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Angels

By Dónal Thompson

I've just written a story in which an angel has a central role. Over the last twelve months or so I have been learning a lot about angels. The word 'angel' comes from the Greek word ἄγγελος (angelos) which means 'messenger'.

One curious thing about angels is that they are mentioned in so many religions. The Bible, the Koran and the Torah all mention angels. The Buddhist and Hindu traditions have angels - 'devas'. Mormons, Bahá'is and Zoroastrians also share a belief in these celestial beings.

If you go to Apple's online music store and look for songs called 'Angel', you will get 692 results.

If you want to read a book connected with angels you could go to the Amazon online bookstore and choose from ten thousand seven hundred and fifty-seven titles.

In 2006 *Angel* was the twenty-ninth most popular name for a boy and *Angela* the twenty-fourth most popular name for a girl in Spain. In the USA *Angel* and *Angelina* both make it into the top 50.

In Hollywood angels have been represented many times. Perhaps the most endearing example is the angel Clarence in Frank Capra's 1946 masterpiece *'It's a Wonderful Life'*. He is sent to convince George Bailey (James Stewart) that a man is not a failure if he has friends.

Angels, of course, can be found in architecture and monuments. It is worth looking up at the buildings in most capital cities to see the stone guardians watching us. They can be found on banks and fountains and not only on churches. In England's Gateshead the local council have recently commissioned sculptor Anthony Gormley OBE to create 'The Angel of the North' - an immense, embracing structure that welcomes people to the Tyneside region. It is striking that in the twenty-first century nobody seems to question the choice of an angel. Is that good or bad?

English speaking actors are a superstitious lot. It is considered the height of bad manners and bad luck to say the title of Shakespeare's play *'MacBeth'* in a theatre. Actors will always refer to it as 'The Scottish play'. If some uncultured fool does so, all the other actors will refer to another Shakespeare play *'Hamlet'* and quote *'Angels and ministers of grace defend us!'* as an antidote.

Whether or not angels exist is not the business of this weekly letter, but rather the remarkable endurance of angel symbolism in our culture and other cultures. Only one other ancient symbol seems to transcend geographical and cultural frontiers and that is the dragon which is found as far apart as China and Wales.

Do we still dream of flying? And if so, where to?