

## In Search of Flannery O'Connor

by Jeff Minick

IN LATE JUNE, a friend and I traveled into Central Georgia, looking for Flannery O'Connor.

Mary Ann had never heard of Flannery O'Connor. She didn't know Hazel Motes from a hole in the ground and assured me she had never encountered "A Good Man Is Hard To Find" or "The Life You Save May Be Your Own." Mary Ann's literary tastes run in a different stream, and she was strictly along for the adventure.

All of that notwithstanding, it was Mary Ann who finally conjured up the spirit of Flannery O'Connor for us.

That Saturday morning we dropped from the Carolina mountains into Piedmont Georgia and followed Route 441 toward Milledgeville, where O'Connor spent the last 13 years of her short life—she died at 39 of lupus—living on a nearby dairy and beef farm with her mother, Regina. Driving into town from this farm, which the family called by its original name of Andalusia, meant for O'Connor a three-mile jaunt through pastures, barns, and scruffy pine. Corporate America has since set its stamp on Milledgeville, and that same stretch of road is today a plastic strip of motels, fast-food restaurants, shopping malls, and outlet stores.

At Andalusia we parked in a gravel lot behind the house. The custodians of the property have retained nearly all of the 500-odd acres formerly owned by the O'Connors. Surrounded by oak, cedar, and walnut trees, the outbuildings were in varying states of repair. It was hot and dusty, and we didn't trouble to walk to all these buildings, though I was fascinated to see that directly behind the house a small barn lay collapsed upon itself, with an enormous old iron washpot upside-down in the wreckage. Beside the fallen barn was the

water tower, painted white, which figures in some of O'Connor's stories. Off to one side of the yard was a coop holding three peacocks—O'Connor was famous for keeping such birds—whose shrill cries occasionally startled the air of this quiet place.

The outside of the house, with its large screened-in porch, its various abutments, and its red and apparently freshly painted tin roof, appeared in good repair. Around one of the second-floor windows buzzed a swarm of honeybees, an incongruous detail which I felt sure O'Connor, had she seen such a sight, might have worked into one of her stories.

Inside the house were the rooms that I had hoped would evoke in me the spirit of O'Connor's writing. Here in the kitchen were the white metal sink, stove, and cabinets so prevalent among kitchenware in the first half of the 20th century. Here was the Hot-Air Refrigerator O'Connor had bought for her mother with the television proceeds of "The Life You Save May Be Your Own." In a bookcase in the combination parlor and dining room there lay open a copy of *Pinocchio* in which O'Connor as a girl had scrawled some of her earliest literary criticism: "This is absolutely the worst book I have ever read. Don't read it."

The small gift shop at the back of the house carried O'Connor's books as well as some tourist items: coffee cups, pens, cards. Mark Jurgensen, who was operating the shop and the tours that day, spoke to a small group of visitors for five minutes or so about O'Connor's life at Andalusia and how she had written most of her important work here.

O'Connor's lupus made getting around troublesome, and so she lived at the front of the house in the spacious room that

might otherwise have served as the parlor. Standing in the doorway, I looked at the bare room with its faded carpet, its typewriter and desk, the crutches leaning against a plain dresser, the tidy single bed, the cracked and peeling paint of the walls. (The foundation is trying to raise money to make these repairs.)

"This place is Jerusalem for me," a Massachusetts man said to Mary Ann when she walked to her car for her purse. "I've read everything she's ever written and everything ever written about her."

Jerusalem it is to those who love O'Connor's writing, but something—her spirit, her presence—was, for me, still missing. It was missing when we later visited the Flannery O'Connor Room in town at the Georgia College and State University, where we found other items belonging to O'Connor, including another typewriter and desk. The presence I sought was missing when we stood at her grave in Memory Hill Cemetery. It was missing when we took the trolley tour of Milledgeville and later, too, when we attended Mass at Sacred Heart Catholic Church, sitting just a few pews back from those habitually occupied by O'Connor and her mother.

What was absent, I realized by day's end, were O'Connor's people, the characters of her short stories and novels. Neither they nor their descendants were visible. The motels and restaurants somehow seemed to hide them from view. In town, many people we met during our explorations were outlanders. Our trolley tour guide, for example, a knowledgeable raconteur who clearly loved his adopted town, was a retiree from Pittsburgh. We didn't find out much about O'Connor on our two-hour tour, but we did learn a solid amount of history. Our good guide point-

ed out that Milledgeville was the capital of Georgia from 1804 to 1868. During his March to the Sea, Sherman and his men ravaged the town, sacked the Episcopal church, quartered their horses inside, and then accidentally blew the roof off the church when they exploded a nearby town arsenal. Oliver Hardy was from Milledgeville and worked in the local movie theater; the murders behind the novel *Paris Trout* occurred here. Of the parishioners at Mass that Saturday evening, only two were originally from Milledgeville. (We found out this statistic when the visiting priest, who hailed from Michigan, joked at the end of Mass about Yankee invaders and was told by a parishioner that there were only two natives sitting in the pews.)

Yet all was not lost. I still had Mary Ann.

**THAT NEXT MORNING**, as we drove back toward Commerce to catch the interstate, Mary Ann pointed out a roadside sign advertising “J&J Flea Market, Georgia’s Largest.” I had promised her some shopping in return for enduring my literary ambles, so we swung down a dirt road past a pretty pond into an enormous bazaar composed of weathered wooden tables, a maze of dirt roads, and a swarm of shoppers and vendors.

