OUTLINE for AWP20 Panel

**Scheduled Day:**Thursday, 3/5/20  
**Scheduled Time:** 09:00:AM–10:15:AM  
**Scheduled Room:**Room 210B, Henry B. González Convention Center, Meeting Room Level

**Prayers on the Page: Faith as the Last Taboo in Children’s Literature**

Early US children’s literature was Christian-themed and heavily moralistic, but today mainstream houses, and therefore writers, avoid the personal, emotional, and dangerous subject of religion. This despite the fact that 75% of Americans identify with one, 90% believe in God or a higher power, and teens ever seek to make sense of the world and understand their own spiritual identity. Should we be depicting religion/spirituality as a normal part of our character’s lives? Why not, or why and how?

**Event organizer and moderator:**

**Ann Jacobus** earned her MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults from Vermont College of Fine Arts. She grew up in Texas and Arkansas and is the author of YA novel, *Romancing the Dark in the City of Light*. Her current novel in progress is about a young psychic medium who lives in a fundamental Christian religious community.

**Panelists:**

**Katie Henry** is the author of the young adult novels *Heretics Anonymous* and *Let’s Call It a Doomsday* and a playwright specializing in theatre for young audiences. Her novels have received starred reviews from Kirkus Reviews, Booklist, Publishers Weekly, and School Library Journal.

**Susan Kaplan Carlton** teaches writing at Boston University. Her novel *In the Neighborhood of True* is set in 1950s Atlanta against the backdrop of a synagogue bombing. The book’s been named a Best Book of 2019 by Amaz­on and a Junior Library Guild selection.

**Mark Oshiro** is the award-winning author of ANGER IS A GIFT, which was a Lammys finalist and the winner of the 2019 Schneider Family Book Award. When they are not writing, they run the online Mark Does Stuff universe and are trying to pet every dog in the world.

WELCOME and INTRODUCTIONS

**Moderator statement:**

**Ann Jacobus**: In my YA novel *Romancing the Dark in the City of Light,* as well as my other manuscripts, I’m always drawn to address the multi-faiths of my characters but was in years past discouraged from writing too much about religion. I’m Christian and was loosely raised in the Protestant (Presbyterian) church, but I have family members and friends of all faiths. My faith was especially important to me as a teen. As an adult, I lived for four years in the religiously conservative Arabian Gulf (Kingdom of Bahrain) where I had the opportunity to read about, observe, and learn about Islam. I believe humans are hard-wired to seek meaning and purpose in our lives which faith can provide us and stories help us understand. The novel I’m working on now is set in in a small, southern, conservative Christian community and is about a young character who is just discovering their ability to communicate with the spirits of people who have died.

Children’s fiction in the US dealing with religion/spirituality has largely been left to independent, faith-based publishers. Meanwhile, teens grapple with what it means to be human, compounded by questions about social justice, tolerance, gender/sexual identity, and communal responsibility that are often colored by their community’s spiritual beliefs. Younger readers are curious about kids whose families practice faiths different from their own. Religious tolerance is a perennial issue.

We hope today to explore the question of whether or not it is beneficial and/or constructive for young readers see how characters and their families approach and practice the multi-faiths of our society. And if so, how.

**Panelist Personal Statements**

**Katie Henry:** My debut novel, *Heretics Anonymous*, centers around an atheist boy who has just (unhappily) started to attend a Catholic high school, and finds himself drawn into a group of other kids--a gay Jewish boy, a neo-polytheist, a devout Catholic feminist who wants to a priest--who don’t quite fit the school’s religious mold, either. The protagonist of my second book, *Let’s Call It a Doomsday*, is a Latter-day Saint living in the very secular city of Berkeley, CA, who grapples with questions about her faith, sexuality, and also the potential apocalypse.   
  
I’ve always been fascinated by religion, because I think it tells us so much about who we are not just as individual people, but as a species, and I’ve always been drawn to telling stories about young adults whose beliefs--or lack thereof--put them at odds with the culture around them. Teenagers grapple with evolving feelings about every aspect of their lives, and religion isn’t an exception, though it sometimes seems to be treated that way, especially for belief systems outside mainstream Christianity. When I write about faith, my goal is to present it in the most nuanced way possible; to show all the good it can do as well as the harm it can cause. I try to pose these questions: what does it mean to believe, or not believe, or be unsure? How do you fit yourself into an institution that sometimes doesn’t value you as you are? How can you help a religion evolve, whether inside of a faith or outside it?

