

An Anxious Awareness: A Review of How to Read (and write) Like a Catholic

- Ryan Hanning PhD

"There he was—who called himself Obadiah Elihue—leaning against the tree, crying like a baby." The final lines of Flannery O'Connor's *Parker's Back* leaves the reader with an all-too-common sense of angst and the shared human bewilderment by the distance between our transcendent end and our human brokenness. How this distance is overcome is the central mystery of the Christian faith. For Catholic authors it informs how they understand and capture both the depravity and beauty of this fallen yet redeemed world. The Catholic sensibility of literature is deep, rich, and complex. It is a road best traveled with a guide. Someone who can point out the nuances, creative discordance, theological aesthetic, and moral squint that runs through the various genres of Catholic literature. Joshua Hren proves a most capable guide, providing both a tour of the craft and an apprenticeship in the trade. He does not deconstruct as a critic, but rather illuminates the contours as a devotee, weaving together the threads to reveal the full tapestry and in so doing he makes an effective apologia for his own craft.

How to Read and Write like a Catholic is divided into five parts primarily made up of previously published essays that examine the interior dimensions of Catholic literature. Despite being built upon a collection of essays it reads well. Each part serves as a thoughtful examination of the essentials of Catholic literature replete with examples and the encouragement to read the novels and short stories for oneself. Hren's vast knowledge of the art is on full display both in the myriad of stories he references, as well as the prose he uses to build his case for the Catholic literary imagination.

In Part I, *Reading (and Writing) Like a Catholic* Hren examines the essential themes of conversion and redemption that fill the Catholic cosmos. He cites the luminaries of the craft providing a primer on the contours of Catholic literature. Augustine, Dante, Newman, Maritain, O'Connor all serve as interlocutors to an extended dialog on the purpose, limits and future of the Catholic literary tradition. Hren explains early on in the book, "It is my hope that Newman's *idea* of literature as the study of human nature, and largely of man in rebellion, can enter into a marriage with approaches to literature that overemphasize and misrepresent its relation to the beautiful; through his insistence upon the limits of literature, Newman helps us refine our understanding of literature's nature and its dangers, its possibilities and its graces...leading us to both purify the source of our stories (that is, ourselves) and stand soberly before the problem of compelling conversions that both build on nature and originate beyond it." (14)

He unflinchingly examines the tension between honoring tradition and creative originality. "As writers, then, Catholics ought not be anxious about their influences. When they forget their traditions, Catholics, like any other creatures, become intoxicated on the fumes of the present moment—trapped in the "relevance" fallacy and exposed to the experiments of historicist novelties." He continues, "If a contemporary Catholic writer has borrowed from Dante the device of comedic devilish character, Godspeed! If a contemporary Catholic writer has absorbed some of O'Connor's Christ-haunted characters who experience grace violently, this is not necessarily a sign of "unoriginality." To be traditional is, in part, to be unoriginal." (52). He later explains that this dynamic tension is not in contradiction to engaging the times "The Catholic writer can and must engage the broad literary culture of her times, learning from the

experiments, thematic turns, and [its] sheer acumen." (53). This theme of tradition and originality in relationship rather than in opposition is developed throughout the text.

Part II, *Reading Christ-Haunted Fictions* examines the stories and characters that serve as theological case studies for the mysteries of providence and soteriology. Most impressive is Hren's ability to carefully connect the art to the craftsman. He provides ample background to understand how the faith (or in some cases lack thereof) impacted the religious imagination which, to the careful eye, saturates their pages. Chekhov may have lost his faith "but his drift from Orthodoxy did not leave the Russian faithless." (157) His aesthetic and ability to display the foibles of a Christian faith lived without charity permeate his work. Hren gives equal treatment to Waugh alongside Hemingway, Kerouac, Fitzgerald, and even the atheist Gustave Flaubert. In each chapter he presents a narrative to support how the faith makes claims upon the artist who would seek to present human beings in their current condition. He is also careful not to canonize the authors, many of whom are not Catholic. Here, Hren demonstrates how a Catholic reading of a text can enhance its depth and give context to the perennial challenges of being human. One need not baptize Flaubert in order to find meaning in his stories.

Part III, *Reading Human Nature* presents the stories which demonstrate a propensity towards painting human nature accurately, without resorting to the trite caricatures that diminish the reality of the human struggle with nature and grace. In this part, Hren makes some of his strongest endorsements of the stories and authors that represent the canon of reading for the novice and master alike. Speaking of Balzac he explains "His *Lost Illusions* should be required reading for every peddler of the pen, and everyone stricken by the climber's desires. For, with homeopathic skill, Balzac cures the soul-sick through artful administrations of what ails us." (177). As he walks through the various novels he provides not so much a summary, but a piercing analysis of what ought not to be missed in the story. If one is going to read literature, they ought to read it well.

