

Agnes of God

by John Pielmeier



October 19 through November 11, 2007

STUDENT MATINEES

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Table of Contents

THE PLAY AND THE PLAYWRIGHT

- 3 For Teachers: Plot Summary of *Agnes of God*
- 4 For Students: Plot Summary and Characters
- 5 The Playwright: John Pielmeier's Quest for Primitive Wonder

CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS CONTEXT

- 7 Cultural Glossary for *Agnes of God*
- 9 Musical References in *Agnes of God*
- 10 The Meaning of Names in *Agnes of God*
- 12 The Choice to Believe: Mysticism in the 20th Century

ACTIVITIES AND RESOURCES

- 14 Tossing Lines: A Pre-Play Class Activity
- 16 Scenes to Read Aloud from *Agnes of God*
- 21 Post-Play Discussion Questions
- 24 *Agnes*, an Abused Child: Books for Further Reading

Agnes of God

by John Pielmeier

Oct. 30, 31, Nov. 6 & 7, 2007

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Linda Kelsey*
as Mother Superior



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Alayne Hopkins
as Sister Agnes



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The Play and the Playwright



From left to right: Linda Kelsey* as Mother Superior, Alayne Hopkins as Sister Agnes, and Colleen Hennen as Dr. Livingstone.

**Member of Actors' Equity Association*

For Teachers: Plot Summary of *Agnes of God*

A young nun, Agnes, is discovered, her body covered with blood, having just given birth. Her baby is found dead in the same convent room strangled by the umbilical cord. Dr. Martha Livingstone, a court-appointed psychiatrist, is brought in to examine Agnes and determine whether or not she is fit to stand trial. Mother Miriam Ruth, the nun in charge of the convent, wishes to protect Agnes' innocence throughout the interview process. Before and after Agnes' sessions with the psychiatrist, Mother Miriam and Dr. Livingstone debate what is best for Agnes. During their discussions, Agnes' life before she came to the convent becomes a central topic in trying to understand her innocence and beliefs. Dr. Livingstone also investigates Mother Miriam Ruth's role in the events once she discovers Mother Ruth was present at the birth of the baby and had known previously about Agnes' pregnancy. Throughout these exchanges, Dr. Livingstone questions Mother Miriam about earlier events in Agnes' life. In the end it is revealed that Agnes was the one who killed her baby in an effort to "return the child to God."

by Nancy Fisher, South St. Paul Public Schools

Plot Summary and Characters

Plot Summary

A young nun, Agnes, is discovered, her body covered with blood, having just given birth. Her baby is found dead in the same convent room strangled by the umbilical cord. Dr. Martha Livingstone, a court-appointed psychiatrist, is brought in to examine Agnes and determine whether or not she is fit to stand trial. Mother Miriam Ruth, the nun in charge of the convent, wishes to protect Agnes' innocence throughout the interview process. Before and after Agnes' sessions with the psychiatrist, Mother Miriam and Dr. Livingstone debate what is best for Agnes. During their discussions, Agnes' life before she came to the convent becomes a central topic in trying to understand her innocence and beliefs.

Characters

Dr. Martha Livingstone

A psychiatrist appointed by the court to explore Sister Agnes' sanity. Due to a series of painful events in her past, she has become angry at and fallen away from the Catholic Church.

Mother Miriam Ruth (Mother Superior)

The nun in charge of the convent where Agnes lives. She is responsible for Agnes.

Sister Agnes

A young novice (a woman in her formative education to become a nun) in a Catholic convent of religious sisters. She has lived a sheltered life with very little schooling and was not exposed to movies, TV, or books.

by Nancy Fisher, South St. Paul Public Schools



From left to right: Linda Kelsey* as Mother Superior, Alayne Hopkins as Sister Agnes, and Colleen Hennen as Dr. Livingstone.

**Member of Actors' Equity Association*

The Playwright: John Pielmeier's Quest for Primitive Wonder

John Pielmeier will be the first to tell you his body of work, which stretches over three decades, is too diverse to offer a unifying theme. However, what we see in *Agnes of God*, and what Mother Miriam and Dr. Livingstone try or fail to see in *Agnes*, compose the central motif of Pielmeier's career.

Born in 1949 in Altoona, Pennsylvania, Pielmeier received an early education in parochial schools before attending Catholic University in the late 1960s. He eventually took a degree in speech and drama, even though he "very slowly fell in love with theatre." It wasn't long before that love brought him onto the stages of regional theatres across the country, including The Guthrie, before completing his MFA in playwriting from Penn State in 1978. In fact, one of his first plays was produced in Minneapolis in 1976.



Playwright John Pielmeier

Even though Pielmeier, an avowed "lapsed Catholic," wrote only one other work involving religion (a 1983 teleplay about a young missionary murdered in El Salvador),

Agnes of God is representative of the tension between the real and the imagined, the rational and the irrational, that is a hallmark of Pielmeier's work.

