

Flannery O'Connor

Mary Flannery O'Connor (March 25, 1925 – August 3, 1964) was an American novelist, short story writer and essayist. She wrote two novels and thirty-two short stories, as well as a number of reviews and commentaries.

She was a Southern writer who often wrote in a sardonic Southern Gothic style and relied heavily on regional settings and grotesque characters, often in violent situations. The unsentimental acceptance or rejection of the limitations or imperfection or difference of these characters (whether attributed to disability, race, crime, religion or sanity) typically underpins the drama.^[2]

Her writing reflected her Roman Catholic faith and frequently examined questions of morality and ethics. Her posthumously compiled *Complete Stories* won the 1972 U.S. National Book Award for Fiction and has been the subject of enduring praise.

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Early life and education

O'Connor was born on March 25, 1925, in Savannah, Georgia, the only child of Edward Francis O'Connor, a real estate agent, and Regina Cline, who were both of Irish descent.^{[3][4]} As an adult, she remembered herself as a "pigeon-toed child with a receding chin

Flannery O'Connor



Born	Mary Flannery O'Connor March 25, 1925 Savannah, Georgia, US
Died	August 3, 1964 (aged 39) Milledgeville, Georgia, US
Resting place	Memory Hill Cemetery, Milledgeville, Georgia ^[1]
Occupation	Novelist · short story writer · essayist
Period	1946–1964
Genre	Southern

and a you-leave-me-alone-or-I'll-bite-you complex."^[5] The Flannery O'Connor Childhood Home museum is located at 207 E. Charlton Street on Lafayette Square.

O'Connor and her family moved to Milledgeville, Georgia, in 1940 to live on Andalusia Farm,^[6] which is now a museum dedicated to O'Connor's work.^[7] In 1937, her father was diagnosed with systemic lupus erythematosus; it led to his eventual death on February 1, 1941,^[8] and O'Connor and her mother continued to live in Milledgeville.^[9]

O'Connor attended Peabody High School, where she worked as the school newspaper's art editor and from which she graduated in 1942.^[10] She entered Georgia State College for Women (now Georgia College & State University) in an accelerated three-year program and graduated in June 1945 with a social sciences degree. While at Georgia College, she produced a significant amount of cartoon work for the student newspaper.^{[11][12]} Many critics have claimed that the idiosyncratic style and approach of these early cartoons shaped her later fiction in important ways.^{[13][14]}

In 1946, she was accepted into the prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa, where she first went to study journalism. While there, she got to know several important writers and critics who lectured or taught in the program, among them Robert Penn Warren, John Crowe Ransom, Robie Macauley, Austin Warren and Andrew Lytle.^[15] Lytle, for many years editor of the Sewanee Review, was one of the earliest admirers of her fiction. He later published several of her stories in the Sewanee Review, as well as critical essays on her work. Workshop director Paul Engle was the first to read and comment on the initial drafts of what would become Wise Blood. She received an M.A. from the University of Iowa in 1947.^[16] During the summer of 1948, O'Connor continued to work on Wise Blood at Yaddo, an artists' community in Saratoga Springs, New York, where she also completed several short stories.^[17]

In 1949, O'Connor met and eventually accepted an invitation to stay with Robert Fitzgerald (a well-known translator of the classics) and his wife, Sally, in Ridgefield, Connecticut.^[18]

Career

O'Connor is primarily known for her short stories. She published two books of short stories: *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (1955) and *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (published posthumously in 1965). Many of O'Connor's short stories have been re-published in major anthologies, including *The Best American Short Stories* and *Prize Stories*.^[19]

	Gothic
Subject	Morality · Catholicism · grace · transcendence
Literary movement	Christian realism
Notable works	<i>Wise Blood</i> <i>The Violent Bear It Away</i> <i>A Good Man Is Hard to Find</i>



O'Connor's childhood home in Savannah, Georgia

O'Connor's two novels are *Wise Blood* (1952) (made into a film by John Huston) and *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960). She also has had several books of her other writings published, and her enduring influence is attested by a growing body of scholarly studies of her work.

Fragments exist of an unfinished novel tentatively titled *Why Do the Heathen Rage?* that draws from several of her short stories, including "Why Do the Heathen Rage?," "The Enduring Chill," and "The Partridge Festival."

Her writing career can be divided into four five-year periods of increasing skill and ambition, 1945 to 1964:

- Postgrad Student: Iowa Writers' Workshop, first published stories, drafts of *Wise Blood*. Literary influences include Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, Henry James
- Early: *Wise Blood* completed and published. In this period, satirical elements dominate. Influences include Jacques Maritain
- Mid: *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* published, *The Violent Bear It Away* written and published. Influences include Friedrich von Hügel. In this period, the mystical undercurrents begin to have primacy.
- Mature: *Everything That Rises Must Converge* written. Influences include Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Mary Anne Long. In this period, the notion of grotesque is expanded to include the good as grotesque, and the grotesque as good.



