels of Judaism or Jewish orthodoxy that certain families practice. One particular Jewish family is "very religious and from sundown on Friday till sundown on Saturday they wouldn't answer their doorbell, ride in a car, smoke, turn on the radio or even the light switch … [and] have a mezuzah hanging at the door [which] they'd kiss with their fingers and touch them [while in prayer]" (Blume 96). Sally is taught that the mezuzah is a small parchment scroll contained within the decorative case that is affixed to the doorposts of Jewish homes because it is a reminder to those who live there of their connection to God and their heritage while protecting them whether inside or outside of the home. Sally does not agree with the way the Daniels family practices their religion because they do not coincide with her own and thinks to herself that she "had never known such orthodox Jews" (Blume 97). The reader is made aware that Sally views the Daniels family as being different from her own and that it is "silly of Mom to pretend that they observed the Sabbath like the Daniels" (Blume 97). Sally does not want to imitate the Daniels and their religious practices so she questions her mother about why they should observe the Sabbath when they usually do not. Sally's mother does not answer her and instead states, "It doesn't look nice [to not observe it] … what would they think?" (Blume 97). Sally's inquiries about religious practices are met with no answers which creates a stage to be set

for Sally to examine her own religious identity within the framework of the social environment she experienced while living in Miami Beach.

As Sally navigates the Jewish faith and her relationship with God, the reader determines that Sally's connection is an affiliation of convenience. Sally prays to God when she worries about her father and not at other times. This becomes apparent when Sally prays, "*Please God, let Doey-bird get through this bad year ... we need him, God ... we love him ... so don't let him die ... keep him well, God ...,"* but does not pray when her brother is sick or when she herself gets hurt by the stinging tentacles of the Portuguese man of war (Blume 148). Sally learns that prayers do not always work out the way a person wants it to be with Barbara telling her, "I prayed for my father during the war … I prayed with my mother and Marla every single night … but it didn't do any good" (Blume 255). Barbara provides Sally with a glimpse into her family's heartache that is not comforted by prayers or religion which makes Sally question if prayers have any effect at all or if superstitious actions may be better.

In addition to how Sally views shivah and the mezuzah, the lighting of the first candle on the menorah portrays the trivial way in which Sally views the observance of Hanukkah. The Jewish holiday commemorating the recovery of Jerusalem and rededication of the Second Temple is not fully understood by Sally and this is depicted vividly when Blume writes, "… [she] laughs out loud at the idea of celebrating Hanukkah in the middle of the summer … then opens her eyes to make sure no one heard her" (Blume 209). With the Sabbath, shivah, mezuzah, and Hanukkah as important paradigms of Jewish traditions, the reading audience is made aware that Sally is not privy to the Jewish teachings that some of her Jewish peers are learning from their families. The lack of belief and experience is evident when Mr. and Mrs. Daniels, orthodox Jews, "are sitting shivah … pretending Bubbles [their daughter] is dead"

because Bubbles is going to have a baby with a *goy* – a non-Jewish boy. Andrea continues telling Sally that "it's horrible … she's their only child … God should punish them for what they're doing" (Blume 337). Sally does not understand how the Daniels could feel this way about Bubbles because Andrea tells her that "If she'd done it with a Jewish boy … then they'd be planning a wedding" (Blume 337). The hypocrisy infuriates Ma Fanny as she responds exclaiming, "… 'A pox on them! … Sitting shivah for Bubbles … meshuggeners!' … Your child is your child … no matter what … they should know what it's like to *really* lose a child! … (Blume 339). Sally knows she can share her feelings with her grandmother when she feels that she cannot share them with her mother. Blume expands on this when she says, "Grandmothers can often offer insights because they are in a way removed from the immediate problem" (Weidt 40). Sally begins to realize that the hardships no one wants to talk about with an inquisitive child full of questions may not be the secrets she thinks they try to keep from her. Blume recalls her own childhood memories on the topic of sin and death when she says, "I had a lot of questions but I was afraid to ask them … I was curious about [it] but no one gave me any information … even though I was envied for having a loving father, one who claimed I could talk to him about anything, I never actually asked him the questions I had" (Tracy 6). Unable to get answers from their parents, Blume and her friends turned to each other like Sally does in the novel with her friend Andrea when she is curious about sin, God, and death.

