



Children of Eden: A Novel

By Joey Graceffa

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Joey Graceffa has captured the hearts of millions of teens and young adults through his playful, sweet, and inspirational YouTube presence. Already a bestselling author with his memoir, *In Real Life*, Joey now presents his first novel, *Children of Eden*.

Rowan is a second child in a world where population control measures make her an outlaw, marked for death. She can never go to school, make friends, or get the eye implants that will mark her as a true member of Eden. Indeed, her kaleidoscopic eyes may very well give her away to the ruthless Center government.

Outside of Eden, Earth is poisoned and dead. All animals and most plants have been destroyed by a man-made catastrophe. Long ago, the brilliant scientist Aaron Al-Baz saved a pocket of civilization by designing the EcoPanopticon, a massive computer program that hijacked all global technology and put it to use preserving the last vestiges of mankind. Humans will wait for thousands of years in Eden until the EcoPan heals the world.

As an illegal second child, Rowan has been hidden away in her family's compound for sixteen years. Now, desperate to see the world, she recklessly escapes for what she swears will be only one night of adventure. Though she finds an exotic world, and even a friend, the night leads to tragedy. Soon Rowan becomes a renegade on the run.

The first novel from YouTube superstar Joey Graceffa, *Children of Eden* is a thrilling and completely absorbing new book from one of social media's brightest young storytellers.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Joey Graceffa is one of the leading content creators and actors on YouTube. His memoir, *In Real Life: My Journey to a Pixelated World*, was published in 2015 and became an instant *New York Times* bestseller. Joey ranked third on *Variety*'s 2015 #Famechangers list and has been featured in *People*, *Forbes*, *Entertainment Weekly*, and *The Hollywood Reporter*. In 2013, Joey produced and starred in his own Kickstarter-funded supernatural series, *Storytellers*, for which he won a Streamy Award, and in 2016, he debuted *Escape the Night*, a surreality competition series for YouTube Red for which he won a second Streamy Award. For more information, please visit ChildrenofEdenBook.com.

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Children of Eden

✖ “GIVE ME MORE!” I insist, pounding my fist on the gleaming steel of the outdoor dining table. Above us, the stars glimmer through the nanoparticle haze that keeps us safe from the ruined atmosphere. Across the table from me, my brother Ash’s eyes twinkle.

“The priests say our ancestors ruined the planet that way, Rowan. More, more, always more, until the Earth couldn’t give any more and she died.” He grins. He’s teasing me, I know, but I see the secret shudder that always makes his body tremble when he thinks of the Ecofail. He is an avid temple-goer, and spends hours on his knees in penance for the acts of our ancestors. Not that it does much good. The atmosphere is as broken as ever, the world is dead, and only the tender care of the EcoPanopticon keeps us alive now. Praying will never make a tree grow in this world again. The Earth is dead, but we still survive.

Of course, I’ve never been to temple. Maybe if I had I wouldn’t be such a cynic. But then, I haven’t been anywhere in the last sixteen years. At least, not officially. You see, I don’t exist.

I might as well be a figment of my twin brother’s imagination. If I were, I think he would have gone inside and fallen asleep long ago. Figments are easier to shake than I am. Ash knows I never give up. Through long habit—and Mom’s insistence—he is used to devoting a good chunk of every day to my persistent questions.

For a girl who doesn’t exist, I can be a pain in the neck. Or so Ash tells me almost every day.

I smile wickedly at my brother. “More!” I tell him again. When he hesitates, I spring on him, toppling him backward. The chair thuds on the thick carpet of moss that my mother so carefully maintains. Ash tries to roll out of the way, but we’re the same height, and much to his embarrassment I’m a little bit stronger than he is. “More!” I shout as I pin him down. “Tell me more!” I begin to tickle him, and he squirms until we are both near hysterical.

“That’s enough,” comes the gentle voice of our mother from the veranda. “Do you want the neighbors to hear?”

