

America

SPRING 2022

THE JESUIT REVIEW OF FAITH AND CULTURE

SPRING LITERARY REVIEW 2022

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2022 Bernardin Lecture

Synodality as an Expression of the Church's Responsiveness to Christ and his Work



Bishop Daniel Flores

The Cardinal Bernardin Common Cause lecture series offers Catholic prelates a platform to engage people of good will in common cause with the Church on important issues facing us today. The Hank Center welcomes our 2022 Bernardin Lecturer — the Most Rev. Daniel E. Flores, Bishop of Brownsville, Texas.

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Welcome to Spring Books 2022

My first stint as an **America** employee was as an intern, 18 years ago. Among my assigned duties (another was to shovel snow) was to compose an informal literary history of the magazine in celebration of its 95th anniversary that year, in April 2004. It was a rewarding task in the long run, if somewhat monotonous in the doing. We hadn't yet digitized the archives, so I paged through 95 volumes of the magazine over the course of several months and composed a 7,000-word magnum opus that never saw publication. I give it now to new interns, none of whom read a word of it.

Nevertheless, the project gave me a sense of the magazine's history that has been valuable in the years since. It is good for morale to discover a new name now and again among the long list of distinguished thinkers **America** has published: Just two weeks ago, I found a trove of articles by Walker Percy. And it is good for humility to read a Jesuit complaining (a century ago) that the magazine was "entirely colorless" and that **America** "was accorded less respect by fellow Jesuits than a grammar class."

During my forays through those past issues, I discovered something else once I reached the 1960s and 1970s: Some of the names were familiar to me. Not just because they were famous—though there were more than a few of those too—but because they were still writing for **America**. Some of our contemporary authors had been publishing with the magazine for half a century or more.

My predecessor as literary editor, Raymond Schroth, S.J., wrote

his first article for **America** in 1957; he wrote his last in 2018. Robert Drinan, S.J., wrote his first in 1945, his last in 2005. Richard A. McCormick, S.J., wrote an essay on Henrik Ibsen and modern theater in 1952. Forty years later, **America** was still publishing him regularly on moral theology. Our longtime film reviewer, Moira Walsh, reviewed "Miracle on 34th Street" in 1947. She was still writing reviews in 1974. Are we a hopelessly retrograde operation by nature? Or have the editors done well to practice St. Ignatius Loyola's advice, *age quod agis*? (Roughly translated: "If the running game is working, don't switch to the pass.")

The Rev. Joseph A. Komonchak, ecclesiologist *nonpareil*, was first published in **America** 34 years ago, though articles citing his work on the Second Vatican Council appear long before that. He is interviewed in this special Spring Books issue by Kenneth Woodward. Father Komonchak is the co-editor of the five-volume *History of Vatican II* series that adorns the shelf of every Catholic theologian, and his conversation with Woodward, the former religion editor of Newsweek (for 38 years!), brings new insights into that council as well as our current church milieu.

Other insights into church history can be found in our "Last Word," a thoughtful reflection by Shannen Dee Williams on her experiences writing her new book, *Subversive Habits*, the first full history of Black Catholic nuns in the United States. Williams's account of the opposition she faced when trying to access historical records from those "invested in main-

taining the multitude of myths that undergird human history" is a reminder to us all not to forget some important questions: Whose histories do we celebrate and whose do we ignore (or erase)?

There is much more in this issue: A conversation between Ricardo da Silva, S.J., and Marcia Pally about the songs of Leonard Cohen includes weighty theological questions about theodicy, covenants and the theories of René Girard. (Yes, you read that right—there was a lot more to Cohen, the "high priest of pathos," than just "Hallelujah" and "Chelsea Hotel #2.") Mary Grace Mangano interviews Christopher Beha on faith and fiction. Benjamin Ivry wonders if the risqué author of *Madame Bovary* was actually a deeply Catholic writer.

Our book reviews cover a medley of topics, from Buster Keaton to climate change to Supreme Court rulings to college basketball to a primer on how to read well. Oh, and there is also a review of *Drug Use for Grown-Ups*.

As always, we offer deep dives into authors past and present, including looks back at the works of Joyce, of Faulkner, of William Least Heat-Moon. And an appreciation of Dante, who died 700 years ago, and so never wrote for **America**.

We publish these special literary issues in print twice a year, both as a chance to offer our readers a broader exposure to great books and also to allow us to chase after our own particular favorites from yesterday and today. We hope you enjoy!

James T. Keane, *senior editor*.



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A library in Lviv, Ukraine, March 14. The library has been transformed into a headquarters of the Ukrainian resistance where young people, adults and the elderly gather to help create camouflage nets.

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America | MEDIA

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Wounds, Shadows and Dribbles

Facebook has taken its lumps as a company and a community in the press over the past few years, and rightly so; we here at **America** have gotten our licks in as well. But we should also give credit where credit is due. One saving grace during the past two years of pandemic has been our ability to continue the Catholic Book Club in its online discussion form on Facebook. In a time when many of our in-person book clubs or other social interactions (when's the last time you went inside a library?) were severely restricted, we still have had a place to chat about books.

We discussed three over the past six months, each from a different genre and offering unique perspectives. First, we read Kirstin Valdez Quade's award-winning debut novel, *The Five Wounds*. Next we had a bit of a double-header: We knew we wanted to read John Gasaway's history of Catholic college basketball, *Miracles on the Hardwood*, but our Catholic Book Club moderator, Kevin Spinale, S.J., had a thought: Why not also read famed Georgetown University hoops coach John Thompson Jr.'s memoir, *I Came as a Shadow*? Father Spinale's instinct was correct—the two books complemented each other well.

All three books were reviewed in **America** in the past year as well, offering readers a primer on what to expect (though hopefully no spoilers!). Father Spinale also offered interpretive essays on the books and included discussion prompts for each.

The Five Wounds

In her review of *The Five Wounds*, Jenny Shank noted that the novel had its origins in a short story published 13 years ago. In 2009, Kirstin Valdez Quade published a story in *The New Yorker* about a man named Amadeo Padilla, who wanted to play the role of Jesus in his New Mexico community's annual *penitente* procession and crucifixion ritual. Why? To find absolution for his sins, and perhaps redemption in the eyes of his family and community.

"In her second book and first novel, *The Five Wounds*, Valdez Quade returns to that story and expands it into a tale of five generations of a Catholic family in New Mexico during the year of their fleeting overlap," Shank wrote. "While the short story dazzled with its humor,

verve, bold use of Catholic imagery and shocking action, the novel settles in, lets the virtues and contradictions of its characters unfurl and offers profound insights about how the stability of even a tension-filled family can serve as a saving grace for each member."

Many readers connected with the humanity and struggles of Valdez Quade's characters. "This book made me think a lot about various painful situations I have lived through," commented Liz Latorre. "While my experiences were very different from the characters, I found common ground when I thought about the possible value of pain." Julie Griffin appreciated the way that the character of Amadeo Padilla, "not the most astute of thinkers," nevertheless was able to discern in the end that "his pilgrimage/procession was really all about love" rather than vanity or needless suffering.

But not everyone was a fan. "I loved Valdez Quade's collection of short stories, including the one on which this novel was based, and so was looking forward to reading *The Five Wounds*, but what a snoozer it turned out to be. Self-indulgent tangents, characters that took forever to go anywhere," wrote Andy Simons. "Too predictable, with a very unrealistic Hallmark ending," wrote Michael Grout. Others objected to the occasional graphic sexual content of the novel; I'm glad we chose it over *Lady Chatterley's Lover*.

"This work reminded me of the works of Flannery O'Connor," commented Daniel Petruccio. "The flawed nature of all the characters and the ultimate moment of grace; also the constant theme of our need for relationships in our life. I kept reminding myself that we are all broken in some way and without grace we can't fix ourselves."

Miracles on the Hardwood

Of the 5,300 colleges and universities in the United States, 221 are affiliated with the Catholic Church. That's just over 4 percent of the total. Yet in the 2021 N.C.A.A. men's basketball tournament, eight of the 68 teams were Catholic—almost 12 percent of the total. On this year's "Selection Sunday" on March 13, the top-ranked team in the country was Catholic (Gonzaga); four others were in the top 25.

Why are Catholic schools so good at basketball?

John Gasaway explores a number of reasons in *Miracles on the Hardwood: The Hope-and-a-Prayer Story of a Winning Tradition in Catholic College Basketball*. He also celebrates some great moments and stories, from U.S.F.'s back-to-back national championships in the 1950s to the thrilling March Madness runs of Villanova in the 1980s, Loyola Marymount in the 1990s and Loyola Chicago in recent years.

"It is because of Catholic education: the whole top-to-bottom, grade school-through-graduate school behemoth that keeps going along as best it can," offered Father Spinale. "And at each level, in almost every main building, there is a basketball gym. Each junior high and high school has a court, and a team with little cost and maintenance save that of redoing the floors every year or so. Catholic college basketball represents the fruit of all the competition and fun that happens in those gyms at the heart of Catholic schools throughout this country."

This year's N.C.A.A. Division I Men's Basketball tournament provided a nice bonus for fans of *Miracles on the Hardwood*, as several Catholic colleges pulled off major upsets in the opening days. No team provided greater thrills than the St. Peter's Peacocks of Jersey City, N.J., who shocked #2-seed Kentucky in the first round before knocking off Murray State to advance to the Sweet Sixteen. Other Catholic schools with a shot at the title included #1-ranked Gonzaga (despite a second-round scare against Memphis), Villanova and Providence.

I Came as a Shadow

The most prominent coach at a Catholic college for many years was John Thompson Jr., whose Georgetown squads in the mid-1980s are legendary and who remains something of a dean of college coaching. In *I Came As a Shadow*, Thompson gives an unvarnished view of what it was like to coach at Georgetown—including the racism that he and his Black players endured from friend and foe alike.

In his interpretive essay, Father Spinale noted that "N.C.A.A. men's basketball remains a sport where a majority of players at prominent programs are Black, but the vast majority of coaches are white. Have things changed since Thompson's time on the sidelines, or are we still seeing more of the same?"

One reader noted that the "one-and-done" phenomenon where a player leaves school after one year to go pro means that players who might make excellent coaches do not always have the luxury of four or five years of experience learning how to be a college coach. "These players are leaving college, maybe without even graduating, or making any serious attempt at higher education," wrote Brian Lennon. "I don't feel today's players are being properly taught and groomed to become NCAA head coaches."

While the N.C.A.A. has made some progress in recent years, the numbers are still dismal: More than 50 percent of Division I Men's Basketball players are Black; less than 30 percent of their coaches are. "I'd like to think things have improved," wrote Liz Latorre, "but deep down I am afraid they are largely the same."

Georgetown's own head coach is John Thompson Jr.'s most famous collegiate star, Patrick Ewing.

We will make our next selection for the Catholic Book Club in the coming weeks. We are always interested in suggestions from readers for what to choose next. Are you interested in reading and discussing with us? You can join the Catholic Book Club at americamagazine.org/catholic-book-club or on Facebook at [facebook.com/groups/americanbookclub](https://www.facebook.com/groups/americanbookclub).

Happy reading!

James T. Keane, *senior editor*.



The Conciliar Church, Past and Present

Joseph Komonchak looks back on a career immersed in the legacy of Vatican II

By Kenneth L. Woodward

The Rev. Joseph Komonchak is widely acknowledged as the country's leading ecclesialogist. An emeritus professor of theology and religious studies at The Catholic University of America, where he taught for 32 years, he is the English-language editor of the five-volume *The History of Vatican II*. But in the tradition of the luminous ecclesialogist John Henry Newman, Father Komonchak's preferred form of writing is the essay.

A priest of the Archdiocese of New York, Father Komonchak was educated at its seminaries and at the Gregorian University in Rome and received his doctorate from Union Theological Seminary in New York City. His focus on ecclesiology began by accident, not design. His first teaching assignment was to teach the subject to a class of first-year seminarians. In 2015, the Catholic Theological

Society of America presented him with its highest honor, the John Courtney Murray Award, for distinguished achievement in theology.

This interview took place at Father Komonchak's home, a onetime chicken farm he shares with his brother, Andrew, and two large and insistently affectionate dogs in Bloomingburg, N.Y., not far from where he was born 82 years ago. His personal library is likely the largest in the village, which lacks a public library of its own. His most treasured possession: a complete set of Cardinal Newman's essays, sermons and letters.

...

Kenneth Woodward: *Someone once said that it takes 50 years to implement an ecumenical council. It has been 56 years since the close of the Second Vatican Council,*



CNS photo/Giancarlo Giuliani, Catholic Press Photo

The opening session
of the Second
Vatican Council in St.
Peter's Basilica on
Oct. 11, 1962.

yet it seems to me that Catholics are still fighting over how to interpret what the council did and meant.

Joseph Komonchak: Over the decades, we've had three basic interpretations. The progressive interpretation works within a "before the council/after the council" framework that gives bad marks to everything before the council and wonderful marks to everything after the council. Working with the same dichotomous framework, we've had traditionalists like [Archbishop Marcel] Lefebvre idealizing the church of Pius IX through Pius XII, with its rejection of modernity, and deploring what happened at the council and afterwards.

Is there a synthesis?

Well, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger [now Pope Emeritus

Benedict XVI] wanted to settle the interpretation question by proposing that the council be understood as providing reform within continuity: "Yes, there were differences, but that was the fault of the progressives who went too far, and of the media"—that sort of thing. I don't agree with that either, because he is making what the council was dependent upon the intentions of some of the protagonists. I don't think you can do that. So I wound up not agreeing with any one of the three interpretations.

So how do you interpret Vatican II?

I use three terms: experience, text and event. The experience is the set of incidents, encounters, initiatives and decisions that took place between the day that Pope John XXIII announced the council until the day that Paul



At Vatican II, Pope John XXIII was calling the council to take responsibility for “what the church is and what the church should be,” says Father Joseph Komonchak.

VI brought it to an end. So experience is basically “what happened” at Vatican II.

I remember that the head of the American Catholic hierarchy at the time was Cardinal John Dearden of Detroit—Iron John, they called him when he was a seminary dean. A lot of us noticed a very, very different John Dearden who came out of the council from the John Dearden who went in. He himself said it was the greatest experience of his life. Are you limiting “experience” to the experience of the participants in the council?

No. I would also say part of the experience of the council was how it was observed, not only by the Protestant observers, but by how it was covered in *The New York Times*, *Time* or *Newsweek* or wherever else. Plus, the reaction of Catholics back home and all around the world while the council was going on was transformative in some way.

You cast a wide net. And what do you mean by “text”?

It's simple. Text refers to the 16 documents that were produced in the course of those four sessions. They can be found in a moderately sized paperback book and provide a way, if somebody says to you that Vatican II taught such and

such, that you can say, “All right, show me in the documents where it said that.” So in a sense they have a fixed nature, although they need to be interpreted.

And “event”?

“Event” points to the impact of the council, as seen in a large historical context. I don't think there were many bishops at Vatican II who might be called revolutionaries; they certainly weren't expecting revolution. They were in favor of some significant reforms, but the impact of the council on the church at large went far beyond what they could have predicted—and often enough went far beyond what they would have wanted to happen.

How so?

Like the collapse of the Catholic subculture—the Catholicism that you and I knew growing up. That disappeared very, very fast—within a decade and a half after Vatican II.

Or became vestigial.

Yes. As the French sociologist Émile Poulat said, the Catholic Church changed more in the 10 years after



Vatican II than it had in the previous 100 years—which was true. You see it in the internal life of the church, in the way we worship, in the decline of devotions, in the decline of vocations and in any number of other changes, both positive and negative, that have taken place. So, the event points to the question of, “Why did it happen that what was intended to be a reform within continuity became, in so many places and in so many respects, revolutionary?” Say what you will about change within continuity, but that is manifestly not all that took place.

In a different vein, you have written this about Vatican II: “I think the council can be seen as the particular moment in which the Catholic Church became conscious of its responsibility for its own self-realization and eagerly accepted the challenge.” What do you mean by “self-realization”?

When John XXIII called the council, he gave it a task of self-reflection: first of all, for a spiritual renewal of the church; secondly, for

The Angel Speaks

By Matthew Porto

Even from here, I’ve come to know you.
My kind disapproves of my interest—
they call me *exoticist*, *colonizer*.


You know better.

You, standing still in the garden
with an idle shovel leaned against your thigh,
entranced by the jays’ squawk, by their movements
as they carry sunlight on their wings
into the darkening elm boughs;
and you on the subway car,
regarding the frozen tunnels with sympathy,
with recognition of a familiar pressure, of mutual suffering,
as the train lights shove the dark forward....

Most of my kind, when they come,
take pleasure in blinding you,
in watching you fall to your knees.

But I am here to say *Get used to the light*.

Matthew Porto’s work has recently appeared in *Poet Lore*, *American Literary Review*, *Salamander* and elsewhere. He lives in Boston, Mass.



My emphasis is always that the church exists only in concrete communities of believers. 🍒

the church to review its pastoral practices, its language, its relationships with others in order to be a more effective instrument of Christ in the world. On both accounts, you have a self-examination going on, the sort of thing that an individual might do on a serious retreat, saying, “I need to take stock of my life, what I’m doing, etc.” In effect, John XXIII was calling the Catholic Church to undertake at the council responsibility for who the church is and what the church is and what the church should be, what it should say, what it should do.

Well, that makes it sound less existential than the way it sounded to me when I read it.

The language gets some people nervous because if you read my ecclesiological essays, you will see that I am constantly insisting that you do not have a church without people—without, that is, the faith, hope and charity of the church’s members, who by God’s grace make the church come to be. In other words, there’s a human contribution. My emphasis is always that the church exists only in concrete communities of believers. And that means that we enter into the self-realization of the church.

In your essays, you work less with images or models of the church than with theological descriptions like this one: “All that exists and could be called the church, at least on earth, is a community of sinners gathered out of their alienation and division by the Gospel and grace of reconciliation, struggling to be faithful to those gifts.” Yet at Mass, Catholics recite a creed which says, “I believe in the one, holy, Catholic and apostolic church.” In what sense can the church of sinners be called holy?

It is holy by virtue of the gifts of God, the holy word of God, the holy grace of God, in faith, hope and charity. These are all gifts of God. It is holy also in holy people. You have the Gospel, you have the sacraments, you have the Eucharist,

etc.; all of those are holy gifts. That wonderfully ambiguous phrase, “the communion of saints,” the “communio sanctorum,” can mean either a fellowship or community in the holy gifts of God, or it can mean fellowship with the holy people of God. Because “sanctorum” can be either masculine plural [in Latin, meaning “holy people”], or neuter plural [“holy things”].

St. Augustine loved to quote two texts that are relevant here. One is from 1 John: “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” And the other one is what the church prays every day: “Forgive us our debts.” So we have debts to be forgiven every day. The day that we are going to be a church without spot or wrinkle, as Ephesians says, will come only at the end.

Well, how important are churches and ecclesiastical structures and communities?

I certainly believe, as Vatican II stated, that there are non-Catholic Christians who enjoy the grace of God—who are in the state of grace and holy people. The council stated that “the fullness of the means of salvation”—that is, beliefs, sacraments, structures, ministries—can be found only in the Catholic Church. It’s on the level of the aids to salvation that the difference lies.

But on Judgment Day, what’s going to be most important is whether we are living in the grace of God, whether we are leading generous and holy lives. And the council said that Catholics will be judged more severely because of the aids they were blessed with.

In another essay, you warn against twin dangers: abstracting the church from history, as if it lived outside of time, and reifying the church as if it were to be identified with the hierarchy, especially with the pope and his Curia in Rome. Are these still dangers, or have we muted them?

Oh, no, they’re still dangerous. I wrote that only five years ago or so. The language issue especially bothers me, using the word *church* to refer to the hierarchy or the clergy. The secular media regularly does, especially when reporting on the sex abuse scandal. But you see it in church media, too.

