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Posted on 02 February 2017 By Flannery O'Connor

Joyce Carol Oates says in a review in the New York Times no postwar and posthumous literary reputation of the twentieth century, with the notable exception of Sylvia Plath, has grown rapidly and dramatically than that of Flannery O'Connor, whose work has acquired a canonical status since her death in 1964. And she compares Flannery's rep with that of Carson McCullers and Truman Capote who, sez Joyce, have gone down. Which surprised me I mean, no one could dispute *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* or *Breakfast at Tiffany's* or *In Cold Blood*, but plenty of people might like to quibble with *Wise Blood* and its crazy ass ilk. Gee, I wish they'd publish the Authors Hot 100 every year so we could see whose reputations have gone up and whose have gone down. That would be fun. As to what makes them go up and down, I guess that's a secret sauce. Likes of us don't get to know. Well, anyhow I should tell you that I'm in a bit of a quandary here, in this review. With Flannery O'Connor I'm in the most uncomfortable position of greatly enjoying and admiring a writer who I know absolutely I don't understand, and further, that if I did, I wouldn't like any part of what she was telling me. This is because she was a consciously Christian writer, and Catholic to boot. Many, maybe all, of these stories are like or actually are parables. Sometimes they become explicitly mystical. He had never thought himself a great sinner before but he saw now that his true depravity had been hidden from him lest it cause him despair. He realized that he was forgiven for sins from the beginning of time, when he had conceived in his own heart the

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sin of Adam, until the present, when he had denied poor Nelson He saw that no sin was too monstrous for him to claim as his own, and since God loved in proportion as He forgave, he felt ready at that instant to enter Paradise. Say what What was that again So when I find myself loving these strange, menacing, hilarious stories with their deliciously dozy characters and bent backwards dialogue, the Christian message about sin and redemption and grace and so forth just goes whizzing right over my head It s rather like buying Playboy for the pictures of the naked ladies and not bothering to read any of the terrific articles at all. My review, as well as my other thoughts on reading, also can be found on my blog. Coated with cynicism, the stories of A Good Man is Hard to Find question the possibility of redemption in a society nearly rotten Almost all the stories grotesque and make strange Biblical narratives, from the drowning of demonic pigs to angels in the wilderness O Connor s stark descriptions of the South are breathtaking, and her ability to create sympathetic but unlikable characters is impressive The most memorable moments in her work are those rare instances when grace breaks through the grimy setting and offers protagonists the chance to change Aside from the titular story, favorites included The River, A Temple of the Holy Ghost, A Circle in the Fire, and Good Country People. Exiled From Eden I don t always have the aptitude and the patience paradoxically for short fiction, but O Connor has a way of connecting all her stories by setting them in a landscape that refuses to leave you The stories and the unease stay with you as you finish each grotesque piece, building up layer upon layer of despair until you thirst for an almost religious release from it all. Peopled with the religious, the good and the moral trying to come to terms with a god less world, grappling with a cruel world and crueler selves the continuous tensions between religiousness, morality and reality is played out in small, inconsequential dramas that affect nobody and nothing, but continues to fray the fabric of the world And in the end, each mini drama also raises many mega questions Was it the loneliness of spirit that caused this particular drama to play out as it did Can religion be blamed for the mistakes of humanity Was God only ever invented so that humanity could bask in a continuous god less loneliness, blaming abandonment over depravity for their ills Are we self

