

THE



BIBLE

By

Maeve Flanagan

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... At the heart of Maeve Flanagan's, "The Bible," lies catharsis. As an author who, "enjoys writing stories that raise moral and philosophical questions about the human condition," the tale for you to read is certainly not for the faint of heart nor for those more susceptible to violence (I say violence to say that the morality within this piece is ambiguous at worst and deserved at best). I would be the first to tell you that, at the pinnacle of certain situations, violence might be the only acceptable way to solve a problem. Have a bad egg? Get rid of the eggs. Have a bad dog? Time to put Fido down. Sometimes bad men are no better than bad dogs. Flanagan offers the reader scope, reasoning, irrationality, and survival all wrapped up under that infamous book of justification. I think that sometimes we all have to experience and be reminded of characters that we would normally shelter ourselves from because of the comparisons they'd make to our own lives – i.e. these characters couldn't be real because that doesn't or couldn't possibly happen to me. "The Bible" reminds us that these things happen all of the time. Heart wrenching and vindicating, the ambiguity we're left with at the end of this story is a feeling we should all experience. Flanagan has done good work worth reading. Read.*

Five Stars

QUALITY QUOTABLE (*for the love of language...*)

She twisted her body, broke free from his grasp, and ended up flat on her back again. He pulled his right leg back, way back like he was going to kick a football in a field goal attempt. Final quarter, one minute to go, game tied, for the win ... *bam*.

She curled up in a ball on her side, clutching her stomach, screaming. When she opened her good eye, a leather rounded toe box, ebony in color with tan stitching around the sole, stood right in front of her forehead. She froze.

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She lay face down on the floor, her arms shielding the back of her head. A pair of black leather boots straddled her torso.

“Do you think you’re ever going to leave me?”

She told him no.

“You’re a disgrace.” He lowered his tone. “A complete disgrace.”

Disgrace. The word ripped at her soul. She remembered a sermon he’d given. Was it last week? Or the week before? He’d talked about sin and salvation and how the word *grace* meant God’s unmerited favor. Such a lovely concept she’d thought at the time. But now he called her A Dis-grace.

She told herself that she must be the stupidest woman in the world to worry about a word at that moment. But it bothered her. That he called her that. Because she knew that *dis* was the Latin root for *not* so *disgrace* meant *not* having God’s favor.

How could that be? she wondered. What did I do to fall from His grace?

The question vanished from her mind as she caught a whiff of a pungent odor coming from his breath. The raw onions he’d eaten for dinner. She started gagging.

Don't throw up, don't throw up.

He knelt with one knee on each side of her waist and whispered, "Get up. Clean up that mess you made, you stupid bitch."

But it wasn't me, she thought. You were the one who threw the onions and the pork and the peas and the carrots and the potatoes and the plates all over the kitchen floor. I did what you told me. Like I always do.

She wanted to tell him that she'd heard him, that she was going to get up but when she opened her mouth only blood dribbled out. She rolled over on her back to stop the flow. It started trickling down her throat. She coughed, and coughed some more until it stopped. She managed a shallow breath. Pain shot through her rib cage. She tried to open her eyes. The left one wouldn't budge, its upper and lower lids stuck together as if superglued. The right eye managed to squint, its vision clouded with salty tears.

She wondered if she was going to be able to see again.

He stood and moved to her side. She sat up and tried to cover herself with the pink blouse she'd put on that morning but the tattered polyester material barely covered her bra. She used what remained of a sleeve to wipe her face. She gasped, then told him she couldn't breathe.

"You can't what? What did you say?" He grabbed her elbow and pulled hard. "Get up. Now."

She twisted her body, broke free from his grasp, and ended up flat on her back again. He pulled his right leg back, way back like he was going to kick a football in a field goal attempt. Final quarter, one minute to go, game tied, for the win ... *bam*.

She curled up in a ball on her side, clutching her stomach, screaming. When she opened her good eye, a leather rounded toe box, ebony in color with tan stitching around the sole, stood right in front of her forehead. She froze.