Later on, you propose thinking of the various forms that assemblies of Christians take—parishes, dioceses, synods and so forth—as “concrete universals.” What do you mean by that term?

I mean this: I think the Catholic Church as a totality exists concretely in local churches. There is no separate church called a universal church. There is a church which

is Catholic and whose web of relationships—founded in faith, hope and charity—is worldwide. So in that respect it is universal, but it is also very concrete. It consists of all of these people.

You've been concerned with developing a theology of the local church. You argue that catholicity—lower case—is not simply variety or diversity—James Joyce's "Here comes everybody"—but "a whole that interrelates and integrates": two verbs. Then you go on to observe that "particular cultures make a community a local church, but it is the word and grace of God, received in faith, hope and love, that make a community a local church." I like that, but how does that differ from the ecclesiology of, say, the congregationalist churches?

The congregationalist churches, at least in the American experience, tend to be jealously independent.

Baptist congregations even more so.

Whereas our congregations have a powerful sense of their communion with other congregations in a worldwide fellowship. And this includes structures of ministry: a ministry of unity within a local community, and then a ministry of unity among the communities of communities—the bishop—and then there is a universal minister of unity, the bishop of Rome.

I was thinking just of the papacy, Rome as a ministry of unity. But you're saying that on every level of the church, there's a ministry of unity. That might have also been what the great Methodist theologian Albert Outler was pointing to when at the close of Vatican II, where he was an observer, he said: "Ken, deep down, we Protestants distrust the structures we've created, whereas for Catholics, Holy Mother the Church is always, dammit, Holy-Mother-the-Church." Meaning, however much

Pope John XXIII leads the opening session of the Second Vatican Council in St. Peter's Basilica on Oct. 11, 1962.

CNS photo/L'Osservatore Romano



A bishop speaks with two lay women during a meeting at the Second Vatican Council in St. Peter's Basilica in 1962.



CNS photo/Giancarlo Giuliani, Catholic Press Photo

That is interesting, because 30 years ago somebody else pointed that out to me and I thought I had repaired it. I agree with a statement attributed to the great Jesuit theologian Henri de Lubac: “The church makes the Eucharist, and the Eucharist makes the church.”

Vatican II inspired the development of indigenous liturgies as a way of anchoring the church more deeply in the local church and its culture, especially in Africa and Asia. How well has that worked out, in your judgment?

When I first started working on the theology of the local church, I tended to make local culture the chief feature that would define the local character of a local church. But then a couple of experiences made me rethink that assumption. The first one occurred when I was brought in as an outside expert to the theological advisory committee of the Asian Bishops’ Conference. We were talking about local cultures when a priest from Singapore spoke up and

said: “I can’t relate to all of this because Singapore does not have a single culture. Singapore has several cultures, some of them existing side by side, some of them in various kinds of interrelationships. So what you are saying here is that there is a single culture in which the church would embody itself. But in Singapore, that doesn’t work.”

And the second?

The other experience was seeing a photograph of a bishop blessing bodies during the horrors of the Rwandan genocide in 1994. If there’s one thing that that poor country did not need, it was a church that was more Hutu or more Tutsi. It needed a church in which the differences between those two cultural traditions were transcended—transcended in the knowledge of the blessings brought to us by Christ.

So I moved from thinking that local culture is what makes a church local to realizing that the key that determines a church’s local character is historical. What is the historical moment? And what is the challenge that needs to be met by these people who are existing right here and now? In the midst of what historical challenge are people making the decision of faith?

That’s a major change.

You can’t abstract the local church from the historical moment. So if you are asked today, “What is the great challenge of the contemporary moment that the church

Catholics might criticize church structures—“This diocese is inactive, the bishops are all wrong, the pope and the curia are evil”—there is still a basic trust that the structures are valid and will always be there.

And that they always have been there, yes. But I think we Catholics could use a good dose of congregationalism! [The French Catholic theologian] Louis Bouyer said that after the Resurrection and the Ascension and Pentecost, St. Peter didn’t rush off to Rome to establish a bureaucracy. And that the church was, in fact, local communities replicating themselves when people went out from them and founded new communities. Bouyer used the metaphor of “cutting and grafting” to describe it.

Didn’t Vatican II address the relationship between the local church and the church universal?

Yes. In “Lumen Gentium,” it says the Catholic Church exists “in and from local churches.” So the so-called universal church exists—and I would say also functions—only in and from local churches, by which the council fathers meant dioceses. So the universal church is a communion of diocesan communities. And you could argue that a diocese is a communion of parochial communities, parishes.

In all these definitions and conversations so far about the local church, you haven’t included the sharing of the Eucharistic meal.

has to address?,” your first question must be: “Where are you talking about? Who are you talking about?” Because we have one set of challenges here in the United States, and the people in Mali have others.

How can the local church play an integrative role, as you say it should, in this overheated political moment in our history? It seems the only option for pastors is not to mention political issues at all.

Or to preach on it, and to preach on the divisiveness, and to call people to start listening to one another and talking to one another. That would be a responsibility on the part of a pastor.

Does Joe Komonchak do that on Sundays?

I have done it, but it’s difficult because you do have people for whom political commitments are more important than their faith commitment. When I preached on biblical texts on welcoming the stranger and the immigrant, I was berated for bringing politics into the pulpit by speaking against Trump.

The challenge is to get people talking to one another. You have to ask them to do a self-examination, to ask: “Do you even listen to the other side? Can you listen to the other side without disdain?” And I personally find it very difficult to do that myself.

This is an appropriate moment to go back to “Gaudium et Spes” [the “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World”]. What did that highly consequential document mean by “the modern world,” and what were the chief characteristics of that world? It seems to me that beginning with the events of 1968, here and in Europe, the modern world as the council fathers imagined it changed rapidly and dramatically, at least in the West. Do these changes make “Gaudium et Spes” outdated in that regard?

Well, I would say that the modern world in the horizon of the chief protagonists at Vatican II largely meant the world of the industrialized democracies of the North Atlantic—Western Europe and the United States—and outposts like Australia. The future John Paul II [Archbishop Karol Wojtyła] at a certain point in the council pointed out that there were at least two modern worlds, the world of the North Atlantic and the world of Eastern Europe, the world under Communist domination. And then other people began saying, “No, there’s a third world,” located basically in the Southern Hemisphere.

Yes, but those views all seem very dated.

In some respects “Gaudium et Spes” is dated. If you look at the kinds of problems it addresses, the perspectives of, let’s say, Latin America, hardly enter into it. So that was an important point that Wojtyła wanted to make, but it didn’t have a tremendous amount of influence on “Gaudium et Spes.” Still, that document is a serious analysis of modernity, and I don’t believe in post-modernity. I think we are still in the middle of modernity.

How so?

I think of modernity as the result of a set of transformations, embedded in the social, political, economic and technological revolutions that have occurred since the French Revolution—including the cultural one that relativizes everything so that there is no master narrative. We may accept that there is no master narrative; but if I look at the engines that transformed traditional society into modern society, most of them are still powerful, especially in science and technology. That’s why I don’t think the reign of modernity is over.

Throughout your ecclesiology, you emphasize the importance of the laity. You write that “lay Christians in particular cannot be solely passive beneficiaries but are protagonists of the church’s social doctrines at the vital moment of its implementation.” If that is so, what defense can be made of Catholic politicians who support and advance abortion rights, which is so clearly contrary to the social teachings of the church since at least the second century?

The people who are threatening Catholic politicians with denying them Communion are often ignoring the complexity of political existence and ignoring what St. Thomas Aquinas taught, that the closer you come to the concrete moral situation, the less certain you can be.

Can you spell that out?

I would say that a Catholic ought to believe that abortion, at least at a certain stage, is the taking of a human life. That’s one moral judgment. Another is whether that moral judgment should be implemented in secular law. The third is: Is this the secular law that should be implemented?

Also, it’s one thing to ask those questions when a majority of people are Catholic, another when Catholics are a minority. So all of those questions come in, and the farther down you come to the actual question of “this bill in Congress,” the more room there is for disagreement. And so I don’t think that that judgment is clear enough to be imposing canonical sanctions.

Pope Francis has called for a church-wide process called synodality. What do you understand by that word?

It's a term that has come to the fore in the last 10 years or so. Right after the council, the equivalent term would have been "co-responsibility."

Co-responsibility—I haven't heard that term in half a century.

It means that we are all responsible together for what the church is or becomes. All the members of the church have a role to play in determining what the church is and what the church says and what the church does. Right after the council there was some effort to create institutional forms of co-responsibility, like parish and diocesan councils, but they have been allowed to atrophy.

How many parishes in the United States have parish councils? And do they have anything to do? How many diocesan councils have ever been asked to consider anything really serious? Even the bishops' conferences have had their competencies restricted.

But we have had several synods of bishops—I covered some of them in Rome.

For the first 15 or so years after the council, the Synod of Bishops appeared to be a genuine instrument for exercising co-responsibility. For example, the Synod of Bishops in 1971 put out an important statement, "Justice in the World," and later there was a good one on evangelization. But eventually the synods changed character, and the choice of theme was always made by Rome. Maybe there was some consultation with some bishops, but if so, we never heard about it.

Secondly, there really was no debate among members. You wrote your speech, I wrote my speech; I gave mine, you gave yours. My speech didn't necessarily have anything to do with your speech. So there was no real conversation. The only conversation happened when the bishops broke into smaller groups.

But they reported back from those small groups.

Yes. But finally they were told what they could and could not recommend to the pope. It was understood going in that it was an advisory body, but certain topics were simply taken off the agenda: "You cannot discuss that, you cannot recommend this." What value does an advisory body have if it is told what it may and may not advise?

Why was this done?

Because they didn't want to put the pope in the position of

having to say "no" to a synod. They didn't want to embarrass him. To make a recommendation to the pope publicly is to pressure him, and you can't be seen as pressuring the pope—he should be absolutely free. Eventually the Synod of Bishops became a kind of privy council, so it too has atrophied. So all of those instruments for a genuine co-responsibility on the level of the entire church—of the parish, of the diocese, etc.—have been allowed to disappear.

What about the regional conferences of bishops? Africa? Asia? These seem to be more substantive.

Yes, they seem to have retained a certain amount of independence and authority. But I can't speak very confidently about that. I have to say that under Pope Francis, despite all the talk about synodality, I haven't seen noticeable improvements in the structure and functioning of the synods. After all, there are bureaucracies in Rome on the left as well as the right wanting to perpetuate themselves.

From what I've read of the German experience, the "Synodal Path" gives me pause. That is partly because I don't see in it any way to sound out lay Catholics apart from those deeply committed to one cause or another. Recent polls show that two-thirds of American Catholics were unaware that Pope Francis had further curtailed the celebration of the Tridentine Mass—a reflection of the fact that most Catholics have little idea of what's going on inside the church. So who is going to be selected to represent "the church"? Movement types? Special interest groups? The same two dozen people in every parish who are really involved in it?

The first stage of the synodal path is for the bishops to do a kind of sounding out of their people. But I don't know of many bishops who have taken that seriously. But let's say the local bishop were to send out a questionnaire on 25 topics, asking what you think the church should do or say about this or that or these things. You're going to have the splits: You're going to have EWTN Catholics and you're going to have The National Catholic Reporter Catholics. So whom and what do you choose?

But apart from a survey, how do you sound out the laity?

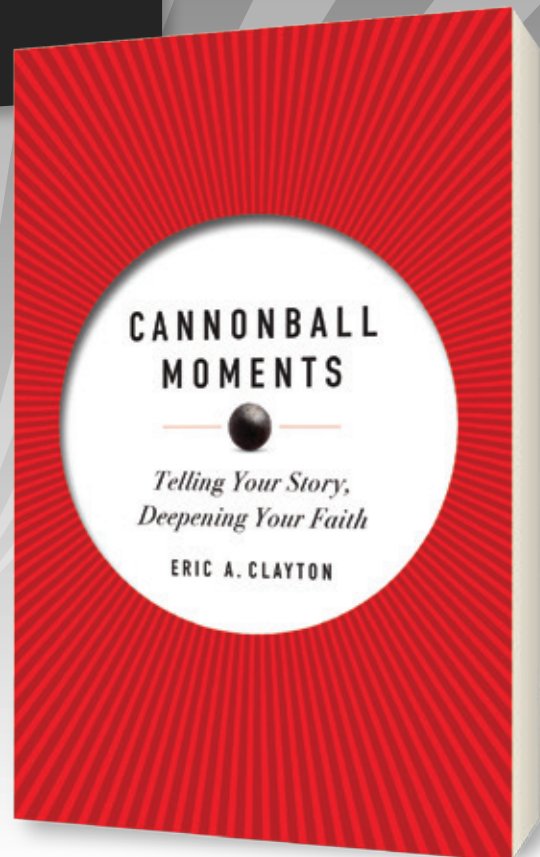
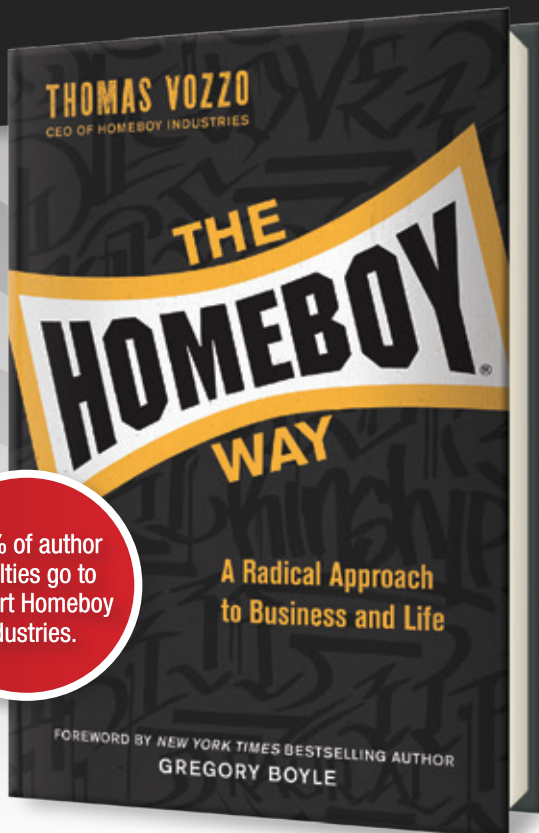
You might be able to do it if you divided your diocese into deaneries and asked each parish to elect some people to go to a larger meeting and then discuss it and have opportunities for input. But that needs to be prepared in advance. As long as it gives people the opportunity to speak up, you can say, "Well, you didn't take advantage of it."

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Any other recommendations?

I also think one of the important things is to give more competencies to local episcopal conferences to make decisions. You don't need to have a worldwide regulation on everything, and you should give more opportunities for local bishops to make decisions. And that too has been very much restricted. It took something like eight years for two or three Roman dicasteries to decide whether or not girls could be altar servers. And then they passed a regulation that is supposed to apply everywhere from Alaska to Zululand!

Pope Francis has said this synodal process is not a democracy, this is not vox populi. He wants to listen for the will of the Holy Spirit in these things. I remember covering two conferences once in the same week. One was a woman-church meeting in Canada, with liturgies for the onset of menopause and after an abortion, etc. The other was a Pentecostal group, Women Aglow. You could not find two more different groups; they both invoked the Holy Spirit, but the Holy Spirit gave two totally different responses. So I don't know of a pedagogy by which a group can discern the will of the Holy Spirit—do you?

I think rather often the Holy Spirit is invoked as an excuse for a lack of reasons for, or a refusal to provide

reasons for your position.

Final question. At the German synod, we heard, as we've often heard in the past, a call for a Third Vatican Council. Given all the work you've done on Vatican II, do you think the church is ready for Vatican III?

Councils don't just fall down from heaven. They have to be prepared, theologically and spiritually—not to mention that a future council would be meeting in a world, or worlds, quite different from the one Vatican II addressed. How local churches and their bishops respond to Pope Francis' emphasis on synodality will give some indication of how ready we are for a Vatican III.

Kenneth L. Woodward was the religion editor of *Newsweek* for 38 years and is now writer-in-residence at the Lumen Christi Institute at the University of Chicago. His latest book is *Getting Religion: Faith, Culture and Politics From the Era of Eisenhower to the Ascent of Trump*.

America

THE JESUIT REVIEW

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The ones who are searching for answers.
Who wonder: "Does the church want someone like me?"
Who struggle to vote for either party.
Who aren't afraid to ask questions.
We get you.

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LEONARD COHEN'S DARK TRINITY

By Ricardo da Silva

Marcia Pally on a musician's covenants

Musicians as erudite and long-lived as Leonard Cohen inevitably draw interest from scholars and fans of every sort, and it is no surprise that the books written about him could fill many a shelf. But perhaps more rare is the scholar who can write a book-length treatment of Cohen's life, music and writings through the lens of Judeo-Christian covenantal theology. When that exploration also includes a vigorous study of theodicy that bridges insights across theological and philosophical chasms as vast as the thoughts of Aquinas, Voltaire, C. S. Lewis and Cohen himself, the result is singular.

That is exactly what Marcia Pally, a professor of multilingual and multicultural studies at New York University, has accomplished with her remarkable new book, *From This Broken Hill I Sing to You: God, Sex, and Politics in the Work of Leonard Cohen*. The text is far from a typical sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll biography; it traces instead what the author sees as Cohen's commitment to covenant with God and other persons—as well as his struggle to sustain those

commitments. Of particular interest is Pally's chapter on Cohen's tortuous history of breaking bonds with women.

When I sat down to a Zoom conversation with Dr. Pally late last spring, she made it clear that she did not intend the book only for theologians or religion majors. "I meant for it to be accessible to anyone interested in how we live in the world, and how Cohen struggled with how we live in the world," she said. "He was a remarkable figure, such a great poetic talent who struggled with these existential and cosmological issues."

Pally's interest in Cohen began during her childhood in the 1960s. "It was apparent to me, immediately, that his music was of a quality and complexity that was unlike the other folk or pop music of the day," she said. "Working on this book has been a real privilege—even when I don't like him very much—because of the complexity and the layering of the imagery."

Pally's painstaking academic study of Cohen has added to the depth of appreciation and respect (how-



Leonard Cohen performing in 2008.



Cohen studied Buddhism seriously and delved into many other wisdom traditions. ●●

ever complicated) she holds for him today. She has more personal reasons for her study of Cohen, too. “A lot of Jewish liturgy is, in fact, poetry or verse,” she said, “and so it has contributed to the way I read liturgy, and can just stop and the worship service goes on, and I’m focused on certain liturgical verses—the way you would focus, for a time, on a work of art.”

Leonard Cohen and Covenant

While Pally’s latest work offers a thoroughgoing introduction to what she characterizes as Cohen’s covenantal theology, she is also able to offer a simpler explanation for the overarching theme of covenant—a biblical idea that may be perceived as increasingly abstruse for readers holding waning religious worldviews.

Pally draws on the experience of human relationships, and the relationality shared between persons, to make the concept of covenant intelligible to people of faith and of none. “Relationality means that we are constituted by our relations, in contrast to the picture where we are individuals and somewhere down the line we opt to relate to other people,” she said. “Rather than a Cartesian and post-Cartesian view of the completed individual who opts to relate, relationality holds that we get to be who we are through layers and networks of relations with other persons, with the transcendent, with our environment.”

“Some of those persons are nearby: mom, dad, family, community, school. But many of those persons who influence who we become are not nearby. Because the eco-

nomic pressures that we’re under; the pollution that we face; the stresses that we or our caretakers are under; the economic, educational, social opportunities that we have or don’t have are not necessarily determined by people nearby. So, our relationality extends in many directions, network-wise, through global paths of interconnectedness that are inevitable.”

