



God Bless America: Stories

Steve Almond

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"Steve Almond is one of our finest literary provocateurs. His stories are without equal in their beautiful terrible honesty. Stylish and finely wrought, these are tales with the force of life itself.

God Bless America: Stories Details

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From Reader Review God Bless America: Stories for online ebook

Mark says

Paperback.

God bless america and First date back stood out

Tuck says

a group of stories that perfectly epitomizes usa's broken heart. steve almond may well be the last moral man in usa (see his resignation from uni job in protest of condelezza (supertanker) rice visit and speech).

Kathleen Maher says

Like most fiction I enjoy, Steve Almond's fluid, distinctive style led me to read the stories once for pleasure and again to see if I could figure out "how they worked." My second reading usually includes as much pleasure as the first.

The best fiction presents a quality most easily defined as magic. All good fiction requires mastery, training, and rigorous practice. But beguilement occurs (I believe this like religion) when readers are compelled to participate. The writing demands the reader's perspective, his or her opinions, and experiences. Fine fiction arouses memories or thoughts and feelings powerful enough to imbue stories with recurring spirit. At the same time, the receptive reader develops a new and intimate awareness. That's my definition of art. (I cannot consider my own fiction finished or even promising without readers.) A fanciful, even mystical theory, but other readers and writers share my standard or else I've misread several essays.

Either way, the fourteen fictional pieces in Steve Almond's "God Bless America: Stories" offer you that chance of enthrallment. They progress from hilarious ("God Bless America" and "Donkey Greedy, Donkey Gets Punched"); to funny but sad ("Not Until You Say Yes" and "Shotgun Wedding"); then sad but funny ("Tamalpais" and "What the Bird Says.") I've settled on *poignant* for "The Darkness Together." Following these are: the sick-sad-funny ("A Jew Berserk On Christmas Eve"); the tragic ("Akedah"); creepy-political ("Hagar's Sons"); tragic-political ("First Date Back"); and finally a man's hard life climaxing in horror that may or may not offer redemption ("A Dream of Sleep".)

Gabrielle says

Last week at Greenlight Bookstore in Fort Greene, author Steve Almond was joined by New Yorker editor and longtime friend Ben Greenman for the launch of his latest book, God Bless America: Stories, a collection of short fiction.

The two met in the early 90s when they were both writing for the Miami New Times, an alternative weekly newspaper in Florida. As with most events where the two people know each other, the discussion was

engrossing, revealing, and amusing.

Steve's wry sense of humor, a quality that often lays itself bare on the page, is even more pronounced in person—at one point he needled the crowd about New Yorkers reluctance to laugh, which thereby got a laugh and lightened the mood for the rest of the evening. He started out by reading from “Donkey Greedy, Donkey Gets Punched,” a story where a psychoanalyst with a secret gambling habit winds up at a poker table with an ex-patient. “Donkey Greedy,” Steve admits is the one story where he lands the plot; otherwise, he says, his style is very primitive and instead rests mainly on character.

Moral is a word often ascribed to Steve and his work. Whether it's his fiction or his essays for *The Rumpus*—his latest, “Occupy Your Conscience: A Rumpus Exaltation,” a laudatory defense of the Occupy Wall Street protesters and critical look at the media who distort their message—Steve wears his liberal upbringing and current day politics on his sleeve. In 2006, the *Boston Globe* ran his resignation letter to Boston College, where he was an adjunct professor, after the school invited Condoleezza Rice to give the commencement speech.

If you think, as I first did when I heard the title, that *God Bless America* is meant to be tongue-in-cheek, you'd be wrong. Written during the past decade, the stories are a culmination of Almond's experience in America during this time. A self-described “heartbroken patriot” he sets out to reclaim the phrase, to make it more honest and wrest it from the hands of political sloganeers.

Almond sees American culture as many of us do: hyperactive, splintered, fragmented, and visual-centric. In a world with Facebook, Twitter, and Smartphones he believes there's a lack of boredom in our lives and, as someone who sees boredom as a laboratory, he mourns its passing. “Attention is a dwindling resource,” he says. As a writer, and as someone who teaches writing, Almond feels it's up to him and fellow writers to find ways to keep the literary arts vital, to combat our distracted, frenetic culture.

