

A Statement & Some Practical Advice from Series Editor Lori Ostlund

Taking over as the series editor of the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction is a bit like coming home. In 2008, my collection *The Bigness of the World* received the prize. I was 44 and had been writing—sometimes more seriously than others—since I was eighteen. There was no voice whispering presciently, “Just do your time in the slush heaps and in October of 2008, you will win the Flannery.” So: for many many years, I wrote. And for many many years, my work was rejected. In my mid-thirties, I stopped sending work out for several years, wanting to focus on finding my voice and style, but when I started to submit again—confident that I had discovered my voice—the rejections continued. Yes, there were more “good” rejections. Still, good rejections keep one afloat only so long. I did not have an MFA, had no contacts, no writer friends except my wife, and very little sense of how things—publishing—worked. I was teaching at a fly-by-night ESL school to make ends meet while I finished these stories, and in the spring of 2008, after a botched strike, I quit. It was right around then that I submitted the collection to the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction.

For several months, I felt sorry for myself—no job, more rejections. I can still picture the moment that summer—we were walking up Taraval in San Francisco, waiting to cross the light at 19th—when I said to my wife that I was going to stop writing and get a proper job (a proper job being one that paid properly and where my hard work would translate into success). Thus, I enrolled in paralegal courses and found another part-time teaching job, and—in the way of such things—on my first day of classes, I came home to the message from the University of Georgia Press that I had won the FOC award. Actually, the message did not say that I had won, just that they would like me to return their call, which I tried for hours to do, but given the time difference, it was not until the next morning that I finally reached a person. When the woman on the other end of the line told me that I had won the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction, all of those years of longing caught up with me. I had no words. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I need to hang up now.”

Would I have stopped writing permanently? I suppose not. I tell you the above story to acknowledge that I understand how frustrating and demoralizing this process can be and to let you know that the panel of judges are people whom I have chosen because they represent a diversity of voices and styles and preoccupations; because they read broadly; because they understand the responsibility before them; because they love short stories; and because they are generous of spirit, excited at the prospect of reading submissions and perhaps finding the new FOC recipient in their ‘pile.’ (See their bios to learn more about them and their story collections.)

The award is named for Flannery O'Connor, who changed the way that we understand the short story, though it is important to acknowledge that at the same desk that she wrote her stories, stories that often challenged and exposed racism, she also penned correspondence containing overtly racist sentiments. Alice Walker, a tremendous admirer of O'Connor's work, wrote, “Hide nothing of what she was, and use that to teach.” In that spirit, I want to be clear that the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction embraces all that O'Connor brought to the art and craft of the short story, but rejects her racism and homophobia.

I close this statement by paying tribute to Nancy Zafris, the series editor who chose my collection as well as numerous other collections during the years that she served in this position that I am now fortunate to hold. Nancy was an amazing writer, teacher, editor, and supporter of writers. In a world—publishing—where many focus on currying favor with those more established, above them on the publishing pecking order, Nancy was an exception, always most interested in reaching downward to pull new writers up beside her. I know this well, for I was one of many she yanked upward. She had a sharp tongue and a gentle spirit. Nancy Zafris died in 2021. She is deeply missed by me and numerous others. I hope to honor her memory by carrying on the good work that she did in the spirit with which she did it.

Send me your stories!

Sincerely,
Lori Ostlund

Some practical comments:

1. Your manuscript should be collection length, double-spaced, and properly formatted, but beyond this, make sure that it is a clean manuscript (proofread) and that you have not included your name or any cover letter-style information.
2. Read it aloud.
3. Don't over-worry about the order of the stories yet. You might know exactly the order that you want them in, or you might have no idea. If you fall into the latter category (I certainly did when I submitted), lead with what you consider your best work. The aforementioned panel of great judges will be forwarding me the best work that comes across their desks, around eight collections per judge, so if in doubt, aim for a stellar opening impression.
4. If you have entered before, don't let that stop you. Rework the collection and try again. Numerous writers have won this prize or others for collections that had been through the process in the past. Maybe your collection has not met the right screening judge yet. Maybe this time it will.