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Flannery O'Connor: Images of Grace (Book Review)

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in the Reformed Church" (p. 113). He concedes that "liberalistic enmity against orthodox doctrine" was "a factor" in determining official church policy. All I have read elsewhere and the testimony of the seceders, including van Raalte, whom the author quotes (esp. pp. 130-135), suggests strongly that this was more than "a factor."

Still, there is no question that this is a scholarly book, thoroughly—indeed, exhaustively—researched. But what is its strength is also its weakness. One does not expect such a book to be light reading, but *Sources* was written originally as ten Zythoff's Ph.D. dissertation and has all the earmarks thereof. The writing marches; it never soars. It is prosaic, never imaginative. Any inclination to flair and brilliance has been sternly suppressed by the requirements of sober academic judgment and documentation for every statement—very nearly one page of small-print endnotes for every three pages of text. That the work reads as well as

it does is a credit to Dr. Milo Van Veldhuizen, who "smoothed out" the grammatically correct writing of a man whose basic language was Dutch, thereby making the style seem natural for an American audience. Still, this is not bedtime reading for the casually interested; it is reading at which one often has to work, albeit with considerable profit.

A couple of minor points. There are a few errors which the proofreader did not detect, rather noticeable because they occur in proper nouns. And there is an odd reference (p. 2) to King William Frederick II of Prussia; this ought to be Frederick William II.

All in all, this is a scholarly, worthwhile book on a topic little known or understood. Those of Reformed background who have any interest in their roots ought to read it, and they can do so with considerable benefit.

Flannery O'Connor: Images of Grace. Harold Fickett and Douglas R. Gilbert. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986. Reviewed by James C. Schaap, Associate Professor of English.

What Harold Fickett and Douglas Gilbert have done in *Flannery O'Connor: Images of Grace* is piece together a testimony—part biography, part critical study, part devotional—to the work of the foremost Christian fiction writer of the twentieth century. Via a scholarly essay by Fickett and a photographic essay by Gilbert, the book, handsomely printed by William B. Eerdmans, celebrates the works and days of Flannery O'Connor, who died at the age of 39, already somewhat famous for her two difficult novels and two collections of short stories.

Fickett's biography reveals no secrets. In fact, now that O'Connor scholarship has become a sprawling enterprise, there is not much anyone can add to the already well-documented, short life. She was born in a small town in Georgia, spent some time at the University of Iowa in the early years of the Writer's Workshop, then returned to live with her mother and a brood of yard birds, pheasants, and peacocks, in Milledgeville, Georgia, where she died. There is no rakish behavior in the biography, no long-standing feuds, no arresting drama at all to speak of, nothing but her own long bout with a rare disease named lupus, a battle she fought valiantly—even joyfully at times—and eventually lost. But as she was fond of saying herself, for a Christian there are far worse things in life than dying.

Although others have told the O'Connor story before, Fickett traces it again with a special eye for the way in which both her faith and talent may have developed. "The conflicts in her own personality became a means by which she would learn to identify with the impaired, the outcast, and the poor," he writes in the opening chapter. "And through this identification she would see, at last, the 'ultimate image of reality,' the Christ who himself went

beyond identification to become, in actuality, impaired, outcast and poor."

What is unique to this study of O'Connor is the faith of the collaborators. Fickett's carefully worded text has the sturdy feel of a reminiscence undertaken by a blood relative—both he and O'Connor, fiction writers and fellow believers bonded together by the blood of the Lamb. And the study has the strengths and weaknesses of any such study.

One strength, for instance, is Fickett's ability to plumb the sometimes opaque depths of O'Connor's imagery and symbolism in order to discover the spiritual truth lying at the bottom. Much of this essay is composed of a long and detailed analysis of the two difficult novels, *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear It Away*. By pursuing O'Connor's "radical images" with scalpel-and-forceps care, Fickett reveals the deeply theological tenets of faith and life which undergird her work. The result is sometimes surprising and even joyous. Fickett—and the Christian reader—have much cause to celebrate the results of the analysis. He proves her to be everything she ever claimed she was. "I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy," she once wrote in an essay entitled "The Fiction Writer and His Country." She continues: "This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and what I see in relation to that." Fickett's careful analysis illustrates that there is no discrepancy between teller and tale.

Of course, the danger of the kind of deeply detailed analysis which Fickett undertakes is that O'Connor's stories may have to be pronounced clinically dead before they can be dissected. Readers of this book should see to it that they read O'Connor's fiction—and read her well—before they

undertake to celebrate with the authors of *Flannery O'Connor: Images of Grace*. There is a certain joy in seeing one's own sense of a story or a novel repeated in a secondary work such as this; but if one reads Fickett's critical commentary first, then goes to the novels or stories, one may do a disservice to the literature, reading only for what the critic claims is there.