As an instructor at Grub Street Writers, an independent center for creative writing, he's noticing a trend, a modern-day gimmick that placates to our bad habits: increasingly fledgling writers are beginning their stories in the middle of an action scene without any reference to who the people are and why they're in a particular situation. He points to *Henderson the Rain King* by Saul Bellow as the antithesis of this seemingly new approach: a story that opens by laying it all out on the first page, not with guns blazing in the midst of confusion.

Although Steve calls this new collection “very sad and very dark,” there are moments of levity. In the title story, the protagonist, a naive and delusional Boston-area tour guide with aspirations of becoming an actor, gives a hilarious view of American history, a nod to Steve's own political leanings:

"It was unfortunate that not all guides shared Billy's enthusiasm. But what Billy had learned by studying his country's history was that America had been built by opportunists. It was a large and prosperous country and one that could accommodate the less enthused . . . But this was America, the land of opportunists, and here it wasn't enough to want something. You had to fight for what you wanted and fight hard, fight through your own resistance and the jeers of others and physical adversity, which was what the Pilgrims had done vis-a-vis the whole Thanksgiving situation, and after them the colonists, who had bucked the most powerful empire on earth even though they were basically just a bunch of underfed tax evaders. . . . it showed how far some people would go to find good property."

During his talk with Greenman, Almond said he believes all writers are really writing about is their family—always working out issues. Whether this rings true for others, it's clearly Steve's approach. Now a father and at the age where one's parents are reaching the end of their lives, the stories pivot on the notion that family life in America is deteriorating: our myth of rugged individualism has advanced at the expense of community and perpetuated a pathological disconnection from our loved ones. “What the Bird Says”

highlights these current preoccupations of Steve's—and echos the concerns of many of us who are moving along with him. In this story a dying father calls his estranged son to his death bed, presumably to reconcile, but the humiliation and shame he feels from his vulnerability trumps his goodwill; his behavior remains the same.

At Greenlight Steve mentioned his desire to "break the reader's heart". If this is his aim, he should consider his new book a success. *God Bless America* is a mature work offering a profound experience for those looking to examine the times in which we live.

Theresa says

I came to this book because I had heard Almond's story, "Okay, Now Do You Surrender?" in a library reading. I thought that story had a unique narrator voice and a great comeuppance for the protagonist. But these stories were tiresome. I can see some improvement over the 2002 *My Life in Heavy Metal* collection, but it's definitely not there for me. As with his earlier book, I found these stories distasteful. I would not recommend the book.

Bob Schueler says

This is an amazingly diverse and fascinating collection, unified by Almond's unflinching and unsentimental yet deeply humanistic view of people. It reveals the vision of a careful observer who cares deeply about people and what they go through along their journey. The amazing thing about this writer is that he manages to delve into dark, complicated, knotty places in people and still manages to be funny and hopeful. Each of these gems is unique unto itself, offering a different view of life and people, often using differing writing styles. All of them are beautifully crafted. It's like an album full of achingly beautiful songs. Almond's values and underlying vision are what unite them--you always feel like you're reading the same writer at work, one with an appreciation for the complications of life and a vision for expressing those complications in the most penetrating ways. His characters are complex, flawed, always believable and fully realized.

I'm not generally a fan of short stories, and got these because I'd read the author's book *Against Football* along with some essays published in the *Boston Globe Magazine*. These want inspire me to read more short fiction. I can't recommend this collection too highly.

Joe says

There's a lot going for this collection--Almond's capacity to make us sympathize with the sort of characters you'd wish to the phantom zone if you unluckily happened on them in real life; his willingness to get those characters into all kinds of trouble, and to do so quickly; the humor. However, the most appealing aspect of "God Bless America" is that even though it is, in a manner of speaking, a collection of stories about "the way we live now," Almond doesn't beat us over the head with his ideas about society. All of that stuff comes out--the fall out of unending war, the blinding capacity of ambition, the human love of obliviousness--through the characters and their situations. In some ways it's a nice antidote to Saunder's "Tenth of December," the stories in which were so thesis-forward that it often read as a treatise on "what's wrong with the world."

