

EDEN WEST

Q&A with author **PETE HAUTMAN**



***Eden West* dips into the themes of religion, spirituality, and beliefs, similar to some of the themes you explored in your National Book Award winner, *Godless*. What keeps you returning to these ideas?**

I am interested in faith, and how it serves us, and how it can destroy

us. I think faith and religion are hugely important elements of what it is to be human. They infuse our every thought, and they drive life-and-death decisions every single day. So why do so few young-adult books touch upon issues of faith and religion? Most YA novels never mention religion at all. What sort of church does Bella Swan go to? Does Katniss Everdeen believe in God? What about Bilbo Baggins, or Harry Potter? I'm not suggesting that YA books should all contain a religious component—in fact, most of my own books do not—but I do think there's a lot of avoidance on the part of authors who don't want to offend anyone or cost themselves sales. People can get very prickly about religion, so it's a bit of a minefield. I guess I'm attracted to that.

How did you conceive of the Grace, their belief system, and the land of Nodd? Did you do any research to develop the personality and ideals of this cult?

I've always been fascinated by cults in particular and religions in general. The belief system of the Grace is made up of bits and pieces of several different groups. I began working on *Eden West* about fifteen years ago, and one of the first things I found was that there are real cults that are far, far stranger than the one I was creating. The Grace have a strange and frightening worldview, but it is nowhere near as strange or horrific as that of Jim Jones, whose 909 followers committed mass suicide in 1978. Or that of the thirty-nine Heaven's Gate cultists who killed themselves in 1997. Truth is indeed stranger than fiction.

In the book, Jacob has a strong connection with Lynna, a girl from outside the fence. What can we learn about love from Jacob and Lynna?

Jacob and Lynna come from two different worlds, yet they find themselves thrown together by geography, by circumstance, and by chemistry. Their efforts to bridge the gap tell the story of how we all struggle to build bridges between our own strange selves and the stranger we desire.

In "real life," love brings together people of different faiths, different skin colors, different backgrounds. Such relationships come with built-in challenges. Sometimes these challenges make love stronger; sometimes they destroy it. That makes for a good story.

What kinds of questions do you hope teens will ask themselves after reading this book?

What is true? We all grow up believing certain things. Sometimes we believe them our entire lives. We are told things as children. Santa Claus will come on Christmas Eve. Genesis is literal fact. Reincarnation is real. The earth is a sphere. Yetis stalk the Himalayas. Guardian angels protect us. Aliens are watching us. Apples are good for you. Some of those things might be true—I don't know. But I do know that questioning core beliefs is how we learn and grow, and that for me, at least, it is what makes living and thinking an everyday adventure. What is true today might not be tomorrow.

If you could describe *Eden West* in one sentence, what would you say?

After all this heavy talk about religion and faith, I should say that *Eden West* is a fast-reading and occasionally funny book about a pair of star-crossed (perhaps) lovers who find each other through a chain-link fence, and together discover what is truly important.



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