

Flannery O'Connor

THE CONTEMPORARY REVIEWS

Edited by

R. NEIL SCOTT and IRWIN H. STREIGHT

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FLANNERY O'CONNOR

The American Critical Archives is a series of reference books that provides representative selections of contemporary reviews of the main works of major American authors. Specifically, each volume contains both full reviews and excerpts from reviews that appeared in newspapers and weekly and monthly periodicals, generally within a few months of the publication of the work concerned. There is an introductory historical overview by a volume editor, as well as checklists of additional reviews located but not quoted.

Despite Flannery O'Connor's brief life, her work, comprising novels, short stories, essays, and articles, has had a great impact on American literature and to some extent popular culture of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Her writing has become well loved, well read, and often studied. This book reprints complete book reviews and excerpts from review essays on the works of Flannery O'Connor that appeared in newspapers and periodicals during the author's writing life (1945–64) and after her early death. The more than 400 edited reviews are prefaced with a substantial Introduction that situates O'Connor within the critical milieu of post-war American letters and Southern literary tradition, and provides an overview of contemporary critical responses to her collected stories, novels, and occasional pieces. An important resource for scholars of O'Connor and of Southern literature generally, this volume reveals much about her early reception and the continuing relevance of her work.

AMERICAN CRITICAL ARCHIVES 16

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Frontispiece: Flannery O'Connor reading the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* at home in Milledgeville, Georgia.

Photograph courtesy of the Flannery O'Connor Collection, Georgia College & State University Library.

*For David R. Joy and Marie F. Harper
and, of course, my beloved Sheila, David, Stephanie, and Sherry*
R. Neil Scott

*For Susan,
Jairus, Aaron, Jesse, Sage, and Flannery Evangeline
with love and promises to keep . . .*
Irwin H. Streight

Series editor's preface

The American Critical Archives Series documents a part of a writer's career that is usually difficult to examine, that is, the immediate response to each work as it was made public on the part of reviewers in contemporary newspapers and journals. Although it would not be feasible to reprint every review, each volume in the series reprints a selection of reviews designed to provide the reader with a proportionate sense of the critical response, whether it was positive, negative, or mixed. Checklists of other known reviews are also included to complete the documentary record and allow access for those who wish to do further reading and research.

The editors of each volume have provided an introduction that surveys the career of the author in the context of the contemporary critical response. Ideally, the introduction will inform the reader in brief of what is to be learned by a reading of the full volume. The reader then can go as deeply as necessary in terms of the kind of information desired – be it about a single work, a period in the author's life, or the author's entire career. The intent is to provide quick and easy access to the material for students, scholars, librarians, and general readers.

When completed, the American Critical Archives should constitute a comprehensive history of critical practice in America, and in some cases England, as the writers' careers were in progress. The volumes open a window on the patterns and forces that have shaped the history of American writing and the reputations of the writers. These are primary documents in the literary and cultural life of the nation.

M. THOMAS INGE

Editorial note

Unlike other authors in the *Cambridge Contemporary Reviews* series, all of who, with the notable exception of Henry David Thoreau (who shares a volume with Ralph Waldo Emerson), wrote and published prodigiously, some with corpuses of 25–30 works or more, Flannery O'Connor published very little. Her literary output over the 19 years of her writing life amounts to only two short novels, *Wise Blood* (1952) and *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960), and two collections of short fiction, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (1955) and *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1965), the latter published posthumously. As well, she composed an introduction for and edited a memoir of a young cancer victim, *A Memoir of Mary Ann* (1961), written by a community of Dominican nuns who cared for the child. A trade paperback combining her two novels and first collection of stories was published in 1964 as *Three by Flannery O'Connor* and did not occasion any contemporary reviews as far as we have discovered. Her occasional papers – talks, published essays, and articles – were edited by her good friends Sally and Robert Fitzgerald and published as *Mystery and Manners* (1969). Seven of the fourteen collected and compiled pieces were published in O'Connor's lifetime. Her collected short fiction was published in 1971 as *Flannery O'Connor: The Complete Stories* and was honored with the National Book Award for Fiction that year – the first time the award had been granted to a non-living author.

