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ETHICS IN CONVERSATION

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Knowing Through Seeing

Cassandra Nelson, *A Theology of Fiction*, Wiseblood Essays in Contemporary Culture, No. 17 (Menomonee Falls, WI: Wiseblood Books, 2025)

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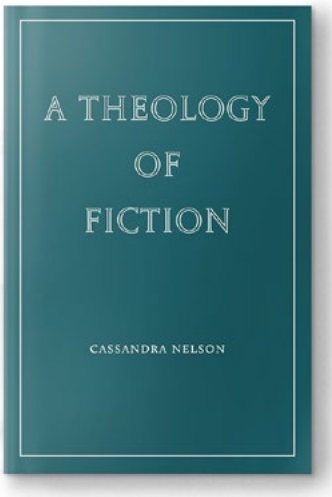
In his book *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*, James K. A. Smith argues that "we are storytellers – and story-listeners…. We are narrative animals whose very orientation to the world is fundamentally shaped by stories."[1] In *A Theology of Fiction*, Cassandra Nelson helps us make sense of this human experience with story, particularly as we encounter great works of fiction. *A Theology of Fiction* discloses its aim from the outset: to offer "*a* theology of fiction – one particular understanding of fiction's theological dimensions" (p.4). In addition, Nelson invites her readers "to see firsthand how fiction brings the mind's image-making capacity whirring to life," leading to "at the deepest level, if one chooses to engage with it – soul-work" (p.8). Nelson's book introduces her readers to the theology and writing of Sister Mariella Gable, O.S.B., who believed that "'the tale or novel has a power to move people' as even the most brilliant philosophy and poetry do not" (p.18). This overview of Sister Mariella Gable's literary life, an exploration of what constitutes Catholic fiction, and interaction with specific genres and works form the basis for Nelson's reflections.

A lesser-known figure in the American literary landscape of the 20th century, Gable served as a teacher at St Benedict's Academy and later the College of St Benedict in St Joseph, Minnesota. She also authored or edited numerous volumes of poetry, essays and fiction, some of which "helped to put American writers like J.F. Powers and Flannery O'Connor on the map" (p. 13). Averse to what she considered the sub-par Catholic fiction of the early 1900s, Gable cultivated her anthologies with quality in mind, agreeing quite frankly with J. F. Powers that "God doesn't like crap in art" (p. 15). Passing over "well-intentioned, but artistically deficient,



1 James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Words*, Cultural Liturgies, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 108.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stories," (p. 16) Gable's "earliest, inchoate definition of Catholic fiction was thus a negative one: it *wasn't* what had passed for Catholic fiction in America in the early decades of the twentieth century" (p. 18, emphasis mine).

Over time, Gable's definition of Catholic fiction gained further boundaries. She illustrated the aim of such fiction with a bulls-eye consisting of three circles: the outermost circle represents "the local color of Catholic life," offering the broadest target for content and style; the middle circle includes an orientation toward ethical issues in alignment with teachings of the Catholic church; and the narrowest – and best – aim of Catholic fiction is to wrestle with "the inner workings of the person who desires earnestly to live, though not without struggles and failures, in accordance with Catholic teachings" (p. 22). It is important to note here that a work need not *espouse* these Catholic teachings, but merely wrestle with them – Gable argues that "any story that truthfully represents value in this way qualifies as Catholic fiction," including "fiction that shows what *not* to do or *not* to value, and why" (p. 24). In fact, she suggests that "secular fiction is limited. Catholic fiction is unlimited; it embraces all of reality" (p. 26). Because of this, such fiction is multidimensional: considering the psychological, social and eschatological planes of reality. Gable emphasizes fiction's eschatological reality, going so far as to argue that "fiction which does not engage with the eschatological dimension of the human condition cannot be great fiction" (p. 40). However, despite the narrowing parameters of Gable's conception of Catholic – or qualitatively great – fiction over time, she "was ready to admit that debates about its definition, parameters, and even existence are likely to go on indefinitely" (p. 41). In the end, Sister Mariella's offerings match Nelson's aim: to offer *a* theology of fiction, her own particular understanding of the intersection between theology and literature stemming from a lifetime of literary experience and critique.

The final chapters of *A Theology of Fiction* move from Gable's insights to application of them; Sister Mariella's ideas on the relationship between the eschatological dimension of fiction and genre provide the basis for Nelson's examination of satire and comedy. Nelson examines texts such as Huxley's *Brave New World* and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* alongside works by Catholic authors Muriel Sparks and Aubrey Menen. Nelson writes that "Spark and Menen show


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in their fiction that …. Any attempt to comprehend human experience by examining what merely *is* and ignoring what *ought to be*…is likely to meet with…disappointing results" (p. 47). In fact, Nelson argues that "certain genres of fiction actually demand the kind of stereoscopic, ironic vision made possible by the difference between what *is* and what *ought to be*," regardless of the author's own metaphysical beliefs. Inattention to this dimension of satire – as in all fiction – reduces its ability to fully engage with the human condition.