Please don't kick me in the head. Please don't.

One minute passed. Two minutes. He didn't move. She didn't move.

He cleared his throat and said, "The Book of Revelations, chapter eight." The words came out slowly, his baritone voice holding the first syllable in *revelations* a bit longer than the rest of the word. Even though they'd lived in Idaho for five years, whenever he would preach his West Virginian drawl would return and expose an Appalachian Mountain childhood he'd tried to conceal.

He started over. "In the book of Revelations, chapter eight, the bible tells us ..." He paused, then put the bottom of his right boot on the top of her neck applying just enough pressure so she could feel her jugular vein throb against it. "The bible tells us, 'as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the fornicators ...'" He stopped for a moment and closed his eyes. The only sound in the room came from an antique grandfather clock sitting in the corner.

Tick-tock. Tick-tock.

The children. She was grateful he'd waited until Grandma had picked them up for a trip to the zoo before he'd begun the pummeling. Usually they'd cower in the corner of their bedroom closet, huddled in its darkness. Today, though, instead of watching the Saturday afternoon fights they were watching zebras and peacocks and parrots.

He opened his eyes. "Where was I? Yes, the fornicators." He inhaled deeply, then exhaled slowly while pushing the boot down harder. "Revelations says, 'the fornicators,

sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their lot shall be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.”

He coughed up some phlegm from the back of his throat, swished it around his mouth, bent down, and spit on her face. The wet, sticky mucous dripped slowly down her cheek like a thick teardrop. She didn't move.

“You must remember my sermons on Revelations, don't you darling?”

She told him of course she remembered, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Good.” He removed his boot from her neck. “What does Revelations, chapter eight mean?”

She said it meant they were going to Hell.

“Who? Who's going to Hell?”

Her mind blanked. She couldn't remember exactly who the *they* were.

“The fornicators,” he said. “It says the fornicators, doesn't it?”

She reached to her face and wiped off the stickiness with the tips of her fingers. She told him she wasn't a fornicator, that she didn't do anything wrong.

“Do. Not. Lie to me,” he yelled. “I see everything. I see the way you look at Emily's husband. The way he looks at you. Adultery starts in the heart.”

She told him she hardly knew Emily's husband, that she'd never looked at him in any special way. She rolled over, got up on her elbows, and tried to take a deep breath. She stopped. Sharp pains shot through her chest. The bones hadn't healed since the last time.

He started pacing behind her feet. Faster and faster, back and forth in six-foot segments. “Liar,” he said going one direction. “Sinner,” he said going the other way. “Whore,” as he turned around.

Call 911. I have to do it this time.

She scoured the room. My phone. Where did he throw it? She remembered hearing it smash into something, somewhere in the room. But where? Even his phone would do. It didn't matter whose phone she used. Her phone, his phone. Any phone.

Except the landline. Last year he'd ripped it right out of the wall. Wouldn't let her call the cable company to restore it. He'd cancelled the cable TV too. Told her it was a bad influence on her and the children. So she had to rely solely on her cell with its spotty service because the mountains surrounding their home messed with the signal. Still, it worked most of the time. She could call 911. She knew that because they'd discussed it. The need to be able to get help in case Joshua had an accident with his BB gun or Hannah got bit by a rattlesnake or some other crazy thing happened.

She moved her head slightly to the left. Out of the corner of her eye she spotted it. A silver shimmer on the credenza. His phone. He'd told her he'd chosen silver because the color was a mirror to the soul. Next to the phone sat a bible. His bible. The Holy Book had traveled on a boat with his great-great-great grandfather from England to Baltimore. She hadn't been allowed to touch the bible since their younger child's baptism.

At twelve inches tall, five inches thick, and weighing at least eight pounds, it was the largest bible she'd ever seen. Metal clasps held the faded leather cover closed because if the pages accidentally opened, dozens of newspaper clippings, funeral cards, and hand-written notes would spill out.

