**JONATHAN ROGERS, HOST:** Hey Habit listeners, Jonathan here. I wanna be sure you know about another podcast where you can find more great conversations with really thoughtful people.

(SOFT ACOUSTIC GUITAR MUSIC FADES UP)

**JR:** The Tokens podcast is hosted by my friend Lee Camp. You may have heard Lee when he was a guest on The Habit Podcast. He’s a great conversationalist, and he has great guests, because apparently, he knows everybody. I especially loved Episode 3 with poets Tracy K. Smith and Marie Howe.

**MARIE HOWE:** The great thing about poetry for me — what saved my life really — is first of all, poetry can try to hold the unsayable truth about being alive, knowing that we’re alive and that we’re gonna die.

**JR:** You can find the Tokens Podcast at tokensshow.com, or wherever you get your podcasts.

(MUSIC FADES OUT)

**JR:** Hey friends, Jonathan Rogers here. Before we get started, I wanted to mention a new online writing class that I’ve put together. It’s called Writing with Hobbits. Over six weeks, starting August 18th, we’ll read *The Hobbit* together, and we’ll talk about the principles by which Tolkien works his particular kind of magic as a writer. Then we’ll apply those principles to our own writing. I’d love to see you there. Find out more at thehabit.co/hobbits.

(ACOUSTIC GUITAR THEME MUSIC FADES UP)

**JR:** Welcome to The Habit Podcast: Conversations with Writers about Writing. I’m Jonathan Rogers, your host.

(THEME MUSIC CONTINUES)

**JR:** Christine Flanagan is an English professor at the University of the Sciences in Pennsylvania. She’s the editor of *The Letters of Flannery O’Connor* and Caroline Gordon, published by the University of Georgia Press. O’Connor’s letters have long been among my favorite things she ever wrote, but in this collection, Caroline Gordon’s letters to O’Connor are the real showstopper.

(THEME MUSIC FADES OUT)

**JR:** The letters of Flannery O’Connor and Caroline Gordon bring to light a vital literary influence that a lot of O’Connor’s most ardent fans don’t know much about.

Christine Flanagan, thank you so much for being on The Habit Podcast with me!

**CHRISTINE FLANAGAN:** Thank you, Jonathan!

**JR:** I so enjoyed your book *The Letters of Flannery O’Connor and Caroline Gordon*. And my listeners are probably pretty familiar with Flannery O’Connor. Um, she comes up very often on this podcast. But probably not as familiar with Caroline Gordon. So tell us about who was Caroline Gordon, and what was her relationship to Flannery O’Connor? It’s a great story.

**CF:** I’ll can tell you Caroline Gordon was an unfamiliar name to me as well. I, as many of your listeners, Flannery O’Connor was the familiar name. Years ago, there was an anthology called *Letters to a Fiction Writer*, edited by the late Frederick Busch, and in that book there was a series of letters from fiction writers to fiction writers, and their mentoring and giving advice on writing and life. And there was a letter from Caroline Gordon to Flannery O’Connor. This long letter, which is one of the first letters in my book. I think it was written in November 1951. I think the original document is something like 9 pages, single spaced typed. It’s about 4,000 words. Which, you know, is about 16 pages right? And it was this unbelievable door that opened for me. Who was this woman who gave such advice to Flannery O’Connor, this Caroline Gordon?

So she stayed with me for years, and then as I went to work on Flannery O’Connor — doing different scholarship on landscapes and ecological ideas in O’Connor — I kept running into moments of Caroline Gordon in the archives. So I found out — you know, among many other writers who have gone the way of the past — she’s not widely read or taught today. Even during her life, she was more, as she was called, the wife of Allen Tate. But during her life, she published two collections of short stories, ten novels, two books of nonfiction. She was a person who was asked to write the front page book review on the New York Times — The New York Times review on Faulkner’s work. She’s the person who brought attention to Faulkner. she was the person who was asked to write the introduction to an American edition of *Madame Bovary*. She was highly accomplished. She won a Guggenheim in 1932. She had a story nominated for the O. Henry Prize.

In my introduction to my book, I write a lot about how in 1952 she was nominated for the National Book Award. So one year after she met Flannery O’Connor, she was nominated for the National Book Award, and the other nominees were Faulkner, Capote, Salinger. Her editor for 20 years was Maxwell Perkins, and that was the famous literary editor of Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald… so I could go on. Who is this woman who has become invisible in so many ways?

