



## A Good Man is Hard to Find

by Flannery O'Connor

### In a Nutshell

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Some readers think "A Good Man is Hard to Find" is a cynical tale, uncompromising in the way it brings out human pettiness and manipulation. Others think it's a black comedy worthy of a Coen brothers short film, or a twisted cartoon. Or perhaps it's a horror story. Still others think it's an uplifting depiction of the mysterious ways God works through human beings over and above their own wills. Maybe it's even all of these at once?

Since it was first published, "A Good Man is Hard to Find" has been [Flannery O'Connor's](#) best-known story. Though she'd written it in 1953, the story was published in 1955 as part of a collection with the same name, [A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories](#). Her second published work, the collection established Flannery O'Connor as a major voice in American literature, and particularly Southern literature, until her early death (at the age of 39) in 1964. It also brought her fame as a modern master of the short story (her novels were critically less successful).

Even during O'Connor's lifetime, her works provoked very different reactions in her readers. Many readers and critics found them consistently "grotesque" in their depiction of debased, repulsive (and usually unsympathetic) characters and their at times spectacular displays of violence or cruelty. Some appreciated them as comedies for this reason, while others reacted with disgust. "A Good Man is Hard to Find," as O'Connor's most popular story, frequently stood at the center of discussion. It was also, for that reason, the story about which the author herself spoke most often (she also gave several public readings of it).

O'Connor saw all of her fiction, certainly including this story, as realistic, demandingly unsentimental, but ultimately hopeful. Her inspiration as a writer came from a deeply felt faith in Roman Catholicism, which she claimed informed all of her stories. She wrote, "The stories are hard but they are hard because there is nothing harder or less sentimental than Christian realism" (source: [The Habit of Being](#), p. 90). A recurrent theme throughout her writings was the action of divine grace in the horribly imperfect, often revolting, generally funny world of human beings, a theme very much present in "A Good Man is Hard to Find." This story affords perhaps the best place to start in exploring the work of this rather eccentric, certainly unique literary voice.

### Why Should I Care?

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Is a good man (or woman) hard to find? So maybe you don't think about the question all that much *per se*.

But it does suggest another question you might have thought about, since it's one of the

Big Questions: *what makes a good person?* In the confrontation of thoroughly average old grandmother with a criminal who appears certifiably "evil" by just about anyone's standards, Flannery O'Connor's surprisingly deep little story opens up that question, and a whole bunch of others: \* Is being "good" a matter of being respectable or decent? Having a good upbringing, or good blood? Being religious? Kind and honest? Or is it something more demanding, perhaps even impossible?

\* How does genuine goodness square with the way human beings actually are - with their pettiness, their selfishness, their annoying little quirks and vanities?

\* What does it mean not to be good, and what does it mean to be *evil*?

\* And - a particularly important question in the story - do we need religion to answer any, or all, of these questions? "A Good Man is Hard to Find" also makes us think about the possibility of dramatic transformation in a person.

Having just lost all of her family and threatened with death herself, the old grandmother appears to undergo a sudden and miraculous change of heart: she reaches out lovingly to the very person who has killed those she loves and is about to kill her.

Can we understand an action like that? Can it only be understood religiously, as O'Connor would argue herself? What might the extreme situation have to do with bringing about such a moment? Can such a sudden transformation really happen at all, or should we disbelieve it? Perhaps at some point in your life you or someone you know will experience a "transformative moment." Or claim to have experienced it.

And on that issue too, you'll find plenty of food for thought in this little story.

Then of course there are other less philosophical - but still good - reasons to read the story.

It's just a great read, with a strange but effective mix of foreboding, page-turning suspense and laugh-out-loud humor.

It's about one of those iconic experiences in all of our lives: the family vacation from hell! Rotten little sisters, irritatingly insistent grandmothers, car accidents, coincidental (or is it fate?) run-ins with serial killers...think of it as Coen brothers meets National Lampoon. Add to that all of those deep thoughts on the nature of good and evil, and you've got a short but intense story well worth the read.