

Harper's on the KJV

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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The King James Bible's 400th birthday is everywhere. The current issue of the *Century* features Jon Sweeney's [review](#) of three books on the subject; earlier this year, Timothy Larsen [wrote lovingly](#) of the Bible of his childhood.

The [cover story](#) in last month's *Harper's* (subscription required) has a provocative premise: the editors asked seven literary writers to "select a verse or short passage from the [King James] translation and respond to it, with no restrictions on the form of this response." Like so many other articles on the KJV, the forum's intro text focuses on the translation's language:

Reading the King James Bible aloud is no longer the cornerstone of an American education, even for the religiously devout; none of the major Christian denominations use the King James Version as their primary scripture, opting instead for more recent, "accessible" translations. Yet the language of the King James Bible remains our language.

I'm not sure why *Harper's* scare-quotes "accessible" like it's some made-up concept, and I am sure that accessibility is not the only front on which the KJV has been surpassed. Still, reading creative takes by Paul Guest, Dan Chiasson and others on the legacy of holy writ in the King's English sounds awfully interesting.

It isn't. Or rather: some of the entries are better than others, but most have little to say about the KJV. Instead, they take the instructions at face value by responding in some way to short biblical passages. In honor of the occasion, the passages are printed in the King James--but this often seems incidental.

Howard Jacobson explores the idea of the Creator as an artist, latching onto the repeated phrase "very good" (which [appears](#) in most every English translation). John Banville offers an oddly playful retelling of Absalom's death from the perspective of the "[certain man](#)" who finds him hanging in a tree. Charles Baxter's poem is a

highlight, a lovely meditation on Psalm 91 that would be diminished by a more prosaic translation of the psalm.

But only one writer sheds any light on the KJV itself. That's Marilynne Robinson, also probably the only one who's a household name among *Century* readers (and, incidentally, the forum's only woman). In a brief but lovely essay, Robinson uses the King James language of [I Corinthians 15:51-52](#) as a gloss on the world of Wycliffe and Tyndale from which it came:

[The KJV's] greatness is owed in large part to the fact that it has preserved much that is best in the work of its martyrs, including a sense of the urgent generosity that lay behind their words. Imagine a tonsured youth taking a page or two of Scripture from his sleeve and kneeling to read . . . "We shall all be changed, and that in a moment, and the twinklynge of an eye." He'd have been reading to old Adam the delver, the man of earth, the bearer of the primordial curse whose toil was grossly embittered by the impositions of his fellow men. And in the quiet of the peril they shared he'd have brought him the vision of himself as the new Adam, not burdened and coerced by the needs of his hungry body and by the entrapments of his degraded condition, but wholly conformed to himself as a living soul. We know what we are, but we know not what we may be.