



# **The Terrible Speed of Mercy: A Spiritual Biography of Flannery O'Connor**

*Jonathan Rogers*

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## **The Terrible Speed of Mercy: A Spiritual Biography of Flannery O'Connor** Jonathan Rogers

Flannery O'Connor's fiction is a reminder that the rural South is as good a place as any for transcendence to break through and reveal itself to the human gaze.

The story of Flannery O'Connor's life is the story of her inner life more than her outer life. In a letter to a friend she wrote, "My audience are the people who think God is dead. At least these are the people I am conscious of writing for." And writing for such a people required that she find a whole new language, a language she had to make up as she went along, drawing startling and large figures to get the attention of the almost blind, shouting in the ear of the almost deaf.

Her famous short story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" was once called "profane, blasphemous, and outrageous," but for O'Connor, the real horror was never violence or deformity, but damnation. Horror that awakens a soul to its own danger and prepares it to receive grace is no horror, but a mercy. "The devil," she wrote, "accomplishes a good deal of groundwork that seems to be necessary before grace is effective."

In "The Terrible Speed of Mercy" Jonathan Rogers chronicles how a conventional, devout middle-class lady from a dairy farm in Milledgeville, Georgia, came to write stories that were like literary thunderstorms, turning on sudden violence and flashes of revelation that crashed down from the heavens, destroying even as they illuminated.

## **The Terrible Speed of Mercy: A Spiritual Biography of Flannery O'Connor Details**

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# **From Reader Review *The Terrible Speed of Mercy: A Spiritual Biography of Flannery O'Connor* for online ebook**

## **Joselito Honestly and Brilliantly says**

I do not know why this is called a "spiritual biography." A biography I imagine to be a story of one's life, from beginning to end, from infancy to maturity, old age and death. Flannery O'Connor, however, seemed to be as Catholic as she was born when she died not yet 40. There had been no ups and downs in it, or the swaying from belief to unbelief and back. No dark nights of the soul. Maybe calling this a "spiritual" biography was just an excuse for its brevity? So no one can criticize it as a haphazardly written biography proper?

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## **Christy says**

Interesting to read about Flannery O'Connor's life, I just didn't think this biography was particularly well-written. But now I need to read some of O'Connor's actual stories- I read a collection of her short stories in high school or college but I think I'd get a lot more out of them now.

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## **Sara says**

"And if Southern writers have a tendency to write about freaks, O'Connor remarked, 'it is because we are still able to recognize one'." - p. 21

This is a beautifully crafted book. It was the most perfect orientation to the heart and mind of Flannery O'Connor and it gave me the confidence to meet her writing with the right openness of mind. I have long cringed at the name Flannery O'Connor presuming her work to be macabre and something unholy. As a Catholic and lover of classics I always puzzled over her name being connected with great modern Catholic writers but was too cowardly to meet her on her own terms. I credit Mr. Rogers with helping me to fall in love with this remarkable author and her important fiction.

"And more than ever now it seems that the kingdom of heaven has to be taken by violence or not at all. You have to push as hard as the age that pushes you." *The Habit of Being*, 229.

This beautiful biography has some spoilers in it for the new O'Connor reader - but I confess - those spoilers were a mercy to me. Knowing the fate of the grandmother prepared me and helped me to read the story with the right focus.

I think that Mr. Rogers must really love Flannery O'Connor. He worked very hard to let her tell her own self story by citing countless letters and essays. While he gave us the outline, he filled it in with her own words and ideas and did it in a way that felt relaxed, friendly and intelligent - like his subject herself. He showed profound respect for her theology and faith and worked hard to help the reader understand how those beliefs influenced O'Connor's attitudes and writing.

I genuinely feel like I have met and chatted with this remarkable soul thanks to Mr. Rogers. I sobbed at her

death and appreciated his beautiful treatment of it.

