

America

SPRING 2020

THE JESUIT REVIEW OF FAITH AND CULTURE

SPRING LITERARY REVIEW 2020

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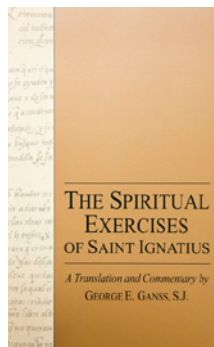
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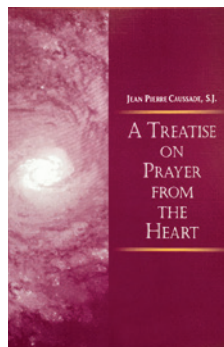
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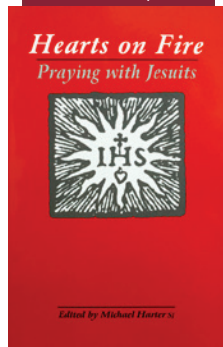


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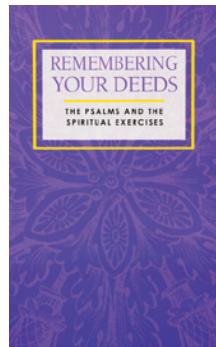


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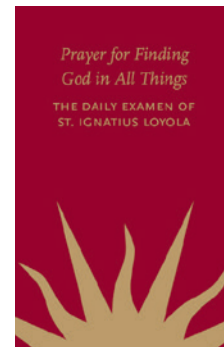
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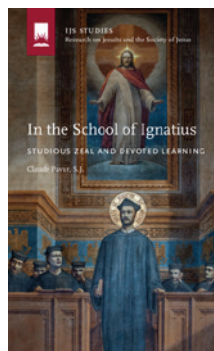


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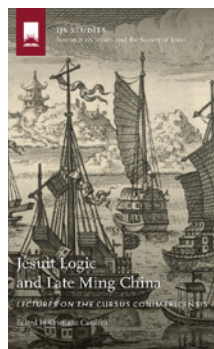
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JESUIT SOURCES

Welcome to Spring Books 2020

When we were first putting together this round-up of our Spring Books issue, I thought it would be a good space to write about an intriguing 2019 book, *Because Internet*, by the linguist Gretchen McCulloch. She tracks the way our communication patterns have changed with the explosive growth of the internet; many of our traditional rules around grammar, spelling and syntax, she notes, have gone the way of the dinosaurs. My sympathies are usually with the dinosaurs, particularly when someone emails me, “Hey can u call me rn,” so I had some harrumphs ready for print.

No more. A month into the Covid-19 pandemic, as we shelter in place across much of the nation, we are all suddenly finding online communication to be a godsend. From messaging apps to Zoom and Google Hangouts, from virtual Mass to ad hoc online classrooms, we are getting by in many cases with help from a huge digital hand. So yes, internet, I apologize 2 u rn.

Both our features in this issue focus offer close observations of U.S. culture, present and past. First, a former **America** editor, Olga Segura, profiles Thomas Chatterton Williams, who despite being a self-identified liberal has also “become one of the fiercest and most prolific critics of identity politics in the United States.” Segura found it difficult to engage Williams’s call to “unlearn race” but then “realized that it was easier for me to understand Williams’s argument if I read it through a theological lens.”

Our second feature is an in-depth look at the British Catholic Evelyn Waugh’s acid take on U.S. culture during several mid-century visits, including a careful reading of his 1948 satire,

The Loved One. Joshua Hren takes us through Waugh’s initial contempt for U.S. culture all the way to his grudging admission that places like New Orleans offered new opportunities for understanding the modern state.

Speaking of New Orleans, it is one of three great U.S. cities (along with New York City and San Francisco) featured in *Infinite Cities*, a trilogy of atlases presented by Rebecca Solnit and other contributors. Our reviewer, Renée Darline Roden, notes that these eclectic atlases are no ordinary collections of grids and gradations but “more like portraiture than the utilitarian GPS systems that populate our phones.”

Louisiana might also conjure up in the reader’s mind the novelist Ernest J. Gaines, who is remembered here by Jason Berry. Gaines wrote nine books over the course of a distinguished career, many employing “a voice grounded by the spoken rhythms Gaines absorbed, a well-controlled prose charged with a musicality in repetitive wording.”

Another look back is Michial Farmer’s appreciation of the 1931 short story “San Manuel Bueno, Martir,” by the Spanish existentialist Miguel de Unamuno, which takes on the troubling theme of a priest hailed as a saint—even while he has secretly lost his faith. He remains a saint, Unamuno insists, and Farmer is inclined to agree.

We have our requisite Flannery O’Connor take, but Maura Shea offers a new angle, using Christine Flanagan’s *The Letters of Flannery O’Connor and Caroline Gordon* as a jumping-off point to explore the relationship between these two Southern Catholic writers. The relationship, Shea notes, “stands out as a kind

of student-teacher relationship in which O’Connor, at least in the beginning, is the gifted student and Gordon the seasoned, exacting teacher.”

We also have four long book reviews for your perusal, on a wide variety of subjects. Franklin Freeman tackles *Edison*, a hefty biography of our most famous inventor and the last book by the famed biographer Edmund Morris; Jill Brennan O’Brien reviews *Horizon*, by Barry Lopez, finding it a mix between philosophy, anthropology and travel writing; Mike St. Thomas finds that mystery lies at the heart of Nick Ripatrazone’s *Longing for an Absent God*, a study of Catholic fiction writers in the years since the Second Vatican Council; and one of **America**’s Joseph A. O’Hare, S.J., fellows, Ryan Di Corpo, reviews the memoir of the longtime peace activist Jim Forest, *Writing Straight With Crooked Lines*.

We offer two poetry selections as well, “The Sand and the Stars,” by Jane Zwart, and “Manatee,” by Michael Cadnum.

Finally, **America** producer Colleen Dulle tells us how Madeleine Delbrêl helped her return to a life of prayer and reading. (Dulle is writing a book on her now.) Delbrêl promoted a lay spirituality and loved the hustle and bustle of the city street, and Dulle found peace reading Delbrêl on the crowded subways of New York City.

Perhaps we’ll pass on that subway for a while. Keep reading!

James T. Keane, *senior editor*



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An soldier sprays disinfectant to curb the spread of the coronavirus at a library in Daegu, South Korea, March 25.

Kim Hyun-tae/Yonhap via AP

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America | MEDIA

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Contemporary Poetry and a Study of the Magdalene

The Catholic Book Club passed another happy milestone this past fall, when our Facebook discussion group gained its 4,000th member (our weekly Catholic Book Club newsletter has also grown, and now has almost 11,000 subscribers), proving that the written word stubbornly retains its allure even amid new platforms and methods of communication. After three years of sharing our thoughts on different books from a broad variety of genres, we have run the gamut from novels to historical biographies to sociological studies to memoirs to short story collections to poetry.

De gustibus non est disputandum, as the Romans were wont to say (we might render it “different strokes for different folks”). We have found that different genres and authors inspire different readers and broad variations in discussion, another reason to mix it up a bit in terms of genres and styles.

Our two most recent selections have been no exception. Our fall 2019 selection was a poetry anthology, *St. Peter’s B-List: Contemporary Poems Inspired by the Saints*, edited by Mary Ann B. Miller, and our winter 2020 selection was an academic text on a fairly specific topic: *The Magdalene in the Reformation*, by Margaret Arnold. In both cases, our conversation was spurred and informed by the literary and cultural insights of the Catholic Book Club moderator, Kevin Spinale, S.J., who wrote interpretive essays to introduce the books to the readers and to further the discussion.

St. Peter’s B-List: Contemporary Poems Inspired by the Saints

“Perhaps some regard ‘poetry’—the word or form is a put-off—as a nasty little inaccessible form of writing to be avoided,” wrote Father Spinale in his introductory essay to *St. Peter’s B-list*. “Perhaps many members of the Book Club still have scars from reading Alexander Pope or feel revulsion after having to stomach some lumpy, middle-aged English teacher passionately screaming, ‘Seize the day!’ while telling you what Robert Frost’s ‘The Road Not Taken’ really means.”

Part of the problem, according to Father Spinale, is that “English teachers excel at telling their students what poems mean—perhaps this is why we rarely read poetry. Perhaps we think we need someone to tell us what it means.” But he did not find that to be the case with *St. Peter’s B-List*:

“The poetry in this collection is very different. We can read it without anyone telling us anything. The experiences of the poets penetrate our own and expand them; these poets make our experiences richer—inflected in a different key.”

Poets in the volume include such well-known Catholic writers as the late Brian Doyle, Mary Karr, Dana Gioia, Angela Alaimo O’Donnell, Paul Mariani and Kate Daniels but also many less familiar names. Of the 70 poems in the anthology, Father Spinale wrote: “Many are extraordinarily funny. Many are heart-wrenching and render the reader silent. All are Catholic. All of them, I think, can contribute to prayer.”

“I think for me the most powerful aspect of this book was not necessarily always the poems written by others (although I appreciated the imagery and reflections found in many of them),” wrote reader Mary Virginia Bunker:

I found that reading the poetry in the book provided me with a personal challenge to try and articulate my own feelings, emotions and experiences/memories related to some of the saints that have deeply impacted my own spiritual journey and practices. I found that reading the book inspired me to do some of my own journaling (free-form verse, personal prayer, reflections, narrative and questions) and artwork around the qualities and stories of the saints that have touched me and people I have loved.

The online conversation on our C.B.C. Facebook page also benefited from conversation with some of the poets in the volume, including Angela Alaimo O’Donnell. “It is fascinating to see the ways in which what we bring to a poem shapes (in some measure) what we see in it. This is why poetry is so multiple in its meanings. A poem has as many readings as there are readers,” she wrote.

The Magdalene in the Reformation

Throughout 20 centuries of Christianity, the story of Mary Magdalene has been a convoluted one—as well as one that has often shown the worst patriarchal and sexist elements at work within church pieties and teaching. The first apostle to see the risen Lord—known, in fact, because of this as the *apostola apostolorum*—she nevertheless found

her reputation over the centuries slowly turned to that of a prostitute or a woman possessed, in large part because interpreters of Scripture made an amalgam of several women mentioned in the New Testament and presented them all as the Magdalene.

In his introductory essay for our discussion of this book, Father Spinale asked if readers had a pre-existing devotion to Mary Magdalene and what their understanding of the saint was before they read this book. A surprising number of readers said they had long held her in high esteem. “Never have I associated her with prostitution or possession. She may at times, in my mind, have been a compilation of the various Marys mentioned in Scripture, but for the most part, I considered her a woman with a mission,” wrote Sally Meyers. “She was ‘ahead of her time,’ unappreciated in a male-dominated culture both then and now. Her belief, her love and her strength drew me to her.”

“Mary Magdalene’s character draws others to her and clearly excites connections and comparisons among those who contemplate her witness to the risen Christ,” Father Spinale wrote. “The reformers understood in Mary an intimacy with Christ and a mission that they can replicate in their own lives. Such an intimacy licenses public witness to Jesus Christ on the part of lay men and women,” he continued. “For early modern Catholics, such an intimacy is afforded one who empties oneself in contrition for sin and enacts love in the all-consuming, often contemplative and unitive way that Mary loves Jesus.”

Margaret Arnold’s words in *The Magdalene in the Reformation* support his contention, as she notes the many ways in which Mary Magdalene allowed people to access the entire story of salvation history, including often in pairs with other saints. “Over the centuries, Mary was made to speak not only her good news but also her whole story, a chronicle of sin and redemption that contains within it humanity’s fall and salvation,” Arnold writes. She continues:

Her progress from sinner to penitent, from prodigal to ascetic, from witness to missionary, describes the arc of the church’s founding narrative. The varying emphases that can be found in different versions of her story point to the preoccupations of those who gave her voice, to the questions that

interested, inspired, and infuriated them.

Further, because the different images of Mary Magdalene inspired other women to argue for authority, to show holiness, to argue for a closer intimacy with Christ, “[a]n army of eloquent Magdalenes has carried the message of the Gospel through the centuries,” Arnold concludes, “despite facing violence, oppression, insult, and mockery. The church owes them its life.”

To offer the broadest possible range of quality books with spiritual and intellectual heft, we are always interested in suggestions for what to choose next. Are you interested in reading and discussing with us? Join the Catholic Book Club at americamagazine.org/catholic-book-club or on Facebook at facebook.com/groups/americanbc. Happy reading!

James T. Keane, senior editor

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Evelyn Waugh, on board the liner S.S. America after it arrived in New York, Jan. 31, 1947. Waugh bore a special antipathy for Americans, whom he considered barbaric and vulgar.



What Waugh Saw in America

By Joshua Hren

An Anglo-American romance

When Evelyn Waugh first visited the United States in 1947, he anthropomorphized the country as Aimée Thanatogenos, the anti-heroine of his Hollywood novel *The Loved One*. She is a naïve young beauty who was “dressed and scented in obedience to the advertisements.” A year later, Waugh crossed the Atlantic from England again. Though he remained vexed by the country’s forbidding foreignness, on second glance his ironic distance was lessened. The birthmarks of the United States, he found, were not all blights that demanded excision. Discovering her Catholic side, the smitten Waugh took the country as his loved one.

Waugh was not always loving; he could be mean when he wanted to. The author of *Vile Bodies*—“Who shall change our vile body?” (Phil 3:21)—had a proclivity toward cruelty. His friend Nancy Mitford once asked him how he could reconcile “being so horrible with being a Christian. He replied rather sadly that were he not a Christian he would be even more horrible...and anyway would have committed suicide years ago.” Waugh bore a special antipathy for Americans (“the bloody Yanks”), whom he considered barbaric, vulgar and bereft of tradition.

And so it was with considerable trepidation that his

AP Photo

The birthmarks of the United States, Waugh found, were not all blights that demanded excision. ●●

agent, A. D. Peters, pondered Waugh's travels to Hollywood, where in early 1947 Waugh was set to negotiate the film rights for *Brideshead Revisited*. In preparation for his client's visit, Peters sent a warning to Waugh:

I must tell you that you have the reputation here—both at M.G.M. and everywhere else—of being a difficult, tetchy, irritating and rude customer. I hope you will surprise and confound them all... They are children; and they should receive the tolerance and understanding that you show to children.

But, as Waugh's biographer Selina Hastings retorts, "tolerance and understanding were rarely conspicuous in Evelyn's attitude toward children." The trip was a recipe for tragedy.

Intrinsic Inhumanity

Waugh's first impressions of New York City included disdain for the "great boobyboxes" (American skyscrapers), which he found "absolutely negligible in everything except bulk.... They bear the same sort of relation to architecture as distempering a ceiling does to painting." Like a 20th-century Dante, Waugh described his taxicab travels as infernal—"sitting through all eternity in a traffic block."

In Beverly Hills, the art of compromise was doubly doomed. American film executives did not understand the book's Catholic undercurrent. Still further, in a Daily Telegraph piece Waugh complained about his trying circumstances without naming *Brideshead*: "A script was recently condemned as likely to undermine the Christian conception of marriage. The story was of an unhappy married man and woman who wished to divorce their respective partners and remarry one another."

And so, with the trip's original purpose failed, Waugh took to reporting on the country. In a 1947 article for The

Daily Telegraph and Morning Post, "Why Hollywood is a Term of Disparagement," Waugh lamented the film industry's capitulation to the "great fallacy of the Century of the Common Man...that a thing can have no value for anyone which is not valued by all." Whereas, in the not too distant past a book that sold a mere 5,000 copies could shape a generation, "a film must please everyone."

Waugh saw an intrinsic inhumanity in the film star's life, which, he quipped, "is as brief as a prize fighter." Then there were the farcical traditions that governed the industry. A screenwriter, wishing to hang a map on his wall, would request a hammer and nails. A union representative would arrive and indicate that the carpenters would strike if he hung the thing himself. These sorts of impositions, Waugh concluded, keep the cost of moviemaking exorbitant:

The capitalist at the head of the company is concerned solely with profits; the proletariat allow profits only to those who directly work for their pleasure; in this miniature class-war the artist vanishes.

In the final lines of the article, he insists that the absurdities under which Hollywood works are insuperable and fears that artists will "be seduced there to their own extinction."

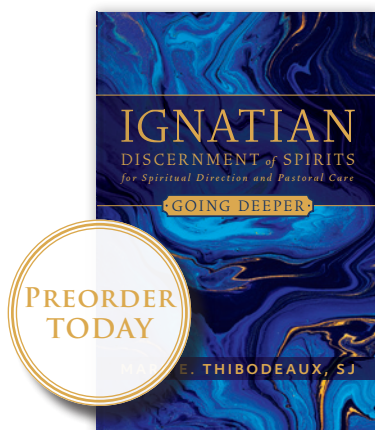
Meanwhile, down the road at an absurd "necropolis of the age of pharaohs" called Forest Lawn Memorial Park, Waugh was gathering the stuff of his next novel: *The Loved One: An Anglo-American Romance*. Eighty miles of pipe kept the lawns golf-course grade, and the place's solemn funerary purpose was nowhere betrayed—not until Waugh entered the "Slumber Rooms" and found there, sometimes on couches, embalmed bodies looking "dandified," effusing an air of "happy childhood at play." Countless concealed radios crooned the "Hindu Lovesong." Caged birds accompanied these soothing melodies with their ample twittering.

