

Talk About God



Talk About God



&
Other Stories

F. G. Paci



GUERNICA
EDITIONS

TORONTO • BUFFALO • LANCASTER (U.K.)
2016

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Michael Mirolla, general editor
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Guernica Editions Inc.
1569 Heritage Way, Oakville, (ON), Canada L6M 2Z7
2250 Military Road, Tonawanda, N.Y. 14150-6000 U.S.A.
www.guernicaeditions.com

Distributors:
University of Toronto Press Distribution,
5201 Dufferin Street, Toronto (ON), Canada M3H 5T8
Gazelle Book Services, White Cross Mills, High Town, Lancaster LA1 4XS U.K.

First edition.
Printed in Canada.

Legal Deposit — First Quarter
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2015952395
Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Paci, F. G., author
Talk about God & other stories / F.G. Paci. -- 1st edition.
(Essential prose series ; 124)
Short stories.

Issued in print and electronic formats.
ISBN 978-1-77183-062-1 (paperback).--ISBN 978-1-77183-063-8 (epub).--
ISBN 978-1-77183-064-5 (mobi)

I. Title. II. Title: Talk about God & other stories. III. Series:
Essential prose series ; 124
PS8581.A24T35 2016 C813'.54 C2015-906649-2 C2015-906650-6

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Reading Boot Camp



PHASE ONE: Processing and Receiving

Recruits, listen and listen well.

The ID on my fatigues says RI. You will call me Reading Instructor or Sir. Nothing else. If you speak to me directly, you will not eyeball me. You will ask permission to speak and end your sentence with a *Sir*. Your names are stencilled on your fatigues. You will refer to yourself as Recruit So-and-so. You are no longer a he or a she. You are no longer at home. You will not use the word “I.” If you wish permission to speak, you will say, Recruit So-and-so requests permission to speak. You have lost your first names, your bad habits, your drugs, your smartphones and electronic devices, your TVs and video games, your computers, your YouTube and iTunes, your porn, your Google, your soft beds, your hair and nails, your mommies and daddies, your cars, your alcohol, your music, your former life. You have all been shorn of your golden locks. You are no longer black or white or brown. Spanish or Italian or Polish or Filipino. Muslim or Buddhist or Catholic. You are now a

recruit of the Reading Corps. Nothing else, and I mean nothing, is more important than the Reading Corps. And it's my job to start you off on the painful process of making you into elite members of a war machine.

Let me tell you right off it's a painful process. But pain is good, pain is very good. If you don't like pain, or come to like pain, you will be weeded out. You will be sent back to your former decadent life, with its lax values, its bad grammar, its mindless culture, its disrespect for the word. Pain is the way through to a new life. Pain will set you free.

Some of you will not make it through this camp. You won't stand the pain. You don't have the guts. There's simply no hope in hell. I've been you. I've played the sports you play. I've watched the thousands of telecasts — the football, soccer, hockey, golf, tennis, baseball, curling, whatever. I've read the sports pages, heard the radio talk-in shows, hung out with you guys in the dressing rooms and at the local watering-holes over beer and wings, been there, done that. And I've watched the movies you watch. So I won't beat around the bush. You can handle the action stuff, the factoids, the literal, the plain, the visible — but when it comes to reading anything deeper than a tweet or text message, let alone an abstruse thought, all your synapses freeze up. They go into crisis-mode. And you're lost.

And you female recruits, you're not much different. You may be able to read a little better, stand the pain of forming thoughts a little more, you may be able to understand the subtleties of relationships a little more, but when it comes to hard serious reading, respecting the word in all

its uncompromising demands, you go gaga like the rest. Your knees shake. You say you're too busy. You don't have the time. Or you have other things to do — like wash your hair and do your nails. Or do some down time putting all your nonsense on *Facebook*.

If you don't make it through, fine by me. You can go back to your hair and your nails and your *Facebook* life.

Here there's no politically correct. There're no individual rights. There's no coddling, no entitlement. There's only the code of the Reading Corps. Words, courage, commitment.