Agnes of God is representative of the tension between the real and the imagined, the rational and the irrational, that is a hallmark of Pielmeier's work. Three one-act plays, also written in the early 1980s and collected as *Haunted Lives*, thrust macabre and gothic elements of violence and murder into naturalistic settings, including one play where a brother and sister pass objects around between them pretending they're body parts. The playwright would return to thrillers in the late 1990s with *Voices in the Dark*, about a call-in therapist menaced in an isolated cabin, and *Sleight of Hand*, about a homicidal magician.

Before that, however, Pielmeier would write his most notable play after *Agnes of God*. *The Boys of Winter* opened on Broadway in 1985. Inspired by one lieutenant's involvement in the 1968 My Lai Massacre in Vietnam, the play is comprised of a series of monologues told by young marines, all trying to understand the motivation behind the slayings of Vietnamese civilians. With unusual sympathy (which was condemned by some critics), Pielmeier goes on an emotionally raw search to understand how atrocities can be committed. "I've always been fascinated with the theme of innocence with blood on one's hands," he told a *New York Times* interviewer in 1985. "It's one of the themes that connects this play with *Agnes of God*."

The Playwright: John Pielmeier's Quest for Primitive Wonder (cont'd)

In the same way that Pielmeier used the Vietnam War in *The Boys of Winter* as a vehicle to explore the grey areas between innocence and faith, he uses the Catholic Church (which he “loves as an organization filled with passionate sinners”) to pose similar questions in *Agnes of God*. It’s true the play is based on a real-life incident, but in a 1982 *Boston Globe* interview during the pre-Broadway tryout, Pielmeier explained, “The only connection was that once in New York while riding the subway I saw a headline in the *Daily News* that said something like ‘Nun Strangles Baby.’” From that, and never having read the article, Pielmeier constructed an inquiry between the nun and the doctor, the devotee and the doubter, the “unnatural” and the “natural.” “I wanted to write a play that simply asked questions,” the writer recalls. “I don’t think the answers are as important.” Given that the climactic revelation at the end of the play does little to clarify Agnes’ true condition, it’s clear he prefers questions and the debates that follow them.

“I wanted to write a play that simply asked questions,” the writer recalls. “I don’t think the answers are as important.”

In the interview with the *Boston Globe*, Pielmeier described himself as a “theatrical romantic,” a tradition that includes J.M. Barrie and Thornton Wilder. Their own works, like *Peter Pan* and *Our Town*, weave their own brands of magic and spirituality into the everyday lives of ordinary people, caught up in extraordinary circumstances. This is the central conflict that pits faith resolutely against logic. One might even say Pielmeier has spent his career supplying a response to Mother Miriam’s lament: “What we’ve gained in logic we’ve lost in faith. We no longer have any sort of primitive wonder.”

by Matt DiCintio

Cultural and Religious Context



Nuns who live in a contemplative order do not have contact with the outside world.

Cultural Glossary for *Agnes of God*

Most of the action which is discussed in *Agnes of God* takes place in and around a community of Catholic nuns. As a result, there are many traditions and concepts that are referred to which may be unfamiliar to a non-Catholic audience. We are providing this glossary of definitions to help students and other audience members to better understand the play.

Angel—a messenger of God’s will and God’s love. A **guardian angel** is a celestial spirit assigned by God to guard and guide an individual through life. The devil is believed to be a fallen angel or an angel who no longer serves God.

Confession—a sacrament in the Roman Catholic tradition where a person of the Catholic faith confesses his or her sins and receives absolution (forgiveness) from the priest. Traditionally this exchange takes place in a **confessional**—a small room where the priest and the penitent (the person confessing) are physically separated from each other, both from contact and sight. There are two parts to the sacrament of confession: the first step is the confession of sins or wrongs the penitent has committed; the second step is the confession to a belief in God (an prayer known as the act of contrition).

Contemplative life—nuns who live in a convent and do not engage in an outside ministry such as teaching or nursing, but who live a life of contemplation and who “give themselves over to God alone in solitude and silence, in constant prayer and willing penance” (Perfectae Caritatis, 7). Contemplative nuns make vows to live a life of poverty, chastity, and obedience in a community in order to grow in knowledge and love of God within the enclosure of the convent. Sister Agnes lives in a convent of contemplative nuns.

Continued >>>

Cultural Glossary for *Agnes of God* (cont'd)

Extreme Unction—refers to the anointing by a priest of a dying person with oil and is accompanied by prayer at the bedside.

Mother Superior—in the religious life, this is a nun who is appointed and placed in charge of the spiritual and material welfare of the other nuns in the community. Obedience is given to the Superior of the religious house.

Mystic—one who experiences realities that are beyond human comprehension (or not apparent to the intelligence and senses) which stem from direct communication with God.

Saint—according to the Catholic faith, this is an individual who lives a particularly holy life, loving God and others, and now is in heaven with God. This person has been canonized, the official three-step process to become a saint in the Catholic Church.

Sisters—the common form of address for members of female Christian religious orders, because they are sisters in Christ.

