

America

SPRING 2021

THE JESUIT REVIEW OF FAITH AND CULTURE

SPRING LITERARY REVIEW 2021

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Catholic Pilgrimage

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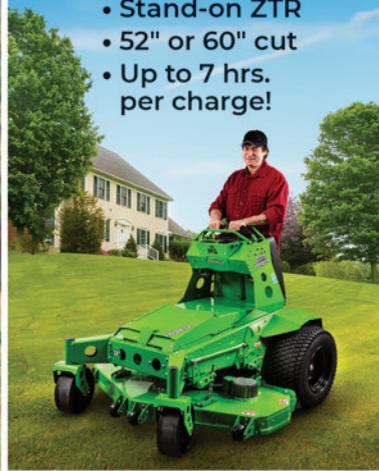
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Welcome to Spring Books 2021

In the spring of 2015, I was blessed with the opportunity to travel to El Salvador for the beatification ceremony of St. Óscar Romero (he was canonized in 2018). The Mass was an intense and electric ceremony on its own—hundreds of thousands packed the capital city's Plaza Salvador del Mundo—but equally powerful were the days before and after. Did you know that one can visit the saint's apartment? Right across the street from where he was martyred by Salvadoran paramilitaries while saying Mass, it has been preserved as it was the day he was killed, including his bookshelves.

If almost all one's intellectual interests meet in the town of Nerd at the intersection of Books and Church, the chance to browse the library of a saint is an opportunity not to be missed. I crouched down on the floor, my nose an inch from the glass of the bookcase, and perused the titles one by one.

He was learned: academic texts in Spanish, English and French. He was practical: an owner's manual for a Toyota Corona and a book on aerobics. He was pious: numerous short hagiographies. He held different theologies in tension: Karol Wojtyła's *A Sign of Contradiction* near a book by Hans Küng. And he enjoyed a bit of lowbrow material: an English-language paperback of Malachi Martin's 1978 novel *The Final Conclave*. It all seemed to fit.

What will each of our bookshelves look like if we meet an untimely end? I take comfort in the fact that no looky-loos will have much interest in mine, because they are far less edifying than the above. Mobster biographies; censured theologians; science

fiction; John Irving and Joseph Heller and Donna Tartt novels galore; a Chinese-language original of Mao's *Little Red Book*, of which I can't read a word; ten million books about Bob Dylan. *¿Santo subito?*

There are a few books mentioned in this special issue I want to add to that collection, however, starting with Daniel Hornsby's *Via Negativa*. Jon M. Sweeney profiles both Hornsby and his debut novel in these pages and finds the story of an aging priest driving across the Midwest in his aging Toyota (not a Corona, but a Camry) to be a pilgrimage "as real as any I've encountered in American fiction."

Another fascinating book profiled here predates Hornsby's 2020 novel by 64 years (it also predates Hornsby's birth by half that number): Caroline Gordon's largely unread novel *The Malefactors*, reviewed in this issue by Joshua Hren. A treatment of the "Lost Generation" that ends with a powerful story of conversion to Catholicism, the novel centers on a dysfunctional couple immersed in a bohemian lifestyle who eventually find God in the oddest of places. Flannery O'Connor considered *The Malefactors* to be "undoubtedly the most serious and successful fictional treatment of conversion by an American writer to date." If nothing else, read it to speculate on whether the novel's philandering husband who finds his way to God is based on Allen Tate.

Another fascinating look back is an appreciation by Joe Hoover, S.J., of *Following Christ in a Consumer Society*, by John Kavanaugh, S.J. Brother Hoover, **America's** poetry editor and a newly published author himself, re-

members an erudite scholar who took a blowtorch to our consumer culture in 1981 (and again in 2006).

There is much more in this issue: reviews of new books, visits to old favorites and forgotten treasures, poetry and more. We are also delighted to have once again one of my favorite writers, Mary Gordon, in our pages. Her "Last Word" column for this issue ruminates on her new book project: *What Kind of Catholic Are You?* "I am writing about living human beings, many of whom have left enormous paper trails," she writes. "I have many more affinities with some of these people than others, just as I have more affinities with some of the fictional characters I have created than with others." At the same time, "I believe that because the people about whom I am writing share with me a vocabulary, a set of images and shared practices (after all, when we hear the 'Hail Mary,' we all know the words), there are some firm grounds on which we can all stand."

We hope you enjoy reading this issue as much as we enjoyed putting it together. **America** offers these special literary issues twice a year, as a chance both to introduce new authors and to peer into our bookshelves, disedifying though they may be, for a beloved classic.

James T. Keane, *senior editor*.



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Dr. Hannah Thomas with a book from the historic library of the oldest living convent in England, Bar Convent in York on March 18. Rare books from the library, which was established in 1686, are being made available for researchers in a global database.

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MARY GORDON

What kind of Catholic are you?

Rare Finds: The Treasures Found in Books

One of the advantages of belonging to a virtual book club rather than a real-life version is that it survives in a pandemic. In fact, in some ways our Catholic Book Club has thrived in the past year: Many of us found books to be valuable sources of nourishment during the time of Covid-19, and many of us also sought out community and companionship in virtual settings when in-person encounters became rare. Our online community on Facebook now has over 7,000 members, while our weekly newsletter reaches over 14,000 subscribers.

We discussed two books over the past six months, each from a different genre and offering unique perspectives. (We try to rotate our selections among biography, fiction, nonfiction and poetry.) First we explored a brand-new literary/historical analysis by Peter Manseau, *The Jefferson Bible*; more recently we have been discussing a 2019 novel by Irish writer Niall Williams, *This Is Happiness*. Our Catholic Book Club moderator, Kevin Spinale, S.J., offered interpretive essays on both books and included questions for discussion. Our Facebook page continues to be the gathering place where our Catholic Book Club members discuss each book.

The Jefferson Bible

In the King James Bible, the Gospel of John concludes with an observation that if everything Jesus did were recorded, “I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written.” But even what *was* written down has produced its own cornucopia of books, as there are as many versions of the Bible under the sun as one could possibly imagine, for every genre and affinity group in all of Christianity, each with its own particular idiosyncrasies and emphases. One of the most unusual of these was the result of a quixotic project by the third president of the United States, Thomas Jefferson. Taking scalpel and glue to the text of numerous Bibles in his possession (in various languages), Jefferson cut-and-pasted his way to *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*. “This one-off, hand-crafted book now has a book-length biography explaining its conception and construction, its discovery, its duplication and its reception history,” wrote Father Spinale. That book is *The Jefferson Bible: A Biography*, by Peter Manseau.

Jefferson’s final product, according to Manseau, was

“made of twelve types of paper, ten varieties of ink (six in the printed matter and four in the handwritten notes), two adhesives, threading of both linen and silk, and goatskin leather.” Jefferson used his creation for his own personal devotional reading during the last six years of his life.

Among Jefferson’s particular bugaboos were Jesus’ miracles, which he thought distracted from the reality of Jesus as a great ethical teacher rather than a worker of wonders, so he cut them from the text. Unfortunately, as both Peter Manseau and Father Spinale note, the resulting figure is hardly a dynamic messiah (much less divine!). “Time and again, Jesus indicates that he might be able to perform a miracle of some kind, and then does nothing. While this no doubt made him more acceptable in Enlightenment circles, one imagines it would have made Jesus far less popular in Galilee,” Manseau writes. “[Jefferson] may have imagined his *Life and Morals* as scripture shorn of all its unreasonable elements, but Jefferson’s is a hard gospel. The blind do not see; the lame do not walk; the multitudes will remain hungry if loaves and fishes must be multiplied to feed them.”

Many of our members agreed. “The whole concept of cutting and pasting Scripture is hard to get my head around,” wrote Liz Latorre. “I definitely can think of some portions [of the Bible] I would like to cut, but I keep having this niggling thought in the back of my head that the parts I would want to cut probably have something in them that I actually need to hear—I just haven’t discerned what the message is.”

Another reader, Michael Shak, wondered if Jefferson was too stubbornly wedded to rationalist ideals to embrace a Jesus of miracles. “Jefferson’s deist prism, from which he looked out on the world, hamstrung him to reason but never opened him up to the God of Abraham—a God of faith,” he wrote. “Faith, while reasonable, opens a believer to the life of paradox, which Enlightenment thinkers like Jefferson revolted against because it didn’t fit into their system. Faith is iconoclastic.”

At the same time, some readers were surprised to find Jefferson himself a far more complex figure in Manseau’s telling than they had thought. In some ways, this book is as much a biography of Jefferson as a story of his take on Scripture. Manseau shows him to be a scholarly figure of great talents and also enormous flaws—and one with a

rather unique take on Jesus of Nazareth.

This Is Happiness

In February we began discussion of our latest book, *This Is Happiness*, by Niall Williams. The novel is set in the west of Ireland just as the residents begin to catch up to the modern world; electricity and alarm clocks start to replace candles and church bells as the measures of time. A wild cast of characters occupies the small town of Faha, which at first seems like it should be a sleepy backwater but turns out to be rich with exuberant life. Williams presents the town's colorful residents in intricate detail, and does the same for their physical and spiritual surroundings as well.

"Gleefulness. I want to assure you that Niall Williams's *This Is Happiness* bestows on its readers a feeling of gleefulness," wrote Father Spinale in his introductory essay. "'Glee' is a word I hardly use, but it is what I felt in reading nearly every paragraph in the novel."

Readers loved Williams's prose, even when it occasionally crossed the line from lyrical into something more affected (and required dedication and concentration from all of us to hold on to the plot threads). "I found the meandering language very inviting. It took a while to figure out how to read the book: not hastily, but sitting down and entering into the landscape of character and place," wrote Dorie Wessell Bliss. "It reminded me of reading a Wendell Berry novel: a different time, slowed down, rich with life."

"I am reminded of the joy I experienced when reading Doig's *This House of Sky*, or Frazier's *Cold Mountain*, or McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*," wrote David W. Madsen. "In fact, if reading this book were any more pleasurable, I'd have to give it up for Lent."

"I cannot recommend this novel highly enough," wrote Father Spinale. "The salt of the earth who are depicted in this novel are all light and glee for the soul."

To offer the broadest possible range of quality books on topics of interest to our readers, 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/americancbc. Happy reading!

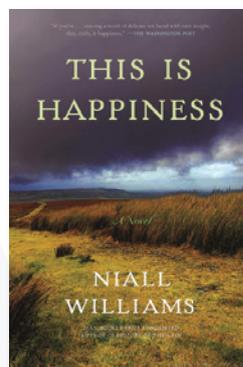
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The online discussion group for *America* readers interested in quality literature.

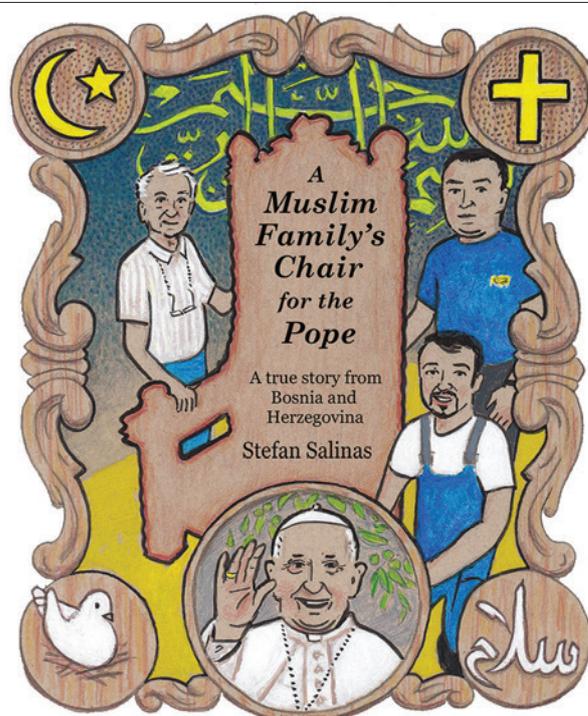
While we might look new, the Catholic Book Club has actually been around for many decades in different forms. Our goal has always been to provide *America* readers with additional literary resources and to come together around our shared enjoyment of and appreciation for fine works of literature. We introduce a new book four times a year, providing discussion questions, conversation prompts and supporting materials that you can use individually or with your home, parish or school group.

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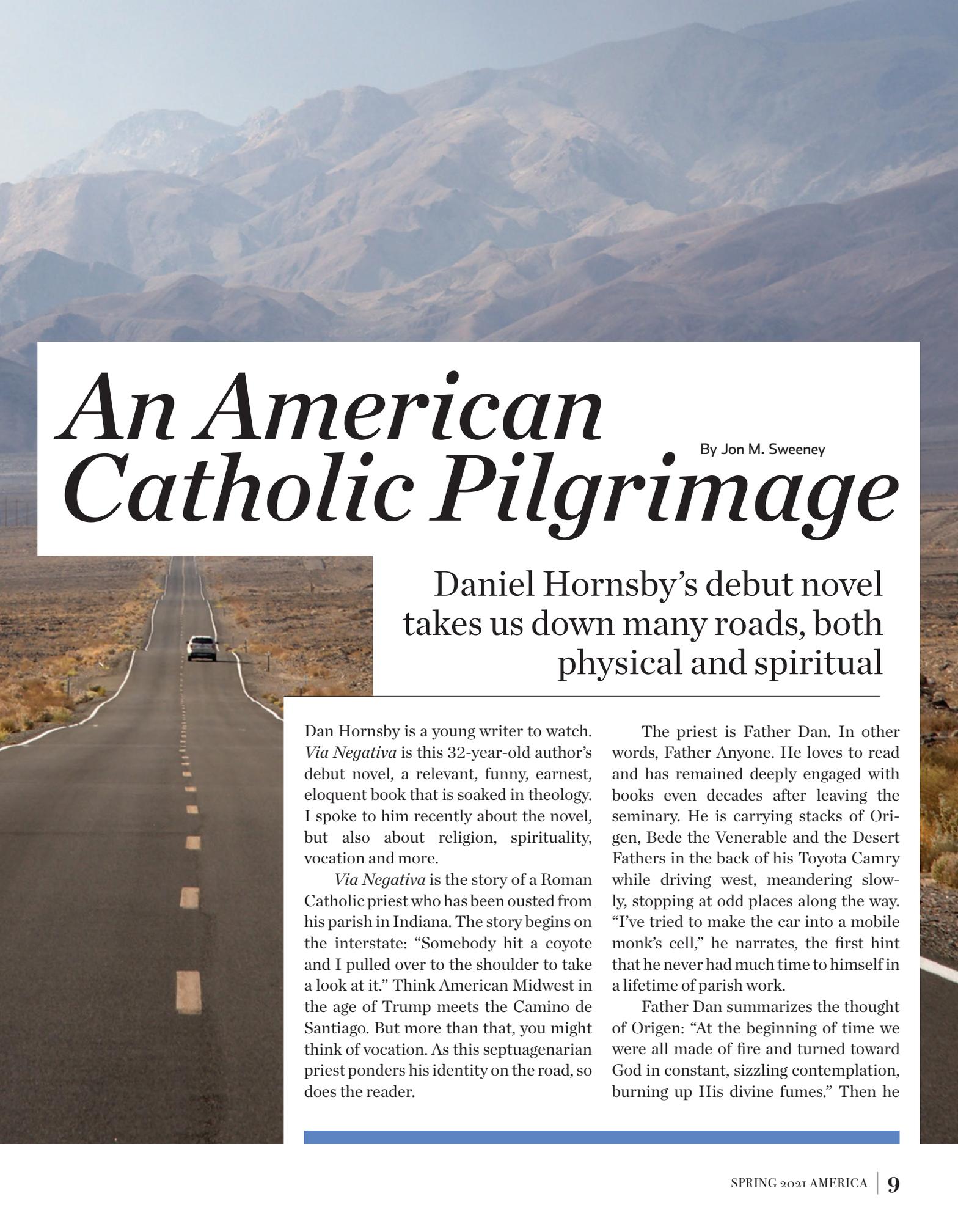
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Daniel Hornsby's *Via Negativa* is a funny, earnest, eloquent book that is soaked in theology.



An American Catholic Pilgrimage

By Jon M. Sweeney

Daniel Hornsby's debut novel takes us down many roads, both physical and spiritual

Dan Hornsby is a young writer to watch. *Via Negativa* is this 32-year-old author's debut novel, a relevant, funny, earnest, eloquent book that is soaked in theology. I spoke to him recently about the novel, but also about religion, spirituality, vocation and more.

Via Negativa is the story of a Roman Catholic priest who has been ousted from his parish in Indiana. The story begins on the interstate: "Somebody hit a coyote and I pulled over to the shoulder to take a look at it." Think American Midwest in the age of Trump meets the Camino de Santiago. But more than that, you might think of vocation. As this septuagenarian priest ponders his identity on the road, so does the reader.

The priest is Father Dan. In other words, Father Anyone. He loves to read and has remained deeply engaged with books even decades after leaving the seminary. He is carrying stacks of Origen, Bede the Venerable and the Desert Fathers in the back of his Toyota Camry while driving west, meandering slowly, stopping at odd places along the way. "I've tried to make the car into a mobile monk's cell," he narrates, the first hint that he never had much time to himself in a lifetime of parish work.

Father Dan summarizes the thought of Origen: "At the beginning of time we were all made of fire and turned toward God in constant, sizzling contemplation, burning up His divine fumes." Then he

Via Negativa is about a deeply religious life that is without much peace—or, perhaps better, a confusing and conflicting peace. ●●

explains, with equal brevity and brilliance, why Origen was never canonized.

He has some experience with drugs: There was a bit of pot in minor seminary, and his car holds a bottle of Niravam, presumably prescribed to him for depression, although we never really know for sure. He administers it in half-doses to the injured coyote he has gathered from the highway and begun to care for in the backseat of the car.

Their pilgrimage, as real as any I've encountered in American fiction, begins in Muncie. ("They'd given me two weeks to move out of the rectory.") Father Dan and the coyote are slowly, uncertainly making their way toward Seattle to see Clara and Brian, a couple who were best friends with Father Dan at their Indiana parish but have since moved on. The Toyota takes the place of the rectory that Father Dan no longer has.

Their journey across 2,500 miles of American frontier, taking a route that is not at all direct. Father Dan listens to compact discs of the artist Prince, in whom he hears "a real mystical theology." He tracks his course on an old-fashioned road atlas. He's a baby boomer, and a sincere one. "All priests are supposed to be without homes," he reflects, probably to make himself feel better.

He sees his generation of priests in a way that made me smile and wince all at once:

There are guitar-playing priests, and there are pre-Vatican II priests, and there are Eisenhower priests. There are pedophile priests and there are communist priests. There are pot-smoking priests (subcategory of guitar-playing priests) and alcoholic priests (functioning, tragic, or, that fine balance, Irish). There are gun-owning priests, golfing priests, and tennis-playing priests. There are gay priests and there are priests that are much too straight. There are poetry-reading priests and there are Merton-esque meditating priests, categories I might fall under.

But these categories prove a bit too pat for our narrator, because we soon see that it is not at all easy to "place" Father Dan.

Dan the Author (not the Priest)

The author of this book, the novelist Dan Hornsby, is of course also a Dan, and while we are not usually supposed to associate writers with the characters they create, the similarities in *Via Negativa* were too close to pass unnoticed. For example, the first line of the novelist's biography on the flap of the dust jacket tells us that "Daniel Hornsby was born in Muncie, Indiana." A few lines later we discover he has two master's degrees, an M.F.A. from the University of Michigan and an M.T.S. from Harvard Divinity School. Again, *Hmm*. These are seemingly significant parallels that have been deliberately pointed out in his biography. I asked Hornsby: Did you want the reader to see you behind Father Dan?

"At first," Hornsby said, "naming him after myself was a little bit of self-trickery, scaffolding I thought I'd eventually remove. It allowed me to identify more closely with a character whose experience didn't necessarily match up with mine—I'm not a priest, I'm 40 years younger than Father Dan—but whose interiority has some overlap. The name just stuck, since about 25 percent of all Catholic priests of vague Irish extraction are named Dan."

