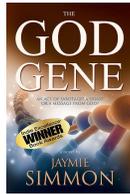


# The God Gene

By Jaymie Simmon



## Discussion Guide

### Overview

Winner of the National Indie Excellence Award for Literary Fiction, *THE GOD GENE* is a satirical story about faith and politics in the digital age. Research scientist, Rosalind Evans' stumbles upon a monumental discovery, and with the media fanning the flames, debate rages over the authenticity of the so-called God Gene.

Rosalind quickly becomes a scapegoat in a plot involving the White House, the Vatican, big pharma and American politics. The chaos and absurdity of the God Gene controversy contrasts with the very real anguish and grief that Evans suffers in her personal life. She fights for integrity, faith, and ultimately, her life in this fast-paced satirical thriller.

### Discussion Questions

1

What would it mean for society and for organized religion if there really were proof of God's existence?

2

God's most often repeated message in the Bible is "Don't be afraid." What are the major characters afraid of, and how does fear keep them from grace? Have you seen examples of this in real life?

### 3

The following quote from Stefan Gunquist sums up a central theme of the story, that science and faith are compatible. Do you agree? Why or why not?

“Roz, you may have discovered the next clue in God’s grand scheme. It started with the big bang, the emergence of human life, the Prophets, Jesus, Galileo, Mendel, Watson and Crick... and now Rosalind Evans. Why not? Isn’t that much more interesting than the reductionist scenario that casts us as nothing more than a bundle of chemicals that one day slithered out of the muck by accident?”

### 4

What prompted Rosalind to give the street preacher, Boone Wilkes, the lemonade? What did the encounter reveal about her? How did it contribute to her journey?

### 5

What purpose does the character of David serve in the story? How would things be different if he had left Rosalind and gone to New York? How does he example God’s grace in the story?

### 6

Some of the characters are exaggerations: Claudia Moray, Mick the Tech, Bradshaw’s father, the Senators in the hearing, and others. What is the purpose of such characters in the story?

### 7

There are 8 clergymen/theologians in the story: Joseph Steele, Lex Ellison, Summer Ellison, Stefan Gunquist, Cardinal Duffy, Boone Wilkes (the street preacher,) Sadie Luft (the airport pastor,) and Father John Newsome (interviewed by Vaniere on TV.) How do their representations of God and religion differ? Which view do you most closely identify with, if any? Why?

### 8

Why do you think the author chose The Ten Commandments as the “message from God” instead of some other scripture or a made-up message?

## 9

Moments before she discovers the God gene, Rosalind is sleep-deprived and bereft. She is described this way: “At least the nightmares were gone, but she wondered whether they weren’t preferable to endless mucking around at the edges of sleep. It didn’t matter. In the end, no pill, mantra or strong drink could overcome the reality: Since Claire’s death, Rosalind Evans was, like Jacob Marley, doomed to wander.” How did her emotional and physical state effect her reaction to the God Gene? When did she stop feeling “doomed?”

## 10

The Starry Messenger serves as a kind of Greek Chorus. What purpose does he serve in the story? How do his Socratic teachings affect public perception of the God Gene?

## 11

Obfuscation plays a big part in the story. Vast amounts of information are not only readily available, but also subject to distortion by anyone with access to the Internet or the media. How does this affect our perception of truth? In the Judiciary Committee hearing, Senator Farthing says that the truth always comes out. Do you agree? Why or why not?

## 12

Sometimes small characters in a story deliver big messages. When Rosalind asks the doctor in the pool how, as a scientist, she can defend her belief in God, the doctor says, “On a temporal level, I can’t prove it. On a spiritual level, I can’t deny it.” This reopened Rosalind’s mind to the idea that science and faith are not mutually exclusive. Are there other examples of small characters delivering big messages in the story? Who are the small characters with big messages in your life?

## 13

How is Rosalind’s Ferris wheel summit meeting like Job’s visit with his three friends in the Bible? How is it different?

## 14

At the end, Rosalind explains that whether the God Gene is “real” or not is irrelevant; what matters is that it is transformative. Are the following characters transformed at the end of the story: Rosalind, Vaniere, Steele, Cardinal Duffy? If so, how? If not, why not? Are other characters transformed?

## 15

The story of Betty Freud and her aborted fetus in a Tupperware bowl is patently ridiculous, yet there are many, including Steele, who treat it as truth. Do we see this kind of perpetuation of myths in our daily lives?

