

Flannery: A Life of Flannery O'Connor

By Brad Gooch

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The landscape of American literature was fundamentally changed when Flannery O'Connor stepped onto the scene with her first published book, *Wise Blood*, in 1952. Her fierce, sometimes comic novels and stories reflected the darkly funny, vibrant, and theologically sophisticated woman who wrote them. Brad Gooch brings to life O'Connor's significant friendships--with Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Hardwick, Walker Percy, and James Dickey among others--and her deeply felt convictions, as expressed in her communications with Thomas Merton, Elizabeth Bishop, and Betty Hester. Hester was famously known as "A" in O'Connor's collected letters, *The Habit of Being*, and a large cache of correspondence to her from O'Connor was made available to scholars, including Brad Gooch, in 2006. O'Connor's capacity to live fully--despite the chronic disease that eventually confined her to her mother's farm in Georgia--is illuminated in this engaging and authoritative biography.

PRAISE FOR FLANNERY

"Flannery O'Connor, one of the best American writers of short fiction, has found her ideal biographer in Brad Gooch. With elegance and fairness, Gooch deals with the sensitive areas of race and religion in O'Connor's life. He also takes us back to those heady days after the war when O'Connor studied creative writing at Iowa. There is much that is new in this book, but, more important, everything is presented in a strong, clear light." --Edmund White

"This splendid biography gives us no saint or martyr but the story of a gifted and complicated woman, bent on making the best of the difficult hand fate has dealt her, whether it is with grit and humor or with an abiding desire to make palpable to readers the terrible mystery of God's grace." --Frances Kiernan, author of *Seeing Mary Plain: A Life of Mary McCarthy*

"A good biographer is hard to find. Brad Gooch is not merely good-he is extraordinary. Blessed with the eye and ear of a novelist, he has composed the life that admirers of the fierce and hilarious Georgia genius have long been hoping for." -- Joel Conarro, President Emeritus, John Simon Guggenheim Foundation

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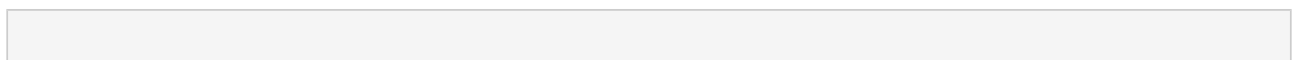
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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Gooch (*City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara*) offers a surprisingly bloodless biography of Flannery O'Connor (1925–1964), who, despite the author's diligent scholarship, remains enigmatic. She emerges only in her excerpted letters, speeches and fiction, where she is as sharp-tongued, censorious, piteously observant and mordantly funny as her beloved short stories. There is little genuinely interesting new material, but there are small gems—the full story of O'Connor's friendship with the mysterious A. of her letters, for instance. Perhaps mindful of the writer's dislike of being exposed in print, Gooch errs on the side of delicacy; he does not sufficiently explore her attitudes toward blacks and how the early onset of lupus left her sequestered on her mother's Georgia farm, without the male companionship she craved. Instead, he plumbs O'Connor's fiction for buried fragments of her daily life, and the revelations are hardly astonishing. Readers looking for more startling tidbits will be disappointed by this account that brims with the quiet satisfactions the author took in her industry (I sit all day typing and grinning like the Cheshire cat), her faith, friends and stoic approach to a debilitating disease. 16 pages of b&w photos. (Feb. 25)

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From [The New Yorker](#)

Drawing on recently unsealed letters and an impressive array of interviews, Gooch provides the first major biography of Flannery O'Connor since she died in 1964, at the age of thirty-nine. He presents a writer influenced by the early death of her father and the retreat from city life to country; an Irish Catholic upbringing that evolved into an adult fascination with theology; and a Southern small-town culture whose matrons, including O'Connor's mother, were happy for her success but put off by the unladylike nature of her work. "Everybody here shakes my hand but nobody reads my stories." Though she spent time in both the Midwest and the Northeast, lupus narrowed the circle of her life to a dairy farm in Milledgeville, Georgia, where she collected exotic birds. Gooch's account is meticulous, but O'Connor's sedate, chaste life is pale in comparison with her fantastic fiction—a contrast that underscores her inscrutable genius.

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The gifted O'Connor once stated that she would merit no biography because "lives spent between the house and the chicken yard do not make exciting copy." Brad Gooch, however, has done a thorough job teasing out the details of O'Connor's short life and enduring legacy. Although gracious and polite, Gooch was nonetheless admonished by critics for skimming over some of the more eyebrow-raising aspects of her life, such as the question of her sexuality and her contentious relationship with her mother. Others complained that Gooch neglected to properly analyze O'Connor's work and the genesis of her distinctive style. Perhaps the gifted O'Connor will always elude our attempts to understand her, and readers unfamiliar with the author should turn to her work; however, her fans will come away from *Flannery* with an enhanced appreciation for her achievements. Copyright 2009 Bookmarks Publishing LLC

Users Review

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