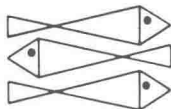


Flannery
O'Connor
The
Complete
Stories

Flannery O'Connor

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Farrar, Straus and Giroux

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THE COMPLETE STORIES OF
Flannery O'Connor

by *Flannery O'Connor*

Wise Blood, NOVEL

A Good Man Is Hard to Find, STORIES

The Violent Bear It Away, NOVEL

Everything That Rises Must Converge, STORIES

Mystery and Manners, ESSAYS EDITED BY

SALLY AND ROBERT FITZGERALD

Introduction

Flannery O'Connor's first book has never, up to now, been published. It was entitled *The Geranium: A Collection of Short Stories* and consists of the first six stories in this volume. The title page of the original manuscript, in the library of the University of Iowa, bears the legend, "A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts, in the Department of English, in the Graduate College of the State University of Iowa." It is dated June 1947 and a separate page carries a dedication to her teacher, Paul Engle.

At their first meeting in his office, in 1946, Mr. Engle recalls,* he was unable to understand a word of Flannery's native Georgian tongue: "Embarrassed, I asked her to write down what she had just said on a pad. She wrote: 'My name is Flannery O'Connor. I am not a journalist. Can I come to the Writer's Workshop?' . . . I told her to bring examples of her writing and we would consider her, late as it was. Like Keats, who spoke Cockney but wrote the purest sounds in English, Flannery spoke a dialect beyond instant comprehension but on the page her prose was imaginative, tough, alive: just like Flannery herself. For a few weeks we had this strange and yet trusting relationship. Soon I understood those Georgia pronunciations. The stories were quietly filled with insight, shrewd about human weakness, hard and compassionate . . . She was shy about having them read, and when it was her turn to have a story presented in the Workshop, I would read it aloud anonymously. Robert Penn Warren was teaching a semester while Flannery was at the University of Iowa; there was a scene about a black and a white man, and Warren criticized it . . . It was changed. Flannery

* Letter to Robert Giroux dated July 13, 1971.

always had a flexible and objective view of her own writing, constantly revising, and in every case improving. The will to be a writer was adamant; nothing could resist it, not even her own sensibility about her own work. Cut, alter, try it again . . . Sitting at the back of the room, silent, Flannery was more of a presence than the exuberant talkers who serenade every writing-class with their loudness. The only communicating gesture she would make was an occasional amused and shy smile at something absurd. The dreary chair she sat in glowed."

The publishing career of this unknown writer of twenty-one had already started. Flannery mailed "The Geranium" to the editors of *Accent* as early as February 1946.* They accepted it at once and printed it in their summer issue. On the basis of the stories she later incorporated into her novel-in-progress, *Wise Blood*, Mr. Engle recommended her for a prize offered by a publisher for a first novel. In the spring of 1947 she was awarded this prize—the sum of \$750, which was to serve as part of the advance against royalties if the publisher ultimately accepted the novel.

Flannery received her master's degree that summer; *Sewanee Review* published "The Train" the next spring; in June 1948 she took the important and crucial step of finding a literary agent and a lifelong friend, Elizabeth McKee. Miss McKee placed her story "The Capture" (entitled "The Turkey" in the thesis) with *Mademoiselle* in November. It was shortly after this—I was not the publisher involved with the prize—that I met Flannery O'Connor.

Robert Lowell brought her into my office late in February 1949. They had come to New York from Yaddo, the writer's colony at Saratoga Springs, where Flannery worked on *Wise Blood* and Lowell on his poems. Behind her soft-spoken speech, clear-eyed gaze and shy manner, I sensed a tremendous strength. This was the rarest kind of young writer, one who was prepared to work her utmost and knew exactly what she must do with her talent. I rather regretted, as a publisher, meeting such an interesting writer at the start of a career in which I could play no part. She told me she was committed elsewhere, and if I knew anything it was that she would

* We are indebted to Daniel Curley, former editor of *Accent*, for verifying this date.

honor her commitment. She asked about a new writer I had recently published—Thomas Merton; I gave her a copy of *The Seven Storey Mountain* to take with her to her mother's house in Milledgeville, Georgia. Later I heard that she would be coming north again to live in Connecticut with my friends Sally and Robert Fitzgerald and I hoped I'd have the opportunity to know her better.

It was not until after her death in 1964 that I learned exactly how her publishing fate took an unexpected turn. (Our later publishing relationship also developed surprisingly, and I'll come to that.) The details are fully and rather comically recorded in her correspondence with Elizabeth McKee, who gave me copies of the letters before she added the originals to the papers that Flannery's mother, Regina O'Connor, is collecting. The excerpts from Flannery's letters are quoted here with the permission of her literary executor, Robert Fitzgerald.

