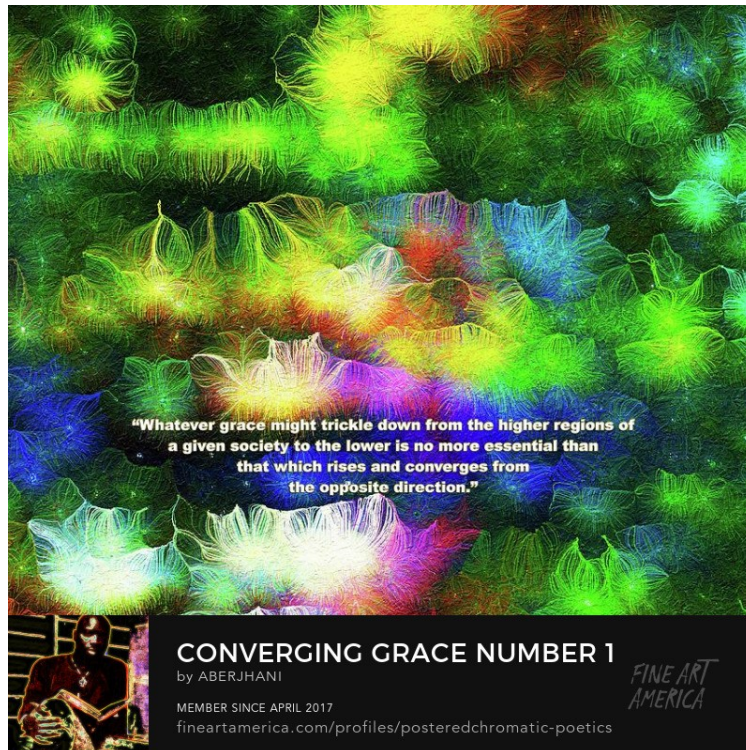


SENSIBILITIES OF AN UNCANNY NATURE
From Greeting Flannery O'Connor at the Back Door of My Mind:
Adventures & Misadventures in Literary Savannah



From the book: "Whatever grace might trickle down from the higher regions of a given society to the lower is no more essential than that which rises and converges from the opposite direction."
(artwork available at [Fine Art America.com](https://www.fineartamerica.com))

How does a person greet an iconic author at the back door of his or her mind? Is something like that even possible? It is when the voice of such an author no longer restricts itself to printed pages. Instead, it takes up residence in a given life in the form of: searches for answers to troubling questions, longings for a more engaged connection, or the sudden manifestation of an unexpected dialogue. The feat is not so much accomplished as it is experienced by focusing mindful attention on how certain individuals' lives have informed, enriched, or otherwise impacted the conditions of one's existence.

Given our shared links to Savannah, Georgia, the written voices of Flannery O'Connor, James Alan McPherson, and John Berendt were all bound to occupy some amount of space and energy in my literary adventures and misadventures. A common geography, however, serves as only one anchor for the three narratives which make up this volume: *Days of Midnight Madness*, *On Exile*, *Genius*, and *James Alan McPherson*, and the title memoir, *Greeting Flannery O'Connor at the Back Door of My Mind*. Where the subject writers are concerned, I likely would have smiled at the geographical factor and then quietly moved on if not for threads of circumstances and events which wove our separate stories into a colorful collage of collective significance.

While as an adult I was studying changes in Savannah through a lens of hypersensitivity forged when growing up in the city during the 1960s and 1970s, John Berendt in the late 1980s was writing a monster bestseller penned from a very worldly perspective unlike anything I would have gleaned from my childhood. In fact, few Savannah natives would have. Many, later, raised loud rebel protests over his depiction of the city's composite character even as others did everything they could to take advantage of what I call the madness that came at midnight. Berendt and I, nevertheless, over a period of several years, found ourselves occasionally working together at bookstores where I was a manager and he a star attraction. Observing and surviving the various manipulations which went on behind the scenes to make his tome the modern classic it has become produced situations I never expected to witness (nor write about) in Savannah. Yet often at their

dynamic core were comic absurdities and painful heartbreaks not completely unlike scenarios involving McPherson and O'Connor.

