



99 Stories of God

Joy Williams

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Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award finalist Joy Williams has a one-of-a-kind gift for capturing both the absurdity and the darkness of everyday life. In *Ninety-Nine Stories of God*, she takes on one of mankind's most confounding preoccupations: the Supreme Being.

This series of short, fictional vignettes explores our day-to-day interactions with an ever-elusive and arbitrary God. It's the *Book of Common Prayer* as seen through a looking glass—a powerfully vivid collection of seemingly random life moments. The figures that haunt these stories range from Kafka (talking to a fish) to the Aztecs, Tolstoy to Abraham and Sarah, O. J. Simpson to a pack of wolves. Most of Williams's characters, however, are like the rest of us: anonymous strivers and bumblers who brush up against God in the least expected places or go searching for Him when He's standing right there.

The Lord shows up at a hot-dog-eating contest, a demolition derby, a formal gala, and a drugstore, where he's in line to get a shingles vaccination. At turns comic and yearning, lyric and aphoristic, *Ninety-Nine Stories of God* serves as a pure distillation of one of our great artists.

99 Stories of God Details

Date : Published April 22nd 2013 by Byliner Inc.

ISBN :

Author : Joy Williams

Format : Kindle Edition 131 pages

Genre : Short Stories, Fiction, Religion, Literary Fiction

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From Reader Review 99 Stories of God for online ebook

Kevin Kelsey says

I'm not above saying that I didn't *get* about 70% of the stories in this collection.

STORIES SIX AND SEVEN WERE SUBLIME

Sue says

I have intended to read Joy Williams for some time and now, thanks to Tin House Books and NetGalley I've had a great introduction. These are most definitely not traditional stories of God's intercession with man as read in religious works. These are everyday experiences that reveal the human and seem to border on something other. At times, The Lord shows up personally to check in on humans, but not in a majestic way, more in a personal, often perplexed way given how humankind seems to be dealing with the world now a days.

These stories vary in length from a couple of sentences to a couple of pages (at the most). Most are no longer than a long paragraph or two. Some are biting satiric. Some are achingly sad. Some require time for the words to sink in. A few left me completely befuddled. I consider such a mix a wonderful success. My brain and heart were challenged.

If one is looking for traditional religious writing here, you will probably be disappointed. But if you are open to the religious experience that exists in all of life then this may well be for you. I just found a sentence from one of my status updates written while reading which I will include here: "The general theme of God can be taken in many ways, some quite traditional and literal, while others seem to be more related to the gods of life today." This was my view about 2/3rds through and seems a good summary of these short fictions.

I do recommend it for those who enjoy this story form---which I am enjoying more and more.

A copy of this book was provided by the publisher through NetGalley in return for an honest review.

Steve Daykin says

Some of these ultra short short stories piqued my curiosity. Most left me baffled.

Melody says

I didn't find these minute stories to be intriguing or funny, just rather odd and tiresome. They read as random thoughts that made the author feel clever. Each one is like a movie that ends in exactly the wrong spot and makes you regret watching it in the first place. Obviously well appreciated by others, but quite unappealing to me.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

I would say it is difficult to form an opinion on an author just from super short fiction, and this book of 99 stories is a collection of flash pieces - some are as small as a sentence fragment, while others are a page or two. Some of them have characters facing their mortality (where God surely is) and others have God wandering through the randomness of life trying to make sense of it all. There were several clever laughable moments but really I need to read her longer short stories before I have any real sense of Joy Williams. My interest is definitely there!

For true entertainment, read the Amazon reviews of this book (an eBook used to be available), where half the people thought they were buying a devotional text and were puzzled and angry by the end. Ha!

Thanks to the publisher for providing a copy through Edelweiss in exchange for an honest review.

Perry says

Deep Thoughts by Jack Handey--Redux

[updated 10/21/17] *3.6 stars

The 99 sketches in this book reminded me of the old Saturday Night Live "Deep Thoughts by Jack Handey," two perfect examples being,

If you get invited to your first orgy, don't just show up nude. That's a common mistake. You have to let nudity 'happen.'

If you ever discover that what you're seeing is a play within a play, just slow down, take a deep breath and hold on for the ride of your life.

Most though are a little longer (none more than 2 pages) and not as humorous. The following quote could truly be confused with a "story" from this book (i do not say this in jest).