O'Connor with Arthur Koestler (left) and Robie Macauley on a visit to the Amana Colonies in 1947

Characteristics

Regarding her emphasis of the grotesque, O'Connor said: "anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic."^[20] Her texts usually take place in the South^[21] and revolve around morally flawed characters, frequently interacting with people with disabilities or disabled themselves (as O'Connor was), while the issue of race often appears in the background. Most of her works feature disturbing elements, though she did not like to be characterized as cynical. "I am mighty tired of reading reviews that call *A Good Man* brutal and sarcastic," she wrote.^[22] "The stories are hard but they are hard because there is nothing harder or less sentimental than Christian realism. ...When I see these stories described as horror stories I am always amused because the reviewer always has hold of the wrong horror."^[22]

She felt deeply informed by the sacramental and by the Thomist notion that the created world is charged with God. Yet she would not write apologetic fiction of the kind prevalent in the Catholic literature of the time, explaining that a writer's meaning must be evident in his or her fiction without didacticism. She wrote ironic, subtly allegorical fiction about deceptively backward Southern characters, usually fundamentalist Protestants, who undergo transformations of character that, to her thinking, brought them closer to the Catholic mind. The transformation is often accomplished through pain, violence, and ludicrous behavior in the pursuit of the holy. However grotesque the setting, she tried to portray her characters as open to the touch of divine grace. This ruled out a sentimental understanding of the stories' violence, as of her own illness. She wrote: "Grace changes us and the change is painful."^[23]

She also had a deeply sardonic sense of humor, often based in the disparity between her characters' limited perceptions and the awesome fate awaiting them. Another source of humor is frequently found in the attempt of well-meaning liberals to cope with the rural South on their own terms. O'Connor used

such characters' inability to come to terms with disability, race, poverty, and fundamentalism, other than in sentimental illusions, as an example of the failure of the secular world in the twentieth century.

However, in several stories O'Connor explored some of the most sensitive contemporary issues that her liberal and fundamentalist characters might encounter. She addressed the Holocaust in her story "The Displaced Person", racial integration in "Everything That Rises Must Converge" and intersexuality in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost." Her fiction often included references to the problem of race in the South; occasionally, racial issues come to the forefront, as in "The Artificial Nigger," "Everything that Rises Must Converge," and "Judgement Day," her last short story and a drastically rewritten version of her first published story, "The Geranium."

Despite her secluded life, her writing reveals an uncanny grasp of the nuances of human behavior. O'Connor gave many lectures on faith and literature, traveling quite far despite her frail health. Politically, she maintained a broadly progressive outlook in connection with her faith, voting for John F. Kennedy in 1960 and supporting the work of Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement.^[24]

Illness and death



Andalusia Farm, where O'Connor lived from 1952 to 1964

By the summer of 1952, O'Connor was diagnosed with systemic lupus erythematosus (lupus),^[25] as her father had been before her.^[8] Subsequently, she returned to the family farm, Andalusia, in Milledgeville, Georgia.^[15] O'Connor lived for twelve years after her diagnosis, seven years longer than expected.

Her daily routine was to attend Mass, write in the morning, then spend the rest of the day recuperating and reading. Despite the debilitating effects of the steroid drugs used to treat O'Connor's lupus, she nonetheless made over sixty appearances at lectures to read her works.^[15]

O'Connor completed more than two dozen short stories and two novels while suffering from lupus. She died on August 3, 1964, at the age of 39 in Baldwin County Hospital.^[15] Her death was caused by complications from a new attack of lupus following surgery for a fibroma.^[15] She was buried in Milledgeville, Georgia,^[26] at Memory Hill Cemetery.^{[15][27]}

Letters

Throughout her life, O'Connor maintained a wide correspondence,^[28] including with writers Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop,^[29] English professor Samuel Ashley Brown,^[29] and playwright Maryat Lee.^[30] After her death, a selection of her letters, edited by her friend Sally Fitzgerald, was published as *The Habit of Being*.^{[31][29]} Much of O'Connor's best-known writing on religion, writing, and the South is contained in these and other letters.

In 1955, Betty Hester, an Atlanta file clerk, wrote O'Connor a letter expressing admiration for her work.^[31] Hester's letter drew O'Connor's attention,^[32] and they corresponded frequently.^[31] For *The Habit of Being*, Hester provided Fitzgerald with all the letters she received from O'Connor but requested that her identity be kept private; she was identified only as "A."^[22] The complete collection of the unedited letters between O'Connor and Hester was unveiled by Emory University in May 2007; the letters had been given to the university in 1987 with the stipulation that they not be released to the public for 20 years.^{[31][21]}

Emory University also contains the more than 600 letters O'Connor wrote to her mother, Regina, nearly every day while she was pursuing her literary career in Iowa City, New York, and Massachusetts. Some of these describe "travel itineraries and plumbing mishaps, ripped stockings and roommates with loud radios," as well as her request for the homemade mayonnaise of her childhood.^[33] O'Connor lived with her mother for 34 of her 39 years of life.

