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# FLANNERY O'CONNOR

## THE COMPLETE STORIES

Foreword  
by Hilton Als

CENTENNIAL  
EDITION

A stylized illustration of a peacock, shown in profile facing right. The neck and head are dark blue, the body is a lighter blue, and the tail feathers are a vibrant green with dark green outlines. The legs are orange with black outlines. The background is plain white.

WINNER  
OF THE  
NATIONAL  
BOOK AWARD  
FOR FICTION

## *The Complete Stories*

FLANNERY O'CONNOR

Flannery O'Connor was born in Savannah, Georgia, in 1925. A devout Catholic, she lived most of her life on a farm in Milledgeville, Georgia, where she raised peacocks and wrote. She was the author of two novels, *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear It Away*; thirty-one short stories; and numerous essays and reviews. When she died at the age of thirty-nine, America lost one of its most gifted writers at the height of her powers.

BOOKS BY FLANNERY O'CONNOR

NOVELS

*Wise Blood*

*The Violent Bear It Away*

STORIES

*A Good Man Is Hard to Find*

*Everything That Rises Must Converge*

*The Complete Stories*

NONFICTION

*Mystery and Manners*

*The Habit of Being*

*A Prayer Journal*

Flannery O'Connor

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THE  
COMPLETE  
STORIES

WITH A FOREWORD BY HILTON ALS  
AND AN INTRODUCTION BY ROBERT GIROUX



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*Foreword:*  
*This Lonesome Place*

BY HILTON ALS

The two niggers, a man and a woman, cutting across the field are looking for a little moonshine when they spot the white boy, Francis Marion Tarwater—the teenage antihero of Flannery O'Connor's startling second novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*—who is digging a grave for his great-uncle Mason. Mason, a self-titled prophet who spent his life denouncing the world for having forsaken its Savior, believed that Tarwater might have the calling, too, but the boy is not feeling his religion right now, standing in the dirt, just this side of death. O'Connor writes:

The woman, tall and Indianlike, had on a green sun hat. She stooped under the fence without pausing and came on across the yard toward the grave; the man held the wire down and swung his leg over and followed at her elbow. They kept their eyes on the hole and stopped at the edge of it, looking down into the raw ground with shocked satisfied expressions. The man, Buford, had a crinkled face, darker than his hat. "Old man passed," he said.

The woman lifted her head and let out a slow sustained wail, piercing and formal. She . . . crossed her arms and then lifted them in the air and wailed again.

"Tell her to shut up that," Tarwater said. "I'm in charge here now and I don't want no nigger-mourning."

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"I seen his spirit for two nights," she said. "Seen him two nights and he was unrested."

"He ain't been dead but since this morning," Tarwater said . . .

"He'd been predicting his passing for many years," Buford said. "She seen him in her dream several nights and he wasn't rested . . ."

"Poor sweet sugar boy," the woman said to Tarwater, "what you going to do here now by yourself in this lonesome place?"

Published in 1960, *The Violent Bear It Away* appeared just as Martin Luther King Jr. was cutting a large revolutionary swath through the Old South, and only six years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, when that little black girl in sunglasses had her face dotted with the spittle of her white countrymen in Little Rock. The South may indeed have seemed like a "lonesome place" to whites then. Integration was not going slow, as William Faulkner had said it should (to which Thurgood Marshall responded, "They don't mean go slow, they mean don't go"). And, in order to move into a modern South, whites would need to be less encumbered by the old ways: by manners, by the Christian charity and moral rectitude of colored life—the "nigger-mourning" that cut to the soul.

Race and faith and their attendant hierarchies and delusions are O'Connor's great themes. And remain America's one hundred years after her birth. She was hailed for her artistic and social independence, but readings of this American master, whose *Complete Stories* we celebrate in this splendid reissue of the original 1972 book, which won O'Connor—posthumously—the National Book Award, often overlook the originality and honesty of her portrayal of Southern whiteness. Or, rather, Southern whiteness as it chafed under its biggest cultural influence—Southern blackness. It's remarkable to consider that O'Connor started writing less than a hundred years after Harriet Beecher Stowe published *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and just a decade after Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*, two books whose imagined black

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Mary Flannery O'Connor at the Catholic Cathedral of St. John the Baptist. The Church's sanctioning of mysticism would later have a profound influence on O'Connor's writing, but Catholicism was a faith that had little sway in the "Christ-haunted" South O'Connor grew up in—a place where Jesus *was* God. Savannah had been settled first by Episcopalians and Lutherans, then by Baptists and Methodists; Catholics were excluded from the state's charter until 1794, and were thereafter rarely regarded as anything but an itinerant non-Reformed sect, as alien a presence as the Jews. ("That must be Jew singing," someone scoffs when two Catholic girls sing psalms in the 1954 O'Connor short story "A Temple of the Holy Ghost.")

