

tradition by echoing their work without ever veering into merely derivative territory. Through embedding the faith into the very bedrock of the novel, Durbin demonstrates he has embraced Tolkien's and Lewis's wisdom about Christian storytelling. Narnia's Mr. Tumnus would be proud to share any reader's shelf with Mr. Girandole.

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Worth Reading: A Book Review of *What is Heaven Like?*, Richard Eng, by Jasmin Biggs

In his memoir *Surprised by Joy*, C.S. Lewis gives the name "joy" to the longing ache that accompanies a particularly striking encounter with beauty or goodness. Distinguishing it from both happiness and pleasure, Lewis describes Joy as "an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction."² He also describes it as "the inconsolable secret" in each one of us, an ache for the glory for which we are made, our "desire for our own far-off country."³

Under this definition, Richard Eng's new children's book titled *What is Heaven Like?* sparks Joy.⁴ This simple story offers an encounter with beauty and wisdom that

² C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: First Mariner Books, 2012), 17-18.

³ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 29.

⁴ Richard Eng, *What Is Heaven Like?* (New York: WestBow Press, 2022).

elicits a heartfelt ache for glory. As a student of theology and as a mother, I am always on the lookout for picture books for my young daughter that both shine with artistic excellence and ring with Biblically sound, age-appropriate theology. This offering meets both criteria.

Eng communicates Joy through the poignant roots of the story, the fresh and evocative metaphors, the lovely illustrations, and a surprising theology of work that upends our popular conception of the afterlife.

Poignant roots

This book was written out of a place of loss. It was birthed as the author processed the grief of the loss of his own unborn son, Jesse. Through the story, he imagines taking Jesse as a 6-year-old on a fishing trip in a high mountain lake. Together, father and son marvel at the colors of sunrise slanting through the fog and anointing the surrounding peaks. As they endeavor to land Jesse's first fish, the sublime scene sparks a discussion regarding the nature of heaven.

Evocative metaphors

Eng offers two metaphors for heaven that I found particularly Lewis-esque. As the sun illuminates the fog with riveting light, Jesse recognizes the beauty but is blinded by the brightness. Just then, a fish leaps in the distance. His father explains that a fish may find the murky depths more navigable than the clear air above, which is so bright that it struggles to see.

Likewise, until God gives us eyes to see, we may find that the clear, clean atmosphere of heaven hurts our eyes. Just as the light hurts the eyes of the fish, we may sometimes feel that the perfect ways of God are blinding and painful. In these murky shadowlands, we do not

understand the ways of God here below, where we do not yet have the eyes to see clearly. It is too bright for us to understand.

Thankfully, God has promised to help us one day to see. “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.” (1 Corinthians 13:12) This is such a clear and accessible metaphor for a difficult theological concept – the problem of evil. Yet it also casts an imaginative vision for glory that is more than a simple explanation for our pain. The reader cannot help but ache for the day that our faith will be made sight, and the unbearably bright mist becomes clear, revealing the unfathomable beauty for which we were made.

Just before Jesse lands his first fish, a second metaphor emerges. The fishing line quivers with barely-perceptible twitches; a fish is just there — almost, yet not quite, within reach. Jesse’s dad explains that these vibrations are akin to the sensations of longing we feel in our hearts, “pointing [us] to something better and something greater.” The new heaven and new earth await, just beyond the veil.

Sometimes, in the thin places, the fishing line quivers, twitches, tugs. Unbidden, an inconsolable ache pulses through our gut, when every heartbeat hurts and, for just a moment, we stop breathing. We glimpse the glory for which we were made. We remember. Our satisfaction awaits, the fulfillment of our unspeakable need and the healing of our inconsolable pain. Our salvation, the fullness of glory, is both unbearably distant yet unimaginably close, right at hand, closer than our breath.

Theology of Work

Near the end of their conversation, a topic emerges which might be surprising in a children's book about heaven: a robust theology of work. Jesse's dad explains that heaven will not consist merely of singing and floating on clouds; it will also consist of work. Jesse complains that he does not want to just do chores in heaven, a relatable sentiment for all of us! His dad agrees, relating how sometimes his vocation is dull and draining. However, he then explains how the best parts of his job make him come alive with joy as he utilizes his giftings to make the world a better place.

He then asks Jesse what he wants to be when he grows up. Jesse eagerly responds that he wants to go to Mars! His dad explains that God gave Jesse those desires for adventure and exploration. Then he explains that in the new heaven and the new earth, each of us will exercise the gifts and talents that God has given us as we work to build a new and heavenly society. In our work here and now, we find great joy and fulfillment when we use our unique passions and giftings, although not all of us are fortunate enough to achieve a career that utilizes those giftings. Thankfully, in the new heaven and new earth, all those unique giftings will find their fullest expression in work that makes us come alive with passion and purpose, full of significance and fulfillment. The work we do will be the most purpose-driven, heartfelt, and fulfilling work we have ever dreamed of doing.

This imaginative vision of the next life is a far cry from the cotton-candy vision of heaven we all dread — a world of sugar-sweet nothingness. The new earth is not a Gnostic fantasy, but rather a substantive, embodied

place. I can't help but wonder what the heavenly coffee shops and ice cream shops will be like. What architectural wonders will we encounter? What incredible drawings and paintings will fill the art galleries? In what sublime, intricate gardens will we wander? What incredible concerts will be performed? What sports will we play? Since we are made in the image of God, sub-creators⁵ made in the image of the divine Creator, each of us will have a role in creating these embodied goods for the eternal joy of our beloved fellow saints. Jesus is preparing a place — a home and a calling on the new earth — for those of us who love engineering, art, writing, architecture, cooking, tailoring, gardening, hip hop, and a myriad of other embodied goods. Eng spurs us to ponder our role in using our God-given gifts to serve the saints in this world and the next.

Other Considerations

At the end of the story, discussion questions are included to spark deeper discussion between caretakers and children. Between the beautiful illustrations, the simple story, and the thoughtful metaphors, *What Is Heaven Like?* is accessible and enjoyable for children and genuinely thought-provoking for adults. The story and pictures are simple enough for a young child to enjoy and understand, yet it offers adults nourishing food for the soul and intellect. I encountered a deeper and more accurate theology of heaven than even most adults possess. And the aches of Joy that I experienced in reading this book left me with a renewed desire for Glory.

⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-stories," in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine, 1966), 86.

I am eager to stock the shelves of local churches, bookstores, and families with this excellent work.

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