Author Flannery O'Connor as a teenager circa 1940

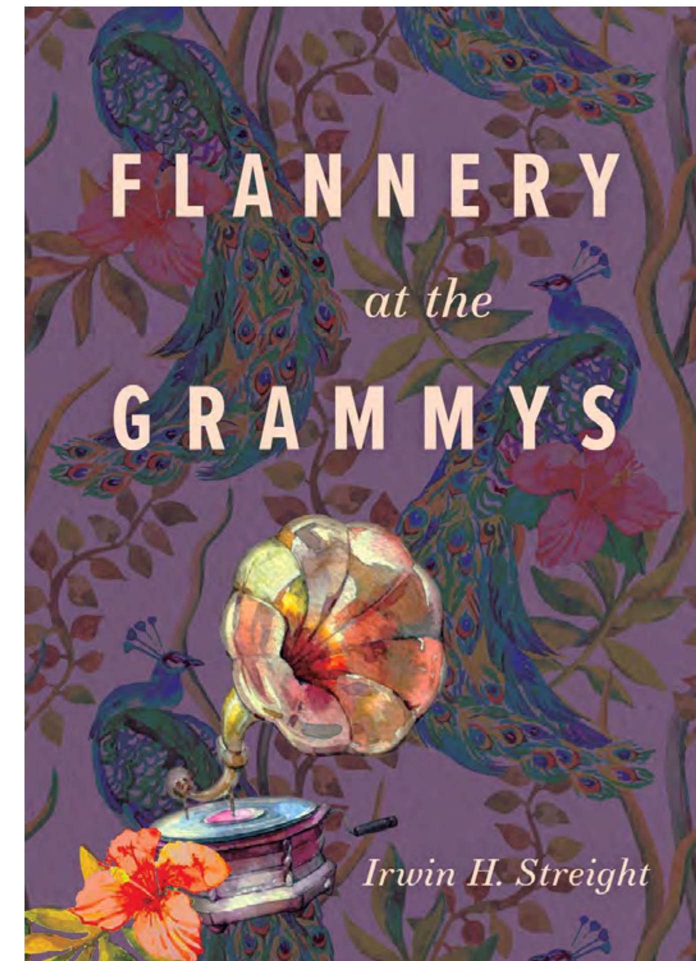
COURTESY OF THE FLANNERY O'CONNOR ARCHIVE AT GEORGIA COLLEGE SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

BIRDS OF A FEATHER

Why the offbeat stories of Flannery O'Connor continue to resonate with musicians

by Colleen McNally Arnett

> **“O’Connor is having a new moment. She is getting her flowers in a way that she maybe wasn’t before.”**
> Janie Bragg
> executive director of the Flannery O’Connor Childhood Home Foundation and Museum



FRANK BRANNON WAS SOAKING in a hot tub in his backyard in Decatur, Georgia, when the idea for his song, “Flannery’s Waltz,” came to him by way of a cardinal.

The song is named for his late cousin, the famed Southern Gothic author Flannery O’Connor. A winner of the National Book Award for Fiction in 1972 for her posthumous collection of short stories, O’Connor is best known for her devout Catholicism, dark humor, and grotesque characters who encounter dilemmas of morality in what she called a “Christ-haunted” South.

Some people believe that seeing a cardinal is a sign from a deceased loved one, and that the red bird is a messenger from the afterlife. But when it comes to O’Connor, birds are always significant. Birds often appeared as symbols in her writing and as artwork adorning the covers of her books — a white dove for *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, a collection of short stories O’Connor wrote during the final decade of her life, and peacock feathers for *The Complete Stories*.

Born in Savannah, Georgia, in 1925 to Irish Catholic parents, O’Connor described herself in a writing course at the University of Iowa as a “pigeon-toed child with a receding chin and a you-leave-me-alone-or-I’ll-bite-you complex.” She famously taught a chicken to walk backward, and later, raised peacocks on her family’s farm in Milledgeville, Georgia, about 100 miles southeast of Brannon’s Atlanta-area backyard.

By trade, Brannon co-owns a landscape design and installation firm with his wife. In his spare time, he enjoys woodworking and performing his original songs at retirement communities. He recorded his musical tribute to his cousin as part of his first album, *Dance on the Wind*, in 2015, produced by Thomm Jutz at TJ Tunes in Nashville. In “Flannery’s Waltz,” Brannon strums his guitar and passionately sings:

She wrote with the hope
that all the world’s folks
Would see their superficial ways
She wrote to understand
the mystery of God’s plan
In search of grace everyday

Given Brannon’s mother, Helen O’Connor, was a first cousin and, as he describes it, “biggest fan” of the literary phenomenon, his muse may not be all too surprising.