"The more I thought about it, the more I liked it," he continued. And then:

In addition to being something of a joke at the expense of autofiction, blurring the lines between the author and the narrator seemed like a way to riff on some of the weird tactics my favorite writers and spiritual thinkers use. Dionysius the Areopagite, the writer whose work forms the core of the apophatic tradition, hid behind a pseudonym; the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* is anonymous, maybe for his own protection; even Dante's pilgrim is both him and not him.

I had to ask what "autofiction" meant. It is a term of postmodern literature, current since the 1980s, that refers to books like *Via Negativa*, in which a novel's protagonist shares the name of its author. This is in contrast to what we often refer to as autobiographical novels, like *David Copperfield*. In other words, autofiction is, by definition, meant to be playful.

Dan the Priest (not the Author)

Father Dan is wearing his clerical collar along the way: in the car, at rest areas and at roadside attractions in Indiana, Illinois, Kansas, Colorado and Montana. He alternates between pastoral counseling and screwing up badly at each of the places where he stops. “Priests creep me out,” one waitress tells him, and they end up having a long conversation about God, miracles and dreams.

There are several moments of self-doubt. “I wasn’t a very good pastor, or parish priest, for that matter,” he reflects. “I was stubborn and prone to prickly megrims.” And later: “I’ve occasionally been grateful not to have been a fisherman in Galilee 2,000-plus years ago. I worry I would have been asked to follow and wouldn’t have been able to. I’m afraid I would’ve just kept on fishing.” I didn’t believe these statements. By then, I already felt I knew the real Father Dan.

Hornsby makes sudden and seamless transitions from plot and narrative to theology or the history of theology. One second, the priest is throwing a blanket, soiled by the coyote in the backseat, into a rest stop trash can, and the next second the priest tells us: “Bede joined the monastery of Monkwearmouth when he was seven. As an oblate.”

Father Dan fasts and experiences visions, most of them inconsequential. He uses words like “thaumaturgical,” which means “wonderworking.” And he quotes Catholic mystics like John of the Cross along with the aforementioned Dionysius, Origen and the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. He suggests at one point that it is his passion for these authors and his following of these texts (Thomas Merton too) that are “at the root of why I no longer live at the rectory, why I now live in a Toyota Camry.” Even if you are a priest, I suppose, to go *via negativa*—what Meister Eckhart called “the wayless way”—is not good for a career.

He is also an eccentric. We hear anecdotes from Father Dan’s experiences in parishes over four decades. For example, he once spent two months at a parish in Crawfordsville, Ind., building a large geodesic dome near the rectory, modelled on a design by Michelangelo, and then used it for personal retreats to escape the other priests.

“The dome wasn’t the first time I’ve tried to give myself a mystical experience,” Father Dan says. There are other, similar attempts to experi-

What the newborn sees while he flies

By Michael Higgins

out of his mother’s Ford Explorer flipping on I-10 after hitting ice: the horrified face of a grandfather, his silver Accord skidding wildly, as he glimpses a baby in a car seat spinning past his windshield;

an eighteen-wheeler braking on slick cement in the expert hands of a trucker who once saved a drunken driver in a swollen stream; IHOP, where travelers devour pancakes, eggs, and bacon

and wait for better weather, and a cook, with a toddler napping at home, works a double shift.

The infant won’t remember reeling images or the cop who freed his anguished mother, bruised yet whole,

or his partner, after a puzzling search in a steady drizzle, plucking the child, flushed but unharmed, from bramble.

Michael Higgins is an editorial consultant in academic medicine and higher education. He is completing a novel, *Crier Moody* in New Orleans in 1991.



Daniel Hornsby
Photo courtesy of author

stows away in his trunk. A day later, he returns her to her father. This causes the priest to reflect: “Hitchhikers are anachronisms. So are priests. I think it’s safe to say hitchhikers have more in common with Jesus than most priests do.” Further, “I think the holiest people are the ones who can leave everything behind in search of a true life.”

On another occasion, he obtains a handgun. He hides it from sight, but becomes increasingly interested in what it does. He likes the feel of it in the palm of his hand. He practices loading and unloading it.

He continues to rehearse mistakes that he made as a pastor. Then he discovers that his old best friend—the priest who left to get married—had once been raped by a priest when they were students together in minor seminary.

By the time Father Dan is ready to release the coyote, near the end of the novel, the animal is too accustomed to his crate and his cans of tuna fish to go. Together, they continue driving on to Montana, where Father Dan fantasizes how he might kill the retired pedophile priest with that gun.

I won’t tell you how it ends.

ence something wonderful, including a bizarre vision while he is on a hermit retreat in the middle of New Mexico that includes nudists running past his campsite.

He has a visionary experience while immersed in the complete darkness of the dome for four days. The precision with which Father Dan details the experience made me wonder if Hornsby had written the scene from personal experience. “Did you try it?” No, Hornsby replied, he didn’t. However, “I loved that there was a way of seeing that came from cultivating darkness. John of the Cross could have made up that study. I didn’t try it myself, though maybe I should one of these days. A silent retreat for the eyes.”

Father Dan’s best friend left the priesthood years ago to get married after falling in love with a Unitarian Universalist minister. Father Dan himself considered leaving the priesthood in 2002, when *The Boston Globe* reported on priestly sexual abuse and coverups on a massive scale. Instead, Father Dan concludes, “I decided it was my role to remain on the edge of the outside of things.” Nevertheless, he begins to ponder a surprise visit to a guilty priest he once knew in Indiana, who is now living in quiet retirement in Montana. That potential visit takes on an increasingly ominous tone as the novel progresses.

The road is Father Dan’s home and his life is now all pilgrimage—and there are misadventures. Stopping at a garish roadside attraction billed as a bottomless pit to hell, he adds a teenage girl, Anna, to his car, accidentally. She

Theology and Fiction

The last few decades have seen a great deal of spiritual reflection in contemporary fiction. Writers like Toni Morrison and Don DeLillo have written novels of the “spiritual but not religious” sort. What distinguishes *Via Negativa* is unique: a protagonist who is actively involved religiously, reflecting on his religious institutions and even wrangling over doctrinal controversies, yet in the context of a novel for the widest possible audience.

Via Negativa is full of theological insight—of the Catholic, *via negativa* sort. For example, Father Dan describes some of his health problems, which resemble those of some of the saints he adores. St. Teresa of Ávila suffered terrible migraines, and St. Francis of Assisi inexplicable ecstasies. Father Dan tells us that he has also had these experiences, part of a mysterious “cocktail of illness, depression, and illumination,” he concludes. Then he offers this: “I think my first religious instincts were partly born in these bizarre headaches and can be traced back to the holes in the world they made. Or showed.”

This reminded me of another novel that I love: Ron Hansen’s *Mariette in Ecstasy*. Like that earlier classic, *Via Negativa* is about a deeply religious life that is without much peace—or, perhaps better, a confusing and conflicting peace. There is nothing nostalgic here, just as there

wasn't in Hansen's beautiful book.

However, Father Dan has become peripatetic like a friar, in contrast to Mariette's cloistered life as a nun. At the end of Chapter Four, Father Dan reflects, "If we want to see God in the world, all we have to do is see the world." I have long wrestled with a similar teaching from Martin Buber's *I and Thou*: "One who truly goes out to meet the world goes out also to God." So I shot the Father Dan quote back to Hornsby and asked him: Is this a *via negativa* teaching, or is it actually the antidote to such teaching? His response:

I turned this paradox over in my head a lot while I was writing the book. The present-absence of a God hiding everywhere. To start, I think this line in particular borrows from something Pseudo-Dionysius says: "God is therefore known in all things and as distinct from all things. He's known through knowledge and through unknowing."

There's always something paradoxical to the wisdom of the negative way. The writers working in an apophatic mode are paradoxical just by way of writing, using experimental language to describe the way in which language can't fully contain God. This feels pretty natural to me, despite the apparent contradiction. Painters and filmmakers are obsessed with darkness, musicians with silence.

As a writer, he is drawn to the limits of language, too: "There's a complementary relationship, a conversation between knowing and not knowing, seeing and darkness, that's part of a process, I think, for the soul to move toward God."

A Vocation to Mystery

I asked Hornsby: "You have two graduate degrees, and your novel seems well-born from both. What is your own vocation, and how is it related to the obtaining of those degrees?" I was fascinated by his answer:

To be completely honest, I'd lost all affection for faith and religion by the time I left Kansas for Michigan to get my MFA. For the reasons you might expect. Writing, and the hungry reading needed to do it, allowed me to cultivate my Catholic affinity for mystery, and I found in the books I loved the same kinds of sparkling and disturbing glimpses into reality that could keep me alive. Eventually I began writing more and

more about people who were navigating the deep Catholic/Christian tradition, and as I read *The Cloud of Unknowing* and the sayings of the Desert Fathers, I found those texts spoke to me directly.

Hornsby said he still feels some anger and resentment that "so much of the tradition had been withheld from me when I needed it, especially the writers who offer a wilder, more mysterious and more demanding God." At Harvard Divinity School, he tells me: "I tried to gain a greater sense of context for some of the texts that I admired, and also cultivate my own spirituality around darkness, silence and the limits of understanding. The book came out of that."

As for his vocation, he told me, "I think that when we make things—whether that's a folk song or a [musical] beat or a poem or a dress—we participate in the same swirling mystery that made us. I want to be a part of that."

There's another much-discussed theological novel from about 15 years ago: Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* is also the story of a pastor in the American Midwest, a retired Congregationalist minister in Iowa. It is a generous, beautiful book, but Hornsby's has a different feel altogether. Religion feels like a shared cultural identity in *Gilead*; in fact, the nostalgia of *Gilead* probably accounts for some of its success with readers. In contrast, the shared experience of *Via Negativa* is mostly, well, negative: clerical sexual abuse scandals and fights in the church over belief and power. But those elements are not why *Via Negativa* succeeds so brilliantly.

There is a rootedness in the desert, not the pastoral, in this novel. There is wisdom, but it comes from the reader's experience of the narrative—the shared pilgrimage of the story—rather than the reflections of age and bygone times. *Via Negativa* is a story for the present and the future. It is also very funny and, frankly, we don't give as many awards to humorous books as we should. It is inconceivable these days that a funny novel would win a major literary prize. But in these ways, I think Hornsby's *Via Negativa* is a sort of anti-*Gilead*.

What's next for the novelist? "The next book is almost the exact opposite of *Via Negativa*, with a truly despicable narrator," he said. "There's an evil biotech company, an indoor forest, punk bands and vampires. Not a lot of theology in this one, though the central startup is named Kenosis." Wink.

Jon M. Sweeney is the author of recent biographies of James Martin, S.J., and Nicholas Black Elk, and of *The Pope's Cat*, a popular series of fiction for children. He lives in Milwaukee.



Caroline Gordon, Lost and Found

REVISITING *THE MALEFACTORS*, A NEGLECTED CATHOLIC NOVEL

By Joshua Hren

Caroline Gordon's significance for the Catholic literary tradition has been so consistently underappreciated that even the sympathetic reader cannot help wondering whether her relative invisibility might be merited. When her importance is recalled at all, Gordon is reckoned as wife of (her handful of a husband) Allen Tate and as an indispensable editor of and mentor to many.

Her contributions in those latter roles were no small matter. Without her rallying praise and exacting advice, Walker Percy might never have gotten out from under his early novel *The Charterhouse*, and *The Moviegoer* might have remained an existentialist essay rather than a National Book Award recipient. When Robert Giroux wavered over Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, Robert Fitzgerald asked Gordon to apply her sharpened sensibilities to the manuscript. Gordon immediately recognized that "[t]his girl is a real novelist" and wrote her a

long letter filled with earnest appreciations ("There are so few Catholics who seem possessed of a literary conscience") and painstaking criticisms that gave the novel a needed transfusion.

In spite of this arc of influence, Gordon's own writing has remained largely unread. Many of her novels, long out of print, have been lost to prospective generations of readers. In the last few years, however, we have seen a small revival for Gordon with the publication of *The Letters of Flannery O'Connor and Caroline Gordon*, edited by Christine Flanagan. In *Good Things Out of Nazareth* (whose title is taken from Gordon's own description of the Southern Catholic literary movement), Gordon plays a major part, even if she is not the protagonist. And, finally, Cluny Media, as part of its sustained effort to bring many "Catholic novels" back into print, just republished two of Gordon's important works: *How to Read a Novel* and *The Malefactors*. Cluny



One of the controlling symbols in Caroline Gordon's *The Malefactors* is a bull. The animal, affiliated with martyrdom, eventually becomes alms for the poor.

Christian Wiediger/Unsplash



THE MALEFACTORS
IS MORE THAN THE
'SPIRITUAL HANGOVER OF
THE LOST GENERATION,'
AS TIME MAGAZINE
CALLED IT. 

is also bringing Gordon's *The Strange Children* back into print soon.

Gordon wrote two novels in the years immediately following her conversion to Catholicism in 1947 at the age of 52. *The Strange Children*, published the same year as *Wise Blood* (1952), was nominated for the National Book Award alongside works by J. D. Salinger and Truman Capote. In *The Malefactors*, which followed four years later, the famous poet Tom Claiborne and his wife Vera inhabit a farm at Blencker's Bridge, headquarters of a lively collection of family and friends and literati. When they turn away from painting and poetry, these bohemians make life "a party every day." As her misanthropic husband takes a mistress, Vera roots herself in bulls—not watching the brutal beauties of Hemingway's matadors, but rather raising prize bovines and serving as "president of the Red Poll Breeder's Association of the Atlantic Seaboard States."

The odds of this "strange book" (to cite the original jacket cover) succeeding were diminished before it reached readers' hands. Gordon had originally dedicated the work to Dorothy Day, who is refracted in the character of Catherine Pollard. Day was astonished to find herself rendered, in Paul Elie's words, "as a holy seductress with a blasphemous past"—including participation in a Black Mass. Although Gordon considered the book "a tribute, an act of devotion," Day wrote "forceful letters" demanding that the dedication "To Dorothy Day," as well as her character's dabbling in Satanism, be excised.

As Bainard Cheney notes, "The decision, just before publication, to eliminate the dedication, gave the publisher cold feet, and the novel was shelved rather than promoted: perhaps a considerable reason for its small sale."

Merits and Demerits in *The Malefactors*

Although *The Malefactors* is more than the "spiritual hangover of the Lost Generation" (as *Time* magazine called it), the novel cannot entirely dodge one critic's charge that it is "tedious." First, the past exerts a persistent influence on the action. As Gordon explained to a friend, the stories of three dead men (the poet Horne Watts, as well as the fathers of Tom and Vera) "unfold chronologically, counterclockwise to the main action." Intentional as the intervening flashbacks may be, at times they stretch on for pages between exchanges of dialogue happening in the present.

Second, the novel introduces the reader to too many characters too quickly. By beginning with a fête at Blencker's Bridge, Gordon provides the material occasion for the massive cast that we meet in the first 30 pages but overwhelms us with convoluted town and familial relations.

Finally, Gordon's attempt to write saints—her efforts to transform Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day into compelling literary figures—makes for some of the weakest characterizations in the book. "She certainly had a hard time making those [Catholic Worker] people believable," O'Connor admitted. As Paul Elie observes, O'Connor would never write a novel like *The Malefactors*, "in which good and thoughtful people discuss the quandaries of religious faith in an earnest and intelligent way. Good people, she believed, are especially hard to write about."

When Gordon's agent approached O'Connor requesting a kind of quid pro quo for Gordon's praise of *Wise Blood* and *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, O'Connor ducked, indicating that "it would be impertinent for me to comment on the book, simply because I have too much to learn from it."

Nonetheless, O'Connor did write a review for *The Bulletin*, a diocesan newspaper in Georgia. Although *The Malefactors* is "profoundly Catholic," O'Connor wrote, she thought it remained "doubtful if it will receive the attention it deserves from the Catholic reader, who is liable to be shocked by the kind of life portrayed in it, or from the reader whose interests are purely secular, for he will regard its outcome as unsound and incredible." The outcome she mentioned is the conversion of Tom Claiborne, his strained but not entirely uncannily turning toward the Catholic faith. This most difficult aspect of the novel is its most complete achievement. O'Connor went so far as to say that it was "undoubtedly the most serious and successful fictional

treatment of conversion by an American writer to date.”

In the novel, Tom rises late on the day of the fête to find Vera out walking her prize bull, the “Red Poll.” At once we behold one of the novel’s controlling symbols (the Red Poll) and we grasp the couple’s de facto separation as he wearily resists each of her requests with the same palpable indifference. He wishes to avoid a visit to his sick aunt’s room. He wants someone else to pick up Vera’s cousin Cynthia from the train station.

When he grudgingly fulfills his wife’s latter request, things get complicated quickly, as Tom and Cynthia’s interactions are charged with indirect but evident erotic tension. Upon seeing Cynthia, Tom has to restrain himself from giving her “Southern kisses,” and he speaks awkwardly of his age (“I’m getting to be an old man”), as though to simultaneously acknowledge and diminish the force of his attraction.

Tom is a difficult man to love, a fact that elevates Vera in the reader’s heart; still, Gordon renders Tom’s own agonies with soft touches that solicit concern for his soul rather than condemnation. His mentor, Horne Watts, committed suicide by leaping from a transatlantic ship, a memory that haunts Tom throughout the novel. His imagination reels with hyperbolic visions of others close to the edge. Seeing Cynthia sitting on a bench, he wonders whether it was “the shadow of a tree trunk or the wavering walls of a chasm? It crept on across the grass and she set her cup down and leaned farther backward, her hands clasped in her lap... Did she know that her bench stood on the lip of a chasm?”

Tom’s early successes with poetry won him laurels and editorships, but he cannot conscientiously ride on the coattails of these youthful victories. In embarrassment, he has “fallen into the habit of deceiving Vera.” Her happiness, he knows, depends on his. Although he has written only a handful of pages of middling poetry in many years, each day Tom asserts that “I’ve got some things to do,” shuts himself into his office and locks the door. The lock is a safeguard against shame; once before, a servant had entered the room to find the poet asleep on the sofa instead of communing at the altar of the Muse.

Portraits in the Attic

Cynthia appears in Tom’s office “in a white dress,” bearing a manila folder filled with poetry. Cognizant of the gulf that separates him from his wife, Tom confesses to Cynthia, “I haven’t been able to write anything for a long time.” She

preys upon this declaration of poetic impotence, indicating how eager she is to have him admire her poems and then trading his confession for a volatile confidence. Although Tom has known that Vera’s father had committed suicide (for it was his wife who found him dead at his easel), Cynthia tells him more: In his last days, Vera’s father painted grotesque pictures of himself, pictures that his daughter had supposedly burned but were almost certainly instead locked up in the Claiborne attic just above them.

Tom and Cynthia ascend into the attic, and just before they open the aluminum container concealing the controversial paintings, Cynthia starts pressing closer to him, whispering his name. He raises his head to find his wife as witness to their proximate infidelities. Vera swears that there are no paintings of her father’s. They are “*Mine!*” she declares, averting “her eyes from his while she contrived the first lie she had ever told him.” It is obvious that Vera’s first falsehood is in part a consequence of Cynthia’s cruelty and of her husband’s own flirtations with extramarital intimacies.

The affair between Tom and Cynthia accelerates. She takes up an apartment in New York City, and he assumes an editorial position at *Parade*, a newly launched literary magazine. As Anne M. Boyle writes in *Strange and Lurid Bloom: A Study of the Fiction of Caroline Gordon*, the author “turns her attention to the salvation of the frustrated, intellectual” male who needs to recover his manhood. Tom’s adultery is a cheap assertion of virility, whereas his assumption of an editorial position is the opposite because it requires daily work. Soon thereafter it “occurred to him that he had spent half his life avoiding offices. He wondered whether it had not been a mistake.” The discipline that his duties demand reorients his restless soul; and, unexpectedly, he experiences “stirrings of his imagination” for the first time in years.

Gordon’s treatment of Tom’s spiritual ascent is marked by novelistic action on multiple levels. Awful as his treatment of Vera is, he does not suffer the downward spiral of a morality tale. His reliance on his wife’s wealth and his simultaneous retreat into and alienation from the land had increased his sloth. Wrong as he is to run off with Cynthia, Tom nonetheless gains dignity from the work he does now out of necessity.