Stigmata—the appearance of some or all of the 5 wounds of Christ (hands, feet, and side) without any outside cause. This is preceded or accompanied by physical or moral suffering on the part of the recipient. Some who have experienced the stigmata include Padre Pio and St. Francis of Assisi.

by Nancy Fisher, South St. Paul Public Schools



This painting by El Greco shows the wounds of Christ on the hands of St. Francis of Assisi (born in the 12th Century). The appearance of such wounds is known as “stigmata.”



This photograph of Saint Pio of Pietrelcina (Padre Pio), taken during Mass, shows the stigmata on his hands. Padre Pio often wore wrist covering to hide the wounds, which afflicted him for over fifty years.

Musical References in *Agnes of God*

Throughout the play, Sister Agnes is heard singing. Most of the songs she sings are sections of the Catholic Mass and follow the structure of the Mass beginning with the **Mass of the Catechumens** (for those learning to be Christians) and moving into the **Mass of the Faithful** (the most sacred part of the Mass attended only by those who have professed their faith, been baptized, and live a life of faith and action for God).

The first song Agnes sings is **Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison** (meaning “Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy”). It is a prayer at the beginning of the Catholic Mass. It is sung in Greek, the language of early Christians, instead of the traditional Latin.

The next song Agnes sings is the **Gloria**, which translates as “Glory to God in the highest and peace to the people on earth.” This is the song of praise sang by angels at the birth of Jesus.

The third piece sung by Agnes is **The Creed** (“I believe in...”). Sometimes called the profession of faith, the Creed is a public statement of what a Christian believes.

The final song in Act One is called **The Sanctus** (“Holy, holy, holy Lord God of hosts, heaven and earth are filled with your glory”). The Sanctus begins the Mass of the Faithful, the holiest part of the Mass that is attended only by those who are baptized and live a life of faith.

The music in the second act of *Agnes of God* starts with a secular French folksong sung by Agnes during the second scene. The lyrics come from a famous poem by Josquin des Pres (c. 1450-1521) and reveal a conversation between two potential lovers:

Man: Kiss me, my sweet love. In the name of love, I pray you.

Woman: I won't do it.

Man: And why not?

Woman: If I did such a crazy thing, my mother would die. That is why.

The next piece of music in the second act is the **Ave Maria** (“Hail Mary”), a prayer to Mary, mother of Jesus. It includes the words the angel spoke to Mary when Jesus was conceived: “Hail Mary full of grace, the lord is with you. Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”

The next song Agnes sings is the **Agnus Dei**, a prayer sung during Mass before the receiving of the communion wafer. The Agnus Dei translates as “Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world have mercy on us...grant us peace.” This prayer asks for the forgiveness of numerous personal grievances.

The final song that Agnes sings is an English folksong. Its lyrics are sexual and suggestive.

by Nancy Fisher, South St. Paul Public Schools

The Meaning of Names in *Agnes of God*

Mother Miriam Ruth

When a woman becomes a nun, many times she chooses a new name. The Mother Superior in *Agnes of God* chose the name Miriam Ruth. Miriam and Ruth are two women from the Old Testament Bible.

In the Old Testament, Miriam was the sister of Moses and Aaron. The meaning of the Hebrew name Miriam is disputed. It may come from the Hebrew “leharim” (to raise), thus giving “she who raises.” More commonly it is thought to come from the Hebrew word “mar,” meaning “bitter.” Some believe it to come from the Aramaic “wished for child” or associate it with “sea,” as “bitter sea, sea of bitterness” (from mar “bitter” and yam “sea”). “Rebellion” or “rebelliousness” is another traditional meaning often assigned to the name.

In the Bible, Ruth was the daughter-in-law of Naomi. After the death of her husband, Ruth went to Bethlehem with Naomi. She was a stranger to Judaism, but stayed with her mother-in-law out of love rather than returning to her own people. In the Book of Ruth she says, “Whither thou goest, I will go.” This indicates her desire to remain with Naomi and her people. The name is derived from a contraction of the Hebrew word for “companion” or “friend.” In English, the word root “ruth” means “pity” or “compassion”.

Sister Agnes

The name Agnes comes from the Latin word “agnus” meaning “lamb” as in “Lamb of God” often used in referring to Jesus. It can also mean “sacrifice” as in “sacrificial lamb.”

Dr. Martha Livingstone

This name refers both to Dr. David Livingstone and the New Testament character Martha.

David Livingstone was a Scottish missionary and explorer in central Africa known for his controversial work. Livingstone felt that religion and science were not only friendly to each other, but that one could not exist without the other. His meeting with H. M. Stanley gave rise to the popular quotation, “Dr. Livingstone, I presume?” Mother Superior jokingly uses this phrase with the doctor at the beginning of the play.

Martha is a woman from the New Testament. She is the sister of Lazarus and Mary. She is depicted as a doer, a capable young woman who organized and ran a large household. She berated Jesus for coming too late to save her brother Lazarus from his illness. However, she is also credited with being the first person to greet Jesus as the Son of God (John 11:20-27).

