

Bethany Gorman

From a Child's Perspective

Kathleen Zamboni-McCormick. *Dodging Satan: My Irish/Italian, Sometimes Awesome, but Mostly Creepy, Childhood*. Sand Hill Review Press 2016.

Kathleen Zamboni-McCormick's debut novel, *Dodging Satan*, is an engaging, clever exploration of the (not so) everyday life of a girl growing up in a dysfunctional Irish-Italian Catholic household. Writing about her experiences of religion, the narrator, Bridget, feels God's presence in her life in strange and endearing ways. Bridget's spirituality helps her tackle complicated concepts such as anxiety, sex, and feminism, while still maintaining her childlike innocence. She explores the parameters of Catholicism to discover who she is and what she believes; her story is an inverted fairy tale that questions the arbitrary Catholic perception of good and evil and searches for meaning in the midst of madness.

Zamboni-McCormick creates a unique voice by allowing Bridget's inner dialogue to take center stage. Playfully tossing around words and phrases such as "'cuz," "q.t.," and "know what I mean," she frames the narrative and establishes an extended conversation between Bridget and the reader. When she contemplates, "any minute now I might have to give my soul away, just to stop Satan. 'Course then I'd be lost for all eternity. Satan is so sly, keeping it all on the q.t. He doesn't appear in any room but mine," Zamboni-McCormick makes readers feel like they are in on a secret (one they won't dare tell). Her tone also helps explain more adult concepts. Bridget says, "I've never touched silk crepe before, and it gives me an odd sensation inside myself, know what I mean?" The informal diction downplays the physical sensation Bridget feels, allowing her to examine her sexual feelings from a safe distance (and therefore remaining pure).

Throughout the novel, Bridget questions her spirituality, entertaining the possibility that what she believes is actually false. Her Catholic roots are so deep that doubting her faith seems wrong, even sacrilegious. However, doubts still slip into her subconscious. One evening after dinner Bridget thinks, "It's so dark that all I can see is my own reflection. And in an instant I'm terrified, What if I'm just an average girl? No angels coming with any special announcements for me. No distinction by God as someone exceptional . . ." This realization scares her because she wants so badly to believe in the magic of religion and, instead, is confronted by reality. She expresses her doubts about God's goodness, stating, "My overall impression, perhaps now that I'm eleven and a bit of a woman's libber, is that God-the-F (as I'm now starting to call him) has some pretty strange and sexist attitudes about females and that, really, He's so much worse than my father."

When Bridget's neighbor teaches her about women's liberation, Bridget relates it to her Catholic beliefs and begins to realize that her perception of God has fundamentally changed. Disillusioned, she states, "He made Adam first and then Eve from Adam's rib. So right away she's second rate. He didn't have to create Eve like that. He could have spun her out of thin air. Or dramatically made a star fall and turned it into her. . . . So He must have wanted her to seem inferior." Still, Bridget is determined not to give up on Him, no matter what she may think about Him. She even contemplates becoming a nun because she is unwilling to relinquish the childlike magic of faith; Catholicism, to her, incorporates as much wonder as it does structure. While taking holy water from her church, Bridget says, "That God would let us see The Holy is surely a sign it was ordained by Him for us to realize how powerfully concentrated this water is. Water that we're going to bring home to my sacred font. Water that's going to be strong enough to fight Satan." Bridget wants to cling to the comforting aspects of spirituality that gave her peace as a child, such as believing that holy water has religious power that will keep Satan out of her bedroom at night, even though she now questions the authenticity of those beliefs.

This beautiful, heart-wrenching story takes readers on an adventure with surprises at every turn. Bridget's consistent need to make sense of the world around her contradicts the uncertainty of her

Catholicism. Her experienced voice highlights her naiveté, creating a fascinating dichotomy in which she is both wise and childish. She awakens to sexual desire but remains deeply rooted in her faith; straddling angel and devil, she does not know what to do or which path to take. Her road to discovery is full of excitement and disenchantment, love and fear, happiness and confusion. Zamboni-McCormick, in sharing the story of her childhood, examines Catholicism on both a personal and a celestial level in order to discover a higher truth: it's hard to be a woman.

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