In her first letter (June 19, 1948) to Miss McKee, Flannery revealed she had been working on the novel "a year and a half and will probably be two more years finishing it." She described her writing habits in a letter dated July 13: "I must tell you how I work. I don't have my novel outlined and I have to write to discover what I am doing. Like the old lady, I don't know so well what I think until I see what I say; then I have to say it over again. I am working on the twelfth chapter now. I long ago quit numbering the pages but I suppose I am past the 50,000 word mark. Of the twelve chapters only a few won't have to be rewritten, and I can't exhibit such formless stuff. It would discourage me to look at it right now and anyway I yearn to go about my business to the end."

At the end of the year, when she was worried about money, her agent advised her to submit the new chapters in order to get a definite commitment and perhaps a further advance. From Yaddo, December 15, 1948: "Perhaps I shall get down [to New York] in January and perhaps before that send you the chapters I am working on . . . I have decided, however, that no good comes of sending anything off in a hurry." On January 20, 1949, Flannery wrote: "Here are the first nine chapters which please show [the publisher] and let us be on with financial thoughts. They are, of course, not finished but they are finished enough for the present . . ." When

there was no response by February 5: "I'll be anxious to hear the outcome . . ."

She heard it on February 16 and it was not to her liking. One can sympathize with the publisher's problem at this early stage of composition. *Wise Blood* was a strange book, as Flannery would have been the first to acknowledge. What she could not accept was the tone of the publisher's letter. He said he thought she was a pretty straight shooter, that she had an astonishing gift, but that some aspects of the book were obscured by her habit of rewriting over and over again. To be honest, he added, he sensed a kind of aloneness in the book, as if she were writing out of her own experience, and consciously limiting this experience. He wished she would sit down and tell him what was what. He hoped she didn't mind his forthright letter.

Flannery wrote at once to Miss McKee: "Please tell me what is behind this Sears-Roebuck Straight Shooter approach. I presume . . . either that [the publisher] will not take the novel as it will be if left to my fiendish care (it will be essentially as it is), or that [the publisher] would like to rescue it at this point and train it into a conventional novel . . . The letter is addressed to a slightly dim-witted Campfire Girl, and I cannot look forward with composure to a lifetime of others like them."

At the same time, in an effort to honor her commitment, she answered the publisher's letter next day: "I can only hope that in the finished novel the direction will be clearer . . . 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 pretend to do otherwise. The finished book, though I hope less angular, will be just as odd if not odder than the nine chapters you now have."

Matters had not improved much by the following April, when she wrote Paul Engle to tell him that "other publishers who have read the two printed chapters"—she was referring to "The Train" and to the publication that winter of "The Heart of the Park" in

Partisan Review—"are interested." She also told him about her meeting with the dissatisfied publisher, at which he "and I came to the conclusion that I was 'prematurely arrogant.' I supplied him with the phrase." She thought that "no one will understand my need to work this novel out in my own way better than you, although you may feel that I should work faster. I work ALL the time, but I cannot work fast. No one can convince me I shouldn't rewrite as much as I do." She concluded with the news that she had been turned down for the Guggenheim fellowship for which Mr. Engle had recommended her. (Her other sponsors were Robert Lowell, Philip Rahv and Robert Penn Warren.)

I met her again in May 1950, at the christening of Maria Juliana Fitzgerald in Ridgefield, Connecticut. I noted what good spirits Flannery was in, as we gravely performed our roles as godparents, renouncing the devil and all his works and pomps. (It is to be regretted that she did not live to see our godchild become Sister Mary Julian in 1970.) She told me she was still working hard on the novel and was still committed to her publisher, though her literary agent soon informed me that the submission of additional chapters had not allayed his doubts. Finally, in October, after she had obtained a release from him, I offered and she signed a contract for *Wise Blood*.

The strength I sensed in Flannery at our first meeting now had an incredible strain put on it. She was stricken with lupus on her journey home for Christmas, and spent nine months, desperately ill, in and out of Emory Hospital in Atlanta. On her release she was unable to climb stairs, and Regina O'Connor then decided to move to "Andalusia," their country place five miles from town, which was to be their home and Flannery's refuge from then on. By the following September Flannery was writing Miss McKee, "The last time I saw Bob Giroux, he said we would push the date [of delivery of the manuscript] up to the first of the year [1951] but that there was nothing magic in that date. There is nothing magic in my speed or progress at this time, but I don't know anything for it. I plan to last until the first of the year and then see what I've got." A full year later (September 1, 1951) she wrote Miss McKee from Milledgeville:

“Bob Giroux and Caroline Gordon made some suggestions for improving my book and I have been working on these and have by now about come up with another draft of it.”

