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Book Review - When Fiction and Philosophy Meet: A Conversation with Flannery O'Connor and Simone Weil

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Off the SHELF

When Fiction and Philosophy Meet: A Conversation with Flannery O'Connor and Simone Weil by E. Jane Doering and Ruthann Knechel Johansen (Mercer University Press, 2019: ISBN 9780881466966, \$35.00)

E. Jane Doering and Ruthann Knechel Johansen of the University of Notre Dame have combined their expertise on Simone Weil and Flannery O'Connor to write a book that examines the intersection between these two writers. Doering, director emerita of the Teachers as Scholars Program, has written on the French philosopher Simone Weil. Johansen, professor emerita in Notre Dame's Program of Liberal Studies, has written on the American fiction writer Flannery O'Connor, who was born — and spent most of her life — in Georgia. While Weil and O'Connor never met, they shared a concern about the secular direction of their own societies and felt a duty to demonstrate the reality of good and evil through their works. Having read Weil's philosophy, O'Connor wrote fiction that reflects those responses to modern spiritual concerns.

The first chapter of this book examines the context of the writers' intellectual and spiritual formation, which Weil developed during the time between the two world wars. O'Connor

came of age as an Irish Catholic in the Protestant South on the eve of the civil rights movement. The second chapter describes their mentors, their central concerns, and how they express these concerns. The final four main chapters highlight individual concepts through Weil's philosophy and O'Connor's fiction.

Doering and Johansen detail Weil's rational argument that, with God and God's grace, the moral breakdown of modern life can be resolved through understanding and surrendering to divine love, regardless of whether that love is shown through joy or suffering. The authors connect Weil's argument to O'Connor's fiction, which is steeped in the violence and realism that she saw in her secular society.

One example of this connection is found in O'Connor's most anthologized short story, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." The authors link Weil's concept of grace, which is available only when there is a void open to fill, with O'Connor's

narrative. In the story, the grandmother uses her religion as a shield when confronted with The Misfit. It is only when she accepts her religious doubt while on the brink of death and reaches out to The Misfit that she opens a space for grace to fill. The Misfit confirms this with his final words over her dead body: "She



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would have been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.”

Doering and Johansen fill this book with scholarly details about both writers, sometimes to the detriment of the narrative. The density of the details can detract from the themes connecting the philosophy of Weil with the narratives of O’Connor. In addition, readers may have trouble following the connections, as each theme is written with two sections, one for each woman, rather than one section with

the philosophical and fictional responses intermingled.

This book will be most useful for the reader who has a thorough grounding in the works of Weil, O’Connor, or both. Readers may also appreciate the background and influences of both women in addition to the religious influences in their philosophy and fictional narratives.

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