

2012
TUSCANY PRIZE
FOR
CATHOLIC FICTION



*Selected
Short
Stories*

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CATHOLIC FICTION

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Short
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www.TuscanyPress.com

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Preface

We at Tuscany Press have been asked many times: Why Tuscany Press, why Catholic fiction, and why a Catholic short story collection?

Let me start by inviting you into the world of Catholic readers as we have experienced it. We noticed that if we wanted to read good Catholic fiction, we had to reach back to the writers of the last century: Flannery O’Conner, Walker Percy, Graham Greene, and then further back to J. R. R. Tolkien and G. K. Chesterton. Look as we might it seemed as if good contemporary Catholic fiction did not exist.

We asked ourselves how that could be. There are writers, perhaps great ones, and, certainly, many short story writers who are Catholic. Why isn’t there contemporary Catholic fiction? We tried to find a publisher dedicated to Catholic fiction, but we could not find one. We tried to find a Catholic fiction literary prize that might guide us to recent works of Catholic fiction, but we could not find one.

As Catholics and all other Christians know, we live in a world filled with the presence of God—a living God. We have always believed that our stories should reflect this fact, this reality. We believe in redemption, forgiveness, grace, and love—a true love born from God. We may live in a broken world with fallible people, including ourselves, but God’s grace enters this reality.

Maybe it was a nudge from above, or simply a human insight that caused us to found and launch Tuscany Press. Certainly, it was, in part,

because of our strong belief that the stories we read should reflect the truth of God's presence, a loving presence.

Tuscany Press began in June 2012 and the Tuscany Prize for Catholic Fiction—Short Stories was born. We want to encourage writers of Catholic fiction. We want to publish as many writers of Catholic fiction as possible, and short stories are fun to read.

The doors of Tuscany Press were opened, and before we had a fully operational Web site, we received manuscripts. The short stories started showing up—eventually, many stories. Before we knew it, we had more than a hundred short stories, and they kept coming.

They came from all over the country and outside the United States. The stories came from rural areas, cities, and the suburbs, and from Catholics, Christians of all denominations, and some non-Christians. Authors dusted off old stories from more than twenty years ago, and young writers sent in their stories. We had priests and religious and lay-people sharing with us stories of faith and the presence of God.

After experiencing all these stories, I rediscovered how much fun short stories are to read. In fact, we had so many well-written short stories that we decided to change the 2012 Tuscany Prize for a Catholic Fiction—Short Story collection: We would keep the first-, second-, third-, fourth-, and fifth-place winners, and add five Honorable Mentions.

This Catholic short story collection, we hope and believe, brings God's loving presence to readers in smaller bites, in a format that involves less commitment than, say, a novel, but each story is no less driven by fallible people who, somehow, experience God's grace.

May each of these stories carry the light of redemption, forgiveness, love, and grace, and may each reader discover and bask in this light.

In His Peace and Grace,
PETER J. MONGEAU
Publisher
Tuscany Press

Introduction

*“She would have been a good woman,” The Misfit said,
“if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute
of her life.”*

So closes Flannery O’Connor’s short story “A Good Man Is Hard to Find.” It is the final significant moment of the story and one that points up the moment when the grandmother—and the reader—discovers her ultimate and unseen destiny. It is also one of the more famous examples of what was being written during the heyday of the so-called Catholic Renaissance of postwar America. What’s most remarkable about this Catholic literary “moment” is that despite being so brief, it would have a profound impact on future writers, Catholic and non-Catholic alike.

Somewhere in the middle of his memoir *Swimming with Scapulars: The Confessions of Young Catholic*, the Catholic author Matthew Lickona recalls how during his heady young days as a college student he discovered these writers of the Catholic Renaissance—and specifically the late Southern Catholic writer Walker Percy. Years later, Lickona relates that Percy’s “words had already sunk deep into me, taking up residence in my long-term memory. They still bubble up in all sorts of situations, little moments of *a-ha* recognition.”

Those readers familiar with Catholic fiction in general and Flannery O’Connor’s story in particular probably already know about Mr. Lickona’s “little moments of *a-ha* recognition.” For those readers who have yet to acquaint themselves, those moments depend on the

unique perspective on the sacred that Catholic fiction writers bring to their usually secular subject matter.