Continued >>>

The Meaning of Names in *Agnes of God* (cont'd)

Think And Write

1. It is interesting that the playwright has had the Mother Superior in the play choose a name with so many contradictions. Based on what you know about Mother Miriam Ruth from the play, think about the meanings of the two names and write a paragraph explaining why the Mother Superior may have chosen those two specific names.
2. Playwrights often choose specific names for their characters based on the meaning of the name or on some other context. Choose a character from the play and then write a paragraph from the point of view of the playwright explaining why you gave that character that specific name.
3. Write a paragraph about why you think the name Agnes works for the character of the young girl in the play.
4. Research Dr. David Livingstone, and then write about the similarities and differences between the real life Dr. Livingstone and Dr. Martha Livingstone from the play.

by Cheryl Hornstein, Independent Theatre Educator

The Choice to Believe: Mysticism in the 20th Century

“I want to believe. I want the *opportunity* to believe. I want the *choice* to believe.” Mother Miriam rails at Dr. Livingstone in one of their fiercest confrontations in *Agnes of God*. Her view encapsulates the evolving interaction between science and faith throughout the 20th century. In that Century of Progress, the experiences of science and faith clashed like at no other period in history, leaving the role of mysticism even more in doubt than ever. And mystics, more than anyone, received the largest share of suspicion.

While characteristics of mystics vary among different faiths, a mystic is defined broadly as a person who loves God deeply and pursues that love actively, in hopes of participating in a divine communion.

In his 1902 *Varieties of Religious Experience*, Williams James, a pioneering American thinker who studied the psychology of religious experiences, offered five characteristics of a mystical experience, all of which Agnes displays: ineffability, the inability to locate an adequate vocabulary to express the experience; noetism, receiving a divine feeling as knowledge; transience, mystical states are unsustainable; and passivity, acting in abeyance to these states. In *Watcher on the Hills*, Raynor C. Johnson qualified these characteristics in 1959 with physical descriptions, including the appearance of light, ecstasy, an obscured sense of time and usually averse effects on one's health.

A recent University of Wales study revealed that Christians, Jews, Muslims, and Buddhists have similar mystical experiences, regardless of whether Christians call it *Illumination*, Muslims, *Irfan*, or Buddhists, *Nirvana*. The study also tallied more than 6,000 such experiences since 1969, or 200 a year. Our natural reaction may be to dismiss these events as hoaxes, as Martha Livingstone originally does in *Agnes of God*. Can stigmata occur and the Virgin visit at the same time the atom is split and genes are mapped?

If we use James' criteria to consider mystical experiences in the 20th century, several notable figures emerge. While such happenings have occurred throughout many faiths, many outlined below, like Agnes', are rooted in strong Catholic backgrounds. The Catholic faith maintains a rich mystical culture, with hundreds of saints and persecutions suffered in the name of God. Joan of Arc, burned at the stake in 1431, is a classic example. Whether Agnes is another of these saints or mystics is the central question of the play.

Rudolf Steiner was an Austrian literary scholar and social thinker, who on his eighth birthday in 1869 began to receive spirits of dead relatives. In 1904, after obtaining degrees in math, physics and chemistry, Steiner published *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*, inviting readers to act on mystical powers as outgrowths of natural science. This book would lay the groundwork for the shifting relationship between science and faith in the 1900s.

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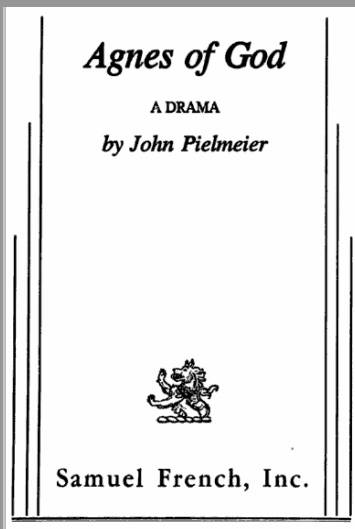
The Choice to Believe: Mysticism in the 20th Century (cont'd)

At the turn of the century, Pope St. Pius X received visions of his successors presiding over a century of war, death and famine. In 1918 Theresa Neumann, a poor German woman, was on her death bed a half-dozen times before being suddenly healed each time. As she neared death, she was said to have uttered phrases in Aramaic, the native language of Jesus. When Neumann died in 1962, nine wounds were found on her body, including a *Longinus*, a mark replicating Christ's spear wound. Julia Kim, a mystic who fled Korea during the war there, suffered bleeding and pain before hearing Jesus' voice multiple times. Kim also possessed a statue of Mary, which began to weep tears, then blood, in the mid 1980s; the statue continued to weep for exactly 700 days. The blood was tested and found to be real human blood.

In 1940, Maria Esperanza Bianchini, a 12-year old Venezuelan girl, was paralyzed after acute pneumonia, then mysteriously healed. It is said she still continues to receive stigmata, prophesy, manifest a Holy Host in her mouth, emit the scent of flowers, levitate and sprout a rose from her chest. Some have even claimed to have seen rose petals fall from the sky around her.

