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REVIEW: Portraits of Grace: Images and Words from the Monastery of the Holy Spirit

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exciting copy." Those readers familiar with O'Connor's work will appreciate the self-effacing humor and irony in her comment. Yet, in fact, it took 38 years for the first book-length biography of O'Connor to appear (*Flannery O'Connor: A Life*, by Jean Cash, University of Tennessee Press, 2002). And now we have Brad Gooch's very good biography of her as well. Why did it take so long for a biography to appear? Certainly not because she was an unworthy subject. As Gooch points out, O'Connor has become a one-woman academic industry. To date, more than 195 doctoral dissertations, more than 70 book-length studies and well over 1,000 articles have been written about her relatively small body of work.

No, the reason there was no biography of O'Connor until recently is that her friend Sally Fitzgerald was generally understood by fans and scholars of O'Connor to be working on the definitive O'Connor biography, a project that had been under way for more than 20 years. Fitzgerald was still working on the O'Connor biography when she died in 2000. This provided Cash and Gooch an opportunity to fill the biographical void.

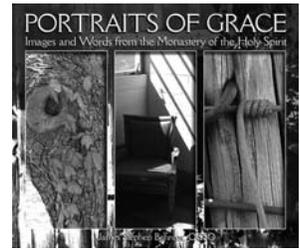
Gooch's carefully researched and documented biography relies heavily on the recollections of people who actually knew O'Connor. That is both a strength and something of a weakness, since some of those recollections are well over 50 years old. He also largely refrains from literary explication in favor of giving biographical details that help provide context for the stories.

So now we have two biographies, and one would think that would be more than enough to cover a life "spent between the house and the chicken yard." As Gooch commented in a recent interview, "Unless someone comes walking out of the woods with a startling revelation, the plot points of O'Connor's life have been set, and the connections with her work are now open and available for interpretation and reinterpretation."

All Georgia libraries should have both the Cash and the Gooch biographies in their permanent collections. Yet what is lacking in both books is a better understanding of O'Connor's essential spiritual life and its relationship to her art. Perhaps the biography currently being written by professor emeritus William Sessions (who knew O'Connor well) will address this aspect of her life more fully. In the meantime, the best sources for understanding that fundamental aspect of her life and art remain her own letters and essays published posthumously as *The Habit of Being* and *Mystery and Manners*. ►►

— Reviewed by **William A. Richards**
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Portraits of Grace: Images and Words from the Monastery of the Holy Spirit by James Stephen Behrens, OCSO (Acta Publications, 2007; ISBN 978-0-87946-334-2, \$19.95).



This collection of observations and meditations pair a photographic image from the monastery with corresponding text. Both the size of the photos and the amount of related text vary from page to page. Some observations cover three paragraphs, others two or less. Each photo has a caption, or title, such as "Friends," "Colored Brick Wall," "Stress," "The Brighter the Light." The book is coffee-table sized, at 9-by-10 inches. All photos are color.

Although the book follows no obvious pattern (there is no table of contents), it does offer a focus of morning observations in the first pages. Each photo captures a scene, an object or a mood from the monastery. Besides the photo of the author on the back cover overleaf, no human is fully pictured. Among the 200 or so photographs, only three contain images of the human form: an artist painter's torso, Jesus Christ on the Cross and the Buddha. Still, the book is titled *Portraits of Grace*.

The objects of the photographer's eye range from clay pots to airplanes to flowers to aged tools to scenes of rooms set with their items of function such as a dining room, a scriptorium or a wall of shelved books. Many photos capture a sense of timeless function: a brick pathway, an old step stool, a bicycle, a pair of worn boots. Other scenes capture the columns of the monastery church in various shades of contrast from vivid dark to bright light, or subdued infusions of light. An ever-present theme of the book is light: the light of the Divine, which illuminates the human to better grasp as well as the variety of light needed to capture the photo in its intended sense.

Is it a photography book or one of meditations? It is both a visual delight and a collection of concise wise observations about our lives within the context of a larger continuum. The Monastery of the Holy Spirit, a Trappist community, is located in Conyers. Visitors are welcome to walk the grounds, shop at the bookstore/gift shop and bonsai nursery, to worship at regularly scheduled services, as well as attend retreats. This book is the third by the author. All three volumes explore the dimension of grace found in the everyday, the ordinary and in the monastic way of life. ►►

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