Anne Lamott’s divine comedy: Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith.By Anne Lamott. Pantheon, 275 pp.

by Debra Bendis in the July 28, 1999 issue

Read the sidebar interview, 'God lets me start over.'

To say that Anne Lamott is a born-again Christian is to invite misunderstanding, for she is also an irreverent child of the 1960s, a lifelong Democrat and a comedian. And, though she writes about a life-changing encounter with Christ, she does not pretend to have gotten her life completely together. She continues to struggle with despair, her own ego and relationships with men. With her characteristic self-deprecating honesty and savage wit, she labels herself a "bad born-again Christian."

Lamott's blend of candor and humor has created a group of avid fans, many of whom have followed her essays and novels since *Operating Instructions*, the 1994 book about being a single parent. (She describes it now as her "black-humored . . . anti-George Bush baby book.") According to one fan, writing in the on-line journal *Salon*, Lamott "shows me pieces of life that are usually left for dead. . . . I trust her to tell the truth. I figure no one can make up the crazy stuff she writes."

She writes penetratingly and hilariously about everyday anxieties, like her fear of flying, her failures as a parent and her concern about those "triangles of fat that pooch at the top of my thighs." She confesses to an instinctive dislike of a mom (Lamott calls her "Enemy Lite") who brags that her son is an "early reader." Lamott's son, Sam, is a "late reader," which prompts Lamott to ponder reading achievements: "Albert Einstein was a 'late reader.' Theodore Kaczinski was an 'early reader.' Not that I am at all defensive on the subject." Enemy Lite excites Lamott's loathing in many ways--by cooking wonderful cinnamon rolls ("obviously the woman has a little baking disorder"), by looking great in latex shorts ("I hate that in a person") and by

sporting a Reagan bumper sticker. But eventually Lamott realizes that her real enemy is her own obsessions and self-absorption, which prevent her from recognizing Enemy Lite's generosity. She names the essay "Forgiveness."

Lamott has given readers intimate glimpses of her life in other books, but in *Traveling Mercies* she connects the biographical details with her lifelong yearning for God. She begins by describing a tense childhood. The difficulties of her parents' marriage and the resultant turmoil in family life led her to seek refuge at the homes of her friends. She compensated for low self-esteem by becoming a high school tennis star and by meeting her parents' standards of academic achievement ("I was 35 when I discovered that B-plus was a really good grade"). By the time she entered college, she had also become dependent on drugs and alcohol, and was making a habit of moving from one sexual relationship to another.

Though her parents scorned religion, Lamott detected signs of God in her life from childhood on. She would pray at bedtime, believing in "someone listening, someone who heard." She stored memories of Catholic worship when she attended church with a friend, and she absorbed the prayers, Bible readings and loving acceptance that she encountered in another friend's home. In college, Lamott says, "a puzzling thing inside me . . . had begun to tug on my sleeve from time to time, trying to get my attention." Moved by the power of Abraham's God in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, she told her friends she believed in God. After being embraced by Jewish friends, she was bat mitzvahed.

When she began her career as a writer, her life was still marked by the heavy use of drugs and alcohol and by doomed relationships with married men. She also became bulimic. One night in 1984, she lay sick, scared and near death.

> I became aware of someone with me, hunkered down in the corner. . . . I knew beyond any doubt that it was Jesus. . . . And I was appalled. I thought about my life and my brilliant hilarious progressive friends, I thought about what everyone would think of me if I became a Christian, and it seemed an utterly impossible thing that simply could not be allowed to happen. I turned to the wall and said out loud, "I would rather die."

But she didn't die. She called an Episcopal priest who became a friend and counselor, and she made her way to St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Marin City, California, where she found a community of people who believed in her and loved

the baby she brought with her.

In *Traveling Mercies* Lamott recounts her struggles to eat properly and to live without alcohol (in chapters titled "Hunger" and "Thirst"). And in "Overture: Lily Pads," Lamott takes us to other dark places in her past: her near suicide, the lonely nighttime binge drinking, the deaths of her father and several close friends by cancer. Lamott eloquently articulates the craziness of the grief process, its erratic visitations and its frightening weariness, as well as the realization that she will survive to earn the "two best things: softness and illumination."

Throughout the book, Lamott exhibits a prayer life that is part blunt confrontation with God, part comedy. The humor that provides relief from the painful issues is also her way of engaging those issues. "Oh, God," she says when she's trying to make a decision, "tell me what to do—would it be so much skin off your nose to give me a sign?" Scared about the possibility of skin cancer, she writes a note to God (and deposits it in a cookie jar): "I am a little anxious. Help me remember that you are with me even now. I am going to take my sticky fingers off the control panel until I hear from you."

What's going on with me here? Lamott asks God at every turn, and then waits for an answer. She usually gets one worth hearing about, for her faith informs her life at every turn. We are lucky to have been invited to listen in on the conversation.