

Stories of Your Life and Others

by Ted Chiang

This collection of science fiction stories often presents characters who must confront sudden change with some sense of normalcy. Chiang examines what it means to be alive in a world marked by uncertainty, but also by beauty and wonder.

TOWER OF BABYLON

1. Hillalum addresses the story of the Tower of Babel (found in Genesis 11), but he interprets the story as, “a tale of thousands of men toiling ceaselessly, but with joy, for they worked to know Yahweh better.” (6) Consider this perspective. Do you agree? Do you have any critiques? How does Hillalum reconsider his own interpretation as he stands at the base of the tower in his own time?
2. “When they began the tower, the architects knew that far more wood would be needed to fuel the kilns than could be found on the plain, so they had a forest of trees planted.” (7) How do we as a culture care for our resources and plan for the future? Can we learn anything from this facet of the story?
3. “When they awoke the next morning, the miners were scarcely able to walk, so sore were their legs. The pullers laughed, and

gave them salve to rub into their muscles, and redistributed the load on the carts to reduce the miners’ burden.” (9) What do you think of this approach to the task at hand? Consider the process of building strength. Are there other ways the travelers fortify their companions?

4. “And yet any caravan was essentially a journey, a thing that began at one place and ended at another. This town was never intended as a permanent place, it was merely a part of a centuries-long journey...we live on the road to heaven; all the work that we do is to extend it further. When we leave the tower, we will take the upward ramp, not the downward.” (13) Consider this quote in its context, but also in your own. How does it speak to you?
5. What do you think of the story of the star hitting the tower centuries ago? How did the people respond to the event when it happened? How do they treat the story now?

Can you think of an event in our own collective history, or your own personal history, that is treated similarly?

6. There is a theme of disorientation throughout the story. Discuss how Hillalum experiences his journey to the vault. “Perhaps men were not meant to live in such a place. If their own natures restrained them from approaching heaven too closely, then men should remain on earth.” (17) Earlier Hillalum questioned if he should climb the tower, it seems that as he did indeed climb his conviction that men should not ascend to heaven is solidifying. What do you think of this?
7. “It is true that we work with the purest of aims, but that doesn’t mean we have worked wisely. Did men truly choose the correct path when they opted to live their lives away from the soil from which they were shaped? Never has Yahweh said that the choice was proper. Now we stand ready to break open heaven, even when we know that water lies above us. If we are misguided, how can we be sure Yahweh will protect us from our own errors?” (20) Before this quote another worker raises the

point that if Yahweh was displeased they would not have been allowed to be successful in their project thus far. Another opinion is raised that if Yahweh was pleased there would have been a stair case waiting for them, and there is not. These people are struggling with their understanding of the character of Yahweh. At this point, when it is still unclear how the story will end, discuss these three views and how they might communicate something about our own understanding of the character of God. Do you agree with one more than another? Would you add or take away anything given your own experience with God?

8. You have finished the story. What is your response to it? How do you feel? What did you learn anything about God within this story? Did you discover any truth about God that might speak to your own experience with God?

UNDERSTAND

1. While Leon was in vegetative state someone made the decision to administer hormone K to him. After he recovers, and gains greater intelligence, he is given the choice to receive more of the hormone therapy. Do you think he should do it? How do you think this choice will affect the rest of his story?
2. If researchers developed drug therapy like Hormone K that increased intelligence, would you take it? How much would you take? Would you recommend it to your friends? Your kids? Your parents? In each case, why or why not?
3. “To me, these people seem like children on a playground; I’m amused by their earnestness, and embarrassed to remember myself doing those same things. Their

activities are appropriate for them, but I couldn’t bear to participate now; when I became a man, I put away childish things. I will deal with the world of normal humans only as needed to support myself.” (47) What elements of humanness does Leon discard in his journey? Does Leon ever stop being human? Discuss.

4. “And here am I, with people, people everywhere, yet not a one to interact with. I’m only a fraction of what a complete individual with my intelligence could be.” (51) Leon recognizes a need for human interaction, but only insofar as it enhances his personal growth. What might this sort of isolation and utilitarianism eventually do to a person. Are there ways you see our larger culture, smaller communities, or perhaps within yourself, treating other people as Leon does? How does this affect humanity? How does it impact our discipleship?
5. Who or what is Leon’s God? In answering this question, what did you discover about how you define God?
6. Describe Leon and Reynold’s interaction and the effect the existence of “the Word” has on them both.
7. Was the ending of the story inevitable?

DIVISION BY ZERO

1. Take note of the structure of the story. What happens in the sections headed by a number? What happens in the sections headed by a number and “A”? What happens in sections headed by a number and “B”? Why do you think the author chose this structure? Does he ever deviate from it?
2. What does this story reveal about shame and its impact on a person’s understanding of their identity?

3. There is an ongoing consideration of sympathy and empathy throughout the story. How are they similar and different? Have you ever experienced a time when you couldn’t feel one or the other? If so, how did you handle it?

STORY OF YOUR LIFE

1. When you think of aliens what do you think of? Positive, negative, neutral? How do the characters in the story respond to the aliens?
2. Have you ever tried to communicate with someone who only spoke and understood a language you didn’t understand? What was that like? How did it feel?
3. This story examines how different beings interact with time. How do you think God experiences time?
4. Louise considers the issue of freewill on page 131. What do you think of her conclusion? How do you understand free will in your own life? In light of this, what do you make of God’s sovereignty?
5. Would you want to know the future if you could? Even if you wouldn’t change anything about it?