Here's how Ms. O'Connor explains it in her essay "Novelist and Believer":

"I have to make the reader feel, in his bones if nowhere else, that something is going on here [in a story] that counts," she writes. "Distortion in this case is an instrument; exaggeration has a purpose, and the whole structure of the story or novel has been made what it is because of belief. This is not the kind of distortion that destroys; it is the kind that reveals, or should reveal."

Serving as shorthand for the sorts of startling revelations that, as O'Connor points out, Catholic fiction reveals—or ought to reveal—Mr. Lickona's *a-ha* recognition indicates that he, like so many other readers, has hit upon the very earmark of modern Catholic writers.

Of course, that statement begs a number of questions: What makes a writer "Catholic"? What puts the "Catholic" in a novel or short story in the first place? What distinguishes the revelations found in "Catholic" fiction from, say, that of Jewish, Protestant, Muslim, or, for that matter, Hittite fiction?

Getting one's hands around the term "Catholic fiction" or "Catholic novelist" or even "Catholic storyteller" tends to be a slippery affair. Does a Catholic writer acquire his bona fides by throwing some Catholic elements—say, a priest distributing Holy Communion or hearing a dramatic death-bed confession—into his story as a Hollywood director would employ special effects? Does Catholic fiction merely explain or simplify tenets of the faith by rendering the catechism in storybook form? Is a story truly Catholic only if it has a happy ending or an edifying "moral" for both children and adults?

It would be easier to describe the taste of a turnip, the smile on the Mona Lisa's face, or the cut of your house key than to offer a definition of Catholic fiction broad enough to address these questions and encompass all examples or specific enough to account for all writers who are considered "Catholic" in their outlook and approach to fiction writing.

Consider what this task entails. First of all, such a definition must avoid overplaying the term “Catholic fiction.” After all, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway were Catholics who happened to write (or, perhaps to be more precise, writers who happened to be Catholic)—does that make them automatically Catholic writers? The definition must also avoid inflating the term into a distinction without difference. There is the danger of rendering Catholic fiction a matter of, as James Joyce would describe the Catholic Church in general, “here comes everybody!” For example, do Willa Cather’s dying archbishop and the creepy Catholic priests who show up in Stephen King’s horror stories automatically place these non-Catholic writers in the same clubhouse as J. F. Powers and Graham Greene, two Catholic writers who cut their men of the cloth from the whole cloth of fiction?

Now, there was a time when distinguishing literature as “Catholic” made as much sense as asking for a cup of “wet water.” Count for sure all the great storytellers of Western Civilization since the advent of Christ among those who took their Catholicism in even doses with their tales—Dante, Chaucer, Rabelais, Boccaccio, arguably even Shakespeare, and so forth. All these writers were influenced by and in turn influenced the Catholic milieu that existed before Nietzsche proclaimed God dead and writers started falling over themselves to be the first to write His definitive obituary.

With the highly exaggerated reports of God’s demise and other humorous thoughts, we return then to Mr. Lickona’s “little moments of *a-ha* recognition.” Far from being dead, God is very much alive in the stories presented here. The ultimate agent of grace, God serves as a sort of theater manager in fiction, enhancing the revelations readers find in each story by ensuring that the sound and house lights, as it were, are adjusted to enable the actors to hit their marks as the drama unfolds. Readers are invited to experience this same sort of “a-ha” moment in the short stories presented in Tuscany Press’s Collected Short Stories.

The first-place winner of the Tuscany short story prize is Kristin Britten’s “Eyes That Pour Forth.” Set in a faraway monastery, Britten’s

story shows—literally—through her character’s eyes the miracle and mystery of ordinary life. In “The Reasons Why,” the second-place winner, Mollie Ficek touches on another such mystery when she relates the story of Marcy and her aunt Grace, who, suffering from dementia, offers her niece an invaluable lesson in unconditional love and inexplicable human suffering. Human suffering again serves as the psychological setting of third-place-winner Kaye Park Hinckley’s “Moon Dance,” although in this story Anna, with the help of her husband Will, discovers that forgiveness is a necessary third partner in the dance of love and life.

