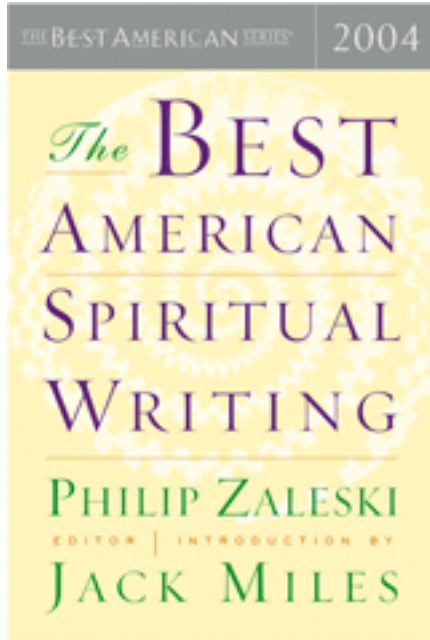


Press Release



[The Best American Spiritual Writing 2004](#)

edited by [Philip Zaleski](#)

introduction by Pulitzer Prize-winner [Jack Miles](#)

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About the Book

Introducing the newest addition to the acclaimed Best American® series: *The Best American Spiritual Writing 2004* (Houghton Mifflin; publication date: October 14, 2004), edited by Philip Zaleski and with an introduction by Jack Miles. The pieces in this collection range from quiet meditations on natural beauty to precise discussions of religious theory. Though many of the pieces are not of a traditionally religious nature, each one shares the theme of seeking the sacred within the ordinary. These stories, poems, and essays challenge and compel the reader to understand his or her own spiritual path, be it religious, social, or philosophical.

James Fredericks explores the depth of his relationship with a Buddhist teacher in "Masao Abe: A Spiritual Friendship." Fredericks, a Christian, writes that his friendship with the Zen master Masao Abe "requires [him] to stand where there is no place to stand." Though the heart of this story explores the complicated and ultimately powerful tie between two men who are devoted to their own beliefs, Fredericks also discusses friendship itself at great length. "Every friendship, no matter how good or how old, once involved making a hospitable place in our lives for a stranger."

In "The Green-Eyed Monster: Envy Is Nothing to Be Jealous Of," Joseph Epstein (author of *Snobbery*, *Fabulous Small Jews*) discusses what he deems "the most insidious" of the seven deadly sins. While breaking down the exact denotation of the word, Epstein discusses the moral breakdown of those who fall prey to envy. He is a master of bridging academia and social commentary, and in this essay he approaches an old subject with fresh vigor and insight.

Especially moving are personal essays chronicling spiritual change through grief. In "Physics

and Grief," Patricia Monaghan relates the unlikely comfort she found after her husband's death through the study and reading of physics. The uncertainty of the science mirrored the questions she faced on a daily basis. She writes, "If we cannot know something as simple as two aspects of a subatomic particle's motion simultaneously, how can we know for certain that there is no life after death — or that there is?" The simple act of losing her keys sets off a chain of events that eventually leads to a spiritual shift and a marked change in the expression of her grief.

In addition to these pieces, the collection includes personal stories from Rick Bass, B. K. Loren, Robert Coles, and Lindsey Crittenden; an essay on genetic modification by Bill McKibben; and poetry by Philip Levine, W. S. Merwin, Andrew Hudgins, and Franz Wright. Oliver Sacks contributes an essay on blindness and perception, David Gelernter discusses Judaism and extrapolates themes of belief in "Judaism Beyond Words," and Thomas Lynch writes on the importance of paying tribute to the body as part of the grieving process in "Good Grief."

Zaleski (author and editor of many books, including *The Recollected Heart* and *The Book of Heaven*, and a senior editor at *Parabola*) and Miles (Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *God: A Biography*) lead us thoughtfully to these selections. Zaleski references the Book of Proverbs in his foreword — "Death and life are in the power of the tongue" — to speak to the importance of language in coping with the strange gray area between life and death, the realm more commonly expressed in terms of suffering, grief, and the human experience. And Miles begins his thoughtful introduction by stating, "By now the word *spirituality* ought not to embarrass me, but like the word *mommy* it still does." Indeed, the word *spiritual* is a loaded one, conjuring images of new-age mysticism or old-fashioned religious doctrine. This collection of writings, through its scope and breadth, showcases a beautiful and intelligent array of spiritual subjects and voices. Houghton Mifflin is proud to introduce you to this moving and important book.

About the Editors

Jack Miles is the author of *God: A Biography*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for biography in 1996, and *Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God*. A former Jesuit seminarian, he has been a Regents' Lecturer at the University of California, Santa Barbara; the director of the Humanities Center at Claremont Graduate University; and a visiting professor of humanities at the California Institute of Technology.

Philip Zaleski is the author and editor of many books, including *The Recollected Heart* and *The Book of Heaven*, a senior editor at *Parabola*, and a research associate in the Department of Religion at Smith College. He and his wife, Carol Zaleski, are working on a book about the nature, practice, and meaning of prayer across religious traditions and through the ages (to be published by Houghton Mifflin in Spring 2005).