Given the remarkable posthumous acclaim for O'Connor's art and thought, and the special honor accorded her in the seven years following her death in 1964, in selecting and editing reviews for this volume we have taken what we feel are legitimate liberties within the rubric of *contemporary* critical responses to American authors with which the series is concerned. In O'Connor's case, the editors felt, and the series editor concurred, that it is simply untenable to be limited to those reviews published within her lifetime. Some of O'Connor's finest stories were collected in the posthumously published *Everything That Rises*, notably "Revelation," "Parker's Back," and "Judgement Day" – the latter a reworking of one of the first stories she wrote for inclusion in her MFA thesis, "The Geranium." Reviews of her second collection of stories register a critical awareness of the deepening of her literary craft and vision. Early critical studies of O'Connor's fiction were guided, for better or for worse, by her

literary-theological manifestos collected and published in *Mystery and Manners*. Reviews of these occasional essays are crucial for understanding some of the critical assumptions that gave direction to O'Connor scholarship in the flowering of critical monographs on her work that appeared in the 1970s–1980s. Her accomplishments in the art of short fiction and evaluations of her place within American letters are germane to reviews of *The Complete Stories*. This volume thus includes reviews that are not by definition *contemporary* but that nonetheless evidence initial critical responses to her work. We chose not to include the nearly 125 reviews of O'Connor's collected letters, *The Habit of Being* (1979), restricting ourselves to her published fiction and her essays and public lectures (hybrid texts of which are included in *Mystery and Manners*) – those works of imagination and intellect that she offered up for public scrutiny.

Given the small body of fiction and prose she published, we have been able in this volume to collect and reprint most of the reviews of O'Connor's works published within her lifetime and shortly following her untimely death. The few items on checklists at the end of each section are either brief bullet reviews that offer little other than descriptive commentary; reviews for which, through no fault of our own, we could not secure permissions at the time of publication; or reviews that appeared in British publications following the decision by O'Connor's London publisher, Faber and Faber, to reissue new hardcover editions of *Wise Blood* and *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* in 1968 and *The Violent Bear It Away* in 1969. Paperback reissues of the Faber editions of O'Connor's two novels and her last story collection, *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, appeared in 1980 and garnered a few reviews. We have included a sampling of these post-contemporary reviews to give a sense of O'Connor's growing reputation with British readers. Checklists at the end of these book sections provide full bibliographic details for further reviews of her reissued works in the British press.

Thus the reader/O'Connor scholar is here presented with virtually the full suite of critical book reviews on O'Connor's published fiction and essays, more than 400 reviews from more than 200 publications. The complete evolution of contemporary critical responses to O'Connor from influential reviewers in leading periodicals to small-town book columnists is evidenced within these pages. Questions of how O'Connor fared with her contemporary critics, most interestingly among the often ambivalent, sometimes antagonistic, reviewers in the major Catholic periodicals, can be definitively answered with reference to the primary documents collected herein.

Many of the reviews reprinted in this volume appeared in newspapers: major dailies and weeklies as well as lesser, local print media. Newspaper book reviewers often write in haste, and are particularly prone to factual errors. As well, some reviews of O'Connor's works that appear in the newspapers of the South were written by individuals whose literary palate had not been well graced.

After reading a “painful” review of *Wise Blood* in Georgia’s major daily, the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, O’Connor remarks acidly in a letter that the book reviewer is foremost a gardening columnist, who should not have been “taken . . . away from the petunias.” Numerous reviews collected in this volume contain basic errors of biographical and bibliographical detail. The *Time* review of *The Violent Bear It Away* (February 29, 1960), for example, incorrectly describes the nature of O’Connor’s affliction with lupus. One reviewer, who claims personal contact with O’Connor on several occasions, states erringly that she died of cancer (Newquist, *Chicago Heights Star*, May 27, 1965). Curiously, the majority of reviews for the posthumously published *Everything That Rises Must Converge* mistakenly give O’Connor’s age at the time of her death as 38. Born March 25, 1925 in Savannah, Georgia, where she lived until 1938, O’Connor died August 3, 1964 in Milledgeville’s Baldwin County Hospital, four months past her 39th birthday. Whether this is one critic’s mistake carried over by others, or somehow indicative of widely deficient math skills among book reviewers, it is impossible to tell.

