

Flannery O'Connor's letters with Caroline Gordon and other friends

Two new collections add to the landmark volume *The Habit of Being.*

by [Henry L. Carrigan Jr.](#) in the [October 23, 2019](#) issue

In Review



The Letters of Flannery O'Connor and Caroline Gordon

Edited by Christine Flanagan
University of Georgia Press



Good Things Out of Nazareth

The Uncollected Letters of Flannery O'Connor and Friends

Edited by Benjamin B. Alexander
Convergent

When Flannery O'Connor died in 1964 at age 39, she left behind two collections of short stories (*A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories* and *Everything That Rises Must Converge*) and two novels (*Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear It Away*). At the time of her death, she was developing a voice that had an edge. A rural Southerner, she had learned to dress her sardonic remarks in sly humor. Anytime she dispensed her wisdom through the voices of her characters, she pointed to the truth of a situation as she saw it—and her readers could take it or leave it.

O'Connor also shone a light on the character of redemption in her stories and novels. But in her characteristic picaresque manner, she revealed that grace didn't come easy. Finding Christ hiding behind every tree in her rural Georgia—the "Christ-haunted South," as she called it—didn't always lead to redemption. For example, the swaggering Bible salesman in "Good Country People," who carries condoms and whiskey in a hollowed-out Bible, is the misfit Messiah who reveals to Joy/Hulga her need to embrace her vulnerability and open herself to love. At the end of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," the Misfit carries a revelation about the nature of hypocrisy and truth: "She would've been a good woman," said the Misfit, "if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life."

When O'Connor died, readers felt bereft of a voice that spoke hard truths in an unsentimental way. Her fiction presented a landscape shot through with violence and grotesque characters, but she said she wrote in such a way because sometimes you have to shout to proclaim the truth to those who are hard of hearing. Several collections of her essays were published posthumously, and *The Complete Stories* (1971) won the National Book Award in 1972. But readers continued to thirst for another drink from O'Connor's well.

That thirst was slaked in 1979 with the publication of a collection of letters, *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor*, selected and edited by her good friend Sally Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald writes in the introduction, "I have come to think that the true likeness of Flannery O'Connor will be painted by herself, a self-portrait in words, to be found in her letters." Readers pored over the letters, which do reveal O'Connor's personal side: her warm humor, her sometimes ambivalent, though mostly loving, relationship with her mother, her thoughts about her lupus, the progressive neurological disease that killed her, and her thoughts about writing and religion. Her correspondents included writers such as Walker Percy, Elizabeth Bishop, and Caroline Gordon.

Now, within a one-year span, we have two more collections of letters: one based on her friendship with Gordon and the other based on her letters to friends.

The more exciting of these collections is Christine Flanagan's *The Letters of Flannery O'Connor and Caroline Gordon*. These letters not only chronicle the 13-year friendship between the two women, they provide remarkable insight into what functioned as a kind of epistolary writer's workshop with the two women offering critiques of each other's work in progress. They reveal that Gordon had a hand in

shaping some of O'Connor's best-known writings, including *Wise Blood*, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," and "The Displaced Person."

The letters also provide glimpses of Gordon, a writer who should be better known. She studied with Ford Madox Ford, who later called her novel *Penhally* (1931) the "best constructed novel that modern American has produced." Gordon met and married poet Allen Tate in 1925 (the year O'Connor was born), lived in New York, and befriended Dorothy Day, Katherine Anne Porter, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, among others. She converted to Catholicism in 1947, and she said that her vocation as a writer had prepared her for this late-in-life conversion. Perhaps this is why she was never puzzled by O'Connor's work.

Flanagan divides the collection chronologically, and each section consists of correspondence focused on a particular O'Connor story or novel. The first section, which covers May 1951 to February 1953, includes letters discussing *Wise Blood*. Gordon was asked by a mutual friend to read O'Connor's manuscript a year before the two writers first met in person. Her initial letter to O'Connor, filled with details about the structure of the novel, sets a tone for the rest of their correspondence: "You won't, of course, pay too much attention to anything I've said in this long letter. After all, it's just one novelist talking about the way she thinks things ought to be done. I may be quite wrong."

O'Connor replies later after Gordon has shown her a piece she has written, asking O'Connor's advice: "I am certainly indebted to you for letting me see this piece and I think it ought to be a book. If Catholic novels are bad, contemporary Catholic criticism is PURE SLOP or else it's stuck off in some convent where nobody can get his hands on it."

Gordon is quick to point out both the weaknesses and the tremendous strengths in O'Connor's writing. After observing what does and doesn't work in "A Good Man Is Hard Find," she urges O'Connor to move beyond what she's accomplished to a higher level:

You have here, in a nut-shell, it seems to me, the chief weakness in your work: the tendency to use too restricted a viewpoint at crucial moments, thereby cutting down on the scope of your action. You are superbly agile in slipping in and out of your characters, borrowing their eyes and ears and mouth in the interest of verisimilitude. In fact, it is through this very agility

that you achieve some of your finest effects but I would like to see you learn to do something else—to soar above the conflict, to view it as if through the eyes of an eagle, at certain crucial moments.

Gordon later adds: “Of course this will be hard to do but you have got what it takes to do it. I feel very certain of that. I think that this group of stories you’ve just done are among the finest that have been written by any American.”

Good Things Out of Nazareth: The Uncollected Letters of Flannery O’Connor and Friends is a more disappointing addition to the O’Connor canon. In spite of the subtitle, many of the letters in the book have already been published in other collections, including Flanagan’s. The editor, Benjamin B. Alexander, fails to reveal his qualifications—beyond being a rabid fan of O’Connor’s writing—for editing such a volume, and his apparatus for editing is unclear.

Alexander’s voice intrudes frequently. He introduces each letter (and sometimes each part of a letter) with his own interpretation, and he often lapses into anachronism. For example, introducing a letter from O’Connor to Father Scott Watson, Alexander notes: “She praises Teilhard de Chardin, a view the presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in the United States also expressed in the homily at the wedding in May 2018 of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, the Duke and Duchess of Sussex.” He also leaves out significant information about correspondents, failing, for example, to identify the Tennessee novelist and short story writer Peter Taylor in introducing O’Connor’s letter to him.

The lack of an organizing principle gives the collection a scattered feel. Even more frustrating is the way Alexander portrays O’Connor in his commentary. He seems to want to turn O’Connor into a C. S. Lewis figure rather than reveal her for the Catholic writer she was. Her writing shows that she approached matters of belief and doubt in ways that differ significantly from Lewis and the Protestantism he represents.

There is little in this collection that is new. Its greatest value may be that it encourages us to return to O’Connor’s fiction and essays so we might once again hear her voice.