Here you will forget your previous existence, your soft comfortable and worthless lives. You will forget your bad habits, your entitlements, your me-first attitude, and learn what honour is, and courage is, and what the Corps stands for. And it's my job to make you put the Corps first ... always the Corps, forever the Corps of READERS.

Get used to it.

If you want to be a Reader, if you want to be part of an elite fighting corps, you have to say good-bye to your former life. Once you get through Reading Boot Camp, you'll never be the same again — and once you've changed, the veil will be lifted from your eyes and you'll finally be able to see through all the bullshit.

We look at your former life with disdain. It's a world where everything's muddled, confused, and undisciplined. With its competing rights and interests. With its different fads and raves and phobias. With its different beliefs and businesses. With its lies and deceits. With its total disrespect for the word. With everyone looking after themselves

and their families first. Where mere opinion and self-interest rules as conventional wisdom, all manipulated by the ROI, the Return on Investment. Here we cut through the quagmire of opinion and entitlement and rights. We emphasize duty to the word. We keep it simple but not stupid. We achieve clarity of thought and action. We bring back the purity of the word. But it can come only at a great sacrifice.

I hope you're ready for that sacrifice.

Among other things, boot camp is comprised of Orientation and Marching Procedures, Weaponry and Marksmanship, The Obstacle Course, Close Combat, CPR, and Basic Warrior-Reader Training. All during this process you will be evaluated. If you meet the stringent standards of the Corps, you will graduate and become full-fledged members of a proud tradition, the Reading Corps.

One last thing. I love the Corps. I love it with a passion. And I won't let anyone, and I mean anyone, drag it down into the mud. I'm a Lifer. And, make no mistake, it's war out there now. Our enemies have not only stormed the gates of the Tower of Babel, they've taken over the whole apparatus of government and media and sports and business. And whether they're in smile mode, whether they foam at the mouth or speak with rhetorical flourish, it's clear they have no respect for the integrity of the word. They have no respect for thought, let alone poetry. They don't read. They don't even know how to listen. They just blab and jab, twitter and jitter, blog and jog, spewing out their garbage, trying to fill the empty hole in their soul.

Facebook, hell! They don't know what the face of a book is!

PHASE TWO: Orientation and Marching

All right, let's begin with a few simple Corps rules. You will obey my orders at all times. You will listen carefully at all times. You will be totally alert at all times. You will do everything you're told to do, quickly and smartly, at all times. You will give of yourself completely, even to the point of losing yourself.

You will always, and I mean always, honour and follow the code of the Corps: Words, courage, commitment.

You are now Corps Group 462. When you write home you will use that as your address. You will tell your mommy and daddy that you are having fun, that you're enjoying your time with the Corps, and that you are becoming valued Readers.

IS THAT CLEAR?

"Yes, sir."

I CAN'T HEAR YOU.

"YES, SIR!"

You have received your fatigues and utility hats and hair-cuts. High and tight for the guys. A little longer for the girls. You have received your chow times. Some of you haven't slept in thirty-six hours. You have been yelled at, screamed at for thirty-six hours straight. You've broken rules you didn't even know existed. You have learned to make a bed, Reader style, with a forty-five degree fold, keep a tidy footlocker, stand at attention for inspection, and always give unquestioning and immediate obedience.

Now, get in line. NOW! I want to see a tight formation. MOVE IT! FOUR TO A LINE! TOES RIGHT ON THOSE MARKS ON THE GROUND!

That took all of twenty seconds. We're going to get it down to four seconds for tomorrow, got it?

All right, let's have a head count.

Before we learn to fight as Readers we must learn to think as Readers, act as Readers. And live as Readers. You will always put the Corps first.

This is how you will stand erect as a Reader. This is how you will lift your feet when we march. Precisely like this. Left foot, right. Left foot, right. Crisp and sharp at all times. And when we march, we march as a unit, Group Unit 462.

Do you read me?

"Yes, sir!"

I CAN'T HEAR YOU!

"YES, SIR!"

