

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-82863-5 - Flannery O'Connor: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by R. Neil Scott and Irwin Streight

Excerpt

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WISE BLOOD (1952)

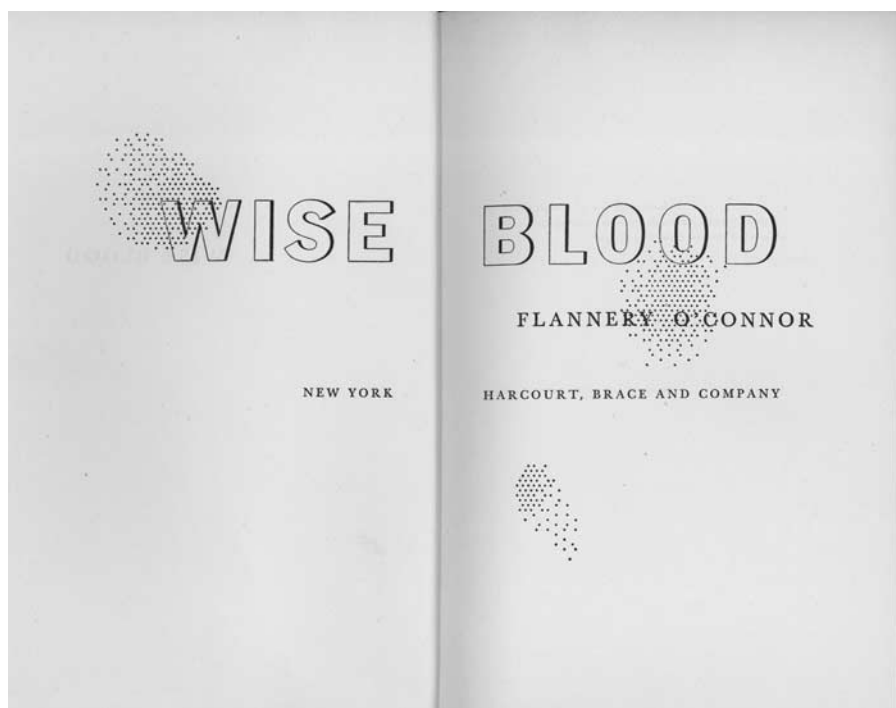
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“New Creative Writers.”
Library Journal,
 15 February 1952,
 p. 354.

Information about Flannery O'Connor author of *Wise Blood* is somewhat meagre. She was born in Savannah [Georgia], 26 years ago, lived for a time at Yaddo, New York, and now makes her home in Milledgeville, Georgia. *Accent* and *Made-moiselle* have published some of her short stories and *Partisan Review* and *Sewanee Review* chapters from *Wise Blood*, which is about the South, southern religionists, and in the opinion of some readers in the tradition of Kafka.

“May 15 is Publication
 Date of Novel by
 Flannery O'Connor,
 Milledgeville.”
Milledgeville Union-Recorder [Georgia],
 25 April 1952, p. 1.

Harcourt, Brace and Company, one of the country's leading publishing houses, has announced May 15 as the publication date for *Wise Blood*, a novel by Flannery O'Connor of Milledgeville.

Although advance copies of the book are not yet available, a pre-publication review of it by the New York critic, Caroline Gordon, says in part, “I was more

impressed by *Wise Blood* than any novel I have read in a long time. Her picture of the modern world is literally terrifying. Kafka is almost the only one of our contemporaries who has achieved such effects.”

Editorial comment by the publishers describes the book as an “extraordinary novel, which introduces an important new talent, relating the story of Hazel Motes, who comes from Eastrod, Tennessee, and has discovered a new religion which he preaches from the hood of his rat-colored Essex. . . . Haze, a primitive figure, represents the most primitive issue of our time or any time – religion. In his fight for truth as he sees it, he clashes with two other evangelists. . . .”

Wise Blood say the publishers, “has great humor, and horror, and compassion, and its satire is reminiscent of the Evelyn Waugh of *The Loved One*.”

Although a native of Savannah, the 26-year-old author of the new book is a member of the Cline family of Milledgeville and in 1938 returned here with her mother, Mrs. Edward O'Connor, and she completed high school at Peabody and her college studies at Georgia State College for Women. From GSCW she went to the State University of Iowa and studied writing under Paul Engle, receiving a Master of Fine Arts in Literature in 1947. She had a fellowship in English at Iowa for two years.

She began her novel in 1947, living for seven months of that year at Yaddo, Saratoga Springs, N.Y., which is an estate left by the Trask family for writers, painters, and musicians who are doing creative work. Later she lived in the country with friends in Connecticut.

