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READING CULTURE  
*through*  
CATHOLIC EYES

*Fifty Writers, Thinkers,  
and Firebrands Who Challenge  
and Change Us*

JAMES T. KEANE

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## INTRODUCTION

I grew up in a house filled with people and full of books. The people were my parents and their eight children, as well as the countless friends, relatives, neighbors, classmates, and more who found an open door to our home. The books in our home were from everywhere.

Some were our parents' textbooks from the 1950s and 1960s, including a vast number of works of fiction; some were from their children's high school and college classes; some were tomes both new and used bought at bookstores; some were part of my father's always-growing collection of books by and about Thomas More and the Renaissance; and some, of course, were page-turners by Tom Clancy and Robert Ludlum and Michael Crichton and Sue Grafton or books about dinosaurs. (To the deep-thinker-reader, don't knock it till you've tried it; a Tom Clancy novel makes an excellent *amuse-bouche*.)

Despite my father's occupation as a television comedy writer, my parents were not big fans of television—to this day, I sometimes notice visitors to my mother's home looking around the living room, disconcerted: *where the hell is the TV?* And of course there was no such thing as social media or the internet in those days. We were all voracious readers in my family, something I never really noticed myself until I was home from college one summer and a buddy said, "WTF, Keane, I stopped by your parents' house and there were five people in the living room reading in silence."

One night when I was a preteen, I reached over to a bookshelf in our living room and pulled out a slim paperback novel: *Mr. Blue*. Who knows why I grabbed it; perhaps the slight little thing looked out of place among the huskier tomes surrounding it and slowly crushing it to pulp. I opened it and took a look. From across the room, my father perked up. “*Mr. Blue!* What a book! Had a huge impact on me.” Since truthfully the only book that had occasioned a similar feeling in me up to that point had been Clancy’s *Red Storm Rising*, I figured I would give Myles Connolly’s 1928 classic a read.

Truth be told, I didn’t really understand *Mr. Blue*. I don’t think I had much of a sense of what it was about until after I read *The Great Gatsby*, which had been published three years before *Mr. Blue* and was still a staple of high school curricula in the early 1990s. But it got me started on a quixotic path that soon included Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Walter Miller Jr.’s *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, and J. F. Powers’s *Look How the Fish Live* (all of which were also to be found on a shelf somewhere in that house in Burbank). Did I read them more than I read *Sabre Jet Ace* or *Jurassic Park*? Certainly not, but it was a start.

“There is always one moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in,” Graham Greene wrote in *The Power and the Glory*, a line that I love (and one I think John Irving has used in half a dozen novels). While I can’t identify one single moment when that happened, a series of reading moments in that Burbank living room grew into my own journey as a writer.

Years later, I took a class in college somewhat misleadingly titled “Philosophy and Fiction,” because in all fairness it was a course on Catholic novels. We read Graham Greene,



Muriel Spark, Walker Percy, Flannery O'Connor, Shusaku Endo, Evelyn Waugh, J. F. Powers, and more. (Yes, it was mostly white male authors.) That class gave me more insight into the worlds of pedagogy and reading for enjoyment—and into the notion that it is possible to communicate some of the great truths (and most of the great struggles) of human existence through the imagining of a scene. Years later when I was introduced more fully to Ignatian spirituality, I found a similar idea sketched out in St. Ignatius's notion of "contemplation of place," imagining oneself inside a Gospel story.

After that class ended, I read everything J. F. Powers wrote, including his second novel, *Wheat That Springeth Green*. I consumed as much Graham Greene as I could before the sheer angst of so many of his characters wore me out. I read more Flannery O'Connor, even those stories I didn't (and don't) understand. And they led me to authors who would perhaps be appalled to be included in a catalog of Catholic writers, like John Irving. Is *The World according to Garp* a great Catholic novel? Assuredly not. But it is a great, great novel.

Years later, while working at *America* as an associate editor and a Jesuit seminarian, I began to meet some of the writers who occupied places of great honor in my brain: fiction writers like Ron Hansen, Mary Gordon, Alice McDermott, Tobias Wolff, David Plante; spiritual writers like James Martin, S.J., Robert Ellsberg, Daniel Berrigan, S.J., and Anne Lamott; theologians like Roger Haight, Beth Johnson, James Alison, Avery Dulles, and many more.

Around that time, Father Mark Massa, a Jesuit priest at Fordham University, offered me the chance to teach a course on "American Catholic Novels" in the Curran Center for American Catholic Studies. Father Massa was something of

a wizard when it came to getting students into desks, and so I soon found myself teaching a course that was cross-listed for credit with Fordham majors like Theology, English, American Studies, and History. After a disastrous first class in which my lecture turned out to be thirteen minutes long, I settled into the course and found I loved it—loved the students, loved the material, loved the way a writer even from prior centuries could still touch the postmodern heart and soul. After a couple of semesters, Father Massa asked me to change the topic to “Catholic Novels Worldwide” so we could make it qualify for the students’ Globalism course requirement, which widened my reading directions and opened my interests even more.

When in graduate school for theology in Berkeley a few years later, I taught similar courses through the St. Ignatius Institute at the University of San Francisco. The director of the institute, Father Sean Michaelson, S.J., made a deal with me: if I taught a Capstone course on “Spiritual Memoir” in the spring, in the fall I could teach the class I had been campaigning for since day one: “The Poetics of Bob Dylan.” The Dylan class was something of a disaster (I know, shocking), but the course on spiritual memoirs expanded my literary interests significantly. The students had no time for bullshit or false piety—both of which, ahem, sometimes find their way into spiritual memoirs, and novels too. The students in the class possessed lively imaginations and a lot of insight.

After I left the Jesuits in 2012, I spent five years working at Orbis Books as an acquisitions editor and editing the work of some of the world’s foremost Catholic theologians (and many fiery social activists and cultural critics as well). If there is a more polite way to describe it, I will take it, but I was a pig

in [a wallow]. I returned to *America* in 2017 as the literary editor, and soon began writing a weekly email newsletter on the magazine's book reviews and archival material, a role that eventually morphed into a weekly column on the same.

Like most writers and layabouts, I do better with a deadline. It turns out "every Tuesday afternoon" is a rather powerful goad to one's creativity and production. So, too, is Covid time, when we were all reading more (or clicking more, whatever), and one day I looked up and I had something like 150 columns under my belt. And after years of writing the column and getting reader feedback, I discovered that I wasn't alone in valuing literature for the way it informed my lived experience, my understanding of my Catholic identity, or simply my spiritual sensibilities.

This book was born from that project. I hope it works as an invitation to similar journeys for the reader. I expanded some of the columns, redacted others, and simply abandoned a lot of them because no one but me wants to read about C. J. McNaspy's corn cob pipe and his plans for a chapel on the moon. I took a lot of joy from writing this book—with some failed work along the way—and I am grateful for the ongoing learning that has kept me blessed and busy for so many years.

I am grateful to *America* for permission to use my columns in this book and thankful for the many editors who helped with their original publication in the magazine—most especially several generations of literary assistants who put up with my idiosyncrasies while also deleting my sidelong attacks on Mary Oliver and the San Francisco Giants. Angelo Canta, Colleen Dulle, Emma Winters, Sarah Vincent, Jill Rice, and Christine Lenahan all deserve extensive time off in purgatory for their patience and labor.

So, too, am I grateful for everyone at Orbis Books, especially Lil Copan, Robert Ellsberg, Bernadette Price, and Maria Angelini—who should also be forgiven for shouting at me about deadlines and misspellings. I consider it a great honor to be published with Orbis, not least because it keeps me in the company of so many writers and theologians I admire.

*James T. Keane*