Reviewing *Mystery and Manners* in the *Chicago News*, Hayden Carruth makes the untenable claim that “In her relatively short life, Miss O’Connor gave more than 500 lectures.” This may well be a typo, but the context suggests not. The Fitzgeralds state in their “Foreword” to the volume that O’Connor left unpublished “at least half a hundred typescripts for lectures,” though with little indication of where and when they were presented. O’Connor’s dim view of Catholic literary tastes might well extend to bibliographic skills as well. *Catholic Library World* announced that her *Complete Stories* had won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1972 (wrong prize; wrong year) and that the volume contains “many chapters from the three great novels” (she published only two and was working on a third). Ivan Olsen, reviewing *Mystery and Manners* in *The Bee* (Fresno, California), gives the title of her first novel as *Wild Blood* and fails to include *Everything That Rises Must Converge* among a list of O’Connor’s published fiction. Obviously, a number of her reviewers were not familiar with O’Connor’s work, as she at times lamented. These and other like errors are regrettably tagged in the text by the Latin abbreviation [*sic*] to indicate a mistake in the original that may not rightfully be corrected editorially. In a few cases, we have interpolated a bracketed editorial comment to rectify a critical piece of misinformation.

Evident typos and errors in punctuation use, along with careless spelling of names and titles and lack or misuse of capitals, have been silently corrected. Parenthetical bibliographic information giving the book’s publisher and price has been deleted along with editors’ subtitles in longish reviews. Book titles that originally appeared in single or double quotation marks have been italicized. Footnotes in lengthy review articles have not been included. Ellipses are used to indicate deleted material unrelated to direct review commentary on O’Connor’s work or oeuvre, or lengthy quoted passages from her works that appear in

multiple reviews. In no respect has the editing altered or distorted the substance of the contemporary critical responses to O'Connor's works.

About mid-way through our six-year labor on this volume, Neil Scott visited the Farrar, Straus and Giroux Archives at the New York Public Library and stumbled upon a cache of about 125 tear-sheet reviews, many of which had appeared in small, unindexed magazines, journals, and local newspapers throughout the US. These tear-sheet reviews were supplied to the publisher by one or more clipping services. The majority of these reviews, unfortunately, have incomplete citations. While for most items the date and title of the publication is recorded or otherwise evident on the original tear-sheet, a great number of these clipped reviews lack page references. Further, it may be that some of the dates stamped on the tear-sheet reviews are dates of receipt instead of publication. The editors have made concerted effort under the constraints of producing this volume to discover as many of the missing page numbers and correct dates as time and resources would allow – by scanning scores of reels of microfilm, hunting down hundreds of bound volumes of small periodicals, begging the assistance of reference librarians at distant college and university libraries, and appealing directly to authors and to the various publishers and permission holders. At the time of publication, however, there were still items lacking page references, and these have been omitted in the citations.

For most of the more than 400 reviews reprinted in this volume the reader is in possession of the complete text. Nonetheless, scholars who wish to view and use images of the original reviews will find photocopies of all the reviews reprinted in this volume in the files of the Flannery O'Connor Collection in the Special Collections of the Ina Dillard Russell Library at Georgia College and State University in Milledgeville, Georgia.

