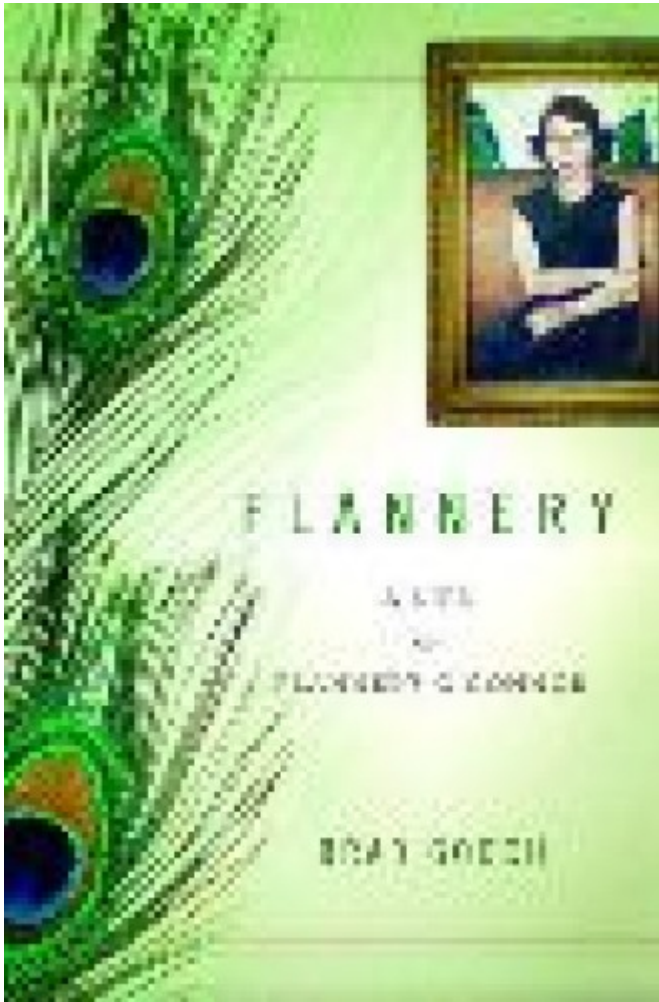


Flannery: A Life of Flannery O'Connor

reviewed by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [May 5, 2009](#) issue

In Review



Flannery: A Life of Flannery O'Connor

Brad Gooch
Little, Brown

She was the best confessedly Christian writer of the 20th century, maybe one of the very best of any time or place. With dark wit, always tinged with a threat of horror,

she packed into her stories the guilt, blood, violence, blinding light and costly redemption that is our encounter with the living Christ, though she seldom made explicit reference to Christ. Her stories are parables of a world with everything out of balance, not just because most of them occur in the unbalanced American South, but because she deeply believed that we have been whopped upside the head by a God who is determined to have us—even if God has to venture into inhospitable rural Georgia to do it.

I keep a collection of Flannery O'Connor's stories at my bedside, delving into them on a periodic basis to purge myself of creeping clerical sentimentality, to flush out the accumulated trash of my bourgeois theology, to remind me of what a liar I am—but also what a gloriously dangerous adventure it is to be caught in the dragnet of divine grace.

I say all that to explain that anyone who sets out to talk to me about dear, dark, medieval Catholic, southern Gothic O'Connor had best do so with appropriate deference to her genius and to her faith. Brad Gooch can talk to me about her anytime he wants.

He has given us our most comprehensive and engaging O'Connor biography. He thoroughly delves into her early years, her antecedents, and the impact of the postwar Georgia world upon her, but always with respect and tenderness (he is very fair about her complicated relationship with her mother). It is a joy to find a biographer who actually cares about and does not feel superior to the person he is studying.