If a kid asks where rain comes from, I think a cute thing to tell him is, 'God is crying.' And if he asks why God is crying, another cute thing to tell him is, 'Probably because of something you did.'

And yet, some of the stories are quite poignant and/or profound. That's really the best summary review I can give to this odd little book.

I received an ARC from net galley and the publisher in exchange for an honest review.

Lauren Davis says

There's nothing I want to say about this small, intricate, deceptively simple book that hasn't already been said by Justin Taylor in his excellent NYT review, so allow me just to give you the link...

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/07/bo...>

Enjoy. Ponder. Reflect. Laugh. Despair. Wonder. It's all there.

Karen says

Gosh, I can't remember the last time I gave a book one star. I found the stories weird and puzzling. Many of these short fictional stories I felt had no connection to God.

Thanks to Tin House Books for providing me a copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.

Rebecca Renner says

I really enjoyed this book! It's a bunch of vignettes, some irreverent, some poetic, others peculiar. Still, they make a cohesive whole. It's an easy read, and it's something different. I highly recommend this book.

B. Rule says

I guess "46 Thoughts Joy Williams Had Before Bed, 35 Items of Color Commentary by Your Aunt on Science Stories, OJ Simpson, and Other Assorted News Items, and 18 Short Stories" didn't fit as well on the cover page. Each of the titular 99 pieces in this book is at most a couple pages long, and most are far shorter than that. For all of her plaudits, I found this slender volume by Williams to be frustratingly padded out. Several of the so-called stories are little more than a sentence that she presumably thought was amusing. Often, these lines read like something that would be used to fill a blank space at the end of a column in a magazine article - think more Reader's Digest than New Yorker. Some of the stories are in the "what if God were one of us?" vein, imagining the deity engaged in various quotidian activities. These stories are mostly about as illuminative as the Joan Osborne song - that is to say, not really at all. A few of the stories are interesting little vignettes or have that tautness that can make minimalist short storytelling so effective. But nothing here comes anywhere close to a master like Amy Hempel. I'm giving this an extra star because at least it had the good grace to be short and easily done with, but really there isn't much to this one. Very disappointing.

Joachim Stoop says

Great concept, huge imagination and variety! But...

Most of these stories just weren't strong, funny, crazy, interesting enough.

* 32 stories were absurd in a silly way:

F.e.: The Lord wants to give a dinner party but can never come up with twelve guests. Whatever steward He has at the time suggests many names, but the Lord can't get excited about any of them. At least the menu was determined long ago. There would be a mixture of fifty pure chemicals—sugar, amino and fatty acids, vitamins and minerals, all made from rocks, air, and water without any killing at all

* 21 stories I just didn't get the plot

Like this single sentence story:

I have never known an insane person, he said. But I have known people who later became dead.

* 15 stories were original but lacked something

You don't get older during the time spent in church, he told us. He pushed a shopping cart with a few rags and a bottle of Windex in it. We gave him a dollar

* 9 stories made me think

* 18 stories were just, you know, stories. Not much going on. Whatever

* 3 stories I adored! Here are 2:

They had been married for thirty-five years. When the occasion arose, she preferred to use the word pantomnesia, he the term déjà vu. She argued that pantomnesia has Greek roots meaning "all" or "universal"—panto—and "mind" or "memory"—mnesia—and therefore is a more technically accurate term. He suggested that she was a snob. She said that déjà vu simply means "already seen" and refers specifically to visual experience, when there is so much, so very much more in experiencing the unfamiliar as familiar. He reminded her that they had had this conversation before.

A doctor of veterinary medicine who adored cats and frequently treated them at the expense of his other patients, some of whom actually died for lack of immediate care while he was attending to the cats, was killed in a one-car accident while driving home at vesper time when he swerved to avoid hitting a cat and struck a tree. The cat was inexplicably sitting in the middle of the road

Lou Last says

95

The American philosopher William James posited that overbelief was essential to a lived life, and that only when we open ourselves to God's influence are our deepest destinies fulfilled. God provided William with many things, including (according to his sister Alice) the ability to be "born fresh every morning." He also gave him a brother, Henry, who He determined would be "younger and shallower and vainer." William quite agreed with this assessment.

96

When a woman sits down to a meal alone, her beloved dead arrive to share it with her, but only at the last moment, the last possible moment, in her prayer that they will.