O'Connor was the only child of Regina Cline and Edward O'Connor, a real estate agent who aspired to be a writer. Both parents were descended from Irish Catholic immigrants, and Mary Flannery began her studies at the St. Vincent's Grammar School for Girls. Even as a child, she had a merciless view of things, and her plain speech won her unwelcome attention from the Sisters of Mercy who provided her instruction. She grew up loving birds and she favored chickens with mismatched eyes or crooked combs. When she was five, she raised a "frizzled" chicken (its feathers grew backward), which she taught to walk backward. A New York-based newsreel company that specialized in natural phenomena heard about the bird and sent a crew to O'Connor's home to film it—"an experience that marked me for life," she said later. The crew's visit provided her with the first approval of her obsession with the grotesque as it lives beside the normal: a frizzled chicken striding backward in the yard while Mother airs out a tablecloth and Father closes the shed door, axe in one hand, wiping the sweat from the back of his neck with the other.

American genius often feeds on its own environs, and O'Connor was no exception. "I'm pleased to live in Baldwin County in the sovereign state of Georgia, and to see what I can from here," she told one interviewer. She knew where her material was, and had known it since she was twelve. By then she had discovered

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the tone of her voice, too, its lyrical flatness and its wildly leaping humor. ("If I . . . tried to write a story about the Japanese, the characters would all talk like Herman Talmadge," she once said.) O'Connor was already slipping verse under her father's napkin at the table and rejecting books that didn't satisfy her interest in the heretical. "Awful. I wouldn't read this book," she wrote in her copy of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. In a copy of *Georgina Finds Herself*, by Shirley Watkins: "This is the worst book I ever read next to Pinocchio." About her early reading, O'Connor wrote to a friend in 1955:

The only good things I read when I was a child were the Greek and Roman myths which I got out of a set of a child's encyclopedia . . . The rest of what I read was Slop with a capital S. The Slop period was followed by the Edgar Allan Poe period which lasted for years and consisted chiefly in a volume called *The Humerous Tales of E.A.Poe*. These were mighty humorous—one about a young man who was too vain to wear his glasses and consequently married his grandmother by accident; another about a fine figure of a man who in his room removed wooden arms, wooden legs, hair piece, artificial teeth, voice box, etc. etc.

From the beginning of her reading life, O'Connor preferred stories that were direct in their telling and mysterious only in their subtexts. She clearly despised the lack of clarity which she believed came with Northern liberalism, and which she lampoons with her intellectual characters, who always function in a kind of godless oligarchy. In many of her stories, intellectuals are depicted as grumpy poseurs, mean and homely failures who can't get on with life and are often driven into the ground by its brutality. O'Connor was like her chicken, walking backward, staring at others as she removed herself from them.

In 1938, after Edward O'Connor was appointed a zone real estate appraiser for the Federal Housing Administration in

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## *The Geranium*

OLD DUDLEY folded into the chair he was gradually molding to his own shape and looked out the window fifteen feet away into another window framed by blackened red brick. He was waiting for the geranium. They put it out every morning about ten and they took it in at five-thirty. Mrs. Carson back home had a geranium in her window. There were plenty of geraniums at home, better-looking geraniums. Ours are sho nuff geraniums, Old Dudley thought, not any er this pale pink business with green, paper bows. The geranium they would put in the window reminded him of the Grisby boy at home who had polio and had to be wheeled out every morning and left in the sun to blink. Lutisha could have taken that geranium and stuck it in the ground and had something worth looking at in a few weeks. Those people across the alley had no business with one. They set it out and let the hot sun bake it all day and they put it so near the ledge the wind could almost knock it over. They had no business with it, no business with it. It shouldn't have been there. Old Dudley felt his throat knotting up. Lutish could root anything. Rabie too. His throat was drawn taut. He laid his head back and tried to clear his mind. There wasn't much he could think of to think about that didn't do his throat that way.

His daughter came in. "Don't you want to go for a walk?" she asked. She looked provoked.

He didn't answer her.

"Well?"

"No." He wondered how long she was going to stand there. She made his eyes feel like his throat. They'd get watery and she'd see. She had seen before and had looked sorry for him. She'd looked