SEVENTY-TWO LETTERS

1. This story centers around the creation of beings out of clay who are animated through their names. Consider the creation story in Genesis 2. What similarities or differences do you detect?
2. Look for instances of tension between science and theology, scientists and mystics, humans and God, in the story. Where do the lines blur between these sets? Are they always in tension?

3. Consider the tones of the characters as Robert suggests to Willoughby an overhaul of the industry for the sake of providing dignity for a lower class of people. What do you think of Willoughby's objections? What is he most concerned with? How does Robert echo his objections later in the story?

4. A second change to the very structure of the human experience is suggested. What is your reaction to such a suggestion in the context of the story, and in your own context?

5. Discuss the ending of the story. Are you satisfied with the outcome? Why or why not?

THE EVOLUTION OF HUMAN SCIENCE

1. The question before you is posed in the first paragraph of this story: "What is the role of human scientists in an age when the frontiers of scientific inquiry have moved beyond the comprehension of humans?" (201)

2. "We need not be intimidated by the accomplishments of metahuman science. We should always remember that the technologies that made metahumans possible were originally invented by humans and they were no smarter than we." (203) Is the fact that the humans who made the technologies who made metahumans possible were no smarter than the author of this short paper and his or her contemporaries a reassuring fact? Or, is it a warning that humans may continue to make self-defeating choices?

HELL IS THE ABSENCE OF GOD

1. In the story the divine, and absence of the divine, are close at hand. In such a world there would be no need for debates about

whether hell exists, or if miracles happen, or if God is real. Even so, people have a choice of whether to love God or not. In a world like this, is faith necessary? Discuss your answer.

2. Janice struggles to come to terms with the effect of the angel's visitation to her. In that struggle she finds herself isolated from her purpose and at least one part of her community. It isn't only Janice who wrestles with the meaning behind God's action or inaction in their life – what do you think of this ongoing discussion? Have you reflected on similar questions in your own life, or walked with someone who is wrestling with those sorts of things? The story of Job, and the man blind from birth in scripture come to mind at this point. What other passages can you think of that might be part of this conversation? If you were in this story, how would you make sense of what is happening?

3. Suffering is a theme throughout this story – how do the characters make sense of their lot in life? How do other characters make sense of other's journey? Do you see similarities between these and the way we deal with suffering in our own world? Where?

4. Neil, Janice, Ethan – who do you identify most with? Why?

5. "You couldn't love God as a means to an end, you had to love Him for Himself. If your ultimate goal in loving God was a reunion with your spouse, you weren't demonstrating true devotion at all." (219) Do you love God? Are there any spaces in your life where your love of God is a means to an end other than simply love for God?

6. People in this story go to support groups to process and connect

after visitations with angels. Why don't they go to church? Are there spaces people in our lives go instead of church to find answers to life's questions?

7. Many people tell Neil what his response should be to God, both in regard to the malformation of his leg and the death of Sarah, but none of these words actually draw him any closer to loving God. Neil must struggle through his journey and come to love God in his own way. Does this reveal anything about evangelism? How did Sarah demonstrate her faith? What was Neil's reaction to her presence in his life?

8. Share your reactions to the end of the story. Take a few moments and read the story notes from the author at the end of the book. Reflect on the nature of God as revealed in scripture – consider the passages you brought up in answering a previous question – and the nature of God bound within "Hell is the Absence of God." Discuss your reflections.

LIKING WHAT YOU SEE: A DOCUMENTARY

1. What do you think of the concept of "lookism?" Are you aware of any "lookism" tendencies in you? What about within your culture?

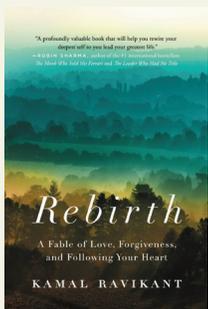
2. On page 250 and 251 there is an excerpt of a speech by Walter Lambert. What do you think of his description of the beauty and advertising industry? Is there any correlation between what you experience throughout the course of your day when interacting with media? How do beauty standards

impact the way we perceive our personal worth and the worthiness of others?

3. What is your reaction to “calli?” How would you vote, for it, or against? Would you choose it for yourself? Your child? Friends? What if not everyone else did? What if you could turn it on and off at will?
4. On page 256 Alex Bibescu brings up the connection between monotheistic faiths and the secular “calli” debate. Consider and discuss his question: “So you see, this debate isn’t just about commercials and cosmetics, it’s about determining what’s the appropriate relationship between the mind and body. Are we more fully realized when we minimize the physical part of our nature?” (257)

Elizabeth Andradi Deere is a freelance writer and editor who lives in Charlottesville, Virginia, with her husband and puppy. A native Texan, she graduated from Truett Theological Seminary in May 2016.

NEXT MONTH



Rebirth

by Kamal Ravikant

After the death of his estranged father, Amit is led by fate to the Camino de Santiago, an ancient 550-mile pilgrimage route across northern Spain. His month-long journey forces Amit to face life’s big questions and causes him to grow and embrace a new sense of purpose and being.