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# Following the footsteps of Flannery O'Connor

**On this vacation, he and his wife are visiting the stomping grounds of great writers.**

*By Frederic Hunter*

from the September 5, 2008 edition

The vicarious experiences that literary creation offers are unquestionably compelling. Naturally, travelers want to visit the locations where it took place.

Which is why my wife and I find ourselves in Milledgeville, Ga., halfway between the Atlanta airport and our destination, Savannah. Literary tourists know that the late Flannery O'Connor, a splendid novelist and short-story writer, did her best work here.

I had not read any O'Connor for years. But the opportunity to spend a night in Milledgeville caused me to borrow a library copy of "The Complete Stories."


O'Connor's output was not large: two novels and two volumes of short stories, the last volume published after her death in 1964. She's something of an acquired taste: acute insights, penetrating and often humorous observations. Still her characters run to the grotesque. Her stories often jolt even shockproof 21st-century readers.

Arriving, we pass Andalusia, the farm where O'Connor lived for many years. Her widowed mother managed the place.

We walk around the town's historic district, absorbing its atmosphere as O'Connor did when her parents took refuge here from Depression-era hard times, moving inland from Savannah, where O'Connor was born.

Attending Milledgeville's Georgia State College for Women, now coed and called Georgia College and State University (GCSU), O'Connor steeped herself in that atmosphere. After graduating, she was accepted to the Iowa Writers' Workshop where, so the story goes, she had a Georgia accent so thick and word choices so down-home that her professor could not understand her. She had to write out what she was saying.

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At the GCSU library, we ask to take a look at the Flannery O'Connor Room. It's spring break; librarians are scarce. "I guess you're stuck with me," declares a pleasant woman of our approximate vintage.

We follow her to the room. It contains memorabilia: photographs of the author, her sayings – one of them something like, "I write every morning from 9:00 to noon and spend the rest of the day recuperating" – her works, and even her baptismal dress.

Getting chummy with our guide, we exchange names. She is Mary Jones, a local woman who reminisces about being taken to Andalusia farm by her great-aunt to attend Coca-Cola parties hosted by O'Connor's mother, Miss Regina. Something quintessentially Southern about "Miss Regina" forges a bond between us.

"What's your memory of those visits?" we ask.

"The silences," says Mrs. Jones, and we sense that Miss Regina was a most unusual woman. Her silence extended to her daughter's work, Mrs. Jones tells us, for she feared that giving one interview would provoke a flood of them. So she gave none.

It's a failing of literary tourists to assume that the characters and incidents in an author's work are all drawn from life. This impression is reinforced when Mrs. Jones tells us about taking a course in O'Connor's stories with a local friend. The instructor, not local, was distressed that the two students kept interrupting classes with laughter. "We recognized the folks Flannery was writing about," says Mrs. Jones. "Her observations were so accurate, we couldn't help laughing."

Generational conflict infuses the stories. Often – as in the magnificent "Everything That Rises Must Converge" – a middle-aged widow figures; often she manages a farm. Set in her ways, firm in her opinions, fundamentalist in her beliefs, this woman has been so minutely observed that the reader laughs aloud. Often she is pestered by a child or young folks who see the world differently than she does. Usually the story drives this main character to a dreadful yet foreshadowed fate.

Alas! Literary tourists cannot resist asking: Was Miss Regina the model for this frequent character? Too discreet to venture into this dangerous territory, Mrs. Jones suggests that Miss Regina may never have read Flannery's writings. At least she was too canny ever to let on that she had.

We leave Milledgeville, well-satisfied, knowing more perhaps about Miss Regina than about her daughter, but more than ever intrigued by the stories, of which I'll read more when I get home.


In Savannah, we visit the Flannery O'Connor Museum, lodged in the house where she lived as a child. In Asheville, N.C., we check out the Thomas Wolfe Memorial Site and tour the Old Kentucky Home boarding house Wolfe's mother ran; it figures in his novel, "Look Homeward, Angel."

At Asheville's Grove Park Inn, we ogle plaques on the doors of the fourth-floor rooms where F. Scott Fitzgerald languished while his wife, Zelda, was across town at a sanatorium, the site of which we visit. In nearby Flat Rock, we check out the Carl Sandburg home where the Midwestern poet spent his last days.

A strange way to spend a holiday, some would say. But it deepens our reading, and our reading enriches our lives.

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