Sister Mariella, and thus Nelson, argue that attention to the *is-ought* phenomenon is a requirement of comedy as well. Gable writes that "only a noble view of human nature can be humorous," and Nelson points out that this view is consonant with the *incongruity theory of humor* (pp. 48-49). Gable's "quick gloss on Catholic humor adds to the incongruity theory both a theological dimension and a generic one. Theologically, the fact that people are made in the image of God appears to be precisely what makes human life so ripe for comedy" (p. 50). An examination of Henry Bergson's Essay "On Laughter" and illustrations from Shakespeare's *King Lear* offer a defense for this necessary incongruity in successful comedy.

Fittingly, Nelson ends her book by examining the legacy of thought that Sister Mariella left behind – first with Gable's own students, such as Betty Wahl, and then in those who would read and consider her work downstream, such as Nelson. Wahl, herself a fiction writer, "never abandoned their shared conviction that 'the highest human pleasure comes from knowing – specifically, from knowing *through vision* – something of the mystery of life,' and that the vehicle most suited to conveying this kind of knowledge is fiction" (p. 68). Wahl proposed the fiction writer to be a type of prophet: "His mission is 'to see and make others see'" (p. 68). This prophetic voice is a necessary element of "restoring vision to contemporary…culture" (p. 69).

Nelson shares her own stories of witnessing this prophetic voice come to life in her literature classroom as students encounter multi-dimensional fiction, prompting the question: "What is that living, breathing thing that can fly for years and never lose its momentum – that waits silently in the pages of a closed book and then whirs to life again at exactly the right moment – in all the best fiction?" (p. 74). In agreement with novelist Caroline Gordon, a mentor to Flannery O'Connor, Nelson highlights the role of the Holy Spirit in such experience "because the right words in the right combination are inexhaustible in a way that points to the eternal" (p. 75). Nelson suggests an appropriate response of reading "widely and freely as Sister Mariella roamed the prairies and rivers of her youth. One cannot know in advance where the Holy Spirit will turn up!" (p. 79).

In many ways, *A Theology of Fiction* accomplishes its aims: Nelson provides a robust overview of Sister Mariella Gable's theological reflections on fiction and inspires readers to participate in the "soul-work" of engaging with it. Yet, despite the author's fair disclaimer at the outset of providing *a* theology of fiction rather than a definitive one, this refusal to set out systematic parameters hinders dialogue with the reader; one struggles to organize the varied theological reflections into a coherent whole. While many of Gable's reflections are interesting and valuable to consider, experiencing the text feels more like overhearing bits of conversation in a café than reading an organized argument, making synthesis difficult. In addition, the book is almost entirely comprised of *Gable's* theology of fiction – not Nelson's. A more appropriate title might alert the reader to expect this encounter and incur less disappointment from its contents.

Perhaps Nelson's greatest accomplishment in *A Theology of Fiction* is in unearthing the contributions of a little known

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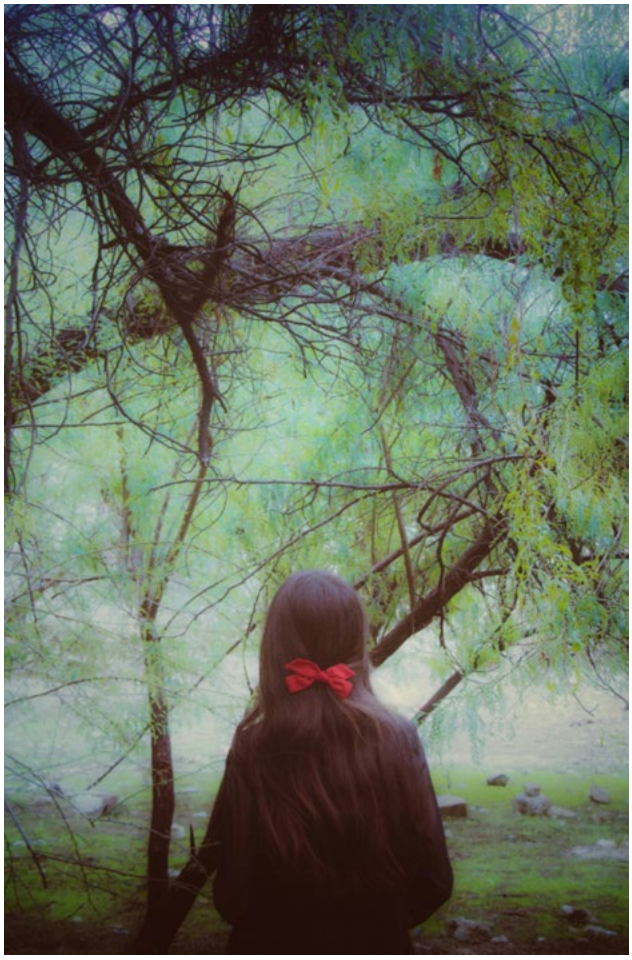
– but influential – figure in theological discussion of fiction. Even readers who are well-acquainted with Catholic writers such as Flannery O'Connor or Walker Percy will not be familiar with Sister Mariella Gable, and there is something to be gained by simply reading her story and contributions. As is evident in Nelson's concluding chapter, many of Gable's observations and conclusions continue to bear fruit in the teaching, criticism and writing of others considering the intersection of theology and literature today. Certainly all readers must wrestle with Gable's claims about the necessary qualities of Catholic fiction – or even good fiction – and trace its teleology. What this tells us about the nature of God and the human experience of story is a gift indeed.