These continuing uncertainties and doubts climax when just before the family goes on a Goodyear blimp ride, Sally wonders about her mortality and what to believe when a person dies thinking to herself that "she'd fly up to heaven and be a beautiful angel with long blonde hair … or … keep her own [brown] hair … but [what] if it turned out that there were no angels and when you died there was nothing … because you were just plain dead … dead and cold …lying in the

ground … *oh!* … there had to be angels …" (Blume 356). Barbara asks Sally if she believes in life after death and they both agree that they do with Sally saying, "I believe in angels" and Barbara responding, "Me too … Jewish angels … not the Christian kind …" (Blume 357). Sally thinks to herself that "it never occurred to her that angels had to be one religion or the other" with the idea that different religions establish for a person a sense of identity which begins to take shape within her mind. Blume remembers these same thoughts at Sally's age when she writes, "… to write about young people [is to] bring our own fears … and worries into it … [and] try to make other kids feel ok" (Tracy 32).

The story of Sally allows the reading audience a glimpse about how unorthodox Jewish families choose to relate to or have a relationship with God. Sally's story portrays a personal choice in having a connection with God without labelling oneself as being orthodox or unorthodox Jewish. The story has religious conflicts and questioning platforms while carrying the same weight on enquiring what religion means to the protagonist in the novel. The story creates a window children need so they can see reflections of themselves in order to create their own religious identities and find a sense of self as they mature and venture out in the world.

CHAPTER 6: QUESTIONING RELIGION AS PART OF AN IDENTITY: A CONCLUSION

The life of a writer is always an adventure. Even for established writers like Katherine Paterson and Judy Blume, nothing is a given – including religion and the questioning they faced growing up in different family household experiences. The upside of writing novels with hot topics and religious questioning is that the world can be a canvas and a writer can find inspiration at different times. Sometimes, inspiration can also come from pain and loss as Paterson and Blume have had first-hand experience with. Disturbing the universe is the first step to take when disillusionment is inevitable, and the vision of seeking to find answers can be found in stories. So, what conclusions can be drawn about religious questioning in these four novels? Whenever a child reader obtains a book that has debatable topics within the pages that deal with forming a sense of identity, the question of whether the book has religious questioning themes is apt to arise.

Both authors provide a reasonable and unobtrusive religious dimension about how religion can be an aspect of adolescent and family life. The characters in the novels come to terms with problems and conflicts in ways similar to young heroes and heroines. Religion is an important element in the stories which allow a path on the difficult search of religious values. The inability to accept the mainstream principles of the parents' religious practices allows young readers to take notice that skepticism is normal for adolescents during a time of forming a sense of identity.

In a way, these novels create a quest that takes the form of searching for and either finding or rejecting a religious identity. Given the degree of ambivalence many adolescents sense toward religion, it is only natural that these novels incorporate honest doubts of their young protagonists. To present forms of religion within the framework of children's literature is

comfortable for children to read – even though it can be uncomfortable for others when questioning their own religious identity. Both Paterson and Blume influenced societal changes that occurred during the 1970s with their writings, and religious questioning provides an outlet for children to begin their own quest while they search and move toward a sense of self.

For the most part, Paterson's and Blume's novels are about growing up in order to forge a unique identity – a self that will always be responsive to the world surrounding them. That identity will come out of the individual choices the characters make. Despite the failures the characters make, young readers are made to believe that Paterson's and Blume's characters can go on. These characters have been dubbed heroes or heroines in their sacred places on the page because they have questioned their religious identities and continue their life quests toward a sense of agency.

In the novels, each of the protagonists are reluctant to verbalize the suppressed desires to the parents and find answers to the questions they seek. These stories are cultural artifacts that help us to understand the construction of a religious ideology found within families during the 1970s. Religious themes are a principal force found within the narratives which are shaped by the characters and choices they make. Each of the protagonists exhibit behaviors of maturity by reinterpreting religious dogma to coincide with their perceptions of human need. The unusually thorough treatment in the coming-of-age journeys places the stories in the context of their comparative religious themes that are defined by their eras. The novels exemplify Paterson's and Blume's power as realists who can use descriptive details and specific life events of a clearly defined individual with powerful contemporary meanings. As readers, we are left with the realization that each of the main characters will either not choose or choose to conform to a certain religious practice with the suggestion that things do and must change. Readers believe in

stories that emphasize the hero's world-making which provides an example of realism that deals with religious values.