John Luiz says

I've been a big fan of Almond's since his first story collection, *My Life in Heavy Metal*, which I re-read several times, and I've followed his career through all the subsequent story collections, books of essays, and the novel he co-wrote with Julianna Baggott. Through it all, Almond never disappoints. His language is always so simultaneously inventive and precise, plumbing the depths of characters whose weaknesses and worst instincts are all too familiar. Steve's also got a strong iconoclastic/provocateur streak so he takes you to places some writers might not dare to go, as he holds up a mirror to sides of ourselves we might not always be the most proud of. *God Bless America* is another great collection, displaying his exceptional talent. The 13 stories in the collection are:

1. *God Bless America* – 15 pp – A very funny story in the rich vein of marvelously self-deluded protagonists. A young man who works as a stock boy in a drugstore accidentally takes an acting class at an adult education center. With no talent but a new passion for the dramatic arts and with dreams of becoming a major star, he takes a job as a tour guide for Duck-boat-like company in Boston. The shady North End characters who run that operation get him unwittingly involved in some high crimes, and with serendipitous luck he manages to have his own little share of the American dream come true.
2. *Donkey Greedy, Donkey Gets Punched* – 22 pp – A great story, chosen for the 2010 Best American Short Stories collection. Steve, I think, is the son of analysts, so he has a lot of fun tweaking the profession. He wrote another very funny story about an analyst who like to parade around naked in his office after hours. In this piece, an analyst treats a professional poker player with a perfect name – Gary Sharpe. The player comes to him and after he whines about a bad loss and his fears that he has a tell, the analyst think he's discovered what it is. After a year's worth of sessions in which the player railed against him, the analyst thinks he might have a chance to exact his own little revenge when he meets the player at a casino and they take each other on in a game of Texas hold 'em.
3. *Hope Wood* – 15 pp – Two unemployed philosophy graduates try to earn some money by helping an old black man who paints pictures on discarded furniture. One of them desperately hopes a crib the old man won't give him might convince his pregnant girlfriend to take him back.
4. *Not Until You Say Yes*– 16 pp – An older widow who works security at Logan airport has to babysit a boy who keeps trying to keep to get bumped off overbooked flights in order to cash in on the vouchers he can accumulate for the inconvenience.
5. *Shotgun Wedding* – 17 pp – A woman who works for an ad agency discovers she may be pregnant, and while she resists taking a doctor's office or home test to get confirmation, she considers the implications her condition might have on her relationship with her ambitious fiancé.
6. *Tamalpais* – 15 pp – A younger waiter's coming of age. While a young man in a restaurant is trying to prove himself, his first customer is a desperate older woman who eats and drinks by herself, announcing that an important man is going to come in any second and throw a lavish party for her. By the end of the night, the young man has to try to avoid the clutches of the very drunk and still very alone woman.
7. *What the Bird Says* – 16 pp – An absolutely marvelous story about a son who moved away from his affluent Southern home and refused to run the family business. But when his always critical father is on his deathbed the son is called home. In morphine-induced hallucinations, the father carries on conversations with a bird he sees on his shoulder, offering brutally honest assessments of each member of his family. Sitting by his side, listening to all of his father's rambling thoughts, the son manages to find a powerful reconciliation with his father.

