

A CONVERSATION WITH GREGORY BLAKE SMITH

What research did you undertake in writing your award-winning book?

Some of the short-short stories included in the collection are set in times or places remote from my experience. There's a young Chinese woman during the Cultural Revolution, a Muslim boy in Tangier, a Russian woman who survived the Siege of Leningrad. For those stories, I had to do a fair amount of reading and research to get the facts and the feel of the time and place right.

How long did it take you to write *The Law of Miracles*?

Interestingly, one of the stories in this collection was written when I was a student at the Iowa Writers' Workshop thirty years ago. But the rest of the stories were written over the five-year period just before the book's publication.

What do you hope readers take away from the book?

Each story is different, and I would hope the reader would enjoy each in itself (like the courses of a good dinner), while

also having a sense of the book's overarching themes.

What was your journey to becoming a published author?

I went to the Iowa Writers' Workshop and since those days I've been a working writer. I've managed to publish three novels and this collection of stories, while also working full-time as an English professor at Carleton College in Northfield.

What are you currently writing?

I'm currently working on a novel set in Newport, Rhode Island. The novel has five parallel stories which take place in times ranging from 1692 to the present. By parallel, I mean that the stories are concerned with the same thematic and moral dynamics, but alter the particularities of character, circumstance, gender, etc. so that each story extends or deepens or offers a variant of the novel's central theme.

Each story is different, and I would hope the reader would enjoy each in itself (like the courses of a good dinner), while also having a sense of the book's overarching themes.

Minnesota Book Award Categories:

Children's Literature

General Nonfiction

Genre Fiction

Memoir & Creative Nonfiction

Minnesota

Novel & Short Story

Poetry

Young People's Literature

24TH ANNUAL



Novel & Short Story Winner

Sponsored by Anchor Trust

THE LAW &
MIRACLES



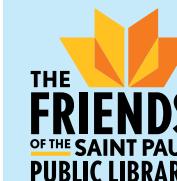
AND OTHER STORIES

GREGORY BLAKE SMITH

The Law of Miracles and Other Stories

by Gregory Blake Smith

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS PRESS



325 Cedar Street
Suite 555
Saint Paul, MN 55101
651-222-3242

www.thefriends.org

A Reading and Discussion Guide Prepared by the Minnesota Book Awards & The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library

The Law of Miracles and Other Stories



SUMMARY

The Law of Miracles is a collection of short stories in which characters navigate between the everyday and the extraordinary. While settings range from St. Petersburg to Venice to rural Indiana – and the characters are nearly as varied – there lies in each tale the suspicion that the transcendent lies just at the edge of perception.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the book's main themes?
2. The collection has a structure of short-short stories, moral problems, in between each of the longer short stories. How does this affect your reading of the book?
3. Are there ways in which the “moral problems” speak to certain themes or concerns you find in the longer stories, or in the book as a whole?
4. In the story “Punishment” the main character, who sees herself as always having been “a good girl,” is brutally beaten by a stranger. What “moral problem” does this present for the main character? How do you see her Catholic upbringing figuring into this?
5. The story “Being and Nothingness (Not a Real Title)” seems to play around with postmodern ideas of identity as being indeterminate and variable. And yet the main character insists that “somebody has to stick up for reality.” Discuss the interplay of the real and the unreal in this story.
6. At the end of “The Madonna of the Relics” the art restorer seems to understand that the discoloration in the angel’s wings in the painting he has been working on was done intentionally. How does this moment of “revelation” inform this story and the movement of the main character towards the young woman?
7. The title story, subtitled “Five Ways My Wife Could Die,” presents the reader with varying realities in which the main character’s wife dies in different ways. Only in the last paragraph does the reader learn that it is in fact the main character’s young son who has died. How does this last “fact” resonate backward through the story?
8. Compare the title story, “The Law of Miracles,” with “Destroying Herman Yoder.”
9. To what extent did you experience a connection among the stories? What techniques did the author use to tie the stories together?
10. Do you think it would be easier to write a novel or collection of short stories?

ABOUT GREGORY BLAKE SMITH



Gregory Blake Smith holds an A.B. summa cum laude from Bowdoin College and an M.F.A. from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. His writing has earned numerous awards. He is the author of three novels: *The Madonna of Las Vegas*, *The Devil in the Dooryard*, and *The Divine Comedy* of John Venner. Smith’s short fiction has appeared in several literary journals and been reprinted in anthologies. Since 1987, Smith has taught American

literature and creative writing at Carleton College in Northfield, where he lives with his wife and daughter

Learn more about the author and his work at
<http://apps.carleton.edu/people/smith/>.