The ideal way to die, Waugh wrote in a 1947 article for *The Tablet*, "Half in Love with Easeful Death: An Examination of Californian Burial Customs," was to "shade off, so finely that it becomes imperceptible, the moment of transition" traditionally called death. The creator of the avant-garde burial home, Dr. Eaton, encouraged all to "[b]e happy because they for whom you mourn are happy—far happier than ever before." His optimistic necropolis had "consciously turned its back on the 'old customs

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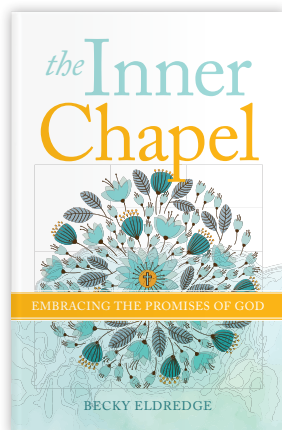
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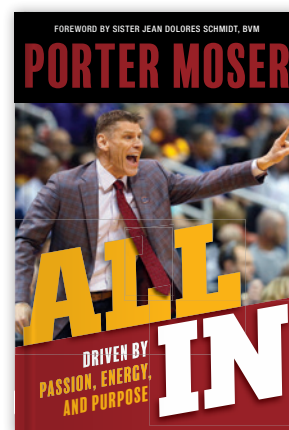


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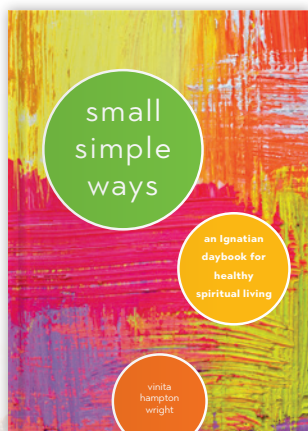
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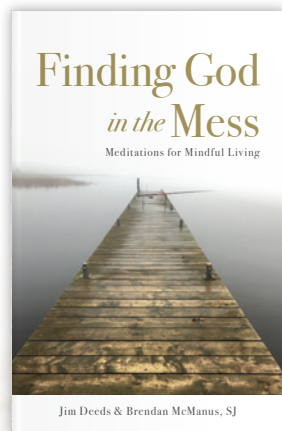
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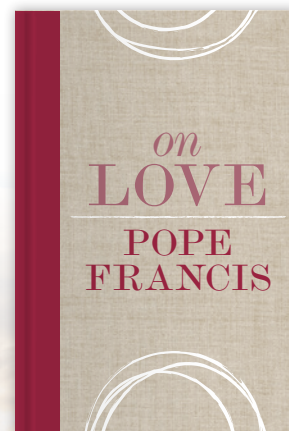
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Waugh described his novel *The Loved One* as a ‘little nightmare’ that bears no resemblance to the ‘vast variety of life in America.’

of death,’ the grim traditional alternatives of Heaven and Hell,” wrote Waugh. “Dr. Eaton is the first man to offer eternal salvation at an inclusive charge as part of his undertaking services.”

Waugh, having witnessed rearranged corpses “fresh from the final beauty parlor,” felt nostalgia for the traditional attire of a naked soul sitting at the judgment seat, bodies surrounded by “marble worms writhing in the marble adipocere,” threatening to eat what flesh remained. Eaton’s achievement was meant to mask the Christian belief that Hell awaits the wicked. Instead, all buried at Forest Lawn passed from the indestructible steel shelves that kept their remains to the “endless infancy” of an insured, purchased paradise.

‘Nothing They Say Is Designed to Be Heard’

These strange burial customs were reincarnated in *The Loved One*, Waugh’s grotesque sendup of the New World’s artificial mastery of death. “It is not possible to be funny about corpses for 25,000 words,” his agent cautioned. Waugh answered by prefacing the book with a conspicuous warning. The novel is only a “little nightmare” that bears no resemblance to the “vast variety of life in America.”

In the opening pages, however, we find English countrymen “exiled in the barbarous regions of the world.” Setting a scene similar to many in the novels of Graham Greene, Waugh eventually reveals that this barbarous region is Hollywood. Though put off by the primitive manners, the English are acclimating to the “generous” Americans, who “don’t expect you to listen.” The secret of their social ease is born of a simple fact: “Nothing they say is designed to be heard.”

The novel’s hero, Denis Barlow, is the shame of his fellow expats; having failed in the film industry, he has

taken up work at the Happier Hunting Ground. His boss, Mr. Schultz, tries to capitalize on the fact that folks talk to their pets “like they was children.” The Brit promises doggy daddies an anniversary remembrance card “without further charge”: “*Your little Arthur is thinking of you in heaven today and wagging his tail,*” one reads. The “Grade A service” includes, at the moment of committal, “a white dove, symbolizing the deceased’s soul, liberated over the crematorium” of the dead.

The entrepreneurial Happier Hunting Ground was forged “in emulation of its great neighbor,” Whispering Glades. The latter, developed by The Dreamer, promises all bereaved “a New Earth sacred to HAPPINESS.” Here the mortician Mr. Joyboy assures that “leave-taking” meets the purchaser’s preference. He has long been applying the product labeled “Radiant Childhood Smile” to all the dead without discrimination. Denis Barlow finds this smile “entirely horrible...a painted and smirking obscene travesty.” Here a deceased woman is not merely embalmed. She reclines on a chaise-longue holding a telephone, “as though dressed for an evening party.”

Barlow finds that he has to subject himself to Whispering Glades when his compatriot Sir Francis commits suicide and requires safe passage to a happier place. Barlow is greeted by the mortuary hostess, Aimée Thanatogenos, who plies her beautician’s trade on cadavers. Ms. Beloved Bringer of Death (to translate her name) bears that American lack of manners that made Waugh squeamish.

When Barlow solicits her mortuary services, she tries to triumph over him with the therapeutic: You must not shrink in anxious rejection of death but rather “discuss it openly and frankly,” thereby removing “morbid reflexions.” The answer, she insists, is to “bring your dark fears into the light of the common day of the common man.” Barlow concludes that he has seen her before. She is one with all of her sisters of the reception desk and airliners. She is “the standard product” who would “croon the same words to him in moments of endearment and express the same views and preferences in moments of social discourse. She was convenient.”

But Barlow requires mystery and manners: “He did not covet the spoils of this rich continent, the sprawling limbs of the swimming pool, the wide-open painted eyes and mouths under the arc-lamps.” Just when he consigns this “sole Eve in a bustling hygienic Eden” to cartoonish shallowness and tragic American innocence, he has an epiphany: She is ev-

everything he wanted during his solitary era of exile.

At Whispering Glades, one can buy tickets to W. B. Yeats's ethereal Lake Isle of Innisfree. When Barlow goes out to the isle seeking his muse, he meets Aimée again instead. Soon thereafter he confesses his poet's soul to her, and she, too, becomes besotted. Barlow stoops low to exploit her American naïveté concerning literature and history. She thinks he has composed the Keats he quotes ("I have been half in love with easeful death").

Plagiarizing poetry becomes a boon for Barlow, though Ms. Thanatogenos nearly catches him when, stealing Shakespeare, he compares her to a summer's day. Finding him unsettlingly "un-American," the self-described "progressive" writes to a newspaper columnist named Guru Brahmin (who comprises exactly two men and a secretary) soliciting advice. How could she marry a man who shows irreverence toward Whispering Glades, which she considers "an epitome of all that is finest in the American Way of Life"?

Still more, the English poets he cites are too despondent or ceremonious for this Californian courtship. Citing their melancholic verse, he can't compete with the movies and the crooners. Finally, Barlow is not gainfully employed. Doesn't he realize that "an American man would despise himself for living on his wife?" No, he says, "the older civilizations" have no such prejudices. Desperate for cash, the man remakes himself in an all-American fashion, taking correspondence courses to become a "non-sectarian clergyman." But when the lovesick Aimée discovers his "unethical" literary piracy, she heeds the Guru's surefire advice and kills herself at Whispering Glades.

With borrowed vulgarity, Barlow starts a business of "non-sectarian services expeditiously conducted at competitive prices." Before he can cinch his first client, though, a fellow Brit finagles him into sparing his ex-pats further embarrassment. And so it happens that the Englishman takes his leave, his ticket fully funded by the expatriate Cricket Club. The romantic lie of the Anglo-American match cannot withstand the novelistic truth: Waugh severs the macabre alliance, consigning *The Dreamers* to the columbarium of history.

The Second Time Around

Whether motivated by masochism, a whim of magnanimity or money to be made on a *Life* magazine article on Catholicism in the States, Waugh returned to America in 1948. This time he met Dorothy Day, whom he described

as "an autocratic ascetic saint who wants us all to be poor." He offered lunch to Day and her Catholic Worker fellow travelers in an Italian restaurant. Although she did not approve of the cocktails he bought and shared at considerable expense, the group stayed and talked for hours.

Waugh would later visit the Catholic Worker contributor and National Book Award-winning writer J. F. Powers in St. Paul, Minn. Powers did his part to dispel the rumors that cast Waugh as more of a cartoon than the character he already was: "Saw Waugh...all a lie about liveried servants. Carried out his dishes himself."

During the same travels, while delivering a series of lectures on "Three Vital Writers: Chesterton, Knox, and Greene," Waugh stopped at Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky to see Thomas Merton. Merton was indebted to Waugh, who provided extensive edits to the "long winded" *Seven Storey Mountain*. The book came out in England one-third shorter and with Waugh's recommended title, *Elected Silences*. The younger Merton repaid his debt, in part, through spiritual friendship, advising Waugh to "say the Rosary every day. If you don't like it, so much the better." The monk hoped the beads would assist with Waugh's anxiety over imperfect contrition. To Merton's mind, Waugh was a man "with intellectual gifts" arguing himself "into a quandary that doesn't exist."

In Waugh's review of the book he helped rewrite, he was more charitable toward U.S. society: "Americans...are learning to draw away from what is distracting in their own civilization while remaining in their own borders." *Elected Silences*, with its "fresh, simple, colloquial" ethos, came as a revelatory shock for "non-Catholic Americans," who were altogether unaware of "warmth silently generated in these furnaces of devotion." Waugh went further, anticipating that the United States would soon witness a flourishing monastic revival. Championing the Benedictine option long before the Benedict option became chic, Waugh proclaimed the modern world increasingly uninhabitable, calling us back to the age of Boniface, Gregory and Augustine: "As in the Dark Ages the cloister offers the sanest and most civilized way of life."

Dislike of Dogmas

Once home, Waugh complained that he had "seen enough of USA to last me fifty years," even as *Life* published his article "The American Epoch in the Catholic Church"

(1949), which betrays a conditional surrender to the prospect that providence may be “schooling and strengthening” the people of the New World “for the historic destiny long borne by Europe.”

Waugh started out the article with a host of objections to the United States. It would seem that the hallmarks of the American character, he wrote, are “unsympathetic to the habits of the Church”: compulsive revolt against traditional authority, obsession with mere activity, the blind embrace of novelties, the strangeness of Latin on democratic lips, “their dislike of dogmas that divide good citizens and their love of the generalities which unite them.”

The objections continued. America was marked by “late-eighteenth century ‘enlightenment’ and the liberalism of her founders has persisted through all the changes of her history and penetrated into every part of her life.” Thus many American preachers cast representative majority government as “of divine institution.” Waugh seized upon a ship metaphor to name the essential dogma of the country, separation of church and state. Government, he wrote, was “a ship liner captain” who has received the capacity to command from his passengers. Though the public rooms may be rented out for motley religious assemblies, “blasphemy is permitted only in the privacy of the bars.”

Waugh saw America’s founders as “doctrinaire liberals” (in the classical sense), men who tolerated very little government, who wished to give the private sphere a vast and inviolable circumference. In many Enlightenment experiments, the state (“whether conceived of as the will of the majority or the power of a clique”) had commandeered more of that supposedly sacrosanct privacy, and so the “discrepancies between the secular and the religious philosophies” had become more prominent, “for many things are convenient to the ruler which are not healthy for the soul.” In America, in spite of her idiosyncrasies, that damnable decay had been delayed.

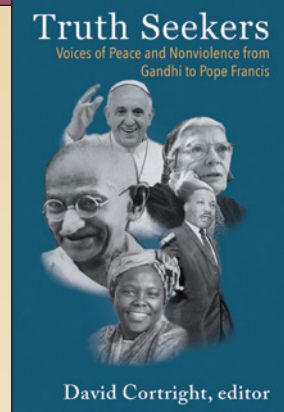
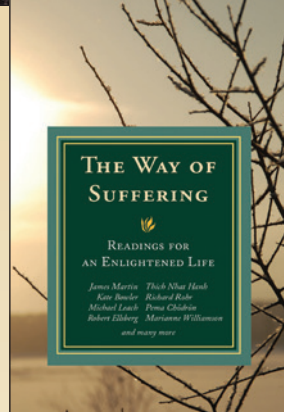
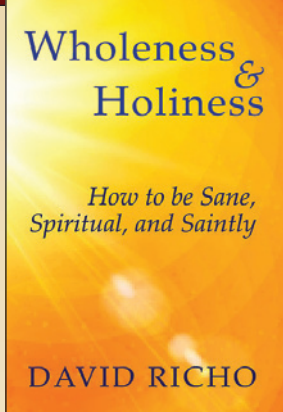
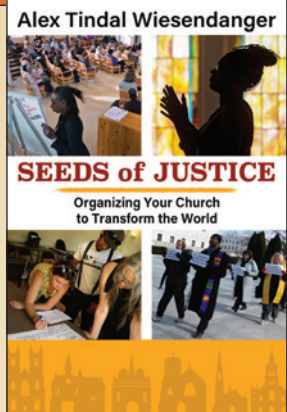
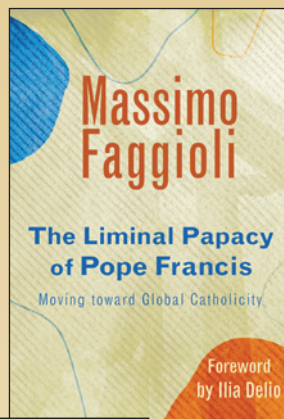
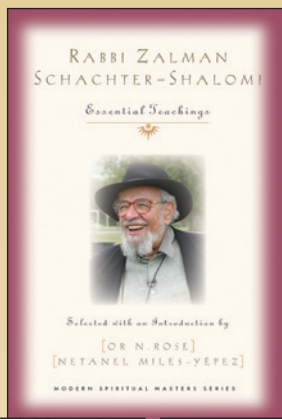
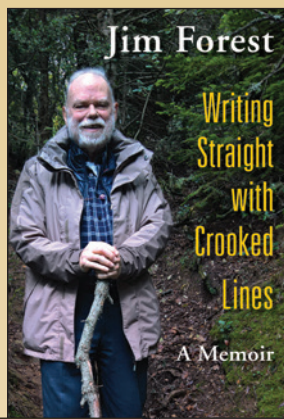
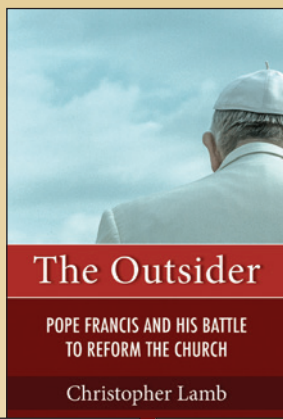
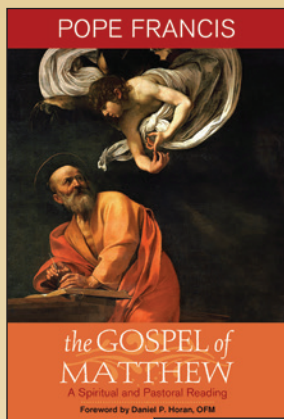
Waugh also felt that America’s anti-Catholic temperament would stunt the genuine growth of Catholicity, as Catholic movements would be denigrated as suspicious evidence of “Popery.” Waugh noted the strength of these prejudices: “It

The Manatee

By Michael Cadnum

After the hail
is shoveled from the porch,
after vespers and the gourmand’s pasta maker,
the pier marching out across the tidewater,
the shrill melody of the grackle and
after the purple suitcase, after the fox
and the mountain, after the liar
forgets his keys, after the anorexic
buys a blue and yellow kite,
after the pickpocket falls in love
and the bailiff pays his ex,
after the wheel and the fire,
after the wave’s thousand shovels
and the oak’s wooden spear,
after pi to the millionth place and
the diamond too rare to cut,
after the word is forgotten and discovered,
and streamed until it’s nothing,
she is not here.
The river slops, wrinkles, flattens,
opaque, transparent, muddy,
brackish, big as war,
she’s nowhere. Gone,
absent, never. Upright like
a woman inside the world.

Michael Cadnum is the author of nearly 40 books, including the National Book Award finalist *The Book of the Lion*. His poetry collections include *Kingdom* and the forthcoming *The Promised Rain*.