Despite its focus on explicitly *Catholic* fiction, Nelson's text prompts readers from any church tradition to consider important theological questions about fiction: What is a sacramental, incarnational view of fiction, and what are its implications (p. 5)? How is (good) fiction "a mode of contemporary 'prophecy'" (p. 7)? Why does "'the tale or novel [have] power to move people' as even the most brilliant philosophy and poetry do not" (p. 18)? What else might fiction help us better "know through seeing" (p. 22)? Can a secular novel qualify as Christian fiction – and, if so, what are the necessary requirements (p. 24)? Such considerations are important for Christians to engage the world of art and literature. As "people of the book," we of all people must wrestle, as Sister Mariella did, with "the mundane and the miraculous, and perhaps most especially *the miraculous in the mundane*" (p. 6), that we might be better able to notice the work of the Spirit in our midst and learn to "[know] through seeing" (p. 22).



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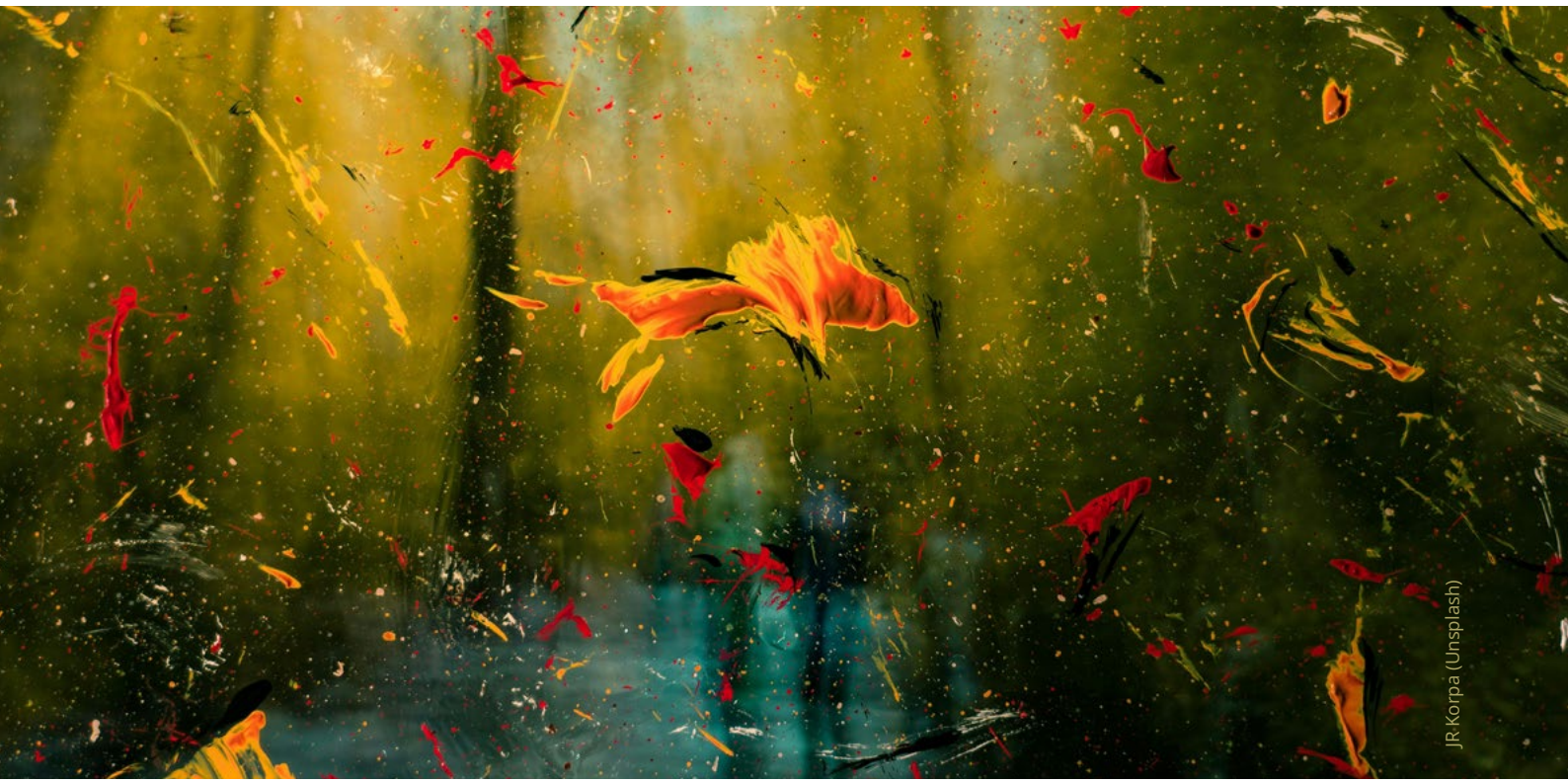

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