Delta of Venus

Metamorphoses

Lady Chatterley's Lover

Kushiel's Dart

Sappho's Leap

Claudius the God and His Wife Messalina

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Thy Neighbor's Wife

exiled These are essentially comic tales mixing violence, religion and morality without any restraints where her characters face the ultimate questions of life and make the best choices they can, which are almost always tragically absurd in the eyes of the observer With the best intentions, they are allowed to knock at and break open the gates to Hell. My favorite is The River view spoiler of a neglected four year old boy looking for the Kingdom of Christ in the fast flowing waters of the river hide spoiler Flannery O Connor taps into a different type of dark with this collection of ten short stories This is not horror, but it is disturbing Nothing uplifting in here, no sirree bob Hidden deformities, unwelcome visitors who refuse to leave, a woman s aversion to doctors, and a door to door Bible salesman who is a collector of some very odd things Many of the characters are slightly off , just as many have a mean streak Eyes play a prominent role, a cast in the eye, a cracked eye, the eyes in the tail of a peacock, the look of the eyes behind spectacles A Good Man Is Hard To Find title story is just as striking as I ve always heard It may stick with me longer than I want. I have been stewing on this book all night it was 1 terrific in every and 2 completely rotten in every way and 3 scary, scary, terrifying scary without trying too hard to be O Connor has said that she searches in the darkest, most hopeless little worlds for god s grace or specifically, god s presence , be it dark or light Seeing as I have no fear of the wrath of an angry god, why did this book affect me so deeply, leaving me with a stunned expression staring at a blank wall for several minutes after each little story had wrapped up My only conclusion is that, aside from being hypnotized to terror by O Connor s seductive prose, I must have some residual, albeit repressed fears of the religion instilled in me at a young age Those tales of terror from the preacher s mouth must still rattle around in my subconscious from time to time, which would explain why the horror movies that have most scared me in my life have always centered on demons and damnation I love a good zombie movie, but The Exorcist scared the bejesus out of me so to speak , and still does to this very day This is true despite the fact that I find the plot to 28 Days Later feasible than that of Rosemary s Baby or any other demon bodysnatching devil takeover plot imaginable I am far logically afraid of microscopic bad things than invisible bad things, I

Atomised

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dangereuses

The Naked Woman: A  
Study of the Female  
Body

Atlas Shrugged

Justine, Philosophy in  
the Bedroom, and Other  
Writings

suppose But I am rambling Read this book YOU WILL THANK ME If I haven't peaked your interest, allow me to mention a few buzz words appropriate to this book serial killer, drowning child, crooked preacher, arson, theft, country trash, unwanted pregnancy, insanity, depression, poverty, seduction, abandonment, missing limbs, prosthetic limbs, ignorance, betrayal, emotional breakdown, and total psychological meltdown And MORE. A Good Man is Hard to Find A family strikes out on a road trip to Florida, knowing that an escaped convict is on the loose What a kick ass tale to open the collection Flannery O Connor had to be an influence of sorts on Jim Thompson, as this reads a lot like a condensed version of one of his stories She would have been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life The River An odd little boy is taken to a river to be Baptised by a fire and brimstone preacher Bleakness ensues He could hear broken piece of the sun knocking on the water The Life You Save May Be Your Own A one armed drifter takes up with an old woman and her deaf maiden daughter Flannery O Connor sure writes some grim tales. A Stroke of Good Fortune Ruby has some difficulty climbing the stairs to the apartment she shares with her husband, Bill Hill, and her brother Rufus, all the while thinking about what the fortune teller said Bill Hill takes care of that A Temple of the Holy Ghost A child's annoying second cousins come from the convent to attend the fair. Yeah, I'm pretty sure I missed the point of this one It was a little different from the previous ones since no one died. The Artificial Nigger Mr Heard takes his grandson Nelson to the big city and they encounter African Americans. I glossed over a lot of this It's a tale of some country folk coming to the big city and it nicely illustrates why we rural Americans get a bad name It also uses the N word times per page than anything I've read before, a product of the time. A Circle in the Fire Three troublesome boys show up at an old woman's farm What will happen when they refuse to leave This one had some religious overtones and was fairly creepy. A Late Encounter with the Enemy Will Sally Poker's 104 year old grandfather, General Sash, die before her graduation I loved this one Good Country People A young man shows up at Mrs Hopewell's house selling bibles and takes a shine to her daughter, Joy. This was another great story that reminded me of a Jim Thompson, Savage Night. The Displaced

Person A priest hires a displaced person to work on Mrs McIntyre s farm How will her existing hands take it when he s capable than them The ending of this one really drives home my point that it s very likely that Jim Thompson was a Flannery O Connor fan.A Good Man is Hard to Find is a powerful collection of tales by an overlooked mistress of the form Four out of five stars. Horrible horrible horrible, particularly the first two Trust me, I m not saying this just for effect They take dark to a whole new level like staring down into a bottomless pit Yet absolutely brilliant, of a review later maybe once I ve recuperated. I am developing quite an addiction for the Southern flavor of American literature, and reading my first short story collection by Flannery O Connor is than just adding fuel to the flame of my interest She is surpassing all my expectations and constantly going beyond the surface of things to touch on personal trauma that is often as unavoidable, tragic and soul reaving as a Greek tragedy I am not sure if I should use the term gothic for her stories Yes, her subjects are usually deformed people, people with disabilities or with communications problems, people with anger in their hearts or living in denial of the outside world A world that keeps intruding on their fictional reality, mercilessly knocking them down and teaching them some harsh lessons or not, to those still unwilling to see or hear I am associating Gothic with romantic heroes or heroines and grotesque settings O Connor s characters are ordinary people engaged in routine, everyday activities Things get scary, yes, but I didn t find any supernatural elements or larger than life heroes Unless you consider the stories through the lens of the author s Roman Catholic faith, which admittedly plays a central role in her plot construction You have the sinners, the trial she or he has to go through, and the revelation of grace, or mercy, or whatever else you might want to call the lesson of the day Literary, I found every story in the collection to be a true gem of style and restrained intensity, the raw emotion that I have so admired in Carson McCullers veiled here in a intellectual and self assured presentation that peels back from the soul every pretense and affectation to aim at the core of the character There is a sustained sense of doom, of bleakness and hopelessness that can get depressing after a while, but than one story ends on a upbeat note, with life going on, and maybe a little wisdom and

