Wildcat

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Abstract
This is a film review of Wildcat (2023), directed by Ethan Hawke.

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While not a traditional bio-pic, and certainly not a full adaptation of any of Flannery O’Connor’s stories, *Wildcat* remains a fascinating film exploring O’Connor’s creative process and her relationship with her mother, Regina. Filmed primarily in and around Louisville, KY, *Wildcat* visually communicates the feel of O’Connor’s central Georgia often marked by poverty and isolation. And the domestic scenes clearly communicate O’Connor’s confinement and the mobility challenges she faced as her health deteriorated.

*Wildcat* (the title is borrowed from a short story from O’Connor’s 1947 MFA thesis at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop) follows O’Connor’s life from her return to Milledgeville, GA in late 1950 until roughly the time of the publication of her first novel, *Wise Blood*, in the spring of 1952. Viewers are also given a few flashback scenes to O’Connor’s years in Iowa as a student (she completed the MFA in June of 1947) and as a post-graduate fellow in the fall and winter of 1947. Her mid-twenties were crucial years in O’Connor’s life because they witnessed her growing
literary reputation and the onset of her lupus which greatly limited her mobility and led to her return to Milledgeville to live with her mother throughout the rest of her life. O’Connor died in 1964 at the age of thirty-nine.

The film opens as O’Connor (Maya Hawke) prepares to board a train from New York City to Georgia. She is accompanied at the station by Robert “Cal” Lowell (Philip Ettinger)—more on Lowell later—who is portrayed as recognizing O’Connor’s brilliance even if her editor at Rinehart & Co. (the publisher who held the right of first refusal for Wise Blood) did not. Lowell serves to inform the viewer that O’Connor was a distinctive and powerful voice in American fiction even if elements of the literary establishment did not recognize her as such. True to the facts of O’Connor’s life, she grows so very ill on the train that when Regina (Laura Linney) meets her at the station, she is alarmed at her daughter’s ill health. What follows is a portrayal of O’Connor’s difficult adjustment to her life on the family farm in Georgia and her increasing loss of mobility. Aside from the flashback scenes set in Iowa, the rest of the film remains with Regina and Flannery and an occasional houseguest. This brief plot summary does little to capture the power of the film, however.

Director Ethan Hawke skillfully weaves characters and scenes from O’Connor’s short fiction into this basic biographical frame. Along the way, Maya Hawke and Linney transform from Flannery and Regina to, in turn, Lucynell Crater and her mother, also named Lucynell, from “The Life You Save May Be Your Own”; Hulga Hopewell and her mother, Mrs. Hopewell, from “Good Country People”; Mary Grace and Mrs. Turpin from “Revelation”; and Julian and his mother from “Everything That Rises Must Converge.” In addition, Hawke takes a turn as Sarah Ruth, Parker’s wife in “Parker’s Back” and as a bedridden pseudo-intellectual based on Asbury from “The Enduring Chill.” And all of this follows the great opening “Prevue” that promises a salacious film
based on the life of Star Drake from “The Comforts of Home” as a coming attraction. In these framed stories, viewers meet a host of O’Connor’s most unforgettable characters—Mr. Shiftlet, Lucynell’s suitor (Steve Zahn); Manley Pointer, the door-to-door Bible salesman who encounters Hulga (Cooper Hoffman); the priest who visits Asbury (played in wonderful cameo by Liam Neeson); the Black woman whose hat doubles the one worn by Julian’s mother (Laketa Caston); and the oft-tattooed O.E. Parker (Rafael Casal).

If all of this sounds confusing, it isn’t at all. Ethan Hawk’s direction makes sure the transitions are clearly signaled to the viewer without being jarring. Those who know the stories will recognize the source material, and those who do not just may be intrigued enough to search out the short stories to spend more time with these odd and enduring characters. But no one will be lost as we transition into and out of the source material from the stories. All of the viewers will be given the opportunity to wonder at O’Connor’s ability to create this cast of characters.

As impressive as the film is, it does have its challenges. For viewers who know O’Connor’s life and work well—and this may be a primary audience—one challenge will be the presence of the poet Robert “Cal” Lowell as a primary character in O’Connor’s life during the scenes at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. O’Connor first met Lowell in Iowa in the fall of 1947 after Flannery completed her MFA and was spending a semester as a post-graduate student. Lowell briefly visited and did a reading that fall, but the scene in which Lowell appears to be running a workshop session where O’Connor is reading is out of place and inaccurate. While it is understandable that Hawke would use his “Cal” as a representative male mentor figure for O’Connor, I found myself distracted by his presence with O’Connor at Iowa. The friendship between O’Connor and Lowell developed during their time at Yaddo, an artist colony in New York State where O’Connor worked after her time at Iowa and where Lowell spent time prior to his teaching stint in Iowa. Wisely, Hawke does
not dwell on O’Connor’s time at Yaddo because it is marked by a bit of confusion regarding what role she played, if any, in the charges Lowell brought against the program director whom Lowell believed to be a communist sympathizer. The scene early in the film showing Lowell with O’Connor at the train station seems to ring truer to O’Connor’s biography, but even here the film seems to suggest a romantic attraction between the two writers that is not supported by historical evidence.

