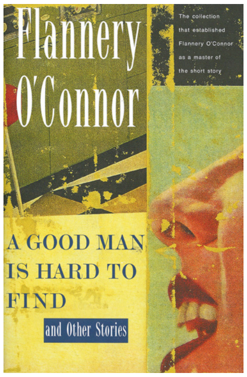
THE PRACTICING DEMOCRACY PROJECT

We the People Book Club

A GOOD MAN IS HARD TO FIND

Reading Guide

Flannery O'Connor
The collection that established Flannery O'Connor as a master of the short story
A GOOD MAN IS HARD TO FIND
and Other Stories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This month the We the People Book Club continues to focus on the phenomena of the American South, and this month's author, Flannery O'Connor, is about as romantic about the region as Colson Whitehead! As Alice Walker famously noted, O'Connor wrote about the South, and especially southern white women, without even "a whiff of magnolia."

A GOOD MAN IS HARD TO FIND, O'Connor's first collection of short stories, established her as a master of the form. These stories create dissonance with any common associations the words "Southern, Catholic woman writer" might inspire. Though all of these descriptors are facets of her genius, her prose defies categorization, expectations, and stereotypes. The stories are violent, perverse, comical, and uncompromising in their presentation of human folly and ugliness. And yet, because her writing is so fresh and energetic, we somehow do not want the stories to end. These are not just short stories; they are too short stories.

O'Connor's stories gained her wide acclaim in her very short life. She earned O'Henry citations in 1955 and 1957. The stories from *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* were included in the posthumous collection, *The Complete Stories*, which won the National Book Award in 1972. In honor of her mastery of the short story form, The University of Georgia Press annually awards the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction.

About This Book Club Reading Guide

Researched and written by Julia Davis (a 2018-2019 Fellow with the Practicing Democracy Project), this guide includes background on Flannery O'Connor, an overview of A *Good Man Is Hard to Find*, and observations on O'Connor's literary style. For your personal exploration and/or discussion with others in your book club, we include commentary on three themes. Questions within each will facilitate three approaches to the work: (1) your interpretation of the text, (2) your personal reflections inspired by your reading, and (3) practices for you to try that animate the novel's democratic values. The guide also includes ideas for further exploration; you might decide to engage these resources before or after your discussion.

Background

Mary Flannery O'Connor's far too brief stay on earth began March 25, 1925, in Savannah, Georgia. She inherited lupus from her father, who succumbed to the disease when O'Connor was just a teenager. After a quiet life on her mother's farm in rural Georgia and a brilliant career that included publishing two novels and two short story collections, O'Connor herself succumbed to the lupus and died in 1964, just 39 years old.

A Good Man Is Hard to Find, published in 1955, is her best-known and most anthologized work; it contains perhaps her most famous story, the title story, as well as "The Artificial Nigger," a favorite of O'Connor's and the title of the book in British imprints. While critical understanding of these ten stories varied, even those who didn't quite know what to make of her perverse imagination affirmed her blazing talent.

Overview

The stories in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* are set in the Jim Crow American South, primarily in rural areas. Her characters are mostly white women and children. Race provides some narrative tension, but O'Connor uses that tension to explore her characters' investment in whiteness. Unlike other "liberal" white southerners, O'Connor writes about black life without sentimentality and rarely ventures to imagine her way into areas of life her own white middle-class existence gave her no access to — which is to say that, in her stories as in her Southern life, black southerners remain on the margins.

The greater and more consistent tension in her stories is theological. The relationship between a fallen humanity and a redeeming God animates these stories and, indeed, all of O'Connor's work. Thus, though the stories are set in a particular place and time, they gather meaning more from the universal than the particular, presenting us with the most elemental drama: alienated, arrogant, blind, and miserable humans struggling to see and to accept the grace that tries to break through to their lives. Whether they accept or deny it, transformation results.