## 16

How does the author use literary devices such as satire, irony, simile, metaphor, and allegory to enrich the story?

## 17

Gunquist said, “We humans are not very good at handling large truths. Tends to bring out the skeptic in us.” Do you agree? If so, what examples of this have you seen?

## 18

Rowan Glass said, “We all listen through filters because the truth can be painful.” Do you agree that we all do that? What are some examples of the filters people listen through?

## 19

Ron Vaniere’s editor said that due to time constraints in his TV newscast, “I decide what the public will know and what they won’t!” What are the ramifications of this for Rosalind? For Vaniere? Have you seen this kind of media manipulation in your life? What can you as a consumer of news do about it?

## 20

When Cardinal Duffy is pondering how far he should go to silence Rosalind Evans, he thinks, “God forbid we hold the institution of the Church to be holier than the God we

worship.” Is it ever justifiable to break the laws of God in the name of God? Have you seen examples of individuals or groups placing human needs above the will of God?

## 21

For those who enjoy analyzing the literary elements of a novel, the following is a list of some of the devices the author used in *The God Gene*. What others did you find? How did they enhance the themes of the story?

**Satire** The overarching satirical elements revolve around people who profess love for God while routinely disobeying His commandments. When presented with absolute proof that God exists, people rebel against it. They argue, debate, plot, and scheme, all while ignoring the obvious: Like the loving father he is, God set rules for mankind to live by.

The satire is heightened by the slightly off-beat nature of some of the characters: Bradshaw has short-man syndrome and is willing to lie about anything in order to preserve his high position. Everything in his office is oversized. Rev. Steele is a man of God yet is driven by a monumental ego. The Pope, the most powerful religious leader on earth, is morbidly afraid that he will lose control if people actually believe that God exists. Mick the Tech is a genius at computer logic yet is powerless to control his libido. US Attorney O’Roarke is sworn to protect the interests of the people, yet is driven by personal ambition to abuse them. Senator Bosch professes to be a man of the people, yet wields his considerable power in ways that serve only his personal ambition. Ironically, Rosalind appears to be incapacitated by grief and fear, yet is the character who is the most grounded and spiritually accessible.

**Irony** Irony enhances the satirical tone of the novel. Everybody breaks the Ten Commandments all the time while proclaiming their good intentions. Bradshaw thinks his office is perfect because unlike him, it is big. Yet everyone who sees it thinks it is hideous. Bosch’s fairness campaign is the antitheses of fair; it is repressive and condescending. The Church of Rome ought to rejoice in proof of God, yet it reacts out of fear and jealousy.

**Metaphor** The storm at sea is a classic symbol for man’s fragility. Faced with the extreme violence and force of nature, Rosalind is forced to acknowledge that she is powerless. It was a moment of epiphany, especially so for a scientist who believes she has, or can find, all the answers.

Herman Wilkes, the street preacher, is a metaphor for how society ignores God amid the hustle bustle of everyday life. He is the personification of humility, Godliness, and good will.

Benton Bradshaw’s smallness of stature is symbolic of his smallness of character.

The setting, Chicago in summer, is symbolic of Rosalind's struggle in that it juxtaposes the ingenuity of man (the architecture) and the grandeur of God (Lake Michigan) It is impersonal, like Roz was after Claire's death. The summer heat stifles the body just as the contentiousness over the God Gene stifles the spirit.

Rosalind's fear of flying symbolizes her fragility and lack of faith – both in God and in the scientific principles she should have full confidence in.

**Simile** “He walked out like a man needing badly to pee.” “The air in the car was clogged with tension, unexpressed feelings hanging between them like storm clouds.” “He scanned the room as if looking for a place to spit.”

**Allegory** The “God gene” is allegory for man's hubris. The characters make the mistake of equating instant access to information with having all the answers. The God gene represents their ultimate misunderstanding of truth.

The Starry Messenger is allegory for God: wise, unknowable, parental.

The Deep X test results are allegory for the interconnectedness of all people in the eyes of God. Deep X says that no single individual has the entire Ten Commandments in their ‘God gene’. It is only when all 7000 sequenced genes are looked at in aggregate that the entire text of The Ten Commandments is visible.

Rev. Steel's uncharacteristic spark of humanity and godliness toward Wild Bill Hitchcock in the motel room is symbolic of the God gene's overarching message that there is hope for all mankind.

The TV director at the trial scenes symbolizes mankind's growing need for immediate gratification with no regard for the consequences.