

in wide use, only a few come from the Old Testament. Among them, from Genesis, is one that has become a “treasured part of English usage”: *Go forth and multiply.*

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Friends Who Pray Together . . .

THE SOURCE: “Religion, Social Networks, and Life Satisfaction” by Chaeyoon Lim and Robert D. Putnam, in *American Sociological Review*, Dec. 2010.

IN STUDY AFTER STUDY, RESEARCHERS have found that religion makes people happy. Nearly 30 percent of people who attend religious services weekly report “extreme” satisfaction with their lives, compared with less than 20 percent of those who steer clear of religious institutions. Why? Is it because churchgoers feel loved by God? Is it because they sleep easy at night, knowing where they’ll go after they die? No and no. A new study finds that the answer may be much closer to hand:

A new study says churchgoers are happier chiefly because of the friends they’ve made in the pews.

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Two sociologists, Chaeyoon Lim of the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and Robert Putnam of Harvard (author of *Bowling Alone*, a seminal 2000 book about Americans’ declining social connectedness), find that people who have close friends from their congregations are more likely to be happy than those who have the same number of close friends through nonreligious affiliations. People who regularly attend church and have three to five close friends from their religious community are 50 percent more likely to be “extremely satisfied” with their lives than non-

religious people who have the same number of friends.

Any evidence that a belief in God by itself leads to happiness is “weak and inconsistent,” the authors report. Private practices such as praying at home are not linked to greater life satisfaction. Those who attend church but have no friends there are not any likelier to be happy than those who stay home on Sunday.

If you aren’t a believer and are looking for more satisfaction in your life, a strategy of going to church in order to make friends isn’t going to work: A bevy of friends from church does little to bolster life satisfaction for those who don’t consider religion an important part of who they are. What really seems to make people happy is the sense of belonging that comes from a combination of religious identity and religious friends. As Lim and Putnam put it, “It is neither faith nor communities, per se, that are important, but communities of faith. For life satisfaction, praying together seems to be better than either bowling together or praying alone.”

ARTS & LETTERS

A Tale of Two Literary Cultures

THE SOURCE: “MFA vs. NYC” in *n+1*, Fall 2010.

AMERICA IS HOME TO TWO DISTINCT literary cultures, defined by where a writer earns his keep: the university (which we’ll refer to as MFA)

and the publishing house (hereafter, NYC). Each culture has its own heroes (Stuart Dybek in the former, Philip Roth in the latter), standard genre (short story versus novel), must-read publications (*Poets & Writers* versus *The New York Observer*), and social

events (departmental open houses versus book parties).

In 1975 there were 79 programs in creative writing offering a master of fine arts (MFA) or other degree. Today there are 854, and each is a source of financial support for writers—lecture fees, adjunct professorships, and something pen porters could once only dream about: steady employment, even tenure. “It’s safe to say that the university now rivals, if it hasn’t surpassed, New York as the economic center of the literary fiction world,” observes the unnamed author

of this article, an *n+1* editor.

Some have celebrated this new economic cushion as liberation for the writer from the profit-driven marketplace of publishing. But any writer who leaves NYC for MFA will find that freeing herself of one market's pressures just places her under another's. In MFA-land, a prospective writer will first experience pressure to publish short stories in literary quarterlies, followed by a race to publish her thesis, and finally, the necessity of continuing to publish more stories, all while teaching a fresh crop of literary hopefuls.

For writers traveling in the world of MFA production, from classroom workshops to literary journals to anthologies, the form that gets studied and published is the short story. "At first glance," says the author, "this may seem like a kind of collective suicide, because everyone knows that no one reads short stories." But what "everyone" reads is not as important in MFA culture—the incentives to publish for a large audience aren't there. What matters is to get read by other MFA students and to have one's stories assigned as course work year after year. In the publishing world, by contrast, novels lose their spots at the bestseller table in a matter of weeks. ("The contemporary New York canon tends to be more *contemporary* than *canon*," the author smirks.) Paradoxically, the obscure short stories of a professor teaching in an MFA program may find a more enduring readership than an NYC writer's novel.

It remains to be seen, but MFA may have more staying power than NYC. "A business model that relies on tuition and tax revenue (the top six

MFA programs, according to *Poets & Writers*, are part of large public universities); the continued unemployability of twenty-somethings; and the continued hunger of undergraduates for undemanding classes does seem more forward-looking than one that relies on overflow income from superfluous books by celebrities, politicians, and their former lovers."

ARTS & LETTERS

Crazy for Caravaggio

THE SOURCE: "Caravaggiomania" by Richard E. Spear, in *Art in America*, Dec. 2010.

IS THERE ANYTHING THAT wouldn't be improved by a dash of Caravaggio? No, apparently. In recent years Caravaggiomania has ripped and roared across the art world, reaching explosive proportions in 2010, the 400th anniversary of the Italian Baroque artist's

death. One exhibition in Rome drew more than 5,000 visitors daily and kept its doors open around the clock in the days before it closed. Marketers splash Caravaggio's name on everything, sometimes plausibly (for example, a "Caravaggio" canvas and painter's easel), but at times less so (Caravaggio-branded eyeglasses and Caravaggio "velvet effect decorative stucco"). And, of course, there is a Caravaggio iPhone app.

Art historian Richard E. Spear writes that Caravaggiomania was preceded by a period of increased scholarly interest beginning in the middle of the 20th century that has now spread to mass audiences. This, in Spear's opinion, is "positive," but he is not impressed with the reasons behind the public's adoration.

To begin with, many people confuse interest in Caravaggio's compelling life story with interest in his art. Michelangelo Merisi (his birth name) was born into



Caravaggio's cinematic style makes him a darling of modern viewers. Above, *Judith Beheading Holofernes*.