PHASE THREE: Weaponry and Marksmanship

Repeat after me.

Language is my weapon. My weapon is closer to me than my life. I will learn everything there is to learn about my weapon. I will learn how it works, how to take it apart, how to put it back together. I will learn how my enemy uses it and abuses it. I must keep it beside me at all times, keep it clean and ready even as I am clean and ready. Sleep with it, eat with it, dream with it, dump with it. Without it I am nothing. With it I am ready to fight the great fight.

I am issuing you now the official Corps dictionary of the English language. It is prescriptive and not the descriptive

crap they publish nowadays. It has been especially written and published for the Corps by a trained group of Readers. It is short and sweet, zeroing in on the words mostly mis-used, on the usage mostly abused, on the vocab skills you will need. You will read it from beginning to end and tattoo it to your brain so that in combat you will not even think about it since it'll be there ready for use at all times.

Keep in mind that a language is a living, breathing entity. It changes with the times, but it is also rooted in the past. In order to know how the language works, we have to know about the history of the language. The dictionary is a weapon without bullets. The language in usage is the weapon firing. And the weapon firing correctly is the same weapon that Chaucer used, the same weapon that Shakespeare and Swift used.

Needless to say, it would be good to know how to use more than one weapon. Each weapon is different in its own way—and much is lost in translation, as you might know. It would be good to know how to use ancient Greek or Hebrew or Latin, especially as these weapons have been integrated into our own. Not to speak of modern French and German. We don't have time, however. In this boot camp our weapon of choice is English. Fortunately for us, almost everything of value has been translated into English, and the great books so often that you can get enough variations to form your own sight lines.

Now open your Corps dictionaries.

Today's drill involves the use of *infer* and *imply*.

Repeat after me. *Since the mayor implied that he would not raise taxes, we inferred that he would call an election.*

Again. *Since the mayor implied that he would not raise taxes, we inferred that he would call an election.*

Recruit Valencia, I see your smirk. Give me thirty push-ups right now! Move it!

“Sir, I don’t believe I presented, like, the slightest evidence of a smirk.”

SHUT YOUR MOUTH! You’ve broken about fifteen Corps rules with one sentence. You’re a disgrace to the Corps. Number one: request permission to speak. Do not use “I.” Do not use *like*. Every time I hear the word *like* I cringe, recruits. I literally cringe. It makes my blood run cold. As sure as I’m standing here in front of you, I will wipe away your smirks. I will wipe away the use of the word *like*. You will never use that word again, unless you use it properly. UNDERSTAND?!

“Yes, sir!”

I can’t hear you.

“YES, SIR!”

Recruit Valencia, straighten your back. Do the push-ups correctly or you’ll be doing them till your arms fall off. DO YOU HEAR ME?

“AYE, AYE, SIR!”

Recruits, I think we have a bad-ass dude in our group. I’m telling you all right now you will never make it in the Corps if your smug index is above stupid. Today’s crop of recruits is the worst I’ve ever encountered in my thirty years in the Corps. It’s the Me-first generation. The most coddled, the softest, the most self-centred group I’ve ever had the misfortune to drill. Your parents have done a stinking awful job. They over-did it. They gave you too

much. Too much care. Too much love. Too many drugs. Too many chances. And they didn't equip you with self-supporting skills. You all feel too entitled. You have no respect for authority, your brains have been muddled, mushed, mired, mollycoddled, mutated by the Digital Age. And your bodies, well, I won't even go there, except that all the fries and burgers and sodas, not to mention the sit-down time in front of the TV and computers, have taken their toll. You're all a bunch of butter-balls. Mass-produced, homogenized, and tweet-brained. You wouldn't stand a chance in battle.

Now, repeat after me.

Language is my weapon. There are many like it but this one is mine. My weapon is my life. I must master it as I master my life. My weapon without me is useless. Without my weapon I am useless. I must learn to fire it true. I must shoot him before he shoots me.