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Waugh called Dorothy Day ‘an autocratic ascetic saint who wants us all to be poor.’

was the Quebec Act tolerating Popery in Canada, quite as much as the Stamp Act and the Tea Duties, which rendered George III intolerable to the colonists.” And yet he argued we must not mistake the strength of a stabilized minority religion like the Catholic faith in the United States nor cling to the rosy lie that “from the age of Constantine to that of Luther there was a single, consistently triumphant, universally respected authority.”

Rather, the Catholic Church, even when she faced fewer or weaker enemies outside her walls, “has always been at grips with enemies inside.” In spite of its depth of tradition and a profound and prolonged influence in Europe, there “conversions barely keep pace with apostasies,” whereas in the United States the Catholic Church is “subject to both the advantages and disadvantages of an underprivileged position.”

Laissez les Bons Temps Rouler

It may be true that, generally speaking, American Catholics are inclined to show great tolerance when it comes to differences across creeds. Debates over the finer points of church teaching are seen as splitting hairs, inconsequential. It may also be true that, generally speaking, American Catholics are incapable of ascetic life. But Waugh distanced himself from generalities of this sort, framing them as limited caricatures of the sort he employed himself to damn the New World from a distance. After all, Catholicism is not entirely alien to the American spirit. Take New Orleans.

Yes, witchcraft is to be found in the Crescent City, syncretized with the Nicene Creed and the rosary. But on an Ash Wednesday in New Orleans, Waugh witnessed “one of the most moving sights of my tour.” Filthy streets showed the excesses of carnival. Still, across the street a Jesuit church was “teeming with life all day long; a continuous, dense crowd of all colours and conditions moving up the altar rails and returning with their foreheads signed with ash” and admonished with a “Dust thou art.”

In the “desert of modern euphemisms,” where the use of niceties such as “under-privileged” and “emotionally disturbed” threatens to conceal what Flannery O’Connor called our “essential disfigurement,” here, in Catholic New Orleans, all day long souls were told of their poverty in the plain and lovingly painful style of the church.

Waugh cautioned against celebrating the city too much, reminding the reader that New Orleans had never known persecution, which is never healthy; he argued that too much toleration, carried over a long time, can enervate and weaken a religious tradition. In Maryland, on the contrary, though Catholics practiced in temporary peace, they were treated poorly. The old Catholic families of Baltimore “have much in common with the old Catholic families of Lancashire,” Waugh remarked. The countryside around Leonardtown, Md., too, was haunted by the tradition of Jesuit missionaries, slipping in disguise from family to family, celebrating Mass in the hidden parts of plantations.

Persecution came to black Catholics, Waugh noted, not from Protestants but from “fellow-members in the Household of the Faith.” Although Waugh was attuned to the efforts of white Catholics to make amends for these scandals of the distant past, he lauded the “thousands of coloured Catholics who so accurately traced their Master’s roads amidst insults and injury.”

Waugh remarked that Catholic colleges have also emerged in the United States at least in part from uneasy relations between church and state. Though poor, American Catholics had “covered their land with schools,” convinced that in a non-Catholic land only a whole education can incubate the faith. In addition, Waugh wrote that it was a “very great thing that young men who are going out to be dentists or salesmen should have grounding in formal logic and Christian ethics.”

“Prove syllogistically that the natural rights exist.” “Give the fundamental reason why usury is wrong.” “What is the difference between soul and mind?” “Give and explain a definition of Sacrifice.”

Waugh chose these questions at random from a Jesuit college exam and cited them as the reason why Catholics could keep pace when the discussion turned to deeper questions of broad concerns, whereas their secular peers were skilled at “particular subjects” but anything general “was shapeless and

meaningless.” Not to mention, the University of Notre Dame’s “holy places are crowded before a football match.”

But Holy Mother Church, Waugh concluded, does not exist to produce philosophers, nor writers. “The Church and the world need monks and nuns [in those days flourishing in Trappist Abbeys and Carmelite cloisters] more than they need writers.” The church exists to produce saints, and “what is plain to the observer is that throughout the nation the altar rails are everywhere crowded.”

In “Americanism,” that amalgamation of all that Americans call “the good life,” wrote Waugh, it is Christianity and “preeminently Catholicism” that plays the redeeming part. He assures his readers that the “Americanism” produced and parodied by the fears of Europeans is a fiction. “There is a purely American ‘way of life’ led by every good American Christian that is point-for-point opposed to the publicized” hyperboles pumped out by Hollywood and popularized the world over. More so than their fellow Protestant citizens, Catholics feel pressured to prove themselves faithful to the “way,” to fit in. J. F. Powers, Waugh noted, was keenly aware of this tension: His Irish priests are “faithful and chaste and, in youth at any rate, industrious, but many live out their lives in a painful state of transition; they have lost their ancestral simplicity.”

Waugh’s great expectations regarding the burgeoning “American Epoch in the Catholic Church” were tempered most by the threatening “neutrality” of the state: “neutral—a euphemism for ‘unchristian.’” Mercantile forces seek to replace the Christ Child with Santa Claus and his reindeer. Waugh witnessed, in early Lent, the Easter Bunny’s arrival at a train station, police posse and brass band in tow: “[P]agan commerce is seeking to adopt and desecrate the feasts of the Church”; and if the matter lands in the hands of public authority, he mused, we know which side the neutral state will likely favor.

Given the liberal regime’s incompetence in religious matters and given the huge differences that divide the different religions practiced by U.S. citizens, “the neutral, secular State can only function justly by keeping itself within strict limits.” It was not for Waugh, a foreigner, to predict how long the U.S. government would hold back from encroaching on religious freedoms. Nonetheless, Waugh seemed to see that encroachment hovering in the distance, however far. He seemed to see the barbarians descending from the hills of Hollywood, howling the end of the “American Epoch in the Catholic Church.” But Waugh the foreigner has fallen for his

forbidden loved one. Even if her birthmarks mar her singular attractions, he won’t speak of them in public.

When Waugh made his final trip to the United States in 1950, he rode the coattails of his diagnoses in *Life*. Waugh was welcomed, in the words of Pamela Berry, “in a quaint Catholic light” that showed him to be “a noble gentle person who is capable, oh, yes, from time to time of naughty spitefulness, but who is on the whole a saintly, good person, healed and beatified by the Church.”

But Waugh was no saint much of the time. The tormented artist was aware of his hot temper and knew how uncharitable he could be. “How to reconcile this indifference to human beings with the obligation of Charity,” he confided in a friend, “That is my problem.” As George Weigel has noted, in his later years the novelist undertook a purgative “spiritual quest for compassion and contrition. As for many of us, the contrition likely came easier than the compassion.” Selena Hastings says that as a corrective to his misanthropy the Catholic writer “channeled a substantial portion of his income to Catholic charities.”

In the case of *The Loved One*, all royalties from its various translations were given to U.S. bishops. His agent wrote to relate gratitude and directives from various prelates, indicating the various orphanages and other ministries that would receive Waugh’s alms.

Almsgiving covers a multitude of sins, but this kind of charity can be easily caricatured: The cantankerous man continues to crank but holds out his liberality as a kind of red herring. *The Loved One* did not need to be translated into “American” English, and so no charities in the United States received royalties from this book. But Waugh, infatuated by the good things he had experienced during his stateside fling, gave American Catholics something perhaps greater: He showed his dilated heart by bestowing upon them the recognition of the impermanence of an epoch.

Joshua Hren is the founder and editor in chief of *Wiseblood Books* and co-founder of the Honors College at Belmont Abbey. He is the author of *This Our Exile: Short Stories*, and his second collection, *In the Wine Press*, is forthcoming in 2020.

A FIERCE CRITIC OF IDENTITY POLITICS

A conversation on race with Thomas Chatterton Williams

By Olga Segura

It is difficult to categorize Thomas Chatterton Williams.

The 39-year-old writer, a self-identified liberal, does not necessarily display the inclinations associated with the label. Since the publication of his memoir, *Losing My Cool: Love, Literature, and a Black Man's Escape From the Crowd*, in 2009, Williams has become one of the fiercest and most prolific critics of identity politics in the United States. Most notably, in an op-ed for The New York Times in 2017, he criticized the author and journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates, claiming that Coates “mirrors ideas of race—specifically the specialness of whiteness—that white supremacist thinkers cherish.”

Williams takes his criticisms of identity politics further in his 2019 book, *Self-Portrait in Black and White: Unlearning Race*, a look into the author's attempt to confront the ways that Americans define identity and race. He acknowledges that his parents, a black father and white mother, raised him and his brother in a home that was “an unequivocally *black* household.” His daughter's birth, however, forced him to reconsider what is meant when a person identifies as black or white. In *Self-Portrait*, he urges readers to move beyond a black-white binary.

“I have spent my whole life earnestly believing the fundamental American dictum that a single ‘drop of black blood’ makes a person ‘black’ primarily because they can never be ‘white,’” Williams writes. “Before my daughter, Marlow, was born that night in Paris, I'd never remotely questioned the idea that, when the time came to have them, my children would be ‘black’ like me.... Blackness as an either/or truth was so fundamental to my self-concep-

tion that I'd never rigorously reflected on its foundations.”

A Writer of Many Contradictions

The reception of Williams's controversial work has been heated. One reviewer described him as “a man born to be Incoherent”; another described the author's work as a crucial contribution to the conversation around race in America. Darryl Pinckney, in the March 26, 2020, issue of The New York Review of Books, writes that because “others [are] giving whiteness too much value,” in order “to strike a balance,” Williams has chosen to “devalue blackness.”


I first came across Williams's work on Twitter, when a commentator used *Losing My Cool* to support his claim that hip-hop music was detrimental to black and brown communities. I read the 2009 memoir and *Self-Portrait* back to back in just a few weeks. I followed up by reading his articles for The New Yorker, The Tablet, The London Review of Books and Harper's. I found myself challenged and fascinated by a man who has written a memoir about abandoning the hip-hop culture of his youth, one of the best essays on Drake I have ever read and a profile on Spike Lee, followed by a book arguing for the unlearning of race.

I found that there is a tension that Williams is well aware of, particularly as a writer living in the digital age. Along with his writing, he seems committed to authentically engaging with others, especially his critics, on Twitter. “I really love the way that it allows the immediacy of, for those of us trying to be writers, not just to participate in the discourse but hopefully shape it,” he told me in an interview in February.



Dominique Nabokov; photo courtesy of author

In *Self-Portrait*, Thomas Chatterton Williams urges readers to move beyond a black/white binary.



WILLIAMS IS COMMITTED TO AUTHENTICALLY ENGAGING WITH OTHERS, ESPECIALLY HIS CRITICS, ON TWITTER. 🍇🍇

“But it also puts things in such binaries, and it turns things into a kind of team dynamic in a way that I think is really against what it means to be a writer,” he said. “I really think a writer is alone and not against other people but certainly not trying to score points to gain applause through likes and retweets in a way that’s really unhealthy with Twitter.”

For writers, he tells me, the process of creating a book or writing a long magazine article is a disproportionate act. A writer can spend months or years on a project that might take the average reader a day or week to get through. This disparity is intensified on platforms like Twitter, where readers can share any criticisms they might have instantly and directly with an author. I asked Williams if this relationship created on social media between reader and writer has ever caused him to doubt an article or book.

“I was not concerned that people would disagree with me. I think that’s actually really healthy and fine, and I really think things have been dialectically like, ‘You put out a point. I respond to that point. And then we synthesize into a new and better point.’ That’s great,” he said. “But I was worried that people would either accidentally or, what has happened in certain instances, willfully misconstrue what I was trying to say, read it in the least generous possible way, kind of project motives onto me, psychologize what I’m saying. You open yourself to the critique of, ‘Oh, you’re a self-hating black person. That’s fine. Why are you trying to make an argument about race?’”

While he expected such criticisms, he still finds them disturbing. “I believe that a lot of minority writers stress about whether they get pigeonholed in writing about identity stuff, like you can’t write about other things.” But he says he is less concerned with being pigeonholed and more interested in contributing to the ways we talk about race in American society.

While Williams does not write with critics in mind, I wondered how he feels about readers, like the one who introduced me to Williams’s work online, who use his words

to justify stereotypes about black Americans. “I really don’t try to write for these types of people that can agree with you for the wrong reasons either,” he said. “That sometimes makes me feel more uncomfortable, a certain type of conservative reader who wants to applaud being a black person that isn’t antagonistic or something like that. That’s not what motivates me at all.”

“I think I have a few things to say that could be valuable in the conversation,” Williams continued. “And so any kind of negative feedback or disagreement—it doesn’t really deter me.”

Unlearning Race

In *Self-Portrait* Williams argues that “there is no such thing, on any measurable scientific level, as distinct races of the species *Homo sapiens*,” adding that human beings make inferences, based on “our own geographical and cultural orientations, about other people and ourselves based on the loose interplay of physical traits, language, custom, and nationality, all of which lack any fixed or universal meaning.”

It was not until Williams moved to France, he claims, that he realized that “our identities really are a constant negotiation between the story we tell about ourselves and the narrative our societies like to recite, between the face we see in the mirror and the image recognized by the people and institutions that happen to surround us.” This need to define ourselves, he says, has led to a “racial sickness plaguing our national life.”

While many have been critical of his call to “unlearn race,” Williams argues that this idea has already been suggested by writers like James Baldwin, Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King Jr. “Race is a delusion, and it’s a duty of ours to dispel,” he says. “There’s no such thing as black or white, and to acquiesce to these terms is to acquiesce [to] your own destruction.”

What does it mean for Americans to move beyond race? First, people have to spend time learning their own history, he says, using resources like 23andMe, a home-based saliva kit that can help determine one’s ancestry, to better understand where they come from. This would also allow us to more adequately define who we are. Rather than someone declaring he or she is white, learning one’s history would allow him or her to say where in Europe his or her ancestors are from. Second, U.S. society must stop being so segregated and allow people of different races to fully engage with one another. “Racism is a perceptive error,” he said, “and what

you actually have to do is you have to get into spaces where you're meeting people and perceiving them as human beings and not as racial stereotypes and myths."

Is there a difference between the kind of unlearning that white Americans have to do and a comparable unlearning needed by black Americans? White people, Williams stated, have to do two things. First, they have to become informed about the ways they were racialized. Second, he said, "they have to think of themselves as 'raced' in order to then think past that and reject it and see it for the illusion it is." He adds, "You cannot get to that illusion state by just thinking that you have no race and you're invisible. You have to understand what whiteness means, absolutely."

But by unlearning race as we know it, I ask him, would we as a society be in danger of negating black culture and the ways that we define what it means to be black in America? "I don't think so," Williams responds, because "these are traditions that communities have created and upheld and honored but there's nothing inherent in the person about it." He believes that regardless of one's identity, individuals can take part in any aspect of human culture, describing this idea as humanistic. "So I think that if you just think like, 'What do I like? What did I grow up with? What do I want to pass on to my children?'" he said. "It's a kind of music, it's a kind of literature, it's a kind of even way of talking, it's a kind of way of slapping hands, it's a kind of way of dancing. All that can be held onto without believing that there's anything racial about it."

Building an Appealing Future

As a 30-year-old, left-leaning, Afro-Latina immigrant trying to engage with Williams's work, I find his call to move past race and labels challenging. There was power for communities like mine in embracing terms like *black* or *Afro-Latinx*. If we were not capable of setting ourselves apart from white Americans with these distinctions, would we lose the representation and power we have historically struggled to achieve in the 21st century?

I realized that it was easier for me to understand Williams's argument by reading it through a theological lens. As Catholics, we are called to envision the kind of racially transcendent world that Williams seems to be envisioning, one in which we are asked to think beyond our political parties and prioritize the behaviors and attitudes Jesus embodies in the Gospel. And in Williams's words, I found some similarities to the works of black theologians I ad-

mire—like the Rev. Bryan Massingale, who, in his pivotal 2010 book, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, also described the need for white Americans to acknowledge their racial particularity.

When I mentioned this to the author, he tells me that while he was not thinking about theology while writing *Self-Portrait*, he is not surprised that his work can be read in this way, pointing to Dr. King's vision of the Christian mountaintop. "For me, what disturbs me about some of the conversations on the left is that you get the impression that times are so divisive, that there's so much discomfort with what Trump has exposed, that some people on the left don't actually have the goal of a kind of racially transcendent future," he said. "They don't want that. They actually want a kind of separation and think that some people are irredeemable and that divisions are irredeemable and unbridgeable. That has to be an anti-Christian view, and that's also, I think, not an appealing future for me. That future is not an appealing one with our God."

Williams grew up with a devoutly Protestant mother and attended a Catholic high school in New Jersey before attending Georgetown University, where he studied philosophy. While faith has not played an explicit role in his work, he tells me that he has had a "very Jesuit upbringing" and points to writers like Aquinas and Augustine who helped him understand how to argue. "St. Augustine and his *Confessions*, that was a really inspirational book for me. And that's the first memoir written in many ways but also the first memoir that made an impression on me and kind of modeled how you use your life to get at larger questions," he said. "So maybe there's a kind of Catholic and continental influence on the form and the way that I go about attacking questions."

Williams demonstrates that black and brown citizens do not form a monolithic block and cannot be placed into a neat binary. He also demonstrates that the role of a writer in 2020 is a complicated one. "The purpose of the writer is not activism," he told me. "It's not the same thing as expressing solidarity or shoring up the team. It's just trying to, to the best of your abilities, engage with contemporary problems and try to see things clearly, even if that takes you on inconvenient paths."

