

Earth from above

by [Stephen H. Webb](#) in the [October 9, 2002](#) issue

*The Lovely Bones*. By Alice Sebold. Little, Brown, 288 pp., \$21.95.

In the most powerful opening chapter of any novel I have read, 14-year-old Susie Salmon narrates the hellish scene of her own brutal rape and murder—from heaven. There are many stories about people witnessing their own funeral, but this bold move transcends such pedestrian plot tricks. It allows the author to document the terrible consequences of human depravity from the heights of divine perfection, and the tension between the two is almost unbearable. Remarkably, when the reader is done, it seems obvious that, far from being a contrived resurrection of the old-fashioned omniscient-narrator point of view, this unique perspective is the only way to fully comprehend such an intolerable tragedy.

*The Lovely Bones* is Alice Sebold's first novel, but not her first attempt to turn pain into poetry. Her first book, ironically titled *Lucky*, is a memoir about her experience of being raped at the age of 18. The police told her that she was lucky she wasn't murdered, but she is also lucky to be blessed with a literary voice that is as precise as it is profound. This pair of books—one a careful documentation of events that are all too real, the other a fanciful tale full of the miraculous and the supernatural—constitutes one of the most memorable reflections on a kind of violence that many of us would rather ignore.

Like Susie Salmon, Sebold was a virgin when she was raped, and her memoir ends, after many excruciating revelations, with a description of a night of "almost virginal" sex with her boyfriend. In her heaven Susie also longs for love, a love she never had the opportunity to experience. In the marvelous climax of the novel she returns to earth and to the man she might have loved by exchanging bodies with a young woman who has been haunted by her death. This incarnational event gives her a bliss more heavenly than anything she finds in heaven itself. Through this otherworldly sexual encounter Susie is saved from her obsession with earthly life. Perhaps Sebold also has found a way to put to rest her own painful memories.

If Sebald has a weakness as a novelist, it is her desire to save everyone. Her novel's ending is as happy as its beginning is disturbing. This false promise of earthly happiness betrays the novel's premise that only heaven provides the comfort and security needed to make sense of evil. Happy endings should happen in heaven, not on earth.

Although the heaven of this story is not full of crosses and saints, it provides more material for somber theological reflection than a score of Sunday sermons. The first person Susie meets in the afterlife is Franny, her intake counselor, who tells her that, even though she can have anything in heaven, she has to understand her desires before they will come true. Her first desire is for Mr. Harvey, her killer, to die, but she soon realizes that she can have only what is truly good or true to her best self. She must learn to dream of desires she has never experienced.

Sebald's imagination will disturb those who picture heaven as full of ethereal spirits floating toward the light, or of the morally righteous waiting in line for their reward. This is a heaven that is, by and large, fun. Susie has a roommate who keeps her company, and she keeps busy by spying on her family and friends. She becomes a watcher, and is able to intervene on earth in small, ghostly ways.

Much of the plot of the book pivots on the question of whether Susie can help mend her broken family. As with many families tormented by violence, strains that were hardly noticed before begin to rip the family apart. The parents' marriage begins to break under the weight of her father's quest to prove Mr. Harvey's guilt and her mother's withdrawal into a world of lonely regret. And Susie's younger sister must navigate a changed world as she grows into a woman, something Susie was prevented from becoming.

Susie also needs mending. She aches with the memory of the boy with whom she shared her only kiss, and she is jealous of the way her younger brother clings to their father. In fact, through her family's courage and survival, they help her as much as she helps them. Susie needs their thoughts and prayers. This reverses the traditional Roman Catholic view of saints mediating on our behalf. It also challenges the Protestant view of the dead as so secure in their salvation that they do not need us at all. As I thought about this portrait of heaven, I could not help wondering about my own reluctance to visit cemeteries and the feebleness of my attempts to pray for those who have died. This novel is a powerful indictment of our neglect of the dead.