He'd read from the bible at their wedding. Three lines from the Book of Ephesians. "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife

even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.”

After the ceremony he'd written her name in black ink in the front of the bible on the insert that recorded the family genealogy. Only her first name, underneath his. Like Mary and Martha, he'd told her, women do not need last names. She'd wondered if anyone would remember her.

Now the bible sat on an old credenza under a wood carving that hung on the wall bearing the words, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” The credenza had been in her family for decades. Her third-cousin twice removed, or maybe it was a second-cousin thrice removed, had built it by hand out of Kentucky coffeetree wood. Its light brown tone blended beautifully against the walls she'd carefully painted last year. Dover white. That was the color. She'd spent hours looking at Sherman-Williams paint samples to find the perfect hue. As she stared at the bible, she noticed a chip in the paint on the wall where he'd thrown a can of soup earlier in the week.

Suddenly, his pant legs blocked her line of vision. “I thought I told you to get up.”

She said she didn't know if she could but she would try.

For a moment her eyes met his. All she saw was a man for whom redemption was merely a word.

She rose to her feet knowing full well he was going to knock her down again. And again. It didn't matter. She was dying anyway. She could feel it deep inside. This time would be the last. She could pray. Like she'd always done. Ask for the Lord's help. To make him stop.

But no, not today. Prayers have never worked. For some reason I've fallen from His grace. I don't know why.

She looked him directly in the eye. He slapped her face. She lost her balance but stayed on her feet. He took his arm back, made a fist, and swung at her head. She swerved backward to her right. The punch missed. He'd never missed before. He stumbled forward and clutched a chair to catch his balance. She looked at him, then at the phone. She threw her body toward the credenza, her hands reaching for the phone, but her fingers brushed across the metal and it slipped away, crashing to the floor.

He grabbed her from behind, both hands on her shoulders, and screamed, "You bitch."

She picked up the bible. Shocked by how light and small it felt in her hands, she swung it as hard as she could in an upward motion toward his head. The top edge caught the bottom of his nose. His head flung backwards. Blood gushed out. He froze for a moment, then ran his fingers across his face and looked down at the red liquid. Some of it seeped into his eyes. He started rubbing them. His vision blurred. He stepped toward her but his boot caught the edge of her sneaker at an awkward angle causing his ankle to roll to the left. He fell sideways into the credenza. She heard a loud thud as his head slammed into the sharp corner. A grunting noise came from his throat. Then nothing. He fell to the floor, limp. She raised the bible above her head and smashed it down on his face with all her weight, striking him over and over, at least a dozen times. She stopped and stared at the book. The leather and metal clasps had turned a dark crimson. She threw it to the floor and looked down. A pool of blood oozed from beneath his head. His body was still, his eyes fixed and staring ahead.

She collapsed to the ground. Her eyes filled with tears.

She'd finally gotten back in His good grace.

End

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I'm fascinated by contradictions in religion. Religious beliefs and their sacred texts can champion virtues like love, charity, and forgiveness. And many great leaders—the Reverend Martin Luther King, Saint Óscar Romero, Bishop Desmond Tutu—rose out of religious vocations. But religion can also embody evil. It's often used to justify slavery, intolerance, violence, and hatred. For centuries religious beliefs have been used to suppress women. To control what they say, what they wear, where they go, who they marry, what they should think. One day it occurred to me that if a sacred text can be used figuratively as a weapon against women, why couldn't it also be used literally as a weapon by an abused woman to save herself. That's when my story, *The Bible*, popped into my head. My writing influences are many. I love the great Irish writers and poets like Joyce, Wilde, Beckett, Behan, Trevor, and Heaney because they all pushed boundaries. My favorite American writers are Cormac McCarthy and George Saunders.*

AUTHOR BIO: Maeve Flanagan is an aspiring fiction writer in Los Angeles. She has a background in philosophy and enjoys writing stories that raise moral and philosophical questions about the human condition.