

A Reader's Guide



Faith: Stories

edited by [C. Michael Curtis](#)

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About the Book

Chosen by the esteemed fiction editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, the stories in this anthology of short fiction present readers with the world of faith in all its guises.

Here are tales rooted in Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, Quaker, and Confucian beliefs, as well as Jewish and Christian ones. From James A. Michener to Gabriel Garcia Márquez, from Amy Tan to Hanif Kureishi, this important gathering of writers explores the boundaries of faith and ritual in everyday life. In one story, a one-eyed Chinese child learns that all heavens are not the same. In another, a wealthy moneylender finds a relic of the prophet Mohammed and decides to keep it, instead of returning it to its shrine. In yet another, a father whose son begins blindly to preach the Koran becomes engaged in a fanaticism of his own.

With subtlety and surprises, wit and candor, these stories explore such issues of faith as sacrifice, superstition, myth, and disbelief. Together, they form an illuminating prism for the religious experience in today's world.

Questions for Discussion

We hope the following questions will stimulate discussion for reading groups and provide a deeper understanding for every reader of *Faith: Stories*.

1. In the stories by James Michener and Jessamyn West, conflicts arise between faith orthodoxies: in the Michener, Quaker convictions are taken as a challenge to Puritan stringencies; in the West, the music-loving husband of a Quaker minister brings an organ into their household, thus directly challenging a deeply ingrained Quaker distrust of music and its ability to divert believers from businesslike piety.

In what way, in the Michener story, does Kenworthy's Quakerism threaten the reigning community belief system? And what explains its appeal to his cellmate, Paxmore? How does the unidentified but vengeful "woman" function in the final page of the story? How would you characterize the accommodation to Jess Birdwell's organ reached first by his minister-wife and then by members of the Ministry and Oversight Committee? Does the accommodation represent a weakening of resolve?

2. In the stories by Khushwant Singh, Hanif Kureishi, and Salman Rushdie, articles of faith are explored ironically. In all three, true believers are portrayed unsympathetically, though in all three the workings of fate appear to underline the potency of their convictions. In the Singh story, how considered does Gunga Ram's treatment of Kala Nag, the cobra, seem to be? Why does Gunga Ram pay the ultimate price for the violence of "us youngsters," one of whom narrates the story?

In the Kureishi story, to what extent is the behavior of Parvez's son fanatical? What justifies the son's use of the term to describe his father's behavior at story's end? How does Bettina function in the story? In the Rushdie story, do events appear to confirm a belief that the prophet's hair has magical properties? To what extent could the behavior of all the characters in the story be said to have intensified, to have taken each to an extreme but logical consequence of impiety? What does Rushdie appear to be saying about the perils of faith commitment? Or of its absence?

3. In what sense can Josie Wire, the heroine of Elizabeth Cox's "Saved," be said to have succeeded in her effort to "save" the man who speaks to her from the Wagon Wheel? What, in the seduction scene, seems to have influenced Samuel Beckett/Bob Hunnicut's change of heart?

4. In "The Deacon," by Mary Gordon, how important is Gerard Mahoney's misreading of Sister Joan Fitzgerald's remark "You know that you are greatly beloved"? How does that misreading affect Sister Joan's wish to order a Scotch and soda at Gallagher's restaurant?

5. In what sense does Cello, the visiting Tibetan monk in "Cello" by Rémy Rougeau, provide an example for Brother Antoine? What evidence does the story provide that Antoine might profit by such an example? How do you feel about the visitors' decision to conceal their companion's gender?

6. Ling Tan, the heroine of Marjorie Kemper's "God's Goodness," describes herself as a "good Christian," and her faith, at story's end, appears unshaken. During the course of the story, has that faith been tested? In what way? Can Mike's view of Ling's religiosity be said to have changed by story's end?