"It is remarkable to think about this woman - who had made a name for herself with stories of earthly terror and grotesquerie - meditating every day on the province of joy, lest she be ignorant of the concerns of her true country. All that darkness was in the service of eternal brightness. All that violence was in the service of peace and serenity." (p 162)

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### **Becky Pliego says**

Now I really want to read *The Habit of Being*.

Two quotes:

"For O'Connor, the real horror was never violence or deformity, but damnation. Horror that awakens a soul to its own danger and prepares it to receive grace is no horror, but a mercy." (J. Rogers)

"I distrust pious phrases, particularly when they issue from my mouth." (Flannery O'Connor)

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### **Adam Shields says**

Short Review: This is a good short introductory biography of O'Connor. I have previously read an edited edition of her grad school journal (*A Prayer Journal*) and one of her collections of short stories (*A Good Man is Hard to Find*). But I knew little about her and after reading the short stories thought I needed to know more before reading more by her.

My plan is to read *A Subversive Gospel: Flannery O'Connor and the Reimagining of Beauty, Goodness, and Truth* and then the Image Journal edition of her college journals and then her first novel, *Wise Blood*.

My slightly longer review is on my blog at <http://bookwi.se/the-terrible-speed-o...>

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### **Homeschoolmama says**

I first was exposed to Flannery O'Connor's writings in college. I was immediately impressed with her stories and read as many as I could at that time. Someone mentioned this book to me, so I thought I'd read it, get a sort of backyard view of the woman who wrote such harsh, sardonic stories.

This wasn't exactly what I'd call a spiritual biography. It was more of an overview of O'Connor's life, with the first fifth of the book glossing over her childhood and the last four fifths of it summarizing her adult life as a writer, with wonderful quotes, excerpts of her personal letters and synopses of her stories. Rogers touches on her Catholic faith, but I wouldn't say this was at all a delving of her spiritual life. Which is what I'd expected and hoped. This may be because O'Connor didn't write much about herself. And she wasn't very sociable either. But I did get a picture of what she was like. A complicated, faithful, talented, eccentric and

brilliant studier of personal dynamics, someone you can't pigeon-hole as a 'Southern Writer', as so many did. She was so much more than that.

I enjoyed this book despite its brevity and cursory information and am inspired now to go back and re-read her stories, and read her two novels.

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### **S Suzanne says**

I wanted a refresher about FOC after reading **All the Rises Must converge** after at least a decade, and reading **The Violent Bear It Away** for the first time.

She is an inspiring person for keeping her spirits and humor as sharp as she did through the ordeal of her last decade of life, ending before she hit 40. The book makes a point that the last thing she ever wanted was to self-dramatize over her illness(es). She always downplayed her fragile state/ or brushed the subject away with humor, and prayed more for her books than her physical health.

She was misunderstood when first published, and often still is. I can see why. A Roman Catholic writing in from the Bible Belt is going to confuse a lot of people. Many do not know their shades of Christianity these days, and as gruesome as some of her tales are, many church-going Christians avoid her. She put immense intensity into her work, and I think she did a good job of setting the stage for her electrifying revelations.

The irony is still there for me that hers are some of the darkest gothic tales ever, yet her views are so different, her goal so different, than they are often interpreted. And from other writers in the same genre.

Highly recommended quick read for anyone interested in basic clarity on where she is coming from. Flannery is a mystery to be contemplated for a lifetime, but this gives one a solid base to start from.

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### **Diana Nelson says**

This is a very thorough biography (including much of O'Connor's own epistolary writing) of Flannery O'Connor's life as an author. For those who struggle to understand the faith that his hidden in her works, this biography will help you uncover it in a general sense.

I think I'm fond of O'Connor because (in addition to her writing skill) she is a black sheep. She shuns popularity and is never afraid to be herself. She's also super sarcastic and witty. I wish we could have been friends.

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### **Ginger says**

Quite good. A wonderful overview and insight into the life of one of the South's most famous writers. Jonathan Rogers proves he is fantastic at biography.

He uses O'Connor's letters extensively to prove his thesis that she wasn't only a Southern Gothic writer, but also full of wit and joy.