That quiets us quickly. Even though there is almost no chance of our laughter penetrating the high, thick stone walls around my family’s compound, it would be a disaster if anyone knew I was here. Oh, Mom could probably pass the girlish laughter off as coming from one of Ash’s visiting friends—even though we almost never have visitors. (When we do, I have to run to one of the many hidden nooks and walled-off secret chambers my parents have improvised all through the house.) But there is always the chance some nosy

neighbor will check the regional scans and put two and two together. That would be the end of me. Literally.

I help Ash to his feet and sit down across from him. In a more decorous voice I do what I do every day: I beg him to tell me more about the world outside the family compound. I'm not just hungry for all the experiences I'm missing out on. I'm starving. Ravenous.

"What did Lark wear today when she changed out of her school uniform?" Lark is the girl my brother has a crush on, and I'm fascinated with her. The way he describes her makes her seem so real to me, almost as if she were my friend, too. Almost as if I were a real person. I know that if we ever met, we'd be instantly close.

Every afternoon when Ash comes home I quiz him about every detail of his day. Academics I learn on my own from vids and datablocks. I'm more interested in the people. The tiniest details enrapture me. Did your Environmental History professor flirt with the headmaster today? Did the autoloop attendant smile when she scanned your eyes on the way to school? Did Brook chew his lavercakes with his mouth open again? These are the friends I will never have, and I love them all.

Unfortunately, Ash isn't always good at the details I crave. When I ask what Lark wore, he only says, "Er, something yellow."

"Bright yellow? Pale yellow?" I press eagerly. "Lemon or buttercup or sunshine?" Of course, no one has seen lemons or buttercups since before the Ecofail.

"I dunno, just kind of medium yellow, I guess."

"A dress?"

"Er . . ."

I fling myself dramatically back in the chair. "Ugh, you're useless!"

Ash, bless him, can never quite understand how all those things that are so trivial to him can mean the world to me. He does his best, he really does. But it's never good enough. Between the two of us we're trying to build a shadow life for a shadow girl. I have to be ready for the glorious day I will finally emerge into the light. If that day ever comes. Mom and Dad always assure me it will, someday. Sixteen years of assurances later, someday still hasn't arrived.

I look at my brother as he struggles to recall the details of his day so I can feel like I am a part of the real world. He is my mirror, almost exactly like me. He has the same night-dark hair, the strong chin softened by a dimple, the light bronze skin. He's told me that he doesn't like his face, that his features are too delicate for a boy. Maybe, if I knew more of the world, I'd think my face was too strong for a girl.

Our main difference is in our jaws, I think. In both of us they are sharply angled and strong. But when Ash worries about something, he works his jaw like he's chewing on the problem, like it's a tough nut he's trying to crack. (I learned about nuts in an Environmental History vid. Food, growing on trees—can you imagine?)

Me, when I'm upset my jaw gets tight and still. I just clench my teeth until the muscles in my cheeks ache.

Been clenching my jaw a lot lately.

There are two other obvious differences between us, other than our gender, of course. Ash's eyes are a flat reflective blue-gray, like our mother's. Mine are a strange, shifting color that seems to alternate from green to blue to gold, depending on the light. When I look closely in a mirror, I can see a starburst of amber in the middle of the blue, flecks and streaks like meteors shooting across an azure sky.

My eyes would give me away in a heartbeat, if anyone ever saw them. Soon after birth, children have their eyes corrected with lens implants. This is because human eyes have evolved to withstand exposure to certain wavelengths of light. Now that the atmosphere is damaged, we're exposed to increased low-band ultraviolet radiation, which can harm untreated eyes. The surgery implants a filter that protects everyone's eyes from the rays. It takes a long time to cause damage, but if someone doesn't get the surgery they will eventually go blind. I haven't noticed any damage yet, but I'm told around thirty my vision will start to dim. The filter is coded to identify every resident of Eden with a quick scan.

Of course, I couldn't have the surgery, so my eyes are still their natural color. Sometimes when Ash looks at me too long I see him blink and shake his head, and I know that they unnerve him. My father, whose own eyes are dead brown like a wall, can hardly look at me.

The other difference between Ash and me wouldn't be apparent to anyone. He's older than me. Only by about ten minutes, but that's enough. It means that he is the official, legal child: the firstborn. I am the shameful second child who never should have come into this world at all.