Keeping and breaking these covenants in our relationships to God and others is, in Pally’s view, an important throughline in Cohen’s literary corpus. “This is the Cohen Trinity,” she said. “Sort of a dark side of Trinity: We betray God, we betray persons—as in the person of Jesus—and we betray, in a way, the Holy Spirit on Earth. And we betray that in the way we live in the public sphere, in the political sphere.”

For Cohen, his existential wrestling with God’s gift of covenant—the seemingly insatiable, if impossibly difficult, human desire to sustain relationships “with others, lovers and God,” as Pally described his triptych struggle at a virtual launch event for her book hosted by the Center for Religion and Culture at Fordham University this winter—is an enduring one. “He wrestled with this through all his writing,” she said.

Her observation is keen. In the title track from the last album Cohen released before he died, “You Want It Darker,” he reveals with poignance—even if initially mockingly—the burden that is the oft-harrowing human experience of keeping covenant:

*Magnified, sanctified be thy Holy Name
Vilified, crucified in the human frame
A million candles burning for the help that never
came.
You want it darker
Hineni, hineni
I’m ready, my Lord*

Hineni is Hebrew for “Here I am.” “In all of Leonard Cohen’s poems, *hineni* is the only word that appears in its original Hebrew,” writes the Israeli philosopher Moshe Halbertal, a colleague of Pally’s at New York University, in his foreword to her book. Abraham first says, “Here I am” to God when God calls him by name, even before God tells him to sacrifice his son Isaac—a profoundly trying moment in Abraham’s covenantal relationship with God.

But later it is also Abraham’s response to his son Isaac, when he is preparing to offer him up to God on the altar of sacrifice. For Halbertal, “this second *hineni* captures Abra-

ham's terrible bind," he writes. "Hineni is used in a person's response to God and in a servant's response to his master.... But such a stance of compliance and resolve, within the hierarchical context, might express either a wholehearted embrace or a defiant acceptance."

This is but a foretaste of the allusions and interpretations that appear to be at play for Cohen. "The rest of 'You Want It Darker,'" Pally writes, "is an incantation: 'Hineni,' I'm here, ready, my Lord."

Cohen and Relationship to God

Even if the beauty of his near-deathbed theology appears to attest the contrary—he died on Nov. 7, 2016, just 17 days after "You Want It Darker" was released—Cohen judged himself someone who practiced religion "in a half-assed way." That is not Pally's reading of Cohen, at least not entirely. "Some of the years," she said, "were not half-assed at all; they were a very serious study of Judaism."

Cohen also studied Buddhism seriously and delved into many other wisdom traditions, including Sufism, a mystical Islamic tradition. Cohen was ordained a Rinzaï Zen Buddhist monk in his 60s, and for almost six years he lived in a Zen monastery just outside Los Angeles under the tutelage of Kyozan Joshu Sasaki Roshi—a Japanese Zen master who was later credibly accused of sexual abuse by his students—and with whom Cohen had a 40-year friendship, perhaps the most enduring relationship of his life. "Though Cohen's life and art were littered with failed relationships," writes Pally, "this was a bond that would not be broken."

Perhaps Cohen thought his practice of faith was perfunctory because he seemed to flit between religious traditions. "Anything, Roman Catholicism, Buddhism, LSD, I'm for anything that works," he was once reported to have said. For Pally, Cohen was nothing if not serious about religion, and never swayed from his primary commitment to Judaism. "I think he saw Buddhism as a practice of discipline and Judaism as the font of theological matters," she said.

But Cohen was also more than a little intrigued by the Christian savior. "Four songs in Cohen's final collection, 'You Want It Darker' (2016), rely on Christian images," Pally writes, part of a six-decade theme in his work. In the very first song he released, "Suzanne," Cohen already had much to say about Jesus, but his recollection of Jesus' encounter with his disciples bears only a slight resemblance to the story as told in the New Testament.

And Jesus was a sailor when he walked upon the water

And he spent a long time watching from his lonely wooden tower

And when he knew for certain only drowning men could see him

He said all men will be sailors then until the sea shall free them.

Cohen's imaginative reflection on Christianity also led him to contemplate the Virgin Mary. In the first stanza of "Suzanne," the eponymous woman leads the listener to "spend the night beside her." By the end of the song Suzanne is passing by the statue of Mary that sits atop the roof of Chapelle Notre-Dame-de-Bon-Secours overlooking the St. Lawrence River harbor in Montreal: "And the sun pours down like honey on our lady of the harbor," sings Cohen.

In other songs, like "Show Me the Place," Cohen's reflection on Christian themes goes deeper:

Show me the place, help me roll away the stone

Show me the place where the word became a man

Show me the place where the suffering began.

Another Cohen devotion sure to endear many Catholics—and Montrealers, if these two sensibilities can be mentioned in tandem—is St. Kateri Tekakwitha. "Catherine Tekakwitha, who are you?" asks the narrator in the opening lines of *Beautiful Losers*, Cohen's somewhat irreverent second novel published in 1966, in which the now-saint was one of the main characters. "Catherine Tekakwitha, I have come to rescue you from the Jesuits," announces the narrator just pages later, only to return again to beg pardon for his offense: "*Pace*, Company of Jesus! F. said: A strong man cannot but love the Church."

St. Kateri also held pride of place in Cohen's Montreal home, where he said a statue of her was perched on his stove and where one interviewer observed an old portrait of her hanging above the sink in one of the bathrooms. "She is one of my household spirits," he told Winfried Siemerling in a 1990 interview. "I think she embodied in her own life, in her own choices, many of the complex things that face us always. She spoke to me. She still speaks to me."

While the character of "Catherine Tekakwitha (patron saint of Montréal), who in *imitatio dei* tortured and starved herself to death," is one of the obsessions of *Beautiful Losers*, writes Pally, "Cohen's interest is not in bodily

Leonard Cohen performs at King's Garden, Odense, Denmark, in August 2013.



erasure but to note that when we cannot attain/sustain the foundational bonds we need, we flail against ourselves in mad frustration.

"Beautiful Losers is a killing of broken bonds."

The Idea for the Book

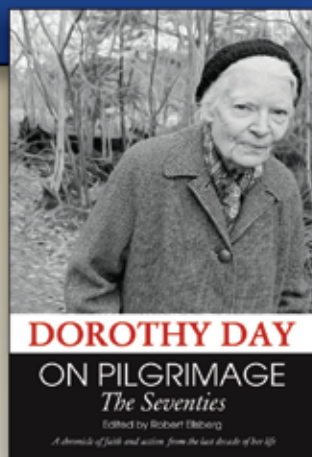
Alongside her academic commitments in New York, Pally also teaches in the theology faculty at Humboldt University in Berlin. She was awarded the German Research Foundation's Mercator Guest Professorship in 2019 and is now a regular guest professor. The idea for her book came after she co-taught a hit course on Cohen in 2017 (which she will reprise this spring) and was inspired to keep researching Cohen's life and writings.

The predominant religious affiliation among students at Humboldt is Lutheran. "There are Catholics and atheists there, and people for whom religion has never come up on the screen," she said. "But not a lot of people who are Jewish." So how does she convey the biblical relationship to God in a way that is relatable to those who are unacquainted, even uninterested, with God talk? "I explain it as a family relationship," Pally said. "It's not only that you

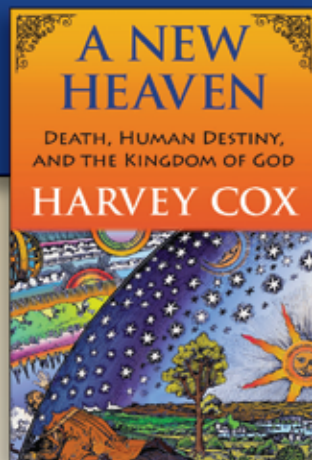
stand back in tremulous awe. It's more like you talk, you get angry, you have an argument, you are dependent, you cry, you get pissed off, you go out, you slam the door, you come back five minutes later and you apologize."

Leonard Cohen, she said, evinces this in his work. "He gets into arguments with God where he speaks for both sides of the argument—he speaks for God himself. He kind of speaks back and forth for both sides," Pally noted. "And so he has been able to illuminate, through verse and poetry, the seriousness of the commitment and then the seriousness of the dismay, also, which is the theodical plight, asking: 'How are we to understand these terrible things that we do, that the species does, how are we to understand that? Why are we so...whatever?'"

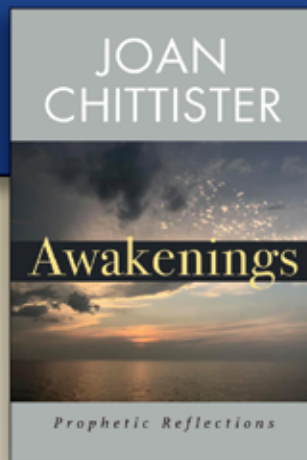
Cohen "has always illuminated the depth of commitment to covenant as understood as a simultaneous bond with God and with others, and then illuminated how frustrating that can be," Pally said. "I think it's because he is so devoted to God, and absolutely convinced that God has made us for relationship with God and others, that he is so pissed off that we break covenant and that God lets us do that."



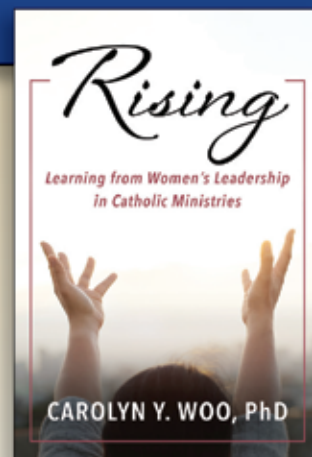
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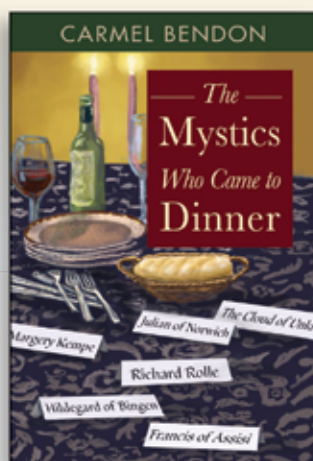
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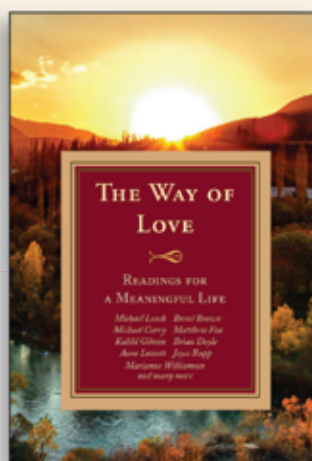
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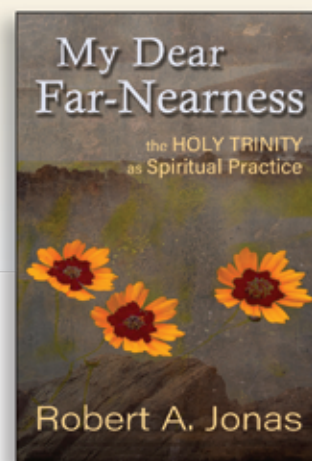
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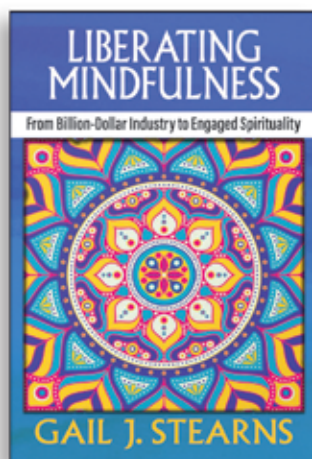
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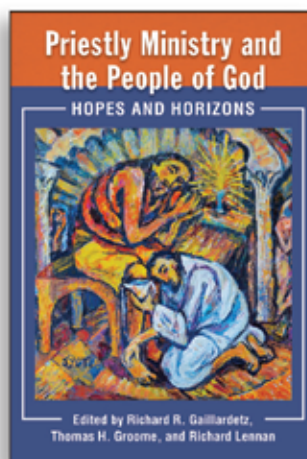
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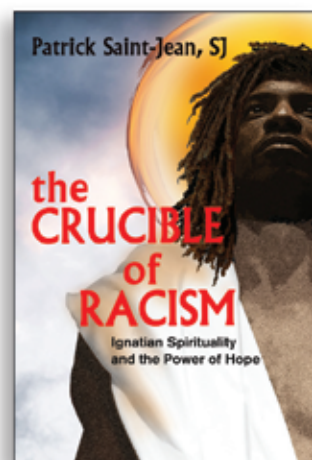
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Cohen was plagued by the magnitude of the violence that God appears to allow us to perpetuate. ●●

It can be easy to mistake Pally's deep study of Cohen for personal devotion. But that would be a grave misreading—even if her ability to just about instantly recall his written words, the ins and outs of his failed relationships, and the observations made of him by numerous biographers and interviewers could comfortably lead to that conclusion.

Pally responds unequivocally to any suggestion that she partakes in Cohen hero worship. “Not devotion, because there are times when I think he’s a nasty guy,” she said. “And I am angry with him for that self-indulgence.” Her observation of Cohen’s self-preoccupation is not unique. “Cohen was a narcissist who hated himself,” she said, quoting Max Layton, son of the poet Irving Layton, Cohen’s mentor. (The poet also said Cohen was “the greatest psalmist since King David.”)

“It’s a very, very shrewd insight,” Pally said of the poet’s diagnosis of Cohen. “[Cohen] is nothing if not self-aware. He really understood himself as something like the covenant failure par excellence.”

Cohen and His Lovers

To illustrate this, and Cohen’s treatment of women, Pally recounted his relationship with Susan Elrod, the mother of his only two children and a woman he never married. Pally called up the lyrics to “Why Don’t You Try” and recited them slowly:

*You know this life is filled with many sweet
companions
Many satisfying one-night stands
Do you wanna be the ditch around a tower?*

“The echo of ‘bitch’ constraining male arousal was unavoidable,” Pally observed. This is not the only example of

crude sexism and disrespect for women that Pally outlines in the Cohen canon. “There’s a fair amount of writing that expresses his fear that women won’t give him enough of what he wants, won’t satisfy him sexually.... And then fear that if they do, it will become an entrapment.” This is, in Pally’s reading, a “double-bind” for Cohen. “But a double-bind is not a bond. It is not a covenant or relationship,” she said.

Nevertheless, Pally admires the artist for his quest to understand his character flaws and his ability to extrapolate universal truths about the human condition from his failings: “There is a bit of narcissism in struggling with your own covenant failures, but Cohen understood that they are the covenant failures of humanity, and he very seriously tried to figure out why that was, and how can you trust in a God who makes us able to be brutal to each other.” This is the central problem for Cohen in understanding God, Pally said.

Cohen, Pally noted, was plagued by the magnitude of the violence that God appears to allow us to perpetuate. “Cohen was interested in the ontology of the cruel,” she writes, “in the capacities in human nature and God’s design that underpin it. What undergirds the Holocaust, as with the rest of our self-interested brutality, is the way humanity is made. The will to evil, *yetzer ha’ra*, is a free radical, able to invade any love and circumstance.”

Pally expressed Cohen’s frustration with God as a series of questions: “How is it that you created us this way? You, who could have created the cosmos in any way, how did you create it this way; where we perpetrate so much brutality and mayhem and abandonment on each other, personally and politically?”

At times, his anger with God is acute, which leads him to pen some of his most poignant phrases. “There are songs like ‘Night Comes On’ and ‘Closing Time,’” Pally recalled, “where Cohen is wondering whether God forecloses on covenant; whether it’s not just humanity in our fallenness that fails covenant, but whether the Godhead itself is closing covenant.”

But then in “You Want It Darker,” she said, “I think he comes to a place where he knows God does not foreclose on covenant. He does not solve the theodical problems of why we are created, able to breach covenant (to each other and to God) and able to be cruel and to perpetrate butchery and disregard and contempt for each other.” However, Pally said, Cohen “comes to some kind of uncomfortable brokering, where there is no perfect covenant because there are no perfect people. And God may seem inscrutable to us

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but there is no other God, as in the First and Second Commandments.”

Cohen’s Covenant and Girard’s Scapegoat

It occurred to me that Pally had, in many ways, found in Leonard Cohen’s life struggle and his resulting artistic production a flesh-and-bones example of overarching themes she had developed over years of personal research. Much of her academic work in the past few years has focused on covenantal and relational theologies and how these play out in the world: The title of one of her most recent books is *Commonwealth and Covenant: Economics, Politics, and Theologies of Relationality*.

Similarly, in 2020, she edited *Mimesis and Sacrifice: Applying Girard’s Mimetic Theory Across the Disciplines*, a collection of essays offering interdisciplinary approaches to the work of René Girard, the great French literary critic and philosopher of the social sciences. Pally’s own contribution in her collection is titled “Sacrifice amid Covenant: From Abuse to Gift,” and it appears to set up many of the constructs she has worked into her research of Cohen.

I found it curious to see no mention of Girard in her latest work, because Girard’s interpretation of the way societies—including Christian ones—view covenantal relationships seems so apt to read into Cohen. Could there be a nexus between Girard and Cohen?

“Mimetic theory,” Pally said, “as developed by René Girard, is best known for its negative outcomes—that we are acculturated within a society, therefore we are acculturated to value the same things in society and, desiring the same things, we compete with each other for them; and this leads to competition in society, increasing tensions, aggression, violence. And then societies have to find some way to deal with that competitive aggression.”

“On Girard’s view,” Pally continued, “societies dealt with it by selecting a ‘scapegoat,’ which is sort of a steam valve for societies accumulating competitive aggression.” But mimetic theory also admits of other, less popular interpretations, Pally explained. “Mimetic theory is how communities survive and how every single one of us gets to be who we are—we are all going somewhere,” she said. “We acculturate values, worldview, practices, norms, rituals, daily behavior. Our environment is not one thing. Our environment is a dynamic, complicated, always changing landscape of cultural stuff that we internalize.”

But what is responsible for the turn, Pally asked, “from the productive aspect of mimesis to the negative side, to competition that becomes aggression and vio-

lence? What makes that turn from the productive use of mimesis to the negative, competitive aggression side? Why does that happen?”

It is here that Pally sees a connection with her work on Cohen, even if she explores it only implicitly in *From This Broken Hill*. She was especially concerned with studying why, at some point, the productivity in each human community turns nasty. How do we go from a place of keeping covenant with God and others to breaking those covenants?

“Are we aggressive, so to speak, from Adam? From creation?” she asked. “Are we really a violent species from the beginning, or did severe, systemic, ingroup and outgroup violence come in somewhat later in the picture? Or, to ask the same question in theodical voice, ‘God, why did you create, or how did you create, the universe so that we make this transition from productive to aggressive?’”

From our earliest records of human existence, for hundreds of thousands of years, when humans were hunter-gatherers, there was a “very, very low incidence of aggression,” she said. But “there is a dramatic uptick in severe and systemic violence, both in the ingroup and between groups, rather recently—within the last 8,000 to 10,000 years, which in terms of evolution is an eye blink.”

What has brought about this sudden rise in violence? It has “to do with the development of agrarianism and sedentarism,” Pally said, “which brings for the first time surpluses [of food and other possessions]. And with surpluses, you have a motive to steal somebody else’s cache of stuff. Then you start to get aggression, associated with raiding and stealing, and then the development of social hierarchies. Who has been able to steal and raid more?”

Evolution and Augustine

Pally’s sojourn into this part of evolutionary biology and psychology “was interesting in and of itself,” she said, but it also raised questions for her in relation to Cohen that “sort of brought me back to Augustine.”

Why Augustine? “He maintained that we have a prelapsarian world of good; our materiality, per se, is not evil. That’s not the problem,” Pally said. “That gave me hope, and changed my question to God a little bit, so it was not so much ‘How did you create the world with so much possibility for aggression?’ Because perhaps God didn’t; we have hundreds of thousands of years where it was a smidgen of an issue.”

