"A provocative and delightful tour through the varieties of religious experience. It will be of use to anyone who is interested in exploring the ways in which the human imagination contends with the spirit-charged riches of ordinary life." —Kathleen Norris, author of *The Cloister Walk* and *Dakota*

"A book of revelation, far better than many sermons or sentimental literalism, it makes the Word flesh; that is, it opens us to the terrible mysteries stitched through our lives that constitute our essential religious experience." —Eugene Kennedy, author of *Tomorrow’s Catholics, Yesterday’s Church* and *Authority*

God: Stories offers insight and pleasure not only to the faithful but also to spiritual seekers and to those who simply love fine stories. Gathered by an esteemed editor of the Atlantic Monthly, these twenty-five dazzling short stories by eminent writers of widely varying persuasion, including Tobias Wolff, Louise Erdrich, Philip Roth, James Joyce, Flannery O’Connor, and John Updike, deal with the question of faith—both its presence and its absence.

The stories range from the comic to the passionate, from the skeptical to the mystical. Bernard Malamud contemplates God as mischief-maker, while John Hersey’s minister identifies himself with the God of righteous anger in order to understand his own shortcomings. Some stories make their way into the perplexities of belief, some explore the hazy perimeter of unconditional love and forgiveness, and others examine the paradoxes of discipleship. Stories by Bobby Ann Mason and Eudora Welty explore the function of church membership as organizing value in a chaotic world. Each of these stories engages issues of deep and universal appeal. God: Stories brings the exploration of spirit to life and puts lofty questions within our reach.
Questions for Discussion

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

1. In what ways do the stories by Brendan Gill and William Hoffman reveal the apparent risks and benefits of prayer? Why do we pray and how do we decide whether our prayers have been answered?

2. Consider the aberrant behavior of ministers in the stories by Louise Erdrich and John Hersey, the more ambiguous behavior of ministers and priests in stories by Mary Ward Brown, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Alice Munro. Do periodic disappointments with our own priests, ministers, or rabbis reflect a fundamental shortcoming of religious institutions, human frailties, or both? What do these stories tell us about what we can or should expect from those who direct our lives in church or synagogue?

3. Flannery O’Connor, John Gardner, James Joyce, and others write about characters whose religious commitments, while formed by church experience, are dramatized outside the church itself. What do we discover in these stories about the tenacity, the misappropriation, or the elasticity of spiritual understanding? In what ways are our daily lives fed by spiritual images? What are some of these images and how do they sustain you?

4. What “religious experiences” are revealed in the stories by Philip Roth, Cynthia Ozick, Eudora Welty, and Elizabeth Spencer? Which seem most comparable to your own experience and which seem most foreign? Why?

5. In Peggy Payne’s story a minister speaks directly to God. Bernard Malamud’s main character encounters a messenger from the afterlife. What do you make of these expressions of the ineffable? How realistic is each? In what ways are they different?

6. Several stories portray priests or ministers in the grip of spiritual misgivings, doubts about their calling, or concerns about their responsibilities. How are these problems “solved” in the stories by Richard Bausch, William Trevor, J. F. Powers, and Tobias Wolff? Where, to use Flannery O’Connor’s phrase, is the “moment of grace” in each of these stories? Do the characters’ problems correspond to your own tussles with faith? If so, in what ways?

7. John Updike, Andre Dubus, and Joe Ashby Porter all write about characters struggling to define their own degree and form of sacred attachment, some with more apparent success than others. What is it that Updike’s Brad Schaeffer never quite understands about his wife’s vision of spirituality? Where do you think Updike’s sympathies lie? How credible is Dubus’s character, Luke Ripley, in his brief for forgiveness, after protecting his daughter from criminal prosecution? How does Joe Ashby Porter’s Patrick Clusel integrate Anne Van Frank’s story into his own life? How does this change his life?

8. James Baldwin and Eileen Pollack write about the intersection of religious myth with the puzzling realities of everyday decision-making. In what ways might you feel ambivalent about the intransigent Rabbi Heckler or the reformist transformations of Rabbi Bloomgarten in Eileen Pollack’s story? Which path does Pollack seem to favor and why? Why does it seem ironic that Florence, in James Baldwin’s story, uses her own mother’s Biblicism as a way of
escaping a life of hopelessness? How did the Bible serve her mother in trying times? How do you reconcile these sharply divergent uses of scripture? Which of the two stories seems more relevant to your own spiritual experience and why?

9. Which story most closely corresponds to your own spiritual leanings or convictions and why?

About the Editor