The last third of the novel is leavened with these sorts of ironies and reversals. Instead of ending up in a bohemian hovel, Tom (and perhaps implicitly Cynthia) is offered an ornate

apartment by friends, a habitation so gaudy that, as Molly, a drunken guest, once admits, “*You*—in this apartment! Several people told me about it, but I had to see it to believe it.”

Gordon’s articulation of the paradox is perfect: The ornamentation and lavishness of his borrowed apartment, when revealed, expose Tom’s deepest impoverishment. He has gained the whole world in exchange for a starving soul. “Oh, you have a ten-dollar word for everything!” Molly chides, “But you don’t fool anybody but yourself.... I don’t think you’re really bright at all. If you had been, you wouldn’t have fallen for that little bitch.”

Tom retreats into his familiar shallow solipsism, peddling the platitude that “people our age often discover that their first marriages were a mistake,” but his protest is no match for Cynthia’s sunken countenance, which he is forced to confront once Molly and the party guests exit. “There was an expression on her face that he had never seen before,” as if “somebody you had never seen or heard of were suddenly standing at the window of a house you had supposed unoccupied.” Beyond the pleasantries of poetry and their carnal passion, he does not know Cynthia at all, does not realize that she is using him for his reputation and influence, as a temporary residence from which to launch her writing career.

Into his consciousness comes an intrusion in the form of unexpected words whose source momentarily eludes him: “while all things were in quiet silence and night was in the midst of her course.” The words are from the Bible (Wis 18), where this scene of night silence is succeeded by the following: “Thy almighty word leapt down from heaven from thy royal throne as a fierce conqueror into the midst of the land of destruction.” Tom wrestles with these words until he has heart enough to profess his depravity and Vera’s goodness.

“You and Vera are very different,” he tells Cynthia. “She’s got her faults, but she is a woman....” The scene’s pitch could break glass, and at last Tom’s most obfuscating window, dirtied by impossible smudges, shatters. Although he is unable to tell Cynthia what she is if she is “not a woman,” when she asks him what *he* is (“And you? What are you?”), he can finally look inside and find the right words: “A son of a bitch. That’s what I am. A son of a bitch.”

There is something in the scene of Greek tragedy, of the “reversal” Aristotle describes in his *Poetics*. In *How to Read a Novel*, Gordon explains that such a reversal is caused “by an incident: something which, happening suddenly,

crystalizes the action and hurries it toward Resolution.” Although “there is nothing illogical about it” (and there is nothing illogical in this reversal of *The Malefactors*), “it has in it all the elements of surprise which make a plot...work.” Molly’s disapproval is not entirely unexpected; she has recently refused to invite Cynthia and Tom to a house party. She surprises us, however, by her frothing forthrightness. Tom’s confession had seemed permanently deferred; we should not have been surprised had he withheld it. However, we have been waiting, *hoping* that he could name his sin.

The substantive turning point of Tom’s conversion is found when he arrives at the outskirts of “Mary Farm,” where his wife has gone to tend pigs. Here Gordon reintroduces one of the story’s controlling symbols, the bull. On the literal level, we find that Vera has given her “prize bull” to the Catholic Worker farm. But, as Cheney explains, “he also signifies the brass bull, in which St. Eustace and his family were burned to death.” The animal, affiliated with martyrdom, moves from being the source of Vera’s pride to becoming alms for the poor.

As we follow Vera and her bull to Mary Farm, we may as well be with Mary Flannery O’Connor as with Dorothy Day: The place is ridden with freaks and outcasts, displaced persons and misfits. “One of them,” like O’Connor’s good country person Joy/Hulga, “had a wooden leg.” Tom, moved by these misfits’ willingness to feed him, gives away his cigarettes. He finds Vera tending not the Red Poll but a mentally ill man and a maimed child. “I’m not going to get a divorce,” Vera tells him. As the spouses converse, the child begins to “utter his strangled cry.” Vera has decided not to get a divorce, Tom concludes, because she is going to adopt the child: “The authorities don’t like broken homes, as we laughingly call them.” She could marry again, in a few months, he mockingly tells her. She should just get a divorce.

Vera’s silence and quiet humility harrow him. “I did not know what it would be like to have her look at me and ask nothing,” he muses, and, still hurting, continues to hurt her. His parting words are refined instruments of torture: “Spend the rest of your life working in an orphan asylum,” he says, “or an insane asylum, if that suits you better.... Have a religious conversion!” A sound, “as discordant as the cries that came from the child’s mutilated throat,” escapes her. “I think maybe I have had it!” she shouts back.

The double entendre is just right: Yes, she has had it

with Tom's antics, and yes, she has had that conversion. It is only left for him to follow. In the words of the novel's epigraph, taken from Jacques Maritain, "It is for Adam to interpret the voices that Eve hears."

In his review of *The Malefactors* in *Commonweal* magazine, the Rev. John W. Simmons found in Gordon "a novelist who had not only avoided with her usual consistency the *clichés* of her craft but had come closer" than any other Catholic writer to "encompassing the elusive miracle" of rendering conversion in an artistically arresting way without cheapening either nature or grace.

As Tom huffs off, he runs into a priest who is also a recovering alcoholic. Father suggests that Tom stay on the farm, let things cool a bit and lend the workers a hand. But Tom won't have it; in a final, barely controlled assertion of his arrogance, he refuses to stay in the "men's dormitory," which, the priest tells him, is "the old chicken house." Tom searches out Catherine Pollard and finds her in St. Eustace chapel. Pollard, it turns out, has been praying for him since "soon after George called," as someone told Catherine that Tom had gone to see Vera. "I wish I could have seen you before you went," she tells him.

When Tom objects that neither he nor Vera is Catholic, Catherine corrects him: "Surely you know that Vera is in the Church. She was baptized when she was a child." No, he says, he did not know that. "I didn't know anything." Tom turns to kiss her cheek, a reversal of the libidinal kisses he wished to plant on Cynthia when he first picked her up at the train station, but Catherine turns her head so that his mouth "fell warm on her mouth."

The kiss of peace sealed, he hastens to Mary Farm, where "he could sleep in the hay if there was no bed. He could be sitting there on the bench with the other bums when she came down in the morning." The allusion to Christ's parable of the prodigal is plain. It works on the reader both literally and allusively—efficiently on both levels—because Gordon has established the agrarian backdrop from page one. Also here, in these final lines, is a brushstroke of Bethlehem. He could, like Christ, be born in the hay.

Discussing what is necessary for the emergence of great artists and the perfection of all artistic aims, Maritain enunciates the "absolutely indispensable maintenance of a sufficiently high level of culture in the average of artists and artisans." It would be absurd, he says, to ask every one of these artists to be an "original genius." The greatest writers often rely on lesser ones to reach the heights of their improvements.

Gordon may not have been a writer of genius, but in addition to being a saving mentor she was a Catholic novelist of considerable talent. She appears on the scene, just now, like a "Lost Generation" matador with an impressive *muleta*—that stick-hung cloth bullfighters bring out for the last third of the match. Her red cloth is rich with the threads of so many masters: Faulkner and Flaubert, James Joyce and Henry James. But, like Flannery, we have much to learn from her, not least the graceful way by which she causes the lost creature to slouch back to Bethlehem to be born.

Joshua Hren is founder and editor of *Wiseblood Books*, co-founder of the Honors College at Belmont Abbey and co-founder of the new low-residency Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing at the University of St. Thomas in Houston. His books include the story collections *This Our Exile* and *In the Wine Press*, as well as the forthcoming *How to Read (and Write) Like a Catholic*.



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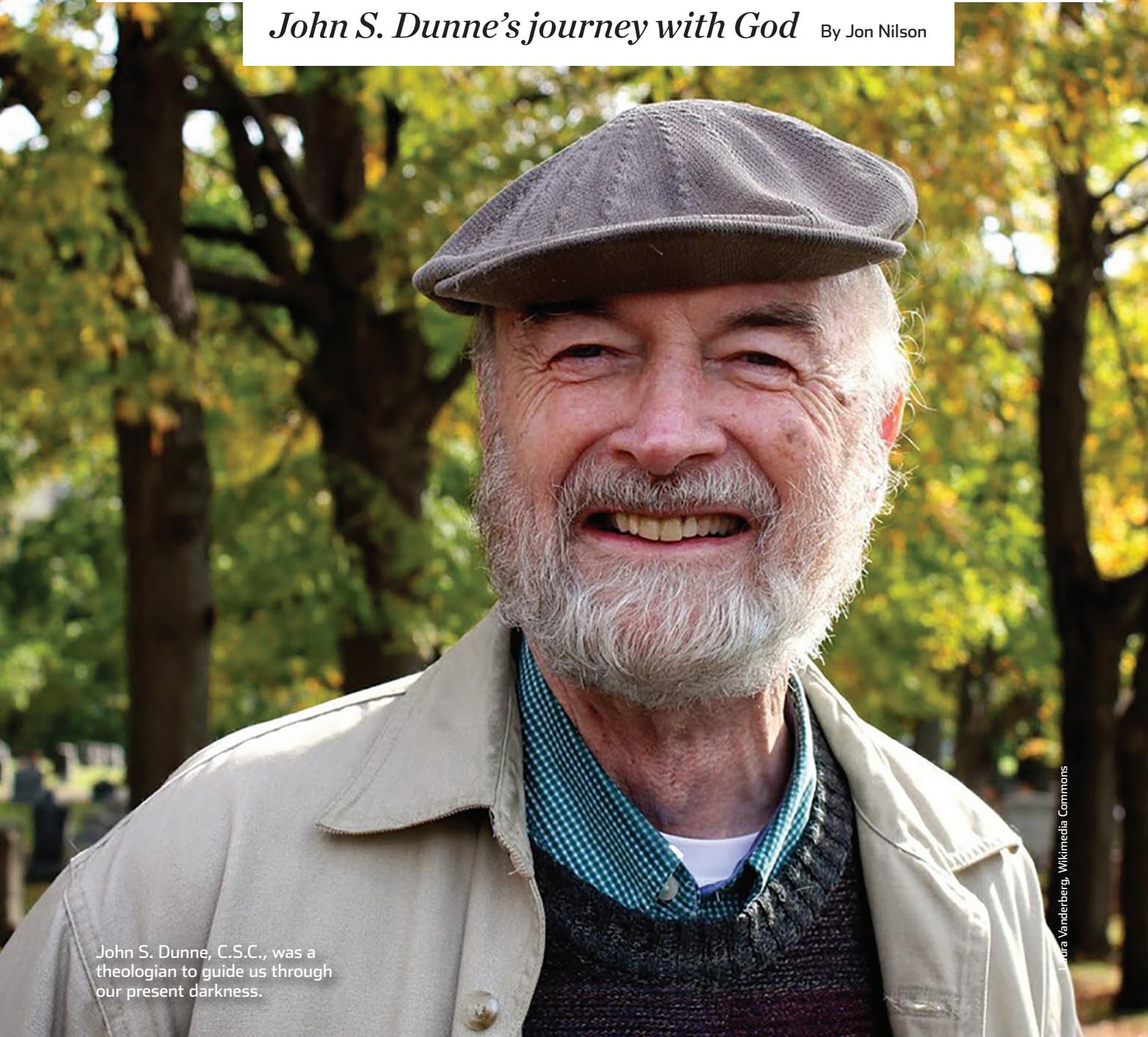
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A LIFE FOR OUR TIME

John S. Dunne's journey with God By Jon Nilson



John S. Dunne, C.S.C., was a theologian to guide us through our present darkness.

Laura Vanderberg, Wikimedia Commons

Before he died in November 2013, friends of John S. Dunne, C.S.C., gathered around his bedside. With him and for him, we prayed in words that he had composed for himself:

*O Lord, go with me
And be my guide,
In my most need
Be by my side:
If you are guiding me
I shall not want,
If you are guarding me
I shall not fear,
Though I am walking
In the valley of the shadow
Of my dying,
You are walking with me,
And when I am not
You will have taken me.*

Dunne spent his life teaching and writing to help others experience what he had experienced. His vocation and that of St. Augustine were similar. Just as Augustine had aimed “to kindle the light of things eternal in human hearts no longer supported by temporal institutions which had seemed eternal but which were crashing on all sides,” says Martin Versfeld, so did Dunne. Thinking of contemplation as “love’s mind,” he said, “that is essentially the work of love’s mind also in our own times. Now too love’s mind has ‘to rekindle hearts in a world that grows chill.’” He is a theologian to guide us through our present darkness.

Newsweek singled Dunne out as a future giant in theology when his third book, *The Way of All the Earth: Experiments in Truth and Religion*, was published in 1972. By 2013, however, he had become nearly invisible, even after writing 17 more books. He did not contribute to theological journals nor present papers at conventions and conferences. Augustine and Aquinas are present throughout his books, but contemporary theologians are almost complete-

ly absent. When Dunne learned that the Rev. Peter Phan, the prolific and honored former president of the Catholic Theological Society of America, had praised his latest book, he replied, in all innocence, “Who is Peter Phan?”

John Dunne was a Catholic priest, a member of the Congregation of the Holy Cross. He studied at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome under one of the 20th century’s greatest theologians, Bernard Lonergan, S.J. He became a professor at the University of Notre Dame and planned to write a contemporary version of Augustine’s monumental *City of God*. Yet he could not make any headway on it. He described the work as “like piling up lumber.” It was the occupational hazard of theologians who, as Karl Rahner, S.J., put it, “can acquire in theology a very great skill in talking and perhaps have not really understood from the depths of our existence what we are talking about.”

Eventually he decided to abandon this *City of God* project to face what he had to: death. Not just the certainty of his own, but the human response to it. As he explained, “I had reached age 30 and had become aware of my own mortality. And so I came in the end to formulate the question, ‘If I must someday die, what can I do to satisfy my desire to live?’” His first book, *The City of the Gods: A Study in Myth and Mortality* (1965), explored how past cultures and civilizations dealt with death. Afterwards, death remained the key and central issue throughout his life and writing. The last sentence of his last (posthumous) book, *Dark Light of Love* (2014), is: “I choose to live towards eternal life.”

TEACHER OF TRUTH

He taught and wrote about his life in ways that would help his students and readers understand the truth of their own. He wanted to show how a life, seemingly full of “sound and fury, signifying nothing,” may become “a journey with God in time,” as he titled his 2003 autobiography. To live such a life is to walk with God into the darkness of death itself, yet never unloved, never abandoned.

Ordinary prose could not express what he discovered

The last sentence of Dunne's last book is: 'I choose to live towards eternal life.'

A CHRONICLER OF LIFE'S JOURNEY

Later, Dunne was to say, "I do not fully know what I am doing until the retracing of steps in the last chapter," echoing E. L. Doctorow's analogy between writing a novel and driving at night: You can see only as far as your headlights, but you can make your whole journey that way. Each of Dunne's books enacts and expresses what he learned during a stage on the road of his own life's journey. For him, there was little point to knowing the history of doctrine or the thought of Augustine, Aquinas, Kierkegaard, Heidegger or Rahner if one remained a stranger to oneself. His readers encounter these and other great authors in Dunne's books, but there is no scholarly discussion of their importance.

Dunne did not do research to gather data for his hypotheses or evidence for his claims. Research was a search for wisdom. For him, as for Kafka, a book should be "the axe for the frozen sea within us." It only becomes an axe, Dunne realized, when you read to discover its meaning for you at this stage in your own journey.

He often found that meaning encapsulized in a few words. For example, in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, he was struck by four phrases that he considered "thoughts essential to a journey in time": "things are meant," "there are signs," "the heart speaks," "there is a way." These four appear again and again throughout his later books. They reminded him to pay attention to the events of his life, to learn how to respond.

While these spoke to Dunne, they may not speak to everyone. Yet the kindled heart will find the particular guidance it needs. (Mary Oliver's "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" is nearly sacred for many people.) Yet guidance comes only to those who live by insight, not by some predetermined life plan. He realized that certitude is self-defeating. Trying to live in certitude only makes one more uncertain, restless and bored. Life becomes a "deadly clear path," not an adventure. "Be led by insights," he had exclaimed, "not arguments!"

COMMUNICATING MYSTICISM

Reading Dunne rightly requires preparation and cooperation. In the preface to *The City of the Gods*, he invited the reader of this book to join him "in tracing these various solutions to the problem of death." In *A Search for God in Time and Memory* (1969), he asked his readers first to undertake "the kind of self-examination that would go into an autobiography or a personal creed." When a friend

in looking, in asking, "What can I do to satisfy my desire to live?" Dunne instead wrote and lectured mainly in images and metaphors. He often quoted Karl Polanyi's saying, "We can know more than we can tell." A persistent, skeptical student once challenged him about the evidence for his statements. An exasperated Dunne replied, "You are trying to understand what I say as an argument. Arguments! Who is ever convinced by argument? Be led by insights, not arguments."

He answered questions about his method with help from Descartes, noting that he began with one certainty, *I am*, but Dunne's own method began with two certainties: *I am* and *I will die*. Facing death uncovered the fundamental and frightening loneliness of being human. We can try to evade death's presence through distractions, through the stimulation of our media-soaked culture, but we cannot escape it in boundary situations like guilt, failure, suffering and death. In these situations, two "roads" diverge.

Two roads. One is the road of resignation, living with a grim acceptance of loneliness. The other is "the mystic road of love" (the title of his 12th book) or "the road of the heart's desire" (the title of his 14th). The first step on that second road is hope for fulfillment that generates enthusiasm, energy and action. Dunne called this hope "kindling of the heart." He borrowed phrases from Isak Dinesen to describe it: "to feel in oneself an excess of strength" and "to know for certain you are doing the will of God."

Kindling of the heart changes life. It alchemizes a resentful endurance into a spiritual adventure. This experience will be different for each of us, but its basic pattern is the shift from impasse and resignation to the realization that "with God all things are possible." It is the gift that African-American spirituality proclaims and praises: "God can make a way out of no way!"

complained that she could not understand his writing, he said, “You don’t just read it straight through. You read it slowly, one paragraph at a time, reflecting on your own life.”

In that sense, reading Dunne is walking in the darkness of one’s own life with a reliable guide. This guide does not turn on a floodlight to banish the darkness. There are no such lights. He has light enough, though, to show you how to take your next step. Journeying with Dunne as a guide, one can learn that the heart’s deepest desire is for God, the God who is also your companion. It is to verify Augustine’s famous prayer: “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

Dunne’s influence on his friends and students was and remains immense, but he has little influence on theologians working today. True, he did little to promote his own work, but the conventional distinction between academic, pastoral and spiritual theology is also to blame for his near invisibility. His books were often categorized as “spirituality,” “spiritual life” or “contemplation,” not theology. If he is known simply as a spiritual writer, not a theologian, some who like his particular style will read him, and others may safely ignore what he has to offer. Dunne is writing authentic theology, however, and one urgently necessary for what he called “the dark times in which we live.”

Rahner, arguably the most influential and productive theologian of the 20th century, saw these times coming: “The devout Christian of the future will either be a ‘mystic,’ one who has ‘experienced’ something, or he will cease to be anything at all.” The secular, empirical and technocratic culture of Europe and North America would make Christianity unintelligible and incredible to many, though they may have been raised as Christians. Worse, the revelations of sexual abuse and the political co-opting of white evangelicals have even made Christianity repulsive to millions.

John Dunne was a mystic, one of those devout Christians of the future. He had “experienced something.” He devoted his teaching and writing to helping others to experience that something as well.

FOUNDATIONS

Loneragan once told Dunne that one should not replicate the twists and turns of one’s own learning for students and readers. Instead, one should present the matter in some order, from the simple to the complex, or from the most important to the least. But, Dunne thought, why not trace the *how*, as well as the *what*, of your discoveries? Why not

offer your own journey as a paradigm of a search for God in time and memory? As he did this, Dunne became a specialist in an area of theology that Lonergan would later call “foundations.” He was not consciously implementing Lonergan’s program in his own work; he developed his unique method and style on his own. Yet we see that Lonergan’s description of foundations is the best way to appreciate Dunne’s achievement as a theologian.