Susie's spiritual progress is linked to her ability to give up trying to control events on earth. She has to give her family time to heal, and her recognition that she has all the time in the world is the beginning of her own healing. She has to learn to let go of "the dark bright pity of being human." When she meets her grandfather for a dance that seems to last forever, she knows that there are many more levels of joy and healing awaiting her.

Susie sees only those she loves in heaven (there is even a great scene where she is reunited with her dog). But this makes heaven too easy. It is natural to hope that those who die prematurely, especially those who are victims of human cruelty and greed, will have a special place in the heart of God, where their innocence will merge with God's holiness. But what if the ascending spiral of choirs that circle toward God include not only the innocent but also the guilty—not only the victims but also their oppressors? What would Susie do if she ran into Mr. Harvey in heaven? Can he too be saved?

Sebold hints at a heaven that would include reconciliation, not just bliss, when Susie, while trailing Mr. Harvey, begins to understand his terrible past. Although this plotline is left undeveloped, it suggests that those guilty of grievous crimes need God as much as their innocent victims do. I imagine that even those of us who have had uneventful lives will come to understand in heaven all the ways that our smallest acts of indecision and inattention have contributed to the chain of events that help produce evil in the world. If so, perhaps our need for forgiveness from those guilty of serious crimes will burn through their open wounds of resentment, defiance and delusion, setting them free to worship God.

And what if we miss the dead more than they miss us? What is the meaning of mourning? Halfway through this novel I put it down and rushed into my son's bedroom to hold him. The novel was so good it forced me to imagine the very worst. How would I respond if my almost four-year-old son met a violent end? Was I crying because I was thinking about how incomplete his life would be? Yes, he would miss out on so many joys, but he would also skip many sorrows. More important, my faith tells me that when he is united with Christ, at whatever age, my son will have all the depths of human experience without any of the pain, because Christ is not only fully human but also humanity at its fullest.

Was I crying because of the experiences I would lose with my son? He is such a part

of me that I cannot imagine my life without him. His death would tempt me to despair so deeply that I cannot imagine overcoming that despair. Yet I trust God that I would find the strength to resist that deadly spiritual disease.

I finally decided that I would mourn the loss of the truth of his life, its singular beauty made manifest in such a precarious form. I could only hope that God would preserve that truth by making him more of what he is now, rather than letting death diminish him in any way.

Many people think it is best not to dwell on such thoughts. It is better to live in the here and now, and let tomorrow take care of itself. One often hears the stock phrase “for heaven’s sake,” but rarely do we think of living our lives for the sake of heaven. Yet preparing yourself for the true heaven by rejecting the temptation of false pleasures on earth used to be what faith was all about. Heaven and hell once dominated the Christian imagination, until skeptics began caricaturing heaven as a scam. Wrestling with the problem of evil has always been an aspect of the spiritual life, but skeptics turned it into a conceptual conundrum by insisting that nothing can compensate for the pain of innocent victims like Susie. How could “pie in the sky when you die” make up for rape? But this argument displays a spectacular failure of the religious imagination. When there is more talk of heaven in novels and movies than in sermons, the church must shoulder much of the blame for confusion and doubt about the afterlife.

Sebold’s novel opens countless possibilities for reflection, but it also demonstrates just how much our language has failed us. Heaven should be something we sing, but it instead has become something we sell. Consumerism makes it an adjective, not a noun. We have heavenly chocolate and heavenly mattresses, but few images of heaven that both provoke and persuade—provoke us to consider why we cling so fast to this life and persuade us that the truth of our lives will be preserved after we die.

We can have the courage to look into the bottomless depths of evil only if we can avoid being blinded by its darkness. That’s what makes this novel so startling. We are able to look Mr. Harvey’s evil in the face because we can see it from the proper distance. Even the slightest glimmer of light that enables us to dwell in the valley of the shadow of death should be enough to persuade us that heaven is too good not to be true.