Back in Milledgeville for the past year, Miss O'Connor is living for the present with her mother at “Andalusia,” a rambling, storybook farm owned by the Cline family.

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"I write every day for at least two hours," says the young author, "and I spend the rest of my time largely in the society of ducks." Raising ducks is her hobby and she owns, also, geese, pheasants, quails, and one frizzly chicken. A frizzly chicken, she explained, is a chicken that looks more like a wet fur coat than anything else.

Miss O'Connor's interest in feathered friends dates back to the time she was about 11 years old and she owned a chicken that got in *Pathé News* by the simple (but exceedingly singular) procedure of walking backwards. A *Pathé* cameraman traveled across several states to film the hen that went places in reverse with as much ease as most birds stroll forward. "Since that big event," remarked the chicken's proud owner as she looked back on the excitement of that by-gone day, "my life has been an anti-climax."

She gives credit to an advertisement in the *Union-Recorder* for an idea that led to one of the chapters in her book. A local theater offered free passes to fans who would shake hands with a gorilla appearing here "in person" on the day of the particular film's showing. This chapter happens to be one of several printed as separate stories in various literary magazines prior to publication of her novel.

Flannery O'Connor's first story was published in *Accent* in 1946. Since then she has had stories or chapters of her novel in such publications as *Sewanee Review*, *Partisan Review*, *Mademoiselle*, *Tomorrow*, and *New World Writing*. She writes only fiction and is interested in the novel only as art.

Her book is dedicated to her mother.

"Wise Blood." *Bulletin From Virginia Kirkus's Bookshop Service*, 1 May 1952, p. 285.

A first novel, which develops from partial appearances in the *Sewanee* and *Partisan Reviews*, in which a Capoted cosmos of satire and allegory and obscurity – or is it revelation – narrows down to a distortion of human life. Centered here, in a quite savage phantasmagoria of good and evil, is Hazel Motes, once dedicated, now a disbeliever in Eastrod, Tennessee, where he decides to preach a new church – the "church of truth without Jesus Christ crucified" – a "church where the blind don't see and the lame don't walk and what's dead stays that way." He escapes the attentions of Sabbath Lily Hawks, the daughter of an evangelist who fires Hazel's mission with hatred; he avoids Enoch Emery, a boy of eighteen who "had wise blood like his daddy" and who ends up by killing a gorilla, stepping into his skin; and he finds his own salvation when he blinds himself with quicklime, creates his own world of darkness in which he wastes away to a desired death. A grotesque – for the more zealous avant-gardists; for others, a deep anesthesia.

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“Miss O'Connor Adds
Luster to Georgia.”
*Atlanta Journal and
Constitution*, 10 May
1952, p. 4.

Georgia's vitality in the field of literature continues, a fact which is brought to our attention by an autograph party being given by the Georgia State College for Women for Miss Flannery O'Connor. Her novel, *Wise Blood*, published by Harcourt, Brace & Co., will appear in bookstores on May 15.

This will probably be the only such party Miss O'Connor will enjoy. She is a young lady lacking in desire to be publicized and as a consequence suffers acutely when put on display.

She likely will have to learn how to take public attention, as her book has been acclaimed by solid critics. Before producing it, she had sold stories to leading magazines of exacting editorial demands.

Miss O'Connor graduated at GSCW and then took a degree at Iowa State University where she majored in English. [*Ed: She earned an MFA in Creative Writing*]

We congratulate her as another in the list of Georgians who by production of first-rate writing keep Georgia's name before the nation in a favorable and commendable light.

Milton S. Byam. *Library
Journal*, 77 (15 May
1952), 894–95.

The career of Hazel Motes, a young war veteran, is made the vehicle for some

wry commentary on life in this odd book. In a world in which it is obvious that he is the only Christian, Hazel Motes founds the Church Without Christ. On the street corners of Eastrod, Tennessee, Hazel preaches that there is no need for Christ and therefore no need to be concerned with sin. Written by another of that galaxy of rising young writers who deal with the South, this one was penned at deep-freeze temperatures. Though there is very little actual life going on, the people live and speak authentically. A good solid work more concerned with people and moods than story. Recommended.

“Flannery O'Connor
Wows Critics with New
Book, *Wise Blood*.
Colonnade [Georgia State
College for Women],
15 May 1952, pp. 1, 4.

GSCW graduate Flannery O'Connor's new novel *Wise Blood*, released today by Harcourt, Brace and Company, has caused a minor sensation among literary critics. The May 19 issue of *Newsweek* devotes almost a full page to a review of the book and comments on the young author.

