

Flannery

For a writer now so critically acclaimed, novelist and short story writer Flannery O'Connor (1924-1964) has never been the subject of a major film biography, so one is grateful to welcome this new documentary. O'Connor was a distinctive voice of the Southern Gothic style who produced the bulk of her provocative and complex works living with her mother in a farmhouse (named "Andalusia") for much of her life—a kind of southern Emily Dickinson—but with writing of a utterly different kind.

Filmmakers Elizabeth Coffman and Mark Bosco have captured the character of this singular American voice by presenting an informative narrative done as a straightforward chronology of her life, a life curtailed by death at only 39 from the ravages of lupus disease. The film covers her early years growing up in Georgia, where she eventually settled with her mother in the town of Milledgeville. Her literary bent was much shaped by stints in the 1940's at the Iowa Writers' Workshop and at the writing retreat of Yaddo in Saratoga Springs, where she got to know major New York talents such as Robert Lowell and Carson McCullers,

O'Connor's slim but memorable oeuvre (two novels and some 30 short stories) began when she was in her teens, and she came to public attention with her first novel "Wise Blood" when she was 27. (This work was filmed by John Huston in 1977, and clips of it are shown). While she did travel delivering lectures, for most of her life she was a recluse at Andalusia, typing, letter-writing, and caring for her beloved peacocks.

Co-creator Bosco, Jesuit priest, O'Connor scholar, and a professor of Literature at Georgetown University, came up with the idea to write a script about Flannery, on which he collaborated with Coffman, herself a scholar and filmmaker specializing in films about writers.

In telling her story, the filmmakers employ never-before-seen archival footage, some of her newly discovered personal letters, and original animations and music to describe her life and legacy. Flannery's own published words are read on screen by actress Mary Steenburgen, who delivers them with an appropriate Southern lilt. The film is also dotted with testimonies and conversations with those who knew O'Connor or were inspired by her (Alice Walker, Lucinda Williams, Hilton Als, Robert Giroux, and Alice McDermott, among others).

The script stresses the writer's profound, but thorny, Catholic faith which permeated her writing her whole life. It was a faith matching grace together with a searing violence. It also does not avoid O'Connor's bred-in-the-bone racism and her occasionally distasteful treatment of Afro-

Americans, who are often stereotyped in her narratives. Yet it also acknowledges O'Connor's creation of believable and singular black characters with real human dimension. Ever true to her Southern roots, she stated, near the end of her life: "You know, I'm an integrationist by principle & a segregationist by taste anyway."

"Flannery" is sure to introduce this singular and confounding writer to new readers.

(The film is unrated and runs 97 minutes).

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