



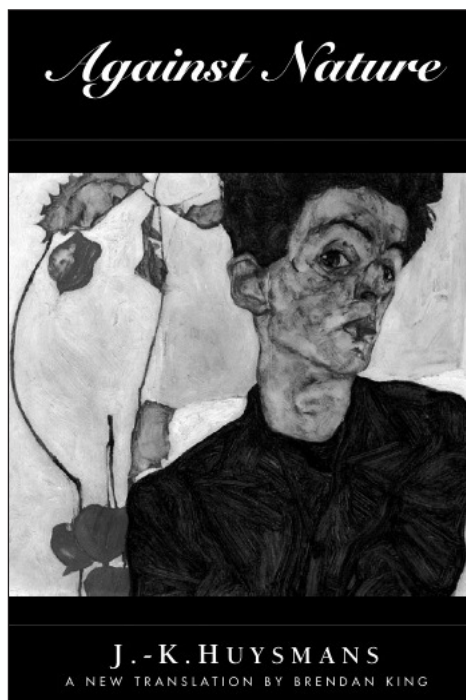
A Handful of Catholic Authors

By Kevin P. Shields

The Second Vatican Council described the Real Presence with three adverbs that are the keys to Catholic teaching and are also descriptive of what makes Catholic fiction. These adverbs are: Truly, Really, and Substantially. Catholic fiction is *truly* reflective of what we naturally intuit about life through our experience and understanding of our faith; it *really* puts our human struggle in perspective, pondering and wrestling with our limitations and our desire to overcome them; and it is *substantial* in that it dives deeply into our humanity and lays hold of those difficult, yet wonderful truths.

Catholic fiction depicts or provides an outline of the way in which our ordinary affairs are affected by our faith. It shows how Catholicism is a holistic and coherent view of life, a way of being. It contains all the drama of life—the good, bad, and otherwise—found in any other work of fiction. The difference is that running through Catholic fiction is a thread of hope, an understanding of purpose that holds out a sense of meaning to be found in our tragedies and triumphs. It realizes that the source of our happy and substantial ending lies outside of ourselves. Yet it also brings to life the depth and struggle to be found in our humanity. Essentially, it is premised upon our fallen nature—in the fact that Original Sin is true and its manifestation is found in each of us. At the same time, it shows we are made in God’s image and likeness in its depiction of our desire for meaningful relationships, for love, and in our search for the truth.

Fr. Patrick Samway, former literary edi-



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tor for *America* magazine and a biographer of Walker Percy, considers a work of fiction to be Catholic “if it dramatizes a view of the world that provides an opportunity for the reader to enter, in some reflective way, into the mysterious plan that God has for his

people.” The presence of this mysterious plan is the golden thread that makes certain fictional works Catholic.

Catholic fiction is enmeshed in this understanding of purpose and the ethic of living a meaningful—moral—human life. As Chesterton said, “Everything human must have in it both joy and sorrow; the only matter of interest is the manner in which the two things are present.”

So what does all this mean to us? It is great to know what Catholic fiction is, but why does it matter? What role does it have to play in our culture, our faith development, the conversion of others, and in the shaping of a healthy worldview?

Catholic fiction matters because it is wide and deep, encompassing all that it means to be human in the fullest possible sense. It matters and we should read it because it provides insight into our sojourn. We find sorrow in it, yet joy too. It does not always come to a happy end, although it does come to a hopeful end. This hope is important to us and our culture, because in hope we find faith. As scripture, in Hebrews 11:1 tells us: “*Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen.*”

Let’s take a look at the following selection of modern Catholic authors: J.-K. Huysmans, Sigrid Undset, Rumer Godden, Flannery O’Connor, John Kennedy Toole, and Cormac McCarthy.

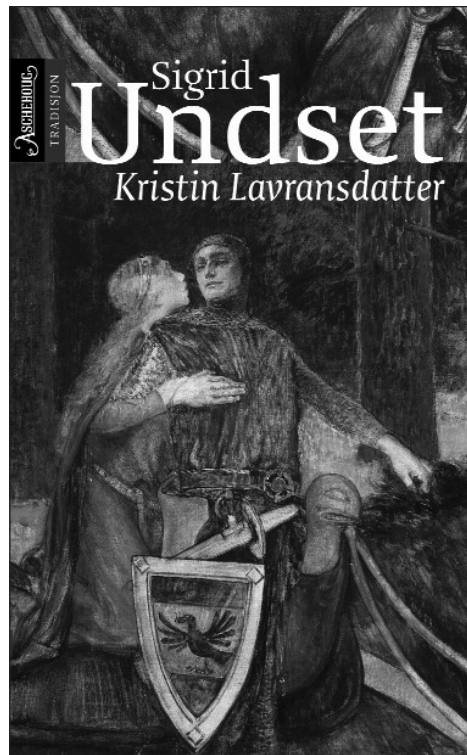
J.-K. Huysmans was born in Paris in 1848. He worked for thirty-two years in the Ministry of the Interior and wrote his first novel *Marthe* in 1876. His reputation was made in 1884 with his most famous—or