97

Several months before her death, the French philosopher and mystic Simone Weil wrote in her notebook of someone who enters her room one day and says:

"Poor creature, you who understand nothing, who know nothing. Come with me and I will teach you things you do not suspect."

He takes her to "a new and ugly church," then to an empty garret. Days and nights pass. They talk and share wine and bread.

"The bread really had the taste of bread. I have never found that taste again." She is content but puzzled: "He had promised to teach me, but he did not teach me anything."

Then he drives her away. Her heart is broken and she wanders bereft. Still, she does not try to return. She understands that he had come for her by mistake, that her place was not in the garret.

The text ends with the words "I know well that he does not love me. How could he love me? And yet deep down within me something, a particle of myself, cannot help thinking with fear and trembling that perhaps, in spite of all, he loves me."

*

Canadian Reader says

If you or I wrote these stories and submitted them to a publisher, they'd be rejected. Bizarre and nonsensical, even the brevity of the pieces doesn't save them from tediousness. They may provide your eyes with some exercise . . . in eyeball-rolling at the author's pretentious "cleverness." Obviously not my cup of tea.

Corey Wozniak says

[UPDATED REVIEW: 23 JULY '16]

Many reviewers here on GR have mentioned that the "stories" in this book might better be called zen koans. I checked my copy of Alan Watts' *The Way of Zen* to see if this description is apt. (It is.) Watts says the koan is a type of puzzle, the answer to which must be intuitively and spontaneously grasped. Some examples:

Question : Everybody has a place of birth. Where is your place of birth?

Answer : Early this morning I ate white rice gruel. Now I'm hungry again.

Question : How is my hand like the Buddha's hand?

Answer Playing the lute under the moon.

Question : How is my foot like a donkey's foot?

Answer : When the white heron stands in the snow it has a different color.

The purpose of the Koan is to provoke a "great doubt" in the student of Zen, and so expand the mind to make room for a great insight.

In many ways, the ninety-nine stories are just like these koans. For one, almost all of them are utterly bewildering. Take these koan-like stories, for example:

94

... in other areas of the country, shopkeepers have threatened mass suicide to protest eighteen to twenty hours of power blackouts every day...

IF YOU FEEL YOU MUST

He was reading the fourteenth canto of Dante's Inferno at 2:30 on Good Friday morning. The readings had begun the evening before. There were twenty-seven cantos at half-hour intervals. He liked his slot. It was a good canto—lively—some of them could put you to sleep. His was the third ring of the Seventh Circle, the ring of burning sand which torments those who were violent against God, Art, and Nature.

There were only half a dozen people there, but he read in a powerful, pleasant voice, stumbling over no word. It was a moving presentation, with the bells and silences. It was a tradition at St. Philip's.

When he left, the stars were shining. It was a beautiful night, save for someone in a BMW cutting through the church's parking lot at high speed to shave forty seconds off of wherever he was going.

Without reflection, he put out his hand and extended the middle finger.
ABANDON ALL HOPE.

My other favorite stories (with asterisks to mark those stories I will want to read to students in my classroom):

- 1—Postcard*
- 3—Aubade*
- 16—If picked or uprooted these beautiful flowers will disappear*
- 9—Clean
- 32—Shaken
- 33—Irreducible
- 36—Dearest
- 65—Dull
- 72—Whale
- 87—Plot*

Ellie says

I thought that Joy Williams collection of short stories, 99 Stories of God might be a sort of collection of fictional devotions. And I suppose they might be, if one expanded the definition of "devotion" beyond recognition!

The stories are very short, somewhat like those of Lydia Davis; most of them are one or two pages and but many are even shorter—a paragraph or a few lines.

But how wonderful they are! God figures in them but often obliquely. Sometimes He seems to be irrelevant to the lives of the people in the story, other times he appears more baffled than the other characters at what happens. There are some true "stories" mixed in among the more purely fictional ones, stories that are quotes from William James or Simone Weil. O.J. Simpson makes an appearance as well.

The range of the stories is wide. They are often dark but funny as well. In fact, I found many of them, despite the bleak portrayal of human life, hilarious.

I am grateful to Tin House Books and NetGalley for giving me an advance copy of this very exciting collection. I can't wait to read them again!

