

*Twenty Questions*, by Paul McComas

reviewed by [Christopher E. Bush](#) in the [August 12, 1998](#) issue

*By Paul McComas, Twenty Questions: A Collection of Short and Very Short Stories. (Fithian, 176 pp.)*

Paul McComas's aptly titled collection introduces us to a series of characters who struggle with doubt. Some of them find a solution to their turmoil through relationships grounded in faith that love's power heals and renews. The very-short-story format presents a clear view of characters in crisis but necessitates a lack of resolution. At the end of each tale questions remain, suggesting that life's inherent ambiguities challenge belief. But McComas makes clear that the same uncertainties also feed faith. His characters are all on journeys of transformation.

In "Viceroy Girls," an extremely short and funny sketch, the unnamed narrator walking along a Chicago street becomes fascinated by the young women passing out cigarette samples. Despite his aversion to tobacco, he is attracted by one of these women, a "shimmering, small-hipped, bright-eyed angel of death." He approaches her, intending to use the cigarettes as a way to strike up an acquaintance. With one word, however, she shatters many of his illusions. By its very brevity and her honesty, their encounter transforms his view of reality.

A longer story, "Now I Know My ABCs," looks at mental illness and the doubts it creates for both the ill and their loved ones. The narrator, the older brother of a recently diagnosed and hospitalized schizophrenic, is confronted with a relationship that has suddenly altered profoundly. The sick woman is no longer the younger sister he has known, and she changes dramatically from visit to visit. Yet their relationship somehow deepens as he reaches an understanding that may never be returned but that nevertheless gives him faith in her.

The book's characters are all young adults--a time when many confront doubt. Some may abandon their faith for a while; some may never get over their disbelief. But ultimately McComas's stories are about hope. Life's questions, no matter what their number, lead to deeper understandings of ourselves, others and God.