8. The Darkness Together – 14 pp – A Pushcart-prize winner about a mother and son forced to share a train cabin with a boorish passenger who forces them to face some unwelcome truths about the perhaps too close relationship the attractive widowed woman has forged with her handsome 18-year-old son..
9. A Jew Berserk on Christmas Eve – 16 pp – A college student spends Christmas with his rich girlfriend at her family mansion, hoping he'll get his long-sought-after chance to have sex with her, but he witnesses some bizarre goings-on worthy of a Fellini movie.
10. Akedah – 6 pp – A heart-wrenching story about a widow who has to deal with the violent streak her son possesses after returning home from World War II. Following doctors' orders, she takes the misguided route some took in the 1950s for dealing with mental illness.
11. Hagar's Sons – 20 pp – A Wall Street securities specialist gets flown to an Arab kingdom for a meeting with a sheik in the summer of 2001. He's treated lavishly but kept in the dark about the purpose of the trip until he discovers the sheik is looking for insider's tip on how to invest in the aftermath of an attack on the United States.
12. First Date Back – 17 pp -- A soldier unprepared for re-entry to civilization who develops a crush on a stewardess on his flight back from Iraq. Her attempt to be kind to him has devastating consequences.
- P
13. A Dream of Sleep – 17 pp – A caretaker for a cemetery watches the world change around him. He retreats within the enclosed space, living there and caring for it, long after all the relatives of the dead who came to visit the graves have died themselves and been buried in more modern cemeteries. His only connection to another person, after years of isolation, comes when he stumbles upon a young girl who snuck into the abandoned cemetery to have sex with her boyfriend.
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Marc says

This collection of short fiction sees Steve Almond evolving as a storyteller. If you loved his first two collections, you'll love this one even more. See my full review at <http://smallpressreviews.wordpress.co...>

Rajal Cohen says

I don't normally go for short stories, but these were really something.

Betsy Robinson says

This is writing that crackles and pops with energy and pulsating life. It makes you laugh and cry or yell *Woah* in shock. Steve Almond writes from his gut, and it's a carnival down there: a poker-playing shrink and his card-shark client (I love the cover of this book; it conveys the originality of the writing); a loser actor; white teenage slummers and a black fixer-upper craftsman; a scheming little kid and a tough TSA agent; a harried, maybe pregnant, unmarried ad agency exec; a crazy wretch of a woman and a frantic young busboy; a dying father, his struggling grown son, and a hallucinated bird; a creepy mother and son and the even creepier stranger who unmasks them; a hilarious Edgar-Allen-Poe-on-acid family of French aristocrats and

the Jewish boyfriend who visits them (“A Jew Berserk on Christmas Eve”—one of the funniest stories I’ve ever read); a mother who makes a heartbreakingly misguided choice for her wounded-warrior son; a beleaguered currency researcher; a shell-shocked soldier; and a graveyard caretaker who is forced to fight for life.

These are all real people fighting for an America (meaning “life”) that cannot and will not be. My kind of characters, my kind of writer, my kind of stories.

Joe Kraus says

I wonder if it’s possible to have too much talent. (It would be nice to think that was one of my problems, wouldn’t it?) That possibility comes to mind because, as strong as almost every story in this collection is, there’s a sense in which they don’t quite fit together. Almond has so many different arrows in his quiver – so many different kinds of strong stories he can work on – that some of these feel as if they undermine others.

I met Almond very quickly at the beginning of the summer, and he is staggeringly gifted as a reader. He has mastered what I think of as the “manic style,” and when he’s writing in that mode he is in the conversation for being as good as anyone I know who’s going now.

The best example of that style in this collection is “Donkey Greedy, Donkey Gets Punched” in which a psychotherapist gets drawn into playing high stakes poker against one of his former patients. I love being able to describe the story so neatly and to feel the humor and tension that spill out of the premise alone. Even better, Almond has a way of writing sentences that go on a beat longer than you’d think, that push something that looks like the everyday into absurd, manic dimensions. As you read, you almost run out of breath and then, when that extra tacked-on fragment arrives, you laugh enough that you do become breathless.

Take for example the last sentence of this excerpt: “Oss was secretly thrilled to be treating Sharpe. The depth of his rage was refreshing. It returned Oss to his adolescence, to the loathing he had so lavishly apportioned to his own father, who sold hardware, who developed pathetic infatuations with his prominent customers.” It’s almost like overhearing someone else’s therapy, as if our speaker can’t help clumsily revealing too much about himself as he talks.