Ash goes inside to finish his homework. My lessons, assigned by Mom and closely paralleling Ash's, were done hours before he even came home. Now, as the night deepens, I begin to pace restlessly around the courtyard. We live in one of the inner circles, just beyond the Center, because my parents are both in the government. It's a huge house, much bigger than we need. But whenever Dad talks about selling it, or dividing it into parcels to lease, Mom shuts him down. It's her house, inherited from her parents. Unlike most buildings in Eden, ours is made of stone. When I put my hands on it, I can almost feel the Earth breathing against me. It's alive, somehow. More alive, anyway, than the metal and concrete and solar cells that comprise the other buildings in Eden. These stones have been in dirt, I think. Real dirt, with worms, and roots, and life. None of us in Eden has experienced such natural circumstances.

The moss that carpets the walled courtyard is alive, but it isn't a real plant. It doesn't need dirt. It doesn't have roots, only threadlike anchors that help it cling to rock. It doesn't take its nutrients from the ground, but from the air. Like everything in Eden, it is separate from the Earth. Still, it is growing, living, and as my feet pace along its carpeted softness a sharp, fresh smell rises to meet my nose. If I close my eyes, I can almost imagine I'm in one of the forests that died almost two hundred years ago.

As chief archivist in the Central Records Division, Mom has access to the oldest records, the ones from before the Ecofail. My datablock lessons only have graphic illustrations of the way things used to be, but Mom told me that in the secret chambers of the archives there are images—ancient and crumbling—of tigers and lambs and palm trees and meadows full of wildflowers. They are so old and precious that they are kept in a static-free room and handled only with gloves.

She gave me one. She could have gotten locked up for doing so, but the photo would probably never be missed, and she thought I deserved something special, for my years in captivity. One day when she was going through the records she found an undocumented image of a night sky over a great chasm. Tucked behind another document, it was labeled with a date immediately before the Ecofail.

The stars don't look like anything I've ever seen. There are thousands of them, swimming in a milky sea, and

beneath them I can make out the contours of trees clinging to the rocky ridge. It is a vastness I can scarcely comprehend. Eden is big, but I can bisect the city in an autoloop in half a day.

The ancient, folded image my mother smuggled out for me shows a world. The World, in fact. It is my most precious possession.

Because my mother has seen such things, she cherishes living organisms even more than most. The majority of households, Ash tells me, make do with cheerful, neon-green turf and plasticized trees. But Mom prefers to get as close as possible to the real thing, even if it isn't as pretty. Besides the moss, we have chunks of rock covered in white and pink lichens. A creeping black slime mold coils its way up an abstract sculpture. And at the center of the courtyard is a shallow pool where red and green sheets of algae swirl continuously in an artificial current.

Mine is a luxurious house, large and comfortable. But a large, comfortable prison is still a prison.

I know that I shouldn't think of it that way. Home should be thought of as a sanctuary, and the alternative to having a home is too horrible to even consider. But all the same, I can't shake my sense of entrapment.

With so many lonely hours to fill, I've learned to schedule my days tightly. Empty time leads to daydreaming, and daydreams are dangerous for a person in my position. Schoolwork, art, and exercise are all arranged in regular sequence so I don't have too much time to yearn for what I can't have.

Right now, it's too dark to draw or paint, and I feel as though I've read every book in the database. So I run.

In the dim starlight I can just make out the faint path where I run miles every day. The moss is resilient—that's why it is one of the few kinds of vegetation that survived the Ecofail—but even it loses its spring under the onslaught of my feet.

As I run, the steady hypnotic pounding centers me. I can feel the blood start to move more quickly through my veins. When I push my body I feel alive. Alive, when almost all of the world is dead. But what good is it to be alive when I'm trapped?

Frustrated, I run faster, taking the corners of the courtyard hard enough to kick up bits of moss. Mom will be mad, but I don't care. I am madder. Furious. Just because of some stupid law, I'm hidden away behind walls, a pariah who will be slaughtered or enslaved if I'm ever discovered.

