'Even the Truest Confession May Contain Some Element of Performance'

An Interview with Carlene Bauer*, Author of *Frances and Bernard*, by Jarosław Hetman**

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Jarosław Hetman: How did you become interested in the literature of Flannery O'Connor?

Carlene Bauer: In my junior year of high school, we read O'Connor's *Good Country People*, and the image of the girl left up in a hayloft by the Bible salesman who leads her up there, unable to get down because he has stolen her prosthetic leg and her glasses, stayed with me for a very long time. It was funny, it was terrible, it was sad, and indelible.

Once you read an O'Connor story, not only will you not stop thinking about it, you will not stop seeing its final image, and if you know that she drew cartoons in high school and college, you will not stop thinking about how much that impulse to collapse an idea, or a character's fate or flaw, into a burning, chiding, revelatory image informs the writing.

Then in my sophomore year of college I took an introduction to theology class (the college happened to be a Catholic one, and this course was a requirement) in which we read O'Connor's *Revelation*. I'd no idea that O'Connor was Catholic, and this came as

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something of a shock to me: I did not think you could be both a Christian and a great writer. Having grown up evangelical, it had always seemed to me that you needed to be one or the other—you couldn't be both a believer and someone who made art that got taken extremely seriously.

I wish I could say that this second encounter led to some dramatic moment of conversion not unlike the one Mrs. Turpin may be experiencing at the end of that story – one that inspired a burst of fanaticism-slash-completism – but other writers ended up mattering to me more, and it took a few years to find my way back to her. And when I did it was through her letters and writing on fiction.

J. H.: Were you first interested in O'Connor's work, or perhaps it was Lowell's poetry that sparked the idea for *Frances and Bernard*?

C. B.: While I love O'Connor's work more, it was Lowell's life that sparked the idea. Which first took hold when I read *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage* (2003), Paul Elie's absolutely fantastic group portrait of four American Catholic writers: Thomas Merton, Walker Percy, Dorothy Day, and O'Connor. In it I learned that O'Connor and Lowell had not only been friendly with each other, but that O'Connor might have had something of a crush on him, and at one point, during a manic episode, Lowell declared her a saint. Up until then I had no idea that these two had even known each other, let alone had a real regard for each other that might have been more than purely platonic. Soon after I started a third-person novel based on this time in their lives that did nothing but just lay there on the page, inert and distressingly glib. So I walked away from it. Then, a few years later, I read *Words in Air* (2010), which is the collected correspondence between Lowell and his friend the poet Elizabeth Bishop, which contained two letters that motivated me to try coming at the book another way.

J. H.: How did you do research for this book?

C. B.: By reading biographies, collections of letters, and histories of the period. I didn't travel to archives or hometowns, just read as much as I could and then stopped when it seemed like I'd read enough to somewhat credibly create two analogous lives and the times that gave birth to them.

J. H.: How did you go about the problem selecting facts from the lives of O'Connor and Lowell for your book?

C. B.: The facts that spoke to my own biography, struggles, and intellectual and spiritual concerns were the ones I drifted toward.

J. H.: Why did you decide to change their names?

C. B.: To fool myself into thinking I was not writing historical fiction. To not alienate readers who had no interest in these figures.

J. H.: How significant should the O'Connor-Lowell context be to your reader?

C. B.: Not very. My hope was that the story I was telling would be of interest even if you'd never heard of either writer.

J. H.: What does the form of the epistolary novel offer to you as a writer?

C. B.: It offered me salvation from having to wrestle with the problem of expository prose – from the exhausting, tedious work of what we now call world-building – when really all I cared about was getting these people to talk to each other. To have their thoughts and their voices be as compelling, if not more compelling, than any plot twists. I'd had that experience while reading O'Connor's letters, and Bishop's and Lowell's letters, and wanted to see if I could recreate that for others.

J. H.: What was the more challenging aspect of recreating O'Connor's spirituality: was it her theology, or the language through which it manifested itself?

C. B.: This is a compliment, because I'm not sure I really did recreate her theology in any real way! I can say with a little more certainty that I might have been more successful in recreating her voice, but even then I know that the voice is probably more my own than O'Connor's.