infamous—novel, *A Rebours* or *Against Nature*. Huysmans is best known as one of the leading writers of the literature of Decadence. His next work, published in 1895, *La Bas*, is a study of Satanism and sadism in which he depicts a Black Mass. In this novel we see a deep-seated need for faith. His next three novels, autobiographical in nature, are *En Route*, *The Cathedral*, and *The Oblate*. Huysmans describes *En Route* in these terms: “The plot of the novel is of the simplest; I have re-used the main character of *La Bas*, Durtal, whom I have undergone a conversion and send off to a Trappist monastery; in him I have tried to note the episodes of *a soul startled by grace*.” The emphasis on these last words is reflective of Huysmans’ own experience of Christ. He converted to Catholicism and became a Benedictine Oblate. Huysmans died in 1907 after horrendous suffering due to cancer of the jaw and mouth. Despite this, he died peacefully—evidence some say of the completeness of his conversion.

Sigrid Undset’s Catholic works were written before she converted. Born in 1882, she was raised by agnostic parents in anti-Catholic Norway. Undset wrote in the first half of the twentieth century and was the third woman to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. She fled to the United States to escape the Nazis and then returned to Norway, where she died in 1949.

Her first novel, *Mrs. Marta Oulie*, begins with the opening sentence—“I have been unfaithful to my husband”—an opening line certain to catch one’s attention! The work is set in contemporary times and created quite a stir. It is the story of a wife’s reeling life and the drama and difficulties unleashed by the choices she makes. As such it was controversial, yet established her as an author. It is, however, her historical fiction that won her the Nobel Prize and is her most Catholic work, although all of her novels are Catholic in their portrayal of human nature.

Undset’s work that won the Nobel Prize is *Kristin Lavransdatter*; a trilogy consisting of *The Bridal Wreath*, *Mistress of Husaby*, and *The Cross*. A truly remarkable work that



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chronicles the life of Kristin Lavransdatter, from her teen years through to the end of her days, it takes place in Post-pagan Norway and paints a tremendous picture of daily life at that time, yet speaks clearly to today’s reader. We find in this novel all the challenges we face today: adolescent infatuation, peer and social pressure, financial and career choices, political intrigue, family struggles, celebrations, illness, violence, murder, and death. It is all here—woven into a tremendously paced story of an incredibly naïve, impetuous, yet strong young girl who grows into a woman of depth and substance. This is a story of life, and also a story of faith, but not of a saint, rather of a sinner—someone like us. We follow Kristin through the same struggles many of us have faced in our lives. Throughout the story we find incredible

reflections in Kristin’s meditations on her choices and the consequences they bring. Here is a woman full of life, strength and independence, yet one who is also timid, unsure and dependent on others. Truly we find a well-painted picture of our humanity in the saga of *Kristin Lavransdatter*.

Rumer Godden, born in 1907, wrote over forty books and died in 1998. Born in England, she lived nearly half of her life in India. She was raised Anglican but through her life in India was exposed to Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam. This opened her eyes to a larger spiritual world than that offered by Anglicanism and tuned her into the universality of man’s spiritual search for truth, peace and happiness.

One of four children, Godden divorced and remarried. Her older sister Jon, also a writer, converted to Catholicism in 1956, followed by her mother in 1957 and Rumer herself in 1965. Her prominent works are *Black Narcissus* (1939), *An Episode of Sparrows* (1956), *In This House of Brede* (1969), and *Five for Sorrow, Ten for Joy* (1979). The first three of these were adapted to film. All these works portray a Catholic sense of life; each bringing out the very human struggles we face in our own lives, and the fact that not all ends in a nicely wrapped package. She examines the balance between the mystical aspects of religion and the submission of the individual to spiritual discipline. *Narcissus* is about a group of European nuns establishing a convent and social work in the Indian mountains; *Sparrows* takes place in post-war England as reconstruction begins and tells the story of struggle and redemption between the youth and adults of a small British village as it attempts to pick up and reassemble itself; *Brede* is about a young British professional who chooses to forgo the successful career that lies ahead of her by joining a cloistered abbey in the English countryside. The story runs deep and touches on many of the doubts and certainties we all struggle with as we attempt to square ourselves with God and the world. Finally, *Five for Sorrow* is about a female military driver in post-liberation Paris who falls into the grip of prostitution. The novel

charts the protagonist's difficult struggle to reclaim her life.

