

Yaa Gyasi's beautiful novel embraces faith that changes and grows

***Transcendent Kingdom* explores an immigrant neuroscientist's complicated relationship with evangelical Christianity.**

by [Lance Morgan](#) in the [October 21, 2020](#) issue

## In Review



**Transcendent Kingdom**

## A Novel

By Yaa Gyasi

Knopf

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Yaa Gyasi's sophomore novel explores the many forms faith takes in our lives—faith in God, faith in science, faith in family—and the various ways we engage with it, from blind belief to inquisitive questioning to sorrowful abandonment. Gyasi raises these questions through the story of Gifty, a sixth-year PhD candidate at the Stanford School of Medicine who struggles to know what to do with the evangelical faith of her childhood.

Her life has been marred by tragedy. Her father abandoned the family, her talented basketball-playing brother, Nana, overdosed on heroin in high school, and her formerly strong mother became suicidal and nearly comatose. These losses turn Gifty away from her evangelical upbringing. “It happened that quickly, a tremble-length reckoning. One minute there was a God with the whole world in his hands; the next minute the world was plummeting, ceaselessly, toward an ever-shifting bottom.”

So Gifty looks to science for answers to the misfortune that has befallen her. A neuroscience researcher, she spends most of her time with the mice in her lab, studying their behavior and trying to learn what makes them behave the way they do. However, when her mother comes back into her life, she starts to question her choice of moving away from her faith and finds herself longing for the comfort she once found in God.

Gyasi paints a textured picture of race and the American diaspora experience. Gifty's mother had moved to Huntsville, Alabama, from her home in Ghana with a bag in one hand and an infant son in the other. Thinking she would find more opportunity for her family, she found instead that America can be cold and indifferent to newcomers. Like many other immigrants who seek community and acceptance, she joined the local evangelical church. Her experience at the church gave her hope in America, so she convinced Nana's father to travel from Ghana—and they had a second child, Gifty.

The family cannot shake the discrimination of the South, even within the church. Throughout the novel, Gifty remembers moments when her childhood was darkened by racism and discrimination in the community. The persistence of this prejudice turned Nana away from the church and their father away from America. He returned to Ghana, the country that has always loved and accepted him.

Gifty's parents think she is too young to understand what's happening, but she seems to be the one who is most affected by the family's misfortune. When her father leaves, she delves into her faith more deeply, looking for answers to why her father left and why her brother seems to be moving farther from the family as well. When Nana gets hurt playing basketball and is prescribed OxyContin, addiction slowly overtakes him. Its darkness seeps into the family, a familiar story in a country facing an opioid epidemic. This becomes the final nail in the family's coffin, causing the series of additional losses that result in Gifty turning away from faith.

“What’s the point of all of this?” is a question that separates humans from other animals. Our curiosity around this issue has sparked everything from science to literature to philosophy to religion. When the answer to this question is “Because God deemed it so,” we might feel comforted. But what if the answer to this question is “I don’t know,” or worse still, “Nothing”?

This is Gifty's ongoing struggle at the start of the book, and it reappears when her mother returns. If Christianity cannot answer her questions, can science?

Throughout *Transcendent Kingdom*, Gyasi takes us into Gifty's research. With her, we study addiction patterns in mice. We wonder if her discoveries will help her find answers to the questions religion failed to answer, even as she admits that she may never get answers from science either: “I used to see the world through a God lens, and when that lens clouded, I turned to science. Both became, for me, valuable ways of seeing, but ultimately, both have failed to fully satisfy in their aim: to make clear, to make meaning.”

Ultimately, Gifty's challenge is not to find the answers to her questions but to find comfort in not being able to. She beautifully models how faith can change and grow to become something even more beautiful. She embodies the journey many of us face: What do you do when you realize how much you've missed hearing the knocking of God in your heart?