So, she had this incredible achievement, and then she and her husband Allen Tate the poet, they also lived in New York, they lived in Paris, they lived in Rome. They were friends with Hart Crane, e. e. cummings…

**JR:** You left out Nashville! They lived in Nashville.

**CF:** Nashville, of course! That was where… outside of Nashville was Benfolly, their home, where they had they had other writers come to live with them, like Ford Madox Ford, Robert Lowell…

**JR:** Robert Lowell lived in a tent in their front yard, right?

**CF:** He lived in a tent in their front yard, right.

**JR:** (laughs)

**CF:** He just showed up, and… cause someone said if you wanna learn to write, you should really go talk to Allen Tate. And he came, and they said there’s no room, because Ford Madox Ford and a girlfriend were in the house, and they had a million people coming in and out. And so Robert Lowell just opened a tent and lived on the lawn. And this just infuriated Ford Madox Ford. Caroline Gordon and Allen Tate said, well, he seems like a nice guy! And they celebrated Thanksgiving with the Hemingways in Paris. The life she led with her husband — who she married twice and divorced twice — was just this incredible experience. Add to that she taught at over 20 different universities, writing conferences. And this is in the 1930s, 40s, 50s, 60s.

**JR:** Uh huh.

**CF:** She’s incredibly accomplished. She earned her bachelor’s degree in classics, she was fluent in Greek and Latin… this is Caroline Gordon! In the world of literary circles, people knew who Caroline Gordon was. They knew her. But she’s one of these people who has disappeared.

**JR:** Yeah. It’s amazing to me to think — we think of Flannery O’Connor as being this sort of lone genius, off by herself. And in some ways she cultivated that reputation. And, you know I think about what she said to the editor John Selby, when he tried to help her — and his idea of helping her was sort of changing the way she wrote — she spoke of “the peculiarity and the aloneness from which I write,” she said.

**CF:** Yes, yes. She didn’t like Selby very much.

**JR:** And this was before she met Caroline Gordon. Just a few months before she met her.

**CF:** Right! John Selby was the editor, the publisher who said — she said he treated her “like a slightly dimwitted campfire girl.” (laughs)

**JR:** (laughs) Yeah, he accused her of being prematurely arrogant!

**CF:** Absolutely! And you know what? She was prematurely arrogant! Good for her.

**JR:** (laughs) Yeah right!

**CF:** Good for her. She certainly was in 1950, to speak that way to a publisher.

**JR:** But it’s so amazing to think about, through Caroline Gordon, she suddenly is connected just one degree of separation from everybody.

**CF:** And it starts with her relationship with the Fitzgeralds. So, I’m gonna go into the weeds, if anybody likes Flannery O’Connor. So, Flannery O’Connor, everybody knows, went to Iowa and Yaddo, and she met Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, who became her lifelong friends. And Fitzgerald was her literary executor, and Sally Fitzgerald was the one who edited *The Habit of Being*. And it was through the Fitzgeralds O’Connor and Gordon connected.

O’Connor was having trouble. O’Connor didn’t know it. Harcourt Brace had wanted to publish her book. This was her first book, *Wise Blood*. And Robert Giroux was the editor at the time, and he was having trouble. He wanted to publish her book, and people at the publisher found *Wise Blood* shocking. They found it disturbing from a young lady. They didn’t understand it. And Giroux, who liked O’Connor’s work — she had been published in reputable journals. She had a good pedigree. She had a masters degree from Iowa. She had the Fitzgeralds and Robert Lowell speaking up on her behalf, but he didn’t really know what to do. Sally Fitzgerald writes — in her unpublished biography of Flannery O’Connor — Sally Fitzgerald writes about there was something going on in the background at Harcourt Brace with *Wise Blood*, and Robert Fitzgerald is the one who had the idea to send the novel to Caroline Gordon. He had just taught with her at a writer’s conference. I wanna say Allen Tate is the godfather of one of Robert and Sally Fitzgerald’s children. So, they had a close relationship — Catholics, intellectuals, writers. Robert Fitzgerald asks O’Connor, is this okay? Can I send this novel, the draft of *Wise Blood* to this writing teacher and writer, Caroline Gordon. And O’Connor says yes, and that begins.