"What kept me a sceptic in college was precisely my Christian faith," O'Connor once confided to a friend. "It always said: wait, don't bite on this, get a wider picture, continue to read." Indeed, she became one of our most trenchant critics of the brave new modernity that so captured (and eventually rendered irrelevant) the work of many of her contemporaries. There was no such thing as the liberated, autonomous individual in her "Christ-haunted South." She named the vacuity of life in a world (or in a flaccid liberal church) where (according to her great antipreacher Hazel Motes, haranguing from the pulpit of his junk car) "the blind don't see and the lame don't walk and what's dead stays that way." Gooch's account of O'Connor's development as a writer demonstrates the intellectual fecundity of looking at the world through the Catholic faith, a faith that (along with her southern upbringing) gave O'Connor the gift of being able to know a freak when she saw one and having the courage to

name it, deeply believing that Jesus Christ suffered and died for freaks like us.

When a clueless *New Yorker* reviewer panned *Wise Blood*, completely misreading the novel, O'Connor commented to a friend that she wondered if anyone would understand her work, seeing as how the world was now populated by "a generation of wingless chickens" with "the moral sense . . . bred out." Poor old T. S. Eliot was "horrified" by her stories and sniffed, "My nerves are just not strong enough to take much of a disturbance."

Gooch's biographical details do not account for this frail woman's ability to write such disturbing fiction. One searches in vain for some mentoring genius who gave her literary birth, some trauma from youth that shaped her, some innate mark of genius that explains her. She spent time in residence among the glittering literati at the Yaddo artists' colony in Saratoga Springs, New York, but she kept to her singular vision and ignored theirs. It is a great irony that this southern woman who never fit in with the alcohol-besotted, vain, self-conscious artists of Yaddo achieved the lasting fame that eluded all of them.

Indeed, Gooch's biography is full of ordinary people impinging on O'Connor's life, but none with much dramatic affect. Gooch reports in detail on her relationships with a few close friends, the parochial quality of her last years of lupus-caused sickness and painful decline, daily mass, small-town routine, and O'Connor at the family farm surrounded by her peacocks, everything under the watchful eye of her mother. There is so little to account for her furious determination to write, despite the public's misunderstanding and her own physical pain—nothing other than that to which O'Connor attributed all of her gifts: her Christian faith.

Gooch demonstrates that the most interesting thing about O'Connor is the God she worshiped. She was a devout Catholic whose most memorable characters inhabited the fundamentalist South, where, she noted, there was a huge difference between having an abstract concept of faith and having known the trembling hand of "Abraham as he held the knife over Isaac." She stung us liberal, mainline Protestants for having reduced "religion to therapy," the historic Christian faith to "our own sweet concoction."

She never preached or moralized. Her authorial intent, as I read her, was to bring the stunned reader to speechless wonderment at the drama of redemption. When a friend revealed her lesbianism to her, saying that her life had been a "history of

horror,” O’Connor wrote right back with acceptance and understanding, telling her friend that she was dead wrong about her life. Through the church O’Connor had inculcated a story that frees us from fate: “The meaning of the Redemption is precisely that we do not have to be our history.”

At times I wished that Gooch had said more about the peculiarities of O’Connor’s faith and how she received such a gift. “I write the way I do because (not though) I’m a Catholic,” she explained. “This is a fact.” Gooch seems determined to report modestly and accurately, rather than to presumptuously analyze and expound upon the fact of O’Connor’s faith; this is one of his biography’s great virtues. Gooch renders O’Connor as O’Connor wrote—with succinct, parabolic restraint—though he clearly cares more about her than she seemed to care for the characters in her stories.

If you want to know more about the influence of O’Connor’s Catholicism, get George A. Kilcourse’s *Flannery O’Connor’s Religious Imagination* (Paulist). Ralph C. Wood’s *Flannery O’Connor and the Christ-Haunted South* (Eerd mans) is perhaps the best theological reflection on her work. In all her stories, as she says, Christ is there but rarely noticed, in the background, darting from tree to tree, eventually revealed to be the central character, but only for those who have eyes to see.

If you love O’Connor and her stories and want to know more about her so you can love her stories even more (though I suspect she would mockingly disapprove of such prying interest into her personality), Gooch’s biography is a wonderful gift.