

A SOUTHERN CATHOLIC NOVELIST SPEAKS

Review of

CONVERSATIONS WITH WALKER PERCY

Edited by Lewis A. Larson & Victor A. Kramer

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—Reviewed by **Wade Hall**

Walker Percy is a man of many faces: a medical doctor who has never practiced; a Louisiana anchorite; a philosopher-novelist; a Southern seeker on a pilgrimage of faith; a Catholic existentialist; a singer of new songs about the old Gospel. These portraits—and more—are revealed in a new collection of “conversations” with Percy, most of them conducted on the screened-in back porch at the writer’s French chateau-like home overlooking the Bogue Falaya River in Covington, Louisiana. The interviews expose a man who has read widely, thought deeply and talks brilliantly about his seven books and the philosophy/theology that informs them.

Before the reader has finished the some 27 conversations and profiles selected and chronologically arranged by editors Lawson and Kramer, he feels comfortably at home with the hospitable Percy, his wife Bernice, his two daughters Ann and Mary, the family maid Ida Mae (who serves steaming coffee or iced tea) and the family dog, a German Shepherd named Lady. “I’ve managed to live here for thirty years,” Percy confides modestly, “and am less well-known than the Budweiser distributor.”

The outlines of Percy’s life are known to most of his readers: his boyhood in Birmingham; his father’s death by suicide; his mother’s death in a car accident; adoption by his father’s cousin “Uncle” Will Alexander Percy in Greenville, Mississippi; his undergraduate years at Chapel Hill; his medical training at Columbia; his bout with tuberculosis; his marriage in 1946; his 1947 conversion to Catholicism and his settlement in Louisiana the same year (first in New Orleans, then Covington); his initial interest in writing essays in philosophy and his subsequent turn to fiction in his mid-forties. These relaxed conversations, however, flesh out the details of Percy’s life and provide many illuminating sidelights and footnotes on his work as a writer. Percy is often tentative and unsure when assessing the work of other Southerners, but he is generally on the mark when commenting on his books and their philosophical underpinnings.

Perhaps because they (and the reader) are fresh, the early interviews appear to be the most incisive and substantive. In the first selection, a notice that appeared in the February 1, 1961 *Library Journal* at the time his first novel *The Moviegoer*, was published, Percy states succinctly that his interest as philosopher and novelist is in “the predicament of modern man, afflicted as he is with feelings of uprootedness, estrangement, anxiety and the like.” People would rather read a novel than an article.” By turning to fiction he was by no means abandoning philosophy, as he explained in 1962 to a writer for *The Charlotte Observer*: “I’ve always liked the French tradition of a man trying to express himself in the two forms, arts and philosophy, and one serving the other, art illustrating ideas and ideas in turn fecundating art.”

Throughout the conversations Percy reiterates his debt to European philosophers, theologians and fiction writers—particularly to Heidegger, Marcel, Sartre, Camus, Dostoevsky, Maritain. He pays special homage to Kierkegaard, the Protestant theologian who was the dominant influence on Percy’s

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conversion to Catholicism. Percy is less impressed with American thinkers and writers—and less aware of their works.

Despite the assertion by the New Critics that writing a book and understanding it are separate vocations, Percy makes remarkably clear and cogent observations about his own novels. He speaks frequently of his philosophical intentions and how he undertook to express them in his books. A reader wanting to plumb Percy's fiction is well advised to read Percy on Percy, provided he does not take Percy's interpretations as "official." Percy as critic should be given no more authority than any other intelligent, informed critic. He does, however, give the reader valuable "approaches" to his books and helpful hints to understanding them.

In addition to illuminating Percy's fiction, the conversations reveal the broad dimensions of Percy's interests—ranging from Descartes to Chomsky, from transformational grammar to race relations. They also reveal colorful biographical minutiae: at 10 he submitted a short story to the now defunct *Liberty* magazine (it was not accepted or even acknowledged); at Chapel Hill he was placed in "a retarded English class"; once, because of his shyness, he remained in a car outside Faulkner's home in Oxford, Mississippi, while a college friend talked with the writer for two hours; his favorite American novel is *Huckleberry Finn*; his favorite movies include "Five Easy Pieces," "Dr. Strangelove" and "2001: A Space Odyssey." Occasionally, however, Percy's pithy sentences sound like contrivances for *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*: "War is man's greatest pleasure" or Southern writers are different because "we were brought up seeing Jesus Saves and Garrett Snuff signs."

Repetition is the bugaboo of such collections as this. There is, indeed, much repetition in these interviews—some of it, admittedly, of the "incremental" variety which allows Percy to approach a single topic from different angles at different times. Judicious editing, however, would have eliminated needless repetition and made the collection tighter and more readable.

Percy's talent, seriousness and charm are, however, evident in every interview. He talks wisely and well. In fact, he is so articulate that such a book as this could start a movement to "canonize" Percy as a Southern oracle, the Sage of Covington and could deflect interest from the writings to the writer. These conversations are justified if they lead readers to Percy's books with greater insight and understanding.

All in all, the anthology is filled with pleasant surprises—even unexpected "epiphanies." But there is one notable disappointment. The only previously unpublished interview is "A Conversation with Walker Percy about Thomas Merton," conducted by Victor and Dewey Kramer in May, 1983. Although Percy recounts a trip to Gethsemani to attend a gathering of the advisory board of an obscure ecumenical journal, *Katallagete*, he remembers little about Merton. "it's amazing how little we found to talk about," Percy recalls apologetically. "How much I wanted to ask him, and didn't feel free to ask him." Percy's vague memory and shyness add up to a sadly empty interview which sheds little light on either Merton or Percy.

On the other hand, the most delightful and revealing interview in the collection is one Percy conducted with himself for the December 1977 *Esquire*. "Questions They Never Asked Me So He Asked Them Himself" is a serious but hilarious probing of Percy's career as a writer. It contains some of his best worded and most profound thoughts. "Life is a mystery, love is a delight," he confides. "Therefore I take it as axiomatic that one should settle for nothing less than the infinite mystery and the infinite delight, i.e., God. In fact I demand it. I refuse to settle for anything less. I don't see why anyone should settle for less than Jacob, who actually grabbed ahold of God and wouldn't let go until God identified himself and blessed him." Grabbed ahold? That's a Louisiana expression, Percy explains. By itself, this self-interview is worth the price of the book!



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