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Where God Was Born
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Q: Near the start of *Where God Was Born*, you recall feeling a unique sense of urgency to write this particular book. "I had wanted to go on my first journeys back to the Bible. I needed to go on this one." Tell us a little more about this. Why Israel, Iraq, and Iran? Why now?

A: A few years ago, I went to the library and retrieved the April 16, 1966 cover story in TIME Magazine entitled, "IS GOD DEAD?" The article suggested that God had retreated forever from public life and that religion was dead as a matter of influence in world affairs and would never return again. What a different a generation makes. Today, the biggest news stories include terrorism, the Middle East, the Ten Commandments, and gay marriage. The biggest movie of recent years: The Passion of the Christ. The biggest book: The DaVinci Code. Religion is bigger today than at any time in the last

century. I realized that if I wanted to make sense of this situation I should go back to the origins of religion itself. I had to go back to the place *Where God Was Born* to figure out: Is religion tearing us apart, or can it bring us back together? That journey led me to the second half of the Hebrew Bible, which takes place in Israel, Iraq, and Iran.

Q: As a Jew growing up in Georgia, you witnessed your parents' ambivalent relationship with their heritage and faith—at one point, you describe the way they "tugged at the gossamers of assimilation." In what ways do you feel these memories inform—or possibly belie—the religious, political, and historical concerns in your writing today?

A: When I was growing up, I, like many Jews, cheered what appeared to be the receding of faith from everyday life. The further religion got from our lives the better our lives would get, I thought, because persecution had been such a burden to Jewish families for generations. But the older I get, the more I realize that religion is not going to be easily marginalized by one of its wannabe successors—science, capitalism, consumerism. Religion has grown stronger in the last 30 years because it's broader than any country. It addresses the dignity of all human beings. It is universal. Religion also breeds overconfidence, and one challenge for today's believers is to rediscover in the fire of faith the source of warmth that can overpower the flames of destruction.

Q: One of the most striking passages in the book finds you engaged in a freely associative conversation with your wife, Linda: the two of you parse the Book of Esther, assess the state of women's rights in contemporary Iran, and explore the consequences of Jewish assimilation around the world. This portrait of a marriage rooted in intellectual exploration, emotional generosity, and mutual discovery is deeply affecting—and it also powerfully underscores the larger themes of your book. What were your intentions in adding such a personal dimension to your narrative?

A: First, you should know that my wife reads most things that I write and it turns out she LOVES this question! When I set out to write WALKING THE BIBLE nearly ten years ago I insisted that it would not be personal. It would be about archaeology, not me and my own search for God. What a fool I was. The longer I have traveled on this road the more personal my travels have become and the more willing I have become to probe those parts of the experience. The way to tell a really big story, I think, is to tell a really small story. Also, while writing about the raw emotion of WALKING THE BIBLE was difficult, it was, inevitably, the part of the book that people appreciated the most. So this time I went even further. Linda is a central part of my emotional life, and my work life, and I thought putting that story on paper was the most honest way to convey what happened to me.

Q: *Where God Was Born* is being published at a time of great tumult and uncertainty in the Middle East—to say nothing of the perpetual, low-flying dread afflicting life in the United States and Western Europe. Tell us about your hopes and expectations for human civilization in the coming decade. What success might Bible-rooted, interfaith dialogue have in providing consolation—or at least perspective—in this so-called age of terror?

A: I think it's safe to say that the biggest question in the world today is, "Can the religions figure out a way to relate to one another that is not by killing one another?" I think the answer is pretty much up in the air—and definitely up to us. It's either open warfare among the faiths, or it's some alternative. And the only path to alternative is some kind of dialogue. I think the Bible can play an important role in this conversation because, from its opening verses, it suggests that chaos is a natural state in the world, and the only force strong enough to calm the chaos is words. Don't forget, God uses words to create the world. Words! Words are only hope.

Q: If you were to don some crafty disguise in order to drop in on a random reading group discussion of your book, what questions would you be certain to bring to the table—and what issues would you find it most important to explore?

A: What a wonderful question. You know, in one of my parallel lives, I am a contributing editor at GOURMET Magazine, and our editor, Ruth Reichl, mastered the art of disguises. So look around: I might be among you! Meanwhile, what would I ask: 1) What's the most painful thing you learned about your own faith? 2) Who would you most like to have dinner with, King David, Jonah, or Cyrus the Great? 3) If you could ask my wife one question about the author of *Where God Was Born*, what would it be? 4) Where was God born?

Q: Any appetizing suggestions you can make for culinary-inclined hosts looking to add some Bible-themed hors d'oeuvres and potables to the reading-group mix?

A: When my mother hosts book events, she serves, among other things, hummus, pita bread, olives. When I encouraged people to host grassroots, interfaith discussions, called ABRAHAM Salons, for my last book, my friends at GOURMET offered a baklava and a brownie recipe. Triple Chocolate brownies. One for each faith! You can find them online, at www.brucefeiler.com, if you click on the DISCUSSIONS button on the front page of the site. And while we're on the topic of the site, I'd like to invite at least one member of the group to write me a report of the conversation. I'm proud to say that I've responded to every email that's come into the site in the last five years.

Q: Tell us about your travels and experiences since finishing *Where God Was Born*. What can we look forward to reading next?

A: I spent half of every month, for six months, back in the Middle East—in Turkey, Israel, Egypt, and Jordan—shooting a three-hour documentary for PBS on WALKING THE BIBLE. It was a challenging and, at times, dangerous experience, but the footage is spectacular, high-definition camerawork shot by a British crew of exceptional talent. We hope to have it on the air in early 2006. Then, a few weeks after we finished filming and a few days after turning in the manuscript for *Where God Was Born*, my wife gave birth to two healthy, hearty, heaven-sent identical girls. Since then, I've been doing a lot of traveling between my bedroom and theirs in the wee hours of the

morning. I hope they make this journey in peace sometime in their lives.