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True Believers

By LIESL SCHILLINGER

THE ABSTINENCE TEACHER

By Tom Perrotta.

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Children, even good children, hide some part of their private lives from their parents; and parents, having been young and furtive themselves, remember the impulse. So when Ruth Ramsey, the divorced 41-year-old mother who is the protagonist of Tom Perrotta's new novel, "The Abstinence Teacher," learns that her teenage daughter, Eliza (who could be a grumpy, pimply poster child for "The Awkward Years"), has concealed a book from her, she's not surprised. "She must have kept it hidden in a drawer or under a mattress," she reflects — just as she herself once hid books like "The Godfather" and "The Happy Hooker." But the book Eliza has been keeping under wraps is not a pulp fiction fable of vice and libertinage: it's the Bible. And Eliza has yet another secret to spring on her mother: she and her little sister, Maggie, want to start going to church. To Ruth, a tolerant, progressive sex-ed teacher, her daughters' embrace of "Goody Two-Shoes Christianity" comes as a slap in the face. "I don't think you're a born-again, fundamentalist, evangelical, nut-job Christian," she tells Eliza, not imagining she would disagree. "I believe in God," Eliza stubbornly replies. "And I believe that Jesus is His only son, and that He died on the cross for my sins."

Ruth is a protective mother and wants a say in whom her daughters choose for friends. But can a parent tell her kids she thinks Jesus is a bad influence and retain the moral high ground?

Tom Perrotta is a truth-telling, unshowy chronicler of modern-day America: the strong, silent type on paper. Readers are most aware of his books that became hit movies — the black comedy "Election," about a high school teacher who coaxes a shy jock to run for school president against a sexually predatory alpha girl; and the wistful romance "Little Children," about a lonely man and woman, both married to others, both parents of toddlers, who slip into a love affair. But Perrotta's unmassaged realism runs through all of his writing — from "Bad Haircut: Stories of the Seventies," a coming-of-age collection so alive in detail that you can practically touch the tube socks and pastel tuxes; to his first novel, "The Wishbones," about a small-time rocker with wedding jitters; to "Joe College," a novel about a working-class kid from Jersey who reinvents himself at Yale, callously breaking ties with his girlfriend back home. Perrotta is a master of the lump-in-the-throat reversal, as in his story "Snowman," when a pack of tough kids smash a giant snowman to punish an "enemy," then realize, "wild with remorse," that it was made for their target's congenitally impaired kid brother. Usually, when you ask yourself, "What would a Perrotta character do?" you know the answer: he'd do the familiar, guiltily compromised, self-interested thing that any normal guy would do ... and you understand him, even if you don't applaud him.

But the male lead of "The Abstinence Teacher" — the tacit lead, that is — is not one of Perrotta's normal guys: it's Jesus, who has come to visit the town of Stonewood Heights, and apparently means to stay. Stonewood Heights, a "well-to-do Northeastern suburb, not liberal by any means, but not especially conservative, either," could be any of Perrotta's traditional cruising strips, with its schools, malls, streets and sports fields. This time, however, he sets

his cast of flawed parents and un-airbrushed kids against the stained-glass background of muscular Christianity on the march. A new church, the Tabernacle of the Gospel Truth, has come to town, bent on ridding the community of "all manner of godlessness and moral decay," and the first weed their scythe of righteousness mows down is Ruth Ramsey's ninth-grade sex-ed class. After a churchgoing snitch reports her teacher's blasé endorsement of oral sex to her parents, the school forces Ruth to push an abstinence agenda, something she regards as "a farce, an attack on sexuality itself, nothing more than officially sanctioned ignorance." Other secular-minded townspeople are slow to catch on, but to Ruth, who is on the crusade's firing line, watching the Tabernacle's influence spread feels like "living in a horror movie. ... 'The Invasion of the Body Snatchers,' or something. You never knew who they were going to get to next."

For the purposes of the narrative, Christ's spokesman takes the form of a divorced dad named Tim Mason, a Tabernacle congregant who was booted out of his marriage after an "epic coke binge" that "ultimately brought him face-to-face with his Savior." Mason clings to his newfound belief as if it were a life preserver. (His mother accuses him of "using Jesus like a substitute for drugs, like methadone.") To keep close to his daughter, Abby, who lives with her remarried, irreligious

mother, Mason coaches fifth-grade girls' soccer; Ruth's daughter Maggie is his star player. After an emotional match, in a transport of spiritual fervor, Mason leads his team in prayer — enraging his ex-wife and Ruth, and setting off a holy war among the soccer moms and dads of Stonewood Heights.

The conflicts Perrotta invents here feel both instantly recognizable and queerly portentous, calling to mind dystopic science fictions from "Body Snatchers," to Ira Levin's "Stepford Wives," to Ray Bradbury's "Martian Chronicles." As in the Bradbury story "Dark They Were, and Golden-Eyed," in which an Earth family, resettled on Mars, slowly acquires alien customs and language, the characters in "The Abstinence Teacher" shift uneasily between two tongues: the unscripted cadences of ordinary speech and the exalted language of sin, salvation and belief. On one page, Mason dreams of taking his daughter to the Tabernacle: "What a pleasure it would be, walking into church with his little girl," he thinks, "to stand beside her as she listened to God's word." But the wrench comes further on, in a rough moment any divorced father — whatever his faith — might feel, as he lingers with his child in the car, the motor idling, before returning her to her mother. "It was a way of prolonging their time together," Perrotta writes: "as if his custodial rights didn't officially come to an end until he shut off his ignition."

In Perrotta's fearful new world, religion injects uncomfortable ironies into lives that have already yawed off-kilter. A mother tells her born-again son: "Please don't talk to me about Jesus. I feel like I don't know you anymore." A pious wife tries to cure her husband's lack of interest in her by studying a book called "Hot Christian Sex: The Godly Way to Spice Up Your Marriage." (Alas, naught availeth.) And, in a scene that could have come from Bradbury's "Fahrenheit 451," a troubled Best Buy clerk named Dennis, stirred to action by the Bible, goes on a rampage, lobbing printers through the air, deploring "the sinful works of man," and shouting "Whore!" and "Abomination!" as he hurls a boombox into a plasma TV playing "Lara Croft: Tomb Raider." The scene appears in flashback; it's the epiphany that led the clerk to create the Tabernacle, to reinvent himself as Pastor Dennis and to embark on a new career as a fisher of men, rather than a seller of electronics.

What does the author think of Pastor Dennis and his flock? As in Orhan Pamuk's "Snow," a novel that devotes hundreds of pages to a heated battle between religious fanatics and educated secularists in a Turkish town without

explicitly taking sides, Perrotta does not spell it out. Instead, he gives space and speeches to proselytizers and scoffers alike, letting readers form their own conclusions. Religion is no less controversial a subject to weave into fiction in this country than it is in Turkey. In any case, Perrotta has never been one to cast stones.

Liesl Schillinger is a regular contributor to the Book Review.