So, we return to our original question: can we believe that miracles occur while atoms split and genes are mapped? Or rather maybe, can we have the *choice* to believe? It's no coincidence that John Pielmeier gives us two steadfast archetypes, a psychologist and a nun, to struggle through that question, which, ultimately, may be unanswerable. "The wonder of science," says Mother Miriam, "is not in the answers it provides but in the questions it uncovers. For every miracle it finally explains, ten thousand more miracles come into being."

by Matt DiCintio



Tossing Lines: A Pre-Play Class Activity

Objective

The purpose of this activity is to familiarize students with *Agnes of God* by exposing them to lines spoken in the play. Based on these lines, students are to make predictions about the play's characters and central conflicts and discuss these predictions with the rest of the class. This activity helps students form questions, gain insight, and build excitement for seeing and hearing these lines acted out on stage. **“Tossing Lines” serves the students best if completed before they attend the play.**

Time Allotted

20-30 minutes

Materials

Tennis ball or hackey sack

Ten slips of paper, cut from Tossing Lines Resource on the following page

Procedure

Cut out the slips of paper printed on the following page and distribute them to ten volunteers. Give students a few minutes (or overnight, if appropriate) to memorize or practice their lines. When they're ready, have these ten students form a circle and give one student the ball. After she speaks her line, the student tosses the ball to another student who speaks his assigned line. Students toss the ball throughout the circle until all lines have been heard a few times. Encourage students to speak lines with varying emotions, seeking out a variety of ways to perform the lines.

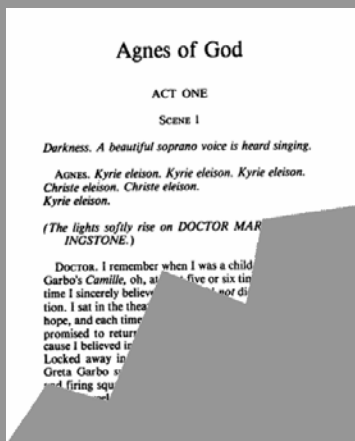
Optional

Re-assign lines within the group (or to other students in the classroom) and continue for another round.

Writing/Discussion

After lines have been tossed, allow students five minutes to write their ideas and questions about the content of the play. The following questions may be used to guide writing and/or discussion.

1. What is the play about?
2. Describe the characters in the play: their age, gender, job, education, personality, etc.
3. What role will religion have in the play?
4. What types of conflict do you think will occur? Why?
5. Explain how you see sanity and insanity as a part of the play.
6. How do you define faith? How do you define miracle?



Tossing Lines: A Pre-Play Activity



To the Teacher:

Cut these apart and distribute to students.

If I say she's sane, she goes to prison. If I say she's crazy...she goes to an institution.

I never saw a baby. I think they made it up.

What we've gained in logic we've lost in faith. We no longer have any sort primitive wonder.

Sister, I'm not with the Inquisition.

But have you ever loved a man? Other than Jesus Christ?

In medieval days nuns and monks would sleep in their coffins.

No room for miracles. But oh my dear, how I miss miracles.

Suffering is beautiful, I want to be beautiful.

I am not made of granite. I am made of flesh and blood...and heart... and soul...

No freaks here. We're all solid, sensible men and women.

Scenes to Read Aloud from *Agnes of God*

Act One, Scene 5

MOTHER. She said she'd been commanded by God.
(AGNES appears. Throughout the scene, one of AGNES' hand is inconspicuously hidden in the folds of her habit.)

MOTHER. He spoke to you Himself?

AGNES. No.

MOTHER. Through someone else?

AGNES. Yes.

MOTHER. Who?

AGNES. I can't say.

MOTHER. Why?

AGNES. She'd punish me.

MOTHER. One of the sisters?

AGNES. No.

MOTHER. Who? *(silence)* Why would she tell you to do this?

AGNES. I don't know.

MOTHER. Why do you think?

AGNES. Because I'm getting fat.

MOTHER. Oh, for Heaven's sake.

AGNES. I am. There's too much flesh on me.

MOTHER. Agnes...

AGNES. I'm a blimp.

MOTHER. ...Why does it matter whether you're fat or not?

AGNES. Because.

MOTHER. You needn't worry about being attractive here.

AGNES. I do. I have to be attractive to God.

MOTHER. He loves you as you are.

AGNES. No. He doesn't. He hates fat people.

MOTHER. Who told you this?

AGNES. It's a sin to be fat.

MOTHER. Why?

