

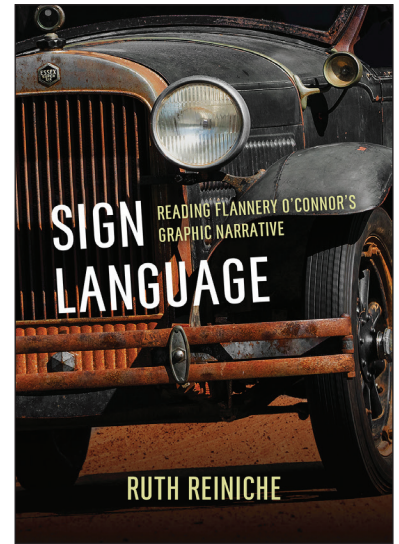
Sign Language Reading Flannery O'Connor's Graphic Narrative by Ruth Reiniche

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Offering a new perspective
from which to evaluate
O'Connor's novelistic text

Macon, Georgia—Flannery O'Connor is unique in that she is not only familiar with seventeenth-century emblematic representations of scriptural truth, but she is also knowledgeable of the conventions of twentieth-century art forms. Her characters are illuminated by textual images formulated from the juxtaposition of scripture, seventeenth- and twentieth-century archetypes, and street detritus that inhabits pictorial sequences exceeding the boundaries of time and diachronically upending O'Connor's narrative world.

O'Connor's undergraduate single panel cartoons are an excellent starting point when tracing the chronological development of her stylized graphic narrative. The sardonic captions are illustrated by characters who are compositions of deeply gouged lines and dots. In her first novel, *Wise Blood*, some of the cartoonish grotesques remain, but the conventions of painting prevail in the novel. Her characters are momentarily frozen in still life tableaux vivants or in montages, resulting in jarring juxtapositions.

In *The Violent Bear It Away*, O'Connor recreates "snapshot" moments, not unlike those inexpertly captured by the twentieth-century amateur photographer with a Brownie box camera. Every photograph taken at this time was accompanied by its negative. Reading the inverted negative and positive space, in the novel, reveals a palimpsestic Divine world coexisting alongside the world as we know it. The idea of tattooing graphic text on the human body first occurs in the manuscript of *Why Do the Heathen Rage?* and then in O'Connor's last story, "Parker's Back."

Flannery O'Connor's graphic narrative, a sign language of dots and lines, discarded objects, and the mutilation of human bodies, provides a stark illuminated manuscript for her readers.

"As I read Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* for the first time, I could not shake the feeling that I was virtually walking through an art gallery and viewing a carefully constructed series of painted canvases," says Reiniche. "The forward flow of the narrative seemed to halt and, in my mind, a complete picture formed. Intrigued, I began first to isolate, and then to determine what was actually happening textually during these pictorial pauses which I was convinced must occur more than once in each of her novels. It was O'Connor's last and unfinished novel that determined how I would conduct this research."

Ruth Reiniche has proudly spent her life teaching the Language Arts in public secondary education. She holds degrees from The University of Michigan (BA), Grand Valley State University (MA), and the University of Arizona (PhD). Reiniche is currently a lecturer for the English department at University of Arizona.

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