“Foundations” does not refer to a set of basic principles or axioms from which theologians deduce their knowledge. Nor is it a set of instructions that any ignoramus can follow to think theologically. It is the reality of the theologian who is caught up in what Lonergan called “total surrender to the demands of the human spirit: be attentive, be intelligent, be reasonable, be responsible, be in love.” By *love* here, Lonergan means commitment to one’s “ultimate concern,” such as the hunger for God, the thirst for truth, devotion to duty or the struggle for justice. This commitment promotes the attentiveness, intelligence, reasonableness and responsibility that expand and deepen one’s knowing and loving. Lonergan calls this commitment conversion.

“The demands of the human spirit” are inherent demands, not alien or imposed from without. Everyone should recognize and follow them, but not everyone is a theologian. Those who make those demands central to their work are theologians who specialize in foundations. They study the dynamics of conversion and the transformations of self that it produces. They communicate the perspectives and insights that arise from their study.

Because these demands are inherent, these theologians must become familiar with them by interrogating their own experience. This was Dunne’s life’s work. Quoting Mary Stewart’s Merlin trilogy, he said, “I have learned to look close at most things that come my way.” As he did, his life became a spiritual adventure, a journey in time with God as his companion on the way, the road of the heart’s desire and the mystic road of love.

He found that self-knowledge and knowledge of God grow together, and he often prayed with Augustine, “May I know myself, may I know you.” Knowing God, he learned, is more an awareness than an encounter, an awareness that cannot be expressed in ordinary expository prose. He had to find metaphors and images for it. Later, when these metaphors and images fell short, too, he turned to music. *Deep Rhythm and the Riddle of Eternal Life* (2008) was even published with a CD of his own compositions.

“Only God enters the soul,” Dunne quoted Aquinas. God alone could give exactly what he needed and desired. The kindling of his heart, the illuminating of his mind and “most things that come my way” were evidence of his being known and loved. Experienced again and again, they revealed God as his companion on his journey in time. Yet they eventually revealed more.

The kindling and illuminating pointed beyond companionship to “indwelling,” the presence of Christ within. His heart was kindled with energy and strength not his own. His mind was illumined with insight and vision not his own. So his sense of personal autonomy and separation gradually gave way to the sense of himself as fundamentally open to and constituted by Christ.

For Dunne, to be a Christian is to enter into and to share Jesus’ relationship to the God who is “My father and your father, your God and my God” (Jn 20:17). Again and again in his later books, he quoted Jesus’ words: “You in me and I in them” (Jn 17:23). Rahner saw this as “the heart of the Christian conception of reality.” Dunne calls it “the essence of Christianity,” our life’s deepest truth. As he later put it, “Christ dwells in you as you” and “Christ is the ownmost self of the Christian.”

To join Dunne on “the mystic road of love,” “the road of the heart’s desire,” is to experience a kindling of the heart like the kindling once felt on the road to Emmaus. Cleopas and his friend had invited a stranger to walk with them. As they listened to the stranger speak to their sadness and loss, they felt their hearts burning within them (Lk 24:32). Like John Dunne, we know we are still walking in the valley of the shadow of our dying. Yet as we read him and heed him, we may also feel peace, courage and joy in knowing Who is walking with us.

Jon Nilson is professor emeritus of theology at Loyola University Chicago and a former president of the Catholic Theological Society of America.

Books by John S. Dunne, C.S.C.

1965 *The City of the Gods: A Study in Myth and Mortality*

1969 *A Search for God in Time and Memory*

1972 *The Way of All the Earth: Experiments in Truth and Religion*

1973 *Time and Myth: A Meditation on Storytelling as an Exploration of Life and Death*

1978 *The Reasons of the Heart: A Journey into Solitude and Back Again into the Human Circle*

1982 *The Church of the Poor Devil: Reflections on a Riverboat Voyage and a Spiritual Journey*

1985 *The House of Wisdom: A Pilgrimage*

1987 *The Homing Spirit: A Pilgrimage of the Mind, of the Heart, of the Soul*

1991 *The Peace of the Present: An Unviolent Way of Life*

1993 *Love’s Mind: An Essay on Contemplative Life*

1996 *The Music of Time: Words and Music and Spiritual Friendship*

1999 *The Mystic Road of Love*

2000 *Reading the Gospel*

2002 *The Road of the Heart’s Desire: An Essay on the Cycles of Story and Song*

2003 *A Journey With God in Time: A Spiritual Quest*

2006 *A Vision Quest*

2008 *Deep Rhythm and the Riddle of Eternal Life*

2010 *The Circle Dance of Time*

2012 *Eternal Consciousness*

2014 *Dark Light of Love*

"Brilliant."
—Ron Hansen



O DEATH, *Where is thy sting?*

A MEDITATION ON SUFFERING

JOE HOOVER



Creatively weaving together meditations on the poor of El Salvador, the Toronto L'Arche community, the attacks of September 11, and various other

encounters, Hoover confronts, denies, and reclaims theology, philosophy, art, and personal stories to grapple with the eternal, vexing question of the presence of God in human suffering.

Joe Hoover, SJ, is a Jesuit brother working as a playwright and actor, as well as poetry editor at America Media. He is from Omaha, attended Marquette University, and lives in a Jesuit community in Brooklyn.

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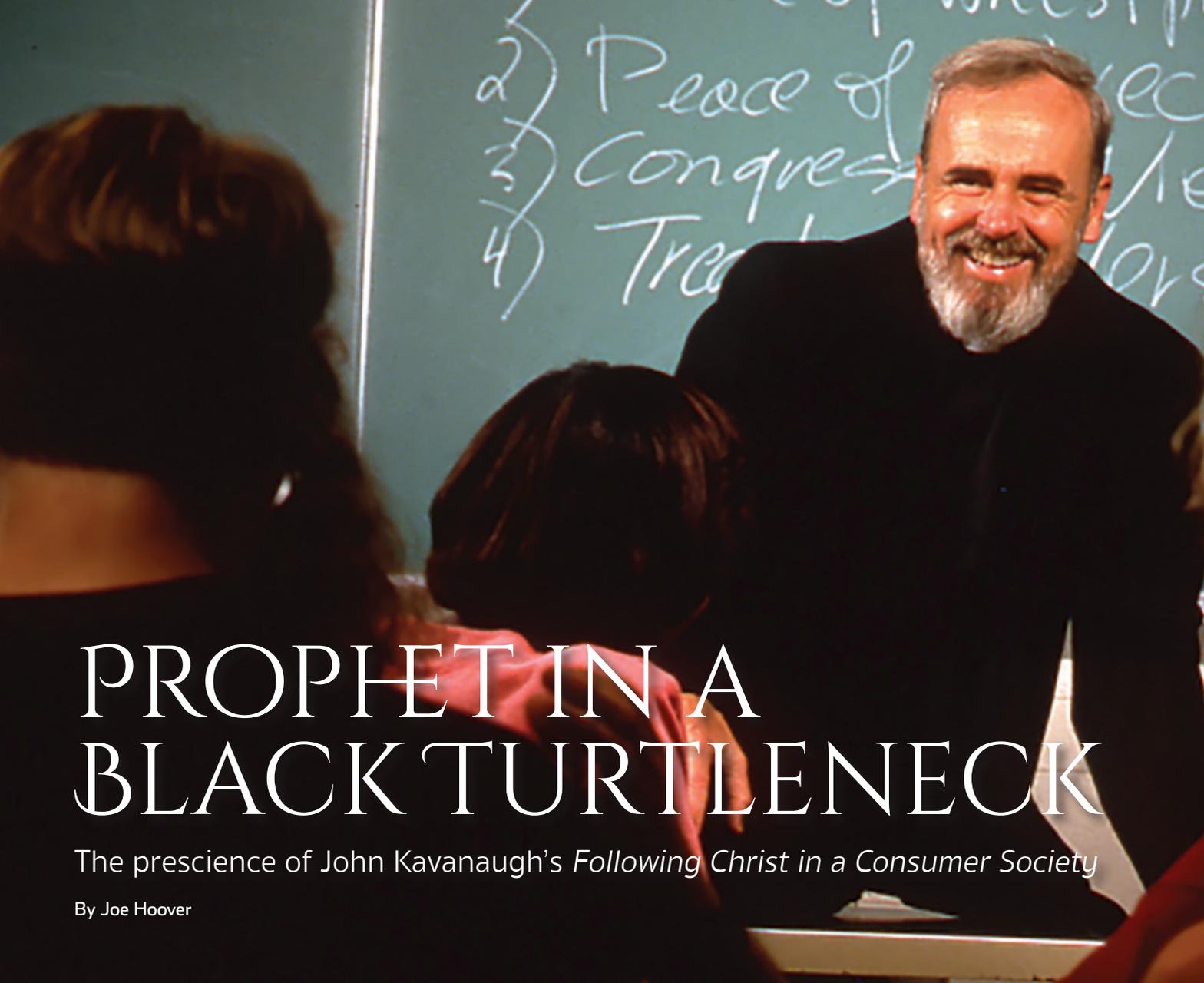
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PROPHET IN A BLACK TURTLENECK

The prescience of John Kavanaugh's *Following Christ in a Consumer Society*

By Joe Hoover

Let's say you had never heard that there was such a thing as a Jesuit, or the Catholic faith for that matter, or philosophy, or theology, or the Man-God Jesus Christ, or moody scriptural folk music, or Madison Avenue or the very concept of the objectification of the human person via the invisible choking reeds arising from the swamplands of unbridled free-market capitalist imperialism. Let's say you have never even heard the name Kavanaugh.

If you had never heard of any of these things, and you were in line for a Ferris wheel, and John Kavanaugh, S.J., was in the same Ferris wheel line, you would nevertheless likely be compelled to go up to this person you didn't know at all, and say:

Hey, Father Kavanaugh, S.J., while we're waiting for our turns on the Ferris wheel, can you give me a brief, reasonable but impassioned disquisition on how the blinding brilliance of Madison Avenue, the bloodthirst of Lockheed-Martin, the humanocultural delusions lurking beneath Western free-choice hyperindividualism and the crushing austerity policies of the post-Reagan 40-year American economic death spiral all congealed to so twist and reconfigure American souls that it turns people into, I don't know, *things that exist merely to be bought and sold*, written off as utterly disposable?

And then, Father Kavanaugh, could you add

John Kavanaugh, S.J., was an esteemed scholar and beloved professor of philosophy and medical ethics at St. Louis University for 36 years.

that when you really consider all sides of the matter, you have to admit, as open-minded, diversity-inclined and religiously un-bullheaded as you are, that the only truly effective countervailing force to all that clawing and scratching American capitalist toxicity is Jesus Christ, and us trying to be how he was.

And then, Father K, maybe bookend it with a few notes from a gently weeping guitar?

It is likely that Kavanaugh would say, crushing a cigarette underfoot and looking at you as if you were the only person on the boardwalk that day, “absolutely,” and start reciting by memory from *Following Christ in a Consumer Society*.

Black turtleneck under a light gray summerweight blazer, thin black beard, dark eyes lively and kind but pitted with the capacity for blistering socio-economic outrage, leafing through Aristotle, The Wall Street Journal or The St. Louis Post-Dispatch style section to glean

ammunition for his cause, John Kavanaugh looked like what you think a Jesuit would look like, even if you had no idea what a Jesuit should look like. He also wrote the book that you think a Jesuit would write, even if you had no idea that such a book ought to be written.

Kavanaugh was an esteemed scholar and beloved professor of philosophy and medical ethics at St. Louis University for 36 years (as well as a parish priest, social activist, musician and **America** columnist), until his death in 2012. His seminal book, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society*, published by Orbis Books in 1981 and later translated into several languages and revised and reissued in 1991 and 2006, has been taught in Jesuit high schools and colleges, as well as numerous other Catholic institutions across the

country in the 40 years since it was released. Its influence has been immeasurable.

Kavanaugh’s thesis in *Following Christ* is, in a way, fairly simple: We become what we do, or what is done to us. He lashed his critique of an all-encompassing American capitalist culture, where everything and everyone has a price, at two philosophical poles: the “commodity form” and the “personal form.” Humans relate to one other as mechanistic utilitarian functionaries—or as objects of love, vulnerability and grace.

The commodity form is, to his mind, all but deadly. “If you are unproductive, you are useless, worthless,” he writes. “You are unwanted, whether you be one of the economically poor, a starving Bengali, a death-row criminal, or a bothersome five-month fetus.”

One of his philosophical arguing points was Karl Marx’s description of the “fetishism of commodities.” “We relate to [things] as if they were our gods,” Kavanaugh writes, “giving us meaning, purpose, and a reason for living.” We at some point began relating to each other as if we were merely objects too.

This Marxist analysis coheres with one of Kavanaugh’s other lodestars, Pope John Paul II. In the 25th-anniversary edition of *Following Christ*, Kavanaugh quotes the pope’s 1990 homily to workers in Monterrey, Mexico, as a crystallization of his book’s fundamental argument. While acknowledging the benefits of free markets, the same pope who helped bring down totalitarian communism declared, “We cannot, however, be silent about the defects of an economic system which...subordinates the person to capital in a way which, without taking personal dignity into account, considers him or her to be only a gear in production’s mammoth machine.”

When surveying American culture, Kavanaugh reserves a generous portion of barely disguised disgust for the advertising industry. For him, the culture of incessant marketing—and being marketed to—chisels its participants into the commodity form with unmatched alacrity. Kavanaugh calls this industry “a nationally institutionalized deceit—a drumming up of false needs and the huckstering of false promises. ‘Datsun saves, sets you free.’ ‘Buick is something to believe in.’ ‘I’m looking for a meaningful relationship and I found it at Saks Fifth Avenue.’ ‘Coke is the Real Thing.’” (Clearly these are from the 1981 edition.) This particular American enterprise causes papier-mâché cathedrals to blossom into our souls. “While religion has become secularized,” he writes, “buying and consuming

Photo courtesy of the Jesuit Archives & Research Center

Kavanaugh's thesis is fairly simple: We become what we do, or what is done to us. ●●

have become vehicles for experiencing the sacred. Eternity is found in Calvin Klein bottles. Infinity in a Japanese automobile.”

Kavanaugh's passionate criticism was also personal. “In my own discussions with parents and their children concerning the problem of family stress and fragmentation,” he writes, “I know of no other force so pervasive, so strong, and so seductive as the consumer ideology of capitalism, its fascination for endless accumulation, extended working hours, the drumming up of novel need fulfillments....”

His arguments are not without nuance. Being productive or marketable, or “consuming,” Kavanaugh writes, are not wrong in and of themselves. But things go off the rails when, as he puts it, “the relation of persons to production is reversed, when the instrumentalities become the measure of the persons.”

It is not his project, he tells us, to declare that capitalism is intrinsically anti-Christian. But, he says, if capitalism “is not subjected to standards of a value system or vision of humanity outside of its own criteria for truth value, usefulness and success, it is inherently destructive of humanity and *a fortiori* systematically opposed to Christianity.”

In his book, his classes, public lectures and preaching, John Kavanaugh occupied a space few other cultural critics occupied; he operated from an unyielding worldview that had the potential to basically tick off pretty much everyone. “There is a connection between ‘clean’ and precise surgical bombings and our antiseptic delivery rooms, both of which administer a so-called sanitized death,” he writes. “There is a web of meaning which attaches street violence to the degradation of women in the media and the heartless neglect of our children. There is a relationship between the attitude that millions in the Third World might be better off dead and our new technologies of euthanasia and assisted suicide for those who have ‘no meaning’ or no ‘quality’ of life.”

He never subsumes all of these social ills under the banner of “life issues” as some Christians do today, turning the phrase “pro-life” into such a catch-all basin of social critique that it becomes almost politically meaningless.

Kavanaugh's analysis is both more specific and deeper.

For Kavanaugh, the only true response to our consumer culture is the life of Christ: inviting, healing, self-sacrificing, loving; the perfect embodiment of the “personal form.” Kavanaugh takes the reader through a comprehensive tour of Scripture, prayer, the sacraments and the witness of religious and lay communal life. He sketches a master narrative, practically a catechism unto itself, of how radically following Christ opposes and transforms everything that materialism and consumerism does to us.

The beating heart of Kavanaugh's passion for Christ is his discussion of “The Final Judgment” in Mt 25:37-40. “When did we see you hungry and feed you Lord? ‘When you fed the least of these.’” Kavanaugh writes:

Marx in his wildest dreams, humanists in their most articulate flights, secularists in their most vaunted claims, cannot approach the revolutionary, the humanistic reaches of this statement. Nowhere has human dignity been more highly exalted. The least human person—the dregs, the poorest, the least attractive...is identified with Jesus himself, identified with God himself.

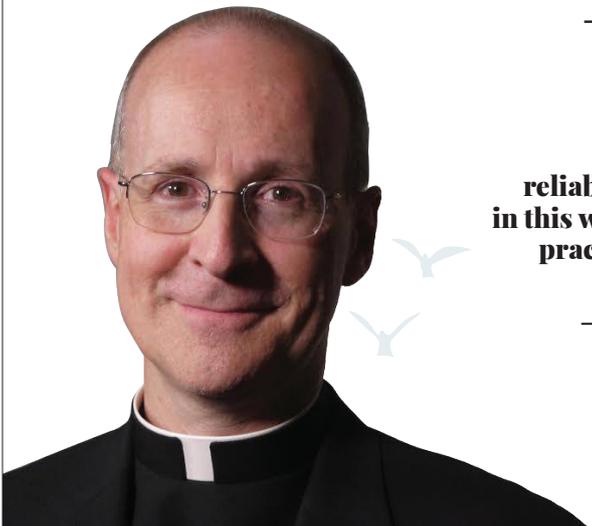
The precise look and feel of American-style violence, poverty and dehumanization changes year to year; the racial and economic disparities between who has lived and who has died in this pandemic are only the latest example. The location of the ad industry continues to shift and mutate too: We carry billboards in our pockets, activate marketing platforms just by walking around our cities and towns. Someone is listening for relevant consumer info through a tiny microphone while you talk to that stranger in line. Nevertheless, capitalism is still capitalism, and the witness of Christ is still the witness of Christ. This book will never go out of style.

Joe Hoover, S.J., is *America's poetry editor*.

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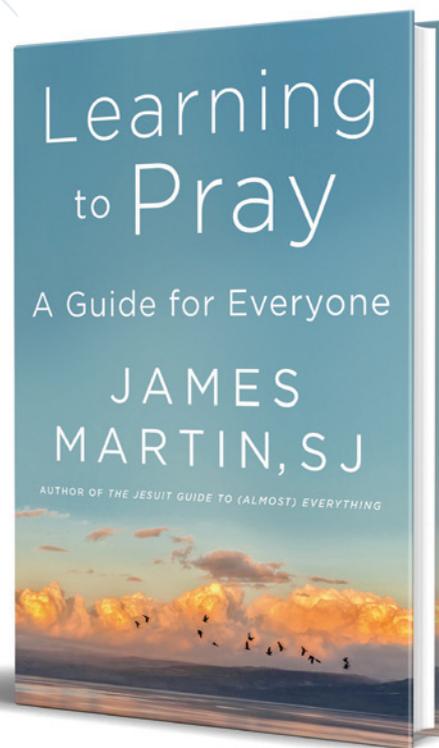
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The True Cost of Real Friendship

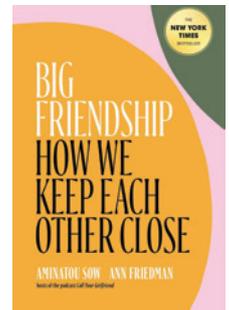
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Big Friendship, by Aminatou Sow and Ann Friedman, is ultimately a defense of sacrificial friendship.

Big Friendship
How We Keep Each Other Close
By Aminatou Sow and Ann Friedman
Simon & Schuster
251p \$26



There is a way of praising friendships that unintentionally undermines them. We often picture friendship as our refuge—romantic relationships bring drama, work brings hassle, family is chaos, but with friends you can relax. You're understood. Friendship is "The Golden Girls," where every tiny comic tiff is resolved by the end of the half-hour. Friendship is sweet because friendship is easy. Friendship is safe, because friendship is too small to really hurt you.