The fourth-place winner, “True or False,” by Bud Scott, sets a familiar scene for Catholic readers, but the confessional box in which Father Timothy and his unnamed “sinner” meet shows us why the doctor is often in as much need of healing as is the patient. Likewise, in fifth-place-winner Michael Piafsky’s “Water,” desperate housewife Carol finds herself at wits’ end in a difficult marriage and hopes to reconnect with her newborn son through three drops of water—and discovers along the way the wellspring of love.

In no particular order, five additional stories are included in the present volume because, judging their quality of merit similar to that of the five winners, the Tuscany editors couldn’t let these efforts go unnoticed. “The Debt,” by L. C. Ricardo, returns us to the hospital setting as her character Lola comes to understand an important lesson in sin and forgiveness. In Caroline Valencia-Dalisay’s “Excess Baggage,” forgiveness proves its power by reaching halfway around the globe.

In her short and bittersweet “Morning Star,” S. L. Scott does Milton one better by letting God speak for Himself on why and with what great sadness He let the Morning Star fall from the sky as part of His will. A second story of Kaye Park Hinckley’s, “Intensive Care,” also appears in this volume, and in it she shows that the patient is not always the one in most need of care. Last, Mathew Zimmerer’s “Near Miss” invites us to live in the moment and realize that such a moment is God’s way of letting us reacquaint ourselves with the miracle of life.

As a working definition, I propose that what distinguishes “Catholic

fiction”—and especially the stories contained in these pages—is the unique perspective a writer affords the reader, a perspective informed with what can be called a sacramental view of reality. Avoiding the fruitless abstraction of the idealist and the spiritual bankruptcy of the materialist, the soul thus formed is capable of holding the material world and the spiritual world in one act of imagination. By navigating this narrow way, the Catholic fictionist is telling his reader that the stuff of this world is in a sense as important as the stuff of the next; such a storyteller also offers evidence that clues to the next world can be found hidden in the stuff of this world. In fact, if there’s anyone to point to as progenitor of this theory, might we not look to God Himself, molding man like a divine glassblower, blowing his divine spirit into this bit of sand and dust we call flesh to give us our human form and function?

It is perhaps no accident that Catholic writers such as G. K. Chesterton and Graham Greene wrote mystery novels. After all, at the heart of things for Catholics, isn’t all of life a mystery, tied intimately and irrevocably to the Pascal Mystery who is Christ? Put this way, we could very well consider the life of faith as one “a-ha!” moment magnified over a lifetime. (In fact, Catholic writers could do worse than take Mary’s “*a-ha!*” response to God, “The Magnificat,” as a standard in their prayer repertoire.)

Many if not all the stories we received for the Tuscany Short Story Prize demonstrate that this “a-ha” moment is crucial to telling a Catholic story. But as always happens when a large pool of talent accepts an invitation to a party, naming the winners wasn’t easy. Nonetheless, after receiving an overwhelming response in the number and quality of submissions, the Tuscany editors judged that the ten stories you now have in your hands deserve to be at the top of the pile.

Our criteria were at once simple and effective—does the story capture the imagination? Is it well written? Does it show the reader more than it tells? Does it, to borrow the novelist John Gardner’s idea, maintain the “fictional dream”? In other words, is the story fully and most perfectly crafted to engage the reader’s desire to hear a story? Does the

story's structure fulfill the basic Aristotelian demand for "a beginning, a middle, and an end"? And finally, does it present characters who will live on long after the story on the page ends?

In the ten stories that make up Tuscany Press's *Collected Short Stories*—both the five prize winners and the five honorable mentions—I believe these questions are answered with a clear and unequivocal "*A-ha!*"

Editing the Tuscany Press's *Selected Short Stories* was truly a labor of love—with equal emphasis placed on both *labor* and *love*. That said, the work of channeling, corralling, and shaping talents, personalities, ideas, and images was not accomplished single-handedly. First, I thank Tuscany's founder and publisher, Peter Mongeau, for his courage and conviction in deciding to take a chance by investing in Catholic culture—and Catholic fiction in particular. I also thank the writers without whom, obviously, this book would not be possible: Karen Britten, Mollie Ficek, L. C. Ricardo, Kaye Park Hinckley, Bernard Scott, Michael Piafsky, Caroline Valencia-Dalisay, Laura Ricardo, S. L. Scott, and Mathew Zimmerer.