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Introduction

Flannery O'Connor was herself a book reviewer, and considered the art of book reviewing a vital practice, personally for the sake of both her own intellectual and spiritual growth, and publicly as a way of nurturing the reading tastes of her religious community. From 1956 to 1964 she contributed 120 book reviews to local diocesan bi-weekly papers *The Georgia Bulletin* and *The Southern Cross*. Her brief 200–300 word reviews covered works ranging from systematic theology and the philosophy of science to religious history and Catholic fiction. She reviewed books, she remarks in a letter, as a way of “performing [a] kind of charity” when her physical infirmity denied her the prospect of pursuing other acts of service to those of her faith community. Book reviewing for O'Connor was a way of giving back to the Church that had formed her religious and artistic vision and, in some small way, as she comments in one review, a means whereby she hoped to make a “contribution to Catholic intellectual life.”

O'Connor had a particularly low view of the literary tastes of Catholic readers, however, and, it must be added, of the average American reader as well. In a letter to Catholic writer John Lynch, she remarks characteristically of her first venture as a reviewer for *The Bulletin*, February 18, 1956, that she has had the “doubtful honor” of reviewing a collection of Catholic short fiction entitled *All Manner of Men*, compiled from stories published in small Catholic magazines, and which included one of Lynch's stories. With some evident perturbation in her tone, she laments the limited range of the stories in the collection, the lack of depth in characterization, and their overly pious intent. Later, in one of her book reviews, she observes of one deplorable novel that its shallow combination of “slickness and Catholicism” had resulted in a “fictionalized apologetics” that introduced “a depressing new category: light Catholic summer reading.”

O'Connor's fiction was anything but “light Catholic summer reading.” Indeed, her Catholicism seldom surfaces in her fiction. She thought of herself as writing more broadly a kind of “Christian Realism,” and was wary about the implications of being branded a Catholic writer. She tells writer Elizabeth Bishop in a letter, April 23, 1960, “Although I am a Catholic writer, I don't care to get labelled as such in the popular sense of it, as it is then

assumed that you have some religious axe to grind.” O’Connor did not write religious fiction in the sense of forming a story around a theological point or matter of Church dogma. In her essay “Catholic Novelists and Their Readers,” O’Connor remarks that the Catholic novel does not necessarily reflect “a Christianized or Catholicized world,” but defines a mode of fiction “in which the truth as Christians know it has been used as a light to see the world by.” While she affirms time and again that her vision as a writer has been formed by the Church, her art was not an instrument for serving her theology. Her calling was to serve the demands of writing good fiction. In this regard, she often referred to Conrad’s literary manifesto in his Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*: that it was the “aim of the artist to render the highest possible justice to the visible universe.” Perhaps because she devoted herself to the business of crafting solid, believably realistic fiction as a literary mode through which to present the mystery of grace in “the visible universe,” her stories have found a permanent place in the canon of American literature.

When she died on August 3, 1964 at 39 from complications arising from her battle with lupus, a disease that attacks the body’s immunity system, she left behind a relatively small body of work: two short novels, and two collections of short fiction comprising 19 stories, the last published posthumously. Though her literary output was small, even in her lifetime her reputation loomed large in American letters. She was hailed as a writer with a particular genius and, as Robert Fitzgerald puts it in his “Introduction” to *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, with a range that is “vertical and Dantesque,” though her stories plough a narrow furrow of backwoods Southern soil, with its rednecks, charlatans, and Bible-thumping piety.

Hawthorne and Poe and to some extent Henry James are her precursors in American literature. Apart from her fellow Southerner William Faulkner, of whom she stood in awe, she found little in common with the major American modernists who wrote short fiction – Dreiser, Anderson, Fitzgerald, and Hemingway. Her modernist models were European – Conrad, Joyce, and Kafka – and, as often, Old World French Catholic novelists – Mauriac, Bernanos, and Bloy. Indeed, she had a marked distaste for the fictions of her contemporaries: Erskine Caldwell, Carson McCullers, and Truman Capote, the latter of whom she once remarked “makes me plumb sick.” She identified herself more readily with writers of experimental fiction: Nathanael West, John Hawkes, and Vladimir Nabokov. In a review of the reissue of *Wise Blood* in the Chicago *Sun-Times*, on which O’Connor remarks in a letter, she is congratulated for producing a *Lolita* story five or six years before Nabokov. It is interesting to observe that she makes reference to very few writers of any period or place in the addresses, lectures, and essays collected as *Mystery and Manners*. She was an original and went about her “bidness” with a prophetic awareness of her gift and calling. Whatever her doubts about how her writing would be received – and she repeatedly commented that her stories were