J. H.: How much importance did you attach to the pacing of the narrative, i.e., the intervals between the letters?

C. B.: A great deal. One of the things that drew me to this form was the dramatic possibility inherent in those intervals – how the weeks or months that lapse between replies can be used as a kind of time signature, and how what is addressed, or pointedly not addressed, within each letter can be used to create and intensify tension. About the letter I mention above – fairly early on in their friendship Lowell proposed to Bishop (who was attracted to women). This event isn't referred to in the letters they're exchanging at the time – it happens off-stage, as it were. Then, about a decade later, after another manic episode, Lowell writes to Bishop of the day he proposed, and in her reply, sent two weeks later, she makes absolutely no mention of his confession and of that event.

In the letter he sends next, Lowell doesn't acknowledge that she refused to acknowledge this confession, so we don't know what he really felt or thought about that omission. But if I were him, I remember thinking, the elision that met my effusion would land like a blow. I also wondered what might have taken place in her mind between reading and responding, and what it must have been like to receive a reminder of a day you might have preferred to forget, to walk around thinking about it, wrestling both with yourself and the sender, and then having to decide what version of yourself was going to show up on the page. What boundaries were you going to erect, and could the friendship survive whatever choice you made?

If, as David Foster Wallace said, every love story is a ghost story, then maybe every letter is a lie. On some level. Even the truest confession may contain some element of performance.

J. H.: I have noticed some subtle hints regarding the differences in the position of a female writer versus a male writer. Was this something you kept front and center while working on the book?

C. B.: Not front and center, but I was and am interested in those differences, whenever they present themselves. But when they do, I try really hard not to make too much of them – they can wound your pride even if you believe in yourself and your talent – and get back to work.

J. H.: My favorite letter in the book was the letter from Ted to Frances, the one she took to be an answer to her prayer: did you think of it as an argument against romanticizing mental illness? I know that an author we share an affinity for, David Foster Wallace, was very outspoken about this.

C. B.: No, but I'm certainly willing for it to be seen as one, because I was conscious all along of not wanting to romanticize mental illness. Although I am aware that anyone using mental illness as a plot point, which is what this book does, is in danger of doing just that, no matter how sensitive the approach. (I feel like I should maybe mention here that there's some history of mental illness in my own family, and I myself struggle with depression and anxiety; I might not have thought about even trying to write this story if the struggle to apprehend and keep hold of reality hadn't touched my own life as well.) Lowell was capable of real violence when he was in the middle of a manic episode, and I don't want to ignore that, but for better or for worse, I'm not the kind of writer who could convincingly depict the perpetration and aftermath of violence. And perhaps the truth is I'm not really intellectually, ethically, or aesthetically interested in it. What I really was interested in was trying to depict how conflicted someone like O'Connor might feel as they stood on the outside of the illness, watching someone they respected and desired suffer so much torment.

J. H.: As a creative writing program graduate, what are your thoughts on such courses? O'Connor is perhaps the most famous Iowa graduate, David Foster Wallace chose Arizona over Iowa because he thought Iowa was too traditional for the kind of writing he wanted to pursue.

C. B.: I wish I had gotten a PhD in theology, religious studies, or philosophy instead! Although my time in the program I attended did eventually get me a publishing job in New York, so I have to remind myself to not regret it too much. Later in New York I found myself wishing I had saved getting an M.F.A. for maybe later in my twenties, when I actually had more concrete ideas for projects and would have appreciated the (hopefully) funded time away from a day job. I've been writing around a day job pretty much ever since I left graduate school.

J. H.: Similarly, what do you think about institutions such as Yaddo? Again, to come back to Wallace, whose experience there was, let us put it mildly, mixed, I feel that you have your reservations also.

C. B.: I've been to writers" conferences – adult summer camp situations where you're there to help teach workshops with lots of socializing around the workshops – but not to a writers" colony, where you're there primarily to work on your own project. So I can't really say what I think. Whatever reservations expressed in the book are those of the characters! The weeks I spent at those conferences were really lovely, and I'm glad I was lucky enough to walk away from them with extremely fond memories rather than bitterness. But I think I might have aged out of the need for the particular kind of socializing that can transpire at conferences and colonies, and while I do think it's incredibly valuable to have blocks of uninterrupted time in which to work on a project, I'm not sure I want to have to petition an institution to give it to me. Rejection can cause an energy depletion I do not have time for.