Today's children are very different from the children a few years ago. How do novels with stories about religious questioning affect children who live on the Internet, play video games, and whose attention span might not be very long? It would be difficult to determine but wisdom does not come in sound bites and computer bytes. Wisdom and figuring out a sense of religious identity, or not deciding which religion to choose, comes slowly and quietly. It takes time, attention, contemplation, and silence to have those conversations privately with oneself. Novels like what Paterson and Blume write demand that readers give themselves, their skill, their intelligence, their imaginations, their human experience, and their deepest emotions while they read. In this kind of exchange between writers and readers, a wise adolescent grows up and is cultivated into a person or soul that can grow.

Paterson's and Blume's narratives present the politics of religion and support the idea that it is okay to not find religion at an early age by reinforcing the sense that achieving the skills of communication will provide access to a wider world. Religious philosophies and life lessons are not altogether clear and Paterson explains this brilliantly when she writes, "I believe children need words, imagination, and story almost as much as they need food, clothing and shelter" while asserting that her goal as a writer is to "tell the best, truest story that I can tell" (*Why Do You Write for Children?* 574). Taking a path while on a journey in life demands total engagement. A book also requires the commitment of its audience because a book takes time to read, comprehend, and ponder. A reader questioning their own religion must invest time, thought and energy in the process. While coming out of this slow and intensive effort, the reader learns and grows intellectually, emotionally, and sometimes spiritually.

The language of the Bible, the historical sweep of its narrative, the vividness of its portrayal of humankind, and its prevailing theme of God's love not only for God's people but for each person is what is set within the context of each of the four novels. The common points of religious questioning speak to each other with each story unfolding in ways that express the main character's desire to determine a path of their own. These stories tell us that it is okay to question that path and determine what religion means to the individual and the readers who read them. The main characters in each of the novels respond to their own religious questioning by observing and holding within themselves their own ideas of who God is and what he means to them just like all children do in today's time.

The twentieth century is considered a time wherein stories invite readers to experience perspectives that are different or unusual in comparison to their own. On the journey through stories, young readers discover that others' beliefs and customs are not as dissimilar as they may believe. Stories lead us to expand our perspectives and make choices that allow us to see through the lens of the other. What is unique about these four twentieth century novels are that each of these widely read stories has impacted the young reading audience in very personal ways. The quests found in the novels allow the main characters to engage with a series of questions within their religious backgrounds and determine what is right for them or where they fit within the family's religious practices. In the narratives we are introduced to characters that are heavily influenced by their Christian or Jewish families and the religious aspects of the liminal spaces they create. The novels develop their dynamic characters and undergo a coming-of-age journey that parallels the lives of Katherine Paterson and Judy Blume. As readers, we observe the actions and events occurring to the protagonists of each story as they continue their individual transitions toward a sense of identity and agency. The books work together by

allowing young readers a window into the life of children seeking answers to questions they have when resisting orthodoxy and trying to form their own religious identity.

All of the novels are resistant to the more simplistic things about religion that are open-ended. None of the novels reject religion, but none of them have become rigid or taken an indoctrinated approach. Each one of the novels are open-ended, thoughtful about the religious questioning, and are more collective in their approach to the discourse about religion. When looking at all four of the main characters, they are all resisting the doctrinaire about religion. The characters find the religious dogma, or certain religious passages when facing humanity, unacceptable and refrain from conforming to it. The stories show a different approach to religion instead of applying some kind of rigid interpretation to daily life. The characters are all taking a different approach and are resistant to the rigid interpretations of who God is and how he factors into the life of the characters. Even though the authors come from different backgrounds, they are trying to suggest that it is okay to question religion, it is okay to come to your own answers, and that people do not have to always ascribe or pledge to a certain religion. Both authors are trying to do this even though they come from a Christian background and a Jewish background and neither one of the authors are trying to take a religious approach.

The advantage, in terms of religious questioning, is not so much the answer as it is the question that is important. The actual thinking about a religious identity is worth pondering the questions to find your own path. These authors are having their characters do that within the context of the story with the characters going their own way in a manner that makes sense to them. Rather than simply present religion as an established given in their children's books, Paterson and Blume wrote these books in which the central characters question religion and seek to make sense of their world.

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