



Arcade Publishing

141 5th Ave., FL 8  
New York, NY 10010

Tel (212) 475-2633  
Fax (212) 353-8148

Contact: Casey Ebro, Editor, Publicity Associate  
(212) 475-2633 / [casey.ebro@arcadepub.com](mailto:casey.ebro@arcadepub.com)

## Joy Castro

Born in Miami, Joy Castro studied literature at Trinity University and Texas A&M University. She began publishing short stories during graduate school and took a position in 1997 teaching literature and creative writing at Wabash College, where she lectures on women's literature, race and gender issues, literary modernism, and the Harlem Renaissance.

An award-winning teacher, she publishes articles on innovative strategies for the post-secondary classroom, and her published literary scholarship focuses on experimental women writers of the twentieth century such as Jean Rhys, Meridel Le Sueur, Sandra Cisneros, and Naomi Shihab Nye. Committed to broadening the reach of higher education to communities in need, she has offered free courses to at-risk teenagers, low-income adults, and victims of domestic violence, and she runs the biannual Creative Writing/ Creative Teaching conference for Indiana high school and middle school teachers.

Her honors include the Charles Gordone Award for Poetry and a Frank B. Vogel Scholarship in nonfiction at the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, and her short fiction and creative nonfiction appear in anthologies and in journals such as *North American Review*, *Cream City Review*, *Chelsea*, *Quarterly West*, and *Puerto del Sol*.



She is currently completing both a collection of short stories and a book about the American Jazz-Age writer Margery Latimer, a contemporary of Hemingway and Fitzgerald and an early feminist innovator who died in childbirth in 1932. Castro discovered Latimer in graduate school while researching Latimer's controversial husband, Harlem Renaissance writer Jean Toomer.

Now an associate professor, Castro lives in Crawfordsville, a small town in rural Indiana.

# The Truth Book

By Joy Castro

Named a Book Sense Notable Book by the American Booksellers Association

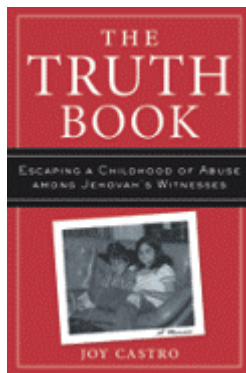
"Joy Castro has written an utterly truthful and harrowing book about the human capacity for hypocrisy and cruelty and also the human capacity for bravery and love. The Truth Book is a compelling memoir written in an achingly beautiful voice."

—Robert Olen Butler, Pulitzer Prize-winning  
author of *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*

The unflinching and indelible personal account of a young girl who endured abuse and the disturbing effects of religious hypocrisy within one of the most enigmatic sects of Christian fundamentalism.

Adopted at birth by a family of Jehovah's Witnesses, Joy Castro ran away at fourteen. Now a professor of literature, she has written a literary memoir that explores the fragile intersections of gender, identity, sexuality, religion, violence, ethnicity, and the body.

In prose breathtakingly beautiful in its simplicity and instantly captivating in its honesty, Joy Castro bears witness to a childhood lost but a life regained.



Named a Book Sense Notable Book by the American Booksellers Association, *The Truth Book* has been adopted as a text in courses on autobiography, women's literature, creative nonfiction, and women and psychology.

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## Turn of Faith

When I was a child, I knocked on doors as a Jehovah's Witness. It was later that I crossed a very personal threshold. By Joy Castro

**A**dopted at birth in 1967 by a family of Jehovah's Witnesses, I was asked from an early age to behave as much like an adult as possible. Three times a week in the Kingdom Hall in Miami, my brother and I strove to sit perfectly still in our chairs. Our mother carried a wooden spoon in her purse and was quick to take us outside for beatings if we fidgeted.

At 5, I sat onstage in the Kingdom Hall in Surrey, England, where my father's job had taken us. Nervously pushing my memorized lines into the microphone, I faced my mother, who was seated across from me. We were demonstrating for the congregation exactly how a Bible study with a "worldly" person, or non-Witness, should go.

I had played the householder before — the person who answered the door. That was easy: you just asked questions that showed you didn't know the Truth. Portraying the Witness was harder: you had to produce the right Scripture to answer any questions the householder might ask.

But we had written our parts on index cards and rehearsed repeatedly at home. I was well dressed and shining clean. I said my lines flawlessly and gave looks of concern at the right times. Finally, the householder agreed with everything I had said: her way of life was wicked, and the Bible clearly proved that Jehovah's Witnesses were the only true Christians who would be saved at Armageddon. Her look was grateful. Then she smiled, becoming my mother again. Everyone clapped, and she glowed with pride. At last I could go out in service.

From the age of 5 until I was 14, I knocked on the doors of strangers each week with memorized lines that urged them to repent. I didn't play with worldly children. I didn't have birthday parties or Christmas mornings. What I did was pray a lot. I knew the books of the Bible in order, by heart, and could recite various verses. My loneliness was nourished by rich, beautiful fantasies of eternal life in a paradise of peace, justice, racial harmony and environmental purity, a recompense for the rigor and social isolation of our lives.

This bliss wasn't a future we had to work for. Witnesses wouldn't vote, didn't involve themselves in worldly matters, weren't activists. Jehovah would do it all for us, destroying ev-

eryone who wasn't a Witness and restoring the earth to harmony. All we had to do was obey and wait.

Shortly after our return to the States, my father was disfellowshipped for being an unrepentant smoker — smoking violated God's temple, the body, much like fornication and drunkenness. Three years later, my parents' marriage dissolved. My mother's second husband had served at Bethel, the Watchtower's headquarters in Brooklyn. Our doctrines, based on Paul's letters in the New Testament, gave him complete control as the new head of the household; my mother's role was to submit. My stepfather happened to be the kind of person who took advantage of this authority, physically abusing us and forcing us to shun our father completely.

After two years, I ran away to live with my father. My brother joined me a tumultuous six months later. We continued to attend the Kingdom Hall and preach door to door; the Witnesses had been our only community. Leaving was a gradual process that took months of questioning. I respected all faiths deeply, but at 15 I decided that I could no longer be part of a religion that condoned inequality.

After she finally divorced my stepfather, my mother moved out of state and married another Witness. Our occasional correspondence skates over the surface of our strained détente. I feel for her struggles. A smart, capable woman, she subjugated her will and judgment, as the Witnesses teach, to her husbands'. If she damaged my brother and me or failed to protect us, she did so out of fear and belief. She wanted to save us from certain destruction at Armageddon, from a corrupt and dirty world. She wanted nothing less for us than paradise.

I love my mother, but I also love my "worldly" life, the multitude of ideas I was once forbidden to entertain, the rich friendships and the joyous love of my family. By choosing to live in the world she scorned — to teach in a college, to spare the rod entirely; to believe in the goodness of all kinds of people — I have, in her eyes, turned my back not only on Jehovah but also on her.

It's strange when Jehovah's Witnesses come to my door now. I know discussion is futile; they have a carefully planned response for any objection. Finally, I say, "I'm an apostate," and their eyes widen at the word: someone who has willfully rejected Jehovah, far worse than a worldly person, who is simply ignorant of the Truth. A threat to the faith of others, an apostate deserves to be shunned, as we were forced to shun our disfellowshipped father. The Witnesses back away from my door. ■

*Joy Castro is the author of a memoir, "The Truth Book," to be published next month by Arcade and from which this essay is adapted. She lives in Crawfordsville, Ind.*