The remaining authors wrote in the second half of the twentieth century and all are Americans. Their work reflects the cultural changes that took place in modern society after World War II, especially in America. As such we find the portrayal of the grotesque and the presence of violence much more in the work of these latter authors.

Flannery O'Connor, born in Savannah in 1925, spent the majority of her life in Milledgeville, Georgia where she died of lupus in 1964. Her corpus of work is one of the smallest—although not the smallest—of our authors. She wrote two novels; thirty-one short stories, and a few speeches and letters.

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There are two qualities in O'Connor's writing that will either endear or repel: Her use of violence and the grotesque, and her portrayal of religion through the view of southern Protestantism. O'Connor was born and raised Catholic in the heart of American Protestant culture. Her Catholic faith was very real to her and something she treasured and practiced with fervor. Yet her portrayal of religion in her novels and short stories is always that of Protestantism, although not over and against Catholicism. She does this for two reasons: 1) all her stories are set in the South and so reflect the dominance of Protestantism as she found it there, and 2) as she states it: "I can write about Protestant believers better than Catholic believers—because they express their belief in diverse kinds of dramatic action which is obvious enough for me to catch. I can't write about anything subtle."

If we accept O'Connor's explanation that she is not writing about Catholic believers, what makes her writings Catholic

in nature?

O'Connor's Catholicism is revealed in her use of the grotesque, which she employs as a lens to help us see the absurdity of our actions when our lives are not understood or lived within the context of the Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection and without an understanding of our fallen nature due to Original Sin.

John Kennedy Toole was born in New Orleans in 1937, and lived his entire life there; he died in 1969. Toole holds the record, among these authors, of having the smallest body of work—two books—both published over ten years after his death.

Toole's famous work is *A Confederacy of Dunces*, published in 1980 through the influence of Walker Percy who recognized the genius and significance of the work. Percy also wrote the foreword in which he alludes to the tragedy of Toole's life. (In a state of depression at his inability to get his book published, he undertook a road trip across the United States committing suicide en route back to New Orleans.)

Confederacy is great fun, full of humor and packed with insights into modern American life. So prescient is the work that it's easy to mark the trajectory Toole expects American culture to take and simply read the newspaper or turn on the TV to see that he had it right.

The quote from which the work draws its title sets the scene for the story. It is from Jonathan Swift's *Thoughts on Various Subjects, Moral and Diverting*: "When a true genius appears in the world, you may know him by this sign, that dunces are all in confederacy against him."

Toole visited Flannery O'Connor's home in Milledgeville, Georgia just days before he committed suicide in Mississippi. *Confederacy* won the Pulitzer Prize for Literature upon its publication in 1980.

Cormac McCarthy is still living and writing and, like Toole, is a Pulitzer Prize winner. He was born in Rhode Island in 1933 and raised in Knoxville, Tennessee, where he attended Knoxville Catholic High School and then the University of Tennessee. He left college without earning a degree and

published his first novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, in 1965. Although it is doubtful that McCarthy considers himself a Catholic novelist, a Catholic sensibility is apparent in much of his work and most profoundly in *Suttree* (1979) and *The Road* (2006).

In *The Road*, a cataclysmic event has taken place and some portion of the world is devoid of vegetative life and the landscape has turned ashen and barren. A man and boy—father and son—we are never given their names, are making their way through this deadness, seeking food and a place with some level of safety and natural life. The father believes this can be found on the coast, what coast we do not know. Along the way they meet others, some alive, many

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dead. They have few belongings, one of which is a gun. They are in constant danger from others and must keep moving. Along the way those they meet either want their help or seek to harm them. The story reflects the resilience of the human spirit and the role that faith and hope play in sustaining human life. Despite its bleakness and violence, there is a message of hope in the story, subtle, yet ultimately sublime. This is a tremendous book, and all the more so because its Catholic ethos, though not overt, is pervasive. It is, in short, a model of good Catholic fiction, and follows in the noble tradition of the rest of the handful of authors we've discussed.

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