Movement usually makes me feel better, but tonight it is torment. I am so sick of running in this same rectangle, clockwise, then counterclockwise. With a cry of frustration I begin to zigzag, sprinting faster and faster, jumping over the lichen-covered rocks, the chairs, leaping to the tabletop and springing off again.

All at once, I feel like I can't breathe. The high walls seem to close in on me, like a giant mouth about to crush me with stony teeth. I dash one way, then the other, crashing into the walls, pounding them with my fists, almost snarling in bitter frustration. I know I'm spinning out of control, but I can't help myself. Most of the time I'm somber, regulated, content. But sometimes, for reasons I don't quite understand, I become enraged at my situation.

It's the strangest thing, but what bothers me most is that Ash couldn't describe Lark's outfit. It's so stupid, so trivial, but it gnaws at me that, with all his privileges and freedom, he couldn't bother to take note of the one thing that mattered to me. Why does that little detail matter so much? I don't understand it. Ash does the best

he can, and it can't be easy having to give up most of his social life so he can regale his secret sister with stories about the outside world. He must resent me sometimes.

Yet tonight, I resent him, and that makes me feel guilty, and even madder. At myself. At the Center and its laws that took everything away from me. Even at the EcoPan that keeps us all alive. I have to get away from these walls. I have to break free!

With an animal gasp of relief I begin to climb a wall, digging my fingers into the handholds I know so well, jamming my toes into crevices where the mortar has crumbled. I climb these walls as part of the physical conditioning my mother insists on. Almost every night I would pull myself up to the top, some thirty feet above the ground, and slyly peer over the edge.

Tonight, that isn't enough. Not nearly enough.

Without so much as a moment's hesitation I fling a leg over the rough stones and sit straddling the wall, one leg imprisoned, the other free. No one will see me; no one will look up. I'm feeling reckless as I gaze out at Eden stretched before me, its concentric circles looking like some strange glyph carved into the land.

Instead of trees, tall spires of algae protein synthesizers jut hundreds of feet above the highest building. The vibrant circles just beyond the Center are lit with bioluminescence that shows off the abundant greenery that carpets the city. Most of the city is equipped with artificial photosynthesis, engineered to act almost as real plants and convert the carbon dioxide we exhale into breathable oxygen. Some of it is like what Mom cultivates in our courtyard—hardy mosses and fungi, decorative algae swirling in liquid mediums. Even in the near-dark it is a green city.

If I didn't know better, I might be fooled into thinking that it is a thriving ecosystem instead of an artificial survival pod. What isn't green, glitters. Unlike our stone house, most buildings are made of polymers and coated in either clear or reflective photovoltaic panels that convert sunlight into energy to power our city. In the daylight, Eden shines like a giant emerald. At night, it looks more like a huge green eye, darkly bright with hidden secrets.

Past the rings of the luxurious inner circles comes the less elegant outer circle. Here in the inner circles, where we live just beyond the Center, the houses are large and fine. Nearer the boundary, though, houses grow smaller, more tightly packed. No one would ever starve in Eden—the EcoPanopticon makes sure of that—but from what Mom and Ash told me, life is not nearly as comfortable near the boundary as it is here, near the Center.

Even at this height I can't begin to see as far as the boundary of Eden, but I know from my lessons what lies there. Desert, burning and merciless. And beyond that, a wasteland far worse.

Compared to my courtyard, Eden is an infinity. It is so big, and I'm so small! The city teems with people. I'm just a particle in that cosmos of humanity. All my life I've only ever met three people. The idea of meeting anyone new frankly terrifies me even more than the very real possibility of being caught. Strangers seem like dangerous animals.

But in a world without life, I would risk being torn and rendered by fearsome fangs just for the chance to see a real live tiger up close. I would give anything, even my own life, to experience what I've been missing out on.

I've thought about going out so many times. There are days when I think of nothing else, when the lure of freedom consumes my thoughts and I can't draw, or study, or run. Now, tonight more than ever before, as I think about that one detail about Lark's outfit and how Ash doesn't know it and I don't know it and I may never know it, Eden seems to call me with its strongest voice yet, and though I'm terrified, I swing my other leg over the edge of the wall—my elation overpowering my terror.

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