Culture



Catholic writer Flannery O'Connor is seen in an undated photo. From March 21-23, 2025, a museum in Savannah, Ga., dedicated to her literary genius and fascinating personality is celebrating the centennial of her birth with socials, specialty tours, author talks and a live band, culminating in an annual birthday party event that will include vendors, games and an O'Connor look-alike contest. (OSV News/Courtesy of 11th Street Lot)

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Long before Catholic writer Flannery O'Connor raised her famous peacocks as an adult in rural Georgia, she kept canaries and chickens at 207 E. Charlton St., her childhood home in Savannah.

She made the chickens' outfits — complete with underwear — with one donning a "white piqué coat with a lace collar and two buttons," she would later recall. She would walk the leashed chickens around town, and as a 6-year-old taught a Bantam hen to strut backward, drawing the attention of a photojournalist who filmed her for a newsreel.

The small Greek Revival row house where she lived with her parents from her birth on March 25, 1925, until age 13 was a place where her imagination was fostered and eccentricities encouraged. A century later, it is a museum dedicated to her literary genius and fascinating personality, with big plans to mark the 100th anniversary of O'Connor's birth.

From March 21-23, the museum is celebrating her centennial with socials, specialty tours, author talks and a live band, culminating in an annual birthday party event — with cake — that will also include vendors, games and an O'Connor look-alike contest.

"It's totally wacky, and it really brings Flannery's sort-of eccentric and quirky side to the forefront," said Janie Bragg, executive director of the Flannery O'Connor Childhood Home Museum, of the annual birthday bash.

The O'Connor family lived in the home, owned by a wealthy relative, during the Great Depression, later moving to Atlanta in 1938 and then the following year to Andalusia, a farm on the outskirts of Milledgeville, Georgia, about 165 miles northwest of Savannah. When her health declined, it was to Andalusia that 25-year-old Flannery returned — after spending time at the prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop and then in Upstate New York — and from where she wrote most of the 31

"Southern Gothic" short stories and two novels for which she is known.

But, her interest in writing was evident even as a child in Savannah. Then known by her first name, Mary, 7-year-old O'Connor wrote a book about her family members and illustrated them as birds. While the approach appalled some relatives, her father celebrated the creative effort, printing copies for distribution.

"We know that she was doted on by her parents, especially her father, (and) encouraged very much to be herself — and to be her unique, eccentric, creative self at that," Bragg told OSV News.

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As an adult, O'Connor would describe her younger self — with a somewhat less endearing tone — as a "pigeon-toed child with a receding chin and a you-leave-me-alone-or-I'll-bite-you complex."

After being converted into an apartment in the 1960s, her childhood home was purchased in 1989 by local English professors who founded the museum and its supporting foundation. For nearly two decades, they worked to restore the house to the years the O'Connors inhabited it. Today it includes some of the family's furnishings as well as personal items that reflect their lives, including their Catholic faith.

Among those items is Flannery's baptismal certificate showing she was baptized at the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist, directly across the oak-filled square from her home. Her crib in her parents' second-floor bedroom sits under a window that frames a view of the cathedral's spires rising over twisting tree branches.

"They had no excuse not to go to Mass every day, and they sure did," Bragg said of the O'Connors. Flannery, she added, "literally, metaphorically, was raised under the shadow of the Catholic Church, and it infused who she was for the rest of her life. So it's a huge part of being in the house physically and thinking about the way that she was raised."

Most of the museum's visitors are English majors, English teachers and devout Catholics, Bragg said. Visitors may be familiar with the faith-rooted themes that pervade O'Connor's work, but as a writer, "she really requires a lot of work on behalf

of her readers," Bragg said.

"I don't think you can be a passive reader when you're reading Flannery O'Connor," she said. "She really requires us to do some critical thinking, some self reflection. And so I think when you read Flannery, you have to take your time with it. … You really have to go back and read it again to really get a better understanding of what she's trying to do through her stories."

Sixty-one years after O'Connor's death at age 39 from lupus, the author continues to captivate. Her life and stories were the subject of the 2021 PBS documentary "Flannery" and the 2023 film "Wildcat" starring Maya Hawke, and in 2024, O'Connor scholar Jessica Hooten Wilson published the unfinished manuscript of O'Connor's third novel under the working title "Why Do the Heathen Rage?"

In addition to the celebration in Savannah, Andalusia is marking O'Connor's centenary March 25 with free tours, cake and talks from artists, including the team behind the children's book "Strange Birds of Flannery O'Connor," published in 2020. Andalusia will also host a larger birthday celebration March 29 with a music festival featuring O'Connor-inspired folk music.

"A big reason why she (O'Connor) continues to pop up and we continue to hear more about her is because there's been more published," Bragg said, noting that a collection of O'Connor's letters to her mother, Regina, were published in 2022; her prayer journal was published in 2013; and a collection of O'Connor's cartoons were published in 2012.

"We keep getting more of her writing, and particularly her nonfiction writing," Bragg said. "We're getting to know more about her as a person. And she was such a fascinating person."