Revelation Without Resolution

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Flannery, directed by Elizabeth Coffman and Mark Bosco. Long Distance Productions, 2019. 1 hr., 36 min.

I can't tell you how old I was when I read Flannery O'Connor for the first time—I suspect somewhere around eleven or twelve. My great aunt, who taught school for almost sixty years, had a large collection of books—she heard O'Connor speak at East Texas State University (now Texas A&M-Commerce) in 1962—and my guess is that whatever story it was came from her library. In Mrs. Landers' eleventh-grade English class and twice again as an undergrad, I read "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," and in graduate school I read her novels, *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear It Away*. In short, Flannery O'Connor has been part of my life for most of my life.

It was in graduate school that what has now become something of a love affair began. I had the very good fortune of taking a course titled "Masters of American Literature: Gothic Fiction." It was taught by a professor whose passion for Southern Gothic literature was palpable. That was the semester that I read both of O'Connor's novels as well as William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, *Light in August*, and other non-Southern American gothic fiction. All of the work we studied that semester was good, but Flannery.... Flannery stuck with me. Although I don't remember when I first read her work, I know that is when I fell in love. So, I was thrilled when I learned in late 2019 of a new documentary film of her life, *Flannery: The Storied Life of the Writer from Georgia*. And I was even more thrilled when The UT Dallas Arts & Humanities Association of Graduate Students welcomed its creators to our 2021 Research, Art, and Writing Graduate Conference as keynote speakers.

Produced by Elizabeth Coffman, scholar and documentary filmmaker, and noted O'Connor scholar Mark Bosco, SJ, *Flannery* is a broad retrospective on the life of one of America's most enigmatic and arguably misunderstood authors. Mary Steenburgen provides narration in a folksy, down-home Georgian accent and tone eerily

similar to O'Connor's own. Her readings are voiced over animations suitably grotesque for the stories they illustrate, and an original music score by Miriam Cutler. *Flannery* features interviews with celebrity fans such as Conan O'Brien, Tommy Lee Jones, and Bruce Springsteen. Alice Walker, author of *The Color Purple*, who grew up across the road from O'Connor's home, literary critic Hilton Als, and other authors, critics, biographers, and scholars round out the roster of contributors. The film is also sprinkled with archival footage of O'Connor's friend and editor Sally Fitzgerald, her publisher Robert Giroux, and other notable figures from her life, as well as rarely seen television footage of the author herself.

Flannery is written as a rather encyclopedic entry of O'Connor's life—from her birth in Savannah into a family with a long and deeply rooted history in Georgia, to her untimely death at the age of thirty-nine, a victim of lupus, the same disease that had killed her father more than twenty years earlier. But this film is far from simply being the sort of reference a high school student might use for biographical information in a book report. Instead of fading into the long list of monotone biopics, its creative and imaginative production qualities invite viewers to be participants in O'Connor's life, rather than mere observers. The evocations of her childhood and adolescence are both nostalgic and melancholic. In her early years in Savannah and then in Milledgeville after her father's fortunes turned as a result of the Great Depression, O'Connor's family was a constant presence. Her parents are portrayed as heavily influential in O'Connor's youth. Her father, Edward, doted on young Mary Flannery and worked to provide so that she wanted for nothing. Her mother Regina on the other hand, no less loving, made sure that while Flannery's head dreamed her feet stayed firmly planted on the ground—a role she never gave up.

Coffman and Bosco avoid deep dives into O'Connor's work, focusing instead on how events in her life and in the post-WWII American landscape influenced it. Her staunch Roman Catholic faith is present in all of her work. Each of her characters meets with a moment of redemption, however obscure it might be and often whether they want it or not. O'Connor's time at the Iowa Writers Workshop—her first experience away from her rather sheltered if not secluded upbringing—did nothing to diminish her faith. Biographer Brad Gooch describes how O'Connor "sweetly and innocently" worked out with help from a priest how her Catholic faith and her writing could coexist. In her prayer journal she prayed to God about her desire to "write a good novel." After three years in Iowa, she was invited to come to Yaddo, a retreat for artists located outside Saratoga Springs, New York. There she met and developed a crush on Robert Lowell, which proved a somewhat dubious encounter. Perhaps out of devotion, naivete, or both, O'Connor found herself wrapped up in Lowell's attempt to bring down Elizabeth Ames, the director of Yaddo, for communist sympathies. As a result, O'Connor

and many of the other writers left the enclave, and she found herself for a brief time in New York City. It was during this time she was introduced to Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, who became lifelong friends, advisors, and editors. O'Connor's travels and experiences during these years would prove remarkably important to her future as an author as they were, with a few exceptions, her only forays away from home.

