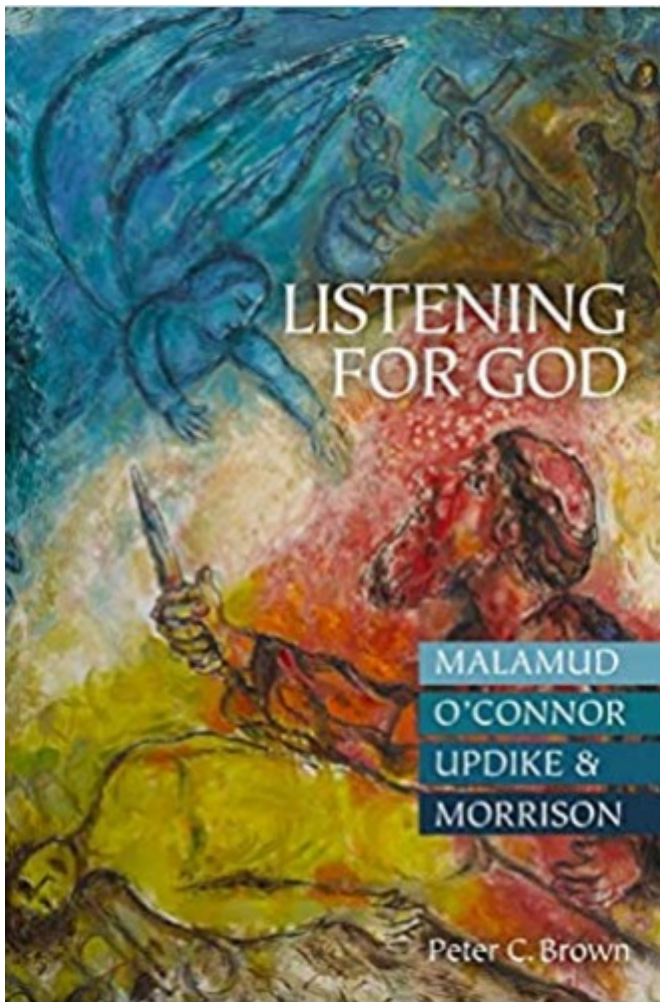


The voice of God in Malamud, O'Connor, Updike, and Morrison

Peter C. Brown's project is urgent and personal.

by [David Crowe](#) in the [November 3, 2021](#) issue

In Review



Listening for God

Malamud, O'Connor, Updike, and Morrison

By Peter C. Brown

Mercer University Press

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“What chutzpa!” Peter C. Brown exclaims in a passage about the murderous character known as the Misfit in Flannery O’Connor’s “A Good Man Is Hard to Find.” He continues as though he were O’Connor’s cousin: “But as Mary Flannery would say, you gotta love him. He’s just so mixed up!” In another passage, referring to John Updike’s Rabbit Angstrom character, Brown writes, “He is on the hook before the face of God. The BIG hook. The only hook that is not just human power, prejudice, prudence, or propaganda in disguise. Let’s see how he wiggles.”

With its academic publisher and its promise to explicate works by O’Connor, Updike, Bernard Malamud, and Toni Morrison, *Listening for God* appears to be a book for literary scholars. Yet while scholars and students will find the book useful for its take on four of the finest American authors, it is far from a mere work of literary criticism. Brown has a much more urgent and personal project in mind—as his regular outbursts of earnest and intimate rhetoric show.

He wants nothing less than to hear the voice of the wholly other God in the works of four important religious existentialist fiction writers. He convinces us that he can faintly make out that voice, which takes the varying forms of YHWH, the sternly inexplicable God of American Catholics and Protestants, and the blended European and African ideas of God crafted by formerly enslaved people.

While Brown’s discussions of these authors’ works are informed and detailed, he has little interest in the typical literary moves. He neither explicates the authors’ plots and imagery nor points to an unjust hegemony their narratives might aid and abet. Instead, he wonders whether their writings might help us—some of us—with the forlorn hope that there is a God in this cold and lonely and unpredictably sad world, a God certain authors, such as his four, have listened for doggedly and perhaps helped us to hear, very faintly, between their lines.

Brown taught philosophy and a Great Books course at Mercer University for many years, mainly “following my nose,” as he describes it. Clearly, Malamud, O’Connor, Updike, and Morrison were on his syllabi. Brown’s nose led him into existential philosophy and literature but also into a theology of the *totaliter aliter*—the wholly other God who, far from acting as our friend in prayer and the blesser of our daily activities, is so far distant as to be nearly undetectable.

And God's distance, as these authors show with their attention to antisemitism, Protestant religious pride, suburban ennui, and vicious American racism, has made us even more aware of a broken world that is often extremely difficult to bear. Brown hopes, with many of us, that literature discloses a God who receives us in our desperation and despair and who gives us a reason to live in this shattered place. He posits a God who is "both transcendent and present," perhaps only "tangential," that is, "touching our experience without entering into it."

Brown's courses must have been deeply committed to faith formation and intellectual transformation. His book overflows with explanations, credos, extensions, scaffolding, funny tidbits, and impertinent commentary. Dozens of his pages present more words of footnote than text, suggesting that he just cannot stop teaching those liberal arts connections.

Yet he confines himself to a mere 18 pages of introductory material, which he titles, in self-deprecating Kierkegaardian style, "Preface in Lieu of a Sermon" and "An Interpretive Strategy: Briefly." Here, Brown suggests that these authors are valuable precisely because they are morally and ethically diffident. They write a literature of radical openness, offering no hope that anyone might arrange a life according to a new, attractive code they alone have discovered.

Brown urges us to embrace Keats's "negative capability," to relinquish our own favored manners and moral lessons to become open to this openness. Only then might we listen for God in these works and, presumably, in our lives.

Then each of his authors gets her or his due. Brown tends to follow his nose as writer as well as professor, so his agenda builds slowly. Eventually it becomes clear that Malamud struggled, especially in *The Natural*, with what it meant to be a chosen people when the Chooser abandons us to our naïveté amid a murderous, ongoing Holocaust. O'Connor struggled in "Revelation," "Everything That Rises Must Converge," and "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" to align God's love with the human tendency to smallness, pride, cruelty, and inner nihilism.

In his Rabbit tetralogy, Updike struggled to work out how God could love and support a "negligible" person like the underemployed "jerk" (these are Brown's words) at the heart of his stories, Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom. Morrison struggled in *The Bluest Eye* and *Paradise* to understand how she and her people can be "Chosen and Covenanted" by God yet endlessly the unlovable alien other in White America's eyes.

In these four chapters, a pattern emerges. Brown ably discusses the dilemmas posed by these authors and their works, suggesting the theological implications of their stories. Then, as each chapter closes, he turns for framing to an apparent personal hero, the 20th-century French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas.

“To be human means to live as if one were not a being among beings,” Levinas wrote opaquely, in a passage that appears more than once in *Listening for God*. In his “Philosophical Coda,” Brown helps us to understand what Levinas might mean. Characteristically, Brown explains in a rather impassioned footnote on his second-to-last page: “It is simply infantile at this stage of human history to insist we’re not ready yet to shoulder our responsibility for our neighbor (maybe tomorrow after I get a raise?).”

Levinas, we know, believed that philosophy was not the “love of learning” but the “learning of love”—neighbor-love, that is. Brown’s amusing, searching book thinks that such love is possible. What chutzpa!