Another good example of stories in this manic style is “Not Until You Say Yes” in which an older TSA worker is assigned to look after a con-artist kid who’s doing everything he can to delay flying cross county to a father who doesn’t really want to see him. Our TSA worker comes both to admire the kid and to resent him; she feels a flicker of a maternal impulse, but she also wants to get back to her own life. The more she suspects she’s being manipulated, though, the more she respects the kid for his savvy and even deeper emotional neediness. It’s a sad story in many ways – Almond is generally sad even beneath the mania – but it moves quickly and it’s compelling.

Toward the second half, though, these stories tend to come in a very different form. There are a handful that turn on Jewish themes – “A Jew Berserk on Christmas Eve,” “Hagar’s Sons,” and “A Dream of Sleep” – but none of them quite fit the manic style that seems Almond’s signature. They are solid stories, stories I’d be proud to have written, but they don’t have quite the same distinctive feel as many of the earlier ones. I’d probably admire a collection comprised exclusively of such stories, but they bring a seriousness in tone and style that, next to those earlier ones, feels decidedly unfunny. Almond is never merely about making you laugh, but he’s great at evoking the nervous laughter of the discomfort that comes before disappointment or disaster. In these “Jewish” stories, though, there’s none of that leavening, none of the sugar that makes the

horseradish go down. (Maybe I should call these Jewish stories the “matzoh stories” since they are unleavened in such fashion.)

And, finally, if I’m being honest, I simply don’t like “First Date Back,” in which a returning Iraq War vet moves clumsily toward assaulting the flight attendant who’s welcomed him back when there’s no one else to meet him. It’s a disturbing story, and I don’t think Almond quite earns the credibility it takes to level such a serious account in a context so removed from everything else he’s written about. Even here there’s plenty of skill, but it’s so out of the focus of the rest of the work that it distracts from the effect of the whole in yet another direction.

I plan to continue reading Almond’s work, but it may be a while before I go for a full collection. At his best, in that manic mode, he’s doing something I envy and admire; he’s finding a new voice for the short story that makes you laugh, think, and feel. The rest of this is generally good, but its “ordinary impressiveness” makes clear how much better that best work is.

Kerri says

This is a tidy collection that takes readers from the Midwest to the Middle East. Almond creates believable settings (an airport, a restaurant, a graveyard, etc.) and places unique characters and situations in those places for an almost surreal effect.

My favorite is “Not Until You Say Yes,” in which a boy traveling alone lures an aging airport security guard to pose as his grandmother so he can get bumped from flights and pocket the vouchers. In “Tamalpais” an inexperienced busboy helps a drunken and distressed woman through a difficult and awkward night. “A Dream of Sleep” juxtaposes life and death, youth and age, past and present, black and white, money and poverty all in the setting of a graveyard.

In these and other stories, characters make the most of unfortunate, awkward or depressing situations, and Almond leaves them changed and ready to face the next step. These characters are not sad or pathetic but a little weird, somewhat flawed and very often funny. In other words, they’re human.

Richard Bon says

Steve Almond creates realistic characters, young and old, dealing with their own demons, flaws, and the pressures of American life. I laughed at times and nearly cried at others. Almond's wit and gift for storytelling made this collection one of the most enjoyable I've read.

My favorite story, mostly because I love to play, read about, and write about poker, was "Donkey Greedy, Donkey Gets Punched." Forgetting all of the clever idiosyncrasies on display in each of the two main characters, a psychoanalyst irresistibly drawn to the poker tables to combat his secretly depressive personality and his swashbuckling professional poker playing patient, Almond’s portrayal of the poker action itself in the climactic final scene propelled this story into a special place within my personal poker-related canon.

Writing is said to be a decision making process, always considering the next word, and when writing about

the progression of a fictional poker hand, that decision making process is compounded by many potential choices regarding cards, odds, player psychology, etc., and Almond's description, what he chose to include and what he left up to the reader, captivated and enthralled. I admire his focus on the players' psyche and conversation, adequate but not overwhelming attention given to the cards themselves, and the overall flow of the game's action. As the Dr. and patient square off at the table during the final sequence, Almond begins from the Dr.'s perspective and I never saw the end coming, kicking myself in retrospect for not being a more astute prognosticator. In my defense, I was gobbling up the words so quickly, so eager to learn the result of the game and story, that I didn't try very hard to predict any outcome other than the one that seemed to be on its way. Almond bluffed me and I loved every minute.

