

Questions for Carlene Bauer

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [November 13, 2013](#) issue



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Read Frykholm's [review of Bauer's novel](#).

Your book tackles sophisticated theological themes. What is your own religious background?

I was raised evangelical in south Jersey. My mother became, in the late 1970s, what we now know as “born again.” My dad was Catholic. As a child, I thought Catholicism

was something you did without thinking about it—an ethnicity rather than a faith. My dad was basically disinterested in religion, but he still wanted us to go to mass with him occasionally.

When I went to a Catholic college I saw that Catholicism was also a philosophy, a theology and a politics. I saw that you could be a Democrat and a Catholic by reading Dorothy Day. When I read Flannery O'Connor I saw that you could be an artist and a religious person. I started accruing more evidence that Catholicism was a whole way of life.

The big struggle for me as a young person was how to be someone who was interested in creativity and art and not losing one's faith to do it. Catholicism seemed to have better answers to that question.

Did you then convert to Catholicism formally?

I did. I was in my late twenties, and I had been in New York for a few years. I started going to St. Francis Xavier on 16th Street in the Village with a college friend. One Sunday, I heard a woman talk about how she had more of an intellectual faith than a lived faith, and I thought, "That's my problem too. Why don't I convert?" I converted because I thought I should do something to give direction to my life.

How did that work out?

About six months after I converted, a lot of the stories about sexual abuse in the archdiocese of Boston came out. I was aware of these stories in a new way. It was undeniable. I just can't show up at church and wonder about what is going on in the sacristy. I found that I couldn't pray. At first, I felt my loss of faith as a relief. Maybe a sadness. I think I feel the loss more now.

How did you get interested in writing about midcentury Catholic writers?

I read Paul Elie's *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*, and I learned that O'Connor and Lowell had met at the writers' colony Yaddo. I had not known and hadn't imagined that they were friends. And I learned that Robert Lowell had been Catholic, which even in my mania for writers who converted, I hadn't known. Elie also suggested that O'Connor was a little infatuated with Lowell. Can you imagine Flannery O'Connor having a crush on Robert Lowell? That seemed like one of the juicier tidbits of literary gossip. I decided to imagine what it would be like for two

people like that to fall in love.

I had also read the Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop letters, and I was fascinated by the interplay between a woman who was more loose and a man who was more adhesive.

Why did you choose an epistolary mode for this subject?

When you write a letter, it is necessarily immediate and personal. If I had been writing in a contemporary moment, I don't know that I could have used that form. But in a letter, you are allowed to mouth off, allowed to rant, allowed to be florid. It was a form in which I could create drama. In the space of a letter, two weeks can pass and everything changes. I was much freer. The form is so elastic.

Why did you decide to make the book a theological meditation as much as a love story?

It helped that I could set it in another era. It seemed easier to imagine these two writers sitting around talking about Simone Weil in the mid-1950s than it did in our own moment. At the same time, my friends and I talk about religion all of the time. But can we make fiction out of it? That's another matter.