Caroline Gordon writes back immediately to Fitzgerald and says this girl has talent, this is good stuff. Writes a fairly long assessment, you know, opening assessment. I think two scenes are… I think she’s muffed two scenes. There’s a little revision that can go on. But she endorses *Wise Blood* completely. That letter goes to Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald sends the letter to Giroux. Harcourt Brace accepts the novel, and it is Giroux who sends the suggestions, then, onto O’Connor. And Gordon says, “I’d be happy to read it again.” And she does.

**JR:** Okay, we’ve been sort of taking about Gordon’s connectedness. But I wanna talk about — I wanna sort of shift to talk about what she did for Flannery O’Connor as a mentor in the craft of writing. I love that story. Until I read your introduction, I didn’t know about Caroline Gordon’s role in breaking that logjam for *Wise Blood*.

**CF:** It’s another moment of invisibility.

**JR:** Yeah.

**CF:** It’s another moment of — you’ll see I’m a big Caroline Gordon fan — it’s another moment where she’s not credited in the way other people would have been. The number of times I have read short biographies — here’s Flannery O’Connor on Wikipedia or wherever — where people credit Allen Tate or her Iowa teachers, the ones who said they didn’t like *Wise Blood*, they really thought she shouldn’t work on it. Caroline Gordon’s name is *never* mentioned. And she never sought that for herself! She never did any of that for her own self-promotion.

**JR:** Yeah, it’s really apparent from your work how generous she was. These letters she wrote… the details are just shocking!

**CF:** You know, Jonathan, I feel like writers, and the listeners of your podcasts who are writers, would understand this. And I feel like this is a way that scholars and writers are different. When I was in graduate school, and my best teacher in graduate school wrote me 9 pages of critique and comments on a short story that changed the way I wrote forever, the value of that, and the number of times in life we have that as writers, are so few!

**JR:** Yeah.

**CF:** And the amount of time — as you know, you’re a teacher too — the amount of time it takes to invest that thought in someone else’s writing… yeah. The generosity of that is just mind-blowing. If all Gordon did was to write Flannery O’Connor that single letter in November 1951 where she gives her feedback and she says, you know, you’re pretty much done with *Wise Blood*, so this is kind of for your future work… she’s being very diplomatic. She’s saying, think about this for your future work, but I’ll talk about *Wise Blood* and I’ll use some examples. That single letter is a masterclass in creative writing. It’s just phenomenal. And this went on for 13 years. On and off. You know, there weren’t every single story that had that amount, but if you jump forward to 1964, when O’Connor was looking for feedback on “Parker’s Back” and she’s writing it in the hospital, and Caroline Gordon surprises her by just showing up to the hospital to visit O’Connor in July 1964. And O’Connor gets some feedback from her usual people on “Parker’s Back,” something’s not right. She still sends her final story to Caroline Gordon. And Gordon writes feedback — which is a letter, one of the last letters in my book — and it’s 4,000 words.

**JR:** Mmm.

**CF:** Feedback. Once again, 13 years later.

**JR:** Yeah.

**CF:** And Caroline Gordon, knowing she’s sick, also says, here’s a short version. Here’s the long version of the comments, here’s the short version. And then she also realizes O’Connor’s on her deathbed, so she also sends a quick telegram: “You have succeeded.”

**JR:** Wow. Another act of generosity.

**CF:** You know, you talk about generosity… Caroline Gordon did the same thing for Walker Percy. In the same month she wrote Flannery O’Connor that big chunk of feedback on *Wise Blood*, she wrote a longer letter to Walker Percy about his work.

**JR:** Yeah, her first introduction to Percy and O’Connor came that same week, right?

**CF:** Her first… it’s really interesting. These big letters that were critiques both come the same month. She writes, essentially, about 50 pages of critique for these two writers in two letters the same month.

**JR:** Two writers who… had either one published a novel yet?

**CF:** No. Neither one had published yet. She had known Walker Percy and his family.

**JR:** Oh, okay.

**CF:** He was actually paying her, which many people don’t know.

**JR:** Really.

**CF:** She had said — because at this point, again, Caroline Gordon is very accomplished at this point in 1951, you know. She’s pretty accomplished. So she thinks, I’ll charge people. She didn’t charge O’Connor. I think she charged Walker Percy a hundred bucks, and I think she said, I’m donating it to the church or something like that. And we can go back to Ford Madox Ford, who was Gordon’s mentor. She started working for him as his secretary in 1927. She was 31. She had published no fiction yet. She had been publishing as a journalist for 10 years. And she met Ford Madox Ford, began working as his secretary. And during this time period, it’s everything from retyping his handwritten manuscripts — imagine how much you would learn retyping manuscripts of Ford Madox Ford. Or he would dictate to her, and she would sit there and type while he dictated his fiction to her. Imagine what she must have learned there.