But O’Connor’s enduring effect on songwriters runs far beyond the family, with Bruce Springsteen, Colin Cutler, Jim White, Lucinda Williams, Mary Gauthier, R.E.M., Nick Cave, PJ Harvey, Sufjan Stevens, Tom Waits, and U2 all taking inspiration from her work.

Last year’s monograph by Irwin H. Streight titled *Flannery at the Grammys* is bringing more contemporary attention to this musical and cultural connection. The culmination of more than a decade of research, analysis, and interviews, Streight’s book reads as densely as an academic textbook. In some cases, artists’ song lyrics are presented side by side with passages from O’Connor’s work, showcasing the remarkable parallels. In other cases, Streight reveals how artists’ more intimate biographical details — often tragic and traumatic — may have shaped a unique understanding and way of seeing the world that made them feel a kinship to O’Connor.

At the heart of the book is Streight’s attempt to answer a compelling curiosity: How do a dead writer’s spiritual stories continue to inform the lyrical content and artistic sensibility of highly successful rock stars and aspiring songwriters alike?

Darkness and Details

Streight, who is a professor at the Royal Military College of Canada, a co-founder/co-editor of *BOSS* (an online journal devoted to Springsteen studies), and co-editor of the book *Flannery O’Connor: The*

Bruce Springsteen

Irwin H. Streight

Contemporary Reviews, first got the idea for *Flannery at the Grammys* from a correspondence between Springsteen and Will Percy, a relative of Southern novelist Walker Percy, published in *DoubleTake* magazine in 1998.

"Springsteen just goes into depth about the absolute transformative influence of reading O'Connor's stories," Streight recalls, adding that Springsteen also watched John Huston's 1979 film adaptation of O'Connor's novel, *Wise Blood*. Streight argues Springsteen's songwriting is transformed from the dizzy style of expressionist lyrics on his first two albums to the storytelling, character-centered songs by his 1982 album, *Nebraska*, where small details reveal so much. "This is what O'Connor taught him on an artistic level, but he also saw something in her exploration of the dark mysteries in the text that influenced him as well," Streight says.

In 1998, Springsteen released a song titled "A Good Man Is Hard to Find (Pittsburgh)" on his box set of B-sides and rarities, *Tracks*. The song title borrows the name of O'Connor's most famous short story, about a dysfunctional family on a road trip that comes across a violent escaped convict known as "The Misfit." (Sufjan Stevens also borrowed the title for a song on his 2004 album *Seven Swans*, as did Tom Waits for his 2022 album *Blood Money*.)

By 2019, Springsteen was still talking about O'Connor when promoting the Netflix version of *Springsteen on Broadway*, the solo-acoustic theater show based on his memoir *Born to Run*. The book, and the show, details Springsteen's Catholic upbringing, his troubled relationship with his father, and the personal struggles that informed his oeuvre.

In a conversation with Martin Scorsese during a Netflix event honoring the one-man show, *Variety* reported the two men discussed at length their mutual religious roots and shared love for O'Connor, with Springsteen stating that *Nebraska* "was very influenced by Flannery O'Connor stories, and her stories were always filled with the unknowability of God."

Says Streight, "Forty years later, she is still a factor in his artistic imagination."

These discoveries led Streight to publish several conference papers on the connection between Springsteen and O'Connor, including an article in the journal *The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin*. He says he did not set out to write a book, but after giving a 2017 conference presentation on O'Connor's influence on punk and heavy metal music, literary scholar Jean W. Cash encouraged him to aggregate all his findings into one tome.

DANNY CLINCH

STEVE LUKITS

Streight's resulting book devotes its entire opening chapter to Springsteen, followed by equally compelling deep dives into more than a dozen artists, each with their own arc of influence.

