



Writing Grace ? Morris Gleitzman

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[Morris Gleitzman](#) [1]

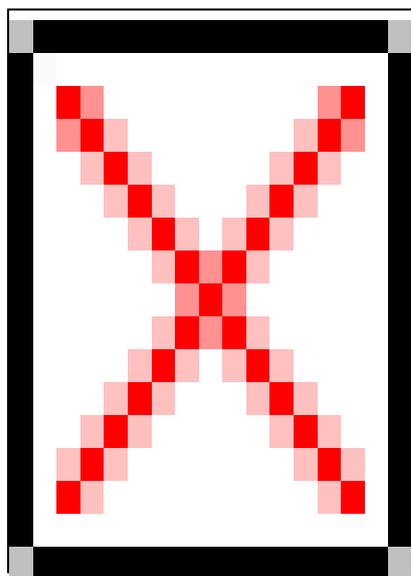
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Morris Gleitzman talks to Books for Keeps



Q: Why did you decide to write a novel about an 11-year-old girl whose family belong to a fundamentalist Christian sect?

I didn't set out to write a story about fundamentalist religion, though once I started to research that world I quickly realised it was the ideal background for the tale I wanted to tell.

I wanted **Grace** to be a story about a particular universal experience ? one we adults have all had regardless of our religious or cultural backgrounds, and one young readers will be grappling with now, or soon. A story about that exhilarating scary childhood moment when we begin to question adult attitudes and beliefs.

It can be a complex time for families when young people start to develop the capacity for independent thought. Sometimes grown-ups are encouraging and sometimes not. In **Grace** I wanted to explore how adults respond when kids start questioning the status quo, how children feel about these responses, and the impact it all has on family relationships.

Part of my interest grew out of an intriguing contradiction. In most parts of the world there are legal limits to how parents can physically treat their children. Lock a kid in a cupboard for a few years and you go to jail. But there are very few prohibitions when it comes to dealing with young minds. Lock a child in a mental cupboard and that's your inalienable right as a parent, particularly if you invoke religious freedom.

Which led me inevitably to children growing up in fundamentalist religious communities. In that world, I imagined, the cupboards would be seen more as lifts, destined to elevate their occupants to a higher place with sublime and eternal benefits. What loving parent wouldn't want that for their children. But how sad to see, as the result of parental love, a child's natural inclination to think for himself or herself stifled and in some cases brutally crushed.

Grace, the main character in the book, is more fortunate than many. Her parents, despite being part of a separatist and very fundamentalist Christian community, have secretly nurtured autonomous thinking in themselves and their daughter. This leads to big conflicts in Grace's world, conflicts that threaten to break up her family. Grace is desperate to prevent this. Among the huge challenges she faces is her church elders' warning that if she disobeys them, God will abandon her.

The community in the story isn't based on any one real-life fundamentalist Christian group. I researched many, some to be found in the suburbs of Australia, others hidden away in remote desert compounds in the US and elsewhere. I avoided some of the more extreme behaviours found in the latter, such as marriage by church elders to very young women, because my story isn't really about those things. I'll be grateful if people of all ages take Grace into their hearts, but most of all I want young readers to have access to the story.

What Grace goes through is an extreme example of what we all go through at her age. If we're lucky we emerge at the other end in possession of our true selves. Every young person has the right to strive for this, and I hope at least some of them find inspiration and encouragement in Grace's story.

I won't make the other answers as long!

Q: When Grace was published in Australia did it offend readers who are Christians?

The big challenge for me was to write about a character whose religious faith I don't share. I was helped in this by having people in my life who do share it. I feel great gratitude to the people who enriched my childhood with their loving and compassionate Christianity. Although I don't share their religious beliefs these days, I will always cherish their values.

Without this background to draw on, I don't think I could have written **Grace**. It certainly helped me stay clear-sighted about my resolve that this story should never attack religious belief, only examine some of the human power structures built around it. And equally importantly, that Grace's faith in a loving God should remain a central part of her life beyond the end of the book.

I hope it didn't offend any Christian readers ? if it did, they didn't tell me about it.

Q: How did you research the novel?

Lots of reading. There are many good memoirs by people who grew up in or at least spent time in such groups. I also spoke to a couple of such people first hand. And watched some illuminating documentaries.

Q: Grace undergoes a lot of adversity and has to struggle to think for herself. Can you comment on that?

As I've already explained, that process was central to my original idea for the story. Every story needs a character facing adversity, but there's something about the double-bind that Grace encounters ? that independent thought is somehow disloyal to some who claim to have her best interests at heart ? that I think strikes a chord in many young people. Even those who aren't facing such an extreme version of it as Grace.

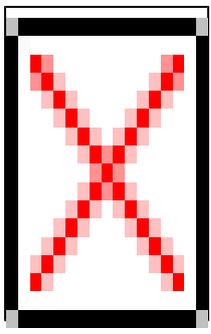
Q: Are there autobiographical elements in the novel?

Not in terms of the setting or events of the story. But we all have to struggle to think independently. Even if we're lucky and our parents and community support us in this, our culture is very keen that we think in pre-ordained ways. Particularly in relation to consumer goods, government policy and national sporting events.

OK, there is one autobiographical element. I've always wanted to walk through a carwash.

Q: Religious fundamentalism, whether Christian, Moslem or Jewish, is a major issue in the world. Is it a theme to which you may return in future novels?

No specific plans to, but I think I'll continue to have an interest in the independence movements that take place in young people's minds. And the psychological and social forces in all our lives which conspire to produce bigotry and a failure of empathy.



Grace

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