



# The 21st-century Catholic novel

*Simon Caldwell* argues there is more need than ever for novels written from a Catholic moral stance to tell the truth about the world in which we live

I am a member of that ever rare breed: a Catholic novelist. In autumn last year I published *The Beast of Bethulia Park*, my debut thriller which can be described as both Catholic and a novel and which is highly contemporary.

Unconsciously, I suppose, the book was “Catholic” because I sought deliberately to imbue my characters with souls. I wanted to write a work of fiction that was true to how I experienced good and evil within my own heart and externally in the world.

And in the secular culture the Catholic faith is once again a source of scandal, viewed, in the words of Dana Gioia, the American Catholic poet, as disreputable, *déclassé* and retrograde. It means that it is nearly impossible today to get a “Catholic” novel published.

Mainstream publishers are not well-disposed to books with religious content.

What makes a novel “Catholic”? One could look for guidance to *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* which defines art – which, of course, includes literature – “as a form of practical wisdom, uniting knowledge and skill, to give form to the truth of reality in a language accessible to sight and hearing”.

The implication here is that Catholic fiction must be truthful, or reflective of truth.

The Cambridge academic Prof Michael D Hurlley, in his introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of *The Complete Father Brown Stories*, noted that Chesterton omitted Arthur Conan Doyle from his list of exemplars of detective fiction even though he thought “The Adventure of Silver Blaze”, the Sherlock

Holmes story, was a model of the genre. For Chesterton there was something missing: namely, a “reference back to serious truths”.

I myself didn’t sit down to write a “Catholic” novel. Indeed, according to Jacques Maritain, the 20th-century French Catholic philosopher, this is not something one can consciously decide to do; rather it flows from the writer by virtue of being a Christian. Writing in *Art and Scholasticism*, Maritain notes that Christian art is “difficult, doubly difficult – fourfold difficult, because it is difficult to be an artist and very difficult to be a Christian, and because the total difficulty is not simply the sum but the product of these two difficulties multiplied by one another”.

“Christianity does not make art easy,” he explains. “It deprives it of many facile means,

it bars its course at many places, but in order to raise its level. At the same time that Christianity creates these salutary difficulties it super-elevates art from within, reveals to it a hidden beauty which is more delicious than light.”

Flannery O'Connor, perhaps the greatest American Catholic writer of the 20th century and an admirer of Maritain, cautioned however that faith alone does not justify Catholic writing. What is also needed is talent – good stories told well. “The Catholic novelist doesn’t have to be a saint,” she wrote, “he doesn’t even have to be a Catholic; he does, unfortunately, have to be a novelist.”

She took the view that great Catholic literature is not didactic but that the moral judgment of a competent Catholic writer will naturally coincide with his or her dramatic judgment, and therefore good stories become vehicles to convey deep and salient truths.

Her own moral vision was inseparable from her artistic vision but she would often use violence to shock her readers out of their coarseness and lassitude. She was sometimes criticised for it but would argue that “there is nothing harder or less sentimental than Christian realism” and that “the truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it emotionally”. The obligation of the Christian writer, she says, is “to the truth of what can happen in life, and not to the reader – not to the reader’s taste, not to the reader’s happiness, not even to the reader’s morals”.

O'Connor was part of an American Catholic literary movement of the last century which also included such authors as F Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway and Jack Kerouac. Although there are many Catholic writers still writing, the place of Catholic literature has declined with Christianity more generally.

This phenomenon was examined by Dana Gioia in *The Catholic Writer Today*. Gioia, whose work is discussed on p. 82, pointed out that the golden days of American Catholic literature shared four characteristics: novelists who publicly identified themselves as faithful Catholics; a cultural establishment which accepted Catholicism as a permissible artistic identity; a dynamic and vital Catholic literary and intellectual tradition visibly at work in the culture and a critical milieu that actively read, discussed and supported the best Catholic writings. “Today,” maintained Gioia, “not one of these four observations remains true.” The same is true in Britain.

Gioia’s essays inspired debate and reflection and in January, Larry Denninger, an

American Catholic author, concluded that, 10 years on, “the situation hasn’t improved”.

“Heaven’s gate may be narrow,” he continued, “but Catholic literature should be as broadly diverse as possible and judged in the main by only one criterion: quality. Is the novel well written, with compelling characters who waver between vice and virtue and battle the demons in their lives – not necessarily triumphing over them, for instructive and identifiable drama exists in the battle, not the victory. Is the ending uncertain, yet hopeful? Is truth revealed through action rather than via debating contests among characters?”

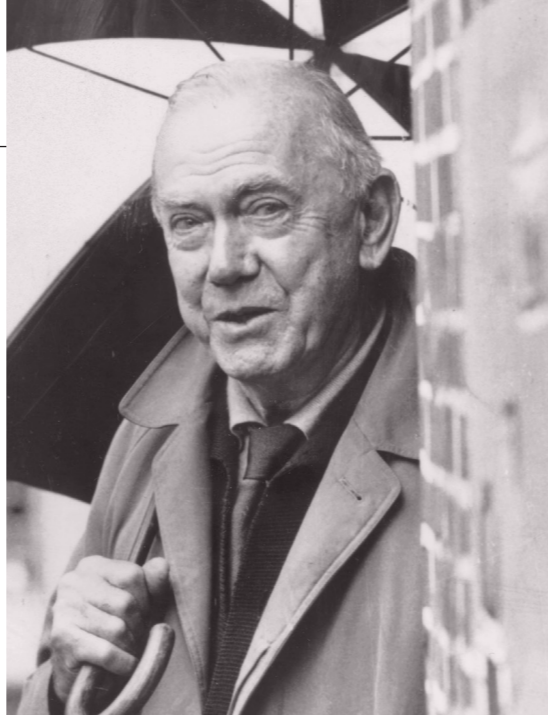
He wrote that: “some good Catholic fiction writers are getting published ... and the culture needs them. It doesn’t need (and won’t read) apologetics and dialectics disguised as fiction.” He threw down the gauntlet to Catholics: “Our culture craves transcendence, perhaps more than it realises, and Catholics uniquely possess a human and theological treasure trove to draw upon. Those of us who are authors must write the hard stories that come from the grey spaces of human brokenness. Publishers must be willing to publish such stories, even in the face of loud objectors. And readers must be willing to read them.”