7. In "The Third Generation" by Tova Reich, Nechama, the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors, decides to become a Catholic nun in a convent built on the outskirts of Auschwitz. Why, apparently, does Nechama make that choice? Why does Arlene, her mother, not "recognize" the language of "suffering and salvation, martyrdom and redemption"? Where, at story's end, do Arlene and Nechama stand with regard to their differing views of a purposeful life?

8. Kate Wheeler's narrator in "Ringworm" says that she went to Burma and sought admission to a Buddhist monastery in order to achieve "complete freedom of the heart and mind." To what extent, by story's end, does she appear to have been successful? How might the experiences and disciplines described help her achieve her goal? Why, at story's end, does a sip of French wine close "the monastery gates" behind her?

9. "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings," by Gabriel García Márquez, may be read as a comic allegory. Should it be? Insofar as it seems to challenge a number of faith responses, what appear to be the author's targets? Why is the appearance of an angel, even one in ragged condition, such a puzzle to the villagers? To Father Gonzaga? To Rome? What would you assume to be the author's attitude toward the Catholic Church? How would an angel fare in your backyard?

About C. Michael Curtis

C. Michael Curtis, senior editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, has edited six anthologies. His own writing has appeared in the *New Republic*, the *National Review*, *Sport*, and other periodicals. Curtis has taught for more than thirty years at Harvard, MIT, and elsewhere. He lives in Littleton, Massachusetts.

A Note from the Editor

This book began to take shape almost immediately after the publication of *God: Stories*, its partner-in-reflection. Several stories in the present volume could not be included in the earlier book, both because I ran out of room and because they seemed, somehow, not to fit. Once *God: Stories* was published and reviewers began to tell me what I had failed to consider in putting it together, I began to realize that I had missed a number of mind-broadening possibilities. In choosing stories rooted in Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish traditions, I had unwittingly excluded more than half of the world's believers.

Faith: Stories, at least in part, is an attempt to close this gap. And while such an attempt to be inclusive necessarily exposes the limitations of the exercise, this book attempts an encounter with spiritual traditions unremarked in its predecessor. I've included two stories — sections of novels, as it happens — that touch on matters fundamental to Quaker traditions and lore; other stories concern Hindu, Islamic, Buddhist, and Confucian values and ideas. While none of these stories intend or accomplish a full appreciation of the traditions from which they arise, they do underline instructive truths about the strength and transformative power of diverse faith experiences. Faith, of course, occurs in many forms, and with various consequences.

We tell ourselves we need to believe in something beyond our own basic wish for survival and comfort, and readers should not be surprised to find here a scattering of stories about the stare-down between rationalism and steadfast faith in sacred agency. Hanif Kureishi's "My Son the Fanatic" and Salman Rushdie's "The Prophet's Hair" are examples. The same might be said of Khushwant Singh's "The Mark of Vishnu" or Marjorie Kemper's remarkable "God's Goodness." In some stories faith is disorienting, even crippling, while in others it

provides a gentle and unexpected respite from the hard realities of lives taken over by pain and disappointment.

God: Stories was intended, among other things, as a resource for reading and assessment by church groups like the one at the West Concord Union Church, in Concord, Massachusetts, where many of its stories were discussed well before they reappeared in book form. *Faith: Stories* will, I hope, extend that exercise, and its broader range ought to invite a conversation about ways in which faith commitments both divide and strengthen us.
— C. Michael Curtis

For Further Reading

The following title is also edited by C. Michael Curtis, and may be of interest to readers of *Faith: Stories*.

God: Stories

"A provocative and delightful tour through the varieties of religious experience." — Kathleen Norris

The companion volume to *Faith: Stories*, this fresh approach to an age-old discussion collects twenty-five dazzling short stories by eminent writers about spiritual experiences. Including John Updike, Philip Roth, Louise Erdrich, James Joyce, Flannery O'Connor, James Baldwin, Alice Munro, and more, *God: Stories* offers insight, solace, and pleasure not only to the faithful but to the seekers — and to those who simply love fine stories.