By the end of the year the novel was ready, and we began to prepare for publication. Flannery had less vanity than anyone I have ever known. When I asked her for a photograph to use on the book jacket, I expected a picture taken before her illness. The new one she sent was not unattractive, and she looked out at the reader with that clear-eyed gaze of hers, but her hair had not fully grown back nor had the puffiness induced by cortisone wholly subsided. The photograph was widely reproduced when *Wise Blood* was published in May 1952. I was disappointed by the reviews more than she was; they all recognized her power but missed her point.

In the five years between 1947, when a draft of the first chapter of *Wise Blood* was written, and 1952, Flannery's development was amazing. In the three years following, she wrote better and better. Starting late in 1952 with “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” a masterpiece of a story, she turned out one beauty after another, including “The River,” “The Life You Save May Be Your Own,” “The Displaced Person,” “The Artificial Nigger” and “Good Country People.” Catherine Carver, whom we were fortunate enough to have as an editor, and who worked with Flannery at this period, brought each new story into my office with more or less the same remark, “Wait till you read this one!” Early in 1955 Flannery completed work on her second book, a collection of these stories which she entitled *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*. In January we sent it to press, having set publication for June. I remember our amusement at Evelyn Waugh's reaction to the advance proofs we sent him: “If these stories are in fact the work of a young lady, they are indeed remarkable.” At the beginning of April, before the book appeared, I resigned from the firm and joined the house with which I have since been associated. When Flannery sent me an inscribed copy, soon after my departure, I felt a twinge of sadness that my editorial association with her books had ended.

Once again fate rearranged what seemed to be an unalterable course. After the very successful publication of *A Good Man Is*

Hard to Find, Flannery was offered a new contract about which she asked my advice, saying she wanted to stay as long as Catherine Carver remained as her editor. In that case, I suggested, why not ask that such a stipulation be incorporated in the contract? This was not readily granted, but Flannery had made up her mind and in the end she got what she wanted. Within three years, after Catherine Carver and Denver Lindley had left, it came to pass that Flannery was free to join the house she remained with until her death. We contracted for her third book, "a novel in progress," on April 15, 1958, and published *The Violent Bear It Away* in 1960. Then I learned that *Wise Blood* was out of print, and we soon acquired this classic work. She wrote a short and eloquent preface for the second edition, describing the book as "a comic novel about a Christian *malgré lui*" and stating that it had been written by "an author congenitally innocent of theory, but one with certain preoccupations. That belief in Christ is to some a matter of life and death has been a stumbling block for readers who would prefer to think it a matter of no great consequence." She ended by defining her theme, free will or freedom, as "a mystery, and one which a novel, even a comic novel, can only be asked to deepen." We reissued *Wise Blood* in 1962, on the tenth anniversary of the original publication, and it lives on both in cloth and paperback editions. Didn't some wise man define a classic as a book that does not stay out of print?

One of Flannery's admirers was Thomas Merton, who became more of a fan with each new book of hers. Over the years I came to see how much the two had in common—a highly developed sense of comedy, deep faith, great intelligence. The aura of aloneness surrounding each of them was not an accident. It was their *métier*, in which they refined and deepened their very different talents in a short span of time. They both died at the height of their powers.

Finally, they were both as American as one can be. When publication of Merton's *The Sign of Jonas* was forbidden by the Abbot General in France, I was able to obtain its release only with the help of Jacques Maritain, who wrote him in beautiful French (the Abbot General did not read English and consequently had not read *The*

Sign of Jonas), explaining what the “American Trappist” was up to. As for Flannery, whose work can only be understood in an American setting, when a German publisher wanted to drop some of her stories as too shocking for Germanic sensibilities, she wrote Miss McKee, “I didn’t think I was *that* vicious.”

On a trip south in 1959 I stopped at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky to see Merton, before going to see Flannery in Georgia. He gave me a presentation copy of the beautifully designed private edition of *Prometheus: A Meditation* to take to her. He was much interested in Flannery’s peacocks. From previous visits to “Andalusia” I was able to tell him about their habits—how they roost at dusk by gradual hops from ground to fence post to tree limb; how their trains get caught under car wheels because they refuse to hurry; how vain they are (they seemed to jockey for good angles when they saw my camera); how funny it is to see peachicks rehearsing with their immature featherduster tails; and how rare it is to see the ultimate display, when the peacock shimmers and shakes his feathers in a kind of ecstasy at the height of preening. I could not tell Merton enough about them or about Flannery and her surroundings. What was Milledgeville like? Well, one of its sights was the beautiful ante-bellum Cline house, where Flannery’s aunt served a formal midday dinner. He was surprised to learn that far from being “backwoods” Milledgeville had once been the capital of Georgia. I also showed him a letter in which Flannery wrote: “Somebody sent me a gossip column that said Gene Kelly would make his TV debut in Flannery O’Connor’s ‘backwoods love story’ [*The Life You Save May Be Your Own*]. I certainly can’t afford to miss this metamorphosis.”