Olga Segura is a former associate editor of *America*. She is currently working on a book on race, religion and the Black Lives Matter movement scheduled for publication by Orbis Books in 2021.

A LOVE SONG FOR ERNEST J. GAINES

The New Orleans writer created the indelible 'Miss Jane Pittman'

By Jason Berry



The author Ernest J. Gaines, who died in November, had a “great writer” gravitas as well as an amiability he could turn on or off like a faucet.

AP Photo, File

The novelist Ernest J. Gaines, who died in his sleep on Nov. 5, 2019, at the age of 86 in his home in Oscar, La., published nine books in a distinguished career. *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* and *A Lesson Before Dying*, which received the National Book Critics Circle award for fiction, are classics. His short story, “The Sky Is Gray,” is widely taught, among other Gaines stories that illuminate rituals of endurance in the era of Jim Crow cruelties.

Gaines created a cosmos in the fictional town of Bayonne, drawing from his upbringing amid Depression-era poverty in sharecroppers’ quarters behind a False River plantation house in Pointe Coupee Parish. It is the same terrain where Gaines breathed his last, albeit in a spacious house that he and his wife, Dianne Saulney Gaines, built in the 1990s after he received a MacArthur fellowship. By then he was writer-in-residence at the University of Louisiana, Lafayette, with a long list of accolades.

Rehabilitating “the old place,” as Gaines called it, was a vanquishing of the past. The outhouses and shacks had largely disappeared, the voices a timeless chorus in his books. He restored the rural graveyard with the resting place of his aunt, Miss Augusteen Jefferson, an inspiration for Miss Jane Pittman.

In dedicating that 1971 novel, celebrated for its epic sweep from Reconstruction through the Civil Rights era following the course of one woman’s life, Gaines cited “my beloved aunt...who did not walk a day in her life but who taught me the importance of standing.”

Newsweek requested a photo of Miss Jane Pittman. “The actress Ruby Dee, when reviewing the novel for [the journal] *Freedomways*, also mistook Miss Jane for a real person,” an amused Gaines would write in an essay, “Miss Jane and I,” years later. “One lady accused me of using a tape recorder, then calling the interview a novel after I had cut out all the inconsequential material.”

His nurturing aunt “crawled over the floor as a six-month-old child might. Some people have said that she had been dropped on the floor by another child when she was small; others have said that she was born with that affliction. To this day I do not know which story is true.” In the cabin where she lived, cooked and oversaw youngsters, older folk gathered. Gaines listened to their stories; some people paid him to write their letters. “I learned to write what I

thought they would like to say and write it fast.”

Without access to a library or high school, the 15-year-old in 1948 made an emotional farewell to the aunt he would never see again, and caught a bus to join his mother and stepfather in Vallejo, Calif., where they found jobs. With a library card he discovered the novels of Steinbeck, Willa Cather and Russians like Chekhov, Gogol, Turgenev and Tolstoy, whose stories of a social hierarchy with peasants had resonance for him. For Southern writers, he later wrote, “blacks were either caricatures of human beings or they were problems. They were either children or they were seers. But they were very seldom what the average being was.”

After high school and military service, Gaines studied at San Francisco State, and then received a Stanford fellowship for an M.A. in creative writing. He hunkered down in San Francisco working on stories and a novel that met with years of rejections. In 1962 he made his first trip back to Louisiana, “back into the past.” For six months he experienced “house fairs, with gumbos and fried fish...deaths, wakes, funerals, baptisms, even threats of racial violence.” On return to San Francisco, he had “a few bitter words through letters and over the telephone” with a New York editor interested in the novel. Gaines cut the 700-page manuscript in half. In 1964 *Catherine Carmier* was published “and just as soon forgotten.”

As he made more trips home, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* took shape. It had gone through 19 paperback editions and become a movie starring Cicely Tyson when Gaines inscribed my copy in Lafayette, La., on Sept. 22, 1978.

Meeting the Man

We met at a writers festival after exchanging letters. The novel had rocked me, viscerally and spiritually, when I read it over several coffee-fueled nights. In 1973, I had published my first book, *Amazing Grace: With Charles Evers in Mississippi*, an account of the civil rights leader’s quixotic run for governor. I was writing freelance for a range of outlets, discovering jazz at clubs and on records, reading in silence until the wee hours of the morning.

Miss Jane’s long life adventures come in a voice grounded by the spoken rhythms Gaines absorbed, a

well-controlled prose charged with a musicality in repetitive wording. Here, Miss Jane meets a voodoo woman:

She had flower bushes all over the yard, but no flowers, because it was winter. She had bottles stuck upside down round all the flower bushes and two rows of bottles side the walk from the gate up to the house. Bottles every color you can mention. She had scrubbed the gallery that morning, and she had sprinkled red brick over the gallery and steps. She must 'a' heard me stop the wagon because she answered the door soon as I knocked.

Gaines was 45 when we met, a hefty man with the “Great Writer” gravitas, yet an amiability he could turn on or off like a faucet. In later years he called me *podna*, a term of endearment among Southern males of both races. That first day, talking over coffee, I confided about my struggle with rejections on a novel. He nodded. “Rejections. I’ve known those.” With a passing reference to turn-downs of his early fiction, he said: “Keep working; keep working.” The words of solidarity from an esteemed author held deep comfort.

I was researching a long essay on links between jazz and literature, arguing that the memoirs of Louis Armstrong, Sidney Bechet and Jelly Roll Morton deserved their own genre. Gaines warmed to the idea. Later I sent the piece that ran in *Southern Exposure*; he wrote to me on April 11, 1979, from San Francisco:

Yes, there’s definitely a Jazz language, which we fiction writers are trying to use. (You mentioned the names, so there’s no need for me to re-mention them here.) But I think in my case I’ve been just as much influenced by the great blues singers as by the Jazz players. Remember, I come out of the Deep South—the plantation South. Rural blues music was our music. But the Jazz language is with us all.... I always have music in the background when I’m writing, and play music all the time when I have nothing else to do. When I travel by car, and I travel a lot, I’m forever listening to music. Prez [saxophonist Lester Young] is probably my favorite but I listen to all of them.

Gaines unloosed a riff on Ralph Ellison, whom I’d

quoted from his book of essays, *Shadow and Act*.

Though I can agree with much of it (his definition of the blues, etc.) just as much of his work confuses the living hell out of me. I wish he could state things much simpler. (Remember the Lord’s Prayer? Chief Joseph’s farewell speech? The Gettysburg Address? Three fantastic pieces of work—simple, simple, simple. This leads into *Invisible Man*, which I consider a great book, but I don’t know if it’s a great novel. Too controlled. Great novels must flow. Somewhere the characters must take over. He gives them just so much rope, then he jerks them back into “place.”

Gaines’s heeding of his characters’ restlessness charges *A Lesson Before Dying*. The narrator, Grant Wiggins, is a schoolteacher forced to prepare an inmate wrongly-accused of murder to face execution. Grappling with his own alienation, Wiggins must rally a community behind the prisoner to persuade the man his life has meaning. Wiggins stands outside the school, watching older boys on a break, chopping wood. “Am I reaching them at all? They are acting exactly as the old men did earlier. They are fifty years younger, maybe more, but doing the same thing those old men did who never attended school a day in their life. Is it just a vicious circle? Am I doing anything?”

On reading the galleys, I asked Gaines if he would do an interview at “the old place” (which he had not yet bought). On a milky February day in 1993 we drove from his office at University of Louisiana, Lafayette; an hour later we were standing in a graveyard. “The privies [outhouses] were all in a row behind those trees,” he said, pointing toward False River. “Every house had one on the ditch. My grandmother’s house had a faucet on the road, and we’d go draw the water and bring it to the house.”

Birds fluttered toward drifting clouds. Where, I asked, was his aunt Miss Augusteen Jefferson buried? “I don’t know,” he replied, just above a whisper.

Was he offended that she lay in an unmarked grave? “No,” he said, gazing at the yellow flowers. “She’s still there, a part of me, with the others.”

Jason Berry is finishing a film documentary on jazz funerals, drawn from his recent book, *City of a Million Dreams*.

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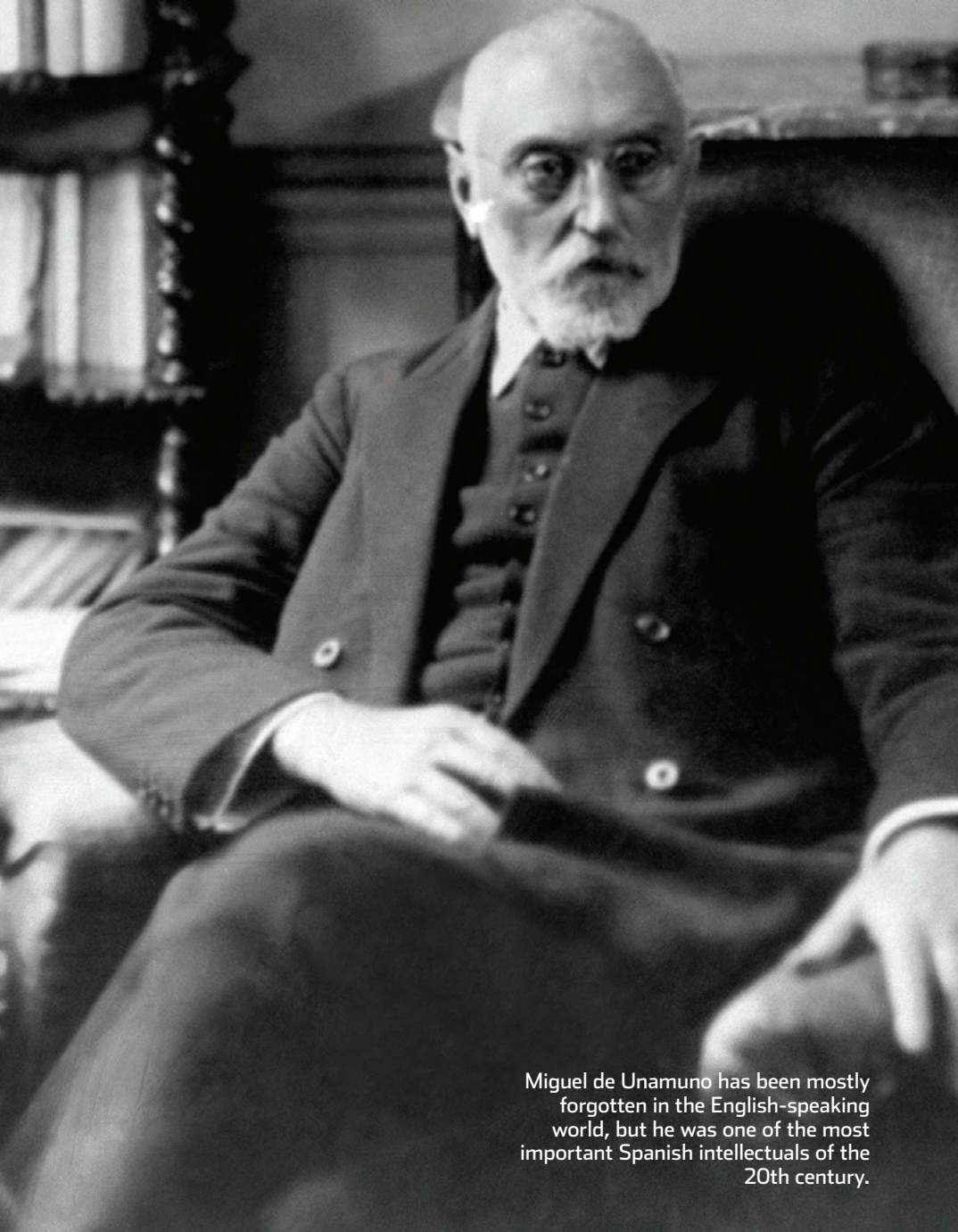


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THE DARK LIFE OF THE SOUL



Miguel de Unamuno has been mostly forgotten in the English-speaking world, but he was one of the most important Spanish intellectuals of the 20th century.



Miguel de Unamuno's troubling tale of a holy priest who no longer believes

By Michial Farmer

Our era of ever-decreasing faith has its own kinds of conversion narrative, and none is likely to be more disturbing to believers than that of the minister who loses his faith. The most recent high-profile case is the young pastor Joshua Harris, who became a Christian celebrity at an alarmingly young age on the strength of *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, a kind of bible for purity culture.

First, Harris announced that he had (rightly) denounced his book and the culture it helped create; a few months later, he announced that he was no longer a Christian in any meaningful sense.

Cases like Harris's make the news, but many non-famous ministers lose their faith. Their stories are chronicled by The Clergy Project, which also helps them find jobs outside their churches and offers them emotional support during what must be one of the hardest transitions a person can go through. To be a minister typically includes the feeling that one has been supernaturally called to the ministry. What does a person who stops believing in the supernatural do with the calling his life has been built on?

The ex-minister is not just changing careers—though of course he or she is doing that, too, and might not have been trained to do anything else—one is also changing his or her entire self-conception. Where once one was a minister of the Gospel, a bearer of the highest truth there is, the search for

AP Photo

that truth has led him or her to see an entire life as a lie. Believers are apt to feel betrayal when their ministers lose their faith, but we ought also to feel compassion for them.

The Clergy Project reports, somewhat disturbingly, that about a quarter of 1,000 participants are still “currently employed in their religious vocation,” meaning that we might see some percentage of active ministers as sleeper agents for unbelief. I am fascinated by the fact that the project’s website continues to use the term *vocation* to describe the ministry. While that word has largely been stripped of its religious connotations by its association with “vocational education”—training for blue-collar jobs—the ministry is the one place it maintains its original sense of divine calling. I wonder if unbelieving ministers continue to think of themselves as having been *called*, albeit by a God they can no longer believe in.

A Saint Without Belief

The short story “San Manuel Bueno, Martir” (“Saint Manuel the Good, Martyr”), published by the Spanish existentialist Miguel de Unamuno in 1931, can help us to sort out the feelings of the unbelieving minister, particularly the one who remains in the ministry even after losing faith. Unamuno has been mostly forgotten in the English-speaking world, but he was one of the most important Spanish intellectuals of the 20th century and an important figure (along with people like Kierkegaard, Gabriel Marcel and Paul Tillich) in what we might call Christian existentialism. His Christianity, however, was conflicted to the point that it might not be accurate to call him a Christian at all. Certainly he was disgusted by the alignment of the Spanish church with antiliberal political forces, but he also believed the death of his son was punishment for Unamuno’s abandoning Catholicism.

But it seems he was never able to have the sort of faith he wanted to have; the best he could manage was the overwhelming desire for God to exist, for the soul to be immortal, for the things he believed as a devout child to be true. His most famous book, *The Tragic Sense of Life* (1912), locates the tragedy of humanity in the horrible coexistence of that desire and a world that typically fails, in the words of the Psalmist, to “declare the glory of God” (Ps. 19:1, NAB). The result is a Melvillian figure who could neither believe nor be satisfied with unbelief—a perfect saint for the Christ-rejecting, Christ-haunted 20th century.

“San Manuel,” written just five years before Unamuno

died, neatly encapsulates the tensions and contradictions of its author’s faith. The title leaves little doubt as to the moral character of the central figure. He is so good that the story’s narrator, Angela, supports his sainthood only 50 years after his death. (In the past this was remarkably fast for the Catholic Church: Note how long it took for the saintly John Henry Newman to be canonized.) Angela believes that Manuel’s sainthood ought to be granted on the basis of his martyrdom, which would surprise his parishioners, since to all appearances he died a peaceful death, surrounded by people who loved him. But Angela invites us to imitate God, who looks past appearances and “into the heart.” (1 Sm 16:7)

We must keep the title of the story in mind as we read, because Unamuno is offering Father Manuel to us as a bundle of contradictions: The more believers get to know him, the less they will be willing to call him good, let alone a saint. But the more we read, the clearer the terms of his martyrdom will appear, and on the strength of that martyrdom, we will perhaps agree with Angela that he is a saint. But she—and surely Unamuno with her—remains conflicted, and we should, too.

Angela introduces Father Manuel to us as “my true spiritual father,” a replacement for her biological father, who died before she had a chance to truly get to know him. Her progressive and atheistic brother, Lazaro, sent her to a convent for her secondary education, though for practical rather than religious reasons. She clearly learns a great deal at her school, but at a 50-year remove all she remembers is that Father Manuel had already achieved regional celebrity and a reputation for sanctity. She had vague plans to enter the convent herself and be a teacher, but eventually lost her “interest in pedagogy”—which suggests that whatever narrative she is telling us is not a simple lesson about anything.

A Restorative Space

She probably lost her interest in pedagogy when she returned to Valverde de Lucerne and spent time with Father Manuel, who had turned his back on a promising scholastic career in order to serve the poor villagers. Importantly, his work there is existential, not intellectual. The most important service he performs for his parishioners is to be a source of comfort for them.

For example, on St. John’s Night in midsummer, it is customary in this village for people “who thought they were possessed by the devil, but seemed to be nothing more

than hysterics and epileptics” to go to the lake for healing. We might expect Father Manuel to exorcise them or to disabuse them of the notion that they need to be exorcised, but he doesn’t. Instead, he “took the task of being the lake himself, a restorative bathing place, and tried to alleviate or, if possible, cure them. Such was the effect of his presence, his gaze, and the gentle authority of his words and his voice—and what a wonderful voice!—that he achieved surprising cures.”

