

CATHOLICISM AND WRITING NOVELS by Brigid Pasulka

A few years ago at an event, the organizer, a woman who had told me that her only religion was literature, asked me the question that is so often implied in intellectual circles and the arts: how can you be both religious and a writer?

If you unpack this question, it's usually an and/or of the following three things: 1) practicing a religion is not cool, and being a writer is; 2) religion is restrictive, and anyone creative needs to be completely unfettered; and 3) religion is something for the unwashed masses to help them through their miserable lives and certainly unnecessary for someone with the intellectual wherewithal to write a book.

I'm being intentionally harsh for summary purposes. The person asked the question out of genuine curiosity, and I absolutely admire her for asking it, since it's usually treated as an unspoken premise rather than something that is up for discussion. I managed to stumble out an answer that several years of thought have allowed me to refine. My answer is still incomplete, and there are other Catholic writers (namely Flannery O'Connor) who have answered the question better, but here are my thoughts:

I once had a drawing teacher who emphasized and re-emphasized that all art comes down to seeing, a lesson that has recently been reinforced via my two-year-old son. Six months ago, he started pointing out everything on the street with two wheels--bicycles, mopeds, Vespas, and of course, motorcycles. He called them all *bah-gi-gos*, a word which he used incessantly, and which we wouldn't figure out for months, which is another story. The point to this one is that even when I was walking around alone, I found myself acutely aware of every single *bah-gi-go* on the road. My son had given me *bah-gi-go* eyes.

It's the same for Catholicism. After so many years of receiving the sacraments, of listening to homilies and reading Catholic-themed books, of contemplation and prayer, my eyes, though imperfect, are basically Catholic-shaped, and that is how I see the world.

Some would argue that this is akin to going about life like a packhorse with blinders on; I recognize instead how it expands my vision. Because not only do I get to see the things going on in the natural world, I get to see the spiritual world behind it. I get to see the invisible links, the coincidences that are not coincidences, the root system stretching in every direction under what--to non-religious people--seems like ordinary dirt.

This invisible root system is one of the most beautiful things about Catholicism, in my opinion--that everything is linked and part of the whole picture, even seemingly opposing forces--good and evil, death and life, suffering and joy, frustration and catharsis. And our lives are not a-series-of-random-events-and-then-you-die. The daily details, yes, are sometimes petty and mundane, but they do in the end add up to something, and even if that something does not take the logical path to explanation, it makes great sense in the quiet of our souls.

Good novels, I find, have the same characteristics as a life lived with Catholic eyes--the meaning surfacing gradually but undeniably throughout the novel, coming together in the end, not in the simplicity of be-good-and-go-to-heaven or the X=Y symbolism of Cliff's Notes, but in the less quantitative language that our soul speaks.

My Catholic eyes also help me to see my characters more clearly, and the variety of characters that are available to me. They constantly remind me that we all have equal worth--not just the "interesting" people, as an ad for our local NPR station bragged of their listeners while exhorting them to reproduce. And while LGBT groups took exception to the call to reproduce, no one questioned the premise--that in order to count, we need to be interesting. We need to be up on current events or have a great talent or be well traveled or well educated, or at least have a child who can be interesting by proxy while we pay all the bills. It's the abiding theme in our Facebook feeds and is reflected in many of our novels, where all child characters are precocious, all young adult heroes save their dystopian worlds and all adult narrators describe everything they see in perfect metaphor.

Catholicism tells us differently. In Catholicism, we all count for something. The least of us are worthy of God's and other people's love. Weak, meek, feeble-minded, mean or even dull, we are all important enough to have novels written about us, and choosing a character from the left-hand side of the Beatitudes need not even be a political statement. It is simply the ordinary way of the Catholic world.

Finally, Catholicism gives me the correct posture to write from--the posture of humility--the deep and abiding knowledge that I don't know it all. Or very much of anything, really. This is a posture that is difficult to practice in the world around us because the world around us is full of self-assurance. We are all experts, sucking in information every waking moment, plugging the holes of doubt with a quick Google search. These days, you very rarely hear the words "I don't know," or even "I don't know much about that."

One glaring exception to this is the astronomers and astrophysicists. I always like listening to them because they tell you how much they don't know right alongside what they do know, and what they don't know constitutes about 95% of their field of study. They have embraced their not-knowing because they know it is an essential step in learning. And learning, at least for me, is an essential step in writing.

The way I look at it, if I know everything about the story I'm writing from the beginning, then I haven't moved much from the typing pools I worked for to in order to get through college. If I were to go at writing a novel like an all-knowing creator, making an outline of the plot and then filling it in, I would miss out on the surprises. I would miss out on the mystery and wonder that brings so much joy to both life and novel-writing.

The posture of humility, instead, forces me to let my characters teach me who they are, forces me to follow them through the story instead of the other way around. It's a frightening process, but I've become comfortable with it--the not-knowing--partly

because my religion allows for it. Demands it. Demands that room be left for mystery and vulnerability. Because those are the quiet places where you can hear the whispers of God and your characters.

If I subtract the false starts, I'm now in the middle of writing my fourth book, and in that time, I have slowly discovered that it doesn't matter who or what I write about; whether I'm writing about soccer stars or reclusive widows, mail-order brides or resistance fighters, the same spiritual root system will appear. I already know before I write my first chapter that there will be joy and suffering and redemption, and that in the end, it will all somehow make sense.

I can't change any of this, which, again, to some people might seem limiting. For me, it is the ultimate freedom. Because, to paraphrase several homilies of Father/Bishop Robert Barron, instead of having to constantly concentrate on the rules and fundamentals of the game, I can concentrate on the game itself--in this case, on seeing my characters' faces and taking down their conversations and thoughts. In other words, the story. And for a novelist, that's incredibly liberating.