Continued >>>

Scenes to Read Aloud from *Agnes of God* (cont'd)

- AGNES. Look at all the statues. *They're* thin.
- MOTHER. Agnes...
- AGNES. That's because they're suffering. Suffering is beautiful. I want to be beautiful.
- MOTHER. Who tells you these things?
- AGNES. Christ said it in the Bible. He said, "Suffer the little children, for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven." I want to suffer like a little child.
- MOTHER. That's not what... (He meant.)
- AGNES. I *am* a little child, but my body keeps getting bigger. I don't want it to get bigger because then I won't be able to fit in. I won't be able to squeeze into Heaven.
- MOTHER. Agnes, dear, Heaven is not... (a place with bars and windows.)
- AGNES. (*cupping her breasts*) I mean look at these. I've got to lose weight.
- MOTHER. (*reaching toward AGNES*) Oh my dear child.
- AGNES. I'm too fat! Look at this—I'm a blimp! God blew up the Hindenburg. He'll blow up me. That's what she said.
- MOTHER. Who?
- AGNES. Mummy! I'll get bigger and bigger every day and then I'll pop! But if I stay little it won't happen!
- MOTHER. Your mother tells you this? (*silence*) Agnes, dear, your mother is dead.
- AGNES. But she watches. She listens.
- MOTHER. Nonsense. I'm your mother now, and I want you to eat.
- AGNES. I'm not hungry.
- MOTHER. You have to eat *something*, Agnes.
- AGNES. No I don't. The host is enough.
- MOTHER. My dear, I don't think a communion wafer has the Recommended Daily Allowance of *anything*.
- AGNES. Of God.
- MOTHER. Oh yes, of God.
- AGNES. What does that word mean? Begod?
- MOTHER. *Begot*. You don't know?
- AGNES. That God's my father?
- MOTHER. Only spiritually. You don't know what that means Begot?
- AGNES. *Begod*. That's what she calls it. But I don't understand it. She says it means when God presents us to our mothers, in bundles of eight pounds six ounces.
- MOTHER. Oh my dear.

Scenes to Read Aloud from *Agnes of God* (cont'd)

- AGNES. I have to be eight pounds again, Mother.
- MOTHER. You'd even drop the six ounces. Come here. (*MOTHER reaches out for an embrace. AGNES avoids the embrace, keeping the one hand concealed in her habit. MOTHER stares at the hidden hand.*) Now what's wrong?
- AGNES. I'm being punished.
- MOTHER. For what?
- AGNES. I don't know.
- MOTHER. How? (*AGNES presents a hand wrapped in a bloody handkerchief.*) What happened? (*AGNES removes the handkerchief.*) Oh dear Jesus. Oh dear Jesus.
- AGNES. It started this morning, and I can't get it to stop. Why me, mother? Why me?
- DOCTOR. How long did it last?
- MOTHER. It was gone by the following morning.
- DOCTOR. Did it ever come back?
- MOTHER. Not that I know of.

Questions

1. In Act One, Scene 5 we learn that Agnes had a baby in secret and the child died or was killed at birth. Mother Miriam Ruth and Dr. Livingstone each have different opinions about how that might have happened. What do you think happened?
2. A lot of information is disclosed about the characters in the scene. What do you learn about Agnes? What do you learn about her relationship with Mother Miriam Ruth?
3. Mother Miriam Ruth describes Agnes as "an innocent." What do you think Mother Miriam Ruth means by that? In what ways is Agnes innocent?
4. At the beginning of Scene 5, Mother Miriam Ruth asks, "Well, what do you think? Is she totally bananas or merely slightly off center? Or maybe she's perfectly sane and just a very good liar. What have you decided?" Mother Miriam Ruth's sarcastic tone in this speech disguises her true feelings. What is she really trying to say to the Dr. Livingstone? Do you think Agnes is "crazy," lying, or something else?
5. What kind of relationship is developing between Mother Miriam Ruth and the psychiatrist? What do you think each of them wants for Agnes?

by Cheryl Hornstein, Independent Theatre Educator

Scenes to Read Aloud from *Agnes of God* (cont'd)**Act One, Scene 7**

- DOCTOR. Do you see angels?
- AGNES. (*a little too quickly*) No.
- DOCTOR. Do you believe that your mother really saw them?
- AGNES. No. But I could never tell her that.
- DOCTOR. Why not?
- AGNES. She'd get angry. She'd punish me.
- DOCTOR. How would she punish you?
- AGNES. She'd...punish me.
- DOCTOR. Did you love your mother?
- AGNES. Oh, yes. Yes.
- DOCTOR. Did you ever want to become a mother yourself?
- AGNES. I could never be a mother.
- DOCTOR. Why not?
- AGNES. I don't think I'm old enough. Besides, I don't want a baby.
- DOCTOR. Why not?
- AGNES. Because I don't want one.
- DOCTOR. But if you did want one, how would you go about getting one?
- AGNES. I'd adopt it.
- DOCTOR. Where would the adopted baby come from?
- AGNES. From the agency.
- DOCTOR. Before the agency.
- AGNES. From someone who didn't want a baby.
- DOCTOR. Like you?
- AGNES. No! Not like me.
- DOCTOR. But how would that person get the baby if they didn't want it?
- AGNES. A mistake.
- DOCTOR. How did your mother get you?
- AGNES. A mistake! It was a mistake!
- DOCTOR. Is that what she said?