But, she asked, “How do we think of the brutality that has come since then?” Pally admitted this question greatly occupies and frustrates her. “And, of course, I’m not going

to solve that question any more than Cohen did. But these are the questions that rattle around in my mind, that are reflected in his poetry,” she said.

I wondered: All this issued from Augustine? “Well,” Pally laughed, “that may be overstating the case, because think about all the other things that he wrote about our fallenness. But he complicated it in a positive way; allowing us to remember the creation story, ‘And it is good, and it is good, and then it is very good,’ and that creation itself is not the source of our despair—or our frustration with God.

“I think we remain a species grounded in cooperation,” Pally continued. “Because if we weren’t, we would not be upset or outraged at incidents of violence. We would say, ‘Oh, isn’t it terrific? Johnny took a machine gun and slaughtered 172 people at Walmart today, pass the salt.’ If violence were normative, we wouldn’t be upset by it.”

My conversation with Pally also delved into her work in Jewish and Christian theology, especially in how we might think of the relationship between the Trinitarian persons as the perfect model of covenant. “I think that’s a brilliant and very beautiful model of the commitment and reciprocity of commitment of covenant,” she said.

That discussion led us to dip our toes into Pally’s pre-academia career—she was a professional dancer and choreographer for more than a decade—and her future hopes to marry insights from her days in dance with her present theological explorations.

“Dance is also the constitution of the dance by the relations of all the movements in it,” Pally explained. “Even if it’s just a solo, every movement becomes a movement in the dance only by being in relation to all the other movements and in the rhythm and dynamics and spacing, and so on, of all the movements. Otherwise, it’s just a poke in the air.”

It seemed fitting that we came to dance at the end, as it is clearly a topic that appears to bring Pally into dialectic with the divine in a personal way. Having heard so much about Cohen’s response to covenant, I wondered not only what Cohen’s answer was in response to our covenant with God and others, but also how Marcia Pally envisaged the struggle to keep faithful to that God-ordained ideal.

You know, it’s asymptotic. The point is to strive to get closer—or with more understanding. But it’s always asymptotic; you never get there. That’s like dance: No one has the perfect arabesque; you get better and better. And some people have arabesques that make you gasp when you see them perform on stage. But from the dancer’s

perspective, it’s always a striving, and the point is to keep striving.

Perhaps to think that we would get there or arrive at perfect understanding or the perfect arabesque is a bit idolatrous. Maybe that’s God’s work and not ours.

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Marcia Pally is a professor of multi-lingual and multicultural studies at New York University and the author of *From This Broken Hill I Sing to You: God, Sex, and Politics in the Work of Leonard Cohen*.



"One of the things that I'm thinking about quite a bit in this book," says Christopher Beha, "is the idea that faith is not something one can simply choose to do."

A Novelist's Journey of Faith

A conversation with Christopher Beha

By Mary Grace Mangano

In July 2012, just two months after publishing his first novel, *What Happened to Sophie Wilder*, Christopher Beha spoke to NPR's Terry Gross about faith, doubt, writing and mortality. Looking back on that book's publication and that interview 10 years later, I wanted to know if Beha's ideas, particularly about faith and writing, had changed since then. He agreed to an interview with **America** to discuss exactly that.

Beha is the editor of Harper's Magazine and has also published the novels *The Index of Self-Destructive Acts* and *Arts & Entertainments* as well as the memoir *The Whole Five Feet*. At the time of the publication of *Sophie Wilder*, Beha had left the Catholic Church. Since then, he has returned. I was curious to know what brought him back.

"There isn't a short answer and in fact that's the subject of the book that I'm working on right now," Beha said. "I sort of tried to give the answer in the form of an essay, and it turned into what's probably going to be close to a 400-page book. I wish I could easily condense it. I think I'd say this: Very soon after leaving the church, I came to be extremely dissatisfied, both intellectually and emotionally, with the primary alternative to theism in our culture, which is what I would call scientific materialism—a sort of mainstream atheism in its contemporary form."

While writing *Sophie Wilder*, Beha already felt dissatisfied with the options he had found: "I was in search of alternatives for a long time and it was an active search. I wasn't just occasionally troubled with the thought, 'Oh, I should really figure out answers to some of these ultimate questions.' It felt very pressing for me," he said. Part of the reason was that two experiences made him aware of mortality from a young age: He had been diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma, a cancer of the lymphatic system, when he was younger; and his twin brother was in a serious accident that almost took his life.

"What I can say," Beha asserted, "is that the Catholic Church had always been my home in very important ways.

One of the things that I'm thinking about quite a bit in this book is the idea that faith—even if you believe that it can be rationally justified—is not something one can simply choose to do."

For example, "You can decide 'It's going to be good for my children if I raise them within the church,' or 'It's going to be good for me if I display the outer signs of belief,' but those are obviously something very, very different," he said. "What needs to happen for one who has lost faith or did not ever have faith is a turning. A turning of the heart."

"But you can't choose [faith], I don't think. That's where I've come to," he continued. "I think if I were going to choose, I would have chosen Unitarianism or some kind of rationalist structure that gives you a lot of what people consider the kind of social or psychological benefits of faith, without involving you on a metaphysical commitment," he said. "I tried that for a little while and it didn't work for me. And at a certain point, I started going to Mass again by myself, not telling anybody except my wife. I didn't know what my intentions really were except that it was something I felt called to do. And after some time of that, I felt like a restless soul who had found my home again."

When Beha first began experiencing the symptoms of Hodgkin's lymphoma at 22, it took many steps to discover that he had cancerous tumors in his body, and then even more to learn that they hadn't gotten into his bones, which was important for responding to treatment. He knew his body was falling apart and didn't know why for a long time. "That's a lot for a 22-year-old kid to take in," he said.

I asked Beha if his illness has affected his understanding of suffering, and if he sees that showing up in his writing. He noted that growing up with a lot of privilege in a townhouse on New York's Upper East Side, as he did, he could have been insulated from many of life's hardships. "One of the things [my illness] taught me is that there's a kind of suffering that nothing can insulate you from, and that we're all vulnerable. You certainly can't be protected

I don't think of my writing as a form of apologetics. ●●

from it by material goods, by wealth.”

He was very lucky, he added, to have a family that could support him emotionally through his illness; to receive life-saving treatment in a country with access to health care; and to be among those who could pay for it. But the experience also helped him understand the limits of what we can do to protect a person from pain and suffering.

Many of Beha's essays in Harper's Magazine and elsewhere in the past few years show that his experiences with pain and suffering—and how they relate to larger questions of life's meaning—remain central themes: “Because God Did Not Relax: The difficult pleasures of William Gaddis”; “Difficulties Everywhere: Can Kierkegaard tell us how to live?”; “How to Read the Bible: The Gospel according to John (and Karen)”; and “The Myth of Progress: On John Gray's *Seven Types of Atheism*.”

In his interview with Gross ten years ago, Beha discussed with her whether every person has the “capacity for faith.” He had more to say in our interview: “Some people are kind of tone deaf to [faith]. I think there are people who do not actually have faith in God, but for whom the religious context makes powerful sense. They see a lot of beauty in it, and they get what's nourishing about it and all that.”

“Now, that's separate from having faith, but there are people that have that. And then there's some people, among atheists, who think the whole thing is just completely absurd,” he told me. “Could something come along in their lives that changes that? Sure. Certainly I have to believe that everybody ultimately has that capacity, that God would not finally deny people the possibility of belief.”

From observing people in his day-to-day life and having conversations with friends (some religious, others not), Beha recognized that some people understand on an intuitive level how membership in a religious tradition could offer meaning; others were simply baffled that someone who

struck them as an otherwise rational and intelligent person would embrace supernatural entities.

Beha's return to his faith did not make him think his job as a writer was to serve as a Catholic witness, but he acknowledged its influence on his work. “I don't think of my writing as a form of apologetics. I don't think of it as a form of proselytizing,” he said. “Writing is a central part of the project of my life, and my Catholicism is an essential part of the project of my life, so they are inevitably bound up with each other.”

“There are things I am trying to figure out about the world, and my spiritual, religious life is a part of the effort to do that,” he continued. “The honest truth is that most of the time I'm writing, I'm writing to sort things out for myself. I'm not thinking that much about what effect the work will have on the reader.”

Beha himself is a prodigious reader: He said that reading great literature is a central part of his day-to-day existence. (His memoir, *The Whole Five Feet*, is about a project he set himself to read all 51 volumes of the Harvard Classics, known as the Five-Foot Shelf). “A day in which I haven't spent at least a little time engaged with literature—not just reading something, but reading something that does the things that great literature does—feels like a lost day. It's a big part of the richness, the fabric of my life. When I'm not reading a book that I feel is engaging me in the way that great literature does, I feel like a less fully human person.” He later called this feeling being “soul sick.”

What are the works of great literature that have inspired him? He mentioned first Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. He first read it during a summer in high school, again in his 20s and then again in his 30s. “Now, at 42, I'm due for the 40s' reading of it,” he laughed. “I expect it will be a book that I try to read at least once every decade of my life. I just think you can return to it again and again. There's so much there and there's so much wisdom in it. At each period in your life, I think you can read it in a different way.”

Proust himself, Beha noted, described a great book as “a lens with which a reader reads him or herself. And I think that's certainly what that book does. You can always return to it because you're always going to be slightly changed from the person you were the last time you read it. And in that sense, it will be a new book because it will be reflecting a new self to you.”

Proust is not the only central canonical writer who has had a significant influence on Beha. “You'd like to have a kind of hipster list where you've got something that no one's really heard of, but the truth is George Eliot is very

important to me. Tolstoy is very important to me,” he said. “Dostoyevsky is very important to me. Henry James is very important to me.” When he feels like he’s gone a long time without getting something out of the literature he’s reading, he reads a short story by Henry James.

Among contemporary writers, he named Annie Dillard and Don DeLillo as favorites. Another recent treasure was *Lucky Per* by Henrik Pontoppidan, a Danish novel that was only recently translated into English. “It was written at the turn of the last century. He won the Nobel Prize in 1917. And the book is astonishingly good. It’s at that level with those people I was talking about: James, Tolstoy and people like that.”

Since he’s a fan of Henry James’s short stories, I asked Beha if he sees himself ever writing in that form. “My wife makes fun of me because I am always saying, ‘I’m going to start a short story,’ and it always turns into the next novel,” he laughed. “I don’t know what it is, I just can’t write short stories. I got an M.F.A. and I didn’t write short stories in graduate school, which is the time when everyone writes them. That’s what you do in those workshops. And instead, I worked on a novel in 50-page increments, which was terrible.”

Beha listed two short story writers as favorites: Mavis Gallant and Franz Kafka. He even somewhat prefers James Joyce’s short stories in *Dubliners* to *Ulysses*, he noted. But there is nothing like the novel for him as a reader. “It seems to be where I go when I’m writing fiction,” he said. “And every time I’ve attempted to write a short story, I either give up on it because it stops engaging me, or it continues to engage me and it becomes a novel.”

When he’s writing, Beha said, he abandons many of his ideas: “I definitely try not to hold on too tightly to whatever the original idea was. I let the process work itself out. But I often find that you kind of intuitively know when you hit on [something], when you start going down a certain direction.”

His latest project, mentioned above, is a book about his spiritual journey. “So I’m not writing fiction right now,” he revealed, “but I do have a sense of what the next thing will be, which I had actually already started before I decided to do this instead. And it started as a short story and now will almost be a novel.”

I was curious how being Catholic factored into the challenges Beha faces as a writer. “I work at a mainstream magazine. I write for mainstream magazines. I also publish much of my work in the mainstream press,” he said. “I don’t think that atheist literary novelists have it any easier than

Catholic ones. I do think there are things in my work that are important to me in what I’m doing, that get recognized in reviews by religious outlets, that don’t seem to get recognized in reviews by secular outlets. But that’s okay for me. I don’t feel like I’m misunderstood.” At the same time, he does feel that “there’s much in the culture at large that’s alienating”—a feeling he had even when he was not a practicing Catholic.

What advice would Beha offer to Catholic writers in 2022? “It’s tough,” he began. “I think truly my advice would be: Find a way to take pleasure and satisfaction in the doing of it. Because it is unlikely that the culture at large is going to give you external rewards for it. And the other thing is, even if they do give you external rewards for it, that’s not going to be worth how much work it is to do it well.”

“You have to do it because there’s something in you that feels a need to do it. And because the doing of it meets that need in some ways,” he continued. “And the nice thing is, if you do feel that way, then you’ll never quit, because, unlike a lot of other arts, it doesn’t take anything. You don’t need funding from a studio or supplies.”

Some artists, he noted, “embark on certain creative careers who get to their late 20s or then their late 30s or into their 40s, and they haven’t really succeeded yet. Then they’re faced with this existential choice: Do I give up on this or not?” Similarly, writing “is something you can keep doing all your life and get great satisfaction out of, and never ‘break through.’ And that’ll be okay. So, I think if you find that it signals that question once and for all, ‘Should I be doing this or not?’ Yeah—if you’re doing it for your own sake.”

Speaking with Beha about the need to understand the world and one’s faith—and how to write with that in mind—reminded me of what James Baldwin said in *Life* magazine in 1963: “An artist is sort of an emotional or spiritual historian. His role is to make you realize the doom and glory of knowing who you are and what you are. He has to tell, because nobody else in the world can tell what it is like to be alive.” Perhaps the past 10 years have seen Christopher Beha, in both his writing and his return to Catholicism, trying to tell us what it is like to be alive; and both are parts of the project of his life.

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Blue Highways appealed strongly to the baby boomer generation and became a metaphor for life as a journey.



ON THE ROAD AGAIN

By Jon Sweeney

William Least Heat-Moon's 'Blue Highways' turns 40

Blue Highways is one of those rare books that continues to define a generation. An autobiographical travelogue written by an author seven years too old to be a baby boomer, it nevertheless appealed strongly to that generation and became a metaphor for life as a journey—a very Catholic idea.

The year of his journey was 1978. He was Bill Trogdon, or William Least Heat-Moon, according to his Osage lineage. He was 38 then, on an extended road trip in a Ford van following a somewhat circular route around the United States, sticking to the highways marked in blue on his old road atlas.

This is how he memorably put it, at the start, from behind the wheel: “The first highway: Interstate 70 eastbound out of Columbia, Missouri. The road here follows, more or less, the Booneslick Trail, the initial leg of the Oregon Trail; it also parallels both the southern latitude of the last great glacier in central Missouri as well as the northern boundary of the Osage Nation.”

Do you remember road atlases? The roadways in blue were the older roads that had been made somewhat unnecessary by the appearance of red ones, according to the maps. But it was the blue highways that connected American towns before those interstates allowed us to bypass them. Heat-Moon's book was about not bypassing people, but truly meeting them, another very Catholic idea.

There was a bit of John Steinbeck's *Travels With Charley* in Heat-Moon's *Blue Highways*; like Steinbeck, its author was not even remotely a Catholic, nor particularly religious, but his spiritual sensibilities came to define American aspirations, if not actual Americans. Bill Trogdon was, in fact, a slightly depressed out-of-work teacher, separated from his wife, wanting to see something of the country he didn't know.

A decade later, he reprised the style of *Blue Highways*, but from the perspective of walking the ground, in *PrairieEarth*, a book that Bill McKibben praised as “the deepest map anyone ever made of an American place.” Reviewers compared it to *Walden*. Heat-Moon was our new Thoreau.

Blue Highways: A Journey Into America was

one of the truly extraordinary books of the late 20th century. It spent 42 weeks on The New York Times best-seller list. Robert Penn Warren called it “a masterpiece,” which was about the best blurb an author could get in 1982. I was in high school at the time. I didn't read it until one summer during college; and from that moment on, I wished I could see the world the way Heat-Moon saw it.

I recently heard that Heat-Moon is still alive, living quietly somewhere near Columbia, Mo. He is now 82. He makes the news only every now and then. Seven years ago, for instance, he and his wife Jan made a public gift of \$1.6 million to the University of Missouri for libraries and scholarships in the university's School of Health Professions.

While rereading his book for the third or fourth time, I really wanted to talk with him. A writer recently said to me when I told him who was the subject of my latest writing, “The younger me learned much about traveling and writing from that book that I still use today.” He expressed my own feelings. I had heard that Heat-Moon was famously reluctant to grant interviews—to my surprise, he agreed.

I know spiritual directors, pastors, religious educators and spiritual writers for whom *Blue Highways* was a formative book. It felt aspirational to the spiritual quest, and in the way that Heat-Moon records simple conversations with ordinary people, it speaks with a moral conscience about what most of us miss or have always missed. He showed us how to live deeply in a place with roots, or simply how to find connections when the progress of life seems to promote only fragmentation.

A Curious Interview

However, curiously, Heat-Moon himself was not then, and is also not now, a religious person. His laconic answers to my questions put a damper on my enthusiasm.

I started out by asking:

When you agreed to this interview, I told you I wanted to ask first and foremost



istock



Blue Highways spent 42 weeks on The New York Times best- seller list.

about the portion in *Blue Highways* that resonated with anyone interested in Catholic religious life, and contemplative monasticism in particular: your encounter with Trappist monks in Conyers, Georgia. I count a few Trappists as good friends, and one of my mentors, M. Basil Pennington, was once the abbot of that community. But that was long after your visit.

I told him that the conversations he had with Brother Patrick Duffy have stuck in the memories of many who read *Blue Highways*. Duffy was a police officer in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn with a lifetime of experiences before becoming a monk.

“Tell me why a man becomes a Trappist monk?” Heat-Moon asked him in *Blue Highways*.

Duffy said a lot of things, almost avoiding the question, until coming out with, “I began to want a life—and morality—based not so much on constraint but on aspiration toward a deeper spiritual life.” He had worked with aspiration as a cop in New York, and by helping some Franciscan friars in their ministries.

Still, he wasn’t able to come out with a clear answer to Heat-Moon’s question. And then, “I was moving away from things and myself, toward concerns bigger than me and my problems, but I didn’t really find a harmony until I came here.” I felt like I understood him perfectly.

I later read in an obituary of Duffy that his priestly ordination was in 1981. Years after Heat-Moon’s visit, Duffy ended up leaving the monastery to become a diocesan priest, serving happily in Santa Fe, N.M., before dying in 2013 at 78. “I’m just curious,” I asked Heat-Moon, “did the two of you ever talk again after the book came out?”

“We did not,” the author said. “And, by the way, long af-

ter meeting him, I heard that Duffy told a few folks that his appearance in *Blue Highways* had become ‘a pain in the ass.’”

“Arriving at Duffy’s monastery,” I said to him, “you describe yourself thus:

I was here out of curiosity, a spiritual voyeur, an ecclesiastical window peeper. What’s more, such cloistered spirituality made me suspicious. Dubious about men who sought changelessness to release them from uncertainty and turmoil, I questioned a faith that has to be protected by illusory immutability.

I asked him: “Did your talk with Duffy and the other monks change your mind? Today, do you see Christianity, or Roman Catholicism specifically, with a similar critique? I wouldn’t blame you if you did.”

Heat-Moon told me, “As much as I admired the monks’ quest and almost envied the comfort it brought them, they only enlarged my consideration of their existential views.”

“I have spent a lot of time at the Monastery of the Holy Spirit myself,” I explained some more. “Many monks there were friends of mine, particularly 10 or 15 years ago. One of them, Father Anthony Delisi, you also quote by name in *Blue Highways*. He was a character. Sicilian. I was once involved in publishing a book of his about prayer. He’s also now gone. But I can easily imagine him answering your questions in the roundabout ways that Father Duffy did.”

Heat-Moon mentioned in *Blue Highways* that he had started and stopped reading Thomas Merton’s *The Seven Storey Mountain*. “I just recently published a short biography of Merton with St. Martin’s Press,” I said to him. “You began to read Merton’s autobiography again while staying at the monastery in Georgia. What was it about Merton that failed to catch your attention then?”

