

Sandol Stoddard Retells Tales Of Bible in Children's Volume

By NIS KILDEGAARD

"Bone from my bones, Flesh from my flesh," said Adam when he first saw Eve; and he loved her, not as a creature separate and strange, but as a part of himself. In the same way, Eve loved him. And so the first man and the first woman began their lives at peace with one another and with all creation.

As Sandol Stoddard recalls it, the invitation from Doubleday publishers to write a children's Bible couldn't have come at a better time. It was October of 1980. She was between books, between chapters of her life.

"I was just moving to the Vineyard. I'd been 30 years in California raising the kids, and having this tremendous job to focus on just as I came to this place that I love so much. It was wonderful."

She settled down that October in her new Vineyard Haven home and read the Bible, all day, every day, for more than a month. She also read any children's version of Bible stories she could find. And she thought about what was lost in translation.

"I looked at what other people had done with Bible stories, and what I felt was so missing, always, was the vitality, the sensuous immediacy, the conversational quality, the passion, the color, the richness, the emotional wallop of the Bible.

"I wanted the kids to have this, and I wanted them to have a sense of the beauty of the language."

It took Sandol Stoddard two and a half years to complete her part in the project — and this month Doubleday is publishing the book with warm and luminous illustrations by artist Tony Chen of New York. She is watching with an anxious parent's eye to see how the book fares, yet on another level she feels content and at ease with her work.

"I think raising a kid is like doing a book, really; you just give it all you've got, and then you let them go. Seeing my book now going out into the world is just as frightening as seeing a child get married. I feel very emotional about it.

"But I know the Bible is going to survive whatever damage I can do to it. I think of it this way: When King David's wife Michal said to him, 'You're making a fool of yourself dancing in public,' he said, 'I'm not dancing for the people. I'm dancing for God.'

"I didn't do this to please anybody. I did it in reverence for the Bible, and as best I could."

One hundred and eight stories from the Bible are retold in the Doubleday Illustrated Children's Bible. The type is large, and easily half of the 384 pages carry illustrations. For Sandol Stoddard, the project was not one of creation — the stories were already there — but of selection and condensation. Her choices

were carefully thought out.

"First of all, my choices were for what I thought the children ought to know. After that, I found myself choosing parts of the stories that would present the spiritual and moral content in a way that children could best understand. Very often this would be in terms of family relationships, or a child's presence in a scene.

"There's a lot of passion about children and the relationship to children in the Bible. There's the childless mother of Samuel, the prophet, who finally gets the baby and sings this song of joy. Then Mary, in the New Testament, picks up the same song of joy. It's wonderful.

"So there was no strain in finding ways to make kids feel at home in the Bible. They're there, all the way through it."

In organizing her text, she worked hard to achieve a continuity that would allow young readers to follow the narrative from beginning to end. And always, she tried to honor the language that gives the Bible its place among the great works of human art.

"Whenever I could, I tried to get in the lyricism. I put in bits of the Song of Solomon; I tried to get in the lament of David. . . . These are the great lines that have appeared again and again in poetry. So whenever I came across something that I knew had been picked out by poets and playwrights and artists and musicians over the ages, I tried desperately to get just a teaser in so the kids will think, 'Boy, that's beautiful. I want to get more of that.'"

Sandol Stoddard's love for the language of the Bible is clear throughout the new book, and it comes as no surprise to hear that she read each story aloud, to get the cadence and the music of the telling right.

And this children's Bible does sing. But her idea of a children's Bible isn't an edited collection of the "nice" parts, and she'll argue with anyone who thinks it should be.

"I see no evidence in the Bible that God is in favor of niceness over goodness. None. And I think the worst thing you can do to kids is talk down to them, or lie to them in any way."

Believing this, the author left herself with serious challenges in writing a Bible for children. Consider, for example, Abraham standing in the book of Genesis with his knife upraised, ready to slay his only son Isaac as an act of obedience to God. How do you explain this to a child?

She does it by emphasizing that a child is chosen for this test because the child is precious above all else:

"Let the boy go," said the Lord. "I do not want you to hurt him. You have shown me today that you refuse me nothing and that you are my true servant

in all things. You have been willing to offer up to me the most precious gift I have ever given you: your son, your only son, whose life is dearer to you than your own."

Sandol Stoddard doesn't wear her personal faith on her sleeve, but she will give a sketchy religious biography. She was raised in the Puritan Protestant country of Connecticut, but hers was not a church-going family.

