

'Chicken Soup' not too comforting

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Faith & Family

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I am not part of the target audience for Jack Canfield and company's newest release, *Chicken Soup for the Christian Teenage Soul*. But as the mother of four teenagers and one almost-teen, all of whom bring home friends for sleepovers, refrigerator raids, or late-night movie marathons, I have some insight into the teenage mind — if not the teenage soul.

I expect that most of the teenagers I know who try to read this book will never get past the first few pages. I believe they will find the book lightweight, formulaic and not relevant to their personal issues.

"Turning off" too soon may be a mistake. There are a few stories in the book that shine like little gems and speak with genuine teen voices about real teen experiences.

One of these, "Daddy's Miracle," is written by 17-year-old Jenny DeYaeger, a parishioner of St. Charles Borromeo Parish in Greece, N.Y. Jenny's story describes how her faith is tested when her father, Jim, suffers a massive stroke two days after her birthday. He slips into a coma that he is not expected to survive.

Throughout the ordeal, Jenny comes across as a real person. She confesses that there were times when "I would lie in my bed just praying that God would make it all go away and restore my life to how it was." She admits to growing angry with friends who complained about arguments with their families. "At least their parents were healthy."

But Jenny's love for her father is



unwavering. Supported by friends, family, neighbors and even complete strangers, her faith grows into one that is steadfast and strong. Today, Jenny says, "I don't let life's adversities bring me down. Instead, I try to face them with a smile and make each day the best day of my life."

Unfortunately, this selection is not typical of *Chicken Soup for the Christian Teenage Soul*. Regrettably, an unusually high number of the stories have hackneyed and redundant themes: the new kid at school, the terminally ill relative, the "geek" whom everyone torments, the love affair gone awry. Even the voices of most of the authors are not distinct-

Chicken Soup for the Christian Teenage Soul: Stories of Faith, Love, Inspiration and Hope
 Jack Canfield, Mark Victor Hansen, Kimberly Kirberger, Patty Aubery and Nancy Mitchell-Auto, editors.
 Health Communications Inc.
 (Deerfield Beach, Fla., 2003).
 283 pp., \$12.95
 Reviewed by Donna M. Marbach

ive and blur the text into a kind of litany of the trite.

While the book does have other potentially moving and interesting stories, they are usually relayed in a didactic manner. We are told, not shown, how the youngsters feel about their experiences.

The editors claim that "most of the stories in this book were written by teens," and some — often the better ones — are. But professionals such as Walker Meade, a former editor for *Cosmopolitan* and *Reader's Digest Book Club*, write many of the vignettes. Teachers or counselors author others. These pieces of adult reflection tend to make the book more about what adults think teenagers should feel or think, than what teens actually do.

To be fair, the book does make an effort to touch on important teenage issues, but it generally does so in a superficial, unrealistic manner. For example, the issues of teenage substance abuse, stealing and bulimia are all crammed into a single three-

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page story, "Desperate to Fit In." The seriousness of these problems is further minimized by an instantaneous and not very credible solution.

Still, *Chicken Soup for the Christian Teenage Soul* does have its positive points. The cartoons are delightful. Frequent quotes from the Bible and by people such as Mother Teresa provide substantial food for thought.

Should you buy this book? If you are one of the several thousand fans of the *Chicken Soup* series and/or have a strong evangelical/born-again Christian background, I'd say yes. For other teens, I'd suggest first checking it out of your local library. You might find it an easy, summer read.

However, I don't think this book will alleviate your concerns over the war with Iraq or domestic violence. I doubt it will comfort you through your parents' divorce, or relieve the pressure you feel to compete for top honors in school. As for healing your soul, I suggest a more effective "cure" might be a chat with Jenny DeYaeger at her church — or helping out another family in crisis.

Marbach, a freelance writer and painter, is a member of St. Ambrose Parish in Rochester. She lives in Penfield with her husband, Joe Brennan, and their five children.

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