I wasn’t going to get a start out of him. This Heat-Moon is a circumscribed character. His only response was simply, “I don’t recall other than to say I was curious about his thinking, but what he said about it proved, for me, not to lead deeper into my questions.”

I kept trying: “Have you returned to any reading of Merton, or authors like him, in the 40 years since *Blue Highways*?”

“I have not. Religion for me today carries little intellectual allure.”

Why was I bothering? Sometimes a book lives a life far outside the confines of its author. But I didn’t want to give up just yet.

I asked him: “We encounter American religion in many forms throughout *Blue Highways*. I realize you wrote about the people you met along the way, but you also must have been interested to meet and talk with those who exhibited a religious passion? You must have sought them out, right?”

“In Brother Patrick, yes.”

“May I ask, then, where were you religiously when you were writing? And how would you describe where you are today?”

“Religion then was of interest to me only when I met someone who could elaborate logically his views.”

So I pivoted to another specific example that anyone familiar with *Blue Highways* will remember.

“I’d like to talk about Arthur O. Bakke, who seems almost like a character out of a Flannery O’Connor story,” I said. “A hitchhiker, you picked him up—the ideal setting for an O’Connor story about a misfit religious figure. Then, to everyone the two of you meet together, Bakke says ‘Salvation is just around the corner’ or ‘Jesus is coming sooner than you realize.’ He was a Seventh-Day Adventist self-appointed missionary, and clearly a mystic.”

“I never did see any mysticism in Bakke’s thinking,” the author said.

“But you and Bakke share the hospitality of a stranger, in his home, the first night you’re together,” I said. “Bakke leads a kneeling prayer in the living room, and you describe, with embarrassment, losing your balance and falling over. You don’t mention any unwillingness to join in the prayer, however. Were you a willing participant?”

“Yes, out of respect for our host.”

“Did you ever hear from Bakke after *Blue Highways* published?”

“Yes. He wanted money for his role in the book. Of all the people I spoke with on the *Blue Highways* tour, this self-proclaimed Christian was the only person to do that.”

The morning after that kneeling prayer, Heat-Moon recorded this bit of conversation in *Blue Highways*, and I told him that I loved how he hears and remembers the ways that people speak:

I felt up to it that morning, so I asked about his work.

“Jesus hitchhikes in me. That’s the work. Luke fourteen: twenty-three.”

“I don’t know the Bible by numbers.”

I then reminded Heat-Moon of what happens next in

Blue Highways: Bakke pulls out his Bible and begins to read aloud. Soon, Heat-Moon asks him, “Tell me how you came to believe. Is it too personal?”

Which then led me to ask my author, perhaps impertinently: “Mr. Heat-Moon, do you believe? What do you believe? Is that too personal?”

“I believe in numerous things, especially science,” he said.

I still didn’t want to give up, but perhaps I should have. “There is one more character I want to remind you of: Fred Tomlins, the experienced pilot of 225 combat missions in Vietnam who flew you over Palouse, Wash., and the Snake River Canyon in a rented Cessna 150,” I said. “The two of you talk about absent clarity, and Fred reminisces about his time in Vietnam, saying that sometimes he misses it: ‘Not the war—I’m talking about the flying and how things were clear cut. Like the work. We all wanted just one major thing—stay alive long enough to get back home.’”

Fred then talks about game shows on TV and drinking margaritas as the things one might stay alive for. But rereading this passage all these years later made me want to ask Heat-Moon: “Has your view of life and ‘what’s next,’ changed over time? Where are you now? Is there a sense in you that you’ve stayed alive long enough to get back home, and that home may be a life after this one?”

Heat-Moon told me: “Probably not a life such as many people imagine. I, as do we all, come from cosmic dust which, sooner or later, will be my destination. But dust is also a temporary destination, one more way station in what may be eternal movement.”

So I simply said thank you. Was it giving up? Maybe so.

I was grateful to speak with an author whom I admire. But his answers to my questions left me unsettled. I wasn’t bothered by his lack of faith—I hadn’t been expecting faith or religiosity. But I had imagined a seeking heart and mind behind those obviously seeking eyes. William Least Heat-Moon’s conversations with fellow travelers helped to create the term we still use, “spiritual seeking”—one last very Catholic idea. That I didn’t find.

He was looking into the distance, now as before, but this time, it seemed, without much hope. In *Blue Highways*, when he stops to fill the Ford with gas for the last time, the pump attendant asks, “Where you coming from?” Heat-Moon says, “Where I’ve been.” And the attendant responds, “Where else?” I guess that’s where he wants to leave it.

Jon M. Sweeney is a frequent contributor to *America* and the author of many books, including *Feed the Wolf* and a biography, *Nicholas Black Elk*.



"The Barque of Dante," by Eugène Delacroix, 1822

Haunted by Dante

By Angela Alaimo O'Donnell

La Commedia and the modern reader's imagination

T. S. Eliot once stated "Dante and Shakespeare divide the world between them. There is no third." Even though Eliot was a modernist, writing non-traditional poems in the 20th century, he believed that this Florentine Medieval poet and this English Renaissance playwright had created work so colossal in scope and so original that writers and readers centuries later would unavoidably be influenced—and haunted—by their work.

There is no denying this. We invoke Shakespeare on a daily basis, whether we know it or not, when we use any of the many words and phrases he coined in his plays. "Method to his madness," "love is blind," "wear your heart on your sleeve," "heart of gold," are all his inventions, to cite just a

few examples. We all know a little bit of Shakespeare by heart. In addition, Shakespeare is ever present to us. His plays never go out of print and have been (with the brief exceptions of the Puritan period in England and times of plague) constantly in production since they were written 400 years ago. In the past year alone, two new versions of "Macbeth" have captured the imaginations of viewers—one a film showcasing Denzel Washington in the title role, the other a Broadway performance featuring a former James Bond, Daniel Craig.

Yet, inevitable as Shakespeare may be, even nearer and dearer to the hearts of Catholics is Dante. Perhaps this is because Dante's gift to us is more than literary in nature. In

La Commedia, Dante provides us with powerful drama and stories, just as Shakespeare does, and in addition creates a vision of a complete moral universe. His vivid depictions of *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*—and the creatures who inhabit those regions—gave the Western world images of these mythic places that would inform the imaginations of Christians for centuries afterward.

There are no descriptions of hell in the Bible, certainly none of purgatory and precious few of heaven. Dante was able to begin with a clean canvas and conjure the lurid particulars of punishment, the trials of purgation and the joy of the beatific vision in unprecedented detail, visionary depictions that would inspire artists as disparate as Michelangelo and Salvador Dali and poets from Chaucer to Eliot (and beyond). His eschatological vision, filtered through these many artists, has entered into our collective imagination and into our religious tradition, filling many a Catholic child with terror (myself included) at the torments of hell and the travails of purgatory. (I spent little time thinking on heaven, for some reason.) What we think we know of these dreaded places is largely due to Dante.

For the past year, readers all over the world have been observing the 700th anniversary of Dante's death, which occurred on September 14, 1321, and celebrating his most celebrated work, *La Commedia*, in a variety of inventive ways—including hosting marathon readings, discussion groups, conferences and lectures. Yet another way of honoring Dante's art, however, is to make more art—to create paintings, music and poems that channel Dante, but also challenge him and the world view he presents modern readers with. This is how I have chosen to honor Dante, though I confess, this decision came to me as a surprise.

The first poem in a series of poems that I would write inspired by *La Commedia* is a fan letter, of sorts, (there are worse things than being a Dante FanGirl) that opens an extended, daily conversation with Dante that would last for months. The sonnet serves as an introduction to a project that would take on a life of its own, one which begins with homage to Dante's bold decision to tell his mighty story in the form of poetry, rather than prose—a genre distrusted by philosophers and saints alike, including Plato and Thomas Aquinas.

Dear Dante

A poem ought to be free to lie its way to the truth.
—John Ciardi, poet & translator

All poets are liars. St. Thomas says so.

*Yet you choose verse to tell the truth.
We glide along on your easy terza rima,
each line, each hanging rhyme, pulling us
into deeper, more dangerous waters.
You can't look away, and neither can we
from the suffering shades, the pure agony
of unchanging pain for eternity. No
respite from the mind's and the body's fire.
If you hated your kind, you could not dream a
worse world than your endless Hell, a liar's
pandemonium no loving words can soothe.
Lured by your language, we blindly follow you,
pray none of the things you write come true.*

Talking Back to Dante

Last summer, in anticipation of the anniversary, I committed myself to reading a canto of *La Commedia* each morning. Since there are exactly 100 cantos and there are very nearly 100 days of summer—and since *La Commedia* is divided into 3 sections in much the same way that the summer is divided into 3 months—this seemed a perfectly poetic way to spend the summer. It was an intense experience, walking with Dante each day. Even on bright, sunny mornings, I found myself drawn into the dark world of the poem. The striking images would stay with me. Dante was not only in my waking thoughts; he began entering into my dreams. He became a ghost haunting the hallways of my house as well as the corners of my mind.

Given his daily presence, it should not be surprising that I began talking back to Dante—and that talking took the form of poems. What began as passive reading gradually morphed into a species of accompaniment. I began to write poems in response to the scenarios Dante conjured. At times the poems would enter into those vivid scenes; at others they would step back and interrogate them, especially in instances where I bristled at the judgment that was being meted out to the poor sinners Dante encountered.

Let's face it: the medieval Catholic world is a far cry from the modern secular one we inhabit. It's true that we have much in common in terms of the values we hold—one is not supposed to commit adultery, practice greed and gluttony, lie, cheat and murder. However, we tend to look less harshly on human brokenness and imperfection, to err on the side of mercy rather than judgment. In addition, there are human behaviors that Dante considers grave sins that our contemporary culture does not, such as homosexuality and suicide. Dante also tends toward intolerance of other religions. The fact that he puts Mohammad in hell is

enough to turn some modern readers away.

It should come as no surprise to us that the world has changed since 1321, when Dante completed *La Commedia*. And yet, Dante has bequeathed us a vision and a vast cast of characters that enable us to see ourselves, with all of our failings, our strivings and our aspirations. He has captured what is universal in the human condition, even as he was subject to the limitations and prejudices of his own time.

And so we read *La Commedia* with a double mind: we inevitably enter into the spirit of the poem as we are pulled into Dante's fantastic story, but we are also aware of the ways in which we are different from Dante. This tension provides a creative space within which to confront Dante—to let him know where we agree and where we part ways.

This was the spirit of the project I began last summer—to engage Dante in conversation, in argumentation and in appreciation. The poems that I wrote in response to *La Commedia* gave me the opportunity to place myself in his poem, to become Dante even as Dante became my Virgil—the pagan poet who guides him through hell and purgatory—and to deepen my understanding of this challenging poem.

I confess, at first it felt presumptuous setting my little poems beside Dante's Great Big One. But I enjoyed the proximity and the sense of intimacy with Dante, so I ignored those nay-saying voices and just kept writing. By the end of the summer, I had 25 poems—and more have come since. Most of them are formal poems, some of them sonnets and some written in Dante's *terza rima*—both forms Dante favored and the latter one he invented—to honor the master's craft. The sonnets included in this essay provide brief outtakes from our ongoing conversation and, I hope, the inspiration to (re)read the brilliant poem that catalyzed them.

Dante in Hell and Paradise

One of the more strident poems in the series confronts the fact of Dante's placement of those who commit suicide in *Inferno*. His setting these afflicted people among sinners who commit acts of violence that can never be redeemed is deeply troubling to 21st century readers, who understand the causes of suicide from a psychological and mental health perspective. (In the sonnet below, I attempt to suggest the relentless, obsessive nature of suicidal thoughts through the use of monorhyme, wherein each line echoes the same end rhyme.) The punishment of these unfortunate souls seems particularly cruel and unjust to our modern eyes.

Yet, interestingly, even though Dante the poet consigns

them to hell, Dante the pilgrim feels compassion for the suicides he encounters in Canto 13 of the *Inferno*, reflecting a complex double-mindedness. In fact, Dante spends a good portion of *La Commedia* weeping—the doomed lovers Francesca and Paolo, the Suicides, and the envious in purgatory whose eyes are sewn shut to keep them from temptation, among others, arouse his pity. This is one of the aspects of Dante's poem that moves us most—that even as he recognizes the necessity of divine justice, he doesn't lose sight of the humanity of those who suffer before him or of his own.

Dante Among the Suicides

*The poet [Virgil] waited, then he said to me:
"Since he [the Suicide] is silent now do not waste
time but speak if you would ask him more."*

*And I replied, "Please question him
about the things you think I need to know.
For I cannot, such pity fills my heart."*

-Inferno, XIII, 79-84



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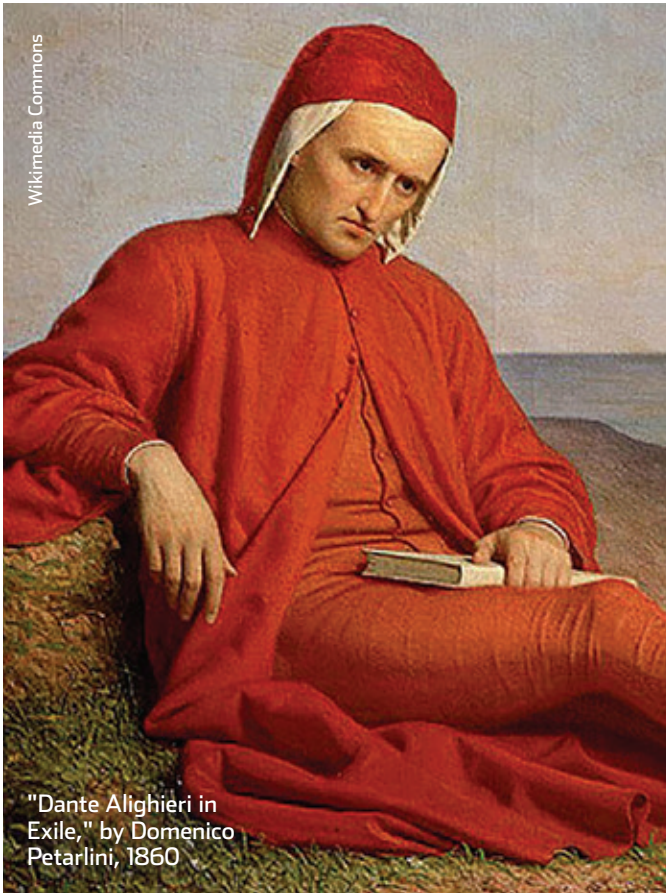
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"Dante Alighieri in Exile," by Domenico Petarlini, 1860

The forest of suicides the darkest place for Dante—and for us. The tortured faceless, their bodies are not theirs, no saving grace allows them to reclaim themselves. They are erased forever; their flesh become dead wood, disgraced for a moment's mortal error. No place for mercy in their Maker's mind, so base is this act in God's eyes. And, yet, encased in Dante's chest is a heart like ours, birthplace of love for the sinner in the face of sin. He's learning that life is a race none of us can win. We're all in last place. Some of us fall, can't keep the killer pace. Perfection is a dream the heartless chase.

Not all of the poems in the series address moments of darkness. Just as the pilgrim in Dante's poem gradually makes his way from the depths of depravity in *Inferno* to the vision of virtue in *Paradiso*, the "Talking Back to Dante" poems trace the same trajectory, leading the reader from hell to heaven, with stops along the journey.

One of the final poems in the series addresses a central paradox of *La Commedia*. It is interesting—and telling—that when Dante finally arrives at the pinnacle of Par-

adise and is bequeathed a vision of God, the Virgin Mary and all the saints, he is rendered, for all practical purposes, speechless. Mere words simply can't convey the beatific vision, and Dante finds himself in the awkward, ironic and somewhat humorous position of having written a 14,000-line poem that culminates in the recognition of the failure of language. For the word-loving, loquacious Dante (as for Shakespeare's dying Hamlet), the rest is silence:

The Price of Paradise


Henceforth my speech will be briefer, even about what I remember, than that of a child that still bathes his tongue at the breast.

-Paradiso, XXXIII, 106-108

The power of speech the price Dante paid for a brief fleeting vision of God. Words his instruments, tools of his trade, simply vanished. The stunned poet saw deep mysteries his tongue could not tell. The pyres of purgation, the horrors of Hell did not rob him as high heaven did. Lost to himself, he became otherwise, was rendered young and dumb again. This is what happens in paradise. When the soul encounters the Holy One there is no longer need for a poem. All you have written becomes mere straw. An eternity looms of language-less awe.

"Talking Back to Dante" is but one of many recent projects created to honor the master poet and his masterful poem. Writers and artists all over the world are penning stories and poems, molding sculptures, making paintings and movies and music in conversation with Dante. All of this artistic energy, set in motion by Dante, serves as evidence and celebration of the fact that *La Commedia* is a living work of genius, not some dead artifact or dusty museum piece frozen in time. As T. S. Eliot and the countless creative works inspired by Dante, can attest, *La Commedia* is very much alive 700 years after its completion and promises to charm us, challenge us and haunt us for centuries to come.

Angela Alaimo O'Donnell is a writer, poet and professor at Fordham University and is the associate director of the Curran Center for American Catholic Studies.



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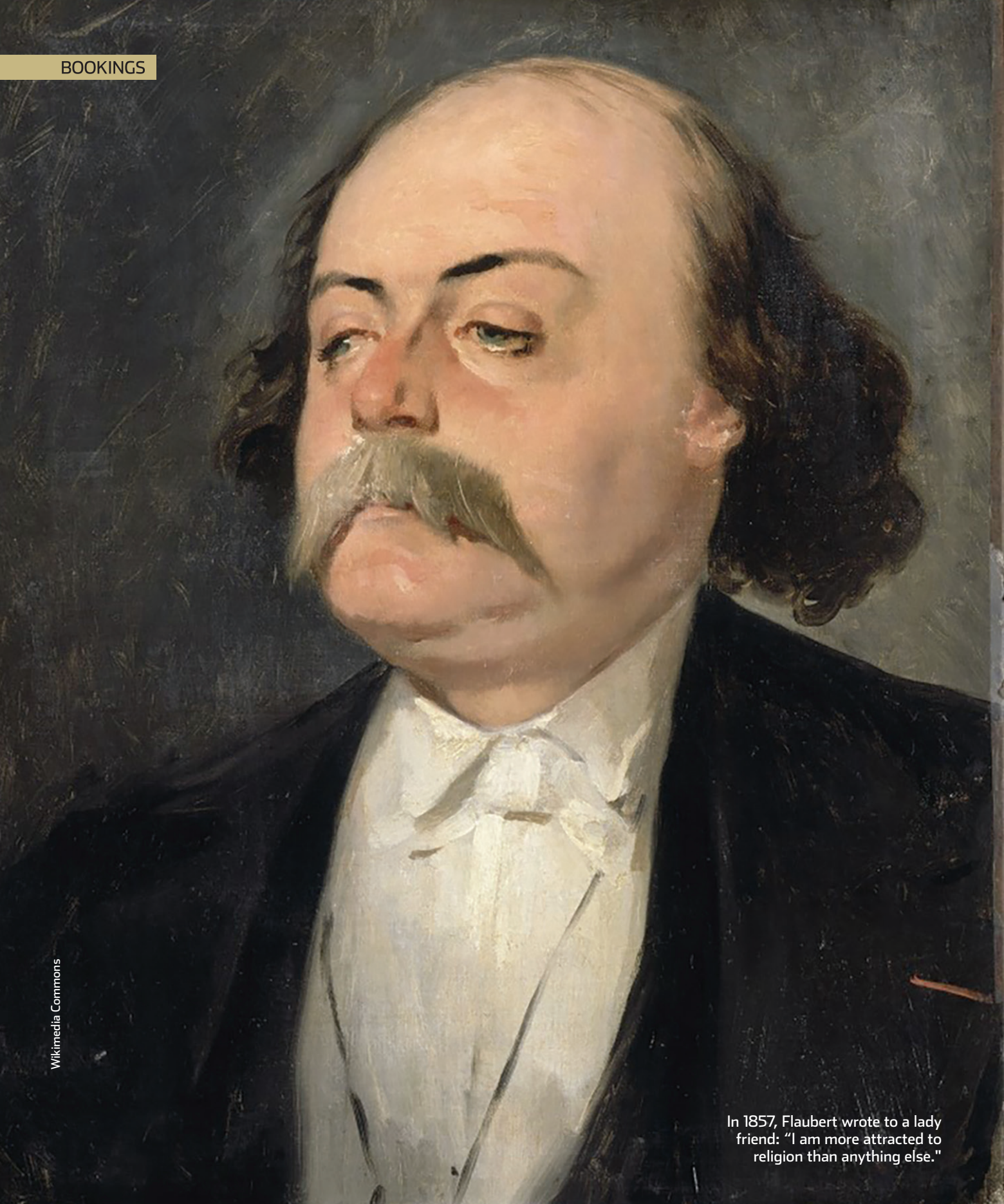
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In 1857, Flaubert wrote to a lady friend: "I am more attracted to religion than anything else."