In the article, Miss O'Connor is heralded as “perhaps the most naturally gifted of the youngest generation of American novelists.” Her book is described as having “an imaginative intensity rare in any fiction these days.” Another timely comment is this: “Apparently there is a subtle parody of communist soapboxing” in the street sermons (of the principal

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character [Hazel Motes], who is a mountain evangelist), and “a genuine presentation of the sense of fury and rejection that sometimes lies back of them. And there is a satire on the secularization of modern life in most of Miss O'Connor's characters: the phony blind man who walks the street calling on people to repent and his juvenile-delinquent daughter who takes after [Hazel]. Most of the time Miss O'Connor sustains without an effort the deliberate unreality of her tale, which seems to float over the surface of an ordinary southern town.”

Newsweek also carries pictures of Miss O'Connor and her Milledgeville home, which is the old Cline house on Green Street famous for its lace brick wall.

Caroline Gordon, the New York critic, says in part, “I was more impressed by *Wise Blood* than any novel I have read in a long time. Her picture of the modern world is literally terrifying. Kafka is almost the only one of our contemporaries who has achieved such effects.”

Wise Blood, say the publishers, “relates the story of Hazel Motes, who comes from Eastrod, Tennessee, and has discovered a new religion which he preaches from the hood of his rat-colored Essex – Haze, a primitive figure, represents the most primitive issue of our time or any time – religion. In his fight for truth as he sees it, he clashes with two other evangelists.”

William Goyen.
“Unending Vengeance.”
New York Times Book Review, 18 May 1952,
p. 4

[Rpt. “Flannery O'Connor – A Writer of Power.” *Savannah [Georgia] Evening Press*, 20 May 1952, p. 5: Rpt. “The City of Fiendish Evangelists.” *New York Times Book Review*, 6 October 1996, p. 78.]

Written by a Southerner from Georgia, this first novel, whose language is Tennessee-Georgia dialect expertly wrought into a clipped, elliptic, and blunt style, introduces its author as a writer of power. There is in Flannery O'Connor a fierceness of literary gesture, an angriiness of observation, a facility for catching, as an animal eye in the wilderness, cunningly and at one sharp glance, the shape and detail and animal intention of enemy and foe. The world of *Wise Blood* is one of clashing in a wilderness.

When Hazel Motes, from Eastrod, Tennessee, is released from the Army at the age of 22, he comes to a Southern city near his birthplace. He falls under the spell of Asa Hawks, a “blind” street preacher who shambles though the city with his degenerate daughter, Lily Sabbath Hawks, age 15. The encounter with Hawks turns Hazel Motes back into his childhood traumatic experience with his grandfather, who was a preacher traveling about the South in an old Ford. The story of this novel, darting through rapid, brute, bare episodes told with power and

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keenness, develops the disintegration and final destruction of Hazel, who physically and psychologically becomes Hawks and parrot-preaches (in vain) to the city crowds from the hood of his second-hand Essex.

In a series of grim picaresque incidents Hazel struggles to outfox and out-preach Hawks. He announces a new religion called "The Church Without Christ."

In Taulkinham, U.S.A., the city of Fiendish Evangelists, one is brought into a world not so much of accursed or victimized human beings as into the company of an ill-tempered and driven collection of one-dimensional creatures of sheer meanness and orneriness, scheming landladies, cursing waitresses, haunted-house people, prostitutes, fake blind men who take on, as they increase in number, the nature and small size of downright skullduggery and alum-mouthed contrariness. One is never convinced of any genuine evil in these people, only of a sourness; they seem not to belong to the human race at all; they are what the geneticist calls a race of "sports."

The stark dramatic power of the scenes is percussive and stabbing, but Miss O'Connor seems to tell her story through clenched teeth in a kind of Tomboy, Mean-Moll glee, and a few times she writes herself into episodes that have to contrive themselves to deliver her out of them, and then she is compelled to go on too far beyond or in the direction of sensationalism.

Miss O'Connor's style is tight to choking and as direct and uncompounded as the order to a firing squad to shoot a man against a wall. It perfectly communicates this devilish intent of the inhabitants of Taulkinham to be mean, or cadge, or afflict each other. One cannot take this book lightly or lightly turn away from it, because it is inflicted upon one in the same way its people take their lives: like an indefensible blow delivered in the dark.

Perhaps this sense of being physically struck and wounded is only the beginning of an arousal of one's questioning of the credibility of such a world of horror.

In such a world, all living things have vanished and what remains exists in a redemptionless clashing of unending vengeance, alienated from any source of understanding, the absence of which does not even define a world of darkness, not even that – for there has been no light to take away.