Chasing the Peacocks

The second chapter of *Flannery at the Grammys* examines Lucinda Williams' better-than-fiction link to the author. Williams' late father, the poet Miller Williams, befriended O'Connor while living in Macon, Georgia in the late 1950s. He took his young daughter, likely around age 6 or 7, along on visits to Andalusia, the family farm in Milledgeville where O'Connor lived and wrote until her premature death from lupus in 1964. First settled in 1814, Andalusia was a cotton plantation and farm until it was purchased by O'Connor's uncle Bernard Cline in 1931. Today, Georgia College and State University (GCSU) in Milledgeville — O'Connor's alma mater — maintains Andalusia and the peacocks as a museum and National Historic Landmark, continuing to introduce new generations to the literary giant.

"The story is that her and my dad had become writing buddies. My father always said she was his greatest teacher," Williams says. "Of course, I wasn't writing at that age and I didn't know who she was." She vaguely remembers the birds, though. "The story, the way my dad told it, is he took me with him and I chased her peacocks around the yard."

Williams' other core memory of that time is perhaps more significant: "When we got there, [O'Connor] was actually writing. She had a schedule, a pretty tight schedule that she kept for writing, apparently. We got there while she was still working on something." The housekeeper greeted them on the big front porch and told them O'Connor wasn't able to accept guests yet. So, they sat outside on the porch and waited. "I like to think that somehow or another, I soaked up something just being in her presence," Williams muses.

Thanks largely to a recommendation from O'Connor, Williams' father was offered a teaching position at Louisiana State University, so the family left Georgia. As a teenager, Williams met O'Connor again through reading her work. "I fell madly in love with her writing," she says, specifically the 1952 novel *Wise Blood*. The story follows Hazel Motes, an eccentric 22-year-old World War II veteran who abandons his faith to form an anti-religious ministry. "*Wise Blood*

Lucinda Williams

DANNY CLINCH

was the book I read that really pulled me into this deep place," Williams says. "I just understood it, even at a younger age. I understood her writing, it just appealed to me and made me feel comfortable. I felt like, 'Oh, I've seen those people before,' you know?"

In this chapter, Streight outlines Williams' nomadic upbringing, her parents' divorce, and her mother's mental illness — all formative experiences that Williams recounts further in her bestselling 2023 memoir, *Don't Tell Anybody the Secrets I Told You*. He also points out how both Williams and O'Connor employ similar literary devices, such as narratives told through child-centered perspectives like in Williams' song "Car Wheels on a Gravel Road" and their ability to confront death as a subject matter.

Although Williams' admiration is clear — she even credits O'Connor alongside her own father in the liner notes of her 2014 album *Down Where the Spirit Meets the Bone* — she says the imprint on her own writing happened subconsciously. "Every time I start talking about her or her work, I start stumbling over words," Williams says. It's surreal, almost psychedelic. Like a dream state, almost — that's why it's hard to explain.

"There are so many levels to her work. There's the stuff on the surface that is obvious, and it just goes deeper and deeper and deeper," Williams continues. "I feel like her writing is something that I got from a young age, but I couldn't express it necessarily except maybe with my songs later on."

An Expanding Circle

For Williams, the continued interest in O'Connor is "kind of mind-blowing." She compares O'Connor's enduring legacy in Southern literature to Robert Johnson's in blues music. "I never would have thought she would make her way into that circle of people," she says.

That ever-widening circle also includes Grammy-nominated folk singer-songwriter and author Mary Gauthier, the subject of Streight's third chapter in *Flannery at the Grammys*.

Gauthier first encountered O'Connor in an English class she took as a philosophy student at Louisiana State University. "I just immediately resonated with her writing and her courage and the sense that in some way, we were kindred," Gauthier says. This was long before she thought of herself as a writer.

Like Williams, Gauthier's own life story reads much like a Southern Gothic novel. As a newborn, she was left on the doorstep of St. Vincent's Infant Asylum in New Orleans and adopted into a Catholic family, where her parents struggled with alcoholism and mental illness. Although now in recovery, Gauthier also misused drugs and alcohol throughout her young adult life before beginning her music career in her 30s. She says O'Connor's writing gave her the courage and permission to tackle tough topics and to tell the

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Flannery O'Connor in 1947

Mary Gauthier

ALEXA KING STONE

truth, even when it is uncomfortable.

"When I became a songwriter, I certainly was aware that there was a woman named Flannery O'Connor who preceded me as a Southern writer and had the courage of her convictions and the willingness to take on the darkness," Gauthier says. "[Streight] points out that Flannery and I are both willing to clear a room. Not every song or story is filled with a forgone conclusion that everything is going to work out just fine. We don't go there. We tend to not wrap up neatly in a bow.