And here they were in their glory—whites, blacks, and Hispanics, tattooed, sweaty rednecks of all hues selling and buying old rusty tools, secondhand clothing, jewelry, “Got God?” baseball caps, lawn mowers, DVDs, watermelons, and tomatoes on this late Sunday morning. Here was the Flea Express, a trolley car, dustier and shabbier than its Milledgeville counterpart, hauling folks from one bare table emporium to the next. Here was the Dust-Buster, a broken-down old truck dribbling water out its rear end to keep the dirt from getting restless on this dry, scorching day. Here, in short, were the people O’Connor frequently portrayed in her work—a whole crew of them, like that mob seen by Mrs.

Turpin in a vision in “Revelation”:

[A] vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. . . . They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.

Later, spotting a fruit stand alongside the road—why she picked this one I’m not sure; the fruit stands here seem as common as James Agee’s ubiquitous tin roofs in *Let*

*Us Now Praise Famous Men*—Mary Ann asked me to stop again. While she was looking over the fruit, she asked the lean young man behind the counter whether the peaches were local. “Those peaches?” he said. “Why, no ma’am. Those peaches have come out of Edgehill, South Carolina.”

After this exchange, I returned home an even happier man. A part of Flannery O’Connor’s people still survive out there in the Georgia hills, and a few of them even understand the meaning of the word *local* as O’Connor herself once understood it. They doubtless possess all the toys of our modern society, computers and Facebook, iPods and WiFi, and I’m sure they watch television shows like *American Idol* and *Dance Your Ass Off*, and eat Big Macs more than they do collard greens and cornbread. But there they are, those people O’Connor studied so often in her fiction, mutated somewhat by the age in which we all live, yet still recognizable.

Andalusia is no doubt Jerusalem for O’Connor aficionados, but her characters—and some of her spirit as well—live on at J&J Flea Market out on Highway 441.

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THE GROUND ZERO MOSQUE and the Koran (non)burning are but two recent examples of overreported and misrepresented stories that reflect the sorry level of media discourse in the United States. Meanwhile, an event took place on September 12 that has vital importance for the United States' declared strategy in the Muslim world, in general, and in the Greater Middle East, in particular. Yet it is an even bet that not one American in a hundred can put a name to it.

On that day, thanks to a referendum on constitutional changes supported by 58 percent of her electorate, Turkey ceased to be a "secular democracy" based on Kemal Atatürk's reforms of 85 years ago. The event was either ignored by the media, or else—on President Obama's and Hillary Clinton's cue—presented as a triumph of democracy in a friendly Muslim country that provides America with a vital bridge between the East and the West. In reality, it was the final step in a long sequence of moves by Turkey's Islamists, who have been in power for the better part of the decade and now feel strong enough to proceed with their endgame.

Over the past eight years, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) have been successful in undermining Mustafa Kemal's legacy and the character of the state founded upon that legacy. What remained, until the referendum, was an increasingly hollow shell of constitutional secularism. That shell was nevertheless an obstacle to the formal grounding of the new legitimacy in Islam at home and neo-Ottomanism abroad. Erdoğan and his team were determined to remove it, and on September 12 they succeeded. Turkey's voters approved a 26-article package that will end the army's role as the guardian of secularism. On current form, there is but little doubt that Erdoğan will be reelected by a simple majority when he calls the general election next spring—yet more proof that "democracy" in the Mus-

lim world means more Islam.

The process was predictable, and it was facilitated by the self-deception of our "foreign-policy community." As I noted on *ChroniclesMagazine.org* many years ago ("Who Lost Turkey?", April 2, 2003), the Bush administration was fatally mistaken to pretend—as Paul Wolfowitz did earlier that year—that Turkey was "a truly indispensable nation" with an "indispensable partnership with the United States," a nation "central to building peace from Southeastern Europe to the Middle East and eastward to the Caucasus and Central Asia . . . crucial to bridging the dangerous gap between the West and the Muslim world":

In his pitch to the West Mr. Erdoğan is unsurprisingly eager to minimize his party's Islamic connections by stressing his "secular" and "conservative" credentials. His assurances were keenly accepted in Washington . . . During a recent trip to Turkey by The Rockford Institute's fact-finding team we were repeatedly warned that things were no longer as they used to be a decade ago . . . The escalating crisis of Turkey's economic and political system over the past decade reflected a deeper malaise, the loss of confidence of the old Kemalist elite. The implicit assumption in Washington—

that Turkey would remain "secular" and "pro-Western," come what may—should have been reassessed after the Army intervened to remove the previous pro-Islamic government in 1997. Since then many voices . . . have warned that "democratization" would mean Islamization, and that America needed alternative scenarios and regional strategies.

Fast-forward to the fall of 2010: Erdoğan and his team claim that the constitutional reform has no other purpose than the country's further democratization. Practicing the Islamic art of *taqiyya* (lying to infidels) in its pure form, foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu said that the referendum was all about advancing civil rights and Western-style liberties, that it reflects "the Turkish nation's will to live in a freer and more democratic environment in compliance with European Union standards." It is "an important turning point for democracy in Turkey," he continued, and "a result of the Turkish nation's interest in the reform process carried out in light of universal and European norms." With an eye to the cultural Marxists in Brussels, he also noted that the amendments introduced "constitutional guarantees for positive discrimination for women, children, the elderly and the disabled."

With the predictable exception of once-ultra-Turkophile neocons, Washington's self-deception is continuing. Only



## Neo-Ottomans Triumphant