A certain paganism infuses this description. The holiday may be called St. John’s Night, but its significance is that it is “the shortest night of the year”; the people come not to the church nor to some official religious site but out into the natural world, and Father Manuel’s method of comforting them is to merge himself with that world. There is little that is specifically Christian in what he does here. He even tells a woman seeking a miracle that his bishop has not authorized him to perform them.

Feeling Forsaken

Even when the ritual—and it is ritual, above all, by which Father Manuel performs his duties—is specifically Christian, Manuel does not so much teach as inhabit it:

And in his Good Friday sermon, when he said the words: “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?” a deep tremor spread through the entire village, like one that passed through the water of the lake on days when there was a strong north wind. And it was as if they heard the voice of our Lord Jesus Christ himself as if it came from the old crucifix at the foot of which so many mothers had expressed their woes.

In fact, though it will be years before Angela realizes it, the feeling of being forsaken is key to Father Manuel’s religious sensibility. She will learn, much later, that what faith he has is wracked with doubt and that his life “has been a sort of continuous suicide, a struggle against suicide, which is the same thing.” One is reminded, anachronistically, of St. Teresa of Calcutta, who spent decades serving the poor despite a lingering and devastating sense of the absence of God. “In my soul,” she wrote in a letter, “I feel just that terrible pain of loss—of God not wanting me—of God not being God—of God not really existing.”

When her doubts became public a decade after her

death, her detractors took the opportunity to gloat, arguing that this supposed paragon of the Christian faith had no real faith of her own. But what could be more faithful than fulfilling one’s vocation even when it feels hollow and useless—for four decades? The paradox of St. Teresa’s life is that her nearly absolute doubt was proof of her faith. So, too, perhaps, with Father Manuel.

The Ritual Comes Before the Belief

And yet the reader, like Angela, is disturbed by Father Manuel’s lifelong existential crisis. It is not clear if it deepens as the story progresses or if Angela simply becomes more aware of it, but his disbelief becomes increasingly explicit even as the villagers become increasingly convinced of his holiness. He even manages to win over Angela’s anticlerical and progressive brother, Lazaro, though here too the townspeople fail to see the truth clearly even as they correctly identify the goodness of their priest.

They are convinced that Lazaro will convert to Catholicism. And he does, albeit not in the way they imagine. He tells Angela “how Don Manuel had spoken to him, especially during the walks to the old Cistercian Abbey, trying to convince him to join the religious life of the people and even if he did not believe, pretend to believe, in order to hide his thoughts. And without trying to catechize him, he converted him in a different way.”

Angela, anticipating the reaction of the reader, is horrified when Lazaro tells her about this exchange. And in fact, Lazaro was himself horrified by this order to practice hypocrisy. But Father Manuel has told him that this is not a matter of pretending to believe: “Like they say, take the holy water and you will start believing.” The ritual comes before the belief.

The belief does not come for Lazaro, at least not as far as he can tell. But he does take Father Manuel’s vocation upon himself; he begins participating in the rites of the church, not for Father Manuel’s sake, not even really for his own sake, but for the sake of the faithful and ignorant parishioners. Life has a horrible secret, Father Manuel tells Lazaro: We all die, with no guarantee that there’s anything beyond death, and the simple villagers simply cannot reckon with this awful truth.

Recognizing the psychological and sociological benefits of faith, Father Manuel decides to remain faithful to his vocation and bring to others a faith he cannot himself muster. Unamuno’s conservative readers, myself included, are

Except perhaps for the greatest of saints, all of us live in some dialectic of faith and doubt.

likely to be disturbed by this decision. I remember teaching this story at an evangelical college, when some of my students became very animated against Father Manuel. “How many days a week do you really believe in God?” I asked. “Do you have the right to call yourself a Christian?”

Fidelity to God’s Grace

That, I think, is the question Unamuno means to ask the believer through the this story. Except perhaps for the greatest of saints, all of us live in some dialectic of faith and doubt.

And yet Fr. Manuel *is* a saint. At the end of the story, Angela reveals that the bishop in charge of his canonization has interviewed her and that she has not told him about the priest’s disbelief. It seems as if she is withholding necessary information, information that would make Father Manuel’s canonization a joke. But here, too, things are more complicated than we might like them to be.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says that canonizing saints means “proclaiming that they practiced heroic virtue and lived in fidelity to God’s grace” in order to “sustain the hope of believers.” By this definition, Father Manuel may rightly be called a saint; whatever he dies believing or disbelieving, his life displays “fidelity to God’s grace” by his service of God’s people. His whole life is spent sustaining a faith that—at least on the surface, at least as far as he knows—he doesn’t share.

But if the villagers don’t see the whole picture of Father Manuel, Angela believes that he doesn’t see the whole picture, either. Both Father Manuel and Lazaro, she tells us, “died thinking they did not believe, but without thinking they believed, in an active and resigned desolation.” Unamuno’s dialectical method rears its head again, and peels back the layers of reality like an onion.

The naïve belief that salvation comes from belief gives way to a belief that ritual begets belief, which gives way to a belief that unbelief can itself be a form of sanctification, which gives way to the belief that belief can lurk underneath unbelief, as it were. “And yet” endlessly follows “and yet.” God alone, if he exists, sees Father Manuel’s heart; the rest of us are dragged back and forth forever. She may be our narrator, but the convent-educated Angela might have ulterior motives for wanting Father Manuel to be orthodox after all.

As if to drive this last point home, Unamuno shuffles Angela off the page for the story’s final two paragraphs. An unnamed editor, presumably a fictionalized version of Unamuno himself, tells us that he isn’t an editor at all, that the story we have just read is Angela’s memoir as it was given to him. He offers his own cryptic commentary, centering on Jude 9: “Yet the archangel Michael, when he argued with the devil in a dispute over the body of Moses, did not venture to pronounce a reviling judgment upon him but said, ‘May the Lord rebuke you!’”

The editor treats this verse as uninterpretable, but it seems to me that Unamuno uses it to evoke our inability to interpret: Ultimately, we do not and cannot know what is going on in the deepest recesses of the clergyman who loses his faith without abandoning his vocation. And surely it is significant that it is St. Jude who appears here as a benediction: the patron saint of lost causes, of things, as one prayer to him puts it, “almost despaired of.” Perhaps the unbelieving priest has merely refused to despair entirely. Only God knows.

Michial Farmer is the author of *Imagination and Idealism in the Works of John Updike*. His essays have appeared in *The Cresset*, *Front Porch Republic* and *Touchstone*.

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LEADING THE CONVERSATION WHEREVER WE ARE, REACHING OUR AUDIENCE WHEREVER THEY ARE.

An Education in Letters

By Maura Shea

Many Catholics interested in literature have had their preconceptions quashed and expectations refined (as if by fire) by the art of Flannery O'Connor. Her stories are often brutal, with unlikeable characters, harrowing plots and haunting conclusions. Yet she offers her readers an education not only in the purposes of fiction but in the way the Catholic faith can enrich and deepen both the writing and the reading of it. Like many others, I revere O'Connor for how she shattered my preconceptions of what Catholic art can be and how she taught me to read literature and the world through a sacramental, prophetic lens.

We sometimes think of our literary heroes as springing fully formed onto the landscape, miraculously endowed with talent and genius and grace. But they, like us, were on a journey and often relied on the help of others in the unfolding of their vocations. It was a surprise to me to discover that much of O'Connor's thought on the nature of fiction and how to write it was in turn shaped by another, rather more obscure literary figure: Caroline Gordon.

In *The Letters of Flannery O'Connor and Caroline Gordon*, the editor Christine Flanagan gathers an admirable collection that traces the fascinating

relationship between two women committed to both their Catholic faith and the craft of fiction. Yet unlike much of O'Connor's correspondence with others, this one stands out as a kind of student-teacher relationship in which O'Connor, at least in the beginning, is the gifted student and Gordon the seasoned, exacting teacher.

Gordon, though not well known today, was an accomplished writer and recent Catholic convert. Nominated for a National Book Award along with William Faulkner and Truman Capote in 1952, she had already won a prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship and the O. Henry Prize in her 30s and was lauded for her novels, including *Penhally* and *None Shall Look Back*. She was introduced to O'Connor by a mutual friend and famous translator, Robert Fitzgerald. In fact, she helped provide the encouragement and feedback necessary to get O'Connor's first novel, *Wise Blood*, published in the first place. "This girl is a real novelist," she observed of the then 24-year-old O'Connor.

Gordon drew upon her own experience of the Catholic faith in her often highly technical and precise feedback on O'Connor's stories. In a letter in which she responded to a draft of the now (in)fa-



At the start of their correspondence, Flannery O'Connor was the gifted student and Caroline Gordon, left, was the seasoned, exacting teacher.



Avery N. Stratton / Wikimedia Commons

mous story “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” Gordon draws upon the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius: “The story, on the whole, does not have enough ‘composition of scene’ to borrow a phrase from St. Ignatius of Loyola. It is not well enough located in time and place.”

From lengthy and thorough explanations of managing tone to the intricacies of narration and point of view, Gordon provided O’Connor with pages of insightful and sometimes severe feedback that engaged not only the vast scope of O’Connor’s vision but even the more minute shape of her sentences:

A sentence is a miniature story, just as a paragraph is a story in miniature. A story must have a climax. A sentence must have its small climax. A sentence is more telling if it ends on the word that is most important. I’d rewrite ‘like the servant of some great man who had just flung the garment on him’ as ‘like the garment that some great man had just flung to his servant.’

And later in the same letter, she writes that “[t]he least flavour of colloquial speech lets the tone down. You ought to learn to write a whole paragraph that is as free from colloquial flavour as one of Dr. Johnson’s. You need such paragraphs for the elevated effects you aspire to.”

It must have required a great deal of humility on O’Connor’s part to digest the sheer amount of criticism that Gordon gave to her—especially regarding something so vulnerable as a rough draft. But these letters reveal O’Connor’s determination to hone her abilities in order to render her vision more justly. She responds to a particularly extensive critique of Gordon’s with the following: “I thank you the Lord knows for haranguing me twice on the same counts and at the expense of boring yourself stiff. This is Charity and as the good sisters say Gawd will reward you for your generosity.”

As a teacher myself, I can feel in the many pages of advice the deep respect Gordon felt for the young writer. In fact, giving someone else such intense and thoughtful feedback is a mark of love. Gordon herself repeatedly acknowledged her younger friend’s talent and capacity to accept criticism: “To begin with, I feel like a fool when I criticize your stories. I think you are a genius.... I might as well come out with it. I also think you are one of the most original writers now practicing,” Gordon wrote.

In her essay “The Teaching of Literature” in *Mystery and Manners*, O’Connor later observed that “[t]he teacher’s first obligation is to the truth of the subject he is teaching, and that for the reading of literature ever to become a habit and a pleasure, it must first be a discipline. The student has to have tools to understand a story or a novel, and these are tools proper to the structure of the work, tools proper to the craft.” Such tools, she wrote, “operate inside the work and not outside it; they are concerned with how this story is made and with what makes it work as a story.”

I suspect she may have had Gordon in the back of her mind when she wrote those words. Gordon was just the sort of teacher who acknowledged her “obligation to the truth” and insisted upon “the tools proper to the craft.” O’Connor later acknowledged: “Whenever I finish a story I send it to Caroline before I consider myself really through with it. She’s taught me more than anybody.”

Yet what strikes me in their correspondence, beyond Caroline’s warm discourses on the finer points of writing and O’Connor’s wry self-deprecation, is a subtle sense of distance, of reserve, that is never really lessened between the two women. Gordon’s letters are always much longer than O’Connor’s, packed with literary allusions, reworkings of sentences and paragraphs, and long explanations; and although O’Connor regularly submits her manuscripts to Gordon and adopts most of the suggestions, she rarely asks direct questions of her mentor.

There are several obvious reasons for this lack of closeness: O’Connor was the age of Gordon’s daughter when they began corresponding, the relationship was from the start professional and the exchanges were always somewhat one-sided: Gordon submitted only one essay to O’Connor for feedback in 1952 and never again after that. Gordon concealed, for the most part, her marital and financial troubles from her young friend until her second divorce began to unfold in 1958, and O’Connor seldom alluded to her own battle with lupus, the illness that had taken her father when she was 16 years old.

It is clear that Gordon’s rather larger-than-life personality seemed overbearing at times to the younger writer; yet O’Connor also often defended her mentor to others. As she said to her friend Betty Hester, “Caroline is wildly mixed up” but “[t]he harshness with which you speak of [her] is not justified.”

They met in person a few times. Upon Gordon’s first visit to the O’Connor family farm, Andalusia, in Georgia,

eight years after the beginning of their correspondence, O'Connor admitted, "It was somewhat nerve-racking keeping her and my mother's personalities from meeting headlong with a crash."

One can see, however, another kind of trust and understanding emerging in the letters. Even if they were not, properly speaking, close friends, they were nevertheless artistically and spiritually akin. Gordon, perhaps better than anyone else, understood O'Connor's work and its theological underpinnings. With characteristic pronouncements and declarations, Gordon plumbed the depths of what O'Connor was trying to do in language that recalls Dante's ambitions. "There is only one plot, The Scheme of Redemption. All other plots, if they are any good, are splinters off this basic plot. There is only one author: The HG [Holy Ghost]," Gordon wrote to O'Connor.

She goes on to unpack O'Connor's work at length. "Your chief weakness as a writer seems to be a failure to admit the august nature of your inspiration," Gordon writes. "You have the best ear of anybody in the trade for the rhythms of colloquial speech.... You have this enormous advantage: what Yeats called the primitive ear. He had it, too and got a lot out of it."

But O'Connor, Gordon continued, had "another kind of ear, one that is attuned to—shall we say the music of the spheres? It is attuned to that music or you would not choose the subjects you choose. The nature of your subject—its immensity, its infinity—ought to be reflected in your style—antiphonally."

Further, she added, "if you were less stout-hearted and less talented I wouldn't dare to say the things I am saying to you but I expect you to do not only better than any of your compeers but better than has been done heretofore."

But O'Connor's literary career did not last long. In July 1964, her illness had reached a critical point. She sent her last draft (of the story "Parker's Back") to Gordon. A few days later, Gordon sent her response; a long letter of detailed criticism that would prove to be their last exchange. O'Connor responded with a short note thanking her and said that she was returning to the hospital the next day for a blood transfusion: "The blood count just won't hold. Anyway maybe I'll learn something for the next set of stories. You were good to take the time.... Cheers to you and pray for me."

Two weeks later, O'Connor died, aged 39.

In an unpublished letter from 1974, 10 years after

O'Connor's death, a graduate student at Emory named James MacLeod asked Gordon for advice about his writing. He had been a pallbearer at O'Connor's funeral and had evidently heard about the support and advice Gordon had given his friend. We learn from MacLeod's letter that O'Connor herself had become a kind of teacher, too: "Flannery has for years tried to teach me prose. In the typical O'Connor manner (dear Flannery) she challenged me to test the theological implications of my theology in short stories."

If my stories failed, he wrote, "don't blame Flannery. Flannery never helped me a bit with originality. She used technique (Now this sentence), psychology (Calvin drew conclusions. You try it.) and the grand slam (Many a pot can brew tea. Can you pour it without slopping?)." He added that through O'Connor he "found the only narrator I could use was the omniscient. I don't know whether this is good or bad."

What is so interesting to me about this passage is to hear, even in MacLeod's brief paraphrasing, echoes of Gordon's own advice to Flannery on sentences and narration. O'Connor had clearly absorbed her mentor's lessons and was passing them on.

As teachers, so often we do not know the kind of impact we might have on students, nor how they might become teachers themselves in unexpected or hidden ways. So much of what we give is not measurable by grades or fame or worldly success. Rather, the relationship between student and teacher occupies a different sphere, which one of my own teachers called "the economy of grace."

Caroline Gordon had no way of knowing, back when she agreed to send her advice to an unknown aspiring writer, the impact she would have on Flannery O'Connor and through her upon many other Catholic writers and the thousands of people of myriad faiths (or none) who have been moved and challenged by those stories.

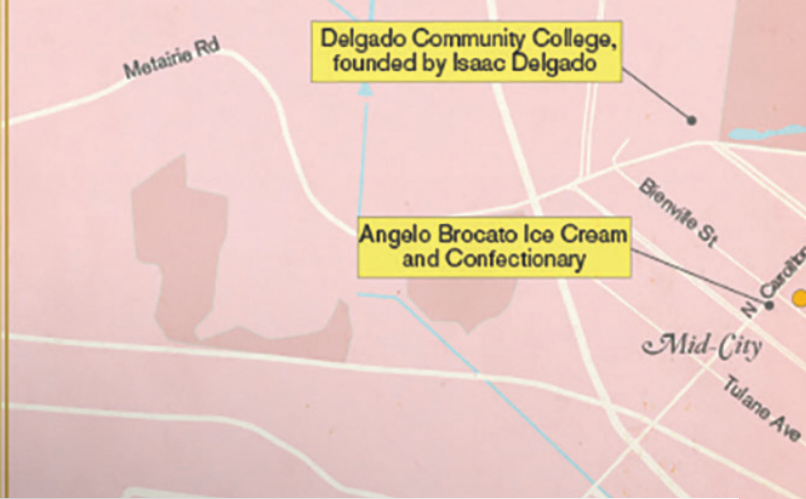
But Gordon was willing to share her own wisdom and deep love of writing with expansive generosity and attention, and her gift to O'Connor has been multiplied like the loaves and fishes to nourish the imaginations of a very great multitude.

