

Charged with the grandeur of God—and the influence of Flannery O'Connor

## **The faith-infused southern fiction of Tim Gautreaux, Robert Olen Butler, and Jamie Quatro**

by [Nick Ripatrazone](#) in the [November 22, 2017](#) issue



Flannery O'Connor. [Some rights reserved](#) by [50 Watts](#).

For many southern writers, Flannery O'Connor is either an inspiring influence or a millstone. Her God-haunted stories have been canonized and taught as exemplars of the short form in many writing programs—evidence that great fiction stirs even skeptical hearts. She casts an especially large shadow on Christian writers with her rigorous example: the meaning of her stories is inextricable from her Christian beliefs, but never obviously so. As she once said of writing fiction: “Your beliefs will be the light by which you see, but they will not be what you see and they will not be a substitute for seeing.”

The work of southern writers Tim Gautreaux, Robert Olen Butler, and Jamie Quatro is lit by a Christian worldview, but like O'Connor, their stories are remarkable most of all for what they see and how vividly they take the reader into the world of their characters.

Although Gautreaux has links to O'Connor, he is in many ways closer in style to fellow Louisiana Catholic writer Andre Dubus. Like Dubus, Gautreaux's characters are often blue-collar in work and in sensibility, and like Dubus, he's interested in how everyday decisions reveal what people are made of.

The narrator of "Deputy Sid's Gift" in the collection *Same Place, Same Things* works at a nursing home. Someone has stolen his '62 Chevy pickup, a rusty spare truck he uses only to haul trash. "It's just a thing you don't look at unless you need it," he says. He buys a '78 Ford to replace the missing truck and goes on with his life—until, on the way home from take-your-child-to-work day, his daughter spots the missing truck in the woods.

The narrator alerts the sheriff's deputy. Together they find out that an alcoholic named Fernest Bezue has made his home in the truck. The narrator brings the vehicle home, only to have Bezue steal it again. This happens several times. The narrator wants Deputy Sid to do something; Sid is inclined to shrug it off.

The story asks: To whom do we offer help? The narrator reflects on his work at the nursing home: "Maybe I was nice to 'em because I was paid for that. Nobody was paying me to be nice to a drunk Bezue from Prairie Amere." But, as he later tells a priest, he began to feel guilty, and since he already had another truck he gave the Chevy to Bezue. "I gave up the truck mostly to make myself feel good," he says, "not to help Fernest Bezue." The man later dies in the truck, and the narrator is left in shock. Where O'Connor might have gone for a moment of revelation, Gautreaux chooses gentle recognition.

Perhaps Gautreaux's finest tale with a gentle epiphany for the reader is "Attitude Adjustment," part of *Signals: New and Selected Stories*, about a priest two years removed from a devastating car accident. A coal train smashed into Father Jim and threw him into the middle of the snowy highway, where "the engineer and brakeman crouched over his body trying to stop the bleeding with shop rags."

His body and mind badly scarred, he is now a "pinch hitter" priest, occasionally "summoned, as a last resort, to drive to a nearby town and say an early mass or handle a Bible study session for children." Father Jim is forgetful, fears giving homilies, and is blind in one eye (young children like him, "perhaps thinking he was a reassigned troll from their books of fairy tales"). Altar boys have to fix his backward vestments. He places Post-it notes on his missal to remember the order of

mass. He has no confidence he can be helpful to penitents during confession.

Drafted into hearing a confession, he hears a man state that he visits pornography sites. Father Jim at first takes the man literally, thinking he goes to the actual studios where pornography is filmed. He says the man should feel sorry for the women in the films and asks him to think about his own niece. The penitent, uncertain where the conversation is headed, mentions that his niece works at Burger King. For penance, Father Jim says, he should go watch her work at Burger King. "Watch the dignity of her work, her service, her efficiency, her mistakes and her successes, how she grows tired but still tries to help people. Compare that to what you see on those sites."