Genre, Language, and Structure

In her famous essay, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Literature," O'Connor identifies some characteristics of Southern writers that very much apply to how her own work ought to be read:

"In these grotesque works, we find that the writer has made alive some experience which we are not accustomed to observe every day, or which the ordinary man may never experience in his ordinary life. Yet the characters in these novels are alive in spite of these things. They have an inner coherence, if not always a coherence to their social framework. Their fictional qualities lean away from typical social patterns, toward mystery and the unexpected. It is this kind of realism that I want to consider."

We may get to the end of one of O'Connor's stories and find that we enjoyed it, that we did not want it to end, and that we have no idea what it all adds up to! Her characters and plots are unexpected, bizarre, eccentric. You will notice in these stories the prevalence of what she calls "freaks," persons she uses as figures "for our essential displacement." The ambiguity in O'Connor's uncommon stories makes them particularly good for discussion: she leaves open a lot of room to play at interpretation.

Her manner of telling these stories only adds another dimension of charm. While the content tends towards the mysterious, her style is to tell the stories straight up. As literary critic Hilton Als wrote for *The New Yorker*, "From the beginning of her reading life, O'Connor preferred stories that were direct in their telling and mysterious only in their subtexts. We know what happens but not what it means."

O'Connor famously remarked that if she could tell you what a story was about there would have been no need to write the story. Generally, however, the meanings of her stories are framed in theological terms; she described herself as writing these stories "in relation to the redemption of Christ."

Ultimately, then, O'Connor's realism is the same realism she claims for other Southern writers: a realism of depths, for as she says in the essay on the grotesque, "The southern writer is forced from all sides to make his gaze extend beyond the surface, beyond mere problems, until it touches that realm which is the concern of prophets and poets."

Themes

Human Sin

There are no heroes or villains in O'Connor's human world, no foil characters to provide contrast to the greater sin or deeper virtue of other characters. This detour from convention makes her stories thoroughly modern and even way ahead of their time.

If we consider *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* a kind of world — and why wouldn't we? — then the way in which O'Connor writes about her characters' humanity constitutes a world view. In this view, every human is awful in his or her own special way, and what characterizes human interaction is the multiplication of this awfulness. It is in fact this consistent view of humankind that most unites these disparate stories. Each of them presents several different kinds of human weakness for us to laugh uncomfortably at.

There is the grandmother in the title story, a status-conscious and selfish woman whose despairing attitude towards the modern world leads the family down an abandoned road to an old plantation. On the way, they meet the Misfit, a murderous escaped convict who blasphemes and then murders the whole family, including the impudent children and their ineffectual parents.

There is Mrs. Cope in "A Circle in the Fire" whose fears and possessiveness lead to the destruction of her beloved woods by spiteful, lawless boys.

There is Lucynell Crater in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," who advertises her disabled daughter, also named Lucynell Crater, to a stranger who is game for the deal because he'll get the family's automobile out of it.

Though O'Connor seems to have more use for female characters than male characters, "The Artificial Nigger" features a virulently racist grandfather successfully and intentionally teaching his grandson to fear and hate, and "The Temple of the Holy Ghost" turns on the disgust of the town's preachers towards "the least of these."

O'Connor's *pièce de résistance* of human ugliness, however, must be "The Displaced Person," a story bursting with people so in love with their own sense of victimization that they lose all perspective and perpetrate the murder of perhaps the only character in the whole collection who could be considered innocent: a Polish refugee from the Holocaust.

The humans in these stories are so deeply unaware of how awful they are that we have to laugh. This laughter comes not from set-ups and punchlines but from O'Connor's ability to find the extreme and the absurd in everyday interactions simply by looking deeply enough into her character's souls. We laugh at Mrs. Hopewell's comeuppance when her daughter snaps, "Woman! do you ever look inside?" but we also laugh at Hulga's own expense: her smug elitism and machinations backfire when the "simpleton" Bible salesman traps her in the barn loft by absconding with her artificial leg.

