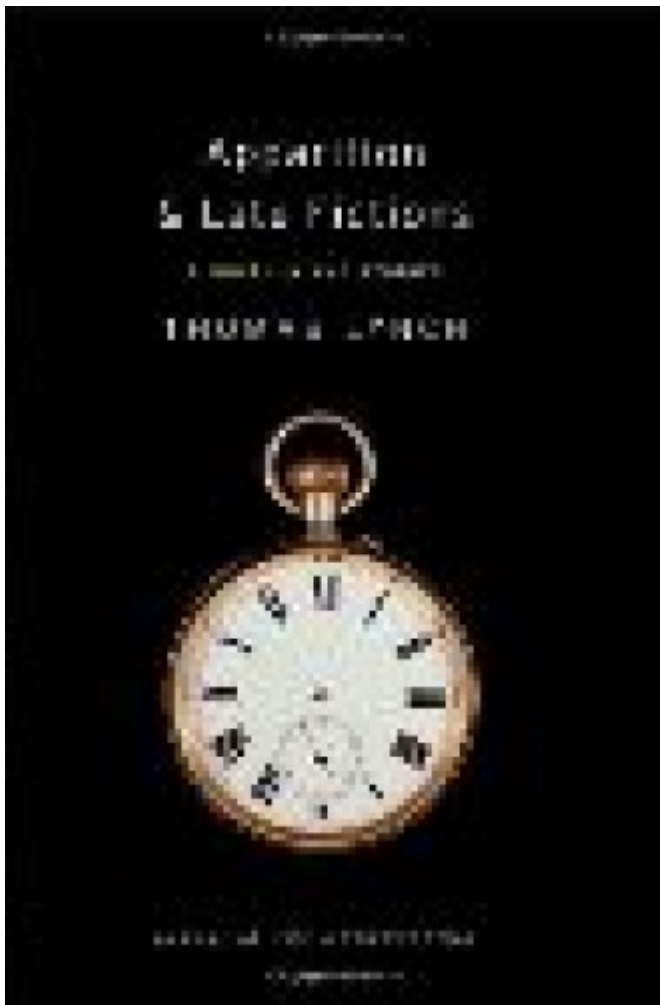


Apparition and Late Fictions: A Novella and Stories

reviewed by [Brian Doyle](#) in the [May 4, 2010](#) issue

In Review



Apparition and Late Fictions: A Novella and Stories

Thomas Lynch
Norton

No nonfiction writer of quality can finally resist the urge to commit fiction. It's like a venial sin you have to get out of your system. Here we have the estimable Mr. Lynch, author of the extraordinary *The Undertaking* (a funny, moving, startling, lyrical account of his years as an undertaker in Michigan), as well as other books of essays and poems, suddenly emitting a collection of fiction. Normally readers want to duck and cover their eyes and murmur quiet prayers when a terrific nonfiction writer tries fiction, but, hey, surprise: *Apparition and Late Fictions* is pretty good. The title story (the novella) is very good. You'll never think of Protestant ministers the same way again.

Readers and reviewers have the awful urge to rank and slate, to pigeonhole and stack, to compare and contrast, to mumble that x is not as commanding as y, to bandy words like *best* and *disappointing* about like shuttlecocks, but why? In the end it's not very useful. This was hammered home to me in recent years as I contemplated the late Frank McCourt, who had the misfortune to write two very good books (*'Tis* and *Teacher Man*) after writing a masterpiece (*Angela's Ashes*) and was roundly thumped for not writing three masterpieces. But isn't writing one enough? Or two, like Ken Kesey? Or three, like Robert Louis Stevenson? So to note that Lynch's *Apparition* is not as riveting as *The Undertaking*, so what? Think of it this way: it's the best book of fiction Lynch has published so far. Or try this: God gave Thomas Lynch startling tools as a writer—a poet's music mania, an essayist's playful ear for voices, a journalist's hungry eye for telling detail. He brings them all to bear here in interesting new ways. Isn't that a good thing?

