



MISCELLANY OF MEN

"I cannot do my duty as a true modern by cursing everybody who made me whatever I am." -G.K. CHESTERTON

Found in the Cosmos

Walker Percy (1916-1990)

By Dale Ahlquist

BACK IN THE EARLY 1990S when the search began in earnest for the source of G.K. Chesterton's most famous quotation – "When a man stops believing in God, he doesn't believe in nothing, he believes in anything." – I was absolutely convinced that I had just read it in some GKC piece. But when I retraced my steps, I realized I had read it in Walker Percy's 1983 book *Lost in the Cosmos*. Percy was quoting GKC, but of course, he didn't cite the source. No one ever does.

Although it was GKC who led the way in bringing me to the Catholic Church, there were other authors who assisted him. One of them was Walker Percy, himself a convert. Converts call to each other, as deep answers deep.

Walker Percy and I also share another distinction (which we probably share with a gaggle of other writers): our first two novels were politely and promisingly praised by publishers, and then rejected, remaining unpublished. But Walker Percy wrote a third novel, *The Moviegoer*, which gained him the National Book Award and literary fame. I still haven't written my third novel. Perhaps that is just as well.

I came to him not through his famous fiction, but through his late non-fiction books: *A Message in a Bottle*, *Signposts in a Strange Land*, and the book mentioned above. His writing immediately resonated with me as it was filled with wit and clarity and common sense and a calm rage at the world. As a medical doctor, he had credibility when he called science "the study of secondary causes," and as a literary artist when he called art "the handmaiden of religion."

In his fiction, he describes an off-kilter world and the



sense of alienation his characters feel. But there is usually one character who seems more off-kilter than everyone else, yet he's the one who knows something, and we know he knows, but he's not the main character and we don't hear enough from him. As Percy once explained:

... novelists are a devious lot ... disinclined to say anything straight out, especially about themselves, since their stock-in-trade is indirection, if not guile, coming at people from the side so to

speak, especially the blind side ... If anybody says anything straight out, it is apt to be one their characters, a character, moreover, for which they have not much use.

In his last novel *The Thanatos Syndrome*, that character is Father Smith, a modern-day St. Simon Stylites, living as a hermit in a forester's observation tower, from which he won't come down.

His books will always hold a place in my heart, but I'm also grateful to him for a book he didn't write, but one that would not have been published without his help: *A Confederacy of Dunces*. It won the Pulitzer Prize in spite of

the fact that the author, John Kennedy Toole, had written it 20 years earlier, tried and failed to get it published, and then failed at life itself, killing himself eight years later. His mother, however, did not give up on the book, and spent over a decade trying to get her son's book published. She continually implored Percy for help. He finally relented and read the manuscript. He was enamored with it, and he got Louisiana State University Press to publish it, and wrote a powerful introduction. Had he not made it happen, we likely would not have the amusing and immortal character of Ignatius Reilly, who I think is the answer to the question: "What if G.K. Chesterton had gone bad?"

A wide-ranging student of literature, philosophy, and science, Percy had a particular interest in semiotics and the works of Charles Peirce. His wife Mary Townsend Percy ran a bookshop in Covington, Louisiana, over which Walker had his office. He had nine Chesterton books in his library, and we will assume that he read them in the 30s and 40s. The six basics: *Orthodoxy*, *Heretics*, *Everlasting Man*, *St. Francis*, *St. Thomas*, *Father Brown*. The others were *Chaucer*, *The Man Who was Chesterton* (an anthology), and *The Catholic Church and Conversion*. It comes out in his writing that he read a lot more Kierkegaard than Chesterton, but, as in the case of Peter Kreeft, it is Chesterton that won the day.

Percy recognized that life is a wrestling match with truth. He found the truth in the Catholic Church, which he joined in 1947, having been raised both agnostic and Presbyterian – and, so I claim, after reading Chesterton.

In the last chapter of his last book, he conducts a self-interview, which includes this exchange:

Q: How is such a belief [in the Catholic faith] possible in this day and age?

A: What else is there?

Q: What do you mean, what else is there? There is humanism, atheism, agnosticism, Marxism, behaviorism, materialism, Buddhism, Muhammadism, Sufism, astrology, occultism, theosophy.

A: That's what I mean.

Q: To say nothing of Judaism and Protestantism.

A: Well, I would include them along with the Catholic Church in the whole peculiar Jewish-Christian thing.

Q: I don't understand. Would you exclude, for example, scientific humanism as a rational and honorable alternative?

A: Yes.

Q: Why?

A: It's not good enough.

Q: Why not?

A: This life is much too much trouble, far too strange, to arrive at the end of it and then to be asked what you make of it and have to answer "Scientific Humanism." That won't do. A poor show. Life is a mystery, love is a delight. 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.

Q: Grabbed ahold?

A: Louisiana expression.

Walker Percy became a Benedictine Oblate, and spent a great deal of time in quiet contemplation at St. Joseph's Abbey near Covington. And it is there that he is buried in the Abbey cemetery.

In May I was invited to Covington to give a talk to a group of good folks who are starting the Chesterton Academy of the Divine Mercy there. I had a little extra time so I made it a point to visit the Abbey and Walker Percy's grave.

Though less dramatic than my first visit to G.K. Chesterton's grave in Beaconsfield in 2002, there was still a similar profound feeling: a long-awaited encounter with someone who had made an important impact on my life, whom I knew only through his books, but whom I knew, *I knew* ... though I never shook his hand or looked him in the eye. But there he was just beneath the ground, just beyond my sight, just beyond this life, waiting to rejoin his soul on that final day far beyond this one. ☞