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Maps and Miracles

By Renée Darline Roden



Infinite Cities

A Trilogy of Atlases—San Francisco, New Orleans, New York

By Rebecca Solnit (Author), Joshua Jelly-Schapiro (Author), Rebecca Snedeker (Author)

University of California Press
574p \$75

When we were children, my brother and I would play with a set of miniature dinosaurs made of brightly colored rubber. The series of species—Triceratops, Brontosaurus, Stegosaurus, Pterodactyl, Tyrannosaurus Rex—repeated in green, blue, red and purple appealed to my sense of order. And their slight differences, which hinted at particular personalities, appealed to my imagination.

One quixotic toy-match made in heaven was the marriage of the dinosaurs and an oversized book of intricately illustrated mazes that I received for my sixth birthday. The mazes in this large book were gorgeous creations, illustrated by enchanted forests, desert cities, pirate ship holds. My brother and I would spread this book out and navigate the dinosaurs through the mazes, where they would fall into traps, get caught by ghosts or just get lost. But several designated mazes in the book were scenes in which we would have our dinosaurs make a home, divvying up cabin berths or tree houses. These particular mazes were landscapes not for passing through, but for remaining in.

As I was reading Rebecca Solnit's trilogy of urban atlases, *Infinite Cities*, I was reminded of those childhood mazes. One of the mysteries that was clear to me as a child and is now hidden to me as an adult is how my brother and I decided which mazes were for traversing, and which ones were for inhabiting. When we flipped the page from the haunted forest to the desert city, how did my brother and I know that this map was not a map to have our dinosaurs travel through, but in which to remain?

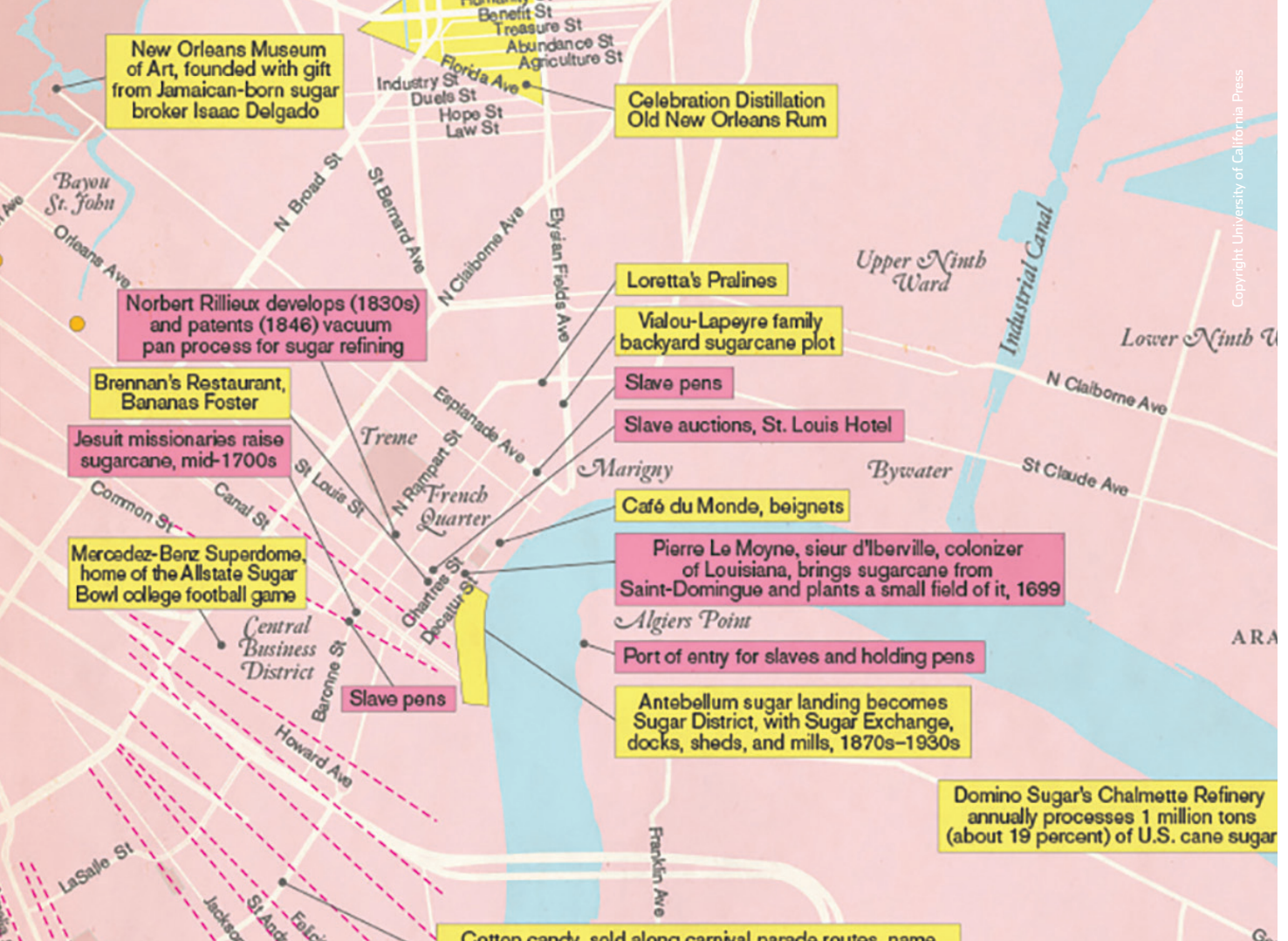
All maps, not just those illustrated mazes, contain an inherent tension between going and staying. We consult maps in order to leave: which highways to merge onto, which exit to make, which turn to take. But we also make maps to know where we are: to get our bearings, to grow roots. Maps orient us, help us see where we are. A map is often a route to remaining.

Like language, cartography is a miracle that insists the unique slice of universe we view from the perspective of our own minds and hearts is—against all odds—expressible. Our memories and feelings are communicable, circumnavigable. I can tell you “I am sad,” and you can navigate with me the choppy waters of sorrow. I can promise “I love you,” and, suddenly, we have mapped a route to remaining.

“Each of us is an atlas of sorts,” Solnit writes. Solnit's atlases are more like portraiture than the utilitarian GPS systems that populate our phones. These maps are intended for the relational kind of navigating. Cities, like humans, are porous, growing, evolving incarnate beings. Although her massive, meandering atlases resist easy analysis and categorization, three key tensions provide the palette with which Solnit paints mosaic portraits of the United States' three great urban souls: power, form and time. These tensions manifest themselves, respectively, as Technology versus Nature, Order pitted against Chaos and Past confronting Future.

Technology Versus Nature

Solnit's atlases masterfully chart great leaps of technology that have built our contemporary cities: the great work in filling shorelines, of building bridges, of creating ingenious public transit. But they also display the cost. Solnit's project responds to the subjugating gaze of the traditional atlas by portraying her city through populist, communitarian stories. There are, tellingly, no real estate developers, politicians or business gurus contributing to these atlases. While the powerful's voices are notably silent, their power



Rebecca Solnit's atlases are more like portraiture than the utilitarian GPS systems that populate our phones. Pictured: "Sugar Heaven and Sugar Hell," a map of confectionary sites in New Orleans.

continues to shape each city.

In the map "Makers and Breakers," the works of Frederick Law Olmstead and Robert Moses are put on trial. The accompanying essay tallies Moses' accomplishments: "Thirteen bridges, 416 miles of parkways, 658 playgrounds...and that's a partial accounting." The essay notes the less-celebrated, more ambiguous accomplishments: among them the destruction of the Tremont neighborhood in the Bronx to make way for Moses' Cross Bronx Expressway and the destruction of the middle-class black neighborhood of Carrville to make room for Olmstead's Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn. "To make an omelet you need to break a few eggs," Moses famously quipped.

In the essay "400 Years and 500 Evictions," Heather Smith bears witness to each broken "egg," homes or livelihood destroyed for the sake of increasing the riches of the city's elite. Consistently, the powerful forget that ordinary

lives have a right to the city, that "living, working, cooking, voting, raising children, falling in love, and generally going about having a life (as interesting or dull as seems appropriate) are activities that confer a right to stay in place." The forces of power that are charted in these maps as ferrying oil, sugar or bananas through city streets forget that cities are not engines of profit, but ultimately communities of people.

In the San Francisco "City in a Cup of Coffee" map, Solnit demonstrates how nature's own food chains and cycles intersect in even the most quotidian facets of urban life: "A cup of coffee is an ingathering of the world; the same cup of coffee, bought and drunk in a neighborhood café, is a sort of communion with the people and place around you."

Solnit's cup of coffee is a perfect metonymy for the city itself—an ingathering, a communion, a confluence of diverse rivers in one muddy delta.

The infrastructure and design of cities are built of human ingenuity. But Solnit's atlases commemorate the intimate connections between the city and the natural environment from which they often seem divorced. Throughout her project, Solnit describes cities as "leaky" and "porous." They are bulwarks of "manmade" space in the wild, but, as fancifully captured in the map "Wildlife," the wild always creeps in.

Order and Chaos

The artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles, profiled in the essay "Coming Clean" about New York City's trash collection, is committed to art that renders "legible the land uses and invisible infrastructures on which our lives are built." Solnit's atlas project has the same goal at heart—to render legible the cities that are built of human design but also human spontaneity and happenstance.

Some of the most breathtaking, transporting maps are not geographically oriented at all. These are maps that chart populations. "People Who" charts ethnic and neighborhood stereotypes in New Orleans. A sultry map, "Hot and Steamy: Selling Seafood, Selling Sex" charts two of New Orleans' main pastimes. "Snakes and Ladders" charts the chaos of the Katrina flooding, the violence, rumors and tragedies that ensued, and the kindness and altruism of neighbors.

One of the most basic distinctions in cartography is between land and water. And New Orleans, claims Solnit, defies that categorization. In that unfathomable city, water and land merge and submerge. The trickster coyote of the water table in "Moves, Remains: Hiding and Seeking the Dead" offers a grim comedy of errors—how does one bury a corpse when the water just below the topsoil buoys it to the top? The map reveals the contours of the not-so-underground New Orleans necropolis in grisly neons of Halloween green and purple.

In "Of Levees and Prisons," the cartographer Shizue Seigel examines the largely ineffective means the city has used to attempt to pen up the river and the population it deems "undesirable." This coercive and even violent implementation of order throws vulnerable communities into chaos. But the accompanying essay ends on a hopeful note: "The urge for freedom is too strong to be put down, no matter how high the walls."

Solnit celebrates this uninhibited urban spirit in "Wildlife" and "Monarchs and Queens," which document

the queer spaces that offered liberation in San Francisco and New York City. Cities are the terrifying and tantalizing idols to the ego of public order.

The elaborate systems imposed by the powers that be—the school zoning system in "Public/Private: A Map of Childhoods," the water system in "Water and Power: The Reach of the City," or the structures for moving money in "Capital of Capital"—are all delicate crusts that eventually tend to crack. In something as mundane as the trash system ("Trash in the City: Dumping on Staten Island and Beyond") or as pernicious as the selling of bodies for sugar ("Sugar Heaven and Sugar Hell: Pleasures and Brutalities of a Commodity"), there lie seeds of revolt. "RIOT!: Periodic Eruptions in Volcanic New York" notes riots you've heard of (Stonewall, Occupy Wall Street) and riots you haven't (the Rocking Chair Riot of 1901, the Brothel Riot of 1793).

Agents of disruption can also be peaceful: A gem of a map hidden at the back of the New York city atlas is a paean to the Quakers of Queens and the citizens of Flushing who drafted the 1657 Flushing Remonstrance to then-governor Peter Stuyvesant, admonishing him for ignoring the religious liberties of their fellow New Yorkers.

Past and Future

"To understand a place is to know its past," Solnit claims. Her maps are stunning excavations of lost cities underneath their current iterations. "A City in Time: La Nouvelle-Orléans Over 300 Years" charts the slow but steady expansion of the city over swamplands. "Fillmore: Promenading the Boulevard of Gone," celebrates the San Francisco drag lauded as the "Harlem of the West." In the accompanying essay, Solnit calls Fillmore a "core sample" that, like a sample bored from a tree trunk, informs observers about the creature's health.

The past is found under city streets, but the future is its people. The New York atlas bursts with maps celebrating the immigrants who have carried New York into the future: "City of Walkers," which reflects on the immigrants who "carry within them the maps of [their] wanderings" and add their maps, their stories, to the story of the city. "Burning Down and Rising Up: the Bronx in the 1970s" maps the wasteland caused by landlords torching their buildings, and the resistance movement of youth that became hip-hop, a transfusion of new life into a decaying city.

Heather Smith's brilliant essay, "Thirsts and Ghosts,"

accompanies the map charting Manhattan's imperial water supply system as a linguistic time travel device. Smith's essay excavates the watery ghosts that haunt Manhattan, like Collect Pond, which used to sit under Manhattan's jailhouse, the Tombs, and is now commemorated outside Manhattan Central Booking by a manicured park. A journalist opening up the trapdoor in the basement of a recording studio reveals Minetta Creek, still flowing near its eponymous West Village street.

One map charts the collision of past and future in the city. "Death and Beauty" marks each of the 99 murders in San Francisco in 2008, and a fair amount of the Monterey cypresses that populated the city circa 2009. The trees dotting the city remind us that this urban space had a greener, more natural past.

Throughout the atlases, Solnit compares her cities to trees. Not only can you take a core sample from a city; they often grow in layers. Because of their rings, trees are physical incarnations of environmental memory.

Cities can ravage the natural world around them, they can pillage and plunder natural resources, and they exploit—particularly the men and women within them. And yet cities are an intrinsically natural phenomenon. Like trees, cities hold in their physical bodies the precious memories of what humans have achieved; each layer is a precious tree ring recording the political, social and religious ecologies of its time.

Early environmental activists picked up the moniker "tree-huggers" as they literally held onto trees to prevent greed and profit from cutting them down. Clinging to the trees is a bid to save not just the tree, but the memory contained within it. It's a plea to resist forgetting.

Routes for Remaining

What to include in an atlas? Solnit wonders in each project. Despite a map's claim to objectivity, it is always subjective, examining its subject through a particular lens of historical era, through a selective methodology. An atlas, Solnit acknowledges, is written by the victors: by the colonists and conquerors, by those who are confident in their ability to travel and document that travel unimpeded. But no one can fully conquer a city. Solnit titles her atlases accordingly: "unfathomable," "unstoppable," "infinite." The soul of a city is unconquerable.

Solnit's atlases are maps for wandering—not out of the city, but down, through the rings of memory, through each

layer of population, culture and history that has accreted on the soul of this urban being.

"If you walk a city, if you put in your miles and years with open heart and mind, the city will reveal itself to you. Maybe it won't become yours, but you will become its," Solnit writes. These atlases are apologies for going on pilgrimages and growing deep roots. These atlases are calls to become part of their stories. Looking at our maps and the cities around us, it becomes clear: Our private and public our relational and civic choices matter. Cities are built of our choices: They make bridges, they raze neighborhoods, they build parks. So get out, walk the streets of whatever city you find yourself in, become part of its story. Find your own route for remaining.

Renée Darline Roden, a playwright in New York City, holds bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Notre Dame. Her writing has appeared at *Dixon Place & The Tank* and in *America*, *Commonweal* and *Howlround*.

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A Blur of Ceaseless Action

By Franklin Freeman

Thomas Edison, celebrating his 81st birthday, sits at the telegraph key at Fort Myers, Fla., Feb. 25, 1928, which turned on the new lighting system in Bellingham, Wash.

The myth is he was an evil man who electrocuted Topsy the elephant in a filmed experiment and fought a fierce and unscrupulous battle over what kind of electricity the United States would use (alternating or direct current) against the good guy, Nikola Tesla, who wanted to give electricity to people for free. And if you haven't read *Edison*, by the recently deceased Edmund Morris, most famous for his Theodore Roosevelt trilogy and as the winner of both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award, you might be tempted to believe this myth. But once you have read Morris's book, you will know that most of the above is untrue, although Morris does not address whether Tesla

wanted to give away electricity.

"Electrocuting an Elephant" was filmed by Edwin S. Porter, Edison's employee and primary film director. As Morris writes in a footnote, "*Electrocuting an Elephant* has given rise to an internet myth that Topsy was deliberately killed by Edison in order to demonstrate the lethal danger of alternating current as opposed to his own preferred direct current." But Edison had nothing to do with the filming of the event ("although it was issued under his trade name"), and Topsy's death was ordered by officials at Luna Park in Coney Island because she had killed three men in as many months. Not that one of them didn't invite his

fate by giving her a lit cigarette to eat.