In addition, I thank Father Eric Berns, of the Diocese of La Crosse, Wisconsin, for his wise counsel and welcome advice on sacramental and other spiritual matters related to the stories herein; my brother-in-law Christopher Carstens, director of the Office of Sacred Worship for the Diocese of La Crosse, for his advice on certain liturgical questions; and Arthur and Theresa Hippler, Bernardo Aparicio, Jonathan Potter, Jonathan Webb, Brian Jobe, John Liem, Dorian Speed, and especially Matthew Lickona for their support and guidance. My father, Patrick O'Brien, also gets a word of thanks for the great advice he first gave me back in my high school years—advice I've depended on ever since: "Want to be a good writer? Read!" (The same advice holds, it is hoped, for being a good editor!)

Finally, I'd like to thank my wife, Cecilia, and our eight children, Barbara, Seamus, Bernadette, Norah, Liam, Anastasia, Mara Naomi,

and Lucy, for their love and patience throughout this endeavor—and without whom editing Tuscany Press's *Selected Short Stories* would not have been nearly as meaningful.

JOSEPH O'BRIEN

Editor

Tuscany Press

TO ALL WRITERS OF CATHOLIC FICTION

*May you know God's Beauty, Love, and Peace,
may your work be infused with His Grace,
and may Our Lady watch over you.*

*Selected
Short
Stories*

HONORABLE MENTION

The Morning Star

S. L. Scott

I do miss him. When the choirs fill the heavens with voices of ethereal harmony, I sometimes close my eyes and pretend his voice is still among them. His was the most beautiful, with a softness and compassion that warmed the heart and made you long for more when the song ended. Each time I would look upon him and ask, *Just one more, Lucifer*, he'd smile that tender, graceful smile and answer, *Whatever pleases you, my Lord*. And the choir would sing again with my precious angel shining the brightest.

Heaven's beauty has never been the same since I gave him up. But I suppose that's not the right way to say it. Sacrificing my most beloved angel was the most painful thing I have ever done. Perhaps it is because I cannot show my love to him any longer. Humans cannot honor him, nor cherish that once gentle being in which I saw such perfection. They do not understand how deeply I long to reach out and take his face in my hands and whisper *I still love you, my angel*. I cannot allow them this understanding, and it hurts to feel their hatred of him.

Or perhaps it pains me so because his love for me was lost the day I cast him into Hell. I permitted that contempt he felt, the disgust and envy of my throne that sent the heavens crying out in war. I had to do it, yes, I know this. Though the human world was but a glimmer in my plan, there were things that had to be done. My angels—my precious

angels—I wanted to give them a purpose. To guide, teach, and protect the creations beneath them . . . to cherish and love them, as I did my angels.

But there was one problem. For humans to possess free will, to give them a choice, any choice, there must be more than one option for them to contemplate. My angels knew only me and my grace; there was no need for free will in them. But the humans, who would one day be bearing the burden of free will, required that I provide them not only with my grace and love, but also with another's. By my own law there could not be two gods, but without a different path, there would be no free will in mankind. It saddened me to make the decision I ultimately did.

In the angelic ranks, there were a few who could handle such a task, but none as strongly as my beloved Lucifer. If I were to give up one whose grace and wonder so filled the heavens with joy. . . if I were to taint that perfect beauty with visions of envy and cast him out of Paradise forever . . . only one God would remain, while humanity would be given the choices needed for free will. No other angel was worthy to become nearly my opposite, and even though it would take him from me for all eternity, even my dear Lucifer deserved a purpose. And for an angel so great, only the most important duty could be given to him.

So, slowly, that pure love was infected till his eyes burned with contempt and his voice rang bitterness throughout Paradise. Other angels, weaker than my Lucifer and long since influenced by his radiance, felt the disgust sink into them until the heavens split. Most of my beautiful angels remained in my glory, bathed with light and cleansed of his sickness. The rest, shadowed in his ravaged beauty, revolted against me.

