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Book Review: Sign Language: Reading Flannery O'Connor's Graphic Narrative

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Off the SHELF

Sign Language: Reading Flannery O'Connor's Graphic Narrative by Ruth Reiniche (Mercer University Press, 2020: ISBN 9780881467406, \$35.00)

Narrative form is not often something readers take into consideration while enjoying a work of fiction unless they are writers themselves.

However, narrative form is often an important aspect of the experience of literature. In her

book, *Sign Language: Reading Flannery O'Connor's Graphic Narrative*, Ruth Reiniche explores how Flannery O'Connor employs techniques from the graphic arts—in particular, comics, film, and photography—in her fiction to create a unique narrative form. Grounded in theories of visual aesthetics and O'Connor's own history in the arts, Reiniche explores how O'Connor's fiction draws on various visual techniques to structure her writing and to give insight into the narrative moments that these techniques produce.

In chapters one and two, Reiniche explores O'Connor's history as a cartoonist for her college literary magazine and her admiration for *New Yorker* cartoonists, including her own aspirations to be published in that publication. These chapters offer a wealth of contextual knowledge about O'Connor and mid-20th century cartoonists, particularly the social and artistic milieu of which they were a part. Reiniche offers connections which lend to O'Connor's creation of "cartoonish" characters and situations in her fiction, especially in how these highlight larger cultural conversations through the use of grotesqueness and

exaggeration. In chapter three, Reiniche explores O'Connor's female characters in *Wise Blood*. She argues that they are arranged in the text as if by collage (or assemblage), exposing larger questions about the place of women in O'Connor's fiction and in visual imagery more broadly. Particularly of interest is the discussion of women and film. In chapter four, the influence of photography on O'Connor's work, specifically *The Violent Bear It Away*, is

explored. Reiniche argues that a kind of "double vision" in O'Connor's writing allows readers to see multiple "images" at once. In chapter five, O'Connor's short stories are mined for visual techniques, including Byzantine mosaic and tattooing. Reiniche closes by discussing frames, by which she means the containers of the stories themselves—the novel, the short story—and why these media are what O'Connor chose over visual representations.

Overall, Reiniche offers a compelling study of an under-researched topic in O'Connor scholarship. It is most

compelling when offering contextual and biographical information about O'Connor and her world in order to inform the reader about her use of visual techniques. Similarly, Reiniche offers a thorough study over the breadth of O'Connor's work and types of visual techniques to make her case. By exploring so many different works and techniques, it becomes clear how much O'Connor was influenced by the visual image. However, the author's complicated use of theoretical imbrication at times felt confusing and may leave the nuance

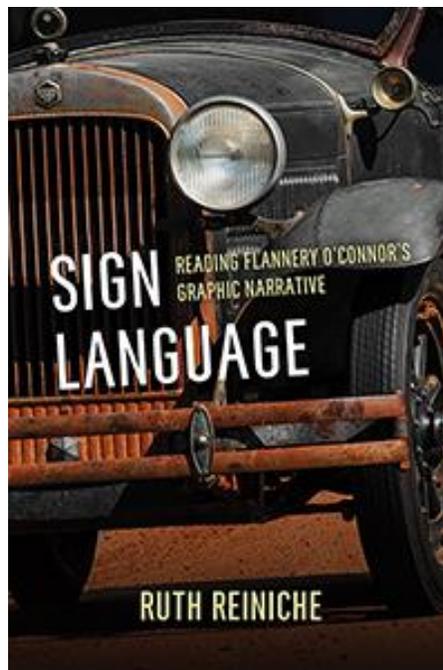


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of the arguments vulnerable to misinterpretation and critique.

This book is recommended for those who have an interest in Southern literature or O'Connor specifically. It is additionally recommended for creative writing students to learn more about

graphic narratives. Academic libraries that collect in the area of Southern literature, 20th century literature, or creative writing craft should acquire this book.

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