**Mark Oshiro**: Despite that I never initially set out to do this, I find myself gravitating back to the issue of religion in the work that I produce. In ANGER IS A GIFT, the local church community plays an integral part in the activism that my main character and his mother participate in. My second novel, THE STARS AROUND US, deals with the notion of faith and isolation, but in a secondary world fantasy. The entire book is structured as a prayer to the main character’s god, too, so my discussion of religion in a textual context is much more pronounced.

I’m interested in writing about faith as a means to provide a safe space to deal with complicated feelings. Despite being an atheist myself, I *want* kids to explore religion and discover what feels right for them and their lives. I was raised in a restrictive environment where it was considered a sin to question *anything* about the faith my family believed in. What I hope to be able to discuss on the panel is not just how literature can be used to question belief, but to strengthen it as well. Kids need that sort of space to be able to understand how their identities and their experiences are shaped by the things they believe, too!

**Susan Kaplan Carlton** - I was raised Jewish (emphasis on the ish), but faith was complicated for me as a teen. Part of me longed for tradition, Fiddler on the Roof style; part of me wanted to be Presbyterian because my crush went to the church down the hill; part of me wanted to be whatever my mother was dabbling in, which when I was in high school was atheism. Then I decided questioning was actually the point—questioning faith but also questioning belonging and not belonging, families of origin and families of choice, thorny ethical issues with unsatisfying answers, acceptance, dissent, and death (so many questions about death).

In my latest novel, the protagonist is new to Atlanta in 1958, and decides for various reasons to keep the fact that she’s Jewish a secret. As I was writing, the question I kept asking myself was what happens when you fall so in love with a place or a person that you want to forget who you are? I think for many of us, teens or not, talking about faith, or the lack of it, is braided together with culture and identity. I love the idea of readers questioning what they do and don’t believe in—and considering how to advocate for those beliefs that feel most true.

**Moderator Questions**

1. How did each of you come to tackle the subject of faith in your books?
2. While this is changing, for the last 50 years, mainstream publishers have left books that are set (non-sensationally) within a religious tradition, to religious publishers. Why? Is this a good policy? Why or why not?
3. We used “dangerous” in our description regarding taking on the subject of religion in general. Do you think this is a fair use of the word? Why or why not?
4. The country is founded on the principal of separation of church and state: Are there any things to keep in mind in writing stories with characters that passionately embrace one faith or another—or who question their faith?
5. Books that question or challenge faith could be in tricky territory, but questioning is a very normal process for teens. What about stories that include characters who are seekers, questioners and/or agnostic or atheist?
6. Stories ideally should be accessible to all readers and publishers want books to reach as wide an audience as possible. Some parents may feel that books about other faiths or books that put faith practices in question might undermine a younger reader’s own, or in some other way adversely affect them. Comments?
7. How do we write about characters whose faith traditions exclude or diminish particular groups (such as LGBTQ people) or whose religions insist on primacy—is there a way to handle that on the page so that the book doesn’t exclude or diminish anyone?
8. Many religions also prohibit things such as pre-marital sex or alcohol, not to mention violence, murder, and hatred. How can books about faith address these topics in a way that is relevant to today’s young readers?
9. Favorite books that incorporate faith well? (Besides your own ☺)

**Recommended Reading (to be expanded)**

*Heretics Anonymous* by Katie Henry

*Let’s Call it a Doomsday* by Katie Henry

*Anger is a Gift* by Mark Oshiro

*In the Neighborhood of True* by Susan Kaplan Carlton

*A Psalm For Lost Girls* by Katie Bayerl

*Other Words For Home* by Jasmine Warga

*Romancing the Dark in the City of Light* by Ann Jacobus

Books by

Padma Venpatraman

Jaye Robin Brown

Mitali Perkins

Veera Hiranandani

Syed Masood

Leah Henderson

Darshana Kiyani

Aminah Mae Safi

Rachel Lynn Solomon

Samira Ahmed,

Ibi Zoboi

Tanaz Bathena,

Laura Silverman

Katherine Locke

Natasha Diaz

Hena Khan