Without respect for your weapon, you might as well give up right now. But it takes more than respect, recruits. You have to love your weapon as you have loved nothing else in your life. You have to love it to distraction. You have to love it so much that when someone abuses it, drags it in the dust, or spits on it, your whole body cringes. As if they were stomping on the flag. As if they were stomping on your mother's throat. And you will not let that happen, will you? You will NEVER let that happen.

Let's understand each other, recruits. Out there, in the me-first world, in the land of buying and selling, of glitz and glamour, of half-truths and lies, of the god of the ROI, our language has been so warped it can't shoot straight.

And you will never be able to go into battle if your weapon can't shoot straight. You have to love your weapon, respect your weapon, and keep it clean at all times. And maybe one day you'll be able to hit your target at all times.

Let's understand each other, recruits. We can't get into the subtleties, the poetry, the rhetorical flourishes, unless we start with the one-on-one correspondence. And we can't get back to the purity of the word unless we clean our weapon at all times.

I got carried away.

Let's get back to business. Open your dictionary. Repeat after me.

I'm lying down on the sofa. She's laying the table for dinner.

LOUDER!

I'M LYING DOWN ON THE SOFA. SHE'S LAYING THE TABLE FOR DINNER.

PHASE FOUR: The Obstacle Course.

OK, today, recruits, we're in our first day out on the obstacle course. You can see it in front of you. The ropes. The walls. The water and mud. And the running route through the forest. You have all been issued twenty books to carry in your backpacks, twenty or so full pounds of paper and binding. I know it's not easy. It's a formidable task. And I'll be timing you. Most of you have never carried such a heavy load on your backs. In order to become Readers, however, you have to do it. You have to do the obstacle course. And I'm going to tell you why, so you'll be well-motivated.

Talk About God



Patrick was talking about the procedure for his open heart surgery—a coronary artery bypass graft, to be precise. He was getting into the nitty-gritty, not sparing us the details, with the saw that was used to open up the ribs, the pinkish and bean-shaped heart, all the clamps and instruments stuck in the aperture, at times going off into tangents, explaining this or that medical term, and tampering with the arc of the story.

A teacher of English Literature at the local university and specializing in drama, Patrick had a tendency to either let his stories get overly dramatic or turn them into lectures. But this was different. Something had happened during the post-op recovery that had shaken him up.

We were having our teas and liqueurs after our meal and sitting in the living room of his upscale home in the P-Patch in my home town, so called because every street in the area started with the letter P. Panoramic Drive. Placid Drive. Paradise Drive. Pleasant Drive. The area was on a rise overlooking the eastern skyline. Through the large bay window we could see over the highway and the bush to the

hills at Echo Bay. The sky was deep blue, the kind of blue that is so deep and so blue that, if we were to pause from what we were doing, really pause and let the sky suck us into its warm embrace, Patrick had told us, it could make us shudder with joy.

He had never spoken like that before.

It was early July, the time when Jen and I usually came up to visit our families. Jen had her father, her sisters and brothers, her nephews and nieces. We were staying at my sister's place, a fifteen minute walk farther up the P-Patch.

Patrick, in oversize walking shorts and Hawaiian shirt, was sitting by himself in his reading chair just to the left of the window. Anyone could see the heart problem and surgery had changed him physically. He had once been a robust guy, short and thick at the waist, with peppery straight hair and a cowlick, over his large head and impish grin, with two prominent front teeth that could cut down any tree in the forest. Now, however, he looked sunken-in, his chest hollow, his cheeks gaunt, making his mouth even more pronounced, his hair almost totally white. Gone was the impish grin and the twinkle in his Irish eyes. He was still in the recuperating stage, there was no doubt, experiencing pains in his chest, having to do physio, and being careful with any strenuous physical activity. It was like being a prisoner in his own body, he said. With all the time on his hands, along with his reading, he had become a little more circumspect, a little more thankful of life's unexpected bounties. He might have to take the first month off work as well.

