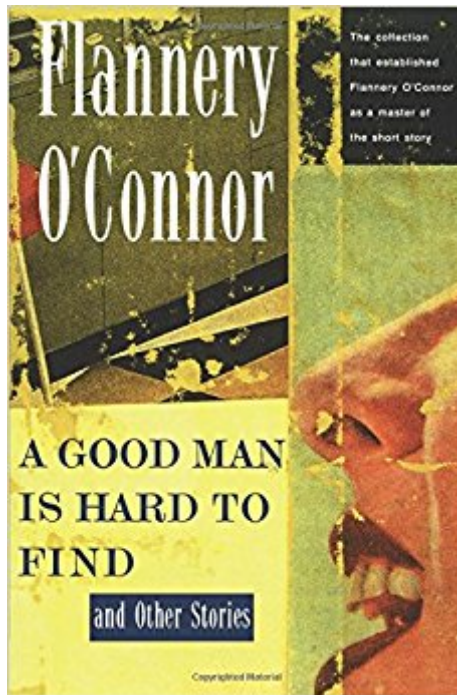


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A Good Man Is Hard To Find And Other Stories



Synopsis

One Of The Greatest American Short Story Collections In 1955, with this short story collection, Flannery O'Connor firmly laid claim to her place as one of the most original and provocative writers of her generation. Steeped in a Southern Gothic tradition that would become synonymous with her name, these stories show O'Connor's unique, grotesque view of life-- infused with religious symbolism, haunted by apocalyptic possibility, sustained by the tragic comedy of human behavior, confronted by the necessity of salvation. With these classic stories-- including "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," "Good Country People," "The Displaced Person," and seven other acclaimed tales-- O'Connor earned a permanent place in the hearts of American readers. "Much savagery, compassion, farce, art, and truth have gone into these stories. O'Connor's characters are wholeheartedly horrible, and almost better than life. I find it hard to think of a funnier or more frightening writer." -- Robert Lowell "In these stories the rural South is, for the first time, viewed by a writer who orthodoxy matches her talent. The results are revolutionary." -- The New York Times Book Review Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964) was born in Savannah, Georgia. She earned her M.F.A. at the University of Iowa, but lived most of her life in the South, where she became an anomaly among post-World War II authors-- a Roman Catholic woman whose stated purpose was to reveal the mystery of God's grace in everyday life. Her work-- novels, short stories, letters, and criticism-- received a number of awards, including the National Book Award.

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Customer Reviews

The ten short stories in this 1955 collection by Flannery O'Connor expose a grotesque underbelly of the Southern mystique that go far beyond their seemingly simple surface plots. Ms. O'Connor has a flare for dialog as well as a primal understanding of the darkness in people's souls. All her characters have a relationship with God and she combines Christian imagery, an apocalyptic vision of life and a strong element of cruelty. And yet, there is a deeply human element that gives me the shivers because it exposes truths I'd rather not see. I could tell from the very beginning of each story that something ominous was going to happen. I didn't know when, I didn't know how, and I didn't know exactly what it would be. Always, I was surprised. And yet, when I thought of it later, each story could have gone no other way. All of them had a sad or tragic ending, although some were more awful than others. What keeps the narrative exciting though is a way she has of suddenly disappearing the storyline and taking it up in another place, leaving just enough information to spark the imagination. Then, when I think I have it all figured out, things change again. Ms. O'Connor writes in simple startling sentences. And most of the stories are no more than 20 or 30 pages long. I found it hard to read one story right after the other however. Each one was so thought provoking that, even though I felt a great deal of discomfort, I wanted to stay with each just a little bit longer. That's because they move much too fast and are too intriguing to stop. Later, when the initial shock of the story is over, is the time to work it out philosophically. And it is then that I could appreciate the mastery of her craft. This is a truly fine book and I unquestionably give it a high recommendation. It is certainly not for everyone however. These stories haunt uncomfortably. But those willing to explore the dark side of human nature in this small work of art will love it.

A family on vacation encounters a cold-blooded gang, a gullible and naive housewife is struck by a mysterious (but hilariously common) "illness," a 104-year-old Civil War veteran is a featured guest at his 62-year-old daughter's high school graduation--each of O'Connor's stories portray characters in improbable, bizarre, and ultimately harrowing situations. These tales are weird, surprising, tense, comical, and often unforgettable--but what exactly do they all mean? O'Connor was often frustrated by the sense that readers and reviewers misunderstood both the intents and the themes of her stories. In her first letter to a fan from Atlanta who became a frequent correspondent, she complained that "she was mighty tired of reading reviews that call 'A Good Man' brutal and sarcastic" and that "when I see these stories described as horror stories I am always amused because the reviewer has hold of the wrong horror." I think she sells herself short with this assessment, however. Her stories are brutal, they certainly can be sarcastic--and the fact that

readers confuse the horror is confirmation of the ambiguous and harrowing (and, yes, Gothic) underworld her characters inhabit. The reason her stories are classics of the form--and the ten stories in this collection are among the best I've ever read--is not only because they are creepy and grotesque, or because she is the master of the ominous set-up and the unexpected ending, but also because after you've found out what happened you'll probably lie awake wondering why it happened. "Christian realism" was how O'Connor described her spiritual stance; "I write the way I do because (not though) I am a Catholic. . . . I am a Catholic peculiarly possessed of the modern consciousness." Decades of critics have argued over the theological underpinnings of her fiction, but an assessment by a fellow author named George Clay helped me make sense of her themes--and the author herself approvingly summarized his remarks in her own correspondence: "[Clay's] interesting comment was that the best of my work sounded like the Old Testament would sound if it were being written today--in as much (partly) as the character's relation is directly with God rather than with other people's." It's not hard to find the ghosts of Job, Ruth, Samson, Esther, Isaac, Daniel, and others in all of her stories. Whether these echoes make for good theology will depend on the reader's own spiritual inclinations--but they certainly make good reading. My favorite piece in this collection is "Good Country People," probably O'Connor's most famous (excepting the title story). Describing a lonely woman with an artificial leg who is seduced by a traveling Bible salesman, the story veers into an inexplicable climax that is both devastating and melancholy. And those two words pretty much sum up any of the stories you'll find here.

The ten short stories in this collection are definitely masterpieces. Neither too long or too short, the stories suggest whole worlds, entire lives (and deaths) with just the right number of verbal brushstrokes. Never preachy or self-righteous, they are yet infused with a deep, complex spirituality that seems to consist of an eccentric and compelling hybrid of Roman Catholicism's quiet mysticism and Southern Protestantism's revivalism and rigor. That said, this is not "chicken soup for the soul"...pretty much every story has a dark edge, and in most of them the author gets you with this impending sense of dread that things are going to go to heck in a hand basket, the only question is how (this makes the book awfully hard to put down, by the way). And she has an incredible talent of capturing the rhythms and characteristic expressions of Southern English without too much Mark Twain twang. In short, this is hands down a classic of American literature.

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