

Author Alan Michael Wilt and His Holy Family

by Cathy Puett Miller

As an Atheist, I tend to read more non-fiction than fiction. For one thing, highly engaging fiction that can entertain and inform both believers and non-believers is, in my opinion, rare. So I was skeptical when I picked up this book, but intrigued as well, since this Atheist author titled his work *The Holy Family*. It turned out to be one of those rare gems, the kind of good book where, in the words of Ernest Hemingway, “after you are finished reading one you will feel that all that happened to you and afterwards it all belongs to you; the good and the bad, the ecstasy, the remorse and sorrow, the people and the places and how the weather was.”

Like many modern titles, this one carries a double meaning, not fully revealed until the end. All along the way, however, Alan Michael Wilt’s prose, with poignancy and tenderness, draws back a curtain and reveals real people, real feelings, and real explorations of the questions we all ask as human beings about life, faith, and love.

Wilt himself is a compassionate, complex, and somewhat private man. His easy response to my questions made our interview more like a conversation with a new friend, even though our talk almost exclusively centered on the book.

He comes from a varied religious background. During his college years, he moved from faith to agnosticism to an exploration of Eastern religions, and he settled for a while on the Catholic Church. His journey included earning a master’s degree from the Maryknoll School of Theology.

The search for meaning is also central to the book’s two main characters, Martin and Justine, who meet, get to know one another, and fall in love. Their story is about the cycle of life and death: birth, loss, and renewal. As the young couple moves beyond infatuation into marriage and a family, this thread continues with language that is honest and relatable.

In writing the story, Wilt wanted to show that change is an opportunity to move beyond something that is no longer meaningful while being able to build upon it. He wanted to show how one can move beyond loss and find meaning. He wanted his readers to explore the question, How can I go on? when faced with sadness. And he wanted to honestly depict those who choose not to believe in a supernatural being and how that colors their responses to human dilemmas.

While he was exploring his own world view, Wilt worked as an editor for several religious publishers, always searching for ways to present the faith he still clung to in new ways. He also learned how writers develop their characters, choose their words wisely, and parse out their stories in the right dosages.

Throughout his quest, he never “bought into” eternal salvation or the need to have all the answers. He wanted to turn the dogma upside down and see what was underneath. Even as he actively searched for ways to do that, he never felt like he fit in. He didn’t comply; he asked questions. Instead of searching for answers, he searched for *meaning*. He exposed and rejected the convenient “safety net” religion offered for dealing with the unknown, with life, and with death.

In 2006, he decided it just wasn’t worth it anymore. He found himself deconstructing the Catholic mass with a skeptic’s eye. “I kept thinking, Is this belief or poetry? That’s when nonbelief began to make sense to me.”

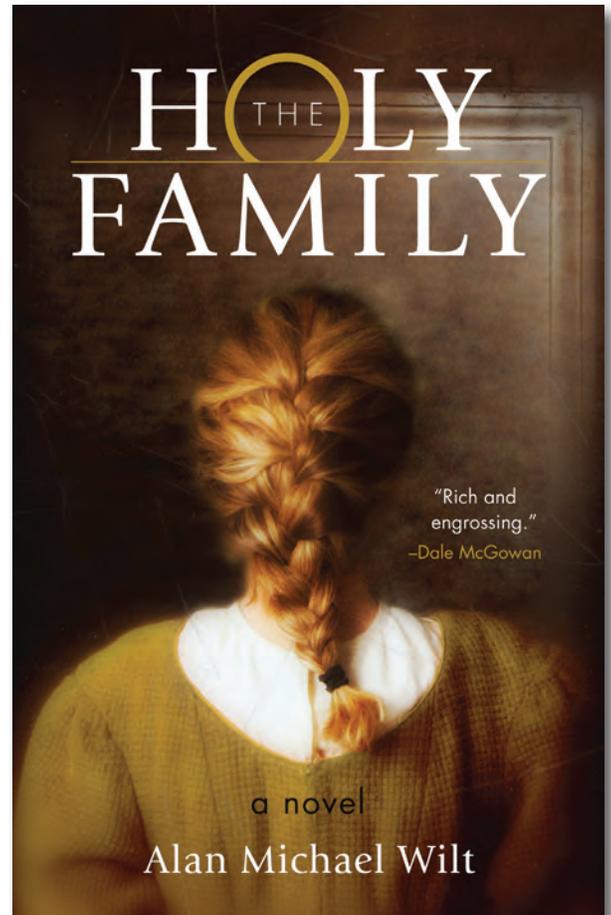
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He still finds it amazing that contemporary Christians frequently give credit to a “father god” rather than embracing the natural or developed abilities and passions that lead us to what is truly a personal choice.

During his early drafts of the novel, he only wanted to craft a meaningful story and view his own experiences from the outside, looking in. He did not want his novel to be a preachy or shallow portrayal with a “how-to” agenda. He had seen too many religious authors make that mistake.

Although a quick read, *The Holy Family* has an undercurrent, something dark and undefined, which surfaces from time to time. Wilt gives readers a unique, frank insight into not only the partnership between two people living with everyday struggles and joys, but snapshots of two particular individuals whose journeys began in unique places. Justine is a beautiful, artistic, inquiring freethinker from the get-go. Martin is a questioning, hardworking, would-be-actor-turned-agent who, without coercion, eventually discards his Catholic faith, like a coat that doesn’t fit anymore. But the characters are neither one-dimensional nor predictable—forever black or white, believer or nonbeliever—as life is rarely that simple.

Regardless of the circumstances his characters face, Wilt portrays truthful, authentic, forthright responses to life. By the story’s midpoint, the undercurrent
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of sadness is even stronger, but still not fully evident are the true extent or major cause behind these pulls at the heart.

At one point, Martin reflects, “If there is one thing I learned from—and sometimes in spite of—the theologians I read and studied, it is that the best thing we can do with death is to know it, own it, and let its reality and inevitability make more vital and essential human beings out of us.”

During the course of our interview, Wilt talked about the death of his younger brother, which happened not long after he finished the book. “I think death is one of the main reasons we hold on to religious myths. When I peeled away the myth and contemplated how I might face my own mortality or that of those I care for, it gave me a great sense that I just might have gotten this ‘dealing with loss and moving beyond it’ thing right. There is strength and contentment in that realization and the reflection has truly been important to me.”

For Wilt, writing the book began as a means of personal reflection, but as the process unfolded, he began to think of *The Holy Family* as contributing to the normalization of Atheism. Sometimes, fiction is a safer place for open dialogue between readers who may have diverse viewpoints on religion, belief in a god, or coping with loss and change.

Experiencing stories like *The Holy Family* is actually where human literacy begins, according to Kendall Haven, author of *Story Proof: The Science Behind the Startling Power of Story*. In this summary

of qualitative and quantitative research on the subject of storytelling, Haven presents evidence that the human mind understands and creates meaning through specific story elements, and it is through story structures that our minds can remember and recall.

The Holy Family is a story that touches the very essence of what it means to be an open, growing human being who refuses to let circumstances dominate or define life.

A Life Member of American Atheists, Cathy Puett Miller is president of TLA, Inc., a national literacy consulting firm. Her reviews of both adult and children’s fiction and nonfiction have appeared in the *New York Journal of Books* online service at NYJournalOfBooks.com/reviewer/Cathy-Puett-Miller. She is a member of the Board of Directors of both The Reading Tub and the Alabama Literacy Alliance. She is also secretary of the North Alabama Freethought Association, an Affiliate of American Atheists.