How Catholic Was Gustave Flaubert?

Decadent writing as a quest for God

By Benjamin Ivry

The bicentenary of the birth of Gustave Flaubert last December was a reminder of the ongoing relevance of the French novelist as a writer engaged with deeply religious themes.

Flaubert created works reflecting an ongoing search for spiritual significance, including the novels *Madame Bovary* (1857); *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (1874); and *Three Tales* (1877), comprising short stories about St. Julien l'Hospitalier, St. John the Baptist and a servant who reveres a pet parrot whom she associates with the Holy Spirit.

His sometimes sardonic portrayals of village clergy, especially in *Bovary*, troubled readers in earlier generations, like his precision in citing the all-too-real frailties of his characters. Even today, pundits do not agree on the meaning of Flaubert's constant grappling with Catholic history and paradigms, although the author's own mind was clear on the matter.

Flaubert saw his Catholicism as a singular form of asceticism, allied to his vocation as a writer. Full-time devotion to his craft was a calling, as he suggested in a letter to Louise Colet in 1853, a fellow author and former lover: "You yourself love existence! You're a pagan and a southerner; you respect passions and yearn for happiness.... But I loathe life [of the senses]. I am a Catholic."

By saying "I am a Catholic" ("Je suis un catholique"), Flaubert was placing himself within a Catholic social community, not just stating a religious affiliation. Readers have compared Flaubert's devotion to literary work to the dedication of a monk, an anchorite or even a stylite, a type of Christian ascetic who lived on pillars in the early days of the Byzantine Empire, like Simeon Stylites the Elder.

Such comparisons may seem high-flown today, but stringent Catholic critics from Charles Du Bos to François Mauriac regularly invoked him in contexts of sainthood. In

1930, Mauriac compared Flaubert to St. Thérèse of Lisieux; both writers, Mauriac suggested, shared satisfaction in devotions of the kind that, as St. Thérèse wrote, "cause tears of pain to flow that might appear to be caused by some passion."

The literary historian Albert Thibaudet, writing in 1922, termed *Madame Bovary* "as Jansenist as Racine's *Phèdre*," referring to the theological movement within French Catholicism that emphasized original sin, the need for divine grace and predestination. Opposed by the Jesuits, the Jansenists, among whom the 17th-century playwright Jean Racine counted himself, claimed to follow St. Augustine's teachings.

Rather than identifying himself with the Jansenists, Flaubert found kinship with the martyred St. Polycarp, the Christian bishop of Smyrna. As he battled a multitude of everyday distractions, he also felt affinities with St. Anthony the Great, known as the "father of all monks." Indeed, rather than the apocryphal phrase "Madame Bovary is myself," Flaubert might have more justifiably asserted, "St. Anthony is myself."

Signing letters to friends with St. Polycarp's name as a prototypical holy person who felt alienated from his time, Flaubert thought of Polycarp as his patron saint. In Flaubert's dramatic poem in prose, "The Temptation of Saint Anthony," inspired by a painting he saw in Genoa, Italy, characters confront the protagonist, trying to distract him from monastic solitude as a form of worship. Just as the saint was lured by promises of fulfilled appetites of lust, greed and other sins, Flaubert considered that he coped with much interference, both lurid and mundane, in his aesthetic quest.

In 1857, Flaubert wrote to a female friend: "I am more attracted to religion than anything else. I mean all religions, not one more than another. I find each specific dog-

ma repugnant, but I consider that they were created by humanity's most natural and poetic emotions."

Contrasting Critical Opinions

Contemporary reviewers did not always understand this distinction. In 1857, *L'Univers*, a leading Catholic periodical, reviewed *Madame Bovary* and claimed that Flaubert was among those writers who "make intervention by the police and judiciary more essential" because their influence on the reading public is "necessarily disastrous."

A civil court case was launched against *Madame Bovary* as an unsavory tale of an unrepentant adulterous wife. Flaubert won that trial but was less fortunate in 1864, when two of his novels, *Bovary* and *Salammbô*, were placed on the Vatican's Index of Prohibited Books. There they remained until the Index was abolished by Pope Paul VI in 1966 as contrary to the spirit of freedom of inquiry advanced by the Second Vatican Council.

This censorship might not have occurred but for the pivotal role played by Jacques Baillès, who had previously served as bishop of Luçon, a commune in the Vendée department of western France. To justify the banning of *Bovary*, Baillès cited one passage in which a town pharmacist, depicted as corrupt and stupid, criticizes local clergy, as if his sentiments were the author's and intended for universal application.

Baillès concluded that *Bovary* trampled on "religion and morality, everything that is righteous and good, in the most revolting way." Baillès himself could be a bit heavy-footed, known in his parishes and the Vatican for his hard-nosed, obdurate zeal. Modeling himself after St. Charles Borromeo, a Counter-Reformation leader noted for persecuting religious dissidents, Baillès frequently clashed with civil authorities. He refused to allow a Protestant to be buried in Luçon's Catholic cemetery and blocked a high school philosophy teacher's appointment because he was Jewish.

Wearying of constant Baillès-related conflicts, the Vatican forced him to resign as bishop and relocate to Rome, where he was assigned to the Index of Prohibited Books tribunal. There, it was hoped, he would do less damage "to church interests," according to one government minister. Indeed, Baillès industriously participated in banning the complete works of Stendhal, Balzac and George Sand, as well as several novels by Victor Hugo.

After prestigious Catholic writers like Mauriac and Du Bos lauded Flaubert, the continued presence on the Index of *Bovary* became somewhat irksome, as M. Joseph Costelloe, S.J., implied in November 1960:

The motives for the condemnation may be found in the story itself: Emma Bovary, the "heroine" of the tale, is promiscuous and she finally settles her personal problems by taking arsenic. In a society where divorce was extremely uncommon, the flagrant carryings-on of Emma and her paramours must have been disconcerting. On the other hand, this much can be said for the book: Flaubert certainly does not give the impression that he condones the actions of his leading character; the various adulteries are described with tact and without significant details, at least by modern standards; and there is a good moral to the whole: adultery can be just as banal as married bliss—love without honor can lead only to disillusion and despair. This is a book which would not disturb the average adult of the twentieth century in the United States, and it is one which might well be removed from the Index, when, and if, it is revised.

Contrasting with this grudging praise is the ardent admiration of George A. Willenbrink, C.F.X., who in 1976 published a study of Flaubert's *A Simple Heart*. Brother Willenbrink's analysis rejected latter-day critical interpretation that the housemaid Félicité's deathbed confusion of a stuffed parrot and the Holy Spirit was intended to be sardonic:

It is quite clear that [Flaubert] was serious about Félicité, about her virtues, about her vision—and did not mean them to be understood in any ironic sense.... I find it difficult to understand how anyone can read *Un Coeur Simple* to the end and still maintain that the parrot is an ironic symbol. There is irony in the story, but not against religion or the church—primarily because Félicité's faith is free of dogma.... To be sure, it is a religious statement.

A Final, Incomplete Declaration

Such was also abundantly clear in *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, Flaubert's posthumously published novel, in which two Parisian copy clerks stumble through many branches of human endeavor, including religion.

Analysts of modernism, like the critic and Catholic convert Hugh Kenner in his *Flaubert, Joyce, and Beckett: The Stoic Comedians* (1962), relished the dry wit with which Flaubert describes the title duo of *Bouvard and Pécuchet*. Yet earlier, in 1930, François Mauriac had expressed dis-

may that Flaubert's final message was conveyed through "two imbeciles made immortal by [Flaubert's] genius."

Not only genius was at work in *Bouvard*, but also diligence; the author's usual reliance on research and background reading became even more assiduous. To write an in-depth chapter on religion, Flaubert studied and annotated several dozen works of Catholic devotion, seeking colorful descriptions from religious manuals while shunning mystical effusions. He sought what he called received ideas, or observations so banal as to be fascinating, and to some extent he found them.

As he informed the Russian author Ivan Turgenev in November 1879, "I am gorged on pious readings!" One month earlier, he confessed to another friend that he was busy "reading stupid, or rather stupidifying [*stupidifiantes*] things."

Flaubert noted with approval such novelistic details as one author's description of Julian the Apostate, emperor of Rome, as being "proud" of the lice in his beard. He also jotted down waspish comments by religious authorities like the French bishop Louis Gaston de Ségur, who organized the first formal eucharistic congress in Lille, approved by Pope Leo XIII. Bishop de Ségur wrote that "virtues of Protestants exist, despite their Protestantism" because "in reality, [Protestants] are Catholics; they belong to the Church."

Only once in his marginalia does Flaubert appear blatantly unjust, when he accuses Bishop Louis Gaston de Ségur of lying about the spirit of Jesus separating from his body and descending into the heart of the earth. The bishop was surely only paraphrasing the prediction in Mt 12:40 that "for as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."

Flaubert was intrigued by the all-too-human admissions of church officials, as when Bishop Jean-Pierre Camus, in a memoir of St. Francis de Sales, admitted that he would spy on his pious houseguest whenever St. Francis stayed at his home. Flaubert added a marginal note to this account: "Ecclesiastical beauties."

Another authority whose words were eagerly glossed was the missionary Camille Daux of Toulouse, who recounted a story doubly categorized by Flaubert as one of the "beauties of religion" as well as "heaven's punishment of the impious": According to legend, a freethinker near Reims in northeastern France named his dog God, and the dog touched the trigger of the man's rifle with his paw, killing its owner.

An Uncompromising Literary Master

Flaubert's ardently detailed, intransigent evaluation of theological treatises earned the respect of generations of Catholic writers. Among them was José Martí, the 19th-century Cuban revolutionary, poet and journalist praised by Pope Francis in a message to an international conference on world balance in Havana in January 2019. The pope reminded the attendees that during a 1998 visit to Cuba, St. John Paul II had described Martí as "a man of light."

In July 1880 in *The New York Sun*, Martí was among the first to review *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, even before its publication date. Martí incorrectly claimed that Flaubert completed his final, unfinished novel just before he died at his desk: "Seated like a Turk, [Flaubert] examined his phrases, turning, analyzing, and pruning them. There was no obscurity."

In addition to this absolute clarity, Martí attributed to Flaubert a paternal rapport with his writings, so when Flaubert revised and polished his writing, Martí observed, "It is a good father who is correcting his son." In doing so, the late Flaubert had used a pen as an instrument "which cuts, scourges, and wounds in order the better to cure."

With these highly allusive metaphors, Martí echoed Mauriac's concern decades later that Flaubert may have supplanted God with his artistry. For Mauriac, this "grave fault" meant that although Flaubert displayed Christian virtues, including a taste for solitude and detachment, he lacked the essential quality of a sense of charity.

This virtue—evident in novels by George Eliot, Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky, in Mauriac's view—was ultimately lacking in Flaubert's pitiless depictions. But decades later, Mauriac would revise these opinions. In the 1963 preface to a book by Henri Guillemin, he admitted that instead of usurping religion in the name of art, Flaubert's lifelong devotion to beautiful writing coincided with a quest for God "with no more contradiction than there is between light and its reflection."

Benjamin Ivry has written biographies of Francis Poulenc, Maurice Ravel and Arthur Rimbaud and has translated many books from French.



For all their differences, Faulkner's Yoknapatawphans and Joyce's urban Catholics and Jews actually share quite a few traits.

Alex Ehrenzweig/ Wikimedia Commons, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

The Shadow of Gunmen

By Tom Deignan

What Joyce and Faulkner can teach us about our current political moment

It is not clear if a 25-year-old postal employee named William Cuthbert Faulkner was among the readers who accepted the literary challenge thrown down 100 years ago, in the spring of 1922, when James Joyce released his avant-garde epic, *Ulysses*. What we do know is that Faulkner's Southern twist on Joycean modernism has made for popular reading in the wake of the U.S. Capitol insurrection and other spasms of red-state rage.

The Pulitzer Prize-winning critic Hilton Als declared that Faulkner foresaw “the age of Trump and Derek Chauvin’s trial, and the Gordian knot of race that continues to

choke large portions of our country.” Michael Gorra, in his recent book *The Saddest Words: William Faulkner’s Civil War*, added that while “Faulkner’s early readers saw a quarrel in his work between...the Old South and the New,” this now “seems like pocket change, and the story he offers instead is that of the nation itself.”

In a day and age when Confederate monuments are falling and the author of a best-seller called *Hillbilly Elegy* is running for Senate, Faulkner is unquestionably relevant. But the fog of our culture wars may be so thick and hazy that we also need some Joycean fireworks to guide us



through the Faulknerian backwoods.

Joyce's Revolutionaries

For all their differences, Faulkner's Yoknapatawphans and Joyce's urban Catholics and Jews actually share quite a few traits. They all live in the tall shadows of gunmen—haunted by historical ghosts of rebellion and war, steeped in cultures prone to romanticization. For many characters in both Faulkner and Joyce, history is a nightmare from which they cannot awaken. And their social orders are dominant in some ways but subjugated in others, jumbling our conventional understandings of oppression and dominance, even of resistance.

"A revolution must come on the due instalments plan," Joyce's wandering Dublin Jew Leopold Bloom declares late in *Ulysses*. It is an ironic statement in an ironic scene, in a novel that often treats oppression, nationalism and political violence in deeply ironic ways. There are cultural lessons in such passages as timely and valuable as anything in Faulkner.

Upon its release, *Ulysses* dazzled and confounded readers with its kaleidoscopic array of political, sexual and intellectual escapades, unfolding on a single fictional day—henceforth to be known as "Bloomsday." Often forgotten is that on the *actual* Bloomsday, June 16, 1922, Ireland's revolutionary movement—a prominent presence in *Ulysses*—was decisively split in two when voters approved the terms of a contentious Anglo-Irish peace treaty.

By then, Ireland's nationalist movement had been supporting political candidates under the banner of "Sinn Féin," while simultaneously waging guerilla warfare against British colonial forces.

Oft-mentioned throughout *Ulysses* is a shadowy nationalist group called the Invincibles, which murdered Lord Frederick Cavendish in Dublin's Phoenix Park in 1882. Sinn Feiners would later claim the assassination was justified by recurrent British atrocities. "It was as if the English felt themselves absolved from all ethical restraints when dealing with the Irish," Julie Kavanagh writes in her

2021 book *The Irish Assassins: Conspiracy, Revenge, and the Phoenix Park Murders That Stunned Victorian England*.

Joyce's alter ego, Stephen Dedalus, even has gruesome visions of the "behung...corpses of papishes" as he reflects upon the close, complicated ties between Irish nationalism and the Catholic Church. "May the God above/ Send down a dove/ With teeth as sharp as razors/ To slit the throats/ Of the English dogs/ That hanged our Irish leaders," Joyce's rebel Citizen rhapsodizes at one point.

But Joyce also explores resistance to oppression in ways that might seem out of fashion today. With his "huge emerald muffler and shillelagh," the Citizen—and nationalism itself—is portrayed with heaping doses of irreverence. Scholars have noted that, in fashioning *Ulysses* after the *Odyssey*, Joyce links the Citizen with Homer's one-eyed Cyclops—as in: a monstrous figure who doesn't see things very clearly.

Then there are the piteous lamentations over the grave and ghost of the "uncrowned king of Ireland," Charles Stewart Parnell, whose towering memory is contrasted with the none-too-inspiring presence of his brother, John. Finally, Robert Emmet's impassioned proclamations are also juxtaposed with Leopold Bloom's uncontrollable flatulence.

At one point, the Citizen himself "starts gassing," going on and on "about the Invincibles and the old guard and the men of sixtyseven.... Talking about new Ireland he ought to go and get a new dog so he ought. Mangy ravenous brute...." Perhaps most unsettling, after confronting Bloom in a pub, the Citizen rants: "I'll brain that bloody jewman," then shouts: "*Sinn Féin! Sinn Féin amhain!* The friends we love are by our side and the foes we hate before us."

For Joyce, nationalism may have been a necessary response to oppression, but it is not without its own shortcomings. Exploring these does run the risk of undermining powerful goals of resistance and of being a loyal "enemy of my enemy." Looked at another way, though, confronting the fallibilities of the persecuted or their allies might be the ultimate acknowledgement of their humanity—a status never granted by oppressors.

History as Nightmare

The very year in which *Ulysses* is set, a Catholic priest named John Creagh brewed up an antisemitic furor in Ireland. Joyce—who was in Paris as the Dreyfus Affair unfolded—returned to Dublin just "in time for...[this] boycott of Jewish merchants in Limerick," Richard Ellman notes. The 1904 campaign was short-lived and laudably condemned by many Irish Catholics—but not by

Arthur Griffith, who was not only among Father Creagh's supporters, but founded Sinn Féin.

To ignore this about Griffith or the likes of John Creagh, simply because they also happen to have been aligned with the anti-Brits, would be absurd. So would labeling Stephen Dedalus some kind of quisling or traitor because of his lament that he is "a servant" not just of a single colonial ruler, but "two masters, an English and an Italian." Would that more readers and writers—then and now—could wrestle with this "Italian" church's monumental flaws, but also its virtues; its historic protection of the persecuted, along with its persecutions.

Like the Citizen, too many culture warriors—then and now—see only "friends" or "foes," useful idiots or scapegoats, in social conflict. Complicating things any further veers close to giving succor to the "enemy."

Meanwhile, 100 years later, the party now bearing the name Sinn Féin has moved from the radical margins to the very center of political life in Ireland. The nationalists are well positioned to be the top vote-getters in the upcoming May 2022 assembly elections in Northern Ireland. In fact, Sinn Féin is also on the verge of becoming the ruling party down south in the Republic of Ireland.

In short, after a century's worth of bloodshed and growing pains, the Irish nationalist revolution has made its way into the nation's respectable ruling class.

Faulkner's Reactionaries

As evidenced by the January 2021 storming of the U.S. Capitol, Yoknapatawpha County's 21st-century offspring—nationalist in their own way—are looking to take a different route to power. And William Faulkner's relevance in 2022 seems indisputable.

To Carl Rollyson, the recent biographer of Faulkner, novels like *The Sound and the Fury* offer "a stunning rebuke to a society built on segregation and on the ideology of white supremacy." The literary scholar Myka Tucker-Abramson notes that when "a new cycle of wealth extraction...on the battlefields of real estate and oil" beckoned in the United States, "Donald Trump answered [the call], one whose blueprint and history Faulkner's postwar fiction provides." The critic Philip Weinstein could just as easily be talking about the former president when he observes that Faulkner's drifter-turned-magnate (and later, dynastic power-broker) Flem Snopes "is there to fan [chaos] into action and exploit its consequences."