Continued >>>

Scenes to Read Aloud from *Agnes of God* (cont'd)

- AGNES. You're trying to get me to say that she was a bad woman, and that she hated me, and she didn't want me, but that is not true, because she did love me, and she was a good woman, a saint, and she *did* want me. You don't want to hear the nice parts about her—all you're interested in is sickness!
- DOCTOR. Agnes, I cannot imagine that you know nothing about sex.
- AGNES. I can't help it if I'm stupid.
- DOCTOR. ...That you have no idea who the father of your child was...
- AGNES. They made it up
- DOCTOR. ...that you have no remembrance of your impregnation...
- AGNES. It's not my fault!
- DOCTOR. ...and that you don't believe that you carried a child!
- AGNES. It was a mistake!
- DOCTOR. What, the child?
- AGNES. Everything! Nuns don't have children!
- DOCTOR. Agnes...
- AGNES. Don't touch me like that! Don't touch me like that! (*AGNES lashes out at the doctor, who moves away.*) I know what you want from me! You want to take God away. You should be ashamed! They should lock *you* up. People like you!

Questions

1. In Scene 7, Agnes and the Dr. Livingstone talk about babies. What does Agnes understand about babies? What is missing from her understanding?
2. What do you learn about Agnes' past in this scene?
3. Dr. Livingstone is trying to understand how Agnes sees the world so she can make an accurate diagnosis for the court. Does Dr. Livingstone seem to have another agenda? What is she trying to get Agnes to say?

by Cheryl Hornstein, Independent Theatre Educator

Post-Play Discussion Questions

The Conflict between Science and Religion: Mother Superior v. Dr. Livingstone

1. Mother Superior and Dr. Livingstone begin the play with diametrically opposed views of religion and science which color their attitudes toward Agnes and how her case should be handled.
 - a. What do we learn about Mother Superior's past in regards to the angel she used to speak to and the relationship of that angel's voice to Agnes?
 - b. How does this inform her interpretation of Agnes' pregnancy and how her nun should be viewed by the court?
 - c. In contrast, what does Dr. Livingstone see as the appropriate view of Agnes' pregnancy?
 - d. Identify the Mother Superior's view of religion and her stance towards science.
 - e. Identify Dr. Livingstone's view of science and her stance towards religion.
 - f. What does each woman want for the young nun?

2. By the end of the play, both women have shifted their positions on science and religion.
 - a. Identify Mother Superior's shift. How has her view of Agnes changed? What is her final view of Dr. Livingstone and science? How might this affect her role as "Mother Superior"?
 - b. Dr. Livingstone's shift is more complex. First, how does she change her view of Agnes' culpability in the murder of her baby? Dr. Livingstone also begins the play as a confident, menopausal, chain-smoking, atheist and ends as a "doubting, menstruating, non-smoking psychiatrist [who just] made her confession." What has changed her? What has this change to do with her view of "motherhood" psychologically and physically?

3. These changes in the stances of both women, regarding religion and science, have to do with the subject of miracles.
 - a. Recall the references that Mother Superior makes which define what a miracle is to her and what science has done to change how we view miracles today. What miracles does Mother Superior refer to during the play?
 - b. What is Dr. Livingstone's view of miracles during the course of the play? How does she counter Mother Superior's views?
 - c. How does each woman change her view of miracles? Incorporate into your answer the dream Dr. Livingstone recounts in Act Two.
 - d. Explain the following statements:

MOTHER. Good-bye, Doctor. Oh, and as for that miracle you wanted, it has happened. It's a very small one, but you'll notice it soon enough.

DOCTOR. What kind of God can permit such a wonder one as her [Agnes] to come trampling through this well-ordered existence? I want a reason! I *want* to believe that she was...blessed.... And I hope that she has left something, some little part of herself, with *me*. That would be miracle enough. (*silence*) Wouldn't it?

Continued >>>

Post-Play Discussion Questions (cont'd)

The Nexus of the Conflict: Agnes

The nexus of the struggle between science and religion is embodied in the character of Agnes. Is she a Christian mystic? A victim of rape? Is her pregnancy a miracle? The result of hysterical parthenogenesis? Is she a lunatic or a saint?

1. Much is made of Agnes' childhood and her relationship with her mother. What do we learn about the following aspects of her past?
 - a. Her mother's promiscuity as revealed by Mother Superior
 - b. Agnes' absent father
 - c. Her mother's shaping of Agnes' body image
 - d. Her mother's implied view of Agnes' intelligence
 - e. Agnes' view of herself as a "mistake" and a "bad baby"
 - f. Her mother's headaches and conversations with "angels"
 - g. Her mother's physical/genital abuse of Agnes
 - h. Agnes' view of her mother's clairvoyance
 - i. Agnes' perception that her mother is still with her "watching" and "listening"
 - j. Agnes' perception of the battle between and conflation of her mother and the Lady
 - k. Agnes' confusion over whether her mother is in heaven or hell
 - l. Her mother's shaping of Agnes' view of pregnancy and motherhood