An additional detail that may strike some viewers as out of place will be the fact that the film shows O’Connor working on a couple of stories, “Parker’s Back” and “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” much earlier than she was. Hawke can certainly be forgiven this creative license given the film’s project as a meditation on the creative process rather than a traditional bio-pic.

Viewers may also find themselves pondering over the relationship between Flannery and Regina. Because Maya Hawke and Laura Linney seamlessly transition from portraying the O’Connors to portraying one of the many adult child-mother dyads in O’Connor’s fiction, viewers might mistakenly assume that the many troublesome farm women in O’Connor’s stories are based rather directly on Regina. Here’s hoping that viewers avoid making this assumption because, while Flannery’s relationship with her mother was certainly complex, it was also very close. The two didn’t always understand one another—portrayed nicely in a scene, lifted from one of O’Connor’s letters, when Regina sees her daughter’s copy of Dostoyevsky’s *The Idiot* and asks what the novel is about. The answer she receives speaks to Flannery’s quick wit. But the two shared a deep love and affection. According to the editors of O’Connor’s *Collected Works* in the Library of America series, when O’Connor went away to the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, she wrote to her mother daily and continued the practice “whenever she [was] away from Milledgeville” (1240-41). The warmth of the on-screen interactions between Hawke and Linney in the roles of Flannery and Regina
balance the scenes from the stories nicely and hint at the complex relationship the two women shared.

The film should also be forgiven for shying away from the attempt to adapt O’Connor’s fiction to film. To my knowledge, only three attempts have been made to film O’Connor’s work. “The Life You Save May Be Your Own” was adapted, by all accounts very badly, for an early television production starring Gene Kelly as Mr. Shiftlet. “The Displaced Person” was made into a made-for-television film in the seventies, but it is most notable for its casting of Robert Earl Jones and Samuel L. Jackson as Astor and Sulk than for anything else. And finally, Wise Blood was released as a feature film directed by John Huston in 1979. Given the enduring popularity of O’Connor’s short fiction, one might rightly ask why so few attempts have been made.

One answer lies in the narrative technique O’Connor employs so often at the end of her stories. Examples from two stories touched on by Hawke can illustrate the challenges screenwriters and directors face. At the end of “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” Julian, distraught by his mother’s collapse on the street, begins to run to get help. The story ends with the following two sentences: “The lights drifted farther away the faster he ran and his feet moved numbly as if they carried him nowhere. The tide of darkness seemed to sweep him back to her, postponing from moment to moment his entry into the world of guilt and sorrow.” O’Connor’s use of “as if” and “seemed” would certainly challenge the director’s ability to adapt her prose style. At the end of “The Enduring Chill,” Asbury is lying in bed gazing at the water stain on the ceiling he had often imagined as a bird. O’Connor writes:

The fierce bird which through the years of his childhood and the days of his illness had been poised over his head, waiting mysteriously, appeared all at once to be in motion. Asbury blanched and the last film of illusion was torn as if by a whirlwind from his eyes. He saw that for the rest of his days, frail, racked, but enduring, he would live in the face of a purifying terror. But the Holy Spirit, emblazoned in ice instead of fire, continued, implacable, to descend.
These lengthy quotations from O’Connor’s work brings us to the appropriate final word on the film. One of the most striking features of the film is just how much we hear directly from O’Connor. Shelby Gaines and Ethan Hawke share screenwriting credits for the film, but much of the film comes to us in O’Connor’s own words. Quotations taken directly from the stores rest alongside passages from her letters to provide a wonderful sense of O’Connor’s voice. Most striking are the passages recited by Maya Hawke taken from *A Prayer Journal* (first published in 2013). The journal entries, written in 1946 and 1947 during O’Connor’s time as an MFA student in Iowa, provide an intimate look into the writer’s faith and creative process. The book itself is remarkable, and Hawke delivers the prayers in a masterful way. O’Connor would, no doubt, be horrified that we are hearing these personal prayers, but they certainly provide an intimate glance inside the faith and creative process of one of the twentieth century’s most distinctive short fiction writers.

Late in the film, a frail O’Connor is shown creating a kind of altar for herself from her writing desk. The visual image is striking and captures the author wonderfully. This is the power of the film—it leaves viewers with a deep appreciation for a young woman’s commitment to record in her stories a universe of flawed yet grace-seeking characters as they fumble towards redemption.