Flem gets his comeuppance at the end of *The Mansion* (1957), the third and final book in Faulkner's newly rele-

vant Snopes trilogy. But Thomas Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!* is also an illuminating MAGA surrogate. As a young boy, Sutpen famously tried to enter the opulent Pettibone mansion, only to be rebuffed by a Black servant—a perfect storm of class and racial grievance that drives Sutpen for the remainder of his restless, maniacal life.

Sutpen himself meets a gruesome end with its own toxic blend of rage and poetic justice. Eventually even his beloved estate, Sutpen Hundred, is destroyed, torched by his traumatized biracial daughter.

More and more reactionaries, though, are also turning to language and actions—any means necessary, you might even say—that seem more Weathermen than Rotarian. How are we to combat this unlikely turn of events?

Too often, amid the shock and horror of the past five years, the progressive resistance has relied upon fighting strident, inflexible fire with its own strident and inflexible fire. There is a reluctance to scrutinize familiar ideas or allies or look inward—even with Joycean irreverence—amid fears that such reflections might amount to "punching down" or being told that "this is not a space for intellectualizing the topic," as Cambridge academics were warned during a recent workshop.

And so, rather than take an opportunity to distinguish between more and less urgent ideas, hone arguments or perhaps even develop new coalitions, there is faith that poetic justice is nigh, because we are on the right side of history and *they* are not. Thomas Sutpen, after all, was dispatched, even if the slam of that Pettibone mansion door continues to ring in many ears.

Flem Snopes, too, was consigned to the dustbin of Confederate history—by a relative, no less. Yet there are many other members of the extended Snopes clan. One might even call them a dynasty.

Something Wicked This Way Comes

In another ironic twist, some thoughtful observers are now worried Yoknapatawphan rage might lead to Irish-style nationalist violence in the United States. While the United States "obviously has not descended to the level of present-day Iraq or Lebanon or Troubles-era Northern Ireland," Jonathan Stevenson and Steven Simon wrote in *The New York Review of Books* last year, "these are ominously suggestive examples." Efforts to confront armed, far-right militants with laws "more clearly defining domestic terrorism and strengthening the means to combat it" might only "burnish their status as 'freedom fighters.'"

This, Stevenson and Simon argue, is what happened

when “the Provisional Irish Republican Army rose to prominence in Northern Ireland.” They also worry about American militias attempting high-profile assassinations, while also “whipping up populist fervor through strategically calculated hunger strikes...as the IRA did.” All of which “only made it easier for them to gain political traction as principled revolutionaries through Sinn Fein, their political counterpart.”

At least in Ireland, it took decades for the nationalist rebels to make their way to the mainstream. There was, if you will, a “due instalments plan.” Here in the United States, it turns out the Q-Anoners were already in elected office and since 2016 have set about tracking the muck of the swampy margins all the way into the White House and onto the steps of the Capitol.

“And can we not love our country then?” one nationalist character wonders in Joyce’s first novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. It is a question that hovers over much of Joyce’s and Faulkner’s work, and our own moment.

Such “love” can take many forms—including, of course, hate. Which brings to mind a hunting trip in Faulkner’s second Snopes novel, *The Town*. A noise in some shrubbery compels one character to speculate that it might only be “a rabbit,” or it might be “a bigger varmint, one with more poison or anyhow more teeth.” And “you can watch the bushes shaking but you can’t see what it is or which a way it’s going”—at least, not “until it breaks out.”

But by then it may be too late.

*A regular contributor to **America**, Tom Deignan has written about books and history for The New York Times, The Washington Post and The National Catholic Reporter. He is also a columnist for The Irish Voice newspaper and is working on a book about Ellis Island immigrants.*

The Angel Descends to Jakob

By Matthew Porto

The whole of creation’s drama before me:
the wheel and what turns it,
starlight on turned soil, stones clenched in riverbeds,
crystal, pines that reach the road
wrapping the mountain, a serpent
waiting for twitchy prey beneath a cedar.

What man has made now makes him—
I follow my first human thought like a scent.

*

I find the patriarch at the shore, where the ocean
offers up an endless sacrifice of shoal,
shell, and seaweed—the sand takes
the press of the struggle, whirls at each wing-beat;
he bleeds at the forearm and knee;
his soft flesh purples below the jaw from a chokehold.

*

Bright dust falls from my feathers
as the present pours into the eyes of
contender and contender, leveled in exhaustion—
we straddle sand, hands on hips,
heads bowed to pelvis, lapping air.

Crab-shadow, shadow of dune
there at the sea’s altar, the littoral,
where even sunlight rests....

*

Collecting myself, I take off
for the empyrean. Below,
every laughing, hulking thing
shoulders the wheel; road swallows mountain—
starlight, pines, all.

Israel, I named him:
the one who believes all that is
is God’s, and fights it anyway—
my last human thought before the world vanishes.

Matthew Porto’s work has recently appeared in Poet Lore, American Literary Review, Salamander and elsewhere. He lives in Boston, Mass.



Film's Architect of Mayhem

Virginia Fox and Buster Keaton prop each other up in "The Electric House" (1922).

Wikimedia Commons

When I attended film school some decades ago, our first class required us young would-be Spielbergs to make five silent short films before we could graduate to longer subjects and dialogue. This wasn't simply intended as an exercise in self-imposed constraints or as a replay of film history, in which silent films ruled for nearly two decades before being overthrown by talkies. It was instead a crucial lesson in the essence of movies, known in their earliest days as "moving pictures." Image and motion were the medium's superpowers, and learning to harness those forces—to tell a story entirely with action—was properly the first step in the curriculum.

In her elegant new book, *Camera Man: Buster Keaton, the Dawn of Cinema, and the Invention of the Twentieth Century*, the critic Dana Stevens uses the biography of the great silent film clown as a lens to explore the ear-

ly days of movies, the cultural forces that gave them birth and the social upheavals they in turn engendered. The book is all the more remarkable a feat for reading all this through the most taciturn and unforthcoming of movie stars, whose golden period, 1920 to 1928, was a mere fraction of an otherwise checkered showbiz career and whose persona—indelibly labeled "the Great Stone Face" by the critic James Agee—was an unshakably blank expression while the chaotic world whirled around him.

It is precisely this latter quality that makes Keaton an ideal figure through which to consider a medium whose native strengths are visual and kinetic. But to render a life of speechless action in words, let alone to interpret its larger significance, demands a full arsenal of critical and historical tools. Luckily, Stevens has these in abundance and is able to move deftly

from reportage to analysis and from seeming digressions to larger insights. She ably toggles between giving us a sense of life a century ago, using primary sources to paint eye-opening pictures of vanished worlds and customs, and weighing these with the hindsight of contemporary criticism.

For instance, vivid early chapters on Keaton's extraordinary childhood as a traveling vaudeville performer place the book in the context not only of a vanished entertainment world but also of the era's progressive child welfare movement—a mixed blessing, in Stevens's telling, in that while it curbed labor abuses in many fields, it also fueled an all-too-familiar moral panic around a whole sector of "disreputable" entertainment work.

Child safety advocates had some cause for concern in Keaton's case. His specialty, as part of an act with his parents, was to be throttled and



Camera Man

Buster Keaton, the Dawn of Cinema, and the Invention of the Twentieth Century

By Dana Stevens

Atria Books

432p \$29.99

thrown all over the stage by his father. The laughs reportedly emerged in response to the little fellow's unflappable response to these torments, though one might imagine it was often the laughter of relief. This introduces one of the book's main threads: that Keaton's work drew its true power from danger as much as from comedy. As Stevens writes, "The Keatons were not just funny, they were *thrilling*, with real-time risk an essential element of the program."

This would become the enduring throughline of Keaton's work and, to my eyes, his chief film legacy. For all his inarguable greatness as a comedian, to watch many of his silent classics now—from the house-assembly how-not-to "One Week" to the breathtaking hurricane that concludes "Steamboat Bill, Jr."—is to see a genius stuntman and architect of mayhem. Having learned his craft on-stage with little more than a table and a few props, he used the new medium of film as the pretext to build large-scale playgrounds for increasingly elaborate capers.

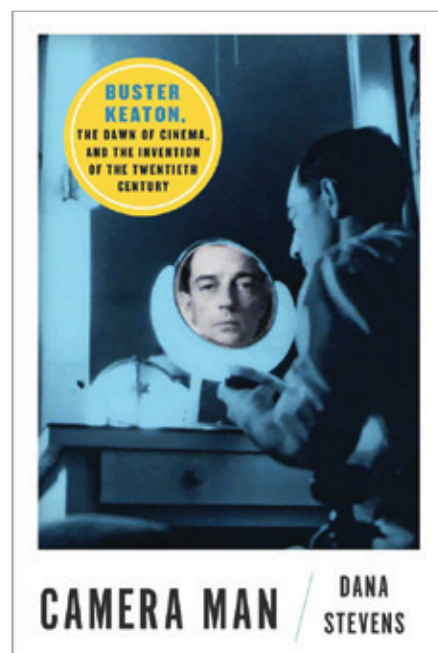
Every time I watch "The General,"

the 1926 masterpiece in which Keaton single-handedly commandeers a Civil War-era train, I can't help but think of "Speed," the 1994 action film whose preposterous premise—the bus can't stop or it will explode—is something a latter-day Keaton might have dreamt up. Keaton's true heirs, it seems to me, are action film directors and stars like Jackie Chan or Dwayne Johnson more than comics like Jim Carrey or Bill Irwin.

Of course, the chasing of dangerous thrills and the primacy of images over words are not unalloyed cultural goods. The logical conclusion of these tendencies, uncritically indulged, are YouTube pranksters and first-person-shooter video games. Stevens makes a familiar point about how the often hostile, challenging world depicted in Keaton's best films bespeaks a worldview skeptical about meaning. "The universe his films posit, however playful and imaginative, is also frighteningly unstable," she writes.

But at least Keaton's imagined settings referred to a recognizable world of real physical things. A century later, we have gone through the looking-glass into a world mediated by memes and avatars. Where do you locate the physical comedy in a population hunched over smartphones?

Even as I write this, I can picture



what Keaton might have made of it. Imagine a subway car, say, full of folks with eyes locked on their phones, lurching in lockstep with every bump on the track, their placid expressions unchanged. Perhaps a single stone face stares plaintively back at us, in the deadpan mockumentary style of "The Office," as if to say, "Can you believe this?!"

Perhaps the visual language Keaton helped to create isn't so worn out after all.

Rob Weinert-Kendt, an arts journalist and editor of *American Theatre* magazine, has written for *The New York Times* and *Time Out New York*. He writes a blog called *The Wicked Stage*.

The Pentecost of Christian Climate Change

If you are a Christian who thinks about climate change, you have probably heard of Dr. Katharine Hayhoe. And if you haven't, it's time you did. Like the theologian Stanley Hauerwas,

Hayhoe has been named one of Time magazine's "100 most influential people." She is a climate scientist whose work is devoted to projections of climate change patterns and their

impact on communities. She is also an author (unpaid, she points out) on the I.P.C.C. reports on climate change, the lead scientist at the Nature Conservancy, a mother, a



For Hayhoe, Christian faith frames and motivates the practice of rigorous science. ●●

professor at Texas Tech and the wife of a Christian pastor.

With seemingly more hours in the day than the rest of us, she is the Beyoncé of climate science communication, with some beats to throw down. Her new book, *Saving Us*, is an extended, carefully organized meditation on how the most important thing anyone can do about climate change—as a start—is to *talk about it*. This book shows readers not only why, but how.

Saving Us is a conversational, first-person narrative that melds the social science around climate change attitudes and communication into a framework and set of stories that readers can access and relate to. It might seem to be a strange move for a professional climate scientist to focus less on the science and more on the question of how humans connect. But for Hayhoe, while the science is compelling, what matters most are shared topics of concern for the places we live and the people we care about.

It doesn't matter if the term *climate change* or the science behind it are matters of consensus; facts, Hayhoe reminds us, do not themselves persuade. Experiences, care, connection and values are the way to the heart of climate communication. In fact, Hayhoe's book is one among several recent publications that show how much heart and integrity matter in pursuit of practical science communication, a theme also prom-

inent in Faith Kearns's excellent book, *Getting to the Heart of Science Communication*.

Indeed, *Saving Us* is far from a deluge of facts. Epigraphs in each chapter generally feature a public expert of some sort—Stephen Covey and George Washington, for example, as well as climate scientists and policy wonks—and a conversation partner she has encountered, whether at a women's group at a church, at a conference or on Twitter. Hayhoe also presents businesspeople, activists, church members, educators and scientists who take creative approaches to solving place-based problems in climate-informed ways. And she amiably brings readers along as she recounts meeting with Rotarians in Texas who came to understand climate change impacts as central to the Rotary mission.

We hear about why, on a trip to the Arctic, Hayhoe reversed her skepticism about polar bears as a bellwether of climate change: "What's happening to the bears is happening to people, too. Yet all too often, we seem to be even less conscious of it than the bears."

Perhaps the biggest takeaway from these stories is that "sharing local climate impacts" has "amazing depolarizing power." Hayhoe demonstrates how sharing observations from our collective spaces and individual or family experiences can lead to over-

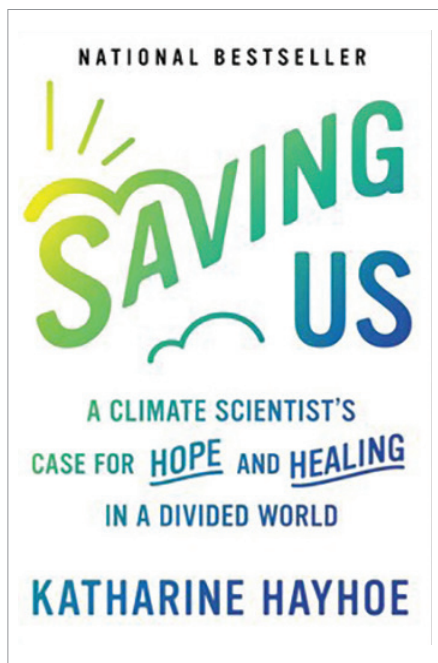
lapping insights about the directions and implications of changes in water availability, land use, pollution and more. And these insights often allow people to talk about deeper questions of what matters to them and why.

Drawing on a framework from the social scientists Tony Leiserowitz and Ed Maibach, Hayhoe begins her book by acknowledging that a certain percentage of people in U.S. society are unwilling to engage in constructive conversations about climate changes. These "dismissives" are people who "can't leave the topic of climate change alone" but talk about it only in an antagonistic way. For them, Hayhoe recognizes, "there is no secret to a constructive conversation.... I don't think it's possible to have one, short of an honest-to-God miracle."

But as Hayhoe also rightly points out, the 7 percent of the U.S. population who are dismissives shouldn't set the tone for others who are "doubtful" about climate change (11 percent), "disengaged" (7 percent), "cautious" (approximately 20 percent), "concerned" (28 percent), and "alarmed" (26 percent). People's perceptions of and relationships to the realities of climate change are much more diverse than many people assume.

Thus Hayhoe's primary thesis:

By bonding over the values we truly share, and by connecting them to climate,



Saving Us

A Climate Scientist's Case for Hope and Healing in a Divided World

By Katharine Hayhoe
320p \$27

we can inspire one another to act together to fix this problem. But it all begins with understanding who we already are, and what we already care about—because chances are, whatever that is, it's already being affected by climate change, whether we know it or not.

For Hayhoe, the “secret formula” to climate change communication is not to harangue or lecture, but to “bond, connect, and inspire.” The point is not to convert people to a particular point of view, but to invite conversation about what matters to all of us and how climate change might be manifesting itself in relation to things we care about—whether that is hunting, aquifer depletion, agricultural wa-

ter supply, mortgages in Miami or the changing patterns of bird migration.

“In fact,” writes Hayhoe, “chances are you’ll know more afterward than you did before; you’ll have a better understanding of the person or people you’re talking to than you did earlier; and you’ll be encouraged rather than discouraged by your conversation.” Part of what makes Hayhoe so effective is that she is not only brilliant; she is also empathetic. She also understands the import of both theological and scientific questions and is unafraid of showing where she has misunderstood things in the past.

From a theological and scientific perspective, the maxim that “truth cannot contradict truth” runs tacitly throughout this book, as well as through Hayhoe’s own life. “After all,” Hayhoe tells us, “the reason I’m a climate scientist is *because* I’m a Christian.” Hayhoe’s skilled and straightforward presentations of faith align with what the Catholic Church, the Evangelical Environmental Network and many other faith groups now teach. “The biblical mandate for stewardship and care for creation, the connection between climate change and poverty, and the Bible verses” all direct her concerns. For Hayhoe, Christian faith frames and motivates the practice of rigorous science.

What is perhaps most remarkable about *Saving Us* is that regardless of one’s views on Christianity or climate change, this book will be well worth any reader’s time. It is, one might say, the Pentecost of Christian climate change communication, demonstrating the power of connection despite perceived barriers.

Christiana Zenner is an associate professor of theology, science and ethics at Fordham University in New York.

A World Alight With the Transcendent

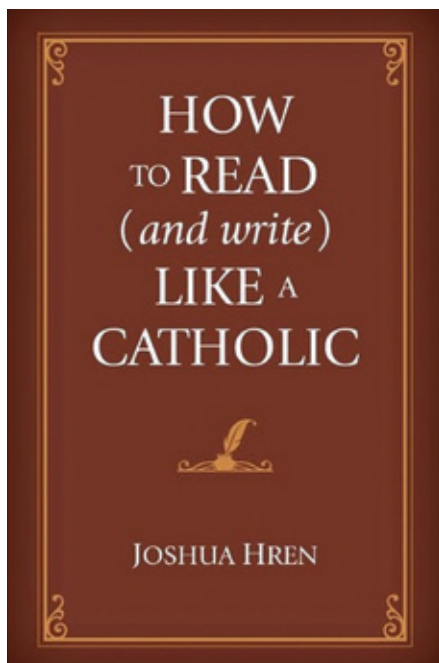
Want to write like a Catholic? Here’s one way to do it.

In late 2012, a New York Times op-ed column, “Has Faith Lost its Fiction?,” left more than a few people pondering the current state of Catholic arts and letters. The column, prepared by Paul Elie, senior fellow with the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs at Georgetown University, lamented the disappearance of the “novel of belief” in North America. He suggested that present-day Christian literary expression hovers as “something between a dead language and a hangover.”

Two years after Elie’s column appeared, the Catholic poet and educator Dana Gioia, of the University of Southern California, suggested in his essay “The Catholic Writer Today” that American Christians—especially Catholics—have disengaged from the aesthetic culture and have, in turn, “ceded the arts to secular society.”

In response to what might be considered a literary call to action comes *How to Read (and Write) Like a Catholic* by Joshua Hren. No stranger to Catholic arts and publishing, Hren recently co-founded a master of fine arts program in Catholic creative writing and poetry at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Tex. Previously he was a professor of English at Belmont Abbey College in Belmont, N.C. Hren founded the Catholic publishing house Wiseblood Books in 2013.

Hren chose Wiseblood as the name of his publishing house in homage to Flannery O’Connor, a key inspiration for himself and a host of other North American Catholic writers. Next to Dante Alighieri, she is the au-



How to Read (and Write) Like a Catholic

By Joshua Hren

Tan Books

480p \$34.95

stories,” he writes.

Readers with more exposure to Catholic moral theology and the classics of Western literature are the most likely to benefit from Hren’s scholarship, but there are insights even for the casual reader interested in identifying how a writer’s work has been influenced by a Catholic sensibility.

Hren is at his most effective when demonstrating how the best Catholic fiction acknowledges sin and evil in creation but does not surrender to a sense of hopelessness and cynicism. “It is all too easy for such writing to collapse into pious sentimentality and disputatious moralism,” Hren says. “But a Catholic literary culture that works in continuity with its rich heritage will give us a contemporary literature that both gazes unflinchingly at the messiness of our present moment and artfully works out its characters’ salvation or damnation.”