Few people today take umbrage at *The Power and the Glory*, yet Greene was so heavily criticised for his work when it came out that in 1940 he felt compelled to explain himself in a piece for the *Catholic Herald*.

He told readers that the character was based upon a priest he had seen on his tour of Mexico during the persecution of the Catholic Church there in the 1930s, a man so consumed by fear and alcohol that he was drunk when he baptised a baby. Greene was motivated, he said, to paint the world as it was rather than how it “should be”.

He also said he was puzzled but utterly unrepentant by criticism of a sex-scene in a crowded prison cell. “Hell has often been drawn by Catholic theologians in far coarser lines than I have used,” he wrote. “To say that the coarseness is ‘unnecessary’ (a favourite word with reviewers) is to me meaningless. One cannot indicate filth by a cypher; one must describe.”

It is true that Pope St Paul VI, writing in *Humanae Vitae* in 1968, warned Catholics against everything “which arouses men’s baser passions and encourages low moral standards, as well as every obscenity in the written word and every form of indecency on the stage and screen”.



Above from left: Graham Greene, Flannery O'Connor.  
Left: Ernest Hemingway.  
Below from left: Jack Kerouac; F Scott Fitzgerald

“It is quite absurd,” he wrote, “to defend this kind of depravity in the name of art or culture or by pleading the liberty which may be allowed in this field by the public authorities”. The question of whether art of one kind or another is obscene really ought to be depend on how it is conceived and executed.

O'Connor took flak over some of her stories on the grounds that they were “brutal”, and her response was combative – once attributing such criticism to readers who were immature or insecure in their faith, or ill-equipped to look beyond action scenes to the deeper themes at work.

Let’s return to Gioia’s account of what he believes that Catholic literature actually is.

“Catholic literature is rarely pious,” he writes. “Catholic writers tend to see humanity struggling in a fallen world ... They combine a longing for grace and redemption with a deep sense of human imperfection and sin. Evil exists, but the physical world is not evil. Nature is sacramental, shimmering with signs of sacred things. Indeed, all reality is mysteriously charged with the invisible presence of God. Catholics perceive suffering as redemptive, at least when borne in emulation of Christ’s passion and death. Catholics also generally take the long view of things ... Catholicism is also intrinsically communal. Finally, there is a habit of spiritual self-scrutiny and moral examination of conscience.” He complains that today there is a “crippling naïveté among many religious writers, and even editors, that saintly intentions compensate for weak writing”. This “is folly,” he wrote. “The Catholic writer must have the passion, talent and ingenuity to master the craft in strictly secular terms while never forgetting the spiritual possibilities and responsibilities of art.”

A failure to produce good fiction will spell the slow death of the Catholic literary tradition in the Anglophone world. Will it matter? I would say so.

If you subscribe to a big channel like Disney or Netflix it is very easy to come across programmes which fit well into the category of true obscenity which Pope Paul warned the Church against. One does not have to look far to find evil celebrated. Secular fiction is often little different. Many books I have read recently contain obscenity, extreme violence and ideology deeply inimical to Christianity. This is not limited to adult fiction: some of the most graphically sexualised material is pitched at young teenagers and adolescents.

The ideological stranglehold which welcomes excessive licence in writing is at the

same time producing homogeneity among authors as it constricts alternative expression. What is acceptable is not only prescribed but increasingly enforced by so-called sensitivity readers who not only wield the authority to cancel or censor present-day writers but who do so retrospectively.

There is an inextricable bond between truth and freedom. The rise and imposition of new ideologies which deny much of what is objectively true would suggest that our freedom is at risk too. It is therefore madness for the Catholic Church to surrender its place to an aggressively secular society, and crazier still for Christians to join the frenzy for censorship.

An egregious example came two years ago when Loyola University in Baltimore, Maryland, removed the name of Flannery O'Connor from a hall of residence after the *New Yorker* magazine said remarks she made in private correspondence could be construed as racist.

Mary Wakefield writing in the *Spectator* noted, however, that “without fail in her fiction O'Connor presents racism as an evil”.

“Isn’t that what counts?” she asks, before encouraging the Loyola students to read O'Connor’s stories because “if you want to write well, you have to read well”. She then reproduced a letter from the university’s Jesuit president Fr Brian Linnane which begins: “Dear members of Loyola Hall community, as we take intentional steps in our equity and inclusion work... I am forming a presidential renaming committee to evaluate all philanthropic and honorifically named spaces on campus. That committee will determine a process for maintaining and removing building names and develop a rubric for naming and renaming, leading a deliberative, inclusive process that centres our mission, values, diversity, equity and inclusion into these decisions.”

“Read that,” says Wakefield. “Savour those intentional action steps. Centre your mission and answer me this. Out of Flannery O'Connor and Fr Brian Linnane, this Easter, who do you trust most to tell you the truth?”

Yes, as the West drifts closer to totalitarianism, we need good Catholic writers more than ever. We need them to tell the truth about the world in which we live.

All of us can support contemporary fiction simply by reading it.

Securing an influential Catholic stake in the wider literary world of the 21st century may be difficult to achieve but, as Gandhi once said, full effort is full victory. The Catholic novel must survive into the 21st century. It is simply too good and too important to lose. **CH**