

A mystery that explores spiritual growth

Maureen Daly | May. 7, 2010

UNFINISHED DESIRES

By Gail Godwin

Published by Random House, \$26

Gail Godwin's *Unfinished Desires* is a mystery set in a Catholic girls' boarding school. Reading it was like eating a whole pan of fudge. I didn't want to keep on but I couldn't stop until I was done.

It is the kind of book I would read if I found it on the shelf of a summer cottage but not something I would buy.

Yet Godwin has a huge reputation: She is a three-time National Book Award finalist, and a recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and National Endowment for the Arts grants. There must be more to her than what I was seeing here. A trip to Baltimore's Enoch Pratt Central Library revealed 21 Godwin works still in circulation and on the shelves. Clearly she has a reading public.

I decided to give her other books a sampling. I spent a couple of weeks residing deeper inside the writing mind of Gail Godwin than Godwin herself. I found recurring characters and themes: professional women in academe or journalism, women formed by boarding school friendships, girls with struggling or neglectful mothers, affectionate grandmothers, and threatening stepfathers, early marriage and divorce, longtime affairs with married men. All these elements are found in *Unfinished Desires*.

Godwin is also informed about many things Catholic. She writes about religious life and seminary with nuance and intelligence. I went back to her new book with a new appreciation.

The structure of the novel is complex. Narrators change and speak from the 1930s, the 1950s, 2001, and later. The reader would do well to pay close attention to chapter headings that label place and time.

Having spent some time as a student and a teacher in all girls' schools, I am heartily sick of the overheated feminine adolescent drama that fuels much of the novel. (Although I confess it kept me turning the pages.) But interwoven with the girlish hysteria was something to me much more interesting: the narration by the former headmistress, a nun now in her 80s as she looks back over her own life.

Mother Suzanne Ravenel is now resident in a home for retired religious where the sister in charge makes a point of treating her with no special deference. Once a year she travels back to the South and is the coddled houseguest of fawning, sentimental alumnae. At their urging she accepts the task of writing a history of the school. Godwin is masterly in her control of the many dictions of the novel. The cloying, respectful adulation of well-bred Southern matrons remembering school days, the breezy enthusiasm of alumna magazine news notes, the earnest classroom essay, and the student-authored play in verse are just a few found here.

Mother Ravenel's cool formal prose of a reverential institutional history alternates with her emotional inner dialogue and self-critical examination of conscience. She looks back at what motivated her entrance to religious

life, how she conducted herself when she wielded power, and how she can assimilate these experiences into her late-life identity. It is an exploration of spiritual growth. Godwin shows readers how Mother Ravenel learns about herself, and how she continues to delude herself.

Above all the book is a portrait of a school that no longer exists. The fictional Mount St. Gabriel's of Mountain City was the actual St. Genevieve's in Asheville, N.C., where Godwin spent her formative adolescent years. Like any boarding school, it was a world in itself. As a convent school in the mountains of the South, an area not then hospitable to Catholics, it combined rigorous academics with defined Southern decorum and high piety.

Like the now-demolished Victorian building that became St. Genevieve's School in 1908, the world of the Southern convent school today exists only in pictures and memories. *Unfinished Desires* brings that school culture back to life.

[Maureen Daly, a freelance writer living in Baltimore, is a graduate of the Ecumenical Institute at St. Mary's Seminary and University]

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