This is not the only Christian model for friendship. It isn't even the most obvious Christian model. The greatest friendships in the Bible are sites of sacrifice. Jonathan, having made a covenant of friendship with David, gladly sacrifices personal safety, his relationship with his father and the kingship. Jesus identifies friendship with discipleship and with his own sacrifice for us on the cross, in Jn 15:13-15 (of course it's in John, the Gospel of the "beloved disciple"): "No one has greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you." That model, in which friendship can be the site of our sanctification *because* it is a site of sacrifice, animates much of St. Aelred's dialogues, *Spiritual Friendship*. For Aelred, friendship is sweet (he himself was called a "honeycomb" because of his tenderness toward his monks) but it also requires painful honesty, loyalty in spite of faults and selfless love.

As contemporary secular writers notice how attenuated our concept of friendship has become and look for ways to build lives where friendship is central, they are also re-discovering the sacrifices common to deep friendships. A new book, *Big Friendship: How We Keep Each Other Close*, by Aminatou Sow and Ann Friedman, gives one of the best defenses of sacrificial friendship I have read in a long time.

Sow and Friedman ditched the comfort-food ideal of friendship long ago. They can write honestly about the beauties of friendship because they have also confronted some of its pain. Much of the book discusses how friends "stretch" you—and stretching hurts as it strengthens. In a glossy, hashtaggy voice, Sow and Friedman describe what it is like to live friendship for better *and* for worse. They

sometimes sound like Insta influencers, but their questions go beyond the advice-column staples ("How can I make friends in my 30s?") into cultural critique of the marginal role friendship plays in our institutions and imaginations: "It can be extremely hard to figure out the right amount of growth and sacrifice to be devoting to a friendship, because we're not taught that friends are worth stretching for at all."

Sow and Friedman are *echt* millennials. They started "the first culturally relevant policy nerd blog." Their envisioned reader relates to dismissive references to the Eucharist (Friedman was raised Catholic) and thrills to the words of "This American Life." But beyond the blank, unholy podcast of it all, being millennials means they are attuned to the economic pressures on modern friendship. They know how crucial a friend's love and admiration is when unemployment makes you feel worthless. They found their own friendship strained by work and the distance they had to move to find work; they know they were only able to repair their bond because they had more money and leisure than many in their generation.

Big Friendship opens with this friendship—once so close that they got matching tattoos of interlocking circles—already on the rocks. Sow and Friedman have booked a spa weekend together in the hopes that tandem mud baths will rekindle that BFF spark. When the weekend fails, the pair go to actual couples therapy for their friendship.

It was so easy at the start! St. Aelred distinguishes between "carnal" and "spiritual" friendship, but he understood that at least at the beginning, most of us mingle the two. Sow and Friedman bonded over trashy TV and cute handbags, but they also shaped one another in deeper ways: Together they learned to comfort, to encourage, to listen, to forgive and to seek forgiveness. They became "inextricable."

Sow and Friedman were there for one another through mourning and chronic illness. The love and understanding they offered one another helped them learn what to look for in romantic relationships. They had keys to each other's



Friendships have the advantage that, unlike marriage, they are not exclusive. 🍯🍯

apartments. They were each other's emergency contact.

Much of the language they had for this *inextricability* was borrowed from romantic partnerships: "We gave wedding gifts jointly, signed, 'Love, the Sow-Friedmans.'" Partly this is just because many forms of love resemble one another. Sow and Friedman even had their own limerence, the early period of obsessive infatuation that the lovestruck sometimes suffer. But partly we struggle for ways to explain the depth of a "big friendship" because these relationships have been pushed out of the public sphere: Friendship is for children; but once you can reach the YA shelves, messy love triangles are where it's at.

Sow's experience of chronic illness exposes some of the features of modern friendship that make it at once vulnerable and resilient. Friedman couldn't be there for her physically because she had taken a job on the other side of the country. She sent care packages and urged Sow to video chat, but as Sow felt helpless in the face of pain, Friedman faced her own helplessness against distance. When I talk to people who are seeking to build lives centered on friendship, this is one of the central concerns they raise: *What if one of us has to move?* Most friendships will not function as an economic unit, and so friends are more likely than spouses to be separated by distance.

But friendships have the advantage that, unlike marriage, they are not exclusive. Some people will always have one BFF, but others will be able to bring several people into an equal intimacy. When Friedman could not be at Sow's bedside, Sow's friend Shani could; their relationship too seems familial. In the acknowledgments Sow writes, to Shani, "I know that you are my home."

Sow and Friedman urge friends to support one another's other friendships. Supporting the "friendweb" trains you to put your friend's needs first, not your own insecurity

or fear. Friedman longed to be with Sow when she was hospitalized—but instead she learned to be grateful that others could take care of the woman she loved.

Their most Insta-friendly term is "Shine Theory": "I don't shine if you don't shine." This phrase is their proverb against envy. It is their version of the motto of America's first Black women's club, the National Association of Colored Women, "Lifting as we climb." And it is also a declaration that friendships strengthen our other commitments and loves: "Without friends, it's much harder to get through periods of family transition, like the death of a parent, the arrival of a baby, or an estrangement from a sibling." Against the idea that we have limited resources to spend on love, they argue that our friends make it possible for us to give more in all the other areas of our lives.

If friendship *can* be so life-sustaining, how did it become so limited and marginal? Sow and Friedman talk to the historian Stephanie Coontz, who says that friendship slowly came to seem like a threat to the emerging ideal of "companionate marriage." Basically, if your husband is supposed to be your best friend, your BFF becomes a distraction. And as Western cultures increasingly identified intimacy with sexuality, all same-sex love started to look too much like homosexuality. Coontz is right that homophobia damaged same-sex friendship; if we want more life-shaping friendships, we need to create communities where people are not scared to be thought gay. But Coontz's account starts too late—in the 16th century, when public honor for friendship was already fading fast. Looking earlier would uncover two different models of love that could illuminate what Sow and Friedman have experienced together.

In the ancient world, pairs of men or women could promise lifelong love and companionship. They could merge their families. We see this in the *Iliad*, when two warriors refuse to fight one another because their grandfathers swore friendship, and in the Hebrew Bible in the vows of David and Jonathan and the promises of Ruth to Naomi. Alan Bray's 2006 *The Friend* explores the public promises medieval and early modern friends could make to become kin. Sometimes these bonds were called "wedded brotherhood," which "the Sow-Friedmans" might appreciate. These older models suggest that friendship could take on greater public meaning without losing its private sweetness.

These bonds were exclusive: David had only one vowed friend. To understand the jealousies and sweetnesses of the "friendweb," we might turn to a different model, the mon-

astery. In the Cistercian monastery where Aelred penned *Spiritual Friendship*, friendship was both sacrificial and down-to-earth: Aelred was popular enough that he had to manage his friends' jealousy, their tendency to say, as the character Walter does in *Spiritual Friendship*, "Gratian has had sufficient attention." ("Walter" was based on a real monk, who wrote Aelred's biography and is endearingly proud of being the jealous guy from *Spiritual Friendship*.)

Sow and Friedman's biggest insights are the focus on healing rifts between friends—and the attention to the specific challenges facing interracial friendships. Seemingly small racial slights become microcosms of all the ways that Sow, who is Black, has to guard herself in friendships with white people. She dreads what *Big Friendship* calls "the trapdoor," the moment in which the white friend will side with the white world. And after some such "incident" comes the fear that even mentioning it will get you accused of overreacting. Silences replace safety—until an outside event forces a painful reckoning.

Big Friendship describes in detail this reckoning in Sow and Friedman's friendship. Friends may fear that honesty about the hurts and disappointments of even a deep interracial friendship will weaken the friends' bond. Sow and Friedman, by contrast, show that accountability, listening, apology and reconciliation *strengthen* friendships—and make possible the honesty that is another name for intimacy. This is true in spite of the "harsh reality" that the "stretching" isn't equal in these friendships: "It's likely that the nonwhite friend is going to feel more negatively stretched, while the white friend gets to have a 'learning experience.'"

Big Friendship handles race adroitly. Its peppy social-media voice is less well-equipped to handle the complexities of upward mobility. Sow and Friedman, having experienced some of the precariousness of the contemporary economy, treat material success as an uncomplicated good rather than as a source of moral danger. St. Aelred says "friendship...cushions adversity and chastens prosperity." But Sow and Friedman show only the first. Out of friendship they "assured each other that it was OK to want more, to ask for more"—but is that still what you need once you have become the boss?

"Shine Theory" attempts to offer upward mobility to everyone, but money is privilege, and privilege cocoons. The richer you get, the harder it is to offer intimacy, understanding and realistic support to friends who have less money. Sow and Friedman note this dynamic in the celeb-

rity friendship of Oprah Winfrey and Gayle King, but their ideal of mutual empowerment bars them from naming power as a temptation.

For models of sacrificial, chastening friendship, Sow and Friedman might turn to fictional meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous. The characters in Dan Barden's 2012 neo-noir *The Next Right Thing* know friendship is more duty than choice for them. Without the bonds forged in the rooms, they will die.

AA's Fifth Step, in which an alcoholic shares with one other person "the exact nature of our wrongs," shapes the novel's plot. On a symbolic level it becomes a kind of sacrament of friendship. To receive someone's worst self is an honor; to share your own is a necessity. Both roles are pledges of lifelong love.

The Fifth Step is a chronicle of abuse of power. It is a reminder that the biggest friendships are the ones that remind you, as they say "in the rooms" of AA, to stay right-sized.

Eve Tushnet is the author of *Gay and Catholic: Accepting My Sexuality, Finding Community, Living My Faith and Punishment: A Love Story*.

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Poets of the Body, Poets of the Soul

Edited by Joe Hoover

In one way or another, the poetry collections discussed here grapple with, revel in or simply bear witness to that which all great art wrestles with: What is going on, and (explicitly or not) what does God have to do with what is going on? Twelve different collections reviewed by four **America** editors are a sample of the God-haunted and the God-hunted literary artists who work out their spiritual, intellectual and emotional conundrums through lyrical compositions that both reveal and obscure, offer insight and challenge commonplaces.

Pilgrimages, by Andrew J. Calis

Each of the five parts of this debut book tackles a different sort of pilgrimage, and each becomes more specific and more granular as it goes on. The first section begins with the highest of highs, speaking abstractly of God and the universe, combining scientific terminology with biblical imagery. Subsequent parts tackle the author's family history and well-worn memories of self, taking the reader everywhere from Jerusalem to Washington, D.C.

Finally, Calis takes us on a journey into his (and perhaps our own) future, death and eventual resurrection.

Every story, every anecdote, every line feels uncertain; or, to use Calis's term, "shattered." Once you reach the end, you might find yourself echoing his words: "I wander, Lord. But in your wondrous grace,/ and in your goodness, you offer other means/ of traveling toward your light."

Kevin Robles

Litany of Flights, by Laura Reece Hogan

An ode to joy and an ode to birds, sugar maples and the chaparral, *Litany of Flights* soars its way through

drought, fire and mercy. In this debut collection, fire is both destroyer and creator, a constant source of personal consumption and renewal. Hogan is a Third Order Carmelite who writes about God in creation, light and shadow. “Even beneath your notice (notice how you do not notice).”

Among other subjects, St. John of the Cross ignites many pages in faithful, burning agony as “the friar of fire,” and St. Thérèse of Lisieux appears before Dorothy Day in a moment of Dorothy’s “tilling.” Springing from the beauty of California, the book excavates the shock of grief and the eternal possibility of relationship and reconciliation.

Erika Rasmussen

Atomic Theory 7: Poems to My Wife and God, by Shann Ray (illustrations by Trinh Mai)

Shann Ray’s riveting collection is perfectly complemented by the sacramental artwork of Trinh Mai. The two artists’ work and style intertwine naturally as they both address themes of love, violence, grief, divinity and more. Ray draws on his experiences living and working all over the world, in particular those places where he has witnessed war, genocide and abuse.

With each memory revisited in verse, Ray confronts the fact that he knows very little about the God who so captures his curiosity and imagination. He is not discouraged by his lack of understanding, though; throughout this collection, the devotion and determination in his writing only increase. As he continues to be puzzled and shaken by the sheer brokenness he observes, he becomes ever more resolute in his insistence on writing about a kind of love that can be profound, reconciled with the pain that is an essential part of reality.

Molly Cahill

Andalusian Hours: Poems From the Porch of Flannery O’Connor, by Angela Alaimo O’Donnell

When Flannery O’Connor was 25, she was diagnosed with lupus, a disease that similarly afflicted and eventually killed her father. She spent the next 14 years at Andalusia, her family’s dairy farm in Georgia, producing as much writing as she could before the inevitable occurred. She died at Andalusia at the age of 39.

A sense of fatalism, that time is constantly running out and not knowing how much of it you have left, per-

vades each of the 101 sonnets in this collection. O’Donnell writes in Flannery’s own voice, embodying her and allowing the reader to feel every cherished childhood memory, every bit of her love for Thomas Aquinas and every missed opportunity that might be her last chance to find happiness. The tragedy within O’Donnell’s poems comes from knowing that Flannery herself has an expiration date, that her wondrous personality and vivaciousness will soon end. O’Donnell shows that, amid the sadness and misfortune, there can be great beauty and liveliness at death’s door.

Kevin Robles

Thérèse: Poems, by Sarah Law

The clear writing style of this poetic biography of the beloved St. Thérèse of Lisieux reflects the “little way” and holy simplicity for which the beloved saint is known. Sarah Law tells the story of the young girl who felt a strong pull to join the Carmelites, who navigated interpersonal challenges and who ultimately spent her last days battling a painful illness that took her life at the age of 24.

After the early pages of verse introduce us in vivid detail to Thérèse’s family members and fellow Carmelites, much of the collection’s latter half describes not only the saint’s physical pain but the prayerful response and theological questions about death and mortality that it evoked. Perhaps most poignant, though, is the post-mortem that Law includes: storytelling about the people, near and far from Thérèse’s simple home and quiet life, who have been inspired by her “little way” since the saint’s death.

Molly Cahill

Spring Up Everlasting, by William Woolfitt

The poems in this collection are grounded in rapt observation, with details of scenes from places like Kanawha, W.Va.: a Pontiac Firebird wrapped around a tree, permanently smudged windows, animal bodies that have fallen into a creek. Writing about Afghanistan, William Woolfitt lingers over the specifics of how a Muslim man uses digital watches to keep track of when he will need to pray, how he touches his forehead to the dirt when he faces Mecca, how he listens to the music from a distant mosque to connect him to others of his faith who are far away.

More than anything, one gets the sense that Woolfitt can find God in anything, from a Pentecostal church to the homecoming of a serviceman to the ritualistic work of

metalsmiths in Mali. In his writing, the divine is everywhere he looks.

Kevin Robles

Survival Is a Style, by Christian Wiman

The author wears his intravenous drip on his sleeve in this, his seventh collection of poetry, where waking up might some days be misery, some days wonder, all held together by a God “not entirely gone.” Having grown up in an evangelical Christian household in Texas whose ice has long since cracked and melted into an endless sea of spiritual entropy and revelation, Wiman continues to explore a desire for faith that asks unanswerable questions.

The poems of *Survival Is a Style* stand on the solid ground of sharp verbs and nouns with bone, and the shaky ground of personhood, chronic illness, despair and even prayer that wishes to be free of deity. Despite it all, the ego roves spry, intact, with his two daughters and a great love and unstinted prayer. “We must create the life creating us, and must allow that life to be.” In Wiman’s writing, it is not heresy when he asserts that language itself profanes God.

Erika Rasmussen

The Harvest and the Lamp, by Andrew Frisardi

Andrew Frisardi reveals his love of Italy right off the bat; his first poem in *The Harvest and the Lamp* is about the city of Orvieto, located on a small hilltop north of Rome. He compares it to Avalon, the legendary island of Arthurian origin and goes on to liken a *casalinga*, an Italian housewife, to the Virgin Mary. He deems the bright skies above Rome to be like “angel’s breath in Dante.”

Much of Frisardi’s poetry is infused with a sense of great fun, though it never spills into the territory of comedy. There is a genuine sense of enthusiasm, a refreshingly honest take on spirituality in his poetry. Frisardi gives a gleeful account of a boy’s first time on a schooner. He is annoyed that even in Italy he cannot escape Donald Trump’s tweets. He confesses that, to make himself feel better after a sudden snowfall in Lent, he ordered mimosas.

Kevin Robles

The Strangeness of the Good, by James Matthew Wilson

James Matthew Wilson bores into the details of life to ultimately ask: “Will you look on it all, just as you should, /

And, in all that sordid wreckage find the good?” Wilson takes from faith’s fullness. He explores in metered verse fatherhood to young children, a devotion to God that often sinks one into deep desolation and how the past has made the man who now offers these clear-hearted lamentations.

The volume also includes a “Quarantine Notebook,” which chronicles in Wilson’s metered monologue-style verses our stretch of isolation from March through May 2020: Beatitudes read aloud to kids at the kitchen table that turn into a scene out of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, or the fingers that scoop seeds into black new soil that becomes its own prayer born from a stranger’s lips several states away. It is not irony that renders this book’s world-weary-and-glad-for-it tone, but a genuineness that gives a life all its own.

Erika Rasmussen

Exploring This Terrain, by Margaret Ingraham

Simply “naming the names” of the creatures and greenery found in these sharply observed poems—along with just a dash of how they appear—does much of the work for Ingraham in her new collection: “silver pierce of your gold heron eye,” a “leg-singing cricket,” the “calculating flight of circling willow ptarmigans,” “the fenny plain of nesting plover.”

Her writing in *Exploring This Terrain* does not over-glorify created things, nor turn them into trite stand-ins for human beings. It reveres nature simply because it is alive. While she also ventures into topics like the legacy of William Faulkner and the aftermath of 9-11, reading most of Ingraham’s poems is like walking with her in the woods as she stops and calls out: Look! Over there! In one passage, she declaims that a heron and a minute ruby throat, not known for their song or sustenance, are “sweet manna on the wing” and “melody beyond any longing.”

Joe Hoover

Shrapnel Maps, by Philip Metres

Philip Metres’s passionate work for peace and justice in the Middle East burns through the lines of his poetry in *Shrapnel Maps*. From family stories to testimony from those on the ground in Israel and Palestine, he writes to find some common meaning in the “place of many names,” as he calls the Middle East. The book weaves poetic storytelling with other media from the locale itself:

political posters, travelogues, maps, photographs, illustrations.

Metres describes in vivid detail how an inability to show kindness to someone suffering can have disastrous consequences not just for the individual who suffers but for a collective: a village, a people, a nation. As he walks through a world in pain with a “Free Palestine” bracelet on his wrist, he wonders: Will his neighbors with opposing ideologies see that symbol of allegiance and turn their backs? Will he have the courage to engage with them? Metres’s writing reveals just how vital matters of the heart can be in achieving justice.
Molly Cahill

Erika Rasmussen, Molly Cahill and Kevin Christopher Robles are the 2020-21 Joseph A. O’Hare, S.J., fellows at *America*. Joe Hoover, S.J., is *America*’s poetry editor and the author of the newly published book *O Death, Where Is Thy Sting? A Meditation on Suffering*.

I heard there’s warm weather somewhere

By Louis Damani Jones

When it starts to warm, I would like
the year to myself, just me and the year
a long pause in the world,
a sharp semicolon there in the center
of everyone around me, segmenting
and connecting in the same breath,
in the same place,
at the same instant
resting out of the continuum of clock tick.

Starting with that kind of warm
that dances and leaps over everything in stutter stops,
heaving heat lines from
asphalt in the stark, abrupt
authenticity of a late winter;

oh, late winter, that season of tried
and tired moments hung up for too long
on a mind’s rack to stretch

and be made into ill-fitting business-casual smiles
that go well with ill-fitting, business-casual spouses
and friends. Just give it a year, or two, maybe, exhorted
our business-casual licensed marriage counselor, twice-divorced.

I just want the one year. Just me and the year together forever
in a kind of instantaneous sunrise that only begins or ends.
Sometimes I wonder if there needs be
an in-between.

It would be in the gap
of half-worth it. Like deciding
to look back at the picture of the family at Easter, or
what used to be your family,
but now is your plaintiff,

your defendant, your kid on the stand.

Louis Damani Jones is a fellow at the Gephardt Institute for Civic and Community Engagement at Washington University. He is also a graduate student at Washington University in St. Louis. His poetry has appeared in the *River Bluff Review* and the *Black Catholic Messenger*.