"In popular music, we like heroes, we like hope, we like upbeat endings and resolution. But life just doesn't work that way," Gauthier continues. "O'Connor's work reflects large luminous figures because it had to make a point, and I think I tend to do the same thing."

Gauthier hopes that Streight's book helps spark a larger discussion around the connection between literature and music, as seen particularly in the kinship between Southern Gothic writers and songwriters.

"Each generation is going to have artists that have been impacted by this profoundly important work," Gauthier says. The heart-wrenching lyrics of fast-rising alternative rock stars like MJ Lenderman and Karly Hartzman of the Asheville, North Carolina-based band Wednesday, for instance, have been compared to O'Connor by journalist Grace Robins-Somerville in the online publication *Salvation South*.

"Flannery was one in a trillion and, wow, what an incredible body of work for somebody who died at 39," adds Gauthier. "She was almost like a child. I'm 62 and I feel like I'm just getting started."

A Cultural Moment

Williams says she has been surprised to learn how many fellow artists — "people you wouldn't expect" — are also fans of O'Connor. "When I was first discovering her, I thought it was just an amazing secret that I discovered this not-very-well-known, brilliant writer. Over the years, of course, she has become a legend, but for a long time she wasn't."

She's not talking about music alone. Williams points to Ethan Hawke, who directed the 2023 biographical drama *Wildcat* starring his daughter, Maya Hawke. In the film, the actress stars as a young O'Connor as the author is struggling to write her first novel. Blurring reality with imagination, the movie interweaves scenes from O'Connor's fiction.

At age 26, Maya Hawke is also a singer-songwriter who has credited both Williams and O'Connor among her influences. She auditioned for Juilliard with a monologue based on O'Connor's journals, which planted the seed for *Wildcat*. Her 2024 album, *Chaos Angel*, also gets its name from a letter O'Connor wrote that describes an internal battle between good and evil. "It's about how she used to punch at her guardian angel, and whirl around, and try to fight it off. And that really struck me," Hawke said in an interview with *Vogue* last year. "I thought about how we all do that. Whether you want to call it your guardian angel, or your instincts, or your true self, your best self, your soul, your spirit, whatever."

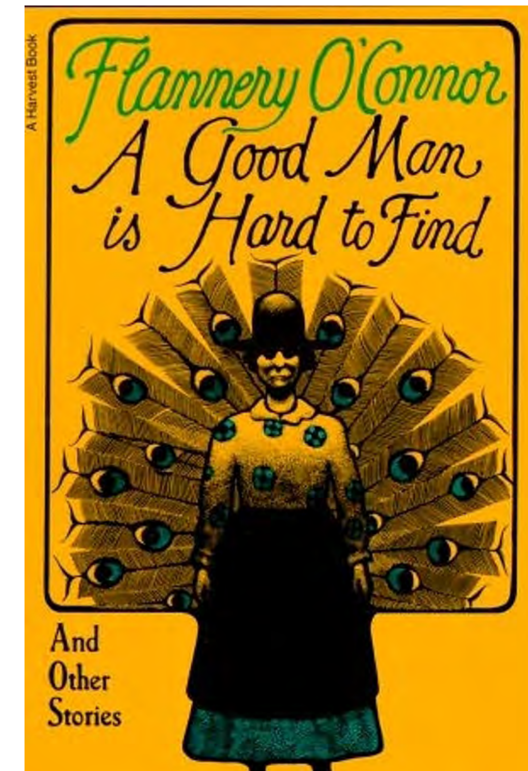
Following the film's release, the Hawkes attended a screening at Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD), in the city where O'Connor was born and where her childhood home is maintained as a nonprofit museum. While in town, the Hawkes stopped by for a tour.

"It turned into us sitting in the parlor having thoughtful discussions," says Janie Bragg, executive director of the Flannery O'Connor Childhood Home Foundation and Museum. "It was really wonderful, because they are such big fans, that we really ended up discussing this person that we all still work to understand, but really love and admire."

This pilgrimage is common among students of O'Connor, Bragg says. Since taking the helm of the historic site in 2023, Bragg has welcomed visitors of all ages and backgrounds who traveled from all over the world to spend time with the author's history, as well as new fans who have come thanks to *Wildcat*.

