

By Bryan Betts '14



THE ROAD TO ANDALUSIA



It's easy to miss. Across from a Best Value Inn on the outskirts of Milledgeville, Georgia, a pair of white signs set back from a busy four-lane highway mark our destination. Hidden from the road by trees, Andalusia, Flannery O'Connor's farm, exists apart from the modern world, preserved more or less as it was when she lived there. We bump along the dirt and gravel road to the 1950s and '60s, to the place that inspired many of the famed Southern writer's stories.

After three and a half hours on the road and a few months in the classroom, seven classmates

and I have finally made it to Andalusia on a day trip with our First Year Writing Seminar (FYW in Furman parlance). Throughout the semester, we have honed our writing skills against the whetstone of O'Connor's fiction, reading and discussing her stories in a small, comfortable setting. Today, though, we enjoy a break from academics and breathe in the same sweet honeysuckle atmosphere as O'Connor once did.

Our guide, English professor Willard Pate, awaits as we pull up to the house. A Southern literature guru, Dr. Pate uses her hands to explain her love for O'Connor.

"Faulkner's about here," she says, her right hand at her eyes. She holds her left hand an inch below. "And O'Connor's right here." It's high praise for a writer whose main body of work consists of only two novels and two collections of short stories.

"A Good Man is Hard to Find" and "Good Country People," two of O'Connor's most well-known and frequently anthologized works, exemplify the style for which O'Connor is famous. Dark, grotesque, violent, humorous, religious, absurd—the stories resist

easy categorization, but what emerges from the descriptive rubble stands among the best fiction of the 20th century.

Brick steps lead up to a large, screened porch and a row of white rocking chairs covered with pollen. O'Connor, who lived at Andalusia for 13 years, would sit on the porch and take in the view. What she saw undoubtedly made its way into her fiction. The porch looks out over a grassy field to the dirt road and a row of trees, and through a clearing in the distance, we can see a small pond, green in the morning light, likely the same "green speckled lake" Hulga sees in "Good Country People."

A faded picture of Jesus hanging above the stairway welcomes us as we enter the house. The image reminds me of a passage in *Wise Blood*, O'Connor's first novel, where she describes Jesus as "a wild ragged figure" moving "from tree to tree in the back of [the] mind." O'Connor was a devout Roman Catholic, an oddity in the Protestant South, but was not one to sugarcoat her faith. Her characters—nihilistic preachers, bigoted housewives, conceited "interlechs"—are as sinful as they are absurd, each suffering through their own spiritual journeys.

"Grace changes us," O'Connor wrote, "and the change is painful."

The house's curator directs our attention to a room on the left, O'Connor's bedroom. A black typewriter sits on her desk. Silver crutches lean against a dresser. Seeing the crutches, I realize how physically

weak and frail the writer was. O'Connor came to Andalusia with her mother after being diagnosed with lupus, a disease that gnawed at her health and eventually killed her. Each morning, the curator explains, O'Connor woke up and wrote for three hours, as long as her lupus would allow. To avoid distractions, she kept her drapes closed and faced her desk away from the window. Time was precious, and she couldn't afford to waste it.

After touring the house, we head outside and wander the estate. Around back, a sign on a pump house describes the well inside, stating that a similar one shows up in O'Connor's second

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novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*. While we didn't read that book, the sign reminds me that O'Connor couldn't help but write her home into her stories.

Taking turns, we look down into the darkness of the well, unimpressed. Then someone flips a light switch, revealing the hole that descends deep into the earth. We crowd into the small space and marvel at the well like small children examining a strange bug on the playground.

As we walk toward the back of the property we find buildings that might have been plucked from O'Connor's stories. The barn from "Good Country People." The milk processing shed from "The Enduring Chill." The stories start to merge with the place, making it harder to distinguish fact from fiction. Leaning against the barn, a wooden ladder leads up to the hayloft where the Bible salesman tricked Hulga into giving up her prosthetic leg. In a sense, Hulga

is still up there, stranded by both the Bible salesman and O'Connor's unresolved ending.

At the end of our tour we drive down the road to Memory Hill Cemetery, where O'Connor is buried. We gather around the grave and talk and laugh; it feels like an oddly appropriate way to finish our journey. Here, as in O'Connor's fiction, death and life, grotesque and beautiful, comic and spiritual, all dwell together. For a moment, I feel as though I've entered one of her stories, having left reality to become a character in a world that, despite being fictional, bears a remarkable resemblance to our own. 

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Through the First Year Seminar (FYS) and First Year Writing Seminar (FYW) programs, freshmen can explore subjects outside of general education and major requirements. Seminars are kept small to encourage discussion and collaborative learning over lectures and exams, and learning extends beyond the classroom through class dinners and field trips to places both near and far.

Here are some of this year's seminar offerings:

Poetry from the Inside

Read, write, and discuss poems to answer the question, "What makes poetry a distinctive literary genre worthy of our attention?"

To Walk the Land

Hike with your class and learn to appreciate the environment of Upstate South Carolina.

Eating as a Sustainable Act

Learn about the food you eat, how that food is produced, and the economic, social, and environmental impacts of eating.

Chocolate: Science, Culture, and History

Prepare and consume chocolate while studying the symbolism and history of chocolate production.

House and Philosophy

Examine the early seasons of the television series *House, MD* using the writings of Socrates, Aristotle, Nietzsche, and Sartre.

Secret Codes: Wars, Computing, and E-Commerce

Study the history and practice of cryptography to understand how, during World War II, it was a major incentive for the development of the first computers.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT FIRST YEAR SEMINARS, VISIT FURMAN.EDU/FYS.