



God and the Swearing Book

My Favorite Reference Questions

By Shutta Crum

The first question came early in my career. A father and son approached the reference desk where I sat with a colleague. The son said, "I want to know what God does all day."

The child—about seven—elaborated. "Just what does God do all day long, anyway? That's all I wanna know." Behind the boy, the father had his hands lifted in the classic "Now, what?" gesture. My colleague whispered, "You can take this one." *Great!* I thought.

Mentally, I began to tick off my choices. Christian texts would contain pictures of Jesus, not God. The burning bush? No. My feet dragged me toward the 200s. Household gods, gods of mythology, totems?

Then my young patron administered the *coup de grâce*. He said, "Ya got a lotta books here. Just any ol' book you got in this whole big library—just any ol' one to tell me what God does all day."

Suddenly, it came to me. "The Sistine Chapel!" I found a picture of Michelangelo's *God Creates Adam*. The child studied it and gave it back to me with a polite, "Thank you. That's all I wanted to know." *Whew!*

I told my colleague, "I'm not sure if I did him a favor. Now he thinks God is an elderly white man who lounges in the sky touching fingertips with others." Still, his library hadn't failed him. Our patron would remember that—even if he forgets what God does all day.

My other favorite question came late in my career. It was whispered by a father. "Do you have any books with swearing in them?"



Photo by Paul T. Hacker

A look must have passed over my face. I'm sure it was due to the scenarios running through my head. Was this person a representative of some gatekeeper group eager to berate me for books that include swearing? Were we about to go through a censorship challenge just as I was due to retire? *Dang!*

He sensed something, for he leaned in and added, "I have two boys, nineteen and fifteen, and they don't like to read. I thought—" he trailed off, squirming.

I wasn't sure if this was an act, or truly, a desperate father. I headed toward our teen section. I found a book I knew was gritty and realistic. It also happens to be well-written,

gripping, sad beyond belief, but still full of hope—*America* by E. R. Frank.

I opened the book. About mid-way down a page was the F-word. Dad was looking over my shoulder. He said, "Great! I'll take it."

For two weeks I worried about the incident. Nothing. Then one night, the father came in again. Behind him slouched two boys. I smiled. Here was a father who trusted his sons, and gave them what they needed when they needed it.

Today, I write during the week of Father's Day. It seems fitting. Both of these fathers thought of the library as the place to find the answer. Fatherly love had played itself out before me, twice! ☺

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Got a great, lighthearted essay? A funny story about children and libraries? Books and babies? Pets and picture books? A not-so-serious look at the world of children's librarianship? Send your Last Word to Sharon Verbeten at CALeditor@yahoo.com.