But he didn’t only teach her writing. And then when he heard she was writing, he made her show him her work. There’s a great story in my introduction about how he sort of took her by the scruff of the neck and said, You sit down, you’re writing fiction. Now you sit down, you’re dictating to me. But he also showed her what a writers’ community was. And I think that’s something you really understand, Jonathan. That a community, for Ford Madox Ford, was you come to Paris, I’m not there, you’re staying in my apartment.

**JR:** Mmhm.

**CF:** Friends, we share food together. You come to Clarksville, Tennessee, and Ford Madox Ford and his wife, you’re staying for months on end. Our extended family. When Gordon first published her first novel, Ford Madox Ford wrote and endorsement of it, saying this is the best constructed American novel I have ever seen! You know, he just gave her these kinds of support. And so I think Gordon really learned what it was to be a writer in the most expansive way.

**JR:** Mmhm. Yeah. Okay, I wanna talk about one specific bit of advice that Caroline Gordon gave to Flannery O’Connor, because I can’t imagine that Flannery O’Connor needed this advice, and… anyway. I couldn’t locate it in the book, but I remember you talking about it at some thing I heard you speak at. Gordon says to O’Connor, in your story, it feels like I’m looking through… it’s like you’re a burglary with a flashlight, and I’m not seeing the landscape. I’m only seeing exactly what you’re showing me at the moment.

**CF:** Yes.

**JR:** It amazes me that O’Connor… I think of her as being a person who’s so strong on place and atmosphere, it’s hard to imagine her ever needing that advice.

**CF:** Right!

**JR:** The fact that Caroline Gordon is the one who told her that… anyway.

**CF:** That specific advice came in 1951 as O’Connor was revising *Wise Blood*, so it was early in her career, and I would attribute many of O’Conor’s achievements to the teaching of Gordon. And the use of landscape and setting is one very specific way. We can see in letter after letter Gordon giving her advice. But I know exactly what you’re talking about. Gordon is telling O’Connor — and I love this writing advice — you can’t write in a vacuum. You have to imitate God. You have to create a whole world or the illusion of a whole world. And she says about *Wise Blood*, I love the dramatic action of the book, but I think the whole book would gain if it weren’t so stripped bare. surround the core of action with contrasting material.

And then she goes and says this passage: “Suppose we think of a scene in your novel as a scene in a play. Any scene takes place on a kind of set. I feel that the sets in your play are wonderful, but you never let us see them. A spotlight follows every move the characters make and throws a blinding radiance on them, but it’s a little like a spotlight a burglar uses when he’s cracking a safe.”

**JR:** (laughs)

**CF:** “It illuminates a small circle, and the rest of the stage is in darkness most of the time. Focusing the reader’s attention completely on the action is one way to make things seem very dramatic, but you can’t keep that up all the time.” Right? She says it demands too much of the reader. “It would be better,” she says, “if you would occasionally use a spotlight large enough to illuminate the corners of the room, for those corners have gone on existing all through the most dramatic moments.”

And this is the advice — I love this advice. I’ve written plays, and I’ve taught play writing as well. I always ask my creative writing students, what are the props? What’s on the stage? What’s in the corner? What’s above, what’s below?

**JR:** Yeah.

**CF:** She will come back to this advice in different ways, but what a phenomenal piece of advice! She’s talking about setting. Saying, look at Chekov’s story, look at *Madame Bovary*. She’ll say landscape reflecting the mood can get monotonous. If you have a fighting couple and the weather is stormy, that can’t get monotonous. And she’ll also say use some contrasting material in the setting.

**JR:** So it feels to me like if you’re the person who convinced Flannery O’Connor to do that, you’re kind of hte person that made Flannery O’Connor. (laughs) I mean…

**CF:** I’ve said it time and time again, and I don’t mean it as a dismissal of O’Connor’s talent. I don’t mean to disregard her achievement. But Flannery O’Connor would not be Flannery O’Connor without Caroline Gordon. I think that’s just unquestionable, but I’ve seen the manuscripts. So, I’ve seen the manuscripts, the letters in their final version. The amount that I’ve learned from Caroline Gordon in writing is just so expansive.