"O'Connor is having a new moment. She is getting her flowers in a way that she maybe wasn't before," Bragg says. "*Wildcat* is successful in many ways, and one of those ways that is really important to [the Flannery O'Connor Childhood Home Foundation and Museum] is that it has introduced people who were not previously aware of her to her work in an accessible way. Her writing isn't for everybody. It's complex, it's dark, it's funny, and it's not everybody's cup of tea. But, I think when they watch *Wildcat* and they see her stories played out on screen, it gives

Flannery O'Connor in 1947



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them a little taste of what O'Connor writes. With that taste, they can decide if they want to dive a little bit deeper."

For the *Wildcat* screening at SCAD, Bragg was stationed in the theater lobby slinging merchandise from the museum's gift shop. "Before the screening, people were buying pens and bookmarks and postcards. After, they were buying books," she says. "What Streight's book and what *Wildcat* do is that they prove to a new generation that O'Connor is cool. She is still relevant and we still have things to learn from her."

Reckoning with Race

As new audiences discover and take inspiration from O'Connor's writings, contemporary discussion and criticism must also acknowledge her moral shortcomings — specifically the racially discriminatory language documented in her fiction and her personal life. Amid a nationwide reckoning on racial equality in June 2020, critic Paul Elie penned an article in *The New Yorker* titled "How Racist Was Flannery O'Connor?"

In it, Elie squarely outlines her "habit of bigotry," documenting crude jokes in her letters she wrote to family and friends, and how she couldn't see the writer and civil rights activist James Baldwin in her home state as "it would cause the greatest trouble and disturbance and disunion." She wrote: "In New York it would be nice to meet him; here it would not. I observe the traditions of the society I feed on — it's only fair. Might as well expect a mule to fly as me to see James Baldwin in Georgia."

For many scholars, including Katie Simon, an associate English professor and interim executive director of the Flannery O'Connor Institute for the Humanities at GCSU, the answer to Elie's question isn't as simple as black and white.

"One thing she was dealing with is that she was living in a white supremacist culture where there was racial violence happening, and she was a part of it," says Simon, who also is an assistant editor of the journal *The Flannery O'Connor Review*. "She had a lot of racist ideas, but she also wrote pieces that were quite critical of racists and white supremacists, and they often have shocking, horrible outcomes."

Simon adds that she sympathizes with the challenges of teaching O'Connor's works, especially given the use of the N-word in a title of one of her stories. "When you read the story, though, it's more complicated," Simon says. "I think she is dissecting racism and dissecting a culture in which power of relations are based on race and class, and she's quite clear-eyed about it."

When O'Connor died in 1964, American culture around her was changing very quickly. It was the year Bob Dylan sang "The Times They Are A-Changin'," the country was still grieving John F. Kennedy's assassination, Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act, The Beatles debuted on television, and Martin Luther King Jr. won the Nobel Peace Prize.

During the era O'Connor resided in Milledgeville, however, the town was segregated. A vibrant music scene boasted 20 Black-owned music venues on the Chitlin' Circuit. At the time, there was a substantial Black middle class employed by the Central State Hospital, and artists like Screamin' Jay Hawkins, Ray Charles, James Brown, and, later, Otis Redding were working out their sounds. And while O'Connor would not have attended these venues, the town was so small that Simon proposes it's possible she was aware of their music.

"She watched TV, she listened to the radio, she went to the movies, and she was a cartoonist," says Simon. If she was so aware of the world around her, then might she have been channeling the blues music in her community through her stories?

"I don't think it's just the genius of O'Connor that all these people are influenced by," Simon says. "I think she is tapping into a zeitgeist, the way Bob Dylan did. He is a genius at writing songs, but he is also absorbing musician influences everywhere and acknowledging them." She cites Dylan's ode to Blind Willie McTell, who was a blues singer and street busker before he died in Milledgeville at Central State Hospital. "Did O'Connor ever hear him busking? I don't know. How could I prove that? But it's in the air."

Simon also points out that *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* is actually the name of a blues tune written by songwriter (and later actor) Eddie Green in 1917, which Bessie Smith made famous in 1928. Considering how widely recorded and played the song was in the subsequent decades, Simon believes O'Connor knew about the song and was alluding to it in the title of her famous short story, and perhaps her life wasn't quite as segregated as originally thought.

Last September, GCSU hosted a conference with 300 attendees and 90 presenters, many of them focused on O'Connor and race, including a presentation by Savannah State University professor emeritus Patricia Ann West. "She's doing some amazing research right now looking at the Black workers on the [O'Connor] farm, going into their back stories, and in Savannah, where O'Connor lived until she was 13, the [histories of the] Black workers in the house, like her nursemaids. What were their influences on her?" Simon says.