misread and misunderstood – there is no doubt that Flannery O’Connor had a profound sense of her vocation as a writer and a remarkable confidence in her gifts and skills for creating compelling fiction. “I write because I am good at it,” she remarked famously to a student’s question. And even those critics who objected to her theological world view could not deny that, particularly as a writer of short fiction, O’Connor was undeniably “good at it,” and, indeed, one of the finest writers of short fiction in our literature.

Wise Blood (1952)

It is fair to say that right from the start of her literary life Flannery O’Connor commanded the attention of the American literati. While her reputation grew slowly, and divergently, right from the start her vision is unblinkingly clear and unrelenting. Her quirky and flawed first novel, *Wise Blood*, the work of a 25-year-old graduate of the prestigious Iowa Writers’ Workshop, announced her signature subject matter and stylistic gifts.

American publisher Rinehart had secured the rights to publish O’Connor’s first novel after she won the 1947 Rinehart-Iowa Fiction Award upon the recommendation of Paul Engle, her instructor and mentor at Iowa, and on the strength of the promising stories that comprised her MFA thesis. But Rinehart editor John Selby proved unsympathetic to the kind of novel O’Connor wanted to write. His condescending objections to early drafts of her first novel infuriated O’Connor, and prompted this personally confrontational and somewhat high-toned response from the young writer:

... I can tell you that I would not like at all to work with you as do other writers on your list. I feel that whatever virtues the novel may have are very much connected with the limitations you mention. I am not writing a conventional novel, and I think that the quality of the novel I write will derive precisely from the peculiarity or aloneness, if you will, of the experience I write from. . . .

In short, I am amenable to criticism but only within the sphere of what I am trying to do: I will not be persuaded to do otherwise.

O’Connor was eventually released from her contract with Rinehart, with Selby denouncing her as “stiff-necked, uncooperative, and unethical” – harsh words that stung her greatly. She was not, however, altogether unaware of her intractability and admitted to being “prematurely arrogant” as an unpublished young writer. Yet, in this early attempt to secure a major publisher (Harcourt Brace soon picked up the option on her first novel), we see O’Connor as uncompromising in her vision and in the kind of story she felt called to write. This determination to find her own form and this early affirmation of her intentions she would carry on throughout her brief writing career.

Though she was nonplussed by Rinehart's criticism of her first novel as "unpleasant," O'Connor *was* concerned about how her "nasty little stories" would be received by members of her family. After the publication of *Wise Blood* in 1952, her mother insisted that she write an ameliorating introduction "in the tone of the *Sacred Heart Messenger*" (her local church bulletin) and paste it on the inside of a copy of the novel to be presented to her supportive 83-year-old cousin Katie, "so she won't be shocked." O'Connor did nothing of the sort. But she does recall her initial anxiety in a letter of February 1956, indicating somewhat sardonically her concern that her elderly cousin would suffer a stroke when she read the novel. Cousin Katie, it appears, did not suffer any ill effects after reading *Wise Blood*, but sent O'Connor a note with a blunt critical response: "I do not like your book."

A number of early reviewers of *Wise Blood* were less succinct but of the same mind. Oliver LaFarge of *Saturday Review* found Hazel Motes "so repulsive that one cannot become interested in him" and the story itself "sheer monotony." Isaac Rosenfeld's unflattering review in *New Republic*, grimly acknowledged by O'Connor in a letter to Robert Fitzgerald, takes the same view, pronouncing Hazel Motes a "poor, sick, ugly, raving lunatic" whose experiences and responses have little value or interest to the modern reader. Further, Rosenfeld comments that the novel is not easy to read: its symbolism is obscure and there is "confusion in its religious ideas," he writes. *Kirkus Reviews* noted that the "savage phantasmagoria of good and evil" in the novel would be of interest only to the "more zealous avantgardists."