Catholicism

O'Connor was a devout Catholic. From 1956 through 1964, she wrote more than one hundred book reviews for two Catholic diocesan newspapers in Georgia: *The Bulletin* and *The Southern Cross*.^[34] According to fellow reviewer Joey Zuber, the wide range of books she chose to review demonstrated that she was profoundly intellectual.^[35] Her reviews consistently confronted theological and ethical themes in books written by the most serious and demanding theologians of her time.^[36] Professor of English Carter Martin, an authority on O'Connor's writings, notes simply that her "book reviews are at one with her religious life."^[36]

A prayer journal O'Connor had kept during her time at the University of Iowa was published in 2013.^[37] It included prayers and ruminations on faith, writing, and O'Connor's relationship with God.^{[38][37][39]}

Enjoyment of birds

O'Connor frequently used bird imagery within her fiction.

When she was six, living in a house still standing (now preserved as the Flannery O'Connor Childhood Home), O'Connor experienced her first brush with celebrity status. Pathé News filmed "Little Mary O'Connor" with her trained chicken^[40] and showed the film around the country. She said: "When I was six I had a chicken that walked backward and was in the Pathé News. I was in it too with the chicken. I was just there to assist the chicken but it was the high point in my life. Everything since has been an anticlimax."^[41]

In high school, when the girls were required to sew Sunday dresses for themselves, O'Connor sewed a full outfit of underwear and clothes to fit her pet duck and brought the duck to school to model it.^[42]

As an adult at Andalusia, she raised and nurtured some 100 peafowl. Fascinated by birds of all kinds, she raised ducks, ostriches, emus, toucans, and any sort of exotic bird she could obtain, while incorporating images of peacocks into her books. She described her peacocks in an essay entitled "The King of the Birds".

Legacy, awards, and tributes

O'Connor's *Complete Stories* won the 1972 U.S. National Book Award for Fiction^[43] and, in a 2009 online poll, was named the best book ever to have won the National Book Awards.^[44]

In June 2015, the United States Postal Service honored O'Connor with a new postage stamp, the 30th issuance in the Literary Arts series.^[45] Some criticized the stamp as failing to reflect O'Connor's character and legacy.^{[46][47]}

The Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction, named in honor of O'Connor by the University of Georgia Press, is a prize given annually since 1983 to an outstanding collection of short stories.^[48]

The Flannery O'Connor Book Trail is a series of Little Free Libraries stretching between O'Connor's homes in Savannah and Milledgeville.^[49]

The Flannery O'Connor Childhood Home is a historic house museum in Savannah, Georgia, where O'Connor lived during her childhood.^[50] In addition to serving as a museum, the house hosts regular events and programs.^[50]

Bono of U2 quotes "Where you come from is gone, where you thought you were going to never was there, and where you are is no good unless you can get away from it" from 'Wise Blood' during recent live performances of Exit (U2 song)

Works

Novels

- Wise Blood (1952)
- The Violent Bear It Away (1960)

Short story collections

- A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories (1955)
- Everything That Rises Must Converge (1965)
- The Complete Stories (1971)

Other works

- *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* (1961)
- *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor* (1979)
- *The Presence of Grace: and Other Book Reviews* (1983)
- *Flannery O'Connor: Collected Works* (1988)
- *Flannery O'Connor: The Cartoons* (2012)
- *A Prayer Journal* (2013)

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External links

- [The Flannery O'Connor Repository \(http://www.flanneryoconnor.org/\)](http://www.flanneryoconnor.org/)
- [Works by Flannery O'Connor \(https://fadedpage.com/csearch.php?author=O%27Connor%2C%20Flannery\)](https://fadedpage.com/csearch.php?author=O%27Connor%2C%20Flannery) at Faded Page (Canada)
- [Flannery O'Connor reads short story *A Good Man is Hard to Find* \(https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/03/25/flannery-o-connor-grotesque-reading/\)](https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/03/25/flannery-o-connor-grotesque-reading/) (audio)
- [Flannery O'Connor introduction to lecture, on *Southern Grotesque* \(https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/03/25/flannery-o-connor-grotesque-reading/\)](https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/03/25/flannery-o-connor-grotesque-reading/).
- [Flanner O'Connor cartoons \(https://www.brainpickings.org/2013/12/12/flannery-oconnor-cartoons/\)](https://www.brainpickings.org/2013/12/12/flannery-oconnor-cartoons/)

Library resources

- [Postmarked Milledgeville \(http://www.postmarkedmilledgeville.com\)](http://www.postmarkedmilledgeville.com), a guide to archival collections of O'Connor's letters
- [Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library \(https://rose.library.emory.edu/\)](https://rose.library.emory.edu/), Emory University: [Flannery O'Connor papers, 1832-2003 \(http://pid.emory.edu/ark:/25593/gz24t\)](http://pid.emory.edu/ark:/25593/gz24t)
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