The Woman Who Was Mistaken for Flannery O’Connor

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by Cassandra Nelson

It can be easy to think these days that everything has already been discovered, and not only that, digitized too — that all the books have been scanned and the rivers charted, leaving not a square inch of Terra Incognita on Google Earth. But anyone who has done any kind of archival research knows otherwise. Just when we think we know it all, things turn up.

This January, for instance, the second of only two known recordings of Flannery O’Connor’s voice resurfaced at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Mary Ann Wilson, a professor in the English department, was cleaning out her office when she noticed an old audio reel labeled “Flannery O’Connor” and decided to investigate. It turned out to be a recording of a talk on “The Catholic Writer in the Protestant South” that O’Connor delivered at the university in 1962. For a half century it languished, unknown and forgotten, in what must have been an awfully large office for an English professor, or perhaps just an above averagely cluttered one. Only to be found again, long after anyone even remembered that it was a thing to look for, a wonderfully unexpected chance to hear more of O’Connor’s cadence and heavy Georgia drawl. In a week’s time, the university will host a symposium to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of her visit, partly inspired by Professor Wilson’s find.

My own recent discovery was considerably more modest, and with an unusual amount of lag-time between the archival work and the actual discovery. This summer, while reading Brad Gooch’s biography Flannery, I came across two suspicious photographs (one pictured on the right), ostensibly of O’Connor at Yaddo in 1948. Yes, it was a woman, at Yaddo, in the late 1940s, wearing glasses, but the face, the pose, the shape of the cheekbones when smiling, and the air of apparent ease before the camera — none of these things matched other photographs of O’Connor. The two images looked off to me from the second I saw them, although it took about a month for the facial recognition software in my brain to figure out whom they depicted instead. And when it did, I was suspicious of that too. What were the odds that the woefully underappreciated subject of my MA thesis — a twentieth-century American writer named Betty Wahl, now chiefly remembered as the wife of J. F. Powers, when she is remembered at all — had been mistaken for the canonical subject of my first dissertation chapter? Slim to none, and I wondered whether I weren't willing the resemblance into existence.

Consulting my own rather humble archives, a file-box in the basement containing scans of manuscripts and photographs belonging to the Powers family, it seemed to me that Betty Wahl Powers, as she went by in her personal life, and not-O’Connor, were wearing the same pair of glasses. Now very unsure of whether I had stumbled across a wonderful coincidence, or was going insane, I wrote to Wahl’s daughter, Katherine Powers, for clarification. “Well, you may be insane,” she replied, “but this is not evidence of it. That is, without any question, BWP. I have the same photo here and one of JFP taken in the same room.”

The coincidences continued to pile up: the book had been a gift from a student of mine in a course that didn’t cover even a single O’Connor story, but somehow in office hours we always got to talking about her work. Katherine found her copy of the photograph straightaway only because she was in the middle of selecting images to accompany her edition of her father’s letters, forthcoming from Farrar, Straus and Giroux. I am one of only a handful of non-relatives who could have picked Betty Wahl out of a lineup. Somehow the stars aligned, and one more puzzle piece of the past wasn't rediscovered exactly, just put
back into its proper place.
Aside from one major difference in their personal lives — Wahl had a husband and five children, O'Connor was never married — the two writers actually have a fair amount in common. They were born a little over a year apart, O'Connor in Savannah, Ga., and Wahl in St. Cloud, Minn. Both wrote fiction informed by a strong Roman Catholic faith and a powerful sense of place, and both had a deep mistrust of progress as it was conceived of in the years following World War II, believing that all the plastic and fluorescent lights in the world couldn't get rid of Original Sin. Neither was the first person you would expect to find in a conga line at Yaddo, but there Wahl is, and there perhaps O'Connor would have been, had their visits overlapped.

Their confusion is in many ways a happy fault, for me certainly, and perhaps for others who are curious to learn more about another talented Catholic woman writing fiction at the middle of the last century. A good place to start might be with Wahl's first published story “Martinmas,” which can be found online in *The New Yorker* archives. The day after the O'Connor symposium, as it turns out, just so happens to be the feast day of St. Martin of Tours. One might almost be more surprised, all things considered, if it were not.

*Photos courtesy of Katherine Powers and the Powers Family Estate.*

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