Isn't it undeniable proof of mysterious divine coherence and miracle that a man who makes his living dealing with the dead should be so penetratingly insightful about the living? How could that be? Isn't it remarkable? Lynch pays attention to the levels of sobs that people hold back in deep grief and to the way we let sobs out one at a time like ferocious animals (the story "Catch and Release"). He points to the subtle differences among Christian groups when it comes to raising cash ("the Baptists had bake sales and the Methodists did Christmas bazaars, the Episcopalians favored crafts and antique sales and the Presbyterians dinners and teas," but the Catholics love "food and drink and dance and games of chance").

No writer, not even a writer of the surpassing quality of Thomas Lynch, can write well about sex. It just cannot be done. If the writing is too glancing and abstract and lyrical, you are not sure if you are reading about sex or chess. If it's too graphic, you

want to duck and cover your eyes. Even if it's pretty close to the intense, sweet grapple of the real thing, reading about it makes it seem like a physics exam.

In a good story, something needs to physically happen. Perhaps this opinion is a roaring failing in this reviewer, who cannot stand stories of tiny social and emotional ripples and gradations, the endless tales of inner turmoil that continue to be inflicted on an unsuspecting universe itching for a kiss or a fight at least. Even the most beautifully written story, like "*Matinée de Septembre*" here, in which nothing happens anywhere other than inside the heroine is not a good story. Incidentally, any story written in English but titled in French is almost certainly not a good story.

A fine writer will here and there write a passage so perfect that you find yourself, no kidding, gasping with a sort of awe and respect not just for the craft but for the crazy human itch that made the writer yearn to write sentences that catch the joy and pain of this life so well. A wife (and mother of two) returned to the marital abode to get her last possessions as her new lover waited in an idling van at the curb. Her husband stood at the front door watching as the children

kept nodding and smiling and weeping and hugging her, their little hands and faces holding and searching and wondering why this was all happening and why couldn't she stay with them and be their mother and she would always be their mother no matter what and someday she was sure they'd understand and Adrian [the husband] went into the house and vomited, because he felt so helpless, so totally lost in the tears of things, so angry and heart-rent and utterly helpless, and their mother's voice trailing off as she left them on the porch waving and sobbing and jumped into the van with her lover and drove off.

Of course that scene has to be rendered headlong, speeding, horrifying; to write that in reasonable sentences would be a lie. Boy, can Thomas Lynch write.

"All my stories are about the action of grace on a character who is not very willing to support it," said Flannery O'Connor, the greatest Catholic writer this country ever hatched, and maybe that line is the best explanation not only of *Apparition and Late Fictions* but of all the best fiction with a spiritual bent—works by authors from Andre Dubus to Cynthia Ozick to J. F. Powers to Frank O'Connor to Tim Winton. There is religious writing, which can be interesting, and then there is spiritual writing, which is a much deeper ocean.

It is rare to find a writer who is superb at more than one form; most writers are lucky to find the streambed in which their water flows most naturally and to best effect. One measurement of really stunning accomplishment is a writer's mastery of several forms, like that of the good Presbyterian Robert Louis Stevenson, who wrote terrible plays, thank God, or we could not bear his brilliance. So I salute Lynch, superb in two forms, nonfiction and poetry, and diving into a third. We have to admire inky ambition, which is all the more refreshing when we ponder the sea of self-help babble that is published instead of stories about the action of grace on dunderheads like us.

Speaking of seas of unfortunate ink, there are any number of mediocre tomes about Irish-American and American-Irish matters, and Lynch's *Booking Passage* is not one of them. *Booking Passage* is even better than Peter Quinn's *Looking for Jimmy*, which is a remarkable thing to write.

Let us cut to the chase, review-wise. Half of Thomas Lynch's new book is very fine—the novella *Apparition*. Half of the other four stories are excellent. You should read half of the four prose books the man has written as fast as you can procure them, then wander at your leisure through the rest of his work. He's one of the best writers we have—perceptive, graceful, huge-hearted and twice as good as most everyone else.