

The risks of writing: An interview with Ron Hansen

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [August 12, 2008](#) issue

Novelist Ron Hansen is known for working with a variety of themes and in a variety of genres. His first novels, Desperadoes (1979) and The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford (1983)—recently made into a film starring Brad Pitt—were set in the wild West. Mariette in Ecstasy (1991) is about a nun who receives the stigmata. Atticus (1996) retells the story of the prodigal son in contemporary North America. Hitler’s Niece (2000) explores the dictator’s peculiar romance with his half-niece. His latest book is Exiles, based on the life of poet and priest Gerard Manley Hopkins and his response to the shipwreck of the Deutschland, which carried five exiled Catholic nuns. Hansen teaches at Santa Clara University in California and is a deacon in the Roman Catholic Church.

How do you practice your faith?

I go to daily mass, and I pray the liturgy of the hours. I don’t pray all the hours, but I do at least one a day. I mostly do evening prayer, because it is a time for recapitulating the day, seeing what has gone on and giving thanks or chastising myself, as the case may be. At Santa Clara Mission, I am often a lector and a eucharistic minister, and if a priest doesn’t show up, then I can do a communion service as a deacon. I started going to daily mass at least 30 years ago. I’ve been going to mass at Santa Clara for longer than I have been teaching there.

What do you think about the resurgence of interest in the Tridentine mass?

I grew up with the Tridentine mass. When I was a teenager and the church started changing it, I thought it was a breath of fresh air. I liked the dialogue between the people and the priest, and I liked the mass in the vernacular so I could understand what was going on. It seemed much more like a supper than a sacrifice. The whole idea of the re-creation of the last days of Jesus’ life and the supper comes forth so much more clearly in the new mass than in the Tridentine mass, in which the priest is praying privately and you are just involved in your own little private space. The

difference for me is that the new mass puts more responsibility on the parishioners to actually know what is going on and to participate.

How has going to mass every day for 30 years shaped you?

The mass is so familiar in all of its movements that it is almost like meditation. I can drift off and at the same time know where I am. It's both a quiet time and a time of community. There are people in the pews whose faces I recognize, but whose names I don't know. Often I hear really good homilies, and I have often heard things that I can make use of in my fiction.

What kind of ministry do you do?

I was assigned to campus ministry at Santa Clara. My chief responsibility seems to have become preparing people for marriage and presiding at their ceremonies.

People talk a lot about the religious apathy of college-age Catholics. Is that what you find?

It depends on what group you are talking about. I think that most college students are really eager to talk about spirituality and about God and eager to have that in their lives. But this generation of Catholics—this generation of students in general—is incredibly busy. To some degree, spirituality has to fit into their schedule. When you get them out to a retreat, they really love the experience, but actually getting them to go is hard.

What kinds of things work with this generation to open them up spiritually?

They are very good at sharing, either talking to a spiritual director or in groups. They are very good at talking about their own lives. They are very close to each other and to their parents—a lot more so than I was. They talk to their parents on their cell phones at least once a day and talk to their friends five or six times a day. They are much more community-based than I was.

Do you see your writing and your ministry as connected?

For me, they are joined, and I think they are joined for my readers as well. Many of my readers are looking for some kind of spiritual nourishment and of course entertainment as well. My typical readers have had some kind of religion in the past,

although they may not consider themselves religious now. But they have enough background to know what is going on. They get the fact that *Atticus* is the story of the prodigal son.

To entertain and to educate are the dual functions of any writer. I want people to notice God's actions in their lives and in the lives of others and to have sympathy for other people. I want them to see that there is something going on here that matters. I don't think you can do that by hitting people over the head. You have to slowly draw them into it.

In a sense, I am trying to proselytize by means of entertaining fiction. Fiction is ideally suited for this because it involves people in other worlds. It lets them see that world through a character's eyes. Then they find themselves making judgments about whether a character is acting properly or improperly.