His wife Anne was on his right, on the red velvet love sofa. She was ten years younger than Patrick, in her summer shorts and a white sleeveless top, her slim attractive figure draped over an arm rest. They had met way back when he was new at the university and she had been in one of his adult evening courses. I had kidded him about marrying a former student, but he wasn't amused. Anne had dark hair and pale skin, with large alert eyes and a ready disposition to get into a fray. Of Ukrainian stock and raised in town, she had gone south to university and come back to teach History and Geography at a local high school. Their two daughters, Meghan and Sophie, both in their late teens, were away being camp counsellors somewhere north.

Patrick had been raised in Montreal, gone to Dalhousie in Halifax to do his doctorate on Samuel Beckett and Absurdist Drama, and then had landed a job in a small northern Ontario city, which he clearly found wanting for its lack of culture. He wasn't a sports guy, and if you weren't a sports guy and didn't like the outdoors life, my hometown, with its down-sized steel plant, its top-heavy population of seniors, its long winters, its isolation in the northland, could be a killer. The majority of the population also had a tough time with newcomers who rode into town from more cultured parts and tried to open their minds. What Patrick had done to make things even tougher was to develop a passion for the Marquis de Sade. Every so often he put on the tamer plays written by the Marquis in the small Shingwauk Hall theatre at the university to

various hospitals down south, she had become a Public Health Nurse.

“Even after all the vital signs are gone,” she said, “the brain can function for a while. Once the oxygen is cut off, however ...”

“The fact of the matter is that if you’re dead, you’re dead,” Anne said. “Nobody comes back from the dead.”

“OK, anyway, what I really want to tell you about,” Patrick said, taking a deep breath, “was the near death experience.”

We all looked at him.

“I have to be honest with you,” he said. “I’m still not exactly sure about what happened. I’ve done some research on NDE’s and tried to compare my experience with what’s happened to others and it’s pretty close, I have to admit. And I haven’t spoken about this to anyone but Anne. Even now, though, all I can remember was lying on the bed and feeling this tremendous pain, as if someone had hit my chest with a sledgehammer. The shock of it must’ve knocked me out. The next thing I knew I felt myself in this dark constricted space, so dark I couldn’t see a thing. And every time I tried to draw in a deep breath it felt I was breathing through a tiny straw. So I started to wriggle free, barely inching along at first, then slipping through at a faster rate. Eventually I felt myself crawling through this tight passageway, like a pipe of some kind, so narrow I had to squeeze through, every inch an effort of extreme pain. And every time I tried to take a breath the straw was getting smaller and smaller. My head was on fire with the pain. And just when I thought I couldn’t breathe anymore

and my chest was about to explode, I saw a bright light at the end of the tunnel, so bright I couldn't keep my eye on it lest it blind me. I could smell its warmth, however, like a warm crackling camp fire beckoning me forward, as if promising me that all would be well. That all manner of pain would cease. That all would be forgiven. That I would only be going where I had begun. And all would be well. And all the waiting and wondering, all the struggle and anguish would melt away. And just when I thought I couldn't move any farther, I felt myself floating up and away. And, suddenly, I opened my eyes and saw my body lying on the bed, the catheters and such sticking out of it, but the it of it undeniable, its mouth slack and its beat and heat gone, the life totally gone from it."

Jen and I were on the edge of our seat.

"Pat, I love you, but no more *pâté de foie gras* for you," Anne said, breaking the tension.

"What do you mean, the *it of it*?" I said.

"I don't know what else to call it." He shrugged. "My body was there and I was somewhere else. I could see the nurses wheel the defibrillator to the bed. I could see one nurse take the paddles and rub them together and the needle of the charge indicator moving and then applying the paddles and the body leaping up into the air. So high it almost fell clear off the bed. I know it's called an out of body experience. But it's the strangest thing. The feeling of serene peace, as if this light were shining through me and there was no before and no after. And my body was there like a thing that I had just shed, as if it had been a cocoon or a piece of old skin."

About the Author



F.G. Paci is the author of 13 novels, the last of which was *The Son* (Oberon, 2011). His first collection of short stories, *Playing To Win* (Guernica), came out in 2012. He lives in Toronto with his wife and has one son.