And then, on a dime, O'Connor changes tone, and the laughter has to stop. The stories almost always resolve in some kind of violence that lays tragedy over comedy. However, crucially, the evils that lead to tragedy are utterly banal. They live in the attitudes and economies, the appearances and priorities of bourgeois life. Her portraits of human nature involve no flights of fancy or radical action but are rooted in a world we cannot help but recognize — and perhaps cannot help but recognize ourselves in.

The humans in these stories are so flawed they provide no guidance and no rest either. We settle our sympathies on one or another of them at our peril; attempts to identify risk condemning us. And perhaps it is in that restless tension that these stories might teach us about ourselves. For, ultimately, O'Connor's consistent portrayal of human nature does what it should: it creates a world. And her dedication to realism indicates that this world is a reflection of our own. Given the totality of human weakness and evil in this world, there is no basis to assume that the reader somehow lives outside of it.

Mrs. Freeman had a special fondness for the details of secret infections, hidden deformities, assaults upon children. Of diseases, she preferred the lingering or incurable.

— from "Good Country People" in
A Good Man is Hard to Find by Flannery O'Connor

THINK

1. Many of O'Connor's characters have disabilities, primarily physical. (O'Connor herself was forced to use crutches the last nine years of her life.) What role does the idea of "disability" play in the stories? Think of the concept broadly — in context and out — and in terms both literal and figurative, concrete and abstract.

REFLECT

2. O'Connor's characters seem to bring out the worst in one another. Reflect on, write, or share with the group a funny, embarrassing, or confessional story about a time when someone brought out your worst. What was it about that person? What did you learn from the interaction (at the time or in retrospect)?

PRACTICE

3. The Practicing Democracy Project has identified anger, fear of strangers, rigid thinking, and violence (among other qualities) as obstacles to democracy. All of these are markers of O'Connor's "sinful" characters. Search yourself for such obstacles and, rather than meditating to bring yourself to a new awareness, seek a relationship with someone in your community who will lovingly challenge you to reframe your thinking and behavior.

Redeeming Grace

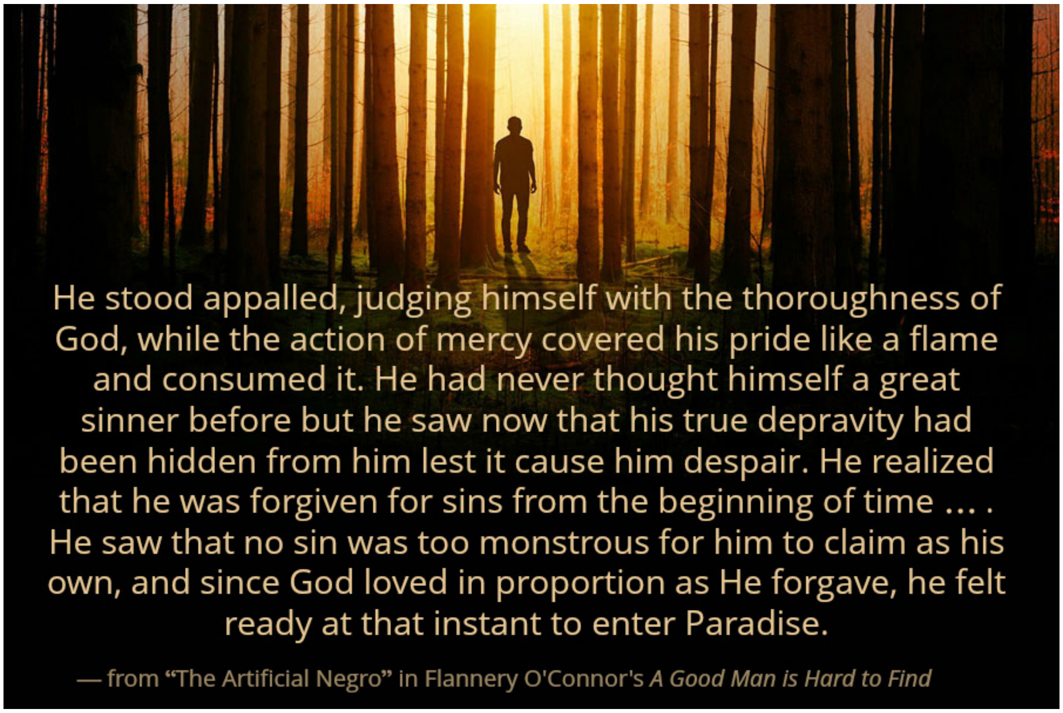
This theme answers the tension created by human sin. From O'Connor's Catholic perspective, the most important aspect of her realism, the most important truth, is that we live in a world created by God. The world we construct through our own interests, our selfishness, and our artificiality is a kind of shadow world that is far less real than God's. The divine, or real, world cares not about respectability and demands that internal ugliness be transformed. God's world has one operating law: humans are helpless to overcome themselves on their own and must submit to divine intervention. Only when we confront this greater reality can we free ourselves from error.

