

# Acts of God

A Note from the Author

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Questions for Discussion





## A Note from the Author

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*Acts of God* is a book of stories written over a period of nine years. It is a book that comes “out of my later years,” as Einstein called a book of essays he wrote when he was my age.

It is a book of praise and wonder. When we are young we are too self-serving and ambitious to look around and know how marvelous our fellow men and women and children truly are. We note their courage and generosity and imaginative leaps, but we don’t keep thinking about them as I have begun to do as I grow older. We are dazzling, we

citizens of this marvelous culture we inherited from men and women whose strength and courage puts ours to shame when we read history. They kept their children alive and invented and learned and built and taught what they had learned and what they inherited. They bandaged their cuts with leaves and built shelters out of earth and stones and trees and dug in the ground to bury their dead. They chased down animals ten times their size and four times their strength, they rubbed sticks or stones together to build fires, and they created languages and numbers and tamed wilderness and dug canals and used the languages they invented to talk and talk and talk, to invent ideas and pass them on, to invent gods and demons, to eat whatever was available, and learned to distinguish the healthy from the poisonous.

All this before they started writing down ideas and numbers and stories and plays. Before they called their creations cities and civilizations. Before they invented machines.

They drew or dreamed the wheel before they fashioned it from wood or stone. The ideal came first in many of their inventions, sometimes in writing, sometimes in dreams.

The stories in this book are about some of the inheritors of this twenty-five-million-year-old startlingly brilliant evolution.

There are men and women in these stories who would have been useful at any stage in our evolution. Heroes and

heroines who don't need or want to be sung or recorded, except that it makes my heart beat faster to write about them. Set them down in any time or place, in any ice age or meteor strike or drought or plague or flood. These are the ones who will build the ark, pull their fellow men to safety, run for higher ground, call out warnings, do their share and more, and then sleep in any shelter and get up and do it all again.

I have known thousands of such people, and I am old enough to be dazzled.

## Questions for Discussion

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1. In her brief note for this collection of stories (page 249), author Ellen Gilchrist says that *Acts of God* “is a book of praise and wonder.” What do you think she means, and how do you feel this “praise and wonder” is demonstrated in these stories?

2. Though the stories in this book deal with people facing adversity, the author manages to infuse each narrative with the warmth of humor. Using your own personal favorite story as an example, discuss whether or not you feel the humor works to make the story feel more “realistic” or less.

3. Gilchrist has made the collection's first story, about what happens to an elderly couple when their caregiver is late arriving one day, the title story. How do you feel that "acts of God" changed the direction of that couple's lives? Discuss whether this is the most appropriate story to carry that title, or whether it could be applied to other stories in the collection.

4. At the end of the story "Miracle in Adkins, Arkansas," teenager Marie James seems to have experienced an emotional epiphany after finding an infant alive in the midst of the destruction left by a tornado. How do you think this event will change and shape her life?

5. One critic called "The Dissolution of the Myelin Sheath" one of the collection's "strongest" stories. Do you agree? If so, what is it about the story that makes it stand out? Were you surprised by the decision the character Philipa makes at the end? Do you feel it was an act of courage, or do you see it as a cowardly thing to do?

6. Members of the Hand family, recurring characters in many previous works by Gilchrist, figure into the story "Toccata and Fugue in D Minor." What is it about these women that makes them unique, and why do you think the author has used them repeatedly? How do you think all the

women in the story were changed by the events at Heathrow Airport? Do you believe you would have responded with the same calm they show?

7. Gilchrist uses the epistolary form to tell the story titled “The Dogs.” Do you like this device? What other books have you read that used this device? Why is it effective here? Do you believe that these letters accurately depict the events, or do you have strong reason to doubt the motives behind what is written?

8. In the story “High Water,” two gay men, both paramedics from California, on vacation in New Orleans, decide to ride out Hurricane Katrina rather than vacate the city to some place safer. Ultimately they end up volunteering at one of the city’s hospitals, and after the whole experience is behind them, the story’s narrator—one of the paramedics—says, “The human race. You have to love it and wish it well and not preach or think you have any reason to think you are better than anyone else. Amen. Good-bye. Peace.” Do you feel this is a fitting conclusion to this story? Was their decision to stay in the city, as well as their actions during and after the storm, realistic? Why or why not?

9. One reviewer of *Acts of God* said that “Gilchrist is writing about life on the planet Earth . . . wars and strife and surprises



and love and children and art . . . all presented with . . . transparency.” Do you feel that the directness of her stories adds to their impact, or do you think they would benefit from a more subtle approach to their subjects? Why?

10. Throughout her career, Gilchrist has written primarily about people who live in the South, and she is often described as a “Southern writer.” Considering the directness of her prose, as well as the lack of ornamentation in her sentences, do you feel that this is an apt description? Other than the settings, what about the stories in this collection strikes you as being uniquely “Southern”?

NATHALIE DUBOIS



Ellen Gilchrist is the author of more than twenty books, including novels, short stories, poetry, and a memoir. She lives in Fayetteville, Arkansas.