

One New Book for the Preacher

William V. Arnold

Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, Richmond, Virginia

THE CHRIST-HAUNTED LANDSCAPE: FAITH AND DOUBT IN SOUTHERN FICTION by Susan Ketchin. University Press of Mississippi, 1994. 408 pages.

Harry Beverly, one of my homiletics professors at Columbia Seminary, first inspired me to read *A Good Man is Hard to Find* by Flannery O'Connor in the mid-1960's. Little did I know how moved I would be. I probably used "The Misfit" far too often in sermon illustrations for awhile, because O'Connor had spoken directly and poignantly to questions that haunted me about my own Christian faith. My sister Katie, who loves books and knows my interests, recently gave me a new book that "grabs me" in a way similar to what Harry Beverly's urging brought about in me thirty years ago.

Now, I don't intend to argue that Southerners are the only folks that wrestle regularly with religious issues in general and the Christian faith in particular (even though many of us claim with paradoxical pride to be from "the buckle of the Bible belt," regardless of where in the South we were born). But there do seem to be plentiful numbers of "raised right" writers that open doors for the questions that keep oozing up from the regions of doubt and hope and anger and joy and evil and promises.

Susan Ketchin attributes to O'Connor the observation that "By and large, people in the South still conceive of humanity in theological terms. While the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted. The Southerner who isn't convinced of it is very much afraid that he (sic) may have been formed in the image and likeness of God" (p. xi). Ketchin's project, which led to this book, was to find if today's writers from the South are struggling with the same questions. "How," she asks, "has religion as it was taught and practiced here distorted, enhanced, shaped the artist's imagination and vision? Are there writers living and working in the South today who are struggling with issues of identity and meaning in their lives and in their art? Do the Bible's stories, symbols, and language still have influence?" (p. xv). My own question was whether there could be other writers that speak to me as powerfully as did O'Connor and Walker Percy and Willie Morris. This author/editor has put me on to several.

To investigate those questions above and more, Ms. Ketchin interviewed some of the contemporary talent on the southern literary scene. She did so at length, confining herself, with one exception, to writers who were born and raised in what historically has been called the South and who had been living in the South for twenty years or more. Thanks to her careful work, we, the readers, are treated to both the manuscripts of her interviews with each writer and a relatively brief example of each writer's work. Ketchin's choices are wonderful, ranging from names familiar to me (such as Will Campbell, Doris Betts, and Clyde Edgerton) to ones I wish I had discovered sooner (like Lee Smith, Sandra Hollin Flowers, and Randall Kenan).

Now, back to that original intent I had in deciding to read this book (my confession) — to find new illustrations for sermons, books, and lectures. This book engaged me, as I should have expected, more deeply than that. Once again, I have had to struggle with myself, and so will you, I expect, if you get this book. The combination

of background, short stories, and interviews are engaging and varied.

For example, have you wrestled with an angel lately? In the case in point, it's not quite like the story we remember of Jacob at the Jabbok. For Allen Gurganus in "It Had Wings," the wrestling match is movingly portrayed in the freak encounter of an older woman, a widow, who suddenly finds herself caring for a fallen angel for a few minutes. And, as the angel departs (in flight, of course), she says to herself, "I helped...I'm not just somebody in a house. I'm not just somebody alone in a house. I'm not just somebody else alone in a house" (pp. 374-375). For me, after reading this story, questions of meaning and worth transcended the conceptual and assumed flesh and blood.

How do all things worth together for — what? Well, how's this for a beginning foray into that question. "The year I was thirteen—1957—my father had a nervous breakdown, my brother had a wreck, and I started speaking in tongues" (p. 5). Lee Smith's "Tongues of Fire" carries us into a supposedly adolescent experience, but I found myself (at age 53!) there again, moving from laughter to reflection and back again over the strange juxtapositions of faith and human turmoil.

The stories by these authors are moving, but so are their words spoken directly to Ketchin in her interviews with them. Reynolds Price, who wonders whether he should be down at the community shelter or at his word processor, speaks of his moral vision: "If I have a moral purpose for writing, it is to elicit understanding of and mercy toward as much of creation as I can present, and you the reader, can manage" (p. 57).

Sandra Hollin Flowers, in her story "Hope of Zion," describes the determination of a young woman not to be taken in by the evangelical zeal at her pastor father's homecoming service. Yet she finds herself springing up "her fists clenched, arms waving stiffly in the air, head thrown back and mouth stretched open in a silent scream of horrified joy" (p. 183). And Flowers herself says in her interview, "I say in all candor that I would not have survived much longer had I not turned to Christ and found in Him the fulfillment of the psalm's (Ps. 34) promise. In that sense, then, my identity as a black woman has become inseparable from my identity as a spiritual person" (p. 196).

You get the picture. The book is filled with a rich variety of stories, reflections, and insights into the minds of these Southern writers who continue to live with and share with us the questions and riddles of being human and being filled with and/or afflicted by faith. In our day of struggling to understand spirituality, the book invites us into the journeys of these authors, who are wrestling with the same thing. To paraphrase the closing of the Gospel of John, there are also many other things that this author/editor gives us in *The Christ-Haunted Landscape*, but if I attempted to write them all down, I suppose this review would be far too long, and you would be cheated out of the opportunity to plumb these treasures yourself.