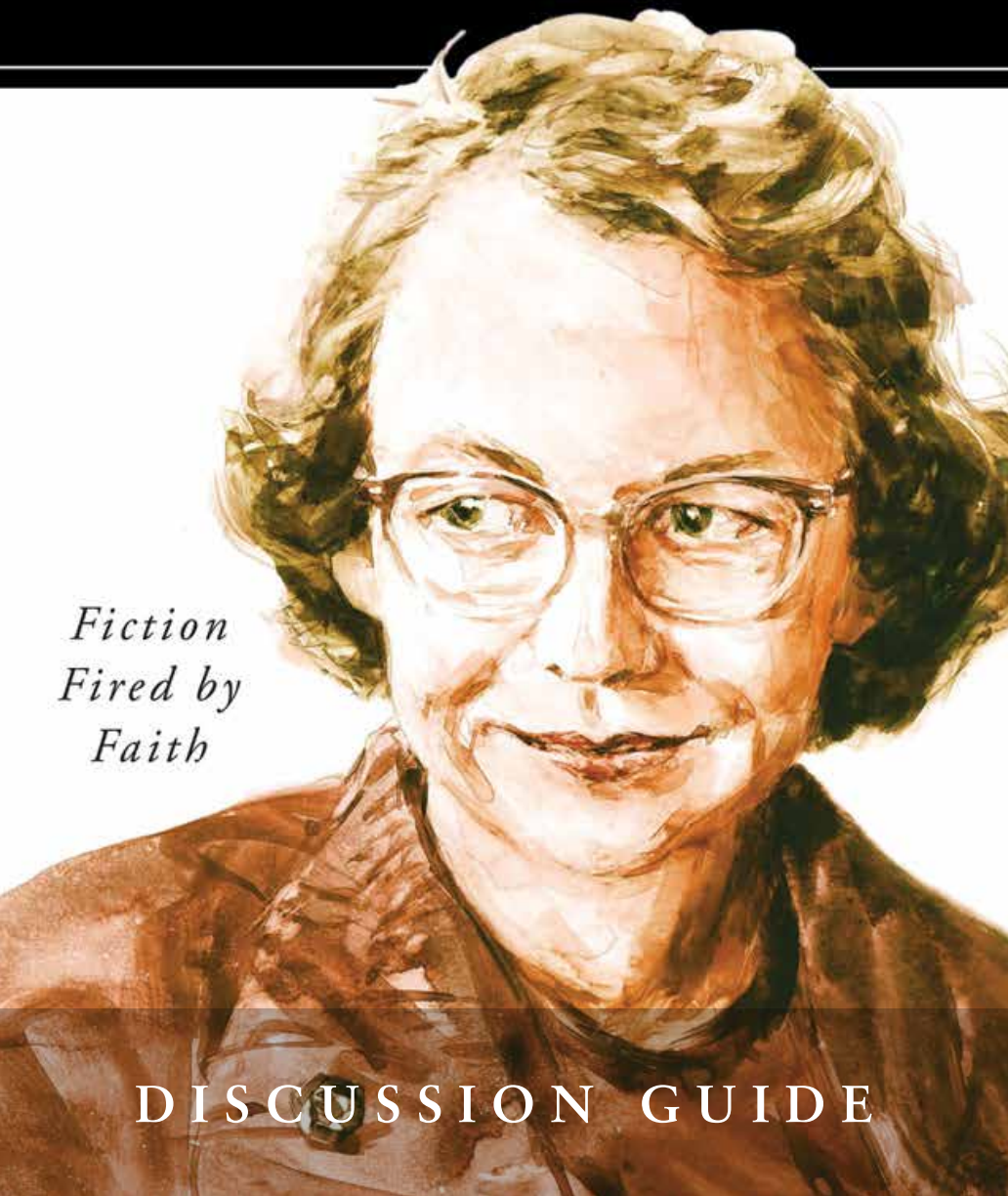


ANGELA ALAIMO O'DONNELL

FLANNERY O'CONNOR

*Fiction  
Fired by  
Faith*

DISCUSSION GUIDE



## About the Book

*Flannery O'Connor: Fiction Fired by Faith* tells the remarkable story of the gifted young woman who set out from her native Georgia to develop her talents as a writer and eventually succeeded in becoming one of the most accomplished fiction writers of the twentieth century. Struck with a fatal disease just as her career was blooming, O'Connor was forced to return to her rural home and to live an isolated life, far from the literary world she longed to be a part of.