"We didn't read the Bible in my household, and I only went to Sunday School one day. They made me color a squirrel brown, and I thought that was the most ridiculous thing I had ever been asked to do on a beautiful Sunday morning. I went home and said that's enough of that.

"I think the Sunday School I was sent to was a sort of holding tank to keep children out of trouble. I do not think that anything to do with religion ought to

be presented in that way, because I think religion is grappling, and is trouble, and is challenge, and is so real that to have it confused with politeness and convenience is very bad."

Sandol Stoddard is a member of Grace Episcopal Church in Vineyard Haven today. She says she became a church-going person about 12 years ago after "a number of very personal experiences that I suppose you'd have to call religious experiences, that I really don't talk about.

"However the father of my four children, from whom I'm divorced, is Jewish. My children are half Jewish, and I feel tremendously close to the Jewish tradition. I feel it's really impossible to be an intelligent Christian without having your roots in the Jewish tradition and honoring it deeply."

Her months of immersion in the Bible have only deepened her appreciation for the Jewish tradition that lies behind

Christianity. "Christianity now seems to me like the flower on top of this enormous cactus, with great roots down into the desert. Christianity is this beautiful flower, but I never saw all the structure underneath it."

In the Old Testament, she says, her favorite stories are Job and Jonah. "I think Jonah is the most wonderful short story ever written. And you could spend a lifetime just on the story of Job."

In the New Testament, she became fascinated with St. Paul, and this surprised her. "I had always resented some of the things he said about women and some of the doctrinaire stuff that seemed awfully fussy to me," she says. "But I got a new view of him, really studying him and tracing his progress, and I think now he is one of the Biblical figures I'd most like to have known personally.

"The turning point for me was when I

read about his preaching so long one night that a young man listening to him fell asleep and fell out of a balcony — whereupon Paul healed the young man's broken neck and went right on preaching until dawn. That seems to me the essential Paul."

The Doubleday Illustrated Children's Bible is the book Sandol Stoddard wishes she had had while rearing her own four sons. She is the author of more than a dozen children's books, and she says: "A lot of what I've done came out of my involvement with my children, my desire to have them know the works that I loved and felt were important." Among those works are Saint George and the Dragon, a rewriting for children of the classic story by Edmund Spenser and, more recently, a collection of five short stories telling of children who encounter Jesus at different stages of his life.

She is also author of The Hospice



"I TRIED TO TELL IT FROM THE CHILDREN'S POINT OF VIEW," SAYS SANDOL STODDARD.

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VINEYARD GAZETTE

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Movement: A Better Way of Caring for the Dying, widely considered the definitive book on the subject. She gave five years of her life to the Hospice movement, and doesn't regret a day of it.

"It was a tremendous experience, because it put me in touch with a grass-roots movement that really does come from a religious base. You don't go out and do Hospice work if you think people are just meat.

"The more I got into Hospice work, the more I saw that it came out of the Judaic teaching, 'Be kind to the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt' — and the Christian gospel according to St. Matthew, 'Inasmuch as you have done it unto the least of these, you've done it unto me.'

"And in the kind of modern society where everybody is dashing around trying to be young, strong, powerful, to go out and take care of someone who's dying, to put your full energy into that, is a statement that you are doing unto the least. I don't think the average materialist would bother with that. So it was tremendously exciting to see how much energy was going into this. I think it says something very hopeful about our society."

Sandol Stoddard is an artist, and she believes that art can fathom deeper truths than can mere fact. She speaks of the Bible as one of the great works of all art, as an enormous distillation of truth that is diminished by attempts to reduce it to literal fact.

"It's a wonderful thing to relax with the Bible enough to allow these stories not to be disturbing, and to try and get at the spiritual truths that are there.

"I think we shouldn't get too bothered about the questions of fact in the Bible. And I also think we shouldn't worship the Bible — we should worship God."

Still, there were Bible stories that troubled her deeply. In the book of Job, for example, she had difficulty with passages in which God destroys Job's family and all his wealth to test his faith. "How do you deal with something like the book of Job?" she asks. "This is an outrage! How can you understand it?

"Well, there's this wonderful statement of Saint Augustine: 'If you can understand it, it isn't God.' That got me through so many moments. There were points in the Old Testament where I had to say: 'This is one of God's mysteries.'

"If we really understood it all, then it wouldn't be much bigger than we are, would it?"