

# The Tablet

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## Novels Written with A Catholic Theme

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SOME NOVELISTS and authors of short stories provide excellent insights not only when they are creating works of fiction but also when they are commenting on the art of writing.

Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy come to mind immediately. I think that O'Connor's "Mystery and Manners" is filled with marvelous insights. Percy's "The Message in the Bottle" and "Signposts in a Strange Land" are also quite good. Ron Hansen's "A Stay Against Confusion: Essays on Faith and Fiction" ranks with O'Connor's and Percy's reflections.

All three authors took a gamble in writing novels with a Catholic theme not because there is so much anti-Catholicism in our society but because there is so much ignorance of the supernatural and religious faith. Even critics can misunderstand novels that have a religious dimension. Witness the recent film version of Evelyn Waugh's masterpiece "Brideshead Revisited."

Commenting on fiction in "A Stay Against Confusion," Hansen mentions that he hesitates to say too much because fiction is better experienced than interpreted. I agree. Noting that symbols are not meant to be fully understood, indeed that to understand a symbol completely is to kill the symbol, Hansen writes the following:

"So the Holy Being continually finds new ways to proclaim itself to us, first and best of all in the symbols of Christ's life, then in Scripture, and finally in created things, whether they be the glories of nature or art or other human beings. ...

"The job of fiction writers is to fashion those symbols and give their readers the feeling that life has great significance, that something is going on here that matters. Writing will be a sacrament when it offers in its own way the formula for happiness of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Which is; First, be. Second, love. Finally, worship. We may find it's possible that if we do just one of those things completely we may have done all three."

I love this vision of fiction. Perhaps the greatest service that fiction writers can render to us is to convince us that "life has great significance, that something is going on here that matters." I am thinking of the course on the Catholic novel that I am currently teaching at St. John's University. If the eight novels that I am having the students read convey to the students that life has

great importance, that something great is going on in their lives, then my judgment would be that the course was a big success.

There is a kind of literature which may be exciting and interesting, but which gives the impression that the heroes and heroines are very different from the reader. It can almost seem that they inhabit another world, so different are their lives from the lives of the reader. I hope that is not the impression that a reader receives from reading a Catholic novel.

Rather the reader, I hope, sees in a new way a deeper dimension to his or her own life by encountering fictional characters whose lives are immersed in the mystery of grace. One way of describing a Catholic novel is that it is dramatization of human beings involved in an adventure of grace.

Years ago, I heard my college English literature professor tell a group of seminarians that if they could read and understand Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem "The Wreck of the Deutschland," they might profit as much from it as from reading a spiritual classic. If I had to state simply the theme of the poem it would be that Christ is present in every moment of our lives, present when everything seems to be going well, present when tragedy, suffering and death are near.

In December, 1875, the steamship, Deutschland, left Bremen, headed for England and then on to America. On the ship were five young nuns, who were exiled by Bismarck's laws against religious orders. The nuns were going to begin new lives in Missouri. On its way to England, the ship ran aground in the Thames and more than 60 people died, including the five nuns. Little is known of the nuns but Hansen makes each of them very real in his novel. Using the little information about them that is known, Hansen uses his imagination and writing skill to create five characters with whom readers can identify.

A convert to Catholicism, Hopkins entered the Society of Jesus in 1868 and soon decided to give up writing poetry to avoid earthly distractions from his priestly duties. The sinking of the Deutschland and the death of the five nuns moved Hopkins to return to the writing of poetry. Indeed he was moved to write a 35-stanza memorial, considered by many to be the best of his long poems.