

As if

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [January 22, 2014](#) issue



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Belief is a hot issue in literary criticism. In the last few years literary critics have explored postmodern belief, lamented the disappearance of the novel of belief, and attempted to sharpen the distinction between religious and literary belief.

An example of the last can be seen in critic James Wood's recent *New Yorker* essay on fiction and death. Wood draws a sharp distinction between the belief that fiction asks of us and the belief that religion requires. Fiction depends upon the belief of the reader to grant its fictional world a kind of reality, if only for a time. Literary belief is always belief "as if." It is metaphorical, not actual. This is fine for fiction, but for religion, Wood insists, such belief is a danger. Believing "as if" a religion's claims are true either signals an impending loss of belief or is simply "bad faith."

But does believing "as if" really pose a danger to religion? Does religious belief truly have no metaphorical quality to it? Does believing "as if" religious ideas were true inevitably lead us away from faith?

In her *MaddAddam* trilogy, novelist Margaret Atwood explores how belief might function in the worst possible circumstances. Rescued from a brutal employer by adherents of the God's Gardeners religion—invented by Atwood, complete with hymns, sermons and a sacred calendar—Toby balks when she is invited to take a leadership position in the sect. She is grateful for her rescue, but she can't imagine believing everything the Gardeners believe.

The sect's founder points out that she's been acting and living as if she believed and urges her to see belief not as the precursor to action, but the other way around. He insists that the words *as if*, rather than signaling a loss of faith, open a door to faith's deepening. "Continue to live according to them and belief will follow in time."

Toby spends the rest of Atwood's trilogy testing that notion. After surviving a catastrophe that destroys most of the human race, she asks herself, "Do I still believe this?" Each time another article of Gardener faith is challenged, Toby's willingness to experiment with believing "as if" leads her not away from Gardener convictions but to a deeper and riskier engagement with them.

At the end of the second book, *The Year of the Flood*, Toby captures a pair of criminals who have terrorized other survivors. She has an opportunity to kill them, and her companions wish she would. These men are so dehumanized and vicious that even the most nonviolent reader might wish them dead. If they escape, it is clear, they will only seek to do harm.

But according to the sacred calendar of the Gardeners, it is the Feast of St. Julian and All Souls, a day to honor everything that lives. Toby is determined to observe the feast as if it matters. I don't know what will happen tomorrow, she tells her companions, but tonight we observe the Feast. And she passes cups of soup among everyone gathered, brutalized and brutalizers alike.

Critic Paul Elie says he longs to find an author whose novels show what belief actually feels like. Wood might say that religious belief feels like the contraction of possibilities (as opposed to what he calls "secular expansion")—an unchangeable acceptance of unchangeable truth claims. But belief is not a static thing any more than religions and their ideas are. Toby's experimental and yet deeply consequential approach to belief reflects for me what belief feels like—oscillating and yet anchoring; uncertain and yet world-opening—much more than the belief described by critics for whom it must be either certain or false.

In the fifth-grade Sunday school class I help teach, we recently talked about the book of Daniel. The kids loved the stories but rolled their eyes when we talked about Daniel surviving a night with the lion and three men walking out of the furnace unsinged. The eye-rolling lent an "as if" quality to our discussion—not in Wood's sense of literary belief, but in the fifth-grade sense of "Yeah, right. As if."

Nelson Mandela had died the week before, and when stories of his life came up in our discussion, the connection to the book of Daniel was not lost on the kids. Mandela emerged from prison and, rather than seeking vengeance, began to build a nation with those who had imprisoned him. It was as if a man thrown into a lion's den by a powerful ruler had emerged alive and whole. It was as if three men thrown into a blazing furnace had lived to tell the tale.

Our kids may not have believed the story of Daniel in the lion's den, but by thinking with it "as if," they began to see the truth of it and what that truth can mean here and now. I hope they began to experience belief as a living, moving, creative force that opens more possibilities than they can even yet imagine.