Edwin Good has published impressive literary studies of biblical texts (as well as an award-winning history of the piano), but in this book he tries his hand at something different—a brief, yet serious reading of Gen 1–11 for the nonspecialist. The book is written in an informal and engaging style, and Good is quite open about sharing his uncertainty about issues and words with the reader. In the preface he explains that he wrote, or at least began to write, the book quite by chance. This is apparent in the tone of the book as well; it is fairly casual, with asides to the reader about contemporary matters that relate in some way to the subject at hand. At the same time, the actual textual discussions display a degree of sophistication and erudition that offset this relaxed tone. This double focus makes for interesting reading, though it may be somewhat frustrating for a reader who would like to take things beyond these initial insights. Ancient Near Eastern materials are referred to but are not used as a means to explain the biblical text—the stories are made to stand on their own.

The chapters of the book work their way through the stories and genealogies of Gen 1–11 according to the usual divisions: “Genesis in Seven Days”; “The Garden” (parts I and II); “Offerings and Their Results” (Cain and Abel); “Some Descendants” (Gen 4:17–26); “Some More Descendants” (Gen 5); “Unusual Births” (Gen 6:1–4); “The Flood(s)”; “Yet
Another Curse—And a Blessing” (Gen 9:18–29); “Descendants and Nations” (Gen 10); “A Tower and a Confusion of Words” (Gen 11:1–9); “A Transitional Genealogy” (Gen 11:10–32). The book concludes with a brief coda in which Good offers some not-so-final thoughts on the stories as a group and on the indeterminate nature of their interpretation. Each chapter consists of two parts: Good’s own translation of the Hebrew text, followed by a more detailed explication of various aspects of each section. There are occasional more detailed notes to be found in the back of the book, but one can read the book comfortably without them. Good’s treatment of the narrative sections of Gen 1–11 is certainly the strongest and most original part of the book. The genealogies and the Table of Nations are by their nature less intriguing, yet Good goes into uncharacteristic detail about the possible locations and identities of the various peoples mentioned. I assume that he chose to comment on these texts as well for sake of completeness, but his concern with the stories and how they work is what really drives the book.

The translation of the Hebrew text differs from standard translations in a number of ways. The idea of the translation is that it be understandable yet somewhat unfamiliar. Good tries to make the reader aware of encountering a text that is foreign and to attend to it as something new and unfamiliar. This is not an easy task for something as well known as the opening chapters of Genesis. Good does not want the reader to fall back on his or her immediate associations with “God” or “Lord,” so he prefers Elohim and Yahweh. Hebrew names of characters and places are retained throughout to encourage this sense of distance—not Cain and Abel but Qayin and Hebel. For a similar purpose Good resorts to some unusual locutions, such as “bowlshape” for the more common “firmament” or “lightgivers” for the usual “lights” in Gen 1:14. The latter offers a nice alternative to the usual reading (even if it is a bit new-agey); the former is descriptive of the phenomenon but distinctly unpoetic. While it may at first achieve the desired effect, its repetition five times in 1:6–8 undercuts this. There is an almost mythological character to the translation of Gen 1, as Sky (not the sky) replaces heavens, Earth replaces the earth, and Sea replaces the seas. Eating from the tree of life allows life “permanently,” not “forever”; as Good points out in a perceptive note on the text, this is more appropriate to the sense of time in Gen 3. Equally interesting is the translation of God’s words to Qayin in Gen 4:7: “you can take charge of it,” for ve’atta timshol bo. Instead of “you must master it” (RSV), a phrase that emphasizes command, Good’s translation suggests that Qayin may not succeed in this effort. In preparation for the flood in Gen 6:7 Good has God say “I’m sorry that I made them,” but this may have too much apology in it—“regret” (NJPS) conveys a sense of deliberation and solemnity more appropriate to the moment. But then again one of Good’s central points is that the deity in these chapters is willful, impulsive, and prone to act without due consideration of the implications of his actions. In light of this, “sorry” might well be the better choice. Occasionally Good misses the mark—in 9:13 he translates
“when I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is visible in Earth,” but surely the sense is that the bow will be visible to God as a reminder, as is stated explicitly in 9:16. “Raising a covenant” in 9:8 and 11 is a more literal translation of the Hebrew than “establishing a covenant,” but its meaning is less clear. Likewise the phrase d’varim ahadim in 11:1 can be translated “few words,” but this leads Good into an awkward explanation about the poverty of speech of the ancients that adds little to his commentary. It would be better to stay with Speiser’s rendering “the same words,” meaning a uniform vocabulary. But on the whole Good’s translation serves his stated purpose of making the text interesting and readable, yet also a bit strange.

Good’s observations on the text itself are certainly his most important contribution, and here he has presented something that is not normally available to the English reader. At its best his commentary offers a detailed yet nontechnical reading of the text with close attention to its literary flow and dynamics. He does this without the theological overlay—or the preachiness—that is often characteristic of introductory-level books on the Bible. By subtitling the book “Tales of the Earliest World,” Good signals that this is no conventional Jewish/Christian commentary but an excursion into a narrative universe whose uniqueness has often been obscured by standard religious commentary. Who are these early people? What was their world like? How did they imagine origins to come about? Most important, who is this deity with changing names, who has absolute power over matter yet cannot control his most sublime creatures, and is uncertain as to what he can expect from this creation? Good points out time and again how much this deity improvises, how he experiments and fails, and how unaware he seems to be of the implications of his actions. To experienced readers of the Bible, these revelations are hardly new, but Good has the sense to simply note them and let them stand. He does not try to explain away the deity’s foibles and missteps but understands them to be an essential part of the universe described in these tales.

Particularly enjoyable are his comments on Gen 1–3. In his observations on the seven-day creation story, Good puts aside the theological aspect of issues such as creatio ex nihilo and the plurality of the verb in “Let us make man” in order to focus on the flow of the narrative. He points out nicely how the text of the creation account brings together abstraction and detail regarding living things in general and the specific creation of humans. His final point about how the naming of the seventh day as shabbat illustrates this move from abstraction to specificity and provides a lovely capstone to this discussion. Once again, Good’s achievement here is not the presentation of new ideas but his ability to frame them in a sophisticated way for a nonspecialist audience. This is a welcome accomplishment in biblical studies.
Similarly stimulating is the discussion of the garden story of Gen 2–3. Good dwells at some length on the character of Yahweh Elohim—the question of God’s possible motives for the prohibition of eating of the tree of knowledge, the apparent oversight in not having created a mate for the man, and the unsolicited appearance of the devious snake. These add up to what Good describes as “creating by improvisation” (16). The point is expanded upon in the following chapter to good effect: What was the deity thinking in rejecting Qayin’s offering? Good succeeds in bringing out both the power and authority attached to the deity as well as the sense of surprise in the text when things do not go according to plan.

Because of its introductory nature, its welcoming style, and its ability to engage in sophisticated discussion while assuming no background in Hebrew language or in biblical studies, Good’s book will appeal to a broad audience. Stanford University Press is to be commended on the design of the book—the cover illustration is delightful—and it will be of particular value to students in introductory courses on religious traditions.