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The Demanding Faith of Flannery O'Connor

In her writing, O'Connor made belief believable.

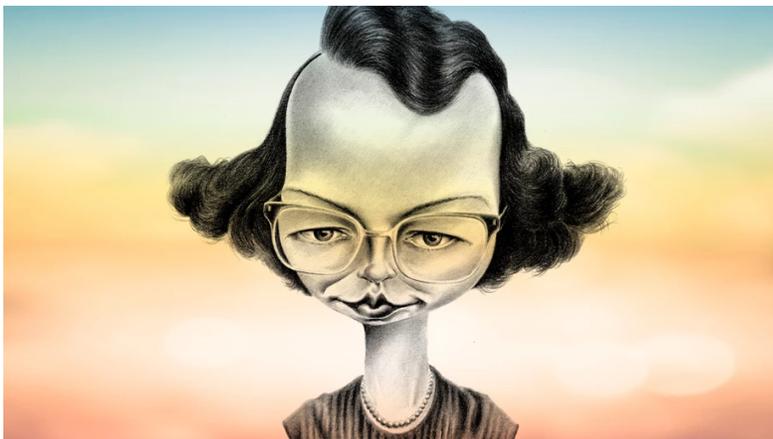
KAREN WRIGHT MARSH/POSTED SEPTEMBER 13, 2017

Image: Klaus Ernst

My family arrived in Atlanta in August, just before school started. To me, the South seemed a different world. Desperate to fit in, I felt unsophisticated and underdressed. Uninitiated.

What a relief that my father's pastorate, a Presbyterian church downtown, featured the usual: Sunday school, youth group, mid-week prayer meeting, and Sunday night services. There, my new friends and I were all literate in the same Protestant way, versed in the biblical trajectory of creation, sin, guilt, grace, redemption, forgiveness. Solid doctrines that resolved uneasy mystery and pinpointed my place in the universe.

Just when I was finding my footing, my AP English teacher assigned a text by the Georgia author Flannery O'Connor. I casually asked who *he* was (and I didn't make that mistake twice).

I was baffled by the O'Connor stories we read in class, alarmed when somebody got gored or blinded or shot. Freaked out by the self-blinding prophet and dying grandmother. Puzzled by the untamed theology of tent meetings. I really couldn't see what Flannery's Jesus-obsessed extremists could say to me, a straight-up kid raised on the Westminster Catechism, the illustrated youth Bible with leatherette cover, and mellow bonfire camp songs.

An unlikely literary sensation

Flannery O'Connor was born in the port city of Savannah, into a South far different from the 1970s Atlanta of malls and movies. The only daughter of devout Catholic parents, Flannery grew up under live oaks and Spanish moss, across the square from the cathedral where she was immersed in ritual, sacraments, and daily mass, sheltered by Sisters of Mercy—a coherent cosmos of faith. Even when her family moved from Savannah to a Milledgeville, Georgia, dairy farm so isolated that it was reached only “by bus or buzzard,” Flannery’s life centered around God.

After graduating from a nearby women’s college, Flannery went off to the renowned Writers’ Workshop at the University of Iowa. Although she claimed that she didn’t know a short story from an ad in the newspaper, Flannery, wholly given to her writing, quickly became a sensation. Though Flannery hardly looked the part, the fiction editor of *Esquire* put her at the red-hot center of his Literary Establishment chart of 1963.

As Flannery’s cultural star was on the rise, she was stricken by lupus, an incurable, debilitating disease that sapped her energy and forced her return to the “very muddy and manurey” farm back in Georgia. Confined there, dependent on her mother’s care, she wrote only as her diminishing strength permitted—for two hours every morning.

Before her death at 39, Flannery predicted that nobody would write her biography, since lives spent between the house and the chicken yard do not make exciting copy. Yet her outsized spiritual dramas enacted on a Southern stage—told through short stories, novels, and many letters—ensure her place among the greatest American writers and at the top of my English syllabus.