In this insightful new biography, Angela Alaimo O'Donnell depicts O'Connor's passionate devotion to her vocation, despite her crippling illness, the rich interior life she lived through her reading and correspondence, and the development of her deep and abiding faith in the face of her own impending mortality. She also explores some of O'Connor's most beloved stories, detailing the ways in which her fiction served as a means for her to express her own doubts and limitations, along with the challenges and consolations of living a faithful life. O'Donnell's biography recounts the poignant story of America's preeminent Catholic writer and offers the reader a guide to her novels and stories so deeply informed by her Catholic faith.

## About the Author

Angela Alaimo O'Donnell is a poet, author, and professor at Fordham University in New York City, where she teaches English, Creative Writing, and American Catholic Studies. She also serves as associate director of Fordham's Curran Center for American Catholic Studies. O'Donnell is a columnist at *America* magazine and writes on Books & Culture.



# Discussion Guide

## Introduction

1. Note the comment made to Flannery's publisher by another author: "Do you really think Flannery O'Connor was such a great writer? She's such a Roman Catholic!" What assumptions lie behind the statement, and where would they come from? Why might such assumptions be mistaken, and how do we know?
2. On pages 5 and 6, Angela O'Donnell offers a succinct and fascinating explanation of the meaning to be drawn from Flannery's famous short story, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." Does this take on the nature of the world and the human condition ring true to you? Why or why not?
3. What is your reaction to Flannery's comments on sickness (page 7)?

## Chapter One

1. In what ways were Flannery and her early life “ordinary as a loaf of bread”? In what ways not? Is it a childhood you would like to have lived, or one you’d be glad to have avoided?
2. How do you suppose Flannery’s ethnic background impacted who she was and what she accomplished?
3. What does Flannery’s throwing punches at her own guardian angel say about her?
4. How do we see Flannery’s longing for holiness reflected in her own life as well as in her stories?
5. Flannery gained—as O’Donnell puts it—“sense of the fragility of life and the vanity of human wishes” from the untimely death of her father. Have any experiences from your own life offered you such a lesson? Has this sense impacted the way you live, the work you do, or the choices you make?
6. O’Donnell notes the claim of author Paul Elie that “the main theme” of Flannery’s life and writing is “independence.” In what ways would that be a healthy theme for a Catholic to embrace in his or her own life? Are there ways in which it might not be?

## Chapter Two

1. Dwell for a moment upon the prayer that Flannery wrote that appears as the epigraph to Chapter Two. There's a lot there in just a few words. What in it resonates most deeply with you and why?
2. What caused Flannery O'Connor, during her years in Iowa, to fear most for the well-being of her faith? Did she have good reason to?
3. The various words of prayer from Flannery's journal cited throughout this chapter provide an interesting window into her multifaceted faith life. In what ways might that life be something to be admired or emulated by others? How is it similar to your own faith experience?
4. O'Donnell makes clear that the incarnation is a major theme in Flannery's fiction. Why might her frequent use of *comic* and *grotesque* elements be effective "tools" to convey her thinking on this theme?
5. If you were writing fiction set in your own part of the world, what "manners" might you focus on to convey "the texture of existence that surrounds you"?
6. The piece of "the mystery of existence" that Flannery seeks to unveil in her fiction is incarnation, sin, and grace. If you were writing fiction, what aspects of life, the world, the human condition, and God might you be most keenly inclined to explore?

## Chapter Three

1. How does the theme of being a “stranger in a strange land” reflect Flannery’s experience at the Yaddo artist colony? In what ways have you shared this experience, particularly in regard to your faith?
2. Why did Flannery come to believe that a writer can “leave evangelizing to the evangelists”?
3. Why do you suppose Flannery was so taken by the statue of Jesus and Mary that she saw in the Cloisters and never forgot after that?
4. How do Flannery’s words about the Eucharist (her take on seeing it as a symbol, its centrality in her life) resonate with you?
5. What impact did Flannery’s friendships with fellow Catholics have on her life and faith? How have friendships nourished (or threatened) your own faith?
6. O’Donnell makes the point that Flannery’s fiction emphasizes the presence of God in creation. Is this a strong part of your own faith awareness and experience? If so, how? Do you tend to be more like the character John Wesley in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” who wants to “go through Georgia fast so we won’t have to look at it much,” or more like that story’s narrator, who points out the “trees full of silver-white sunlight and the meanest of them sparkled”?