The tension we feel as we are unable to find rest or release by identifying with the characters purposes to direct us towards this law. The tension is a repeated pattern: It draws us into the drama of this human world, exhausts us with its ugliness, and then presents us, along with the characters, with only one way out: spiritual growth through recognition of the divine reality. Like her characters, we may or may not have eyes to see the grace that O'Connor's God holds out, but saying yes to these moments of revelation is the characters' only release and ours, too.

O'Connor's stories turn on this opportunity for redemption, but results are not guaranteed. Sometimes characters accept redemption and are changed. Mr. Head is transfixed by the mysterious hold of the "artificial nigger," a salvific figure; he realizes his own sinfulness and receives God's mercy in the same transformative moment. The grandmother in the title story transforms as well, staring down not a lawn ornament but the barrel of a gun. In her last moment, her superiority and class consciousness give way to radical inclusivity as she says to the Misfit, "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!"

Sometimes characters reject the redemption: the preachers in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" who shut down the fair do so in fear of the intersex performer's powerful witness to the purposive diversity of God's creation: "God made me thisaway and if you laugh He may strike you the same way. This is the way He wanted me to be and I ain't disputing His way.

Sometimes, tragically, characters are so convinced of their own righteousness, they make an altar of their sin, mistaking intervention as affirmation. In "The Displaced Person," when Mrs. Shortley is given a vision and told to prophesy she is so fixed in her xenophobia that this is her prophecy: "The children of wicked nations will be butchered … . Legs where arms should be, foot to face, ear in palm of hand. Who will remain whole? Who will remain whole? Who?" Burdened by her own fears, her "good word" is her own violence mirrored back to her.



He stood appalled, judging himself with the thoroughness of God, while the action of mercy covered his pride like a flame and consumed it. He had never thought himself a great sinner before but he saw now that his true depravity had been hidden from him lest it cause him despair. He realized that he was forgiven for sins from the beginning of time … . He saw that no sin was too monstrous for him to claim as his own, and since God loved in proportion as He forgave, he felt ready at that instant to enter Paradise.

— from "The Artificial Negro" in Flannery O'Connor's *A Good Man is Hard to Find*

THINK

1. "A Stroke of Good Fortune" and "Late Encounter with the Enemy" may seem like outliers from the perspective of the theme of redeeming grace. It is not difficult to see the human frailty in the characters, but where is a higher power present in these stories?

REFLECT

2. How do you understand the concept of "higher power"? Did that concept come to you from a text, from personal experience, from teaching?

Reflect, journal, or share with the group about a time when you felt overwhelmed by a force greater than yourself. How did it feel? What did it mean to you? How were you different afterwards?

PRACTICE

3. We often make space for the divine/higher power through self-emptying practices like meditation, mindfulness, fasting, and silence. How can we also touch what is beyond by giving out? Start a conversation, engage in an activity, or forge a relationship with this intention: to energize the world with a sense of the transcendent.

The Abundance of Nature

I have been conscientiously referring to the human characters as "human" not only to honor O'Connor's stark distinction between human sin and divine grace but also to distinguish human nature from the natural environment. Nature plays an important role in O'Connor's world view as both a contrast to human depravity and an expression of God's grace.

