

~Other Speakers G-L: Sermon Illustrations II:

BreakPoint Commentary - October 12, 1998 A Good Book Is Hard to Find - The Fiction of Flannery O'Connor

What great Twentieth-century writer said: "For me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and what I see in the world I see in its relation to that." C. S. Lewis? Maybe G. K. Chesterton? No, the author of those words was an American woman from rural Georgia. Her name was Flannery O'Connor, and her writing is one of the undisputed bright spots in Twentieth-century fiction. Flannery O'Connor was born in 1925, in SavanNah. After spending two years at the famous Iowa Writers Workshop, she returned to Georgia where she wrote short stories and raised peacocks. During her short life -- she died at 39 -- O'Connor produced some of the most powerful fiction with Christian themes ever written. O'Connor represents the tail end of the Southern Literary Renaissance that included William Faulkner, Katherine Anne Porter, and Robert Penn Warren. But she differed from them in that she was, above all, a Christian writer. According to critic Dorothy Walters, O'Connor's "bizarre narratives of absurdly comic Southerners are governed by the stern purity of a rigidly Christian view." O'Connor knew her Christian faith was an anomaly in a world grown complacent, materialistic, and secular. So to reach the prosperous, well-adjusted, comfortable folk who made up the bulk of her readers, O'Connor used jarring, comic situations and grotesque, unsophisticated characters. She intended to shock her readers out of their entrenched complacency, especially in matters of faith. Now be warned her writing is for a secular audience. It's not the kind of fiction you find in Christian bookstores today. The genius of O'Connor was that she could portray religion in an up-close and unfiltered way she knew many readers would find uncomfortable. For example, her novel, "The Violent Bear It Away," describes a sophisticated schoolteacher named Rayber who considers himself a rationalist; he dismisses faith as irrational. But then he stumbles upon a little girl evangelist. Her sermon on God's love hits him like a punch in the stomach. "Do you know who Jesus is?" the little girl asks. "Jesus is the Word of God and Jesus is love. The Word of God is love and do you know what love is, you people? If you don't know what love is you won't know Jesus when He comes. You won't be ready." Well, you won't find that kind of talk in many other Twentieth-century novels. O'Connor knew her audience would identify with the schoolteacher, and would be as disturbed and affected as he was by such powerful words coming from the mouth of an innocent little girl. Much of O'Connor's fiction had this effect on its readers as it has had on me. There is something in her writing that haunts readers so that they can not easily dismiss it. You can learn more about Flannery O'Connor and other great writers in a new book by Louise Cowan and Os Guinness, called "Invitation to the Classics." And then the next time you meet a sophisticated, modern secularist -- one who sneers at religious faith -- ask him if he's read any Flannery O'Connor. Her writing just might be the instrument God uses to open his eyes to the truth. But first, do yourself a big favor. You might want to read her as well.