Edison had hired Nikola Tesla and praised his work ethic before Tesla left to form his own company. In 1915, the two men were rumored to be co-winners of the Nobel Prize in Physics, but neither would ever win it (just as neither Leo Tolstoy nor James Joyce won it for literature). Morris writes of Edison and Tesla: "In all respects except that of creativity, the two inventors were opposites. Tesla at thirty-nine [in 1895] was a melancholy celibate. Edison at forty-nine still had a healthy libido and had carried off two teenage brides, impregnating both of them repeatedly." And if Edison was egotistical, Morris writes:

Edison

By Edmund Morris
Random House. 800p \$3

[H]is vanity concerned only work, while Tesla's megalomania had no bounds. The *New York Times* went too far in reporting that "personally they are warm friends," but they admired each other despite their professional differences. Edison restrained his contempt for alternating current enough to praise Tesla's "amazing" success in transporting hydroelectric from Niagara Falls, while Tesla let it be known that he had "the utmost faith in the genius of Mr. Edison."

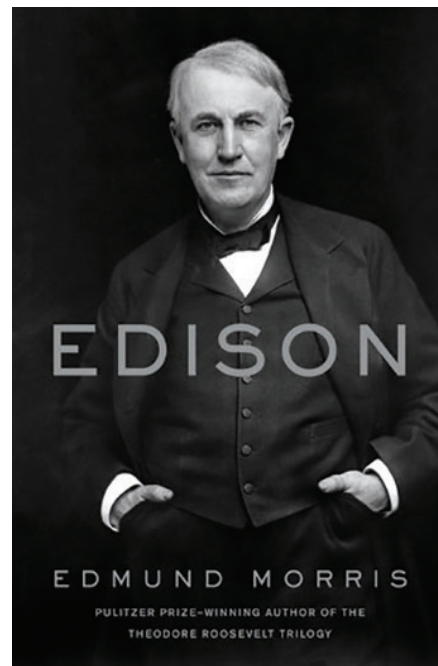
The real enemy Edison faced regarding alternating current was George Westinghouse, whose name might be familiar. Edison, however, did allow himself in 1888 to be part of a movement to encourage the use of alternating current in the new electric chair, Morris comments, and did allow many experimental electrical killings of animals in his lab.

Edison was born in 1847 in Milan, Ohio, in a house built by his father, Samuel, which overlooked the Huron River Valley. You will not learn this until page 615 of the book, though, because Morris tells Edison's life in a chronologically backward fashion. A framing prologue and epilogue are both set in 1931, when the Old Man, as he was called even in his younger days, died. The story of his life is divided into 10-year sections.

Though the writing is clear and compelling—Morris has a knack for describing even the most complex experiments in such a way that you think for a moment you understand what is going on—the chronology can jar the reader a bit because not only are you working through the life from end to beginning, but you are also going back 10 years in each new section and working forward to where you just left off.

In another sense, though, it makes little difference because Edison's life was a blur of ceaseless action, reading and experimentation. He is most well known for inventing the light bulb and the phonograph, but Edison patented 1,093 "machines, systems, processes, and phenomena." In 1881, Morris writes, Edison was "executing, on average, one new patent every four days." He could do this not only because of his natural genius, talent and perseverance but also because he ate sparingly and slept only four or so hours a night, usually in a rumpled chemical-stained suit. During some periods of intense experimentation, he could go 72 hours without sleep.


All this work, of course, left little time for his family. He married twice and had three children with each wife. He could be affectionate but was hardly home, and sometimes when he was home his thoughts were still in the lab. He had trouble with his two oldest sons, both unstable in their personal lives—flitting among too many jobs and women and drinking too much along the way—and who both traded on their father's famous name. They



complained he had never given them a chance to work in his labs; he complained he had made his own way and so should his sons. His daughters fared little better. He would send them money when they needed it but refused to write them consoling letters—a waste of time, in his opinion.

He was happiest working in the lab with the men he hired over the years. (Women were hired only for menial work.) One of these men was Francis Upton, who grew frustrated working with Edison on the incandescent light bulb. "Upton was a brilliant young man of mathematical and statistical bent, and because of those qualities, he was slow to comprehend the way Edison's mind worked," Morris writes. "To him, four months of failed experiments on one intractable thing meant that the thing was no good. To Edison, failure itself was good. It was the fascinating obverse of success. If studied long enough, like a tintype image tilted this way and that, it would eventually display a positive picture."

Another way of saying this is that Edison saw his work as a form of play.

He is most well known for inventing the light bulb and the phonograph, but Edison patented 1,093 ‘machines, systems, processes, and phenomena.’ 

One of his assistants mentions how Edison played with an object or process until a new idea struck him.

Toward the end of his life, after many years as a loyal Republican, Edison became a progressive and supported Teddy Roosevelt. On return from a tour of Europe in 1911, he “spoke about the belligerent nationalism that he had sensed in every country he visited” and said he was not impressed by the Arc de Triomphe: “I always see beside it another and greater arch, thousands of feet high, made of the phosphate of the bones of victims sacrificed for Napoleon’s personal glory.” In religion, Morris says Edison was a “cheerful agnostic,” ready to believe in a supreme intelligence but unwilling to personalize it.

If Edison had not been so prone to drop his projects once he had made the big breakthrough, leaving development work to his assistants, we might all now be driving electric cars. But Henry Ford, the hedgehog to Edison’s fox, was interested in only one thing, and he triumphed with the internal combustion engine, an invention Edison loathed for its wastefulness. He thought we should “utilize natural forces and thus get all our power.”

Franklin Freeman, a frequent contributor to *America*, lives in Maine.

The Mystery of Distant Environments

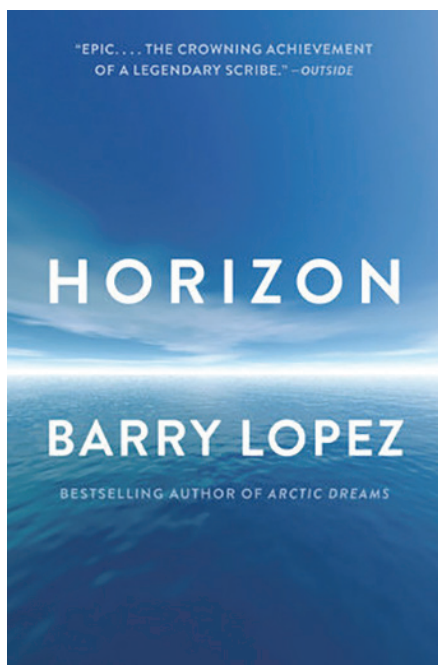
The title of Barry Lopez’s book, *Horizon*, holds multiple meanings, which surface and then submerge throughout the text like dolphins in the wake of a great ship. At times, the horizon is a temporal marker (looking backward to humanity’s origins and forward into the future of the planet); elsewhere it functions as a liminal space beyond which one cannot see, where anything is possible and imagination reigns. It is, of course, also the literal view of the farthest tilt of earth one can see, the line between land (or water) and sky. This last meaning, the physical horizon, is nearly as abstract as the first two—appearing differently to different people at different times and in different places, as it does for Lopez when he first travels to the places described in the book and then when he visits them again later in life.

The book describes his experiences at six remote sites around the globe: a rugged cape on the Oregon coast; centuries-old human settlements in the Canadian high Arctic; the complex biome of the Galápagos Islands; early-hominid fossil grounds in northern Kenya; a British imperi-

al penal colony in southeastern Australia; and fields of meteorites on the vast ice of Antarctica, the only continent without an internationally recognized territorial claim.

Horizon defies genre. It is not just “travel writing,” in part because of Lopez’s vast interdisciplinary knowledge and analysis and also because the places he visits and the people who guide him are inaccessible to those without his connections and renown. Because of his experience as a writer, explorer, certified diver and more, he is invited into challenging geographical and cultural realms where even he at times feels daunted. Its insights reveal Lopez’s deepening brilliance over decades of travel and thought.

An accomplished chronicler of the beauty and mystery of distant environments—his 1986 *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape* won the National Book Award—Lopez writes that his purpose in penning *Horizon* was to see how his own perspective had changed from when he visited these places the first time. Places change over time, of course, but so do the traveler’s ethics, knowledge base and aesthetic sense. He also notes that he wanted “to create a narrative that would engage a reader intent on discovering a trajec-



Horizon

By Barry Lopez
Vintage Books. 592p \$17

tory in her or his own life, a coherent and meaningful story, at a time in our cultural and biological history when it has become an attractive option to lose faith in the meaning of our lives.” Pointedly, he adds, “At a time when many see little more on the horizon but the suggestion of a dark future.”

The concept, influence and passage of time is a major theme running through the book, which is not surprising given that the title of his early research for *Horizon* was “The Shape of Time in Remote Regions.” For Lopez, the awe he experiences in these places, with their unique windows into geological time and the arc of human history, is the crucible in which he develops a new understanding of his own past and a realization of the common human effort to “look back over our lives, trying to make sense of

what happened, to see what enduring threads might be there.” He has an impressive knack for recounting his observations from both an individual and communal standpoint—as Lopez the man and as one tiny fraction of the human race.

Using geographical descriptions as his main framework, Lopez seamlessly incorporates observations and insights from the humanities and sciences. In a lesser writer’s hands, the shifts in time and place throughout the narrative, sometimes within the same paragraph or sentence, would be dizzying. But Lopez’s consciousness of the relevant connections between a dazzling array of memories and experiences produces a unified whole that is considerably greater than the sum of its parts.

He proposes that awe and mystery are just as important (or more than) empirical observations and theory for comprehending the complex trajectory of human and planetary existence. He cautions against the rationalist tendency that “discounts awe and mystery, as though the capacity to respond to reality in this way was something to outgrow.” The wisdom gained by a stance of humility can reveal much about ourselves and our relationship to the natural world. One example is the diminished anthropocentrism engendered by time spent in the frozen starkness of the seventh continent. On Antarctica, as in much of the world’s so-called extreme environments, he realizes, “The world outside the self is indifferent to the fate of the self.”

Notably, *Horizon* provides the reader with a deeper appreciation for diversity—particularly cultural and racial—not merely for the sake of in-

clusion and equality but also because of the importance of different epistemologies for the survival of humanity and the planet. Lopez repeatedly emphasizes the value of including and even prioritizing the voices of indigenous peoples. If we do not listen to the insights of these “keepers of wisdom,” he cautions, we will miss out on a positive revolution in ethical instinct that could well be the only path to evading the dystopian future we now face. It is a warning that is remarkably consonant with a passage in Pope Francis’ recent apostolic exhortation, “Querida Amazonia” (No. 44):

The pattern of thinking of indigenous peoples offers an integrated vision of reality, capable of understanding the multiple connections existing throughout creation. This contrasts with the dominant current of Western thought that tends to fragment reality in order to understand it but then fails to articulate the relationships between the various fields of knowledge.

Although Lopez emphasizes that no one culture can know “precisely how the world is hinged,” he nonetheless endorses the view of some anthropologists that “the presence of elders is as important as any technological advancement or material advantage in ensuring that human life continues.” One of the many times he realized the depths of his own (and Western civilization’s) ignorance of this was during an encounter in 1979 with residents of a small Eskimo village in Alaska. He remembers asking himself: “Why did I know so little about these peo-

Places change over time, of course, but so do the traveler's ethics, knowledge base and aesthetic sense. ●●

ple?... Why weren't their insights into life's predicaments a larger part of the growing international discussion about human fate?"

He acknowledges the paradox of our species' flawed morality—"We are the darkness, as we are, too, the light"—but he also emphasizes the need to seek what Reinhold Niebuhr called proximate goals, "working still to lessen the degree of cruelty and to increase the reach of justice in every quarter."

Daunting in length and largely devoid of dialogue, *Horizon* is nonetheless an engrossing read. Lopez's descriptions of physical, cultural and what he suggests could be called "moral" geography—which "over time inaugurates a social ethic among the people wedded to that place"—are poetic yet unflowery, enlightening but not at all pedantic. He is generally aware of his privileged status as a well-connected American male, and he earnestly attempts to branch out from the hermeneutical lens to which his societal position defaults. Not all of us can go to the places Lopez writes about here, but we can certainly benefit from the "revision of received wisdoms and the shedding of prejudices" he so eloquently describes.

Jill Brennan O'Brien is an editor at Orbis Books in Ossining, N.Y. She holds a doctorate in theological ethics from Boston College.

Catholic Faith and Modern Fiction

I once found myself in a conversation with a lapsed-but-still-curious cousin about the persistent pull the Catholic faith exerts on individuals in what appears to be a post-religious age. Given the unambiguous evil we face daily (in the church and the world), why do people still want to believe? As a way of responding to her, as is my custom in these kinds of conversations, I recommended books. Not the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, though, but rather novels like *The Moviegoer*, by Walker Percy, *The End of the Affair*, by Graham Greene, and *Mariette in Ecstasy*, by Ron Hansen.

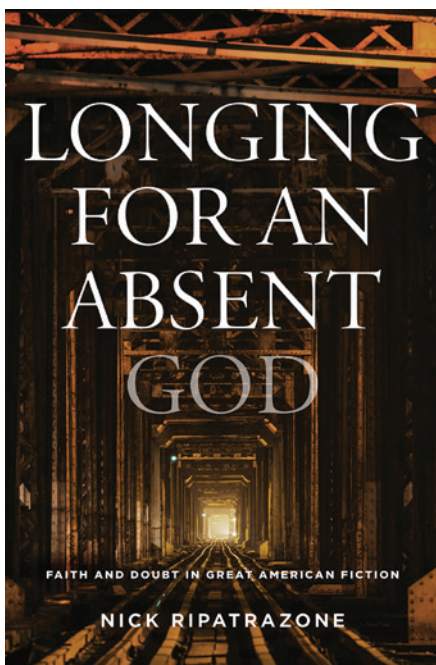
Though apologetics plays an important role in evangelization, fiction is far better suited to expressing the essential paradoxes of faith that drove my cousin's questions. As Flannery O'Connor once quipped, "We Catholics are very much given to the Instant Answer. Fiction doesn't have any. It leaves us, like Job, with a renewed sense of mystery."

The emphasis on mystery lies at the heart of Nick Ripatrazone's *Longing for an Absent God*, which examines the role of the Catholic faith in American fiction in the years since the Sec-

ond Vatican Council. A literary critic, writer and editor at *Image* journal, Ripatrazone is attentive to the interplay of doubt with faith and examines work by Catholics both practicing (including O'Connor, Walker Percy, Ron Hansen and Phil Klay) and lapsed (Don DeLillo, Toni Morrison and Cormac McCarthy, among others).

The postconciliar starting point is not an arbitrary one, as Vatican II marked a move away from the prevalent assumption that religious fiction should be a vehicle for sound doctrine and portrayals of piety. Thanks to challenges by Catholic writers like O'Connor and Greene, attitudes shifted dramatically in the years surrounding the council. Though in the 1950s Vatican officials sharply criticized Greene's *The Power and the Glory* for entertaining "paradoxical modes of thought" in its depiction of an adulterous, alcoholic priest, in the years since then the novel has been widely accepted as a spiritual classic and is required reading in Catholic high schools and colleges everywhere.

Just as the Gospels tell us that the sick need a physician more than the healthy do, Greene understood that to write about the love of God he had to write about sinners, not saints. His impulse was taken up stateside by O'Connor, who wrote "Catholic fiction about the half-hearted and corrupt."



Longing for an Absent God
By Nick Ripatrazone
Fortress Press, 300p \$27.99

Her grotesque stories set in the Protestant South are memorable and numerous, and Ripatrazone focuses on her masterful “Parker’s Back.” He compares the title character’s full-back tattoo of the face of Christ with St. Paul’s bold claim in Galatians that he “bear[s] the mark of Jesus on my body.” Parker’s icon reinforces the incarnational nature of the Catholic imagination, a central thread in the fiction Ripatrazone has chosen. “The Catholic Christ is fragmented and suffering, fully corporal, truly a God unto earth,” he writes. Parker’s wife, who cannot accept such a fleshly representation of the almighty, beats him until Christ’s image forms large welts—almost literally a scourging like Christ suffered at the pillar.

Walker Percy, another practicing Catholic, provides a study in mod-

ern pilgrimage. Ripatrazone examines *The Moviegoer* and the spiritual search undertaken by Binx Bolling, who attempts to cure his malaise by going to films and experiencing, in Ripatrazone’s words, “the liturgy of the cinema.” Though he does not undergo a dramatic conversion, by the novel’s end Binx “is more open to the mystery and grace of Catholicism,” which Ripatrazone identifies in the novel as “not a struggle of dogma, but one of love, identity, and doubt.” The spiritually earnest Binx is an archetypal character representing the practicing authors that Ripatrazone highlights: While he may not be dogmatically faithful, he is genuine, eager and reluctant to give up the search.

The strongest chapter in the book deftly makes a case for the Catholicity of Toni Morrison’s fiction. Morrison converted in her teens (born Chloe, she chose “Toni” as a shortened version of her confirmation name, Anthony), though she described herself as a “disaffected Catholic” later in life. Ripatrazone draws upon her interviews and his own close readings of *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* to argue for the alliance between her depiction of black suffering and Christ’s own. “Morrison’s theology is one of the Passion: of scarred bodies, public execution, and private penance,” he writes, hinting that the African-American experience itself, defined at every turn by bodily suffering and social degradation, is a kind of American passion play.