Catholic fiction should not fall prey to hopelessness and cynicism, even as it acknowledges the grim realities of sin and evil in the natural world. A Catholic writer, Hren says, must avoid “shirking the contours of these cruelties,” as fiction is at its best a record of humanity in rebellion. In turn, a large part of his work consists of drawing out the spiritual depths of humanity’s refusal to serve.

Is Hren setting himself up as the arbiter of orthodoxy when it comes to Catholic fiction? Clearly the author is writing from the perspective of a true believer. But his aim is not to defend the church and its magisterium; rather, it is to become an apologist for a proper understanding of the church’s

embrace of art and literature for the purpose of pointing us toward transcendental things. As he notes:

The works of contemporary Catholic writers are always best wrestled out, written, and criticized within the broader Catholic literary tradition, just as Catholic life is best lived in communion with the long Catholic tradition of councils, encyclicals, friends who give encouragement and fraternal correction, liturgy and ‘social teachings’ that can serve as deepening alternatives to obsessions with originality (the regime of novelty) and identity politics.

In one sense, Hren implies that Catholic fiction writers should be subject to more lofty aesthetics than their secular counterparts. “When [writers] forget their traditions, Catholics, like any other creatures, become intoxicated on the fumes of the present moment—trapped in the ‘relevance’ fallacy and exposed to the experiments of historicist novelties.”


Time will tell if Hren’s new book marks a starting point in an effort to inspire a new generation of Catholic writers to aim higher in their work. Much depends on the individual writer’s appreciation of the mystical, the transcendent and “unseen” sources of creative inspiration.

Hren remains hopeful that a renaissance of sorts is in the offing. As his parting advice suggests, “Today’s Catholic literary artists should familiarize themselves with the notable array of Catholic writers who have preceded them.” All great Catholic literature, he writes, “is a footnote to Dante, but to

thor most often cited in Hren’s study. “It is left to Flannery O’Connor to defend as at least one of fiction’s aims the rendering of grace upon nature,” Hren writes in tribute.

Despite what might seem a presumptuous title, Hren aims at a middle ground in his argument. He relies heavily on the craftsmanship of such masters as Dante and Cardinal John Henry Newman to make a case for what constitutes authentic Catholic literature. Citing Newman’s maxim that “you cannot have a sinless literature of sinful man,” Hren argues that good Catholic literature “cracks the glass ceilings of secularism and invites us into an expansive world alight with the transcendent.”

Hren also cites a number of popular and less well-known writers whose Catholic sensibility informs their creative output. Even Catholic writers who had strayed from the faith in their personal lives, like Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Jack Kerouac, on occasion reveal “a sacramentality shimmering through their



Catholic fiction should not fall prey to hopelessness and cynicism, even as it acknowledges the grim realities of sin and evil in the natural world. ☪

many living Catholic writers who have lost their inheritance, Dante may be the dearest of all.”

Hren’s first full-length novel, *Infinite Regress*, was released this year. It will be interesting to see how Hren’s blueprint for crafting authentic Catholic fiction colors that creative project.

Mike Mastromatteo is a writer, editor and book reviewer from Toronto, Ontario.

High Time to Reconsider Drug Policy?

Carl Hart, a neuropsychopharmacologist at Columbia University, begins *Drug Use for Grown-Ups: Chasing Liberty in the Land of Fear* with a unique admission: While some drug scientists occasionally speak of past drug use, he intends to discuss the titular subject in relation to his ongoing experience with several illicit psychoactive compounds, including “probably [his] favorite drug” heroin.

In each of the first four chapters, Hart presents a prong of the problem with the approach in the United States

to drug use: the “War on Drugs,” closeted use, harm reduction and the brain-disease model of addiction.

What he says about the first two should be largely uncontroversial for anyone sympathetic to drug policy reform. The war on drugs is now widely regarded as an abject failure, even in terms of its own stated aims and by some who were its erstwhile champions. Moreover, most drug policy reform advocates share Hart’s ire at the unequal application of drug war objectives, which has caused them to hit people and neighborhoods of color especially hard. And although some users with an interest in reputation management might feel a little stung by Hart’s critique of closeted use as cowardly, most of them would probably welcome a world in which they did not find it necessary.

But the last two prongs are real bones of contention in advocacy communities. Harm reduction—the idea that we should mitigate any deleterious impact of drug use instead of punishing users and perhaps even distributors—continually increases in popularity and is generally regarded as progressive, in all senses of the word.

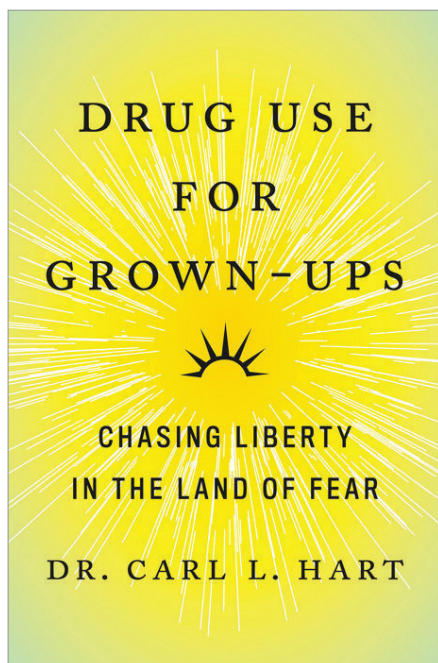
The situation with the brain-disease model—according to which addiction is a disease that calls for compassion rather than a moral failure worthy of censure—is more complex. The debate over what precisely con-

stitutes addiction, who is most susceptible to it and why is a lively one. Consequently, the brain-disease model has nothing like the appeal of harm reduction among advocates of drug policy reform. Nevertheless, it does enjoy support from some drug scientists and addiction specialists who share Hart’s reformist aims.

But for Hart, both ideas cede too much ground to the war on drugs by emphasizing the harms of controlled substances relative to their benefits, which are very real but often completely unknown or ignored in public discourse. As he says, “Addiction represents a minority of drug effects, but it receives almost all the attention.”

After delineating his position on these issues, Hart devotes the rest of the book to his experience with various illicit compounds and the science about them, some widely known (e.g., cannabis, cocaine and heroin) and some less so (e.g., amphetamines, cathinones like khat and “bath salts,” and 6-APB). His central thesis throughout is that “Grown-Ups”—those who “get ample sleep, eat nutritiously, and exercise regularly,” meet their responsibilities, plan their drug use to minimize disruptions, have no contraindications and are not in crisis—should be free to use presently controlled psychotropics without fear of penal repercussions or social stigma.

Hart’s book is well written and



Drug Use for Grown-Ups
Chasing Liberty in the Land of Fear
By Carl L. Hart
Penguin Press
304p \$28

well argued, funny and human. But it is challenging. And it raises at least two points that merit discussion by the church and a thoughtful Catholic response.

First, Hart is right that we inflate the dangers of substances our society stigmatizes while ignoring their medicinal and personal value. And although many families have been ravaged by opioid addiction in recent decades, he persuasively argues that misinformation occludes our understanding even of heroin. So my response to him is generally yes.

But this yes is not as stentorian as it could be, because I am thinking about the church's position and role in these matters. The problem (if there is one) is that the church is not merely interested in those Hart calls Grown-

Ups. Following the example of Jesus, we are, if anything, specifically interested in non-Grown-Ups, people who do not have their lives fully together and who need healing. Hart uses heroin intermittently to "inspire [him] to be a more empathetic person." He even experimented with temporary dependency "to prove...that withdrawal was an inconvenience that could be dealt with."

Hart knows that not everyone is so intentional, disciplined or self-aware, and that the above definition for Grown-Ups is fairly heroic. He narrows his scope to such individuals in part because the public conversation so rarely addresses them. But the church cannot narrow its scope in this way. What, then, should we say about loosening constraints on access to potentially dependency-causing compounds without appealing to the usual distortions Hart is trying to undermine? This is a hard question.

Second, Hart queries our society's attitude toward chemical euphoria. Bluntly, he asks, "What's wrong with getting high?" He stipulates, "To be absolutely clear, I also enjoy heroin for the mere pleasure of its effects." While the church has long affirmed the rejuvenating value of pleasure, for most Catholics this sort of pleasure pursuit is probably a bridge too far. Hart is asking: Have we thought that through? Is the cost-benefit ratio of, say, alcohol *really* less than that of the drugs we stigmatize and criminalize?

For my own part, Hart's distinction between "mere pleasure" and effects like inspiring empathy is too clean anyway; the pharmacology and ethics are interrelated. He speaks of nights by the fireplace with a few lines of heroin: "In these serene moments, I reflect on my day, hoping that I wasn't the source of anyone's anguish." But

it is precisely the serenity—the pleasure—of these moments that allows for the empathetic retrospection. The deepest pleasure always has this sort of impact. So, to adapt Hart's driving question, how might temporary chemical euphoria align with Catholic *telo*? How might such pleasure be therapeutic in the deepest sense of the beatific vision?

Even if the answer to these questions is ultimately "It can't," we will be better for having explored them anew rather than assuming our understanding of these substances is complete in the face of evidence to the contrary. That, besides a really good read, is what Hart is trying to provide.

Bryan McCarthy teaches philosophy at the University of Pittsburgh in Greensburg, Pa. He is the president of the Pittsburgh Psychedelic Society.

South Africa's Answer to William Faulkner

Judges for the 2021 Booker Prize were unanimous in granting the award—the most prestigious literary honor for fiction in English—to Damon Galgut for *The Promise*. A bestselling South African novelist and playwright, Galgut wrote his first novel, *A Sinless Season*, at age 17. He was shortlisted for the Booker prize in 2003 for *The Good Doctor* and in 2010 for *In a Strange Room*. Like the two earlier novels, *The Promise* focuses on racial

tension in South Africa and the way greed promulgates that tension.

The judges called Galgut's story a testament to the flourishing of the novel and noted its unique narrative design. Maya Jasanoff, chair of the Booker judges, said the narrative pays "remarkable attention to structure and literary style" and has "a lot to chew on." I agree.

Here's how the story works: Using present tense, omniscient point of view and a William Faulkner-like stream-of-consciousness, Galgut takes readers into the heads of every character. He even suggests the thoughts of jackals that eat a dove (perhaps a symbol) who flew into a window and died. Beginning each section of the story *in medias res*, he pushes the plot forward and adds suspense.

The novel's most unusual feature is the unnamed narrator, who speaks directly to the reader. Sounding like the stage manager in Thornton Wilder's "Our Town," he intervenes frequently. His presence enhances the story but also takes away from its verisimilitude, as when Rachel dies; he says, "In the hearse, I mean the house, a certain unspoken fear has ebbed...."

Set from the 1980s to the early 21st century, *The Promise* features an upper-middle-class white family living near Pretoria in South Africa. Galgut describes the family as "an amalgamation of everything I grew up with." In that sense, it resembles the 2020 Booker Prize winner *Shuggie Bain*, Douglas Stuart's first novel, which is also about

a dysfunctional family facing discordant times—religious friction in Ireland in the 1980s.

Galgut's plot probes the fortunes of the diverse Swart family, which is a mix of Jewish, Dutch Reformed and Roman Catholic. Their religious differences intensify the family dissonance and exacerbate racial problems during Apartheid and just after.

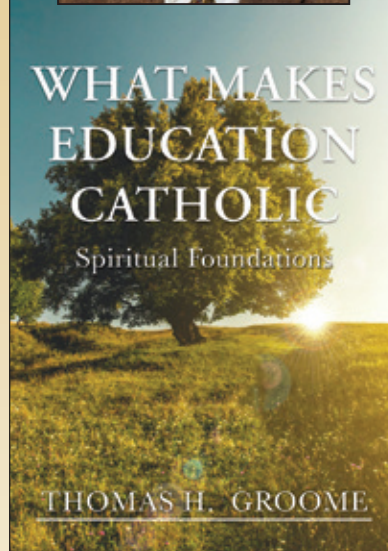
Amor Swart serves as the conscience of *The Promise*. The youngest of three siblings, she became clairvoyant when struck by lightning and would have died had Manie, her father, not carried her down the *koppie* (hill): "like Moses descending the mountain...it was the afternoon the Holy Spirit touched him and his life changed."

Manie asks God's forgiveness, swears off his sinful ways and begs his wife, Rachel, to pardon him for gambling and cheating with prostitutes. She refuses. Soon Rachel, who had converted to Manie's Dutch Reformed Church, reconverts to Judaism.

The narrative begins as Rachel is dying. She asks Manie to give Salome, the family's Black maid, the tumbledown shack where she lives with her son, Lukas. Manie promises to do so, and 13-year-old Amor overhears him. Galgut's novel explores the ramifications of that promise, especially as it relates to racism, hypocrisy and lies—those the characters live with and those that destroy them.

Early on, we learn that Aunt Marina disdains Rachel because Aunt Marina disapproved of her brother's marriage to a Jew and

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Ultimately, Galgut slams Protestants, Jews, Roman Catholics and even meditation gurus. ●●

believed that Rachel “betrayed the whole family” when she reconverted. Marina is especially annoyed that Rachel asked Manie to give her property to a servant and he promised to do so. She is angry that Rabbi Katz insists on burying Rachel in a Jewish cemetery (as she had requested) rather than in the family burial ground, as a tearful Manie selfishly insists.

Manie reneges on his promise to Rachel and lies, saying that he did not promise any such thing. Amor tells him “a Christian never goes back on his word.” Throughout the 30 years of the story, Amor tries to influence her father and her two older siblings, Anton and Astrid, to fulfill their mother’s final wish, arguing, “A promise is a promise.”

Amor’s brother Anton is the most realized character. Sensitive and perspicacious, he considers himself the “prodigal son.” The narrator describes him as someone who “can see the right action and will not perform it.... Dunno. Just always been like that.” He disparages his father’s hypocrisy and distrusts clergymen, seeing them as liars.

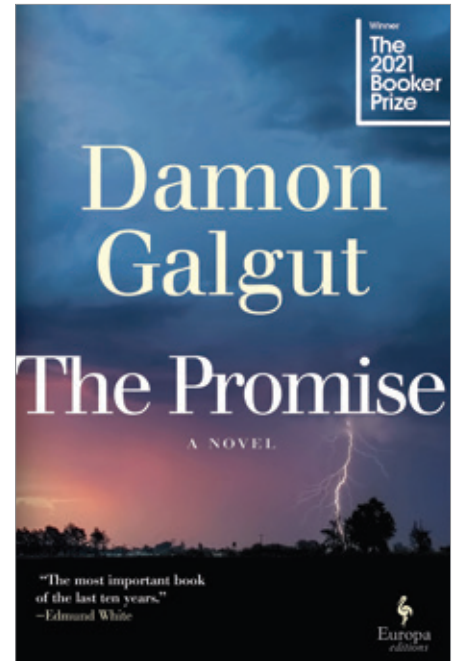
Anton blasts Pastor Simmers, the nearly blind Dutch Reformed minister. The pastor, who sympathizes with Manie’s refusal to give Salome her shack, also plans to acquire a hefty section of the farm to build a fancy

church through a revised will—in effect cheating the family. Later, Simmers persuades Manie to sit in a cobra cage to raise money for charity. Anton, seeing through the “Voortrekker shaman,” is infuriated.

Anton criticizes Father Batty, the Catholic priest, for his “sententious assurance” and insufferable sense of spiritual authority. Dressing up for the funeral Mass, the priest in his full regalia looks like “the human equivalent of a peacock.” He hears Astrid’s confession and reveals what she confessed. It bothers the priest only somewhat that he broke the seal of confession, a reaction that did not seem believable to this Roman Catholic. “The poor man was in pain,” Father Batty says, “and I told him the truth which cannot be a sin.”

The unfulfilled promise seems to bring on what Amor calls “the wrath of the Lord [which is] like an avenging flame.” Following the funerals of Rachel, Manie, Astrid and Anton, only Amor and Anton’s wife, Désirée, survive at the tale’s conclusion. Désirée doesn’t want to give Salome the property, saying she will just ruin it. Amor disagrees, declaring she takes promises seriously.

The storyline melds William Faulkner’s novel *As I Lay Dying* with Geoffrey Chaucer’s “The Pardoner’s



The Promise

By Damon Galgut
Europa Editions
269p \$25

Tale”; Galgut skewers hypocrites, especially religious ones. No one in this narrative sells indulgences, but many sell themselves as exemplars of virtue even though they are evil.

Ultimately, Galgut slams Protestants, Jews, Roman Catholics and even meditation gurus. Putting it succinctly, Anton says, “There is a lie at the heart of everything,” which is as good a way as any to sum up a darkly comic story that seems less a novel than a many-layered morality tale.

Diane Scharper, the author of several books, teaches in the Johns Hopkins University Osher program.

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‘You Must Write It’

An author reckons with her first book

By Shannen Dee Williams



After Hannah Beachler became the first African American to win an Academy Award for production design in 2019 for her work on the hit Marvel film “Black Panther,” she offered a word of encouragement in her acceptance speech that I believe every serious writer should take to heart.

“Never give up,” Beachler declared. “And when you think it’s impossible, just remember to say this piece of advice I got from a very wise woman: I did my best, and my best is good enough.”

When I submitted the final manuscript for *Subversive Habits: Black Catholic Nuns in the Long African American Freedom Struggle* this past winter, I looked up from my computer screen and repeated this important mantra to myself. Then I walked to my room, sat on my bed and cried for three hours straight.

Writing a book is one of the most difficult things a person can do. Sur-rendering that work to the world is even harder. This is especially true when one’s work focuses on a topic that has been systematically denied.

In the 14 years that it took me to research and write the first full history of Black Catholic women religious in the United States, I experienced the gamut of human emotions—from the unbridled joy a scholar feels when making unexpected discoveries in an archive to the righteous indignation of being confronted with evidence of the intentional suppression of facts to

the crippling self-doubt that I suspect every writer battles with when finally forced to sit down and actually produce a manuscript.

Authors learn to become extraordinarily patient with themselves, their thinking and writing processes and their countless failures. Anyone tasked with researching and writing a “hard history” also quickly learns to develop an iron jaw and carry lots of salve for the inevitable encounters with those who are invested in maintaining the multitude of myths that undergird human history.

Perhaps most important, writers learn to accept the painful truth that some stories must be left unwritten (at least temporarily) for the sake of time, space and nonnegotiable word limits set by publishers. Revisions and cuts in book drafts always bleed and leave their own special scars. Ultimately, though, the journey of writing my first book taught me the indomitable power of self-awareness, self-determination and historical truth-telling.

When I began working on my manuscript in 2007, I encountered what seemed like an endless stream of discouragement. So many people, including archivists and scholars, told me that my project was a fool’s errand, that there was no meaningful story of Black Catholic nuns in the United States, that white nuns were not willing or violent slaveholders and never deliberately excluded women from

their communities because of race and color, and many other falsehoods.

In many instances, I recognized that those who doubted my research’s viability knew very little church history, and even less Black and Black Catholic history. In other cases, though, this denial reflected the painful reality of anti-Blackness and discrimination that has actively worked over the years to misrepresent or altogether erase Black sisters’ footprints in American history.

I still vividly recall the distinguished theologian and nun who, in 2011, told me in a room full of scholars and lay people that there were “anthropological” reasons why white nuns did not want to live with Black women and girls called to consecrated life. That moment and its aftermath poured gasoline on an intellectual fire that still burns in me today.

The journey that followed also affirmed to me what the great Nobel laureate and Catholic writer Toni Morrison once said to aspiring authors: “If there is a book you want to read, but it hasn’t been written yet, then you must write it.”

And write it I did.

Shannen Dee Williams is an associate professor of history at the University of Dayton. Her first book, Subversive Habits: Black Catholic Nuns in the Long African American Freedom Struggle, will be published by Duke University Press in May. Twitter: @BlkNunHistorian.



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