I could not fight that battle, not until the end when all my angels' hopes had fallen dry and loathing rained in my ruined Paradise. Then, amid the weary bodies, I walked and cleared the darkness from the loyal, and into the shadows ran those chosen to fail me, save one: my glorious Lucifer, as proud and strong standing against me as he was once humble and cherished at my side. Into my arms I took him, a last loving embrace, and upon his brow I placed a chaste kiss. A final good-bye to my angel.

He does not understand the reasons I have done this. I have denied him such knowledge. So true was his love for me, and mine for him, that should he not feel that hate consuming his heart, my angel would return with repentant tears, and I would not dare to stain such purity again. Thus I watch him, playing with unknown piety the role I assigned him. No other could weave such evil, for none, save myself, were so pure in grace and love.

When my garden was created and my angels, both loyal and fallen, began to learn their purpose, dearest Lucifer surpassed them all. With shrewd planning he tempted the woman, sliding in the serpent's body over her bare shoulders to coil around her neck and hold her in false security. His split tongue hissed lies to please and tantalize a child that could not understand what was being offered until she took that fated bite and inherited the awareness that even her mate lacked. Such wonders awareness can bring, though knowledge and understanding do not come so easily with it. My Lucifer knew this and without teaching his ignorant charge what to do with this awareness, he fled from me, but not before taking a moment to whisper a song in the air and indulge in the memory of a paradise lost.

I have watched him many times in the blistering fires of the damned. Far from his brimstone throne, my Lucifer walks among the sinners he created. Their screams abuse his tender ears until some pity returns to his eyes and, for a moment, Heaven's light warms those poor souls he looks upon. But when he returns to the evil that infects him, such scorn he then holds for those most blasphemous of Hell's power that he takes the whip from a lower demon and tears into the sinners himself. When his fury has finally been quelled and blood bathes that which was once pure to me, he walks to the deepest fires and stands with his face lifted to Heaven. I hear his tortured weeping as he stares up at me, the eternal flames burning away his love until only the hatred remains and the cries of sorrow change to screams of contempt that fill Hell with his rage.

He calls to me still, with challenges and cynical damning. He plays with humans and tests them against me, and I allow it. I sacrificed him

to give mankind choice, and they are free to be swayed by him and the fallen or guided by my grace and loyal angels. In the end, he returns to his domain consumed by even more hatred than when he came to me, and I find Heaven all the brighter for having seen my precious angel once again. I know I will never hear that sweet voice speak kindly of me again, so I will gladly bear his worship of hatred. As long as my creation abides in him, so does my love.

2012 TUSCANY PRIZE FOR CATHOLIC FICTION

Selected Short Stories

“ . . . a new Catholic culture has gradually emerged in the United States, . . . The establishment of the Tuscany Prize for Catholic Fiction has called forth that art, allowing readers to discern the new Catholic cultural flowering. And if this year’s prizewinning short stories are any guide, Catholic art in America is headed, once again, toward great things.”

—JOSEPH BOTTUM, author of *The Christmas Plains*, Essayist and Poet

Brother Michael remembers finding the girl standing in the doorway of the Tanzanian monastery where he lives. She is holding the remnants of her eyes in her hands—milky white orbs with pink muscle attached to them like the trails of twin comets. She doesn’t cry, but she trembles and quivers in the doorframe, and the other monks . . . find out that she can see from those eyes. . . .

“EYES THAT POUR FORTH” by Karen Britten – *1st Place Winner*

So begins the *2012 Tuscany Prize for Catholic Fiction—Selected Short Stories*. In the ten stories gathered here, Tuscany Press has created a compelling collection.

Eyes That Pour Forth + The Reasons Why + Moon Dance
True or False + Water + The Debt + Excess Baggage
Morning Star + Intensive Care + Near Miss

Rediscover the beauty of short stories—especially short stories that see the world with a Catholic perspective which embraces the temporal and the divine, the sinner and the saint, the ordinary and the extraordinary.



JOSEPH O'BRIEN, editor, is an award-winning journalist and a poet. He attended Thomas Aquinas College, Santa Paula, California, and graduated with a masters in English Literature from the University of Dallas, Irving, Texas. He lives with his wife and children on a homestead in the Driftless region of rural southwest Wisconsin. He is the staff writer for *The Catholic Times* of the Diocese of La Crosse, Wisconsin.



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