Whether by nature or from the accident, Father Jim is the type of man who follows his faith to its logical, often messy, conclusion. He finds out that Nestor, an undocumented immigrant who mows the priest's lawn, is in trouble. He stole his uncle's shotgun and sold it to have money to buy tires for his Oldsmobile. When his uncle found out, he shamed him before the entire family. Nestor needs to buy his uncle a new shotgun but doesn't have the money.

Father Jim feels bad for Nestor, so he decides to help him out by buying a gun for him. At the gun shop, he mentions that he's buying the gun for a friend. The shop owners have him arrested as a proxy gun buyer. Gautreaux doesn't offer an easy way out. Father Jim blurts out Nestor's name to the police, Nestor and his wife are deported, and Father Jim spends a year in prison. There "his mind began to come back to him like a book dropped in the ocean and washed up on shore, all there, but slightly warped." In prison he hears confession and says mass. Upon his release, he remains in clerical purgatory. He reads illustrated Bible stories to young children during mass and never appears before a congregation.

The trajectory of the story is harsh, but Father Jim never feels sorry for himself. In Gautreaux's world, Father Jim's actions are a form of witness. He has chosen this difficult path. His suffering is unfair, but never gratuitous.

Robert Olen Butler's Christian characters are more haunted by struggles of identity than conduct. He is especially interested in how Vietnamese Catholic immigrants have tried to make a new life America and how they seek solace for what they have lost and left behind.

“I like the way fairy tales start in America” is the first line of “Fairy Tale,” part of *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*. The story is narrated by a Saigon bargirl brought to the States by an American embassy worker. She views America as a chance to start over, but she also reads fairy tales just to improve her English. Butler peels back her dreams: “Then I hear about New Orleans. I am a Catholic girl and I am a bargirl, and this city sounds for me like I can be both those things.” The narrator wants to be both a Catholic and a bargirl because that was her life in Saigon, where she prayed at the foot of a Marian statue—“Mary the mother of God, not Mary Magdalen, who was a bargirl one time too.” She’s neither innocent nor ignorant but has a dogged hope that things will eventually get better.

The narrator of “Relic” is a caustic businessman who left Vietnam “before the spineless poor threw down their guns and let the communists take over.” In Saigon he owned many expensive relics: ornate furniture, an oracle bone, “a dagger with a stag’s antler handle in bronze.” The man says, “There is much power in objects. My church teaches that clearly. A fragment of bone from a saint’s body, a bit of skin, a lock of hair, all of these things have great power to do miracles, to cure, to heal.”

In New Orleans, the man is “growing rich once more”—he even owns one of John Lennon’s shoes that the singer was wearing when he was assassinated—yet he feels incomplete. He longs for his family (his wife would not leave Vietnam). “My only regret,” he says, “is that I have nothing of hers to touch, not a lock of hair or a ring or even a scarf—she had so many beautiful scarves, some of which she wore around her waist.”

In the absence of authentic relics, he turns to Lennon’s shoe. “I lift my finger and put it on the spot where the scrape begins, at the point of the toe, and I trace the gash, follow the fuzzy track of the exposed underside of the leather. All along it I feel a faint grinding inside me, as if this is a wound in flesh that I touch. John Lennon’s wound.” Butler’s cadences make the lines suffused with doxology. “I make the sign of the cross and slip my foot into John Lennon’s shoe, sliding my forefinger into the loop at the back and pulling gently, just as John Lennon did on the day he joined the angels.”

Like O’Connor, Quatro explores the line between faith and fanaticism.

Jamie Quatro was raised in the Church of Christ, a denomination that shuns visual art and musical instruments in worship. “Any attempt to render God’s presence in

visual form landed you somewhere on the idolatry spectrum.” She longed for a more tangible faith and was attracted to Catholic ritual and culture—rosaries, medals, prayer books, incense, holy water, and the confessional—but remained a Protestant.

The tension between different Christian identities seeps through her fiction. The characters in *I Want to Show You More* are rarely rooted. They often reflect on Bible passages and teachings, but they perpetually behave badly. Her snapshot-style stories feel like versions of parables.

