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Forum: What Shall We Read?: The Garden Within Us All, Voltaire, Candide

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THE GARDEN WITHIN US ALL

Voltaire, *Candide*

Eileen Z. Cohen

Even as a child, when I heard the story of Adam and Eve and of their innocence in the Garden of Eden, I was discomfited. Then, it was because I could not conceive of “Paradise” as a place without lamb chops. As I matured, my distress, I am happy to say, became more nuanced. I liked being “human” and respected human talent. I saw the Eden of the Old Testament as a place where talent and art could not flourish. Marble could not be quarried for Bernini to sculpt, nor trees felled to build a great cathedral. No one would ever have heard of Newton or Galileo. Human talent and suffering in Eden seemed to me to have been reduced to applesauce.

And then I read *Candide*. Occasioned in part by Voltaire’s reaction to the Lisbon earthquake, 1755, when many people were at Mass on All Saints Day and to the responses of some of his contemporaries to this natural disaster of enormous proportions *Candide* rejects suggestions that natural disasters occur to punish sin or that “everything happens for the best.” We have recently heard such comments after Hurricane Katrina and the Tsunami of 2005. Voltaire mocks as

arrogant and self-serving those who would glibly attempt to read blame into natural disasters and human suffering.

His narrative style denies such cause and effect. Instead, he tells us how to live in the world as it is. He enjoins his characters, after much distress and misadventures, both cosmic and self-inflicted, to “cultivate their Garden.” Thus come together a disparate and desperate group of people, among them a former prostitute, an arrogant priest, a foolish long-winded professor, and a wise old woman — none totally good or evil — to make a working community. One character is good at carpentry, another bakes, a third cares for the linen. Thus, through humor, work, and tolerance, they keep at bay “boredom, vice, and need.”

Candide tells us that diverse, ordinary people can live together and even find moments of peace and pleasure, eating “candied citrons and pistachios.” He suggests that the Garden’s possibilities are within all of us; we need to stop asking questions about the *why* of human suffering and try to ameliorate it instead. Good humor, hard work, and generosity to others make this, as Dr. Pangloss says, and this long-winded Professor agrees, “the best of all possible worlds,” It is the only one we have! ■

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