A continual turning

One cannot get through a Flannery O'Connor story without encountering the strangeness of God. As she said, the greatest dramas involve the salvation or loss of the soul. Her short story “Revelation” startles with its final vision of a field of living fire. The vast hordes of souls rumbling toward heaven, the battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs, are a queerly beautiful sight. And then the words, “In the woods around her the invisible cricket choruses had struck up, but what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah.” Here is a spiritual reality, glorious and disturbing, which my comfortable Christian categories cannot contain.

Flannery lamented that our secular society understands the religious mind less and less, that people who believe vigorously in Christ are wholly odd to most readers. It becomes more and more difficult in America to make belief believable, yet this is what she wanted to do.

My husband, Charles, has always been a Flannery O'Connor fan, and he introduced me to her personal correspondence. Flannery’s letters reveal a warm, witty, probing woman—nothing like the stern author I’d imagined from her violent stories. She discusses manuscripts she’s rewriting, the books she’s reading, a funny encounter with the telephone repairman, a promise to send more peacock feathers, news of Cousin Katie, complaints about the “idiot legislature,” and an account of a funeral. Throughout the 596 pages, there is a

great deal of theology. Flannery insists that she is not a mystic and does not lead a holy life, yet she unapologetically displays her faith: a life of continually turning away from egocentricity and toward God.

In Flannery's letters, I find themes that are familiar: sin and grace, fall and redemption, and the ultimate reality, God revealed in the Incarnation. She calls for the abandonment of the self: "I measure God by everything I'm not." She embraces suffering, insisting that before grace can heal "it cuts with the sword Christ said he came to bring." While many casual believers think that faith is a big electric blanket, she says, of course it is a cross. Her Christian faith is a demanding one.

And then there's that word *mystery* again, one of her favorites. She never tosses it around in the way of fuzzy spirituality. Flannery's mystery is a rich and complex thing; it's the ground of her spiritual life, and it explains everything, though I'm still struggling to understand what she means by it. I do know what while we contemporary readers strip the cosmos of religious meaning, Flannery aims to return us to mystery, where the unseen ordering of the world speaks of God the Creator. "This is the central Christian mystery," Flannery says. "Life has, for all its horror, been found by God to be worth dying for."

The meaning of mystery

Nearly 50 years after Flannery's death, I hold a slender Sterling marbled composition book. It is Flannery's private prayer journal, written when she was 19 years old and a student in Iowa. "Dear God," the teenager begins in the first entry. "I cannot love Thee the way I want to. You are the slim crescent of a moon that I see and my self is the earth's shadow that keeps me from seeing all the moon." Flannery prays to know God. Flannery's journal is filled with questions. In some journal entries, she prays for spiritual trust. She prays for forgiveness. And then Flannery writes this one line, "Please help me to get down under things and find where You are."

Help me get down under things and find where you are. When I read her modest petition, I feel, at last, the meaning of mystery for Flannery. She once said that fiction is the concrete expression of mystery—mystery that is lived. For Flannery, mystery is about getting down under things to find where God is, illuminating the divine foundation of all that is, seen and unseen.

Of all of her writings, the words I'll remember best come from this yearning, young Flannery, the wavering believer who wrote, "I don't want to be doomed to mediocrity in my feeling for Christ. I want to feel. I want to love. Take me, dear Lord, and set me in the direction I am to go."

When I was a teenager, Flannery found me, a disoriented, displaced Yankee, and she shook me up with shocking, hilarious, perplexing stories of the South—and of the Spirit. I want to keep on walking with Flannery: to feel, to love, to follow, to get down under things and find where God is.

Karen Wright Marsh is the author of [Vintage Saints and Sinners: 25 Christians Who Transformed My Faith](#) and is executive director and cofounder of [Theological Horizons](#), a university ministry that advances theological scholarship at the intersection of faith, thought, and life. Taken from [Vintage Saints and Sinners](#) by Karen Wright Marsh. ©2017 by Karen Marsh. Used by permission of InterVarsity Press, P.O. Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL 60515-1426. www.ivpress.com.

