

Of Gods, Humans and Beasts: The Horse Sacrifice and Other Stories

Arnold Wishman

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Of Gods, Humans and Beasts is a research-based short story collection that modernizes legends to reflect on how religion fits and feeds modern society.

With modern takes on theology, Arnold Wishman's short story collection *Of Gods, Humans and Beasts* reflects a variety of religious traditions, stories, and figures.

Most focused on Islam, Evangelical Christianity, Hinduism, and Catholicism, the short stories in *Of Gods, Humans and Beasts* cover various topics within the religious disciplines. Father Thomas Keating is memorialized in a fictional account from a man who met him in "Remembering Father Thomas," while "The Curious Birth of a Gentleman God" is a retelling of the Hindu legend of Lord Vishnu's cunning defeat of the demon Bhasmasura.

Such stories are drawn directly from religious texts, here presented from the points of view of deities and other notable figures within them. The result is a collection with fresh perspectives on well-known legends. At times, the book's modern language is jarring, as when David presents the cloth cut from Saul's robes with the statement "Killing a king from behind while he poops is the easiest thing to do."

Those stories which are set in modern times, though they still reference religious traditions and teachings, are more successful. "How Ramji Got the Beard" follows a failed Bollywood film producer seeking a blessing for his next venture; it touches on issues of ethnic stereotyping in media and the double standards present in some gendered religious laws. In "How Supreme Court Played Spoil-Sport," a Hindu man is accosted in an airport by Evangelical Christians seeking to convert him; he rebukes their efforts with a biting retort distilled from their own medicine. The use of religion as justification for prejudice and cruelty is a persistent theme.

At times, the tone of the collection is muddled. Father Thomas is portrayed as a compassionate servant of a benevolent God; "King David, the Great Patriarch" refers to God as a vengeful "evil spirit;" and "Sweet Balls For A Man-God" pokes fun at a man's belief that a Hindu god is visiting his altar in the night. Though no one religion is granted preferential treatment, respect duels with contempt, muddying the intended overarching message.

Meticulous research is evident in the scriptural references of the footnotes, but also throughout the collection. Care is taken to reflect realistic conversations between non-native English speakers, including with the use of words from speakers' shared first languages, though the book's italics often trail to include surrounding English words and punctuation.

Touching on the traditions and mythologies of a multitude of religions, *Of Gods, Humans and Beasts* is a research-based short story collection that modernizes legends to reflect on how religion fits and feeds modern society.

DANIELLE BALLANTYNE (October 29, 2020)

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