I love — she’ll go back to that burglar, that spotlight though, and say things like, you know, in *Madame Bovary*, she’ll describe a scene where Flaubert has Emma and, again, the spotlight is on a few characters, and all of a sudden they hear the sound of a rooster outside in the distance. And Gordon says it makes the scene more dramatic to go outside of it with description. You don’t just have to stay within that scene. She’ll use examples from James Joyce to illustrate this.

You know, when I edited Caroline Gordon’s letters to O’Connor… I have a reading list. I don’t know that I’ll finish it in my lifetime — of writers I should read for advice on writing.

**JR:** Wow. Did you find her… sometimes in reading through your book, it felt like her advice was so technical, it was kind of hard… sometimes it was hard to find out ways to apply it because it was so technical.

**CF:** It *was* technical. And this goes back to… Caroline Gordon went to school at 10, to… she attended a classical, preparatory school for boys at 10. Her father taught there. Again, she knew Greek, Latin. She knew sentence structure. She will diagram sentences. Poor O’Connor, telling O’Connor where the language goes wrong. She would talk about loose and periodic sentences. She would say, “I know I might be didactic,” blahblahblah. I think a lot of people — and, I think, rightly so — conclude that O’Connor was put off and a little alienated by these kind of specific comments. You know, you can’t use the word “squinch,” you can’t use the word “zlurped.” The omniscient narrator would never… you know, Gordon is always harping on “the omniscient narrator would never talk this way.”

But you know what? Gordon’s right? And there’s a reason why James Joyce is James Joyce. When you look at “Araby,” and you read the final sentence, that is not the character’s voice. That is the omniscient narrator’s voice. And so Gordon understood these layers of technicality, that I’m still trying to learn. And so I think she’s called pedantic. People says she alienated others with this sort of critique. And I do not… I’m not ashamed to say I *love* this kind of feedback on my writing. Tell me what kind of word to put on the end of this sentence because it’s gonna make a powerful impact. And I think this is the difference between writers like Nabokov and Joyce and Toni Morrison and other writers, that they care about the work on a sentence level.

And Caroline Gordon was not always successful in her own writing, you know. I think where Caroline Gordon was successful was in the technical elements, and maybe not as successful in those dramatic moments that O’Connor so achieved.

**JR:** Yeah. And so do you see evidence in O’Connor’s letters back that she’s in anyway alienated or offended by some of these comments?

**CF:** (pause) Never to Gordon.

**JR:** Mmhm.

**CF:** In *The Habit of Being* or other place she’ll say… I think O’Connor writes something around 1961. She is working on *A Memoir of Mary Ann*. She’s writing the introduction. And she says something about Caroline Gordon like, she will sacrifice anything to grammar! She’s so hung up on grammar!

**JR:** Yeah.

**CF:** There is evidence that O’Connor stepped away a bit.

**JR:** Yeah.

**CF:** And there’s evidence that Gordon said to her… damn it, what’s wrong? Can’t you get what I told you? You know? Gordon’s not… she did not sugarcoat her criticism. And O’Connor was good with that. That was okay. But at a certain point, it did… I think it did space them apart.

The flip side is, Caroline Gordon was the age of Flannery O’Connor’s mother. Gordon had a daughter O’Connor’s age. So they were not peers. They were… Katherine Anne Porter and Caroline Gordon, Dorothy Day and Caroline Gordon were friends, peers. They were not close in that way. Caroline Gordon was never officially O’Connor’s teacher. And they did not have a mother/daughter relationship. They didn’t have that kind of relationship either. So, O’Connor always treated Gordon with respect. Even though, you know, she’d complain about her to her friends, like everybody will, right? About other people? She always maintained respect for Gordon. She would defend Gordon when things were particularly difficult in her personal life.

**JR:** Yeah.

**CF:** I would call that a real relationship. Where people, you know, honestly communicate, and sometimes you need space from each other.

**JR:** (chuckles) Yeah, yeah.

**CF:** Did Gordon alienate O’Connor? The simple answer is yes, you can interpret that, absolutely. But at the end of her life, who is she sending her final story to?

**JR:** Yeah.

**CF:** And she knew Gordon always had her best intentions when it came to fiction and fiction writing.

**JR:** Okay, this is my next to last question, because I always end with the same last question. You… in your introduction, you remark that while there were so many people who didn’t get what Flannery O’Connor was doing, Caroline Gordon was never puzzled by her. She got it from the start. Which is not an easy… I mean, there are not many people who get it from the start.

