

God Bless America: Stories

Steve Almond

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God bless America: a cliché that seems to be all around us. We hear it said in earnest and with sarcasm. And as such, it sets the right tone for Steve Almond's third short story collection, which finds room for both the heartfelt and the ironic. Almond graciously bestows his wit onto his characters even as they grapple with the serious. Equal parts comedy and profundity, Almond's stories are the kind one sits back and revels in.

The author's readership is large. His work runs in a diverse set of publications—from *Tin House* to *REAL SIMPLE*, from *Ploughshares* to *Playboy*. People read him for his sense of humor and for his sense of place: the boutique agency with "the modern-art installation in the lobby that looked very much like a disemboweled ostrich." The appearance of another office earns the quip, "What do you call this look? Freud gets gangbanged by Ikea?"

Read this book for Almond's depiction of the contemporary—its incredulity and incongruity: "a tax-preparation course called Loopholes Ahoy!" Read it for his characters' idiosyncrasies: "Carrie made it a point to mention sex toys," Almond writes, "because she knew this would put Neil on the defensive, which was where you wanted a boss like Neil."

The laughs are many, but it's not all joy and amusement in these pages. Upon delivering news of a pregnancy over the phone, a woman's heart cracks, "a big crack right down the side. The receiver, balanced on her clavicle, slipped free. His voice grew fainter and fainter, until it was just a scratch in the dark air."

In this heartrending book, a TSA agent finds cause for regret in the face of a precocious and mouthy child (who knows how to profit from the airline ticket system). And in "Donkey Greedy, Donkey Gets Punched"—which earned a place in **Best American Short Stories**—a gambling-addicted psychoanalyst finds that he needs something from his client as the doctor-patient grows more complicated. We literally see the cards the doctor is dealt—and he, like the other characters in this book, isn't always among the lucky ones. Almond bears witness to such uncanny but recognizable lives among us in this masterful collection.

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