

## Witnessing Religious Abuse: Joy Castro's *The Truth Book*

By Susan Rushing Adams

*The Truth Book: Escaping a Childhood of Abuse among Jehovah's Witnesses: A Memoir.* By Joy Castro. New York: Arcade, 2005. 230 pages. ISBN 1-55970-787-9.

"Moments of brokenness interest me," Joy Castro writes in *The Truth Book* (158), concluding a memory of working with her brother Tony to thaw frozen pipes under a metal trailer in ice and snow for an entire day. Near dark, she is unable to continue moving; her stepfather brings her inside and leaves her brother outside.

Castro expertly moves from memory to memory with skilled prose, breaking her own narrative of these terrible years with glimpses into her life after her escape—motherhood, graduate school, her father's death from suicide. She keeps her account in present tense and begins and ends it with second-person, unusual but effective choices that pull readers into the text.

The family, Castro tells us, are Jehovah's Witnesses, and her new stepfather indeed tries to break her and Tony, using religion as his authority. The two are forbidden to speak to their father, disfellowshipped from the Kingdom Hall for smoking, under the threat of separation from one another. She is punished when she does not place religious tracts

while witnessing door-to-door; her brother is frequently beaten. The behavior of Castro's mother is mystifying: she is more afraid of the congregation's censure if her premarital relationship with her husband is revealed than the danger to her children's lives.

Castro appeals to her church elders about the abuse she and Tony must endure, but is told that since she is "a child and a girl, she must submit" (147). Eventually she escapes to her father's home and organizes a successful campaign to bring her brother to their home, too. This is one of the many times that she rescues her daredevil brother, knowing that "our mother will let us bleed to death for Jehovah" (61).

Castro retells her past without lapsing into anger or condemnation; instead, she simply tells the story and lets readers make their own judgments and feel their own fear, sadness, and despair for them. Though Castro's prose is heartbreakingly well-written, the greatest strength of her book is its glimpses of her beautiful spirit—she is the kind of woman who years later worries that she did not allow her brother to pick up the plant he dropped as they escaped to their father's home. She does not leave readers behind, either, reminding us that, "You try to be decent and treat people gently, knowing that they, too, have their scars and madnesses that, like yours, do not show" (227). ∞