**CF:** No, no… the first time I read *Wise Blood*, I didn’t get it from the start.

**JR:** Sure.

**CF:** Caroline Gordon, I write uh… yeah, O’Connor’s work would never puzzle Gordon, and I think there’s a number of reasons why. The most simplistic reason, strangely enough, was they were both Catholics, and they saw themselves not just as orthodox Catholics — Caroline Gordon was a convert. What they saw in themselves… O’Connor later on, but Gordon saw herself as a Catholic intellectual, and she occupied a space with other Catholic intellectuals, like Robert Fitzgerald, who was translating the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Like Jacques Maritain, who famously wrote *Art and Scholaticism*. He was arguably the greatest Catholic intellectual on both sides of the Atlantic at the time, and was close friends with Gordon and Tate.

**JR:** He was their… godparent?

**CF:** Jacques Maritain and his wife were Allen Tate’s godparents.

**JR:** Okay.

**CF:** So um… (pause) So, there is the idea of being a Catholic, and that had some intellectual capacity to it. This is something that I think is lost today. That’s another conversation though. The second part of why Gordon got O’Connor though goes back to Gordon’s classical education. Gordon studied the classics… and think about it. No one has ever said of Homer, “Those characters are grotesque! Why… they’re really violent!”

**JR:** (chuckles) Yeah.

**CF:** Never once did Gordon say of O’Connor’s work that it was violent or grotesque.

**JR:** Interesting.

**CF:** Had that classical background, and immediately, her understanding of classical works fused with her Catholic sensibilities. People don’t go around saying, “The Bible has a bunch of really grotesque characters in it!”

**JR:** (chuckles)

**CF:** Right? These are the things Gordon understood. She understood that storytelling was to communicate a purpose. So when she read O’Connor’s work, she immediately understood, oh! She’s trying to achieve these affects. She’s trying to say these things. She didn’t get hung up on wow, this is a really strange character.

**JR:** Yeah.

**CF:** And she said — I should say, she said very clearly — I think Gordon said — and it was later on in their relationship — Gordon said you know, there’s only one plot in all of fiction. She says, it’s the scheme of redemption.

**JR:** Yeah. Gordon said that?

**CF:** Gordon said that. Any other plot, if it’s any good, are splinters off the basic plot, and she really felt this way.

**JR:** I had to ask because it sounds like something O’Connor would say, or probably did say in *Mystery and Manners* somewhere.

**CF:** Exactly. Yes.

**JR:** And one thing I was thinking about — and again, I’m quoting from your introduction and you’re quoting Caroline Gordon — “I think I’ve been partly converted by my own work too. I have lived most my life on the evidence of things not seen, and what else is writing a novel but that?” Which again, sounds like something O’Connor would say. If you showed me that and asked if it was from *Mystery and Manners* or from somewhere else, I would say *Mystery and Manners*.

**CF:** Exactly. So… that’s exactly why these two women were so… they just got each other. O’Connor knew immediately that Gordon was a reader who understood a vision that O’Connor couldn’t even articulate. And I wanna say in O’Connor’s first letter to Caroline Gordon she says, when she’s thanking Gordon, saying thanks very much for writing to me about *Wise Blood*. And she says the one thing — this is Flannery O’Connor — says, “The one thing that is confirmed is that my novel *Wise Blood* might be recognized by Catholics as a proper effort for a Catholic.” Um…

**JR:** I’m sorry, that it might not be recognized?

**CF:** She wanted to write a Catholic novel — yeah. And so, Flannery O’Connor was saying to Gordon thanks! I’m so glad you got it!

**JR:** Yeah. Um… (pause) Okay, I said that was my next — this is my next to last question. When you read *Mystery and Manners*, do you just see Caroline Gordon everywhere in that?

**CF:** I see Caroline Gordon everywhere in O’Connor. I think I could spend my life just finding ways in which they make sense to one other. Caroline Gordon wrote a book called *How to Read a Novel*. I’m trying to remember what year that was… (pages turning) 1950s… 1957. *How to Read a Novel*. It was just republished recently. O’Connor read that, and she wrote a book review of it — I forget if the book review was published or not. But O’Connor said she passed that book along to her friends. Read this book by Gordon, *How to Read a Novel*. It’s really more about writing, not reading.