O'Connor's stories are peopled by embodiments of hate, prejudice, fear, calculation, and jealousy who exist in a natural world of abundant, generous, and nonchalant beauty. There are no foil *characters* because mother nature is the foil to human nature, the constant, bright, innocent good that makes human busyness and meanness seem depraved and extraneous. Nature is as separate from the human as the divine is — and just as often ignored and taken for granted.

Nature's elements are an everyday offering of grace, simply there, like the sun and the moon. The exchange of light by which we number our days is as present in the stories as in our own lives, another way for O'Connor to remind us that we are, in a real sense, reading about our world. As Tom T. Shiftlet clowns like a crooked Jesus and Lucynell Crater postures as proprietary and dismissive, the sun sets "like God made it to do." The sunrises, sunsets, moonrises, and moonsets are too numerous to exemplify here, but O'Connor calls our attention to them in such a way that we cannot, like Lucynell, simply sigh, "Does it every evening."

The grace of nature's offering and its dignifying power are made explicit at the end of "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" and the beginning of "The Artificial Nigger," consecutive stories. When the child in "Holy Ghost" learns that the preachers have denied the belovedness of the intersex performer, she is "lost in thought. She turned toward the window and looked out over a stretch of pasture land that rose and fell with a gathering greenness until it touched the dark woods. The sun was a huge red ball like an elevated Host drenched in blood … ." The confused child, whose own self-doubts had been assuaged by the witness of the performer, looks past the domesticated greenness to the wild woods beyond and finally to the wildest sight of all: the givenness of the blazing red sun, natural as can be, its beauty there for the taking, as if it were joining the performer in declaring, "God made me thisaway … . This is the way He wanted me to be." Like a communion wafer, the sun reassures the child that she is not alone in her meannesss and her "sass" and that, despite the preachers, God's grace is as accessible to her as daily light and daily bread.

In terms of the exchange of light in our everyday lives, the very next story, "The Artificial Nigger," begins shortly after "Holy Ghost" ends, as moonlight floods Mr. Head's room in the wee hours of the next day. It is tempting to see this juxtaposition in terms of nature's dual role in this collection. "Holy Ghost" ends with an image of nature as an expression of God's grace, and "Artificial" begins with nature as foil to human folly. Moonlight "the color of silver" casts "A dignified light on everything. The straight chair against the wall looked stiff and attentive as if it were awaiting an order and Mr. Head's trousers, hanging to the back of it, had an almost noble air, like the garment some great man had just flung to his servant."

The dignified light is a gift — a nudge, if Mr. Head were paying attention — contrasting as it does the unmoored "moral mission of the coming day" that will bring Mr. Head to his knees.

Nature's roles as gift and exhortation come together spectacularly in "The Displaced Person" where a peacock becomes an everyday sign of the divine that is "beyond" because of human sin. It is not surprising that O'Connor chose the peacock to be the apotheosis of the natural world. O'Connor loved birds; at five years old, she made national news by teaching her chicken to walk backwards, and as an adult she raised peafowl. As we begin the story, the peacock is immediately the agent, the subject of the first two paragraphs, his head "drawn back as if his attention were fixed in the distance on something no one else could see."

This introduction proves prophetic. The peacock follows Mrs. Shortley as if he is offering his casual splendour as a reminder of the beyond she too should be fixed on. She never seems to see the magnificent bird, though he does his best to give her opportunities: "He had jumped into the tree and his tail hung in front of her, full of fierce planets with eyes that were each ringed in green and set against a sun that was gold in one second's light and salmon-colored in the next. She might have been looking at a map of the universe, but she didn't notice it any more than she did the spots of sky that cracked the dull green of the tree."