The Hedge School of Wisdom

Michael Martin's reimagining of a sacramental life

By Elias Crim

One infernally hot July weekend in 2016, I drove three hours or so to a rather unique meetup at a place called Stella Matutina Farm, located a bit west of Ann Arbor, Mich. “You’ll love it,” my Facebook friend Michael Martin assured me in his email invitation. It sounded like he was planning some kind of outdoor fiesta for Catholics, convening a mix of writers, naturalists, theologians and neighbor farmers.

His farm is a 10-acre place, located (as Martin eventually discovered) on a Native American burial ground, an Ojibwa site excavated in the 1930s.

All I knew about the farm at the time was that they put up a maypole every year. “We live as close as you can get to the spirit of Robert Herrick’s poetry,” Martin joked. “Convivial, festive, with folk religion, pagan elements and the classical tradition. It’s a mess.” (With his nine children, I could easily imagine Martin’s farm as a festive mess.)

Along with attending an Eastern-rite liturgy in the barn, eating meals together and enjoying the company of mostly new friends, we had an agenda for our time together.

Martin was inviting us to help him reimagine “everything” (primarily art, culture, education, even the economy) in a “radically Catholic” way. Under the trees, we sat on lawn chairs for two days, exchanging thoughts on each of these broad topics. I think Martin was taking notes as we went.

“I was grateful for a certain sense of urgency that weekend, one that matched my own as we watch certain cultural structures giving way,” recalls Holly Taylor Coolman, a fellow attendee who teaches theology at Providence College in Rhode Island. “I think we all felt a need for new ways of encounter, new modes of thought. It was like when you reach that point of feeling, ‘We gotta talk!’”

Dr. Coolman was thinking of a particular problem. “Intellectual reflection and contemplation in the context of the modern university has serious limitations today. For Catholics, doing theology in the seminary also has its limitations. Same for big academic conferences. So where,” she asks, “are we going to do this work? We have to find new spaces.” Thus the farm meetup, several days of not just conversation but sustained dialogue.



Stella Matutina Farm. Photo courtesy of Michael Martin

Michael Martin argues that a sacramental life separated from cosmological awareness cannot be truly sacramental.

Cosmological Awareness

Most of us were already familiar with Martin's scholarly work and his poetry. We knew he had no interest in projects recovering some lost religious culture ("Make Catholicism Great Again!", as he jokingly described such doomed efforts), nor in embracing the "poetic-industrial complex," as he referred to the dead M.F.A. programs and high-tech AutoTune music of our creative culture. He is himself a mandolin-playing rebel, a college professor and a former Waldorf School teacher turned biodynamic farmer, focused on art as an act of adoration.

His books—a mix of essays and poetry—include *The Submerged Reality: Sophiology and the Turn to a Poetic Metaphysics*, *Meditations in Times of Wonder*, *The Incarnation of the Poetic Word* and *Transfiguration: Notes Toward a Radical Catholic Reimagination of Everything*.

Martin grew up in Detroit. He reports that high school was a disaster but that he had a record deal for his band at age 18, acting out his vision of himself as a working-class troubadour of sorts, a hip Philip Levine. He finally got

around to college at age 25, and he eventually obtained a doctorate in English literature.

Over our weekend of talk, music, food and worship together, we explored Martin's claim that a sacramental life separated from cosmological awareness cannot be truly sacramental. "And life is not life," he proposed, "if it is not sacramental."

We can probably all agree that this cosmological dimension does not exactly form the foundation of most adult Christian initiation programs. Thus Martin's goal of reawakening the church on this vital matter of spiritual formation and its implications for art and culture.

Not surprisingly, given the bookish nature of the group, countless names were dropped in our sessions: William Blake, E. F. Schumacher, Jane Lead, Goethe, Thomas Merton, David Jones, Simone Weil, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Sergei Bulgakov and others. Our approach was not "academic" but instead (to use a favorite term of our host's) agapeic—grounded in love and appreciation.

The hope for the weekend, Martin had advised us,

was fairly simple: If we gather some good people, something will come of it. And something did—or rather, several things did.

Fruits of Contemplation

“One of them was a new magazine with a Blakean name, *Jesus the Imagination*,” Kevin Hughes notes, “a wonderful publication.” And a rather radical one in its aims, as its subtitle (“*A Journal of Spiritual Revolution*”) suggests. “Our intention,” Martin writes on its Amazon page, “is not altogether modest: the regeneration of Christian art and culture.” Why, he asks, should Christians read Meister Eckhart, Simone Weil and William Blake? How do the mystic and the artist invite us to encounter the mystery of Christ’s being in the world?

Hughes, who teaches theology at Villanova University in Pennsylvania, observes that sources of Martin’s inspiration also include Pope Francis’ encyclical, “*Laudato Si*”: “Just as with Michael’s project, it’s about reimagining down to the roots our relationship to the natural world and a fraternal relationship with created beings.” Noting Martin’s agrarian lifestyle and its link to integral ecology, he observes, “Michael is one of the few people I know really putting his money where his mouth is in the very way he is living.”

This led me to suggest that Michael Martin reminded me of Wendell Berry. “Yes,” Hughes responded, “a lot like Berry, in being a farmer-poet and a deeply insightful soul.”

Therese Schroeder-Sheker, a musician, educator and creator of the Chalice of Repose Project, has visited Stella Matutina Farm and says something similar about Martin’s life: “He brings the whole body, soul and spirit right up to the table. His day might begin with writing, then teaching, then working on the roof of his barn, and then end by helping bathe his frail mom, who is living at home with the family. Michael is embedded in multiple structures of accountability. He is a profoundly integrated person who ‘walks the talk,’ as people used to say. His ideas and his work are all symbiotic and connected.”

The Christian Artist

I am struck by Martin’s nomination of the locust-eating wild man John the Baptist as the archetype of the Christian artist. “He calls the Messiah out of the future. He’s embedded in a tradition but lives on the outskirts of that tradition. He does not listen to criticism. He does not solicit advice. He does not fear death. He does not network

or build his résumé.”

As the latter statement suggests, Martin does not view the vocation of the poet as a “career.” In his essay “*On Poetry and Prophecy*,” he writes: “Our times do not associate poets with prophecy, with vision, or with mysticism. Instead, poets, if they are considered at all, are considered in the context of political or cultural movements, or as aloof and elitist poseurs living parasitically off the academic class. They are not seen as agents of revelation.”

Drawing on his experience as a Waldorf School teacher, Martin holds up that model over what he terms “the soul-destroying power of the *Baltimore Catechism* and its arid progeny. It’s my claim that the premature intellectualization of the faith is more responsible for the emptying of the churches than the lures of the world offered to young innocents today.” He cites the Waldorf School Method of celebrating Christian festivals and the liturgical calendar as a way of holding on to what Catholic education has lost: “a Christian cosmological awareness, the rhythms of nature and their relationship to the church year.” In his view, the sacramental sensibility we hope for arises precisely from acknowledging the cosmological structure of our lives.

“The movement of celestial bodies, the sprouting of life from a seed, the intricate social structures and behaviors of a bee colony, the wondrous unfoldment of gestation—all of these reveal a wisdom that speaks to more than the randomness of cosmic and evolutionary accidents,” he says. The biblical term for wisdom, “*sophia*,” along with its rich literary and theological traditions, turns out to be a key to Martin’s “sophianic” understanding of reality.

Poetic Metaphysics

Martin’s work recovering the Christian wisdom tradition recently caught the attention of a Canadian-based women’s study group called Colloquy 2020, which has been hosting an annual series of seminars on the feminine dimension of the church. Martin’s book *The Submerged Reality*, which emphasizes the sacramental nature of gender and sexuality, was taken up by the group. He was also scheduled to address their Sept. 3-6 meeting, originally to be held in Assisi until the pandemic hit.

He believes that sophiology “needs to be considered not as theology and not as science but as a poetic *metaxu* [roughly, a poetic field] uniting the two.” Nonetheless, one notable Anglican theologian, John Milbank, believes that Martin is on to something important with this work, even if

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it is not technically understood as theology.

“It suggests that in a sense the boundaries of orthodoxy are not as clear as we think,” Milbank observes:

Sophiology is taken from the controversial margins of the West—the hermeticism and esotericism of figures like Jacob Boehme, John Pordage, Jane Lead, Rudolf Steiner, and others. Then there are the Russians—Solovyov, Florensky, Sergei Bulgakov. I think these figures were possibly more about trying to defend a damaged tradition than we have realized. The project of sophiology is committed to the unity of the cosmological with the metaphysical, a response which owes much to the way these historical figures saw their own worlds coming apart.

For philosophically-minded readers, this project of “poetic metaphysics” (and not of theology or science) may resemble the field of phenomenology, which influenced the thought of Max Scheler, Edith Stein, Dietrich von Hildebrand and Karol Wojtyła. Both approaches begin in contemplation and address matters of perception.

Moreover, sophiology, as Martin argues, is incomplete “because we have yet to say exactly what (or who) Sophia is.” Some figures in the wisdom tradition have claimed that Sophia is a *person* and even claim to have met her. In the Bible, Sophia is both a person and a quality, but not synonymous with the Logos, despite their cognitive associations.

Nevertheless, if we learn again to see the world in an integral sense—that is, to poetically engage with creation in this fashion—Martin suggests we will find open “a way to a science more concerned with care than with domination, an art renewed and redeemed in the presence of the beautiful, and a secure return of cosmology to religion.”

A New Kind of Education

Perhaps the most striking of Martin’s books is his *Transfiguration*, a collection of essays on science, art, education and economy, all with a view to thinking out loud about what an integral Christian culture could mean.

One chapter answers the question many readers already have in mind: Is this author making a proposal for a new kind of Catholic education? That proposal has a whiff of the long-forgotten (and illegal) “hedge schools” found in rural Ireland in the 18th and 19th centuries.

A form of cultural resistance to British hegemony, the schools (which probably met mostly in barns) were simply informal groups of students gathered around itinerant teachers of the “four Rs” (Reading, ’Riting, ’Rithmetic and Religion), plus Irish history and literature. Sometimes subjects like the Greek or Latin classics or bookkeeping or physics might be included.

But a “post-modern sophiological hedge school” (as Martin describes his vision) is not an attempt to be quaint. Instead, the school would emphasize “engagement with what is real: color and sound, beauty and presence, human interaction and contemplation.” Students in this school—with no textbooks or computers until age 14—“would need time to think, time for reverie, in addition to time for instruction.” A place and a way of learning imbued with the arts and engaged with practical (and outdoor) activities, combined with a contemplative ethos, in Martin’s description.

In the meantime, Martin’s school is mostly represented in the website for his Center for Sophiological Studies, where he combines a blog with links to his books, articles, courses (fee-based video instruction) and additional videos.

On his YouTube channel, the viewer can watch a free series of talks on the metaphysical poets (Donne, Herbert, Vaughan, Traherne, Crashaw), with attention to their work in the tradition of poetic metaphysics described above. This series is also a chance to see Martin’s agapeic style as a teacher and as a poet appreciating fellow poets.

His friend Dan McClain, a chaplain at the College of William & Mary in Virginia, sums up Martin this way: “There are two kinds of theology. There’s the academic stuff, and then there’s the theology that every Christian is called to do. Dwelling with your heart and mind on God in order to become inflamed with the love of God. Poetry is a way of dwelling on God and in his work on the farm, Michael is doing that theology every day.”

Holly Taylor Coolman adds: “He’s doing what he can with what he has. In this moment of falling apart and re-imagining and maybe even building anew, it’s important to remember: This is what it looks like.”

Elias Crim is the editor and publisher at *Solidarity Hall*, a national group blog founded in 2014. He is a columnist for the Catholic channel at *Patheos*.

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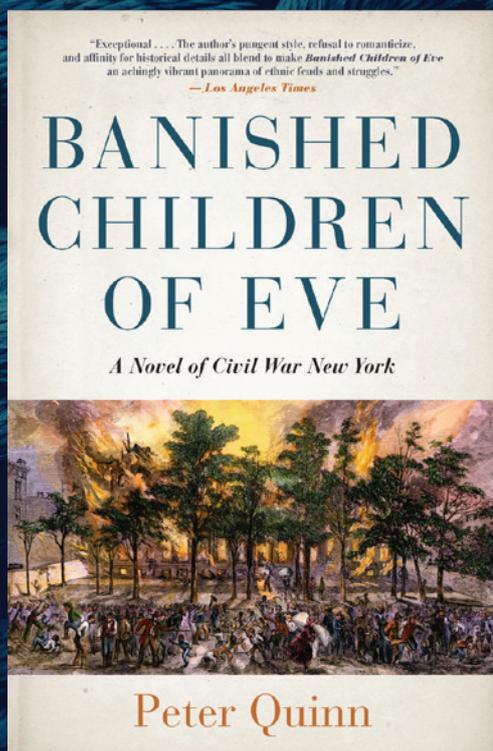
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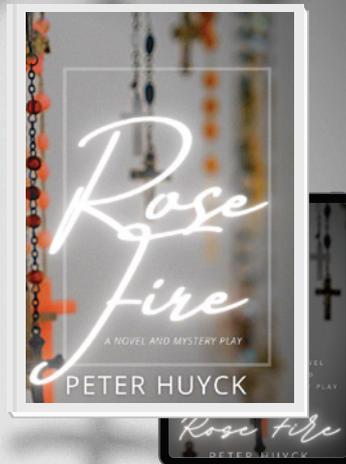
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"I stay in this country,
but I'm not going to be an
Irish writer. I'm not going
to do the Irish thing,"
John Banville said in 1997.



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John Banville's New Irish Thing

By Tom Deignan

Fifty years ago, a former Aer Lingus clerk named John Banville embarked upon what would become one of the more celebrated literary careers of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. A native of Wexford, Banville grew up on the same island as mighty literary giants like Swift and Synge, Yeats and Joyce.

So, naturally, Banville set his first novel—1971's *Nightspawn*—on the Greek island of Mykonos.

"I wanted to get as far away from Ireland as my limited experience of the world would allow," Banville told *The Independent*. The critic Rudiger Imhof has dubbed Banville "the black sheep in the family of Irish writers," while Banville has jokingly referred to himself as a "West Brit," a play on the old but durable Irish insult famously whispered by the nationalist Miss Ivors in James Joyce's "The Dead."

Banville—a Booker and Kafka Prize-winner, and such a perennial Nobel candidate that he was once the victim of a cruel though utterly plausible hoax—has done little to discourage such characterizations. "I stay in this country, but I'm not going to be an Irish writer. I'm not going to do the Irish thing," Banville told an interviewer in 1997. A few years later he told a broadcaster that "I've never cared enough about Ireland to feel I had to flee

from it, or leave it."

And so, in his best-known literary efforts, Banville was uninterested in priests or informants or turf fires. From earlier novels about Copernicus, Kepler and Newton, up through more recent works like *The Untouchable*, *Shroud* and the Booker Prize-winning *The Sea*, Banville has exhibited a relentless fascination with the form and narrative of history, rather than the events themselves; the artifice and inadequacy, rather than grandiosity, of storytelling; the tragi-comic futility of trying to separate the dancer from the dance, the actor from the act, the writer from the written words.

Which, as any reader of Laurence Sterne, or Brian O'Nolan, or Samuel Beckett can attest, is not without precedent in Irish literary history.

Yet something has changed for John Banville in the last 15 years. In a twist worthy of his own byzantine fiction, Banville has adopted a new persona and writing style, and even—perhaps—a changed attitude toward "the Irish thing" he once derided.

Communism and the Church

In a 2011 book entitled *Down These Green Streets: Irish Crime Writing in the 21st Century*, Declan Burke wrote of the "many reasons...for the current explosion in Irish

Banville has adopted a new persona and writing style, and even—perhaps—a changed attitude toward ‘the Irish thing’ he once derided. ●●

crime fiction.” These include, according to Burke, the “end of the thirty-year ‘Troubles’ in Northern Ireland,” a “country awash in cash and drugs” and the “declining reputations of the Church and the political, legal and financial institutions.” As evidence, Burke offered up popular novelists like Tana French, Adrian McKinty, John Connolly and Ken Bruen.

Also in 2011, a certain Irish writer suggested Banville might care a bit more than he had been letting on about historical forces in Ireland. “The church for us was what the Communist Party was for Eastern Europe,” Banville told the editor of *The New York Times Book Review*. “We only discovered this when we got older, how unfree we were.” Such a comparison was, if nothing else, provocative, given what many regard as Catholicism’s prominent role in fighting Communism, from Central America to Krakow.

Whatever ill the Irish Catholic Church must account for (and they are legion), there were no secret police, or bloody street clubbings, or sham elections, right? But what if, in peculiarly Irish ways, there actually were? And what if these dark historical forces were illuminated and dramatized not by bleak literary realism, but noirish who-dunnits?

Banville “remains fascinated by Ireland in the ‘50s,” Charles McGrath wrote in *The New York Times* last October, with Banville himself claiming “church and state worked to keep the people safely infantilized, the church through early brainwashing, the state by blanket censorship and official lying.” Such cultural commentary—Joycean, in a 21st-century way—is at the center of the crime

books Banville has written as “Benjamin Black” since 2007. Most feature the haunted, orphaned pathologist known simply as Quirke.

“It was not the dead that seemed to Quirke uncanny but the living,” he declares in *Christine Falls*, the first Benjamin Black novel, in which the titular damsel vanishes, prompting a potential cover-up by Dublin’s Catholic elite.

The morgue, Quirke later declares, is “his territory.” And in a sense, that is what Benjamin Black has allowed John Banville to do: perform a literary autopsy on post-colonial Ireland, which this summer marks the 100th anniversary of the end of the War for Independence with Britain. Which begat partition. And the gruesome Irish civil war. And, later, “The Troubles.”

Banville’s Benjamin Black novels (among them *The Silver Swan*, *Elegy for April* and *A Death in Summer*, all of which inspired a BBC/RTE TV show, “Quirke,” starring Gabriel Byrne) suggest that one Irish civil war may well have ended a century ago. But a different one—cultural and spiritual, economic and political—was still raging as Banville’s generation came of age. Using the language and conventions of genre, Banville has raised a host of provocative questions about recent Irish history, which he once may have dismissed as “Hibernian rubbish.” The questions remain, vexing and pressing.

A New Protagonist

Banville’s latest mystery, *Snow*, published in the United States last fall, introduces a new detective protagonist, Inspector St. John Strafford, though the conflicts under investigation could be described as closer to ancient. “There was not as much blood as there should have been, given the wounds that had been inflicted,” Banville writes of *Snow*’s crime victim: a Catholic priest, suggestively named “Lawless.”

“The priest’s body had been tampered with, too. He lay on his back, hands joined on his breast.... All that was lacking was a set of rosary beads twined around his knuckles.”

Snow is the second mystery to feature Inspector Strafford, a Protestant who knows it’s “only a matter of time before he would be told...that he didn’t look much like a policeman.” Strafford understands this to mean that he doesn’t “look like an *Irish* policeman.”

If old religious tensions simmer in the background of *Snow*, historical and political conflicts threaten to erupt volcanically in the first Strafford book from 2019. *The Secret*

Guests dramatizes a long-rumored World War II scheme to hide British princesses Margaret and Elizabeth (the future queen) during the Blitz in rural Tipperary, even as bands of armed Irish Republicans plot to seize this prized opportunity to strike against their former colonizer.

Frustrated that he is neither British enough for the aristocracy nor Irish enough for the natives, Strafford declares: “The wildmen were welcome to break in and kidnap that pair of royal brats...and hold them to ransom for whatever sum they took it into their heads to demand.” For Strafford, the very word “us” is dizzying and contentious—chummy or challenging, depending on who says it.

And yet even this outsider knows that a 16th-century story of an Irish rebel whose “head was sent to Queen Elizabeth in a sack” remains more than a little relevant. “The Irish,” Strafford observes, “have long memories.” He is certainly Irish enough to know that.

A Cultural Critique

Much has been made of why and how an unapologetically cerebral esthete like Banville turned to crime fiction. To make more money? To *merely* entertain readers? Banville’s own assurances that he is not condescending toward genre writing have come off as, well, condescending. “I was a little appalled at the speed with which I got the [crime books] done,” he told the Times’s McGrath. Either way, there has been much comparing and contrasting of the Black and Banville styles, resulting in declarations that the former is a skilled craftsman who churns out literary equivalents of fine cabinets, while the latter mystically conjures “art.”