My one quibble with this book was that the editing was atrocious. I even went so far as to scour the acknowledgments to find the editor's name. Several glaring misspellings and the footnotes were an absolute mess.

But the book did make me want to revisit the writings of Flannery with renewed vigor so it's a great success.

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### **Allison says**

Though I thought I was familiar with Flannery O'Connor (having read almost all of her short stories & novels), this biography opened in me a new appreciation for her faithfulness and her wit. Rogers is a superb storyteller and his prose shines here, intermingling with deft quotes from O'Connor's letters and writings to give us an honest portrait of one of the South's most misunderstood writers. Highly recommended, even if you aren't familiar with her works. After reading this, you will certainly want to be.

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### **Ben House says**

This is a very enjoyable book. I have been reading, writing, and talking about Flannery O'Connor for many years now and never cease to be amazed at what she did. This book is a rich and yet short biography of Miss O'Connor. It is full of rich quotes from her letters which reveal her salty wit, her sufferings, the challenges she faced in writing, and her deep theological perspective.

It is hard to beat O'Connor when it comes to such categories as writer of short stories, or writer with a Christian worldview, or Southern writer. The only limitation to O'Connor was that she died rather young and left us with only a few books, some essays, and a host of letters. The Nobel Prize is only given to living authors, so she really was not in the running. I wish she had gotten that award, but I believe she got a greater reward upon her passing from this world.

As Rogers described her writing, rewriting, and reworking her short stories, I was reminded again and again of just how many fine works she produced by banging away on a manual typewriter on a lonely Georgia farm living with her mother and surrounded by pea fowl.

This is a great, funny, and delightful biography. But if you have not read St. Flannery herself, get thee to a bookstore immediately.

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### **Cynthia Coletti says**

As a writer and Christian thinker and artist, Flannery O'Connor exhibited remarkable insight and observation. Whether I entirely agree with her or not I think she is fascinating. There is no one other than she who could have written many of her books. After having read this book, I am actually looking forward to reading some of her books again. I have started a Good Man is Hard to Find twice without being able to get beyond the initial violence. I'm hoping this gives me a greater understanding of what she is doing in her writing. Certainly I understand her better has a person.

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## **Sara says**

I loved this and will read it again, but it took me a while to get into it. The first seven chapters read like a standard biography, not particularly insightful if you're already familiar with O'Connor's childhood and adolescence. The second half of the book is pure gold though, as Rogers delves into the spiritual nature of O'Connor's life as an author and the development of her prophetic voice through her work. He relies heavily on letters that were exchanged between O'Connor and several close friends as he weaves a unified picture of her faith, humor, stories, culture, personality, relationships and chronic illness - it gave me a new perspective on how these aspects influenced one another, and I gained a deeper understanding of how rich her interior life was. This also made me want to read *The Habit of Being* (the collection of O'Connor's personal correspondence) and her entire body of published work in the order it was originally written.

Flannery O'Connor is a marvelous example of a deeply faithful yet often misunderstood person, living with profound integrity despite so many physical, social and professional obstacles. Her life humbles and inspires me.

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## **Sally Ewan says**

Since the "Close Reads" podcast discussion was on O'Connor's book "Everything That Rises Must Converge", I read the stories aloud each week to my husband. After finishing the book, my second time through it, I wanted to better understand her intention, the way her work was viewed at the time it was written, and how she saw God. This short book was a great way to learn more. Rogers covers her entire life but focuses on her spirituality more than the practical facts of her life. Instead, he gives some information about what was happening to her, especially in terms of where she lived, who her friends were, and what her physical condition was like through her life, as background to her thoughts on God. I enjoyed reading this and hope to read more biographies on her.

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## **Kathleen O'Neal says**

A good short biography of Flannery O'Connor. I would have liked to have seen more analysis of how being a woman with disabilities shaped her, but the book mostly concentrated on her devout Catholicism which of course is an important part of her story too. Overall I felt this was a good introduction to O'Connor's life, but it left me with more questions than answers after reading it.

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