

What is Catholic Fiction?

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What is Catholic fiction? What makes a story a Catholic story as opposed to a story with a moral theme? Catholic fiction is defined by the Catholic imagination and a Catholic perspective.

We begin with the fundamentals of good fiction. First, good fiction must be well-written. All writers or would-be published authors must master grammar and syntax, punctuation, diction, sentence variety, paragraph structure, use of breaks, chaptering, and more.

Second, good fiction must tell a good story. A good story follows the structure, form, and art of fiction. There are basic structure and form for a novel, novella, and short story. John Gardner's *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers* defines good fiction and provides a wealth of information on the craft of solid writing.

Also, a good story should have meaning. Gardner says, fiction should be moral—not in the sense of religious or cultural morality. Rather, fiction—and Catholic fiction—should aspire to discover those human values that are universally sustaining. “Great art celebrates life’s potential, offering a vision unmistakably and unsentimentally rooted in love.” [i]

Third, good fiction must “capture the imagination of the reader”. The difference between a good story and a great and publishable story is “Does the story capture the imagination of the reader?” We ask if the author has engaged the reader. Has the author invited the reader into a fictional dream? Does the author maintain that fictional dream throughout the story? Does the story remain with the reader even after the short story, novella, or novel itself has been finished? Capturing the imagination of the reader is the publishable difference.

So, what is Catholic fiction?

Catholic fiction takes the three fundamentals of good fiction—that is, it is well-written, it tells a good story, it captures the imagination of the reader and, in addition, reflects the Catholic imagination and perspective, a Catholic theme, and a protagonist who grows to have a deeper understanding of a moral truth and God.

Flannery O’Connor, the great southern Catholic writer, in her essay on Catholic novelists and the Catholic perspective, writes “. . . the Catholic novel is not necessarily about a Christianized or Catholicized world, but simply that it is one in which the truth as Christians know it has been used as a light to see the world by.” She continues “The novelist is required to create the illusion of a whole world with believable people in it, and the chief difference between a novelist who is an orthodox Christian and the novelist who is merely a naturalist is that the Christian novelist lives in a larger universe. He believes that the natural world contains the supernatural. And this doesn’t mean that his obligation to portray the natural is less; it means it is greater.”[ii]

The essence of Catholic fiction is the use of the Catholic imagination to reflect the presence of God in a story. An imagination that is rich with the symbols of Catholicism (the Eucharist, sacraments, saints, the Virgin Mary, the Mass, the cross, statues, scripture, etc.) that may be brought into a story, concretely or analogically, to remind us of His presence and His grace.

Catholic stories include human frailties, sin, evil, beauty, grace, love, redemption, hope, courage and the presence of God. A Catholic story may contain the practices of Catholicism (what we at Tuscany Press have come to refer to as cultural Catholicism), the things Catholics do—that is, kneeling, genuflecting, praying, the presence of clergy in the story, a character who prays the Rosary or who goes to Mass regularly. Cultural Catholicism, however, does not comprise the essence of Catholic fiction. Catholic fiction is infused with the presence of God and faith subtly, symbolically, or deliberately through the Catholic imagination.

Second, Catholic fiction has a Catholic theme or themes (sacrificial love, forgiveness, goodness existing among evil and sin, etc.). The theme is explored throughout the story—that is, rather than appearing near or at the end of the story, instances of this theme are sprinkled throughout the story, culminating at the end with a message that presents a Catholic truth that we can discover or realize more fully or in a new way.

Third, the protagonist grows throughout the story, through exploration and trial, to a deeper understanding of a moral truth and moves toward God. The protagonist and other characters may start with one frame of mind at the beginning of the story, but by the end of the story the character has changed in understanding.

Catholic fiction shows our broken condition specifically and presents to the story's characters and the reader a Catholic truth that may or may not be able to mend what is broken.

Professor Marian Crowe defines a Catholic novel as “. . . a work of substantial literary merit, in which Catholic theology and thought have a significant presence within the narrative, with genuine attention to the inner spiritual life, often drawing on Catholicism's rich liturgical and sacramental symbolism and enriched by the analogical Catholic imagination.”^[iii]

Good Catholic fiction offers no pat answers or solutions. All is not tidily repaired at the end, but it does offer the way and path to solutions and hope for readers.

John Paul II reminds us of the role of writers and artists in the dedication to his Letter to Artists: “To all who are passionately dedicated to the search for new ‘epiphanies’ of beauty so that through their creative work as artists they may offer these as gifts to the world.”

Catholic fiction is a work of art and beauty, a gift to the world.

[i] John Gardner, *On Moral Fiction* (New York: Basic Books, 1978) p. 83.

[ii] Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969) P.173, 175.

[iii] Marian E. Crowe, *Aiming at Heaven, Getting the Earth: The English Catholic Novel* (Plymouth, United Kingdom: Lexington Books, 2007) p. 24.