The peacock contains the beauty of all nature, not just of the earth but of the universe, a point that is emphasized when, feathers spread again, it attempts to evangelize Mrs. McIntyre: "The cock stopped suddenly and curving his neck backwards, he raised his tail and spread it with a shimmering timbrous noise. Tiers of small pregnant suns floated in a green-gold haze over his head. The priest stood transfixed, his jaw slack. Mrs. McIntyre wondered where she had ever seen such an idiotic old man. 'Christ will come like that!' he said in a loud gay voice and wiped his hand over his mouth and stood there, gaping."

The priest can't hear her denial of responsibility "for all the extra people in the world": "His attention was fixed on the cock who was taking minute steps backwards, his head against the spread tail. 'The Transfiguration,' he murmured," referring to an event in the New Testament when Jesus appears radiant in glory and God's voice from Heaven declares, "This is my son, the Beloved. Listen to him."

The priest listens to the peacock, and Mrs. McIntyre listens to her xenophobic inner voice:

"'Mr. Guizac didn't have to come here in the first place,' she said, giving him a hard look.

"The cock lowered his tail and began to pick grass.

"'He didn't have to come in the first place,' she repeated, emphasizing each word.

"The old man smiled absently. 'He came to redeem us,' he said...."

The abundant beauty of the peacock is like a portal that connects the priest to the transfixing reality of God. In this moment, as in no other in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, the human, the divine, and the natural come together: "He came to redeem us" refers to the trinity of Christ, Mr. Guizac, and the magnificent bird.

He had jumped into the tree and his tail hung in front of her, full of fierce planets with eyes that were each ringed in green and set against a sun that was gold in one second's light and salmon-colored in the next.

She might have been looking at a map of the universe...

— from "The Displaced Person"
in Flannery O'Connor's
A Good Man is Hard to Find

THINK

1. In "A Circle in the Fire," after the boys have set fire to the woods, the child "stood taut, listening, and could just catch in the distance a few wild high shrieks of joy as if the prophets were dancing in the fiery furnace, in the circle the angel had cleared for them."

This is an allusion to a story in the book of Daniel in the Hebrew Bible. Because Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego will not bow down to King Nebuchadnezzar's golden statue, he throws them into a fiery furnace. When he looks into the furnace, however, he sees four men walking unharmed by the fire, the fourth having "the appearance of a god."

How does the allusion help us interpret the story? In what sense are the boys prophets? In what sense is Mrs. Cope an imperious ruler? How do we reconcile the destruction of the trees with their early description as a "wall," protective and sentinel-like?

REFLECT

2. Two of the most important Catholic sacraments, baptism and communion, happen in nature — baptism in "The River" and communion in the sunset of "Holy Ghost." Reflect, journal, or share with the group about a time when you experienced nature as sacred.

PRACTICE

3. In October 2018, United Nations scientists issued a harrowing report illustrating that environmental degradation is advancing faster than previously predicted. They caution that stopping the worst changes is possible only with radical action. Get connected to organizations in your town that are working on creative solutions and decide what changes your household can commit to making.

Other Reading Guides for the We the People Book Club:

The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck

The Underground Railroad by Colson Whitehead

A Good Man Is Hard to Find by Flannery O'Connor

Poetry

Tenth of December by George Saunders

Gilead by Marilynne Robinson

Puddnhead Wilson by Mark Twain

The Fire Next Time by James Baldwin and
Between the World and Me by Ta-Nehisi Coates

Ceremony by Leslie Marmon Silko

The Sympathizer by Viet Thanh Nguyen

The Partly-Cloudy Patriot by Sarah Vowell

Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston

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We the People
Article 1

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The Practicing Democracy Project offers resources to strengthen and deepen the way we live out democracy. These spiritual practices help us do the work both in ourselves and in relationship with our neighbors and communities.

Some practices enhance or support the essential civic virtues and qualities of American democracy, such as respect and service. Others help us deal with problems and obstacles that depress democracy, such as anger and rigid thinking.

The Project offers spiritual practices and resources for all of us — from advocacy and civic organizations to congregations and companies.

For more information on the Project, visit PracticingDemocracy.net.

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