

# A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories

by  
Flannery O'Connor

## StoryLines Southeast Discussion Guide No. 7

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### Discussion questions

How does the title "A Good Man is Hard to Find" bring several levels of meaning to the story? How does the title bring meaning to the entire collection?

In the story "The Artificial Nigger," what significance does the plaster figure of a black man hold for Nelson and his grandfather? In the story "Good Country People," what is the significance of the wooden leg?

### Additional readings

Flannery O'Connor. *The Complete Stories*, 1983.

Flannery O'Connor. *Wise Blood*, 1952.

Margaret Earley Whitt. *Understanding Flannery O'Connor*, 1995.

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Flannery O'Connor is one of America's foremost short-story writers. During her brief life (1925-1964), she authored two novels and 31 short stories. Critical and popular response to her work, however, has bloomed far out of proportion to her slim output. Readers are haunted by her stories and find her themes and characters puzzling, though memorable and thought-provoking. Scholars and critics have produced entire shelves of studies and commentary concerning her work. Her stories plumb the depths of important philosophical and theological issues, yet her characters are common folk, never preachy or philosophical themselves, living embodiments of all-too-common human frailties.

Simply put, O'Connor's stories are worthwhile reading, though readers may at the outset be put off by the shocking and often violent behavior of characters who are grotesque, less than heroic, and often downright unattractive. Her professed purpose in her writing was to reveal the mystery of God's grace in everyday life. O'Connor spent her childhood in Milledgeville, Georgia, raised a Roman Catholic amidst the Bible Belt Protestant fundamentalism of most her neighbors. Though there is much debate among scholars as to the exact nature of her religious beliefs, she represents neither Catholic nor Protestant views so much as she portrays a theology that is mostly her own.

The stories in *A Good Man is Hard to Find* sound at times as if they are being told by an Old Testament prophet: consciously or not, characters enact the age-old battle between Good and Evil. Main characters suffer from spiritual apathy or blindness; men and women smugly assume themselves secure in their material wealth or intellectual fortresses. Each of these stories reminds the reader of human limitations, and story by story, characters are given wake-up calls concerning their own mortality and helplessness in the face of events beyond their control. In this sense, divine grace is a great leveler, descending in a bizarre or violent manner upon the spiritually deficient in such a manner that distinctions between salvation and damnation begin to blur. No matter if characters appear redeemable or not, always the Apocalypse looms nearby. O'Connor at one time said:

***I write the way I do because I am a Catholic . . . I believe that there are many rough beasts now slouching toward Bethlehem to be born and I have reported on the progress of a few of them.***

As to the violent and sometimes surreal events in O'Connor's work, readers may question whether or not the author is focusing on the world through a distorted lens, and if so, why? Today there is much debate over violence portrayed in films. Opponents argue that there is too much violence, too much criminality, too many dark themes, and claim these films perpetuate social ills by making crime seem common and ordinary, thus desensitizing the public. Proponents claim such films are simply mirroring the world as it really is. Certainly both sides of this issue have their merits, and the reader might consider similar concerns while reading *A Good Man is Hard to Find*.

O'Connor justifies the content of her stories as a deliberate effort to awaken people by shocking them. She distorts the ordinary into the grotesque and bizarre to highlight the mysterious manner in which our everyday lives are touched by purposes beyond our own. "I am interested in making a good case for distortion," she wrote, "as I am coming to believe it is the only way to make people see."

In the title story, a grandmother lives in a Georgia suburb with her son, Bailey, his wife and their three children. The family is planning a trip to Florida, but the grandmother doesn't want to go because a criminal called "The Misfit" has escaped from prison and is on the loose. The family bickers back and forth, calling each other names, demonstrating clearly that none of the clan is terribly likable, although the grandmother, while annoying, is less malicious than the others. Grandmother decides to smuggle her cat, Pitty Sing, along on the trip to Florida. The family stops enroute for lunch at Red Sammy's Famous Barbecue. There is much talk at the restaurant about how evil the world and everyone in it has become, present company excluded, of course. Red Sammy moans:

***A good man is hard to find. Everything is getting terrible. I remember the day you could go off and leave your screen door unlatched. Not no more.***

A few miles further down the highway the grandmother sees a road she remembers as leading to an abandoned plantation. She implores her son to show the children the plantation, proclaiming it educational, and after much arguing, Bailey reluctantly agrees to the detour. Soon the road narrows to little more than a dirt path, and just as grandmother realizes the plantation she is thinking of was in Tennessee, Pitty Sing jumps out of his basket and clings desperately to Bailey's head. The car rolls and crashes in the ditch.

Bailey waves down the first passing car, an ominous black sedan with three men carrying guns and wearing prison clothes. "You're The Misfit," blabs the grandmother, and now the real story unfolds as the grandmother tries to cajole The Misfit by attempting to convince him he's a good man at heart. Readers are advised to listen carefully to the dialogue between the grandmother and The Misfit, a perfect example of O'Connor's apocalyptic theology at work during violent and grotesque events. "I found out the crime don't matter," says The Misfit . . .

***You can do one thing or you can do another, kill a man or take the tire off his car, because sooner or later you're going to forget what it was you done and just be punished for it.***

At the close of the story, The Misfit says about the grandmother, "She would have been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life." O'Connor reminds the reader that a gun to the head might be redemption in disguise.

## About the author

Flannery O'Connor was awarded the prestigious O'Henry Award for Short Fiction three times. She attended Georgia State College for Women and the graduate writing program at the University of Iowa. She, like her father, died of lupus, a degenerative disease.