Reading O'Connor carefully is important, however. While it is true that literature students frequently bash English professors for reading too much into the text—dredging up all kinds of buried treasures beneath the lines—O'Connor regularly employed industrial-strength symbols to gain her ends. Fickett, thus, cannot be criticized for digging too deeply within the text. O'Connor demands it.

But what are the dangers of lauding your own (spiritual) sister's (or brother's) work? One can, of course, have his or her vision impaired by filial love. The question is, are there any limitations to O'Connor's work? Fickett's celebrative essay fails to mention some rather obvious problems.

One, it seems, is the repetitive rhythms in her work. At the end of the study, Fickett quotes O'Connor's own personal letter to a friend. In it she admits that she needs prayers because she knows she will have to move along to another stage of her development. "I've been writing eighteen years and I've reached the point where I can't do again what I know I can do well," she says, "and the larger things that I need to do now, I doubt my capacity for doing."

It would have been helpful to see Fickett mention the kind of *déjà vu* one feels when reading, story by story, through the O'Connor canon, the sense for a repeated pattern in her work—spiritually proud protagonists unable to see themselves clearly until finally confronted by a sometimes violent epiphany in which they see themselves cleansed miraculously.

Reading O'Connor is sometimes analogous to reading another great American humorist, Peter De Vries: one feels at times—even in a brand new work—that this ground has been covered somewhere before. The letter quoted above explains that she knew she had exhausted the possibilities for her own flavor of grotesque comic Christianity. I would have liked to see Fickett acknowledge as much himself.

Also, there is the matter of the difficulty inherent in "discovering" what O'Connor is up to. I have taught O'Connor's stories to a decade's worth of undergraduates, and (with the possible exception of the story entitled "The Artificial Nigger") I have yet to encounter a student who feels some sense of O'Connor's Christianity upon first reading. In class, we then go through a silly game.

"You think this story is about a simple old Grandma and escaped murderer? Well, you're wrong. It's really about being saved from sin," I tell them.

Students gasp, astonished.

We then look at all the hints O'Connor has planted into the narrative, and soon they see another level of meaning emerge, the moral lesson sharply and violently explained.

Granted, there is some joy in discovering a bonus idea embedded in the text, but the classroom process, the more often I go through it, has begun to remind me of a children's magazine puzzle—"can you find the seven pitchforks hidden in this drawing?" To be sure, O'Connor's craft has engendered a whole cottage industry of studies and dissertations. But not every reader makes her living doing literary research.

Nonetheless, Fickett and Gilbert's cause is eminently worth celebrating. No other Christian writer has done as much as Flannery O'Connor to make faith respectable in fiction in the twentieth century. I know several contemporary writers, including Raymond Carver, who, even though they do not claim to be Christians, feel that *Mystery and Manners* is the finest book available on the craft of writing.

Furthermore, O'Connor never skimmed on her commitment to Christ, either publicly, in her essays and speeches, or in the work itself. Her stories and novels, no matter how complex, are in fact a testimony, and Fickett is right in staging the kind of altar call for Christian writers he does at the end of the essay. He asks the readers to look to O'Connor's own unfinished work: "We who follow her must take up this challenge, further restoring the sense of the holy to contemporary sensibilities."

Little mention has been made here of Douglas R. Gilbert, whose photographic essay of O'Connor's rural South makes a significant contribution to the book. It would be easy to caricature Southern smalltown life, the region some critics have called "God-haunted"; television does it all the time. But Gilbert neither romanticizes nor satirizes his subjects. Unlike Richard Avedon's *The Way West*, for example, Gilbert's studies concern themselves less with starkness and immediacy of image. The photographs, however, don't blanch at the sight of ugliness, nor do they turn away when the truth seems something preferably not said. Moreover, Gilbert appears to have some sense for the shared humanity of his subjects; perhaps it's his own sense—and O'Connor's—for the image of God in all of us.

For those of us who know and love O'Connor, this book should stand on our shelves adjacent to *Mystery and Manners* and *The Habit of Being*. It is a loving tribute to the one who has, during this century, set the standards for Christian fiction.

Fickett and Gilbert's book *Flannery O'Connor: Images of Grace* admirably nominates this somewhat reclusive Southern lady for canonization. She deserves it.

Through A Glass Lightly. John J. Timmerman. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987, 179 pp. Reviewed by James C. Schaap, Associate Professor of English.

One of the most charming ironies of Christian Reformed Church life is the fact that Calvin College maintains

denominational affiliation as *onze school*, despite the fact that most every self-respecting dominie since Kuyper's rise