

5-MINUTE MEMOIR

Tuesdays With Flannery

BY BEVERLY WILLETT

One month I sit in the drawing room of the house where Flannery O'Connor grew up. I had no idea what to expect the first time I visited the Peacock Guild Writers Salon, the writers' group that meets in this small museum. I'd recently moved to Savannah, Ga., and knew no one. I'd practiced law early in my career and had even been published in *The New York Times*. Still, just thinking about the possibility of looking foolish in what I presumed would be a room full of Master of Fine Arts graduates made me queasy. I hadn't read any of O'Connor's short stories since college, and had spent years as a stay-at-home mom, turning to writing nonfiction only at midlife.

"Have a seat" one of the members said. I walked past O'Connor's baby carriage, eyed the placard above the dining room door labeled "The Bruckheimer Library," and sat on the couch. *Who do you think you are?* taunted the voice of self-doubt. That was three years ago. Last month, eight of us showed up on Tuesday evening. Sometimes our group is a one-on-one. We range in age from baby boomers to millennials, from the prestigious writing program alum to the pastor writing stories about his grandfather. Our group is open to the public and our common denominator is that we are all misfits navigating our way as writers. All brave, even as we cross the threshold of the home of one of America's great literary voices.

We've never had a session focused on O'Connor's writing. Instead we read aloud from our own, and offer one another suggestions.

In May, I participated alongside other literary salon members in the spring lecture series held at the O'Connor home. I'd been frustrated about my new career not proceeding as smoothly as I'd hoped. The inner imposter chided me for leaving my home in what's become known as a writer's mecca—Brownstone Brooklyn. I pictured myself reading from the same podium where Pat Conroy once announced National Book Awards finalists. And as I did, the familiar fear rose up.

*Call in sick. Manufacture an out-of-town crisis.* I debated various possibilities to extricate myself. That's when I began to hear O'Connor's voice.

*Oh phooey!* she scolded. Hadn't I been welcomed into her home? Hadn't I seen the crutches she used before dying from lupus at 39? Who was I to succumb to paralysis in the face of all she had endured?

When I bought O'Connor's *A Prayer Journal* after its 2013 release, I scanned the pages then put it aside. She'd kept it while attending the Iowa Writers' Workshop in 1946. When my fear of the podium reached a new high, I re-opened it. Here was the grand dame of Southern lit struggling with



CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS: Submit your own 600-word essay reflection on the writing life by emailing it to [wds submissions@fwmedia.com](mailto:wds submissions@fwmedia.com) with "5-Minute Memoir" in the subject line.



insecurity. "Maybe I'm mediocre," she wrote. And this: "Nothing can be possessed but the struggle. All our lives are consumed in possessing struggle, but only when the struggle is cherished. . . ." I stopped. I could've chosen other paths, most more financially viable. But nothing satisfied me more than Tuesdays with Flannery, and Wednesdays with my writers' group, and every other day at my PC, blissfully lost, searching for the right words. I led off the lecture series by reading aloud from my freshly finished memoir, voice strong and heart at peace. O'Connor had become my muse—not for her writing, but for her courage. She taught me that writers must remain vulnerable and cherish the struggle. And if they do, they will occasionally experience that unexpected stroke of good fortune O'Connor always wrote about: grace.

Beverly Willett has been published in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Salon*, *The Guardian* and *Newsweek*. She was recently elected to the board of the Flannery O'Connor Childhood Home.