Martha Smith. "Georgian Pens *Wise Blood*, A First Novel." *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 18 May 1952, p. F7.

In a novel whose overtones are chilling and whose horror is undiluted, Georgia introduces an extraordinary talent. Flannery O'Connor, born in Savannah and presently living in Milledgeville, unleashe[s] here as frightening a set of characters as literature ever produced.

Hazel Motes, discoverer of a new religion, called "The Church Without Christ," preaches on the street corner. Molded into his fearful character by an environment and heritage of horror, he moves undeviatingly on to his personal disaster, helped on his way by as unsavory a bunch of helpmates as you'd find under any stone.

In this allegory of modern life, Miss O'Connor seems first to endow her characters with the basic virtues of courage and hell-bent determination. She makes it clear that their actions and thoughts are inescapable, and implies to the quivering

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reader that the very same goblins might “git” you!

No doubt about it, she is a writer to reckon with. Miss O'Connor seems able to express in her characters their basic drives. She translates into cold type motivations that don't seem clear to the people themselves, but after Miss O'Connor writes a sentence the reader is uncomfortably sure of what she means to say.

It's not a book to read late at night, alone. It's no idle, amusing reading, either. It's a book to cause thought, introspection, and sheer terror.

I can hardly wait to read what Miss O'Connor may write about some happy people.

Sylvia Stallings. “Young Writer with a Bizarre Tale to Tell.” *New York Herald Tribune Book Review*, 18 May 1952, p. 3

[Rpt. Milledgeville *Union Recorder* [Georgia], 22 May 1952.]

Flannery O'Connor, in her first novel, has taken on the difficult subject of religious mania and succeeds in telling a tale at once delicate and grotesque. For it fulfills the first and most important requirement of any work of the imagination, which is to convince the spectator of the total reality of something outside his experience.

Very few readers of *Wise Blood* will have suffered from an obsession like that of Hazel Motes, the lanky Tennessean

who sets out to free his fellow men from their enslavement to a redeeming Jesus. Haze's grandfather had preached salvation for sinners, but Haze, remembering the old man's finger leveled accusingly at him, concluded that with no redemption there would be no need for Jesus, and so he determined to convert people to the Church Without Christ, where there were no sins and no sinners. How the world received him and how he came to die in a ditch with broken glass in his shoes and barbed wire wrapped around his chest and both his eyes put out with quicklime is Miss O'Connor's story, and it is a strange one.

For Haze in his career touched also on the lives of Enoch Emery, who stole a mummy out of its glass museum case to provide this peculiar prophet with a new Jesus, and of Asa Hawks and his perverse daughter, Sabbath Lily, who ought by rights to be comic figures straight out of Dogpatch and who yet come to life with all the soft-spoken villainy of Dostoevsky's men and women – except that in this curiously vivid world, good and evil seem to have lost their cutting edge. Haze brought uneasiness to the fat whore, Leora, as well, and to the gorilla who shook the hands of the first ten children in line at the picture show, and to his landlady, who thought that life had at last found her a friend: even if he was a blind man he could learn to play the guitar and they could sit on the porch in the evenings behind the rubber plants, the two of them, he strumming the guitar.

Some of the power of Miss O'Connor's writing comes from her understanding of the anguish of a mind tormented by God, and some from her ability to anchor the fantastic in the specific, so that her characters go about their preposterous lives in a way that parodies with a horrible fascination the actions of a sensible man. She understands also how to drive home

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a telling metaphor: few boys could forget having had for [a] grandfather “a waspish old man who had ridden over three counties with Jesus hidden in his head like a stinger.”

The only doubt Miss O'Connor leaves in the mind is where, after an opening performance like this one, she has left herself to go.

“Frustrated Preacher.”
Newsweek, 19 May
 1952, pp. 114–15

[Rpt. Milledgeville
Union-Recorder [Georgia],
 22 May 1952.]

Flannery O'Connor is perhaps the most naturally gifted of the youngest generation of American novelists, and her first book, *Wise Blood*, has an imaginative intensity rare in any fiction these days. For one thing, it is not autobiographical. Flannery O'Connor was born in Savannah, Ga., 27 years ago, the daughter of a businessman, descended on her mother's side from an old Milledgeville family whose ancestral mansion is a Georgia showplace, once the governor's residence. She graduated from Georgia State College for Women at Milledgeville, spent two years in Paul Engle's class in creative writing at the State University of Iowa, and a season at the writer's colony at Yaddo (Saratoga Springs, N.Y.). Before writing *Wise Blood* she says the biggest thing that ever happened to her was when she was 6. She owned a chicken that walked backward, and it got into *Pathé News*.