kindness settling down on the afflicted, and on the reader A Good Man Is Hard to Find is the opening gambit, and despite the title it is not about romantic searches for a suitable spouse It is about a typical American family leaving on vacation, by car from Georgia to Florida I think There s the working father, the housewife mother, two lively kids and a garrulous grandmother that is kind of annoying in her self centered preoccupation The outside world barges into their lives in the most brutal and unreasonable way, and I can t really think what the lesson is, other than to live life fully and meaningfully while we can, because it is so fragile and precious and easily wasted The River is possible even disturbing than the first story, because here, instead of an old lady, we have a young boy sent by his indifferent parents to spend the day with a babysitter This lady takes the boy to a Baptist ceremony, and I believe the moral is we need to be very careful about what we teach our children and how we protect them from harm The Life You Save May Be Your Own is one of the first stories to introduce the dynamics of a mother and daughter relationship, a recurrent theme in the collection The first one protective, the other damaged and unable to face the world on its own The messenger of change, or Fate, takes the form of a one armed travelling handyman, who offers to fix the women s farm implements in exchange for food and lodging The mother sees in him an opportunity to solve the worries about the future of her daughter, but the man may have plans of his own One possible moral may be that from immoral and selfish actions may result positive outcomes, and that there is a streak of kindness and integrity even in the lost souls A Stroke of Good Fortune is the story of another selfish woman, one of modest origins who tries to escape from the perceived prison of the cycle of marriage and children and taking care of the land and of the family, choosing instead a form of living for yourself Her internal monologue takes place as she painfully climbs the stairs to her apartment She s a gossippy and mean spirited woman, with an acid tongue She had expected Rufus to have turned out into somebody with some get in him Well, he had about as much get as a floor mop, but she is not refused grace, even if the one that descends on her may be different from the one she has prayed for But God or the author knows best A Temple of the Holy Ghost is one of the few stories with a touch

of humour, coming from a very smart young girl who receives the visit in her house of two older girls from a convent school. The title of the piece is a reference to the lesson taught in the convent that your body is a temple and you must treat it as such, not letting anybody especially boys touch it or disrespect it. The young witness narrator is quick to dismiss the convent girls for their shallowness. Neither of them could tell an intelligent thing and all their sentences began, 'You know this boy I know well one time he...' But the story turns out to be not about the giggling adventures of these inept teenagers, but about a circus freak they see in town, and about accepting the other for what he is, not for what he looks like. This is also one of the stories where the Catholic viewpoint and the prayer as a way to salvation are made explicit. 'The Artificial Nigger' is my favorite piece in the collection, the most powerful condemnation of prejudice and narrow minded clinging to traditions. It has also some of the most beautiful and evocative paragraphs. An old man lives alone with his grandson in an isolated farm. Mr Head looked like an ancient child and Nelson like a miniature old man. Mr Head decides that in order to keep the boy by his side, he must scare him away from the big city, so they take a trip together to see all the niggers and the craziness of the metropolis. Crazy their adventure is, but also eye opening about the dark motives and the cruel methods the old man is willing to use in order to reach his goal. Ultimately, the couple turn their back on the modern world and its permissive way of thinking, retreating to their hillbilly abode to lick their wounds and fight with each other. Yet there is hope still for the old man, even at this late stage in his life. Mr Head stood very still and felt the action of mercy touch him again but this time he knew that there were no words in the world that could name it. He understood that it grew out of agony, which is not denied to any man and which is given in strange ways to children. He understood it was all a man could carry into death to give his Maker and he suddenly burned with shame that he had so little of it to take with him. 'A Circle in the Fire' is about another mother with a reclusive disabled daughter. This time, the authoritarian lady is hard working and very proud of her farm, while the daughter hides in an upper room autistic and timidly looks at the world from a safe distance. The status quo is broken by visitors from the city three young boys from an