Little, though, has been said about how the conventions of genre have offered Banville—and so many other artists—new and offbeat avenues for sharp cultural observation and critique. From Captain America punching Adolf Hitler on the cover of *Marvel Mystery Comics #4* to the echoes of world theologies in “Star Wars,” the adventures of sleuths, superheroes and space travellers often allow for bold, even subversive observations about the world. The 21st-century dominance of the Marvel and DC universes has made it easy to overlook genre-influenced offerings by a wide range of “serious” artists, from Guillermo del Toro to Colson Whitehead, who are posing ancient questions in provocative new ways. “Serious genre,” if you will, is not only no longer an oxymoron. It can also serve as a retort to Philip Roth’s famous, frustrated pronouncement on the novelist’s inability to compete with reality itself.

Crime, horror and science fiction offer even established artists like John Banville new ways to explore that very reality. As Junot Díaz put it before his fictional journey through the Dominican Republic’s gruesome and beautiful 20th century: “What [is] more sci-fi than Santo Domingo? What [is] more fantasy than the Antilles?”

In a fitting twist, John Banville recently announced that the *nom de plume* Benjamin Black is being retired, though the mysteries will keep on coming. (Except in Spain, where this open literary secret will persist. Which, again, sounds like some perplexing interrogation of identity out of a Banville novel.)

Either way, for the last 15 years, Black has offered up a version of Irish history that—for whatever reason—Banville never did. That there are cops and corpses and kidnappings in the Black universe does not make the questions they pose any less important or interesting.

Tom Deignan, a regular contributor to *America*, has written about books for *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, and is a columnist for *The Irish Voice* newspaper.

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AP Photo

Georgetown head coach John Thompson Jr., left, celebrating with Patrick Ewing on April 2, 1984, when Georgetown won the N.C.A.A. tournament.

This Is Not a Book About Basketball

“My mother always told me to speak my mind. My father always said, ‘Son, study the white man,’” writes John Thompson Jr. in the opening chapter of his autobiography, *I Came as a Shadow*.

Anyone familiar with the career of the Hall of Fame basketball coach from Georgetown University knows how seriously he took both parents’ advice. To the already initiated, Thompson’s provocative and outspoken advocacy on issues of race will not be surprising. For much of his career, he was considered a “troublemaker” among elite college basketball coaches. He was a blunt, opinionated and imposing six-foot-ten-inch Black man whose success warranted inclusion in an otherwise all-white coaching fraternity. And he consistently used his position to challenge the status quo on matters of race and justice.

I Came as a Shadow, published

several months after Thompson’s death in late August 2020 at age 78, reflects its author’s personality: challenging, unapologetic and unsparingly acute in its observations beyond the basketball court. According to his co-author, Jesse Washington, of ESPN’s “The Undeclared,” Thompson deliberated over every word because “he knew this would be his final testimony and how much it is still needed.” He also reminded Washington periodically that “I don’t want this to be a book about basketball.”

That sentiment could easily serve as an epigraph to the coach’s career. The game was never the objective for Thompson; it was just the instrument. “Basketball became a way of kicking down a door that had been closed to Black people,” he writes. “It was a way for me to express that we don’t have to act apologetic for obtaining what God intended us to have, and that we

should be recognized more for our minds than our bodies.”

With the conversations on race in the wake of George Floyd’s death, it is difficult not to think that the same issues that branded Thompson as problematic 40 years ago now reveal him to be prescient. We are only now catching up to him. “We have entered a new era of vocalizing our humanity,” he says about the Floyd protests. “Yes, Black people are being needlessly killed by police, but there are many ways of killing a person. You can kill people by depriving them of opportunity and hope. You can kill people by saying that society is equal, then starting a hundred-yard race with most white people at the fifty-yard line.”

There are not any lengthy musings on Allen Iverson’s ball-handling abilities or Patrick Ewing’s dominance under the basket, but Thompson does recount the numerous relationships,

I Came as a Shadow

By John Thompson Jr.

Henry Holt and Co.

352p \$14.99

events and controversies he was involved with throughout his career. He reflects on being the first Black coach to win an N.C.A.A. championship, as well as his high-profile protests against Proposition 42 that led the N.C.A.A. to rescind that discriminatory rule. He speaks with enormous gratitude about mentors both famous—coaches Red Auerbach (Boston Celtics) and Dean Smith (University of North Carolina)—and unknown, like Sametta Wallace Jackson, a grade school teacher who protected him emotionally while nurturing him academically. Thompson even goes into great detail about confronting a powerful drug kingpin in Washington, D.C. The man eventually respected Thompson's wishes that he stay away from his players.

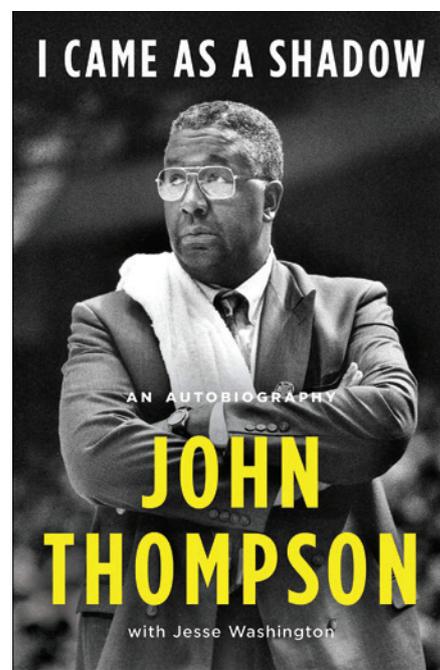
The book's greatest revelations are in the glimpses Thompson allows into the history and experiences behind the man we thought we knew from his public pronouncements. After 40 years in the spotlight, it is astonishing how little insight we had into the contrasts and conflicts that animated Thompson: the indifferent, slow-to-read student who went on to make the graduation of his players the centerpiece of his program; the intimidating coach who was a self-described mama's boy; the practicing Catholic deeply devoted to Mary; the young man whose first experience of racism was in a segregated Jesuit church in rural Maryland; a man who focused his whole life on lofty issues of equality and justice but who was an unabashed capitalist who "wanted to be rich"; a Black coach intent on correcting historical wrongs who worked for an institution that only recently began

addressing its slaveholding past.

My own interest on first picking up the book was to learn about the program and the coach I had been adjacent to for four years but had never really understood. At the peak of the team's performance in the 1980s, I had the privilege of being courtside for nearly every home game, conference tournament and N.C.A.A. playoff game, playing drums in Georgetown's band. These were the years of "Hoya Paranoia" in which Thompson micromanaged every aspect of his team. Other than the cafeteria and classes—which his players attended religiously, without fail—the basketball program was distinctly separate from student life on campus.

Thompson's program was so successful that at one time the Hoyas played in the national championship game in three out of four years. The all-Black teams he assembled in those years had a 97 percent graduation rate and became such a source of racial pride around the United States that Georgetown Starter jackets became iconic urban fashion statements. To Thompson's delight, his program's success even led some African-Americans to believe, mistakenly, that overwhelmingly white Georgetown was a historically Black college.

For the son of an illiterate tile worker and a mother who cleaned houses, it was an extraordinary rise. Thompson grew up in such a segregated world in our nation's capital that he had no significant interactions with white people until he was recruited to play basketball at an all-white Catholic high school. When he was growing up, the affluent and white Georgetown University was



just across Rock Creek Park, a few miles from where he lived, but it might as well have been on the moon.

His journey took a poignant turn in 2016, when Georgetown finally began confronting its own history with racism. In 1838, the Jesuits sold 272 slaves from their Maryland plantations to keep the struggling college afloat. Thompson had been aware that the school owned slaves, but the magnitude of the sale was deeply unsettling for him. The people who were sold were from St. Mary's County, where his father grew up and where "the Jesuits owned everything." The news brought back childhood memories of his first experiences of racism and segregation in the Catholic Church in that same region. "The same Jesuits who founded Georgetown owned my father's ancestors," he writes. "I can't prove it, but there is no doubt in my mind."

His adult work life had been consumed with achieving success and status and building up a university that had once owned his forebears. Is it any wonder that Thompson was a complex

The game of basketball was never the objective for Thompson; it was just the instrument. ●●

man who never felt he had the “luxury of just being a coach”?

I Came as a Shadow is neither a basketball book nor a sports memoir. It isn't filled with inspirational quotes or “secrets to success” that one can practice to emulate the author. Thompson's autobiography is the rare example of an American success story that does not revel in its own glory. Rather, it is haunted by the responsibility that his story of success carries with it.

Bill McGarvey, a musician and writer, is the author of *The Freshman Survival Guide* and owner of *McG-Media.com*.

A Grief That Needs Accompaniment—Not Aphorisms

Liz Tichenor is a young, newly ordained Episcopal priest living at an idyllic Christian camp on Lake Tahoe with her husband, toddler daughter and newborn son when the unimaginable happens. Concerned that her son is showing signs of distress—crying inconsolably for days on end, spitting up bile laced with blood—Tichenor takes her infant to an urgent care medical station. A doctor assures her the baby is fine and dismisses her; she trusts the doctor, chalks it up to new-

mom jitters and returns home. Hours later, late on a January night, baby Fritz stops breathing, and Tichenor faces every mother's most primordial fear: the sudden, inexplicable loss of a child.

“I brought my head close to my son's,” she writes in *The Night Lake*, “to listen, to be reassured, but I wasn't. I held my hand over his mouth. The air was still and dry.” EMTs fail to revive Fritz in their tiny cabin's living room, and Tichenor and her husband Jesse follow the ambulance taking Fritz to the local hospital in their car.

It's on that drive that Tichenor notes the lack of sirens. The ambulance sticks to the speed limit. “I knew. Jesse knew. We were both coming to understand that this was a show they were putting on for us, not for Fritz, who was not coming back.” On that drive, Tichenor first glimpses the night lake, a nighttime vision of Lake Tahoe. The beautiful body of water was suddenly “impenetrable,” she writes, “a blackness that I wished would swallow me whole.”

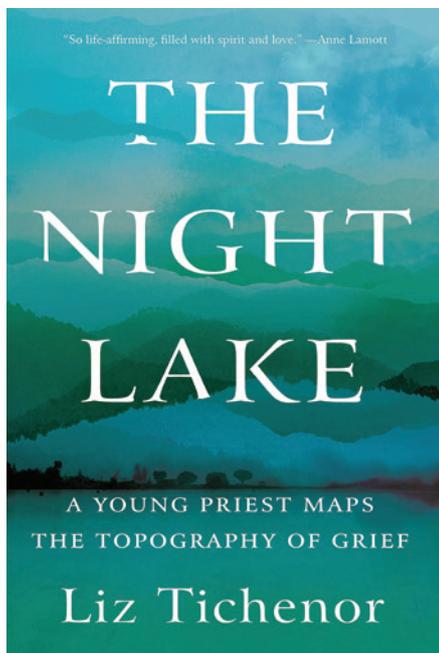
Tichenor does not shy away from chronicling the depths of her devastation, but interactions with her parishioners in the aftermath reveal the unique challenges of her role as both priest and mourner. She is moved from the role of comforter to one in need of comfort. Comfort is unsurprisingly hard to come by.

Tichenor reveals the awkwardness of the way our culture handles grief, especially among religious people. She writes of the bizarre aphorisms in the stacks of sympathy cards she receives. “The truth was that I was glad to hear from anyone, from everyone”—and yet she is horrified by some of the cards that arrive, bedazzled with rhinestones and glitter, assuring her that it was meant to be. “God needed another angel.”

She writes, “Laughing at these cards numbed a bit of the dull ache, if only momentarily.” Tichenor digs deeper, elegantly articulating not just the problem with shallow expressions of sympathy, but with the way religious responses dismissed and minimized her anguish. “Many of the cards tried to solve the problem of grief in a typeset line or two, rhyming if I was lucky, sometimes tying it up with some Scripture to offer a simple reason for my son's death, or sometimes attempting to defend God's honor.”

Tichenor is also startled by the willingness of some friends and family to enter into their grief for Fritz. She writes, “But some [who wrote], I could hear between the lines...actually allowed this death to break their hearts, allowed it to rend them into bewildering grief. They didn't have to be here, yet they were choosing to join me.”

This sense of being joined in grief



The Night Lake
 A Young Priest Maps the
 Topography of Grief
 By Liz Tichenor
 Counterpoint
 336p \$26

echoes throughout *The Night Lake*. Tichenor quickly learns how to distinguish between those she can trust with her devastation—her husband, her pastoral mentor, beloved friends from her days as an undergrad at Dartmouth—and those who “seemed to weirdly want me to take care of them, or who wanted to make it all seem all right, palatable, survivable, understandable, done.”

Tichenor’s grief is further complicated by her mother’s recent shocking suicide. Her struggle with alcohol, strange behavior and tendency to neglect Tichenor and her brother shaped the author’s childhood and young adulthood. What Tichenor thinks of as her own genetic predisposition to rely on alcohol haunts her in the early

days of grief. She eyes the wine bottles lined up on the kitchen counter of their Tahoe cabin but resists the temptation to use booze as a comfort.

Instead she turns to running. Pushing her body over trails that wind along the lake, she challenges herself to longer and longer runs as the time since Fritz’s death eclipses his short life. Running gives her something physical and visceral to focus on. Solo runs turn into races, increasing in length and difficulty.

Tichenor recognizes the limitations of her body as well as its capabilities, and tentatively she and Jesse begin to contemplate having another child. She writes, “I felt guilty for it, ashamed that I wanted another already. Would people think we were trying to replace Fritz? I had no interest in using a child like this.” And yet the “desire to raise siblings” remains a constant for Tichenor and her husband, and soon she is reminded of a strange vision she had the night of Fritz’s death. It was that of another child, a boy.

“My mind turned to the baby I’d seen on that awful dark night. *Sam*, I had heard, clearly, spoken out of the darkness.” Eventually, she becomes pregnant again. Day by day she manages her fear and anxiety, as well as that of her toddler daughter, Alice, whose limited life experience leads her to believe, understandably, that the new baby will also be taken from them. Together, they move through the pregnancy and birth of baby Sam, ever mindful of what has been lost, yet grateful for what has come.

Tichenor’s experience—her hard-earned perspective on life, death and resurrection—necessarily works its way into her ministry as a priest. Now

back in Berkeley, serving at her home church, Tichenor preaches at an Easter Vigil service. She writes, “I could not lie to them. I could not preach the light without naming the darkness, too. I returned to what I knew best, to the only way I could hope to know that Resurrection was true: the ways I’d mapped a path through darkness.”

In stunning, raw prose, Tichenor invites readers into a heartrending but ultimately hopeful story of grief, life and renewal. Returning to Tahoe to camp with her family, Tichenor and her husband take a daytime run around the lake, its darkness transformed into dazzling blue and then transformed again at night, no longer an abyss, but a bolt of “black silk cloth” held by an invisible hand.

Cameron Dezen Hammon is a writer and musician. Her memoir, *This Is My Body*, was published in 2019.

An Artist of Gratitude and Uncertainty

What exactly does a director do? We can see the work of actors and designers in a film or a play, and witness the action and dialogue crafted by writers. But the question of what larger intelligence might have shaped the experience for us verges on the theological; the director’s hand is both unseen and everywhere.

This was especially true of Mike Nichols, the peripatetic director whose five-decade career spanned live comedy, Broadway theater and (most famously) film, from “The Graduate” to “The Birdcage.” His style was famously both sharp and convivial,

MIKE NICHOLS

A Life



MARK HARRIS

Mike Nichols

A Life

By Mark Harris

Penguin Press

688p \$35

self-effacing yet unmistakable, and it yielded career-making work out of actors from Robert Redford to Natalie Portman, while bringing out the best in writers as disparate as Neil Simon, Tom Stoppard, Nora Ephron and, perhaps above all, the underrated comic genius Elaine May, his longtime comedy partner.

His vast and diverse career was overdue for a definitive biography, and Mark Harris has delivered it with the majestic page turner *Mike Nichols: A Life*. About the highest tribute I can offer this biography is that it is not unlike a Nichols film itself (one of the good ones, at least): rich, incisive, dense with detail yet somehow brisk, unabashed by darkness but oriented always toward humanity, connection, light.

The story begins in a dimly remembered Berlin, from which 7-year-old Michael Igor Peschkowsky and his brother were hastily shipped in 1939, reuniting with their parents for a typically hardscrabble New York City Jewish immigrant life of hard

work and difficult living, leavened by escapes to the theater and the movies. Young Mike added one unique challenge to the mix: Hairless since a reaction to a whooping cough vaccine, he spent much of his childhood and adolescence alternately bullied and pitied for his baldness, only coming into his own when he got his first wig at around age 14, after his father died suddenly of leukemia. The wigs would get better as his career path became clearer, but the elements that would create the character of Mike Nichols were in place. Directing would later become his way of being a father to others, and the anger and humiliation of his early life would become the fuel of a lacerating comic sensibility.

It is hard now to recapture the sensational impact that Nichols created with Elaine May in the late 1950s. The two produced a series of razor-sharp satirical sketches that they had honed at a small Chicago theater called the Compass Players and later performed to acclaim on television and on Broadway. That impact is hard to recapture partly because their prickly, urbane style became a template for so much comedy to follow, from some of the better television sitcoms of the '60s to the improv-driven sketch comedy of "Saturday Night Live."

It is also because so much of the duo's magic was of the you-had-to-be-there kind. This is one area where Harris, the biographer, particularly excels: recreating a sense of ephemeral theatrical performances that nevertheless etched themselves into the

consciousness of generations. Neil Simon's early hit plays "Barefoot in the Park" and "The Odd Couple," of which Nichols was as much midwife as director, seem old hat now, but Harris makes clear how groundbreaking they were as embodied stage works. Nichols distinguished himself not so much as a director of dialogue—though he was an ace editor in this area, as in most—but as a director of physical action, finding things for his actors to do that expressed as much as any lines could, sometimes more. It is a thread that runs all the way to his last film, the so-so "Charlie Wilson's War," when he had Julia Roberts unflinchingly do her makeup, including separating her eyelashes, while delivering a long speech about armaments specs.

We might not still be talking about Nichols at all if he had not kicked off his film-directing career with the one-two punch of "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" and "The Graduate." They were both defining works of the 1960s into which he poured everything he knew about contemporary American life, and both pushed the envelope on content in mainstream films. Though he would seldom be as central to the cultural zeitgeist as with those two films, it is striking how often he made work that could be seen as decade-defining, for better or worse, from the sexually frank "Carnal Knowledge" in 1971 to the capitalist Cinderella story of "Working Girl" in 1988, from the lively gay farce "The Birdcage," an unlikely blockbuster in 1996, to the magisterial two-part film for HBO, "Angels in America," in 2003.

It is also striking how much he kept coming back to the theater, right up to his triumphant 2012 staging of "Death of a Salesman"; his biggest stage hit

was, remarkably, 2004's "Spamalot," a rollicking stage simulation of Monty Python. A bit away from the spotlight, Harris quietly makes a case for two projects that belie Nichols's reputation for glittering comedies and dramas among the well-heeled class to which he belonged: "Streamers," a grippingly visceral stage play from 1976 by David Rabe about violence among Vietnam-era soldiers in training, and "Silkwood," a hugely underrated (and currently un-streamable) film from 1983 about a nuclear-power whistleblower, which began a fruitful association with Meryl Streep.

Streep is one of a long series of female collaborators with whom Nichols bonded, starting with May and including Ephron and Emma Thompson. While he also formed strong bonds with men, and retained many of the sexist attitudes typical of show business men of his generation, Nichols had a gift for sensitive and attentive listening that earned his actors' trust. As Audra McDonald, whom he directed in a film version of the play "Wit," puts it, "You didn't feel the direction. He did it so subtly that it felt like he was just lightly touching a ball that was already rolling down a hill." Nichols might be describing his own knack for inspiring solidarity among his creative teams when he says of Streep's rapport with a film crew, "She just somehow moved her soul around."