The only story I didn't love was "First Date Back," not because of the utter sadness it invokes, but because I couldn't quite believe that the date itself would've happened the way it does.

I laughed out loud at the ridiculousness played out by the characters in "A Jew Berserk On Christmas Eve."

"A Dream Of Sleep," a chilling, sad tale, forced me, regardless of my strong belief of the possibilities alive today in small business capitalism, to think about capitalism's propensity for coldness, its inconsiderate nature, the ways in which it can destroy lives.

I'll be on the lookout for articles published by Steve Almond around the web (I read one this week on The Rumpus), and new fiction from him as well.

Bookish Jen says

Writer Steve Almond has a way of writing about people who may be seen as life's losers, are living on society's fringe, or are totally deluded about their greatness. But, he does it in a way that makes you feel empathy for these people, including the sad sack protagonists found in the pages of his latest book, a collection of short stories called God Bless America.

"God Bless America" is the first story in Almond's collection. Working as a drug store stock boy, a young man finds himself unexpectedly taking an acting class when he signed up for something different (this happened when he got lost at local adult education center). He somehow convinces himself that he is a Tom Cruise or Brad Pitt in the making even though his acting talent can be called marginal at best. He doesn't reach leading man status but does become a tour guide in Boston (hey, in a way he is "performing" and has an "audience"), which gets him involved in some criminal activity.

"In Not Until You Say Yes", a widowed woman, still supporting her adult children (and not happy about it), works a thankless security job at the Logan airport in Boston. Her day gets much more challenging (it's not like she doesn't have enough on her plate) when she is assigned to look after a young boy who keeps getting bumped off overbooked flights to make a little extra money. Will she grow fond of this little rascal or will he work her last nerve?

In "Shotgun Wedding" a woman works as a copywriter for a "hip, cool boutique ad agency" but her so-called creative job is empty and soulless. To make matters worse, her period is late and she's feeling the possible effects of morning sickness. Could she be pregnant? Too scared to find out, she resists taking the "rabbit test" at her doctor's office or through a home test. Why? She wonders how her possible delicate condition may affect her fiancé, who is currently in Milwaukee and more focused on his career than being a father. If she's pregnant will her fiancé step up to the plate and be a father or will she have to go it alone?

“First Date Back” is one story in God Bless America that truly got to me. In this story, a soldier comes back to the United States and develops a wee bit of ardor for a flight attendant on the flight home. This young woman realizes the soldier isn’t exactly prepared for life back in the United States. She takes pity on him and agrees to go out on a date with the young man even though she isn’t exactly into him. The young veteran, confused and lonely, takes her one act of compassion for true love, and the results are heartbreaking. You might want to have tissues nearby when you read the “First Date Back.”

God Bless America concludes with “A Dream of Sleep”. Wolf is a cemetery caretaker, confused by the world outside. He keeps himself confined in the cemetery, making sure it and its deceased citizens are well taken care of, and rarely ventures outside its confines. He lives and works most of his days in solitude. Living in mostly solitude, Wolf’s life is upended by a young girl who sneaks into the old cemetery to have sex with her boyfriend. She also appears to be pregnant with said boyfriend’s child. Will Wolf kick this girl out or will he take her under his protective wing and connect with the world outside?

I thoroughly enjoyed reading Almond’s stories, even though they sometimes made me uncomfortable and yes, cry. Almond is a writer’s writer, writing with empathy, clarity and true understanding of the interesting characters that make up our odd society here in the United States. Almond inspires you to care about these characters, but is never preachy about it.

I for one, consider it to be a blessing I discovered God Bless America and the talents of Steve Almond. And I’m thrilled to find out he has written other books, which I am sure I will add to my reading list.

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<https://thebookselfblog.wordpress.com...>