Many reviews commend O'Connor's first novel, but do so somewhat backhandedly. A few, like the unnamed reviewer in *Time*, find merit in the "arty" structure of the novel and in the "oddness" of its Southern redneck grotesques, but judge it at best a bizarre work reflecting Southern degeneracy. Milton Byam in the *Library Journal* at first flatters the author as belonging to "that galaxy of rising young writers who deal with the South," but goes on to comment there is "very little actual life going on" in the novel, though characters "speak authentically." Harvey Webster in *New Leader* faults O'Connor for violating conventions of both realism and expressionism in her uncertain mixture of detail and "faintly precious striving for a multiplicity of symbols." Close to home, Martha Smith in the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* finds that O'Connor's "extraordinary talent" has produced a work of horror fiction, a kind of Southern gothic novel intended to "cause thought, introspection, and sheer terror." She adds hopefully, "I can hardly wait to read what Miss O'Connor may write about some happy people." An unsigned review in the *Savannah Morning News* describes *Wise Blood* as "a shocking book, with lust flaunted and blasphemy rampant," but concedes that amid its surface "obscurity and obscenity" the novel bears "a quality of Dostoevsky" and is the work of "a rare mind." O'Connor was certainly not cheered, and more

often appalled, by reviews of *Wise Blood*. Upon receipt of some unfavorable reviews of the novel, sent by her publisher Robert Giroux, she responds in a letter, "I'm steeling myself for even more dreadful reviews."

Happily, a small number of reviewers saw clearly O'Connor's un-ironic story of Hazel Motes's search for God along a *via negativa*. Sylvia Stallings in the New York *Herald Tribune* praises O'Connor for her "understanding of the anguish of a mind tormented by God" and her ability to "anchor the fantastic in the specific." R.W.B. Lewis's eclectic response in *Hudson Review* notes shades of Nathanael West and Kafka in her "rather horribly surrealistic use of characters and incidents," and commends the author for her "remarkably pure, luminous prose." One of the most perceptive reviews of the novel comes, curiously, from a Canadian, Melwyn Breen, writing in the now defunct arts and culture review *Saturday Night*, who perceives that O'Connor's novel "is a sort of allegory on the fate of religion in the modern world."

Several reviews register an incredulity amongst critics that such an unusual novel is the work of a shy, 26-year-old female, a devout Catholic from a prominent Georgia family. Martin Greenberg in *American Mercury* comments, "You would never guess from the vigor and boldness of the writing that Flannery O'Connor is a woman." O'Connor recounts in a letter to Elizabeth Bates and Robert Lowell an encounter with a man in Nashville, who, upon learning that she was the author of *Wise Blood*, looked at her scrutinizingly and remarked, "That was a profound book. You don't look like you wrote it." She reports that she then put on her "squintiest expression and snarled, 'Well, I did.'" But she appears to be painfully conscious that her personal presence did not seem to stand up alongside her powerful vision and voice as a writer. From comments in her letters about her appearance, especially in photographs on book jackets of her works, it is evident that, throughout her writing career, O'Connor was quite concerned that through the camera's eye she did not appear all that intelligent. She remarks characteristically of the photo on the dust jacket of *Wise Blood* that she looks "like a refugee from deep thought." As Sally Fitzgerald acknowledges in the opening paragraphs of her Introduction to O'Connor's collected letters, *The Habit of Being*, "the camera was often as unjust as what was written about her."

Appearances aside, most mainstream reviewers opined, prophetically, that O'Connor was a new writer with tremendous promise. William Goyen, writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, calls her "a writer of power" and remarks on the visceral effect of reading her first novel. The highly favorable yet somewhat scattershot review in *Newsweek* begins, "Flannery O'Connor is perhaps the most naturally gifted of the youngest generation of American novelists, and her first book, *Wise Blood*, has an imaginative intensity rare in any fiction these days." Across the Atlantic, the London *Times Literary*