When I got to the O’Connors’, Flannery was curious to hear about Gethsemani. Was Merton allowed to talk to me? Yes, without restriction. I described our walks in the woods and the monastic routine of the day: first office (Matins) at two a.m. and last office (Compline) at sunset, followed by bed. I mentioned that in Louisville I’d bought Edith Sitwell’s recording of *Façade*, which Merton played over and over, laughing so hard that tears ran down his cheeks, and Flannery asked me to recite some of the poems. Even my pallid approximation of Dame Edith’s renderings of “Daisy and

Lily, lazy and silly," "Long Steel Grass" (pronounced "Grawss"), "Black Mrs. Behemoth" and the rest made her face light up with smiles.

When Flannery died, Merton was not exaggerating his estimate of her worth when he said he would not compare her with such good writers as Hemingway, Porter and Sartre but rather with "someone like Sophocles . . . I write her name with honor, for all the truth and all the craft with which she shows man's fall and his dishonor."

Up to the very end, she worked hard. She was working on *Everything That Rises Must Converge* during her final illness. "I have been thinking about this collection of my stories and what can be done to get it out with me sick," she wrote Miss McKee on May 7, 1964. "I am definitely out of commission for the summer and maybe longer with this lupus. I have to stay mostly in bed . . . If I were well there is a lot of rewriting and polishing I could do, but in my present state of health [the stories] are essentially all right the way they are." This is a typical O'Connor understatement; some of these last stories, like "Revelation" and the title story, are as nearly perfect as stories can be. In the same letter she proposed eight stories for the book, one of which, "The Partridge Festival," she later withdrew. All eight had appeared in magazines. Later in May she wrote, "I forgot to tell Bob Giroux that the title *Everything That Rises Must Converge* is all right with me if he thinks that is what it ought to be." It seemed absolutely right and (though she never said so) may have dated from a few years earlier when I sent her a French anthology of the writings of Teilhard de Chardin, one section of which was entitled *Tout Ce Qui Monte Converge*. I was unaware of the two unpublished stories she was working on.

The first of these new stories was "Parker's Back." Caroline Gordon later wrote of it: "Miss O'Connor's stories are all about the operations of supernatural grace in the lives of natural men and women. Such operations are infinitely various but so delicate that they have eluded some of the subtlest writers. In . . . 'Parker's Back,' Miss O'Connor seems to have succeeded where the great Flaubert failed: in the dramatization of that particular heresy which denies Our Lord corporeal substance. We do not naturally like anything which is unfamiliar. No wonder Miss O'Connor's writings have

baffled the reviewers, so much so they have reached for any *cliché* they could lay hold of in order to have some way of apprehending this original and disturbing work."

The final story, "Judgement Day," was mailed to me in early July. It is a revised and expanded version of "The Geranium," which appears to have been a favorite of hers, for letters to Miss McKee reveal that in 1955 she had also worked on an intermediate version under the title "An Exile in the East." As "Judgement Day" it became the ninth story in the collection published posthumously in 1965.

What turned out to be my last letter to Flannery was dated July 7, 1964. I knew of the recurrence of her illness, of course, but I did not know that the lupus was now uncontrolled. I enclosed with my letter an advance proof of our catalogue description of *Everything That Rises Must Converge* as it was then conceived. She never replied and in late July she was taken to the Baldwin County hospital at Milledgeville, where she died in a coma on August 3.

There are thirty-one stories in this volume. Nineteen are taken from Flannery's two collections and twelve* appear for the first time in book form. For this edition we have followed the author's original manuscripts for "The Partridge Festival," "Why Do the Heathen Rage?" and the first six stories. For the latter group we have also retained the order she followed in her thesis. The order of the other stories is chronological according to date of composition and does not duplicate the arrangement the author worked out for the two collections, which are of course available as she wanted them. Nor is it implied that all the stories here are of equal merit. It simply seems desirable to preserve as complete a collection of Flannery O'Connor's short fiction as possible.

Elizabeth Bishop, who with her poet's eye sees more than most of us, wrote at the time of Flannery's death: "I am sure her few books will live on and on in American literature. They are narrow, possibly, but they are clear, hard, vivid, and full of bits of description, phrases, and an odd insight that contains more real poetry than a dozen books of poems." She added a bit of testimony that Flannery herself would

* See *Notes*, p. 551.

have relished: "Critics who accuse her of exaggeration are quite wrong, I think. I lived in Florida for several years next to a flourishing 'Church of God' (both white and black congregation), where every Wednesday night Sister Mary and her husband 'spoke in tongues.' After those Wednesday nights, nothing Flannery O'Connor ever wrote could seem at all exaggerated to me."

ROBERT GIROUX

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