Mary Mae and the Gospel Truth

by Sandra Dutton

reviewed by David C Kopaska-Merkel

Mary Mae and the Gospel Truth features a 10-year-old protagonist, so I expected it to be aimed at elementary school children. I don't think that it is. Most children’s and young-adult books feature protagonists slightly older than the target audience. I think that many fifth graders would find this book a distinct challenge. However, if the vocabulary is a tad difficult, Mary Mae is all fifth-grade girl. She seems much like bright fifth-graders I have known. (Although she is a truly exceptional person, in the best tradition of young protagonists.) In tone and subject matter, Mary Mae and the Gospel Truth is definitely age-appropriate, but I enjoyed reading it myself. The characters are solid and the story well told. The plot has enough twists and turns to satisfy. It was obvious to me how things were going to end up, as I think it would be by the end of the first page or two for most adults. I doubt that it would be so obvious to a child. Anyway, this relative transparency of dénouement is not a serious flaw. One last general point: the print is large, so the book’s 134 pages are a quick read.

Mary Mae is an inquisitive child, living in small-town southern Ohio in the late 1980s. She is full of questions about everything, including questions like “Whereat in the Bible does it say the world is 6000 years old?” and “What kind of mind does God have?” She is constantly looking for evidence to support or confute anything she is told by parents, teachers, or other adults. In other words, she is a perfect future scientist. There is only one problem. Most of the other members of her family are biblical literalists.

Mary Mae learns about fossils and Earth history from her teacher, Miss Sizemore. She just loves to tell Granny (really her great-grandmother) all about what she learned in school when she gets home in the afternoon. Granny is as fascinated as Mary Mae, but Mama is another story. When Mary Mae starts talking about fossils as the remains of extinct organisms, and how to study the rock layers visible in road cuts around town, Mama tells her that these ideas contradict the Bible and are therefore wrong. Mama says that Mary Mae may not participate in any lessons that contradict the Bible. She wants to take away the part of school her daughter likes best.

This is a story about the interaction of science and religion, told from the perspective of a 10-year-old. Nevertheless, there is a lot of science in this book, both fact and theory. As far as I can see, from the life habits of trilobites, to the great age of the earth, to the economics of feeding the zoo on Noah's Ark scientific facts and methods presented in this book are described accurately and used in appropriate contexts. Both scientific theories and religious beliefs, as far as I can tell, are described accurately and fairly. There is one exception. Some statements are made by the 10-year-old protagonist and are simplified to the point
of not being technically correct. I hasten to add that I think this degree of simplification is appropriate, and perhaps essential in the context.

One thing I like about this book is its delivery through the persona of a child who is both passionate about her church and about science. She doesn't reject either aspect of her life. She is as excited about the puppet show her Sunday School class is doing as about her interview with a trilobite for a school assignment. (I do hope this was based on something a child actually wrote for school; it is quite charming.) Mary Mae and the Gospel Truth is a little preachy, but Dutton keeps the story in front and the message is pulled along behind. The book is as entertaining and thoughtful as any attempt I have seen to tackle the idea that religion and science are compatible. And not just liberal religion and science, but any religion and science.

Anyone who believes I have just reviewed the answer to this problem that is ripping our society into two mutually suspicious camps is a little optimistic. Mary Mae's mind is open, and she manages to open other minds as well. In real life, opening closed minds is not so easy. Nevertheless, any mind that is open can enjoy and learn from this book.

### About the Author

David C Kopaska-Merkel earned his PhD in geology from the University of Kansas. He works as a geologist, and writes science fiction, fantasy, and poetry on the side.

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