More than half of *Flannery* is devoted to the last thirteen years of her life spent living with her mother after her diagnosis with lupus in 1951. What was intended to be a visit home became a permanent move, as O'Connor quickly became unable to care for herself without help. Her illness and confinement, however, did not stop her work. Sally Fitzgerald refers to them as "grist for her mill," noting that her stories are set in the rural South and are populated with "broken bodies" much like her own.

Although she was limited in her ability to travel, O'Connor was not completely isolated from the rest of the world. She communicated regularly by letter with a number of friends and fans. She also received a number of visitors, one of whom became more to her than just a regular face on the farm. Erik Langkjaer, a handsome young publishing representative, visited O'Connor several times, and became something of a love interest to her. The romance between O'Connor and Langkjaer was not to be, however. Upon returning to his home in Denmark for a summer visit, he was soon engaged to be married. O'Connor was heartbroken to receive news of his engagement in a letter some time later.

In the last few years of her life, O'Connor was incredibly productive, mastering the art of short story writing and producing her second novel *The Violent Bear It Away*. She also traveled occasionally on invitations to speak to different groups around the country. Given that she never made much money from her fiction, these speaking engagements were largely responsible for her income. As her health continued to decline, she reluctantly agreed to visit the shrine at Lourdes, France, at the encouragement of her cousin who, along with her mother, hoped for a miraculous cure. Despite a short-lived improvement in her condition, O'Connor was soon found to have a large tumor, which had to be surgically removed in early 1964. She spent her final days furiously writing to finish her last collection of short stories before her death on August 3 of that year.

In the final, poignant scenes of the documentary, O'Connor is remembered for the remarkable and lasting contribution she made to American literature in the span of such a relatively short career. The film closes with the last lines from one of her last short stories, "Revelation": "At length she got down and turned off the faucet and made her slow way on the darkening path to the house. 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."

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There has been some criticism leveled regarding the lack of depth and time which Coffman and Bosco devote to the more controversial aspects of O'Connor's life and work, particularly her attitudes about race, segregation, and civil rights. While there may well be some validity to those criticisms, given the importance of the issues, they are not ignored. They are raised, discussed, and dealt with honestly and fairly. O'Connor was a complex person, living during a complex time. Regrettably, she did not live long enough for us to know how her attitudes would have evolved. Lengthy speculation would have not served the purposes of the film.

Flannery is a film worth taking the time to watch. For casual O'Connor readers, it is a fascinating look at the life of an author who led a somewhat inauspicious life and about whom not a lot is known. For ardent fans, it is a reminder of why she is so beloved and why her work remains important and captures our imaginations some sixty years after her death.

What is most appealing about O'Connor's fiction is not her characters, settings, or often even the stories themselves. What is most appealing about her work is that, in it, she is not afraid to look into the unknown and let it remain unknown—to give it revelation without resolution. Alice Walker describes it as her ability to go "straight to the craziness without trying to make the craziness black or white…[she] just looked at the mystery of the craziness." Her life and experiences taught her to see the mystery inherent in humanity and in creation and not try to solve the riddle. O'Connor teases everything but forces nothing.

In a 1961 article for *Holiday* magazine, "Living with a Peacock," O'Connor wrote that:

> When the peacock has presented his back, the spectator will usually begin to walk around him to get a front view; but the peacock will continue to turn so that no front view is possible. The thing to do then is to stand still and wait until it pleases him to turn. When it suits him, the peacock will face you. And you will see in a green-bronze arch around him a galaxy of gazing, haloed suns. This is the moment when most people are silent.

That short paragraph immaculately captures my experience reading O'Connor. The enigmatic nature of her work, often conveyed as much by what she doesn't write as what she does, is for me, as a reader,

student, and educator both frustrating and captivating. It is often the missing elements that prove the most telling in the end, and despite my best efforts, those elements cannot be forced into appearance. However, when I sit with the story — when I let it be what it is — the peacock eventually turns his tail feathers my way and the true beauty of her work comes into full view.

In the last couple of years I've become more than just a lover of her work. As a student of Flannery O'Connor, I've discovered that the more I learn about the person, the more her words mean, especially in the times we live in now. It's true with many, if not most authors, that their writing is, at the very least, reflective of their own experiences. With O'Connor, every word I read reveals a life that is not only reflected in her work, but that is inextricably linked to it. The deeper I dive, the deeper I want to dive. Her work is as important today as it was when she penned it so many years ago.

Coffman and Bosco's film serves as a reminder why Flannery O'Connor remains one of the most important American writers of all time. She was imperfect and flawed, to be sure, but she recognized her flaws and did her best to work through them in a way that generations to come could learn from. And we are the better for it. A