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Informed by the experience of being Catholic

Heidi Schlumpf | Feb. 5, 2010

Mary Gordon

There are people in the world who derive no small pleasure from the game of ?major? and ?minor.? They think that no major work can be painted in watercolors. They think, too, that Hemingway writing about boys in the woods is major; Mansfield writing about girls in the kitchen is minor. These people join up with other bad specters, and I have to banish them.

-- *Mary Gordon, ?The Parable of the Cave; or, In Praise of Watercolors? in* The Writer on Her Work

For most of her writing life, Mary Gordon has been trying to banish those bad specters who want to pigeonhole her either as a ?woman writer? or a ?Catholic writer.? Although she is proud to write out of her experiences as both, she knows that such labels have ?minor? consequences.

Gordon came of age as a writer during the feminist movement of the 1960s and ?70s, when there was much enthusiastic support from publishers for writing by and about women. Her own first novel, *Final Payments*, was published by Random House in 1978 when she was only 29 years old. So for many years Gordon preferred the ?woman? label over the ?Catholic? one. It may have put her ?on the farm team? in some readers? minds, but it didn?t carry the connotation of dogmatism or evangelization.

?I don?t have a lot in common with other ?Catholic? writers,? she told *The Atlantic* in 1999. ?I love Flannery O?Connor, but I don?t think we?re very alike. And I?m not like Graham Greene or Evelyn Waugh. ... So I think to describe me as a ?Catholic writer? is misleading, whereas I do think a lot of my subject matter is informed by the experience of being female, which is a much larger and more elastic envelope to fit into.?

Of course, anyone who has read any of her six novels, three memoirs and two other nonfiction books, not to mention dozens of short stories -- many of them award-winning -- could argue that a lot of her subject matter also is informed by her experience of being Catholic.

But until John Updike is considered a ?Protestant writer,? she prefers not to be known as a Catholic one. The label has definitely ghettoized her in intellectual circles, she says.

?Saying I?m a Catholic writer automatically lowers my IQ by 90 points,? she told *NCR*. ?But I can understand why some people think that. We have a pope who?s saying [to Anglican priests], ?If you?re homophobic and sexist, come on in.? ?

She told interviewer Bill Moyers, ?I have to endure the irony of the fact that most of the people whom I admire ... suspect me of perhaps sucking my thumb at night because I am a person of faith.?

Gordon was born in an Irish-Catholic enclave in Long Island, N.Y., to a Catholic mother and Jewish father who had converted to a zealous Catholicism. She attended parochial schools and admits she once wanted to be a nun. Instead, she married an English professor nearly 30 years her senior -- a marriage that quickly ended in divorce. Her second husband, Arthur Cash, is a divorced English professor also nearly 30 years older than she. They have two adult children and celebrated their 30th wedding anniversary last month.

One reviewer has called Gordon ?the preeminent American Catholic -- or, more accurately, lapsed Catholic -- writer of her generation.? That may not be fair. Although she spent the years between her undergraduate days and motherhood in the lapsed Catholic diaspora, she never really lost her Catholicity, substituting social justice work for Mass attendance. She returned to regular church attendance in the 1980s, though she still distances herself from the hierarchy.

She has been involved in progressive causes since her undergraduate days at Barnard College in New York, where she is now a professor of English. Her Web site?s list of ?worthy organizations? includes links to MoveOn.org [1] and Planned Parenthood.

That alone would be enough fodder for right-wing Catholics, who went on the offensive after the publication of her latest book, *Reading Jesus*, in which she brings her literary sensibility to her personal reading of the Gospels. The book is divided into biblical stories she likes (not surprisingly many with women characters; her favorite Gospel writer is Luke) and those she finds difficult. When published interviews quoted her as saying she had never read all the Gospels before, some blasted her for daring to publish a commentary.

?Most people have their family Bible in the attic. They don?t have [scripture scholar] Raymond Brown,? Gordon says in her defense. ?I believe there is an opportunity for a kind of reading that evokes emotional language. Readers want a sense of companionship, because this is an unstable, contradictory text. It doesn?t have all the answers. ... But it?s okay to have sacred texts that puzzle me, even torture me. That?s the best way to honor it.?

She used to be tortured by the use of Mary ?as a stick to beat girls into meekness.? But feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson helped her ?get back to Mary? by reimagining her as a figure of darkness and grief. Gordon?s favorite Marian story is when Jesus says: ?Woman, behold your son.?

?I began to understand how she had to give up this child to the world,? Gordon says. ?We all have to give up our children to the world. You lose control. They don?t belong to you. To love them is to honor their natures. Mary had to honor Jesus? nature.?

But it is Jesus, not Mary, who is the focus of the Gospels. ?Jesus was the storyteller, the powerful one, the complicated one,? Gordon says. ?It?s a little hard for me that the center of my religious life is a man. It?s a paradox I can?t resolve.? She resolves it, in part, by seeing Jesus as a feminist. ?What I love about him is how he really breaks open the world for women. There are so many important moments when sexism is short-circuited,? she says.

If only Jesus could miraculously transform the 21st-century publishing industry.

?I don?t think people believe in fiction anymore,? Gordon says, blaming technology for preventing people from spending hours engrossed in a book. ?Now it?s equally hard for men and women, although there is still an appetite for novels that are violent and ironic.?

Doesn?t that same technology provide even more opportunities for women?s voices, many of whom are blogging about their experiences? ?They might be blogging, but they?re not writing novels,? she answers. ?Blogging is off the cuff, not revised, not considered. The art of fiction is revision. The blog is anti-art.?

Her advice to new women writers: ?If you can do anything else, do it. It?s a very dark time.?

She is equally discouraged about the future of Catholic writing, per se. ?There are writers who are Catholic, but now we are very assimilated,? she says. ?My generation wrote about immigrant behavior. I don?t see a new generation doing that.?

Even new Catholic immigrants? ?Maybe,? she says. ?But it will be different. Their experience of the church is different.?

As for Gordon, she keeps on writing out of and about her experiences as a daughter, mother, wife, working woman and a person of faith. And if that earns her the label of ?woman writer? or ?Catholic writer,? so be it.

?I have to write what I?m called to write.?

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Links:
[1] http://moveon.org