impoverished neighborhood, dreaming of a land of plenty and a life of leisure You take a boy thirteen years old is equal in meanness to a man twice his age It s no telling what he ll think up to do You never know where he ll strike nextl could draw parallels between this story and the parable of Job, seeing as we are tested in our self sufficiency and pride and judged not by the wealth we amass but by the compassion we show A Late Encounter with the Enemy deals with one of the favorite Southern pastimes glorifying the past, clinging to a false image of prosperity and gentility that was built on the backs of slavery and intransigence Here an elderly lady is graduating at 64 from a college and wants her 104 years old grandfather to come and be on the stage as a symbol of Confederacy values See him See him My kin, all you upstarts Glorious upright old man standing for the old traditions Dignity Honor Courage See him The old senile geezer is as fake as the General s uniform he wears, a gift from a television producer in need of fresh material for a feature I would choose as soundtrack for this piece a Jethro Tull tune Living in the Past Good Country People revisits the mother daughter menage, with the particularity that the daughter here is only physically disabled a missing leg from a traffic accident Her mind is as sharp as scissors, at least in theory, as she holds a university degree in philosophy, one that is pretty much useless to her as she vegetates in her mother s house Fate knocks on their door in the shape of a travelling Bible salesman, of good country origins, according to his own account It goes to show that not even intelligence makes us proof against the vicissitudes of fate or sweet tongued crooks Malebranche was right we are not our own light We are not our own light exclaims the young lady in despair, finding philosophy an insufficiently strong support in her time of need OK, so I didn t know who Malebranche is and I had to look it up, but it was worth it It appears he was a French priest and philosopher from the 17 century who tried to reconcile the mind and the body, the will of God and causality in the real world The Displaced Person ends the collection in grand style, opening out the enclosed and often retrograde Southern culture to the modern influences and upheavals brought about by the second world war The protagonist is another strong lady, managing a big farm with the help of white trash servants and former slaves as workers A priest

persuades her to accept a family of Polish refugees from the concentration camps, and the change seems beneficial in the beginning, as the new man introduces modern machines and a rigorous work ethic. Times are changing. Do you know what's happening to this world? It's swelling up. It's getting so full of people that only the smart, thrifty, energetic ones are going to survive. The old hands rebel against the changes, and the lady is torn between being faithful to her traditions and accepting the modern times. Tragedy once again tests the characters to their very core. Peacocks feature prominently in the background as a glittering but endangered symbol of the past glories. The story ends with the priest trying to give solace to the guilty conscience of the owner, and my own review ends with an ambiguous message of hope, one that requires a strong character who accepts all humanity's faults and still has the faith to go on. We are all damned, but some of us have taken off our blindfolds and see that there's nothing to see. It's a kind of salvation. After the journey, I am now convinced that Flannery O'Connor knows not only how to write exceptional pages of literature, but she is well acquainted with all forms of physical and spiritual pain. Writing is a form of exorcising these demons, and possibly transmit the gift of grace to the reader. I am not a member of her confession, or ready to be converted, but I can respect and admire the results of her struggles. This stuff is twisted, sparse, clipped, dark, doomy, funny, dramatic, Southern, angry, sexy, super Catholic, death haunted, maniacal, bizarre, possibly racist, apparently desperate, fatalistic, existential, dreary, ugly, fetid, frenzied, morbid, lax, stern, prepossessing, unforgiving, unrelenting, anti everything, aged, retro, haunting, parabolic, anecdotal, moral, redemptive, sublime, reasoned, feverish, dreamlike, unsparing, sparse, I said that one already, seductive, craftsmanlike, worried, extremely well conceived, taut, brooding, polarizing, scary, and powerful. I literally didn't know one could write like this until I heard her do it. I didn't know that the human mind would conceive of this until she did. Not that it's simply freaky or no, that would be too easy. It's just so carefully done and well proportioned in its flatness and its odd grace. Masterpieces, pretty much to a story. This Now Classic Book Revealed Flannery O'Connor As One Of The Most Original And Provocative Writers To Emerge From The South. Her

Apocalyptic Vision Of Life Is Expressed Through Grotesque,  
Often Comic Situations In Which The Principal Character  
Faces A Problem Of Salvation The Grandmother, In The Title  
Story, Confronting The Murderous Misfit A Neglected Four  
Year Old Boy Looking For The Kingdom Of Christ In The Fast  
Flowing Waters Of The River General Sash, About To Meet  
The Final Enemy Stories Include A Good Man Is Hard To Find  
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