## Chapter Four

1. Why would Flannery say that “sickness before death is an appropriate thing” and even that “those who don’t have it miss one of God’s mercies”? Would you agree?
2. Is there a time when you have managed to discern “one of God’s mercies” in a bitterly disappointing and painful circumstance? (Perhaps Flannery would make a good “patron saint” for those who need help doing so.)
3. What does Flannery’s choice of her “signature” animal, the peacock, say about her? In her place, given the space (like the farm Andalusia) and resources, what signature animal might you choose to surround yourself with and why?
4. Again in this chapter, we read of another Flannery story that points to the difference between recognizing the divine through creation and missing it. Who do you know who reliably recognizes God’s presence and action in the world around them?
5. O’Donnell writes about the (unintentional) community of Catholic writers Flannery was a part of, each trying to engage the “era of unbelief” in which they lived. Flannery tried to present themes of God’s presence and redemption to this “hostile audience” through striking and even grotesque images and characters. Though she was, in the world she lived in, surrounded by unbelief, that world was only an early shadow of the deeper unbelief of our own. In what ways might we choose to live, speak, create, or relate to help divine realities break through into the awareness of our own contemporaries?

## Chapter Five

1. The chapter opens with a passage from a letter that Flannery wrote to her friend Betty Hester, saying that “you have to cherish the world at the same time that you struggle to endure it.” (And O’Donnell closes the chapter referring to this as Flannery’s vocation.) How is this true of Flannery? How is it true of you?
2. Was there ever a time when you were “in full flight from your own redemption,” as O’Donnell says Flannery’s character Shiftlet is?
3. What aspects of a Catholic understanding of the human person do you recognize as being reflected in Flannery’s story (as described by O’Donnell), “The Life You Save May Be Your Own”?
4. Are you able to imagine Flannery going through the course of her days at Andalusia as O’Donnell describes them on pages 80 and 81? In what ways are they or are they not appealing to you?
5. What do you suppose Flannery’s experience with Erik Langkjaer meant to her in the big picture of her own life?



## Chapter Six

1. Reflect on the prayer to St. Raphael that O'Donnell offers on page 91. Perhaps pray it yourself, on your own, or with your family or reading group. What appeals to you most in the prayer?
2. O'Donnell notes that Flannery prayed this prayer "every morning for many years." How would praying this prayer so regularly impact one's spirituality? What does it say about Flannery that it was so important to her?
3. O'Donnell quotes a passage from one of Flannery's letters in which she says, "It seems to be a fact that you have to suffer as much from the Church as for it." What does she mean?
4. "Being a believer in a culture of unbelief" is a theme that was, O'Donnell makes clear, central to Flannery. Reflect on the meaning of this phrase to you. How well did Flannery succeed at this task? How well do you?
5. What do you think of Flannery's words about her doubts, quoted by O'Donnell in the middle of page 94?

## Chapter Seven

1. What is your own experience of “the conflict between an attraction for the Holy and the disbelief in it that we breathe in with the air of the times”? How does this attraction and this disbelief appear in your own experience?
2. Does God’s healing grace indeed “cut with the sword Christ said he came to bring”? How so?
3. Can you recall a time in your own life when “the devil [was] the unwilling instrument of grace”?
4. O’Donnell offers much food for thought when it comes to Flannery’s understanding of race. What conclusions do you reach about this?
5. What does Flannery mean when she says, “My virtues are as timid as my vices”?

## Chapter Eight

1. What do you suppose it is about the passage from St. Cyril of Jerusalem that brought Flannery back to it again and again?
2. Do you have an experience of what it means to be, like Flannery's character Ruby Turpin, "too blinded by her own (supposed virtues) to see her sins"? Have you ever seen it in someone else? In yourself?
3. O'Donnell quotes John Paul II's statement about art being "a kind of bridge to religious experience." How have you seen this to be true, in Flannery's work and elsewhere?
4. What do the final years of Flannery's life tell us about her?
5. Would you like to have met Flannery O'Connor? What kind of conversation might you have if you were able to?