

EVANGELIZING FLANNERY

Bret Lott. *Letters & Life: On Being a Writer, on Being a Christian*. Crossway, 2013.

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Bret Lott's literary résumé reads like that of an insider: former editor of *The Southern Review* and current non-fiction editor of *Crazyhorse*, graduate of the U-Mass Amherst MFA program and faculty member at the College of Charleston, and author of fourteen books of fiction and non-fiction, most notably the novel *Jewel*, an Oprah's Book Club selection in 1999. But add evangelical Christian to that list, and Lott's literary identity becomes more complicated. Larry Woiwode broke that literary ground earlier, but evangelical fiction writers are still met with the skepticism that their narratives will always lead toward God. In contrast, writers of contemporary Catholic fiction—save for Ron Hansen, Alice McDermott, and select others—operate from the apparent objectivity of the lapsed perspective. When Don DeLillo reminisces about the theater of childhood Mass, his nostalgia is shorthand for outgrowing the faith. Often to be a Catholic writer means to be a culturally Catholic writer, one who appreciates the ritual of Mass for its performance, and whose fiction is heavy with doubt. Evangelicals, though, are expected to write past their beliefs.

In several ways, Lott does just that in *Letters & Life*, half craft book, half memoir. The book's structure is risky: some readers might assess the quality of the creative half through the opening remarks on craft. Lott begins the book with no less a proclamation of belief than the Nicene Creed. He is an adult Sunday school teacher at his Southern Baptist church, and believes in a "supernatural God." Lott's evidence for that oft-repeated phrase includes the miraculous appearance of exactly enough gum for 170 Bible camp children. That anecdote sours Michael Robbins, who writes at the *Chicago Tribune* that such narratives "follow the usual fundamentalist self-actualization script." Robbins pivots from Lott's proclamations to a comparative review of *Rejoicing: Or the Torments of Religious Speech*, scholarship from Bruno Latour. The juxtaposition is unfair, yet the fault does not belong to Robbins. The comparison reveals a critical tendency to handle evangelical literature as if it were burning. Better to set it aside, and defer to scholarly discussions of religion, where God is symbol, not substance.

This is not to say that Lott's ability to turn a fictional phrase affords him a free pass in the world of spiritual memoir. But his devotion does

not result in devotional fiction. Lott's literary saint is Flannery O'Connor; his devotional mode is rather Catholic. While his personal stories of faith might only stir the evangelical heart, his usage of O'Connor provides fodder for the working writer. He quotes her dictum, which becomes a personal prayer: "Don't let anyone or anything cut into your time with words." Lott stresses the *working*: he was an RC Cola salesman before taking a writing course at a community college. Other gems of experience here: Lott's pedagogically shaky, but emotionally powerful course with James Baldwin at U-Mass Amherst, and his literary fandom for Raymond Carver. Carver was his "best teacher," but not in a classroom. It sounds like a testament: "reading *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* changed my life."

Where *Letters & Life* takes a curious turn, though, is the mini-memoir that follows his craft reflections. Lott has said elsewhere that he is uninterested in "utilitarian" Christian fiction; that he much prefers the Flannery-stuff of mystery. Yet what of non-fiction? His long-titled memoir, "At Some Point in the Future, What Has Not Happened Will Be in the Past," dramatizes the death of his father. Lott begins the memoir sounding the skeptical horn: "Unless we create fiction that does more than simply entertain the troops—unless we make room within the Christian writing industrial complex for writers to create worthy work—art—that in its craftsmanship and vision challenges the heart and soul and mind of our readers—then we will be nothing more than happy clowns juggling for one another." It's a stinging indictment that echoes TS Eliot's 1932 lament that "The last thing I would wish for would be the existence of two literatures, one for Christian consumption and the other for the pagan world."

That was shared with me by Jamie Quatro, the author of *I Want to Show You More*, as religiously and theologically saturated collection of fiction as one could ever hope to find from a mainstream press—Grove Atlantic—in 2013. O'Connor's need for "distortion" reverberates through Quatro's fiction, although she is not Catholic. Lott, interestingly enough, channels the ideas of O'Connor in *Letters & Life*, but doesn't apply them in the contained memoir. It is difficult to critically examine grief, and while Lott's delivery is solid, sentence to sentence, a reader does not connect with his pain as one would with Andre Dubus's distant, stern father, he of "Digging" and later, "Sacraments." The comparison, again, might be unfair, as Dubus packs much emotion into a small amount of pages, but Lott's literary goal in the second half of this book is not to make the reader cry. Rather, his refrain is initially pitched as a question: "Why do I have to work with words?" Lott wonders why he must be the one to elegize his father. In the midst of the "maudlin, sappy, cloyingly sentimental" real events of grief, he throws up his

hands: “There is no way to write this.” Robbins and some readers will wish otherwise. They will tell Lott that it is his job to find the words. Yet Lott might be playing tricks here: sometimes the writing act is nothing more than a “gesture,” the admission that words are imperfect. Would Flannery O’Connor have been disappointed? Maybe. Yet Lott’s method might be one of many possible answers to Paul Elie’s 2012 *New York Times* essay, “Has Fiction Lost Its Faith?” Elie laments that the newer crop of Christian writers of fiction are “thin on the ground.” Even practicing Catholic Alice McDermott does not escape criticism: “I have been to church with [her] characters, have stood at font and graveside with them. But when I close the books their beliefs remain a mystery. Not in the theological sense—a line going off the grid of cause and effect, a portal to the puzzle of existence. I just don’t know what they believe or how they came to believe it.”

Elie, a Catholic, sounds like he is writing to his Vatican II brethren. Catholic writers love to sketch suffering: Graham Greene’s whiskey priest in *The Power and the Glory* sins his way across the Mexican countryside, before dying a martyr. The Catholic novelist often finds no fault in tearing open the wrapping around the gift of faith. Better to see the tape and the cuts. But in the evangelical mode, suffering is mainly part of the narrative to preface the moment of being saved. Which means *Letters & Life* will work very well for that audience. And his helping of O’Connor will speak to those who find faith to be a manuscript, not the final draft.