In 1946 she attracted the attention of advance-guard critics with a story in a

little magazine, *Accent*. In fact, she originated a curious kind of extremely personal fiction, odd little stories about Southerners who were backward but intelligent, brutal but poetic, like hard-boiled Emily Dickinsons. This is the vein she has developed in *Wise Blood*. In her personal life Miss O'Connor is warm and pleasant, with a soft Southern drawl, but nobody will ever guess it from her stories. She paints in oils, not very well, she says, and raises game birds, such as pheasants, quail, ducks, geese, and guineas, because she enjoys fooling around with them. She is a Catholic in her religion, and at present is trying to read all the works of Henry James, but not making much headway with them, and writes every morning from 9 to 12, finding it very hard work.

In *Wise Blood* she has created Hazel Motes, who is surely the big man of all antisocial characters. Haze makes the gangsters of Hemingway's “The Killers” seem like friendly and companionable folk. Coming back from the war, a woman on the train tries to strike up a conversation with him, and Haze says with a curled lip, “I reckon you think you been redeemed.” Presently he is stalking around the streets of a Southern city with fury and frustrated religious impulses powering him like a turbine. He begins to preach in his own church, a church without Christ: “I'm member and preacher to that church where the blind don't see and the lame don't walk and what's dead stays that way.”

Readers can make of Haze's legend what they will. Plainly the primitive evangelism of his preacher grandfather had curdled by his time, and become purely destructive. Apparently there is a subtle parody of Communist soapboxing in Haze's street sermons, and a genuine presentation of the sense of fury and rejection that sometimes lies back of them. And there is a satire on the secularization

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of modern life in Miss O'Connor's characters: the phony blind man who walks the street calling on people to repent – he had promised to blind himself at a revival meeting, but backed down – and his juvenile-delinquent daughter who takes after Haze. There is another in an ex-radio evangelist who thinks maybe Haze has a money-making idea in his religion, and turns up to take up a collection.

Most of the time Miss O'Connor sustains without an effort the deliberate unreality of her tale, which seems to float over the surface of an ordinary Southern town. What the characters do does not seem real, but the town does, and the unreality usually seems right for such characters as she portrays.

[Milledgeville *Union-Recorder*, "Editor's Note:"] Literary critics [in] the metropolitan newspapers in the nation have given the highest praise to *Wise Blood*, a novel by Flannery O'Connor of Milledgeville. A representative of *Newsweek* interviewed Miss O'Connor by telephone from New York, and the magazine gave far more space and notice to the book and its author than is its custom in the matter of book reviews. The *Newsweek* article is reprinted in full by the *Union-Recorder*, as well as a particularly discerning review appearing in the *New York Herald Tribune*. . . .

Oliver LaFarge. "Manic Gloom." *Saturday Review* 35 (24 May 1952), 22.

The trick of achieving satire and humor through turning values inside out and describing the most outrageous behavior

and ideas with complete calmness is not as easy as one would think. Grotesques, to hold interest, must be extra convincing, and there is danger that outrageousness will turn into mere sordidness. Also, a continuous succession of bizarre actions can become as dull as any other form of repetition. . . .

Miss O'Connor has taken up this device with a vengeance. Her story is built around a fanatic who believes that there is no Christ, no redemption, and no soul, and who goes about preaching this doctrine with complete dedication. There are possibilities in the idea, but they are not realized, for one reason, because the individual is so repulsive that one cannot become interested in him.

This individual, "Haze," is surrounded by a supporting cast that ranges from imbecility to viciousness. The result is inevitably a gloomy tale. The author tries to lighten it with humor, but unfortunately her idea of humor is almost exclusively variations on the pratfall. If a character carries an umbrella, the umbrella collapses; if he walks in the aisle of a train, he falls over someone.

Neither satire nor humor is achieved. Perhaps it was only the blurb-writer's idea that it was intended. Perhaps Miss Flannery's aim was a savage and bitter study of the nethermost depths of a small town, with special reference to the viciousness of itinerant preachers. Savage she certainly manages to be.

Two incidents involving policemen indicate the nature of the whole book. In one, a policeman learns that Haze has no driver's license, so he whimsically pushes Haze's jalopy over a cliff. Later, when Haze is blind, deathly ill, and, as far as I can make out, completely insane, he disappears in a storm and an alarm is sent out for him. Two policemen find him in a ditch, barely alive, so one of them clubs him over the head, killing him. At least