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Wiser Blood. The Wisest. A Memoir on First Reading Flannery O'Connor

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Abstract

In this memoir, Kevin Heath explains how his encounter with Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* helped him come to terms with his own faith and reject ersatz attempts to express it.

Keywords

O'Connor, Flannery O'Connor, Wise Blood, Wisdom, Paideia, Kevin Heath, Cedarville

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Wiser Blood. The Wisest.
A Memoir on First Reading
Flannery O'Connor.

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I.

It's 1983. To borrow the hymnist's words: I once was found, but now I'm lost.

I recommit my life to Christ early in the fall semester of my sophomore year at college. Soon thereafter I join a campus Christian organization, where, for the sake of forsaking something, I forsake the music I love for the Christian substitutes recommended all around: Leon Patillo. Petra and Petra, Petra again. Sandy Patty. The Imperials. The reconstituted Al Green. Dino, Carmen. *Try!* I'm urged, and I *try*, but the music goes down dry as diet food. Soulless. Bloodless. A false note on the tongue. A false ring in the ear.

But it isn't just the music. Time goes by that semester, and more and more I ring false. But I *try*. I join hands and pray aloud at cafeteria table and around flag pole. I pass out good news flyers on quadrangle and sidewalk. Duty bound, I smile. I sing. I knock at neighborhood doors on humid fall evenings, jumpy as a pistol in the close air of those dark front porches, steps approaching.

This is mostly how I remember the group and me then: We talk about Jesus as brightly as we talk about Tom Selleck, and should either handsome gentleman have appeared bodily among us—car

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horns honking, campus bells ringing in a confusion of chimes—we would have been found ready. Eager! Me, too, in a manner of speaking. The one there on the edge of the picture, *trying*—Bible in hand, teeth grinding.

II.

Mixed blood. My father and his family come from Michigan. My mother and hers from Fitzgerald, Georgia.

From the deep South, the deepest. Boiled peanuts. Bouquet of sulphur in the air. Rolled-up shirt sleeves. Chinaberry trees in the sandy gray soil around the service station. Fitzgerald, GA is rural country, two hours west of Savannah, two or so south of Milledgeville. I come from cracker stock.

“Why, sir, you only half Yankee,” my magnanimous step-grandfather boozily reminds me on my family’s yearly visits.

It is a revival of this blood that I will feel first when I discover *Wise Blood* in a Contemporary American Lit class the spring semester of my junior year. And what a difference a year will have made. By that spring I will have rarely been to church. By then I will have rarely opened my Bible. I will have rarely prayed. By then I will have shared, not the Romans Road, but a two-bedroom apartment with an international student from the Canary Islands, a philistine who will rarely be there, and when he is, will rarely be without his expressive American girlfriend, a young woman I will not know until later is a Christian.

She will say the same for me.

III.

It’s March, 1985. After my year of being on fire for the Lord, I’m burned out.

I part ways with the campus Christian org, and the time I once devoted to small group meetings, afterglow gatherings, prayer chains, BYOB (Bring Your Own Bible) parties, I now devote to school. Never a reader before, now I stare into books like someone staring after sparks.

Now I read eating my breakfast.

Now I read in bed.

Now I read lying on a camel back couch in the airy ballroom of the Student Union.

Now I read sitting against a net post before tennis practice.

Now I read alone at the laundromat, my clothes in the dryer, leaping like healed sinners.

And now I read on Saturday nights on the highest floor of our four-story library in the remotest corner I can find, where, as it turns out, God only knows where to find me. Hard books. Harder books. It is in this corner of the library that I read *Wise Blood*, the book that hits me hardest, the axe that releases a frozen sea in me, as Kafka believed the best books do.

“I reckon you think you been redeemed,”¹ Hazel Motes says to Mrs. Wally Bee Hitchcock in the novel’s opening scene.

Motes, who will ring true with me for the rest of my life. Motes, who is, as O’Connor puts it, a Christian in spite of himself, like myself. Whose wild and ragged Jesus moves from tree to tree in the back of the mind, motioning to turn around and come off into the dark, where you can’t be sure of the footing, where you might be walking on water and not know it and then suddenly know it and drown.

“I reckon you think you been redeemed,”² Motes repeats to Mrs. Hitchcock.

¹ (WB 8)

² (WB 8)

Of making many books there is no end, but this is the beginning, which is decades ago now but doesn't seem that long ago. Having had, back then, so little experience with my faith, I couldn't find the words for what I believed or even how I believed it. I only sensed that, right or wrong, what I felt in my bones was unlike what I saw around me. That, *try* as I might, *I* was unlike what I saw around me. It was my blood talking.

Wise Blood began to straighten those crooked paths. O'Connor made my aim truer. She still does. That to be a Christian is to bear a burden. That to be a Christian is sometimes to suffer as much from the church as for it. That in trying to avoid the corruption of morals, Christian art succeeds only in corrupting taste. That one writes because one is Christian, not though. That a Christian vision of the world must be unsentimental—even vicious, even cruelly funny—and redemptively so. Choose this day whom you will serve.

The book stays with me still, more by its “doggedness” than my attention,³ to turn another O'Connor phrase. But it stays. Forever, somehow. Gone but not gone. Not there but always there. Like a song. Like a memory. Like a bird in the blood, as my mother's mother used to say.

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³ (HB 100)