Now consider the following questions:

- m. How has Agnes' childhood shaped her view of religion?
 - n. How has her childhood shaped her views of sexuality?
2. There are several references to Agnes' singing and to her voice itself.
 - a. Whose voice does Mother Superior hear when Agnes sings?
 - b. Whose voice does Dr. Livingstone hear?
 - c. Whose voice does Agnes hear? Who does Agnes think sings through her?
 - d. How do these various interpretations of Agnes' voice illuminate the three women's characters as well as the conflict of the play?
3. Describe Agnes' God.
 - a. What seems to be her view of Him and her relationship with Him?
 - b. How is her view of God shaped by her childhood?
 - c. How has her view of God shaped her past behaviors at the convent (as recounted by Mother Superior)?
 - d. How does it inform her pregnancy?
 - e. What is your personal explanation of her pregnancy?
 - f. Of her murder of the baby?
 - g. How would Freud explain Agnes' view of God?

Continued >>>

Post-Play Discussion Questions (cont'd)

5. There are several references in the play to blood—the bloody sheets on the night of Agnes' supposed impregnation and on the night of the birth of her baby, the blood of her stigmata as recounted by the Mother Superior and as witnessed by both Mother Superior and Dr. Livingstone as Agnes is recollecting her impregnation, God's blood, Dr. Livingstone's blood. Reflect on the role of blood in the play—both literal and symbolic. What might the implications of blood be here?
6. In his introduction to the play, the playwright John Pielmeier quotes Robertson Davies' *Fifth Business*:

“‘If you think her a saint, she is a saint to you. What more do you ask? That is what we call the reality of the soul; you are foolish to demand the agreement of the world as well...’

“‘But it is the miracles that concern me. What you say takes no account of the miracles.’

“‘Oh, miracles! They happen everywhere. They are conditional.... Miracles are things that people cannot explain.... Life is too great a miracle for us to make so much fuss about petty little reversals of what we pompously assume to be the natural order.... You must find the answer in the psychological truth, not in objective truth.... And while you are searching, get on with your own life and accept the possibility that it may be purchased at the price of hers and that this may be God's plan for you and her.’”

Relate this quotation to the world of the play. Is Agnes a saint or a hysteric?

by Marcia Aubineau, University of St. Thomas

Agnes, an Abused Child: Books for Further Reading

To the Teacher

One value of drama is its power to connect the audience with real life; to move the audience from darkened theatre to the messy chaos of daily life. Checking out these resources will aid your students in making that transition.

In the play *Agnes of God*, the audience learns about physical and emotional abuse Agnes suffered at the hands of her mother. There are a variety of true stories of teenagers who endured and survived abuse that may interest junior and senior high school students. The following are suggestions of books for further reading after seeing the play. You will find publisher information and ISBN numbers for all books mentioned at the end of this article.

Memoirs

A trio of books by **Dave Pelzer** tells his own story of surviving an abusive childhood. *A Child Called "It," The Lost Boy*, and *A Man Called Dave* chronicle Dave Pelzer's struggle and ultimate triumph as a child victimized by his mother. Adults in Dave's life rally around him to rescue him from his difficult situation, but Dave himself provides the grit, determination, and resilience as he rises above potentially crippling circumstances and becomes a capable adult.

Jennifer Lauck wrote a pair of books relating her challenge of a difficult childhood following the deaths of her mother and father. *Blackbird* and *Still Waters* give her story of adolescence and young adulthood. A reader of Jennifer's story marvels that a child today would have to endure these circumstances and that a child could overcome those circumstances.

Roald Dahl, the author of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, tells his own story in *Boy: Tales of Childhood*. Dahl relates the physical punishment endured during his adolescence in English boarding schools. Reading this story gives an explanation of why Dahl wrote the stories that he did.

Author **Paula Fox** did not have an easy childhood. In her *Borrowed Finery: A Memoir*, Fox tells of surviving the childhood she spent being passed to various relatives because of her father's alcoholism and her mother's rejection.

True Stories of Help and Hope for Abused Children

These books (and many others) show a reader that a life as difficult as Agnes' can occur in real life. The reader who is left asking, "Can't somebody help these defenseless kids?" will want to read books by **Torey Hayden**. She is a former teacher who stepped in to aid abused children. Included among her many uplifting books are *One Child, Someone Else's Kids*, and *Ghost Girl*. Torey Hayden shows the power of one individual to intervene and help vulnerable kids.

Continued >>>

Books for Further Reading (cont'd)

Community Assistance for the Victims

Witnessing or reading stories of the lives of abused children always raises the question, “how can the community provide assistance for the victims?” Two books clearly provide solid information for the teenager who wants to help a friend or neighbor or classmate. **Joyce Libal**’s book *Somebody Hear Me Crying* is a short, clearly written book packed with case studies and suggestions for ways protective services could help an abused child. Another book that would be useful in helping a friend is *When Something Feels Wrong: A Survival Guide About Abuse for Young People* by **Deanna S. Pledge**.

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