

Greg Johnson

an excerpt

*Flannery Fever**

Some writers resist the designs of literary biography.

In many cases an author will actively discourage biographical inquiry; Eudora Welty did this successfully for most of her long life. In other instances, a deceased writer's executors and relatives will manage to block biographies they deem unflattering or otherwise unacceptable—the Sylvia Plath estate has been notorious in this respect. Still other authors' quiet lives don't lend themselves to an exciting or even viable biographical account; to put it crassly, their life stories might not "sell" to the reading public.

For the Georgia novelist and short-story writer Flannery O'Connor (1925–64), all the above-mentioned inhibitions to a biographical project have been in play. She put off personal inquiries by redirecting critics' attention to her writing, and since O'Connor's death her relatives have been known not to cooperate with those who would delve into the author's private life. As for her routine being too "quiet" to warrant a biography, O'Connor herself put it best: "As for biographies, there won't be any biographies of me because, for only one reason, lives spent between the house and the chicken yard do not make exciting copy. . . ."

To some readers, all this twenty-first-century biographical and critical attention to O'Connor may seem unusual, particularly given her racial attitudes. Indeed, the author's handling of race has become the most controversial topic in O'Connor scholarship. Although O'Connor typically shows racist behavior in an unfavorable light and enjoys nothing more than giving her blinkered protagonists a much-needed

*An essay-review of

FLANNERY: A LIFE OF FLANNERY O'CONNOR. By Brad Gooch. New York: Little, Brown, 2008. 446 pp. \$30.

CRITICAL COMPANION TO FLANNERY O'CONNOR: A LITERARY REFERENCE TO HER LIFE AND WORK. By Connie Ann Kirk. New York: Facts on File, 2008. 415 pp. \$75.

A LITERARY GUIDE TO FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S GEORGIA. By Sarah Gordon with Craig Amason, consulting editor. Photographs by Marcelina Martin. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008. 115 pp. \$19.95, paper.

comeuppance, her use of the most dreaded of racial epithets bewilders some readers, especially younger ones. Her story "The Artificial Nigger," for instance, has virtually disappeared from textbooks and anthologies even though, ironically enough, O'Connor herself considered this story her finest.

Despite the racial issue, however, her work endures, largely because it transcends its place and time to show operant universals of human experience. Gooch, Kirk, and Gordon, in their quite various and welcome new works, provide essential understanding of one of our most significant American writers.