Part IV, *Reading Catholic Fictions* provides similar analysis with a bent towards fiction's ability to point out hard truths and inspire dialog around the thin borders between virtue and vice, faith and faithlessness. Here, the established canon of Catholic literature meets a new generation of authors who have taken up the mantle and suffered well the tension between tradition and originality. He describes in detail the seriousness but subtlety by which Christopher Beha's novels engage the cruel reality of sin. He envisions *What the Catholic Novel Might Become* in his review of Boyagoda's *Original Prin* and the perennial themes that are engaged with a new eye towards the blessings and challenges of modern globalism and its subsequent dis-location. Again, Hren provides an analysis that elucidates what ought not to be missed in the story, and how both its form and substance contribute to building up what may be considered the modern Catholic literary canon.

The final movement in Hren's opus can stand on its own, but best read in light of all that preceded it. *How to Write (Like a Catholic)* is a clarion call firstly to adhere to the craft of good literature, secondly to allow the Catholic vision of the world to organically permeate the mind and pen, and thirdly allow the Catholic literary imagination to achieve its end, which is to illuminate our need for salvation. "To transpose T. S. Eliot into a more colloquial key, we must finish where we started: the imagination, when it obtains the depths of Catholicity, seeks to save. If we translate this into fiction, the Christic imagination incarnates human nature as having its final end not in the characters' self-actualization but in salvation. Say we inhabit a mundane living

room scene, in a secular age— in the Midwest, no less. Say that in this miniscule room, a couple is quarreling over an exorbitant heating bill and the shoddy windows of their old house. Even *here*, however subtly, the Catholic imagination senses and suggests a vast and eternal stage that extends far beyond the seen scene: like the protagonist of Goethe's *Faust*, this couple tips the eternal scales, albeit by sometimes miniscule degrees." (341)

It is worth briefly mentioning four of the most notable features of the book. First is the literature he includes and also what he omits. His selections referred to throughout the text and in more detail in Parts II, III, IV reflect the exemplars of the craft and the themes that he seeks to elucidate. In other words, the canon of acclaimed Catholic literature is on display but is not the only means by which to communicate the point. Alongside O'Connor, Percy, Dante and Dostoevsky, is found Kerouac, Saunders, and the more recent inclusions from Beha and Boyagoda. Second, is the incredible list of 101 Books to Read Like a Catholic, one wonders when Hren will find time to write a second edition with some of the novels, short stories and poems not examined in detail in this text. Third, is Hren's vast knowledge of historical and contemporary debates regarding Catholic literature as a genre and its role in forming the public conscience. While these debates may be less helpful for the amateur, they provide an important context to demonstrate what is at stake if Catholic literature loses its way. Fourth is perhaps the most important and original. Throughout the text Hren puts his literary talent as an author on full display. He provides witness to his most salient points with careful and exacting prose. He honors the authors whom he admires by modeling the communicative power of words well-crafted and infused by the ever-present reality that God seeks to make us saints through the circumstances of our live and not in-spite of them. His treatment of Balzac and Boyagoda read more like poetry than critique.

Some knowledge of Catholic literature is presumed of the reader. For those well versed in Catholic letters, Hren's treatment will affirm their admiration. For those just beginning to plumb the depths, they will be introduced to the pantheon—truly not the right word—of Catholic authors both old and new. In this way, Hren gives a fresh and convincing voice for those seeking to practice, improve upon or explain the *gist* of Catholic literature, and simultaneously inspires new readers (and authors) to appreciate the mantel that is being received. This strength is also it's weakness. To the novitiate, the panoply of names and debates may distract, but if the reader pushes through, they will find these discussions important for later examinations of perennial themes that appear across Catholic literature, often in surprising ways. Overall, the book is full, perhaps bordering on being dense. Not dense in the way that it is burdensome, but in the way that demands to be savored and enjoyed slowly. More endearing than fatiguing. At over 400 pages, Hren's love for his craft clearly may exceed the admiration of the reader, but its winsome tone and willingness to patiently draw out the substance of the stories will likely convert most readers.

If Dana Gioia's *The Catholic Writer Today* was a tactical salvo and wake-up call to Catholic artists, Joshua Hren's *How to Read (and Write) Like a Catholic* is a mature catechism for how to read and write like a Catholic.