Despite the racial controversy surrounding O'Connor, Simon says college students still want to discuss her stories. "After the 2016 election, I had students saying, 'Oh, that character reminds me of Trump,'" Simon says. "It's very relevant. These issues haven't gone away, have they?"

Gauthier agrees that O'Connor's ability to tackle the darkness head on makes her work as relevant now as ever. She often returns to *Mystery and Manners*, a posthumously published book collecting O'Connor's essays and articles, many of them about writing — a copy stays on her bedside table alongside Penelope Fitzgerald's *The Blue Flower*, Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch*, Donna Morrissey's *Rage the Night*, and Sister Helen Prejean's *The Death*

Colin Cutler

MICHAEL HARRIS

of Innocents: An Eyewitness Account of Wrongful Executions.

"There is a lot of violence in Flannery's work, and we live in a very violent world right now," she says by phone in early December 2024, in the days following Donald Trump's re-election and less than a week after United Healthcare CEO Brian Thompson was shot and killed in Manhattan.

"Flannery does it purposefully to make a point about faith and grace. If ever a time that we need grace, that would be now. ... The need for grace comes from a brokenness. I think that she is writing about the big questions of the soul. She doesn't preach. She doesn't tell you what to think or believe, which makes it so great. She is not necessarily an educator. She's a storyteller. It's important writing for people who are students of being human," Gauthier says. "I love the bit [in *Mystery and Manners*] where she writes, 'I think it is safe to say that while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted.' Put that in 2025."

O'Connor at 100

The centennial of O'Connor's birth falls on March 25 of this year. In February, the Flannery O'Connor Childhood Home Foundation and Museum hosted a lecture series with race relations as one of the primary subjects. Coming up, GCSU has devised a diverse suite of programming that runs through May (coinciding with Lupus Awareness Month), some of which is available for free online. For those in Milledgeville, GCSU will display more than 20 of O'Connor's paintings for the first time during a gala event held in tandem with the centennial celebration.

The Flannery O'Connor Childhood Home Foundation and Museum and Andalusia are also planning a special schedule of events to honor and contextualize the author for modern audiences. Among the centennial festivities will be birthday cake, guided tours, local authors, an O'Connor look-alike contest, and live music, including performances by singer-songwriter Colin Cutler, who credits O'Connor as a driving force behind his 2023 album *Tarwater*.

In fact, Cutler — who is also an English professor at North Carolina's Guilford Technical Community College — developed much of the album in Milledgeville as one of 30 scholars studying O'Connor through the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Cutler sees his return to Milledgeville to perform his work for O'Connor's centennial as a huge honor, particularly as he wonders whether O'Connor would have hosted him there herself.

"If she wouldn't have James Baldwin to Milledgeville, I doubt she'd have me," he writes via email. "But it being 2025, maybe she would."

Joining Cutler in the lineup at Andalusia this March are singer-songwriters Shawn Mullins and Sally Jaye. There's even a singer-songwriter workshop that will culminate in a live showcase at Blackbird Coffee's Birdhouse Theatre in Milledgeville.

While the complexities of the human condition in O'Connor's writing remain a mystery six decades after she passed, what's clear is that she continues to evoke creativity and curiosity among her readers — especially roots musicians.

If given the chance to meet O'Connor today, Gauthier says she would ask her about how she came to be audacious. "Was it innate, or is it something you developed through the process of working through fear? Did it take courage to be you?" Gauthier wonders. "I told my friend Brandi Carlile, when her memoir *Broken Horses* came out, 'Well, you probably could just call it *Audacity* because, girl, you got audacity.' And I think with her it is just innate. She's audacious by nature, and I wonder if O'Connor was like that, too."

While Williams has not been back to Andalusia as an adult, in a way, she continues to visit her father's old friend through her writing, particularly *A Prayer Journal*, which O'Connor wrote between 1946 and 1947, but it wasn't published until 2013. "I feel like we would have been able to talk about [her connection to God] and have that in common, because my father was a Southern writer and his father was a Methodist preacher," she says. "I understand that connection, however lopsided it may be."

If and when future generations experience O'Connor's work in an English class, Williams says they must figure out for themselves what the work means to them. "How do you tell someone what to take away from a writer's work? If they understand it, then that's enough." ■