Notably, the book’s title takes its cue from the experience of lapsed writers, whose fiction, in different ways and to varying degrees, nonetheless demonstrates a desire for

transcendence. He connects James Joyce with the “postmodern priest” Don DeLillo (the book would have benefitted from more thorough context regarding Joyce). His close examination of DeLillo’s early novel *End Zone* reveals an obsession with the signs and symbols of God’s presence. Ripatrazone argues that this structuralism neuters the expression of faith in DeLillo’s fiction and reveals the lapsed author, counter-intuitively, to be more of a dogmatist than a writer like the Catholic deacon Ron Hansen, whose *Mariette in Ecstasy* comfortably dwells in faith’s uncertainties and “seeks without needing answers.”

As the author makes his case, he continually bumps against a major obstacle: that efforts to read a novelist’s personal life into his or her fiction are anathema to literary criticism. Straight biographical criticism is not exactly what Ripatrazone sets out to do, but he often veers in that direction. At one point, he writes that Cormac McCarthy’s “ruthless, merciless, supernatural” killers are evidence of a “profoundly Catholic vision” because in grade school he would have learned that the church teaches “that the devil walks among us.” Perhaps McCarthy’s time at Knoxville Catholic did have this effect, but the characters of the Methodist-raised Stephen King also fit this description.

A more convincing angle would be to argue that McCarthy, like his literary influences William Faulkner (Methodist) and Herman Melville (Presbyterian), drew upon tropes from Greek tragedy that, after being fused with Catholic notions of sin and redemption by Dante and others,

Phil Klay has described Catholicism as a religion ‘not of hard mechanical rules but of stories and paradoxes.’

has come to form part of what has often been called the Catholic literary imagination. McCarthy’s own personal Catholicism perhaps reinforced this, but unless we have recourse to his own commentary on the effect of faith on his work (we have such commentaries from writers like O’Connor, Percy and Morrison), the connection, while not altogether improbable, is tenuous.

In concluding his acceptance speech for the 2018 George W. Hunt, S.J., Prize, Phil Klay described Catholicism as a religion “not of hard mechanical rules but of stories and paradoxes and enigmatic parables. It is an invitation to mystery, not mastery, to communion, not control.” At the end of his book, Ripatrazone highlights Klay as an emerging Catholic voice, and it is no coincidence that such a religious vision is at the heart of *Longing for an Absent God*, which, above all, explains how “fiction refracts more than it reflects, and the mysterious process of great stories makes us believers in something.” Despite its hiccups, it is an effective and engrossing book that kindles our desire to explore new writers and revisit old favorites to deepen our understanding of the Catholic faith.

Mike St. Thomas is the chair of the English department at the Portsmouth Abbey School in Rhode Island.

His ‘Unusual Conscience’

How did the son of communist parents—not antagonistic toward religion, but atheists nonetheless—become an Orthodox Christian convert and committed peace activist? The answer can be found in the illuminating and frequently surprising pages of *Writing Straight With Crooked Lines*, a new memoir by Jim Forest.

Undoubtedly a familiar name to some readers, Jim Forest is most often recognized through his fruitful friendships with (and personal biographies of) some of the most influential Catholic leaders of the 20th century: Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton and Daniel Berrigan, S.J. (Full disclosure: I know Forest and hosted him for a lecture on Berrigan at Fordham University in April 2018.)

Now the subject is himself, and it is Forest’s own fascinating life, bolstered by his association with a colorful cast of radical characters, that makes this autobiography an engrossing read. It functions as both a personal history and a snapshot of a tumultuous era in American society—the 1960s—when Forest solidified his opposition to unjust war and his faith in active nonviolence.

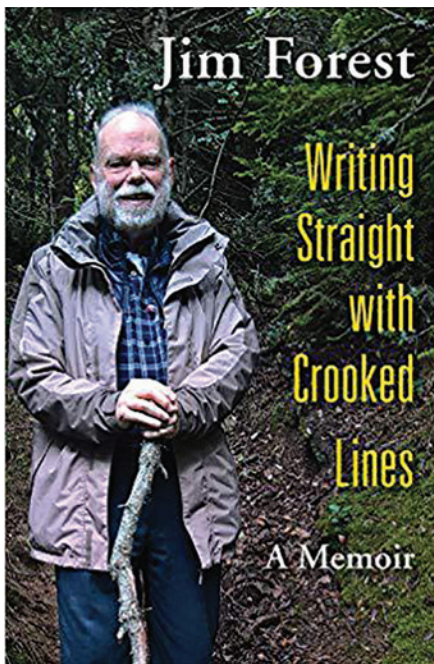
Forest begins his work with a

disclaimer. “Writing an account of one’s life is a kind of archaeology, but instead of digging trenches into multilayered tells, I’m digging into the rubble of my own memory which, like earth, hides more than it reveals,” he writes. Despite this warning, Forest then embarks on an impressively detailed account of his life.

Both of Forest’s parents were active members of the Communist Party when he was born in 1941. Forest viewed his mother’s communism as primarily concerned with the common good. “For her, Communism boiled down to doing whatever she could to protect people from being treated like rubbish,” he writes, adding that she was horrified by the crimes against humanity perpetrated by Lenin and Stalin.

Forest was baptized at the age of 10 after attending his first church service at Christ Episcopal Church in Shrewsbury, N.J. He describes the experience of the liturgy as overwhelming him with “tidal force,” and answering some questions about himself:

It was as if some puzzle about my own identity had been resolved. Every action in the service was directed toward the invisible God, while the bread and wine on the altar, in a compelling but ungraspable



Writing Straight With Crooked Lines
A Memoir
By Jim Forest
Orbis Books. 336p \$30

way, became an entry point into the life, death and resurrection of Christ.

Another formative religious experience occurred in 1959, when Forest enlisted in the U.S. Navy after watching the Fred Zinnemann film “The Nun’s Story.” He had a religious experience during a post-film stroll: “The old question, ‘Is there a God?’ evaporated.”

The disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961 rattled Forest’s conscience: “I felt implicated in a collective sin.” In response, shocking and angering his military superiors, he joined a protest with Catholic Worker members posted in front of the original C.I.A. headquarters in

Washington, D.C. Seeking discharge as a conscientious objector, Forest then told the Navy that he refused to heed any military orders that would kill innocent civilians or betray his convictions. “I was presented with two choices: ‘cooperate’ or be sent to the brig, the Navy term for prison,” recounted Forest.

“Even my military chaplain, though bewildered that I had such ‘an unusual conscience,’ backed me up, crediting his support to a street-corner encounter he had had many years earlier with Catholic Worker [co-founder] Peter Maurin.” This episode linked Forest to the Catholic Worker and set the stage for later actions of nonviolent resistance. Several years before, Forest got his first glimpse of Dorothy Day, who chose him at the age of 19 to be managing editor of the movement’s pacifist newspaper.

“While I have no doubt that Dorothy Day warrants inclusion in the church calendar as a model of sanctity, it was not just to pass the time of day that she went to confession every Saturday night,” writes Forest. Through Day, Forest came into contact with yet another essential spiritual mentor, the Trappist monk and acclaimed author Thomas Merton. Forest began corresponding with Merton in 1962, after publishing Merton’s essay, “The Root of War Is Fear” in the Catholic Worker.

In late November 1964, three months after the passage of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, Forest co-founded the Catholic Peace Fellowship with Jim Douglass and Daniel Berrigan, S.J. According to Forest, the intentions of the C.P.F. were “to organize Catholic opposition to the Vietnam War...and to make known the fact that conscien-

tious objection to war was an option not only for those in pacifist churches such as Quakers and Mennonites but for Catholics as well.” Merton, who would later call the Vietnam War “an overwhelming atrocity,” joined the group’s board of sponsors.

Forest’s story is not without struggle, and the entire memoir is marked by a constant moral questioning: What is the right thing to do? Am I doing it? Where do I go next? The year 1967 found Forest lonely, depressed and separated from his first wife. Dan Berrigan began to question the viability of the C.P.F., while his brother, Philip Berrigan, distanced himself from the organization and from anti-war activities “devoid of risk or suffering.”

On May 17, 1968, Dan and Phil, joined by seven other Catholic activists collectively known as the Catonsville Nine, burned 378 draft files with napalm in a Catonsville, Md., parking lot, an incendiary protest that divided Catholics and collected criticism even from Merton and Day. The action was repeated on a larger scale that September, when 14 activists, including Forest, burned some 10,000 draft files in Milwaukee, Wis. Forest’s civil disobedience landed him in prison for over a year.

His work for peace did not conclude with the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. In 1977, Forest began leading the staff of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation in the Dutch city of Alkmaar, where he and his wife, Nancy Forest-Flier, currently reside. (He later became general secretary of the organization.) Along with Nancy, Forest converted in 1988 to Orthodox Christianity and made their spiritual home the Amsterdam parish of St. Nicholas of Myra. He also served

as general secretary of the Orthodox Peace Fellowship during this time.

Forest's book abounds with unexpected anecdotes. When Joan Baez was falsely warned that Forest might be a C.I.A. agent, she responded: "Jim Forest is much too nice—and much too disorganized—to work for the C.I.A." Other stories include a phone call with Bob Dylan, talks with Graham Greene and Gregory Peck, and, in one of the more disturbing revelations, repeated episodes of sexual harassment by a well-known social critic.

Despite his extensive involvement with religious peace organizations and his acts of nonviolent resistance, Forest does not comfortably define himself as a peace activist. "The problem is that I'm not by nature an activist. Perhaps there is something of Thomas Merton's monastic temperament in me." Forest does not even describe himself as fully Christian, but rather as one "*attempting* to become a Christian."

This emphasis on "becoming" is useful for understanding Forest's book, which portrays a man moving ever toward something, becoming someone new through interactions with his friends, his mentors and his faith.

Ryan Di Corpo is a *Joseph A. O'Hare, S.J., fellow at America.*

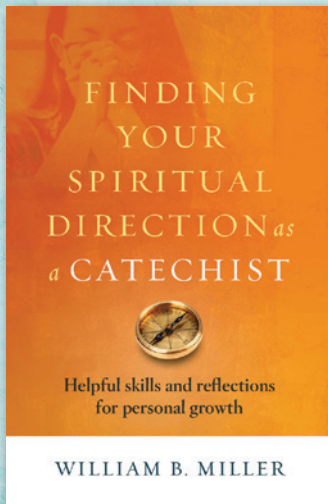
The Sand and the Stars

By Jane Zwart

It has held on for a month
despite baths, despite winter hats
donned and doffed:
a tiny shingle of glitter.
My infant grows so little hair
that to see his skull
throb when
blood ebbs from his heart:
It is still so easy.
His follicles iridesce
just there, a bright tile glued
to his pulse.
Well, I am shy of miracles
and shy
of the talk of miracles.
God is not scrutable. Nor are
God's marvels
a hallowed sideshow
all contrived
to set off dailyness.
On the contrary. Each speck,
each second: It is still
so hard. I am sure
it is radiance first.

Jane Zwart teaches English at Calvin University, where she also co-directs the Calvin Center for Faith & Writing. Her poems have previously appeared in Poetry, Boston Review, North American Review, TriQuarterly and other journals.

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Subway Mysticism

Commuting with Madeleine Delbr el

By Colleen Dulle



New York’s transit system is no place for a mystical experience. Not sober, anyway.

Yet it was on the M60 airport bus, straddling my suFranklin Freemanit-case in a crowded aisle, that I read these words from the French poet and social worker Madeleine Delbr el about finding God on public transit:

In this crowd, heart against heart, crushed between so many bodies...our heart beats like a fist closed upon a bird. The Holy Spirit, the whole Holy Spirit in our tiny heart, a love great as God is beating within us, like a moiling sea struggling to break out, to spread out, to penetrate into all these closed-up creatures, into all these impermeable souls.

I had read this essay years ago, but rereading it while “crushed between so manybodies” in New York was different. Since moving here, I had slowly learned to rein in my gregarious personality. My newfound restraint had left me feeling just what Delbr el described: a restless and explosive love trapped within me, longing to break out.

I devoured Delbr el’s work in the ensuing days, breaking out of a rut in which I had found myself unable to read for pleasure—or pray. Her essay “We, the Ordinary People of the

Streets” is a P eguy-esque poetic manifesto about lay urbanites, reimagining the noise of the city as a chance for inner silence, subway crowds as images of Christ hurt and rejected.

I allowed myself to imagine—the cynical part of me still bristles at the thought—halos on the people on the train. It felt like a somewhat ridiculous exercise (surely these people are not saints) until one morning when I and many others ascended the subway staircase, the unfathomably bright sunlight created, yes, halos around us.

Delbr el’s worldview was decidedly dark as a young woman; she wrote an atheist manifesto at 17 entitled “God is dead.... Long live death!” Delbr el resolved to live life to the fullest in the clubs of 1920s Paris. But the entropy about which Delbr el philosophized materialized in her life when, within the same few months, her parents separated and the man she hoped to marry decided to join the Dominicans.

These developments led Delbr el to question her atheism and, within a few years, convert to Catholicism. Like her American counterpart, Dorothy Day, Delbr el went on to found a house of hospitality in a working-class neighborhood. Delbr el found herself surrounded by communists, who dominated the French worker movement at the time.

In response, Delbr el became a bridge builder: She coordinated war-time social programs through both

her house of hospitality and the city’s communist government, was a friend of the French worker-priest movement and became a sought-after writer and speaker on Catholic-communist relations. She promoted a theology that reimagined laypeople as “missionaries without a boat” in their daily lives.

Her ideas would catch the notice of theologians like Henri de Lubac, S.J., who advocated for a fuller understanding of the missionary role of lay people at the Second Vatican Council. A few years after the council, in 1969, de Lubac would give a speech on division in the church at St. Louis University. He offered Delbr el as a model of the kind of simple living and spirituality that rivals “the refined purity of certain cerebral spiritualities in whose name ordinary Christianity—the only one familiar to the saints and to the ordinary Christians for the past 20 centuries—is criticized.”

Decades later, I find myself reading de Lubac’s words as part of my research for the biography I am now writing on Delbr el for Liturgical Press’s “People of God” series, and I cannot help but see that the U.S. church, still divided along the lines de Lubac described, needs Delbr el’s words and example to transform our vision of one another, whether across ecclesial lines or simply across the subway aisle.

Colleen Dulle is an assistant producer of audio and video at *America*.

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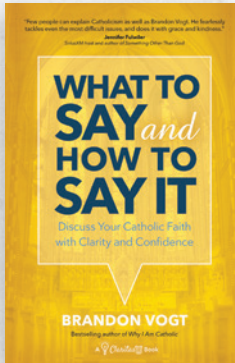
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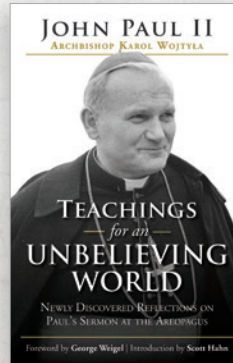
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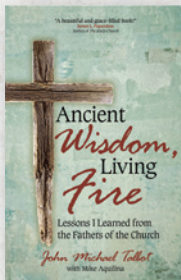
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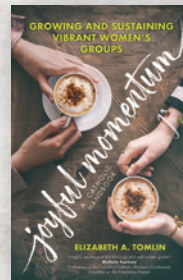
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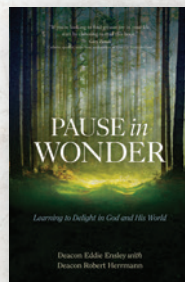
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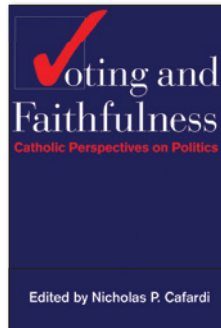
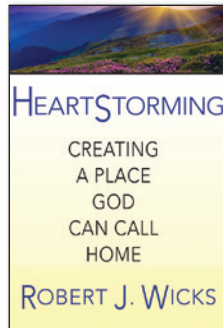
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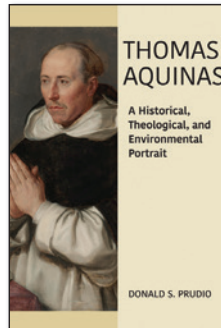
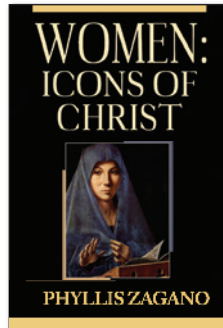


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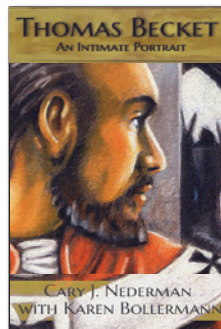
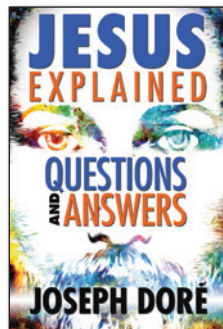


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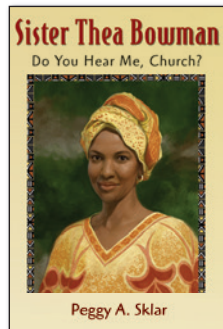


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