“Caught Up,” the first story of the collection, serves as a key to the entire book. The narrator begins with a childhood vision: she was sitting on the patio and watching the “thick clouds above the mountain turn shades of red and purple, then draw themselves together and spiral.” She felt a tug at her stomach, “as if I were a kite about to be yanked up by a string attached just below my navel.” She thinks that “all I had to do was surrender—close my eyes, relax my limbs—and I would be catapulted, belly-first, into the vortex.” But “the vision ended there. I never left the patio.”

Quatro creates the feeling of wanting to be somewhere else, wanting to escape the body and be transfigured. The narrator’s mother says, “God speaks to his children in dreams. She said we should always be ready for the Lord’s return: lead a clean life and stay busy with our work, keeping an eye skyward.” The narrator marries a “good man who cries at baptisms and makes our children carry spiders outside instead of smashing them.” But 17 years into the marriage she falls in love with a man who lives far away. They talk every day and plan to meet up—but first she confesses her plans to her mother.

“I said I loved my husband and wanted to protect my marriage. What I didn’t say was that I only knew I was supposed to want to protect it; thought that if I did the right thing, eventually my heart would follow.”

She goes for a long run and has the childhood vision again—but links the feeling in the vision to being with the other man. He is her escape. In a revelation to both her mother and the reader, she says that she has only been flirting with the man over the phone. That the two did not have physical contact doesn’t matter, her mother says. “You might as well have . . . It’s all the same in God’s eyes.” Quatro often leaves such lines at the end of paragraphs, sections, and stories. Her characters are aware that what they are doing is wrong, and they feel guilty, but they don’t stop.

Like many O'Connor stories, Quatro's "Demolition" features the Holy Spirit in idiosyncratic form. It's about a deaf man who comes to church on the first Sunday of Lent, joined by a younger man who waves his hands in the air like a charismatic believer. The boy turns out to be the man's translator, who can "take sentences into his body and churn them out with his hands." The congregation is fascinated: "It partook, we said, of the nature of holiness itself: one man giving of himself in surrender, the other receiving in gratitude."

But at a later service, the boy announces that the man was never a Christian, and he leaves the church. The congregation is confused, but some admire the strange man's disappearance, thinking it reveals the Lord working in mysterious ways.

Soon the congregation begins to find shards of broken stained glass on the church floor. The pastor tries to find significance in what has been broken—the head of the angel wrestling with Jacob, the burning bush. Contractors are hired to see what is wrong with the windows, but some members think the breaking of the windows is God's judgment.

Others think the missing pieces of glass are a gift. "With only the lead outlines remaining, the familiar Bible stories were now articulated in three dimensions: yellow-greens of spring maple and silvered sprays of pine; fade-to-gray of cloud; blue sky beyond. Could it be, we said, that in this fusion of the ancient stories with present-day creation, God meant to reawaken our childhood sense of mystery?" These members love it that the world has bled into their church: "Breezes fluttered our skirts and chucked our collars up under our chins. Through the empty lead came drifted scents of honeysuckle and wisteria, mown grass, grilled fish. We could hear weed trimmers, children's laughter, the whir of a moped, the drone of an airplane."

Dissension continues in the church, with some calling the changes "the revival," others "the insurrection." After those in power decide to demolish the church, a group begins meeting in a clearing, saying that their bodies are the homes of God. There they confess their darkest secrets. The strange man from early in the story returns and becomes their leader. The characters descend into madness. Like O'Connor, Quatro explores the line between faith and fanaticism.

For Gautreaux, Butler, and Quatro, the world is charged with the grandeur of God. Their stories hold out the possibility of salvation in Christian terms—realized through suffering and painful transformation and found by holding on to what grace is

available.

In the final scene of Gautreaux's "Attitude Adjustment," Father Jim is sitting on the floor in a church annex during mass, telling kids the story of the Good Samaritan. "His burdened legs were cramping up, a thousand needles shooting through them." When the children express their own concern for his obviously beat-up body, "he began to feel like the Jewish fellow on the side of the road must have felt. The children were worried about him, and their concern was like medicine." At that, "Father Jim settled back, and realized that no one could know the reason for pain, unless it was that getting hurt was rewarded by visitations like the one around him."

*A version of this article appears in the November 22 print edition under the title "Gentle, mad epiphanies."*