

The God Issue

Maybe it's a reflection of my own obsessions and dreams that so many stories and poems in this book strike me as "about God."

After all, when asked to describe my spiritual journey, I've drawn more than a few laughs by responding, "I've been, in turn, a child of God, a Southern Baptist, Agnostic, Atheist, Agnostic again, Humanist, Hippie-Mystic, light-foot Methodist, Episcopalian, lapsed Episcopalian rationalist... with Unitarian and Buddhist leanings.

Which is pretty much where I stand, though I've come to believe, like the Zen Buddhists, that nearly everything one says about God or cosmos only reduces such concepts. Having said that, I could write a book about the above chronology, and—had I time to seine a quarter-century of weekly commentaries, assorted articles, stories, and bind them by topic—I likely would have a book about God, but I digress.

I've laid out and edited 20 issues of *NMW*, starting in 1996, when we published smaller issues twice-annually rather than one large one (this is our largest). More often than not, as if by synchronicity or some other mystery, a flavor or thematic resonance presents itself as I shuffle materials.

One issue brims with romance and love. Another presents the many faces of war and peace. Our last issue was deemed too political by some. Often the theme reveals itself early on. Other times no true pattern emerges, though we frequently contrive one, such as "the Kesey issue" (2002) because it contained my long tribute essay on Ken Kesey, and because a picture of Aquarius the water bearer—from a giant zodiac painted on Kesey's Oregon living room floor—graced our cover.

In this anthology, a prominent theme emerged early in the process. That's why I'm calling this "the God issue." At the risk of reducing that which we speak about, I'll attempt to show why.

When compiling this book I was struck by the many God-related themes. All sorts of gods, Judaeo-Christian, pagan demi-gods, goddesses, demons, and scientific formulations of God, cosmos and spirit abound herein.

Not to sound sanctimonious. While some works embrace our theme with *Devotion*, the name of the cover art by **Will Rickenbach**, others take the form of questions and grave expressions of doubt. And you'll encounter "the F-bomb" as my children call it, and other profanity. Still, story after story, as I came to them in turn, announced this God theme, some more than others....

The first story here would seem to belie this notion. **A. Molotkov's** tale about a man who collects body parts in time of war—inter-cut with a story

about a girl seeking love—is more anti-war than religious per se. But then, people who write thoughtful anti-war stories are doing the Lord’s work, if you’ll pardon the vernacular, although some might disagree, including Molotkov. Only by implication does the subject arise.

Next comes “Cerberus Sleeps,” **B.K. Loren**’s story about what might happen if the hound that guards the entrance to Hades were living in the home of a deeply troubled American family.

Then there’s **Vic Sizemore**’s “Hush Little Baby,” a story that tackles notions of salvation and old time religion head-on, as his protagonist wrestles with romance, immortality and cosmic justice while tending his seriously ailing daughter and the funeral of a family friend.

It would be a stretch to call the short-short fiction herein “God related.” Take our first ever flash fiction, **Deidre McAfee**’s “Hydroplane,” a story that strikes with the force of a head-on collision, or take the quirky piece by newcomer **Travis Ladonuel**, and other engaging reads not overtly religious. Still, the short-short story section is just that, after all, and it leads to nonfiction that is hard-hitting and religious—though not in a pious way. Two creative nonfiction pieces, “hide and seek” by **Amy Andrews** and “Bread and Company” by **Josh MacIvor-Andersen**, are stories and meditations at once, about seeking the hidden face of God against backdrops of haunting spiritual malaise, conflict and death in a darkening universe. These are amazing true-life accounts, as are the less overtly religious pieces by **Ellen Graf**—who writes about the music and internal logic of language—and **Jann Banales**, who offers a tribute to a long-dead childhood friend.

Allusions to God and spirituality are sprinkled throughout our largest ever **Poetry Suite**—a section that includes poems by **American Book Award Winner Pamela Uschuk** and by **Nikki Giovanni**. **Jack Neely**’s essay on Giovanni contains allusions to her religious roots, her interest in old spirituals, and even to heaven (“Everybody talkin’ ’bout heaven ain’t goin’ there...”).

Think of the rest as worldly context for such notions. **R.B. Morris**’ tribute to **William S. Burroughs**’ iconic *Naked Lunch*; stories and poems about love and loss, life and death, poverty and riches, justice and injustice, consciousness and nothingness, time and eternity. These are meditations on the whole tableau of human suffering, transcendence and mutability that all religions and cosmologies address one way or another.

As I say, we set out with no theme in mind, but turns out—as my Gospel-strumming daddy used to say—“The Lord will provide.”

Amen, Namaste, Shalom, Salaam, Shantih, and Peace,
Don Williams