**JR:** I’ll have to check that one out. I don’t know that one.

**CF:** So, Flannery O’Connor sort of understood her.

**JR:** So, here’s some praise for your book. When I read *Mystery and Manners*, I’ve always thought man, there’s nobody like Flannery O’Connor! There’s nobody who thinks like Flannery O’Connor. She is a species of one. And then I read what you’ve put together and think… not true! She was not a species of one! She was a species of at least two. Because your book has changed the way I think about O’Connor’s place in the intellectual and literary world. So thank you for that.

**CF:** And again, I think to understand the role a mentor can have does not discredit that writer’s achievement.

**JR:** Sure.

**CF:** To… I think we see this all the time. But we also see it and hear about it in a vague way. Like, “so and so was the mentor of…”

**JR:** Mmhm.

**CF:** I’m gonna give you a compliment. I loved — you know, it’s funny, I love archives. And I knew I had read your book years ago, a spiritual biography of Flannery O’Connor.

**JR:** *The Terrible Speed of Mercy*, yeah.

**CF:** And so I googled it. I was like, where… what did I say? What did I do? And I found an email I’d written to myself in 2014 jotting down notes on your book?

**JR:** Yeah.

**CF:** Specifically you had written your observation on Flannery O’Connor was she invites us to step into mysteries, but she never resolves them, and she never reduces them to something manageable/ I just love that. And I love that I found it in my own archives. And that’s one of the ways Caroline Gordon understood O’Connor as well.

**JR:** Great. Alright, we have arrived at the last question, and I’ve warned you…

**CF:** Yes.

**JR:** Who are the writers who make you want to write?

**CF:** Changes all the time!

**JR:** Mmhm.

**CF:** Always different. Anything by my teachers. My best teachers are Thomas Gavin, Melanie Rae Thon, Jessica Treadway… Jessica Treadway actually has a new book out right now called *The Gretchen Question*. Those are three fiction writers, every time I read their work, um… you could put a note in your notes for the podcast. Anytime I read anything by those three writers, I’m reminded by the craftsmanship of writing and the teaching and the generosity that they showed me as well.

**JR:** Yeah.

**CF:** Right now this year, very specifically, I am — what I do is I get obsessed with a certain piece, and then I wanna crack apart that piece. I cut it apart by scenes. I tape it to the wall. I look at each scene individually. I sort of move around. So I”m looking at a lot of nonfiction, but specifically Leslie Jamison’s essay “52 Blue” makes me want to write. I want to understand what she did and how she did it. And it is just a phenomenal essay. “52 Blue,” you can google it.

**JR:** Okay.

**CF:** Today, that is the writer who is making me really wanna think about writing.

(THEME MUSIC FADES UP)

**JR:** I will check that out. Alright, Christine Flanagan. Thank you so much for being on The Habit Podcast.

**CF:** Thank you so much, and I love your podcast! Keep on!

**JR:** Well, thanks!

**DREW MILLER:** The Rabbit Room is partnered with Lipscomb University to make this podcast possible. Lipscomb has graciously given us access to their recording studio in the Center for Entertainment and Arts Building. We’re so grateful for their sponsorship, their encouragement, and the good work they do in Nashville.

Special shout-out as well to Jess Ray for letting us use her song “Too Good” as part of this podcast. Visit jessraymusic.com to hear more of her beautiful songs.

**JR:** The Habit Membership is a library of resources for writers by me, Jonathan Rogers. More importantly, The Habit is a hub of community where like-minded writers gather to discuss their work and give each other a little more courage. Find out more at TheHabit.co.

**DM:** This podcast was produced by The Rabbit Room, where art nourishes community and community nourishes art. All our podcasts are made possible by the generous support of our members. To learn more about us, visit rabbitroom.com, and to become a member, rabbitroom.com/donate.

(THEME MUSIC OUT)

(SOFT, MEDIEVAL STYLE GUITAR MUSIC FADES UP)

**DM:** Do you ever wish you could dive headfirst into the world of *The Wingfeather Saga*?

(QUIET FEMALE VOICE SINGING MELODY)

**DM:** Well, you almost can, thanks to the beautiful new hardbound editions, new prints from illustrator Joe Sutphin, custom bookmarks, and even maps! Find all of these and more at store.rabbitroom.com.

(MUSIC FADES OUT)