The parallels between my story and James Alan McPherson's for a time led me to entertain hopes of one day earning something similar to the kind of confirmation and initiation he had received from *Invisible Man* author Ralph Ellison. Garnering such a win, at the very least, would have required somehow managing to get as close to McPherson as he did to Ellison when interviewing him in 1969 for an essay published the next year in *Atlantic Monthly* magazine.¹ What, exactly, did I want from him? More than an acknowledgment of my work or worth, it seemed to involve defining a mission (or maybe even a destiny) similar to the one assigned the writers, artists, educators, poets, musicians, and leaders of the bygone Harlem Renaissance and Black Arts Movement eras. But it would be one centered in our hometown—even though I often envisioned myself living and working elsewhere (something I in fact did). The question too long avoided in my imaginings of a cultural-arts-scene overhaul led by McPherson was the price, complete with hidden costs and stolen tickets, his heart and soul would have to negotiate, and likely bear, in order to make such a remarkable event possible.

And then there was O'Connor. Efforts to discover a way I might register a sense of shared freedom and humanity with the virtually canonized globally-recognized writer were much like hammering repeatedly with bare bloody fists at an entrance blocked by a giant boulder. What would it take to end the hammering and bleeding? I would travel thousands of miles and come to face to face with her commanding legacy before finally considering certain possibilities. It became less a matter of solving a puzzle than one of determining exactly where she preferred to place pieces of one with faces which looked like mine. That a strange kind of conversation--dreamed? imagined? intuited?--would one day begin to offer needed answers and form the genesis of this book was not something I could have anticipated happening. But it did.

For more than one demographic of America's diverse populations, black, white, brown, red, yellow, and combinations thereof--male or female and different-flavored sexual identities--back doors were once synonymous with emblems of racial, economic, and political oppression in their most cutting conspicuous forms. They stood alongside crosses burning with flames of hatred as opposed to crosses gleaming with messages of love or redemption, with "Whites Only" and "Coloreds" signs attached to public restrooms and water fountains, seats at the backs of buses and trains or up in balconies of theaters, segregated beaches, pamphlets on eugenics, and "strange fruit" (as Billie Holiday sang) hanging from southern trees.

Evoking this historical twentieth century function in the first half of the twenty-first century would seem ridiculously archaic if not for striking counterparts in the form of hate crimes, mass incarceration, black bodies repeatedly falling to gun violence, and

economic gentrification so often directed against people of color. Moreover, all of this has been repeatedly, casually, streamed on large and small screens around the world. Many current-day legal and illegal immigrants from Latin America, the Middle East, Africa, and Eastern Europe know something about the back-door experience because they, too, have lived it. Time has not removed the necessity of documenting how too many of us still dehumanize and eradicate our fellow human beings seeking shelter from the world's increasingly destructive "natural" and "man-made" storms.

Rear entrances have, however, served more inspired purposes as well. Some have provided meeting places for secret lovers. Others have been transformed into Eden-like refuges carpeted and ceilinged with vines blossoming fragrant roses, morning glories, wisteria, or honey suckle. Nothing wrong with thinking of love as emblems of hope or love. On certain days of the month, you can find in our present time (at least in Georgia) many people who are battling poverty lined up at the far ends of churches to receive brown bags filled with food which otherwise would end up in dumpsters.

There is also in this era of technological wonders the notion of digital back doors which allow hackers to sneak in and out of computer systems belonging to people other than themselves. Whether that is a good or bad thing tends to depend on the hacker, his or her affiliates, and the intentions in question. Coming to personal and professional terms with the impacts of O'Connor's, McPherson's, and Berendt's blazing passages has felt at times like someone slipped invisibly into my life and effectively hacked it. The beliefs, assumptions, and confirmed certainties of a comfort zone forming fragments of an established identity—that of mine and many others'—were compromised and eventually reconfigured.

More than anything else, the back door as it is approached in the pages which follow represent points in time, places in space, and regions of the spirit where sensibilities of an uncanny nature either collide or converge. Stepping through it led to the kind of adventures and misadventures for which we are rarely prepared, yet somehow often end up welcoming. The results are the kind which continue to increase literature's prized value as it pertains to specific communities and the world at large, providing solace and shelter during the best of times and the worst.

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