Fiction, by its nature, asks ethical questions. As you are reading, you are constantly asking whether a character has done what you would have done or if the character has gone awry in some way. When you are reading, whether you are aware of it or not, you are offering advice to the character, and thus offering advice to yourself.

Aren't proselytizing and co-creating inherently different ways of looking at what a novel does?

No. That's where some Christian fiction goes wrong. It sets up a situation that's too pat, with good and evil too diametrically opposed. People are much more complicated than that. The other thing about that kind of fiction is that if you don't have an altar call at the end, people think it has failed. People should carry the thoughts of a book they've read around with them for a while and then move, ever so gradually, toward some new conviction.

Many of your books are about outsiders. How does Gerard Manley Hopkins, the focus of your latest book, *Exiles*, fit into that pattern?

I call the book *Exiles* because Hopkins felt that he had been exiled from his family and his community when he converted to Catholicism and became a Jesuit priest. At that time, a Roman Catholic was not allowed to have a fellowship at Oxford. Hopkins was one of the smartest guys there and a natural to go on to graduate school, but he had to forsake that because of his conversion.

Hopkins's parents were unhappy about his conversion as well, and in England there was a strong feeling that the Jesuits were the enemy of the crown. He felt ostracized. He was finally sent over to Ireland, where the people were pursuing home rule and thought of the British as the enemy. He actually wrote a poem called "Stranger" with the line, "To seem the stranger is my lot, my life." His family never visited him all the time that he was a priest. Some of his brothers wouldn't speak to him. Some of his old Oxford friends with whom he came into contact put him down and smirked about his religious commitments, and that must have been difficult.

How did you get interested in Hopkins?

I was a big fan of Dylan Thomas when I was in college. I read a biography of him and learned that he had been influenced by Hopkins, so I started reading Hopkins. I was entranced by his work, but I didn't really understand it. Even now when I read one of his poems, I feel like I am seeing new things every time. There is a source of endless pleasure and delight in researching him. A lot of people have noticed that you can't really solve his poems; they keep bringing up new ideas.

When people think of Hopkins they often think first of his faith. But he also wrestled with doubt.

I have a priest friend who points out that the opposite of faith is not doubt but certainty. I think God intended that—it is a way of making us creative instead of smug in our belief. God plants in us the seed to love and worship God, and the seed is enough to make us want to seek God out, but not enough to fully get there. That reaching, that striving, is what God is really interested in—that creative activity that all of us should pursue.

Who are the writers in your private canon?

I really love Gabriel García Márquez's *100 Years of Solitude*. I think that Nabakov's *Lolita* is one of the best books ever written. And I love *The Great Gatsby*. There are a limitless number of great books out there.

What role does risk play in your fiction and in your faith?

Risk plays a very important role. That sense of creativity I spoke about earlier is based on risk, on pushing boundaries. When you take on a subject that isn't automatically appealing to people, you are taking a risk. When you start trying to

create a world and convince people that it is special enough that they should keep on reading, that's a risk.

Most writers I know have a kind of orneriness at their core that makes it easier to deal with the risk factor. They say, "I don't care what you think. This matters to me, and you will find out if you just keep on reading that this is as special as I think it is."

Whenever you begin a project you are always afraid you are going to fall flat on your face. Almost all the writers I know are neurotic in some way about their writing. They present it to an editor just hoping that it is successful, and if it is, they feel they've gotten away with something.

Taking risks is important in religion too. Religion is a lot roomier than people think when they are looking at it from the outside. You gradually get a sense of confidence that God has a long leash. You are allowed to roam. God knows that you are coming back and you know that God will take you back, like the best of parents. Faith gives you a solid foundation, a bedrock, a way of returning.

Hopkins once wrote to somebody that he did truly want to see his poems published and that writers ought to have an audience. But then he said, "Christ is the only literary critic." For him, Christ was the only one who counted. If you are doing your best work and you are doing it for God, then whether you are well received or not matters a little less. Religion provides you with the solidity and the connection that you need to do creative work.