This all describes Nichols at his best, when he felt engaged by the work at hand. Harris also details a series of misbegotten productions, from "Day of the Dolphin" to "Wolf," for which Nichols was poorly suited and in which his vaunted talents for camaraderie were noticeably lacking.

Nor does Harris skimp on the de-

tails of Nichols's profligate life. Like many who go overnight from poverty to wealth, as he did with the success of Nichols and May, he became a compulsive big spender on everything from Arabian horses to luxury apartments. He was also married four times, the last time to newscaster Diane Sawyer. His addictive personality led to a dangerous dependence on cocaine, but most often found its expression in his attachment to his work. Some of his most disastrous projects, as well as the good ones, came about because he was simply "itching to direct," a job he realized early on "that I would never use up. This was something I knew I could never tire of."

One of the book's subtle but consistent threads is that under all this personal and professional restlessness was a deeply buried survivor's guilt. Meeting a fellow refugee from the Holocaust late in life, Nichols recognizes that he had been in "flight from himself" since he was a bald Jewish kid on a ship to America. Though Harris doesn't make the connection explicit, this deep background may explain the rich resonance of Nichols's best work: It has both the awed, smiling gratitude of a newcomer to a country full of wonders and, like the lovers fleeing on the bus at the end of "The Graduate," an abiding uncertainty about what to do with that abundance. All you can do is hold hands with the equally frightened person next to you until you reach your destination. No one knows what the director has in store.

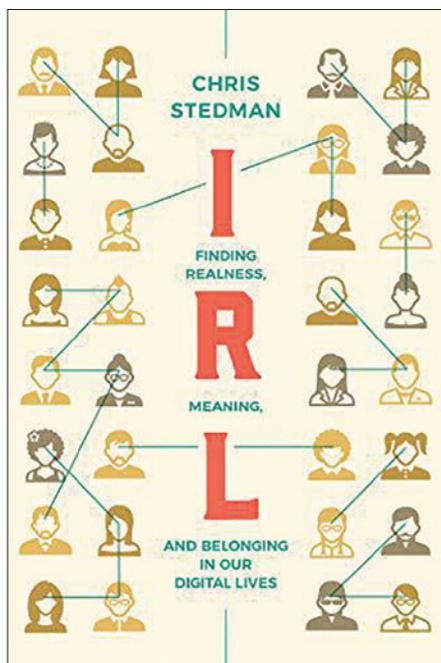
Rob Weinert-Kendt, an arts journalist and editor of *American Theatre* magazine, has written for *The New York Times* and *Time Out New York*.

Finding Community Online

As we move into the second year of the Covid-19 pandemic, shifting our work and personal lives from "real life" to working and socializing almost entirely online, the question of how our identities are changing because of increased time in digital spaces is more timely than ever. Chris Stedman, who has spent years thinking and writing about online life and its impact on our ideas of self and interpersonal relationships, is the perfect guide to unpacking what identity means in the digital age with his new book, *IRL: Finding Realness, Meaning, and Belonging in Our Digital Lives*.

A breakup and an unexpected illness led Stedman on a quest to understand the psychology and sociology behind how our online identities are constructed through social media. As a gay teen, he found on the internet spaces to share his identity with other L.G.B.T. young people; but as an adult, he often found himself editing and censoring his personality in social media posts.

This narrative of a curated, performed identity feels particularly poignant in the pandemic, when many of us rely on the internet for social connection instead of finding it "in real life" (the "IRL" of the title). On one social media platform, like Instagram, we might be more concerned with filters and making our lives appear desirable and attractive. On another, like Facebook, we might be rolling our eyes at someone's political posturing even while we're doing our own political posturing. On Twitter, we're probably trying to make the snappiest come-



IRL
 Finding Realness, Meaning, and Belonging
 in Our Digital Lives
 By Chris Stedman
 Broadleaf Books
 336p \$24.99

backs and snarkiest jokes while dunking on people whose opinions we think are ridiculous, all while espousing our own ridiculous opinions.

But none of these things presents any kind of whole or authentic self to the world, just fragments of our personalities that shift and change depending on the medium or the minute. As much of a bricolage as they are, the digital pieces of our lives, according to Stedman, can form “a mirror that reveals what we’re attached to, what scripts we follow, and how we understand ourselves.”

Stedman admits that while online life may offer “profound new opportunities to see things about ourselves,” it also leads us to an “impulse to broadcast an edited image of ourselves.” His accounts of the meaning of self-

ies at different times, and the impulse to take them in the first place, are both touching and funny because so many of us have also used this form of self-portraiture to share our “real” emotions with the world, only to slap on layers of filters until the person in the photo is no longer recognizable.

FOMO, the “fear of missing out” that we experienced before the pandemic when looking at other people’s Instagrammed dinners and vacations, has only become a more painful sensation because we know those dinners and vacations are now putting people’s lives at risk. But a photo of a person eating alone, traveling alone or watching Netflix alone doesn’t feel worth sharing when no one is going to “like” that part of our lives. The more we perform and curate an identity online, the more we lose touch with the flawed, human part of ourselves that craves connection in the first place.

Of course, this longing for connection and its impact on how we behave is not exclusive to online spaces or to the pandemic. There is always going to be a “public-facing” version of ourselves, ironed and polished and groomed, and a private version, sloppily cleaning our fingers of Cheeto dust by wiping them on our sweatpants. While there are obvious psychological and social ramifications to the ways the internet compounds our sense of having a divided identity, Stedman’s book adds another layer to his blend of storytelling, research and investigative journalism: spirituality.

As the former humanist chaplain at Yale and Harvard and the author of a previous book, *Faithiest*, that made the case for nonreligious people being included in conversations about faith and spirituality, Stedman has been

writing about the meaning of faith and religion for years. He is an expert guide for readers who are moving through the shifts many people are making from religious affiliation to seeking “meaning, purpose, and a sense of realness” on the margins of (or outside of) religions, including in online communities. In the pandemic, when we cannot gather in person, many people have felt their ties to religion fraying and fracturing. How the internet plays a role in this disaffiliation is a question Stedman wrestles with and unpacks throughout the book.

Younger adults, who increasingly identify as religious “nones,” use the internet not just to find the kind of community religion used to provide before American religion became politically polarized, but also to find civic engagement and socializing. But, according to Stedman, nones also embrace the internet for its potential to help us know ourselves better. “New elements of our humanity may emerge” from our collective movement toward more individualized identities, but the view into other people’s very different lives that the internet offers us may be “an important part of becoming more fully human.”

In these pandemic days, however, all of us, regardless of religious identity or lack thereof, are seeking the same things online: connection, guidance, solidarity. But who we are when we go looking, and how the internet changes our sense of self, are the ideas Stedman’s book can help us untangle. Writers and philosophers from Marcus Aurelius to Thomas Merton have wrestled with this notion of the “authentic” self. Stedman’s book is another guide to help us move past the idea that simply sharing things on the internet is enough to connect us, and

into using that same internet sharing as a space for vulnerability that might actually open us up to more authentic relationships online.

Stedman reminds us, however, that authenticity can happen only with an understanding of how the internet actually works, how it is designed to be addictive and to make us want to buy things. “The irony of turning to profit-motivated platforms for meaning and belonging,” he says, is that those very platforms are the things currently helping us to understand our own desires and longings. The more we are able to be aware of the dangers online life poses to our quest for self-knowledge, the more we can enable ourselves and others to avoid those dangers.

Ultimately, Stedman leads us to understand that while the internet is full of pitfalls, it is still capable of connecting us to one another and of helping us deepen our relationships to ourselves through self-reflection. “If you believe that understanding the experiences of people who are different from you is an important part of becoming more fully human,” he writes, the ties we can build online are essential. But this requires an effort to “use social media well, to wield its power carefully and mindfully.” In a moment when many of those in power have been doing the opposite, and doing damage as a result, Stedman’s humorous, thoughtful guide to how we can rehumanize the online world is needed more than ever.

Kaya Oakes, a contributing writer for *America*, teaches writing at the University of California, Berkeley. Her fifth book, *The Defiant Middle*, will be released in the fall of 2021.

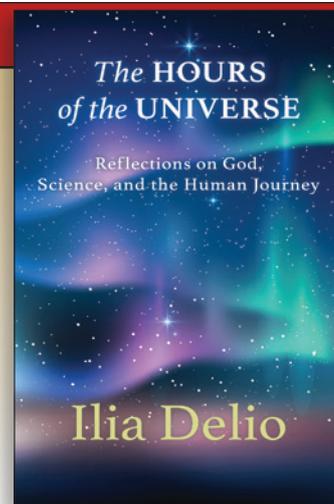
In the Grip of Serious Threat, With No Screens

If you are reading this in the ever-lengthening middle of the Covid-19 pandemic, I will assume it has been a while since you’ve been on an airplane. This makes the beginning of Don DeLillo’s new novel, *The Silence*, all the more intriguing and unsettling at the same time—a combination very much in keeping with the fused-together, competing effects that DeLillo’s work has long had on readers.

This story opens with an older East Coast couple returning to New York on a transatlantic flight. Jim Kripps “wanted to sleep but kept on looking” at the endless array of data points about time, distance and temperature displayed on the screen on the seatback in front of him. He knows better than to spend the flight this way: “Sleep was the point. He needed to sleep. But the words and numbers kept coming.” Meanwhile his wife, Tessa, a poet and editor, wonders how much longer until the flight attendant serves scones, which in turn occasions a discussion between them about how to pronounce the name of the baked good.

DeLillo presents this banal, listless decadence with a light and mordant touch. Here are people with lives so materially full that this is how they pass, and pass through, existence. They know it, and acknowledge they could both seek more for and of themselves and their time and place, except, as Tessa laments to herself, curiosity and discovery have been defeated by the technological suffusions of the contemporary world: “There is almost nothing left of nowhere.”

But those scones never arrive.



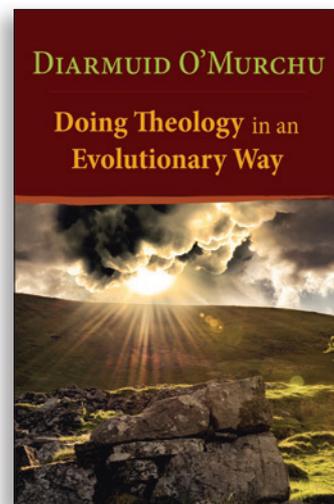
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Since the 1970s, Don DeLillo has been the wry and cool Jeremiah of American life. 🍃

Instead, the plane goes into extreme turbulence that leads to a crash landing, and more ominously still, all the screens go blank, on and off the plane.

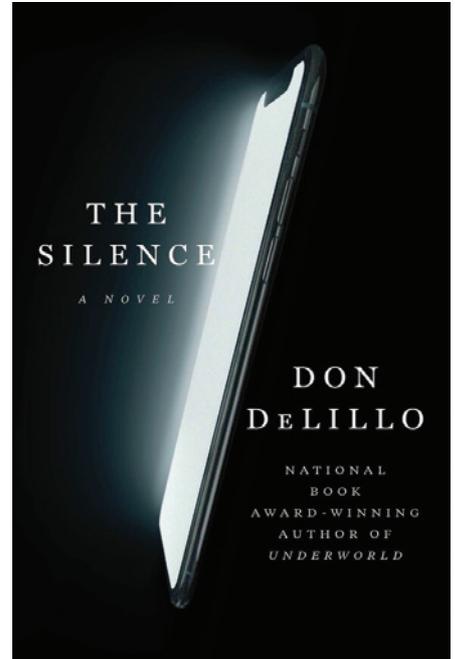
Since the 1970s, Don DeLillo has been the wry and cool Jeremiah of American life. His novels have enjoyed popular appeal and critical acclaim for exposing the personal and civilizational tensions of living amid endless material excess, unremitting cultural decay and permanent existential dread—either because the excess is all there is to live for thanks to the decay, or because none of it matters in the face of looming, large-scale disasters.

In *White Noise* (1985), a passive-aggressive professor tries to support a middle-class family life and organize an academic conference while an “airborne toxic-event” looms, posing a potential mortal threat made worse by government obfuscation and alarmist media coverage. In *Underworld* (1997), DeLillo’s most ambitious undertaking, various characters come to terms with the trajectories of life during and after the Cold War in some 700 pages that involve extended and intertwining storylines focused on nuclear missile technology and nuclear waste disposal, the World Series and the private longings and worries of both J. Edgar Hoover and a Bronx

nun named Sister Edgar.

DeLillo’s fiction features a great deal of deadpan satire and cultural critique. The main character in *White Noise* is a professor of “Hitler Studies”; religious figures, especially nuns, show up in several books and are always more self-aware, worldly and caustic than simplistic and sweet, perhaps owing in part to experiences DeLillo had through his mid-century American Catholic upbringing and later education at Fordham University. You don’t laugh outright so much as snicker during a DeLillo novel, just as you tend to shudder more than wince, especially because of his gift for implicating his readers in the very situations and behaviors he conjures.

This is especially the case when it comes to our disordered relationships to technology, the major focus of *The Silence*. To demonstrate as much, DeLillo suddenly removes technology from daily life and then asks the question, “What remains for us to see, hear, feel?” The provisional answers begin to take shape while Jim and Tessa are flying to New York to join their friends Diane, a retired professor, and Lucas, a building inspector, who are “waiting in front of the superscreen TV” in their Manhattan apartment for Super Bowl LVI to start on a Sunday night in 2022.



Diane and Lucas are accompanied by a former student of hers, Martin, who seems capable only of making small talk about theoretical physics and Einstein’s reflections on Jesus of Nazareth as a “luminous figure.” Meanwhile, Diane and Lucas try to make sense of the sudden technological failure that caused every screen they own to fail. A Chinese attack on American infrastructure? A natural cataclysm? Simply a failed power station? Eventually a bruised and equally confused Jim and Tessa join them. Accepting that they won’t be able to identify the source of the total technological breakdown, they begin to undertake the more demanding work of considering its effects on themselves and others. It is here that DeLillo’s novel becomes especially timely and provocative.

The novel’s publication in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic intensifies DeLillo’s representations of people living, uncertainly, “in the

The Silence

By Don DeLillo
Scribner
128p \$22

grip of serious threat,' who keep remembering life as it was. Self-confined to the apartment and peering outside for clues and evidence, the characters eventually learn that the technological breakdown is worldwide and affects not just phones and other screens but also the cessation of all technology-powered warfare. This makes for an uneasy kind of peace, and also new life: "People begin to appear in the streets, warily at first and then in a spirit of release, walking, looking, wondering, women and men, an incidental cluster of adolescents, all escorting each other through the mass insomnia of this inconceivable time."

It is good for book and reader alike that *The Silence* is not a Covid-19 novel but instead thematically adjacent. This creates space both to forge differential connections and identifications with our own erstwhile "inconceivable time," and also to imagine this same present situation without recourse to our assorted devices. Following DeLillo's characters in their cerebral, off-kilter deliberations about what to do with the suddenly available abundance of time and no screens, it is impossible not to realize how much of our time is filled in by technology these days, whether for information gathering or avoidance of reality.

DeLillo was born in 1936, and it is tempting to dismiss his new novel's exposure of our techno-addled tendencies as so much octogenarian literary ranting. Likewise, compared with his prior work, including his re-

cent series of short and simply plotted novels, *The Silence* is a slim and stark story that borders on scant storytelling. The characters are little more than hyper-ideated voices attached to upper echelon coastal demographics.

That said, DeLillo's deeper commitment to the status and prospects of the human person, under any kind of extreme condition, remains alive and affecting because of its assured ambivalence. Near the end of the story, for example, gloomy Martin turns especially nihilist, declaring that whether the streets are empty or full, screens black or pulsing, "The world is everything, the individual nothing. Do we all understand that?" DeLillo then tells us "Max is not listening." Instead, he's reclined in front of the blank television. What's he waiting for? Has he given up? Right now, we can imagine ourselves in his place, facing the same questions and seeking answers.

Randy Boyagoda is a novelist and a professor of English at the University of Toronto, where he also serves as vice dean, undergraduate, in the faculty of arts and science.

The Pope and the Pandemic

Lessons in Leadership in a Time of Crisis



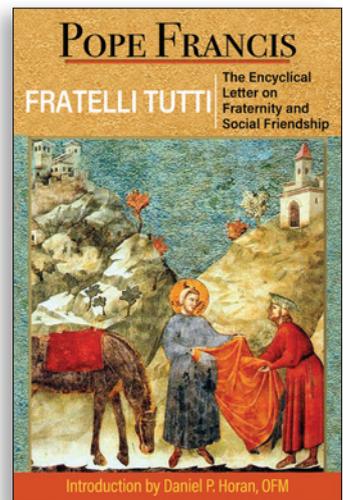
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What Kind of Catholic Are You?

Entering into the language of understanding

By Mary Gordon



There are a few questions that tempt me to an irritated, if not to say aggressive, response. “Was it different when you were young?” “Why don’t you color your hair?” But the one that requires the most self-control is one that people whom I know only slightly (or not at all) feel remarkably free to ask: “Why are you still a Catholic?”

The answer that usually shuts people up is that “the terms are large.”

My frustration stems from the awareness that for most people, *Catholic* means only one of three things: a regrettable tendency to lean right, an appetite for sexual repression, an inborn or early-developed talent for blind obedience. Or perhaps a belief on the part of the questioner that Joseph Ratzinger and I are on the same page, whereas in reality there are almost no pages that we are both on (except probably the page headed “Mozart”). Or maybe their failure to recognize the difference between the two popes canonized at the same time: John XXIII and John Paul II, one of whom was devoted to opening windows and the other to sealing them shut.

That brings me to my current project, a book called *What Kind of Catholic Are You?* I have come up with a series of couples, with each member of the couple saying that her or his ideas stem from his or her Catholicism—except that the ideas are diametrically opposed. So I link Bill O’Reilly and Stephen Colbert, Nancy Pelosi and Kellyanne Conway, Sonia Sotomayor and Brett Kavanaugh, Paul Farmer and Robert R. Redfield,

Anna Quindlen and Ross Douhat, Rachel Maddow and Laura Ingraham. Don’t worry: The list isn’t finished.

I have written nonfiction before, and I use the same muscles as I do when I write fiction, only differently. The pleasures are distinct, as are the troubles. When you are inventing a world, you can sometimes feel like Bugs Bunny or Wile E. Coyote when he suddenly realizes that he has gone past the edge of the cliff: There is nothing but air beneath his feet. When you must respect facts, you can feel overwhelmed by what must be selected from a daunting body of material.

I am very strict about the distinction between fiction and nonfiction. In fiction you make stuff up, and in nonfiction you don’t. In monitoring the differences, I like to give myself a title owned by a particularly frightening nun in my high school: Prefect of Discipline. In the case of memoir, I believe that the writer has a responsibility to question scrupulously whether her memories are accurate; if she is unsure, that needs to be marked, even meditated upon.

When I wrote about Joan of Arc, I had to respect what historians had said with much more authority than I. I had to make judgments from an avowedly amateur position. And I had a real problem with battle scenes: I simply couldn’t visualize them. My beloved late husband tried patiently to make models of them on our dining room table, using oranges for the English, lemons for the French. I still couldn’t see

it. He had to write simple narratives of the battles for me, and only then could I begin to digest them enough to render them in my own voice.

What Kind of Catholic Are You? brings a new set of problems, and oranges and lemons will probably not be of much help. I am writing about living human beings, many of whom have left enormous paper trails. I have many more affinities with some of these people than others, just as I have more affinities with some of the fictional characters I have created than with others. But I am not creating characters; these are real people with real lives not under my control. But I hope that some of my novelist’s habits of mind and language can be of use as I try to enter into an understanding of lives in some ways similar to, and in others very different from, my own.

Perhaps because of my experience as a novelist, I am really not interested in an extended game of *gotcha*. I believe that because the people about whom I am writing share with me a vocabulary, a set of images and shared practices (after all, when we hear the “Hail Mary,” we all know the words), there are some firm grounds on which we can all stand. And if there’s no firm ground, I have to mark that too. Just like Bugs Bunny or Wile E. Coyote.

Mary Gordon is the author of numerous novels, memoirs and literary criticism. Her most recent novel, Payback, was published by Pantheon in September 2020.

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